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Social Mobility Among Black Individuals  
in Cape Town, South Africa**

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# The Tithes of Apartheid: Perceptions of Social Mobility Among Black Individuals in Cape Town, South Africa

## Abstract

*Although almost entirely ignored by South African scholars, studying perceptions of social mobility is profoundly important for understanding South Africa's changing economic and political environments. This study probes perceptions of social mobility in a single South African city, Cape Town, through twelve in-depth ethnographic interviews with black African residents of Cape Town. This paper differs from other research on perceptions of social mobility by examining how previous experiences of social mobility, instead of current class position, influence these perceptions and future expectations. Most of the interviewees stressed the continuing relationship between race and class: respondents tended to believe that the top of the income distribution is mostly white, while the bottom of the income distribution is entirely black. Despite the widespread perception of the distribution of income in South Africa as racialised, all of the interviewees identified a number of pathways to upward mobility for black people. They disagreed, however, on the accessibility of these pathways. This study found that those who had either experienced some degree of social mobility or those who were born into advantaged backgrounds tended to conceptualise mobility in predominantly individualistic terms and believed that upward mobility was available to those willing to work hard and motivated to take advantage of educational opportunities. In contrast, those from more disadvantaged backgrounds who had not experienced significant mobility, although also recognising the importance of hard work and education for economic success, tended to offer structural explanations for their lack of mobility and faulted their lack of social capital and rampant nepotism in Cape Town for exhausting the few available opportunities.*

# Social Mobility in South Africa: an Underexplored Field

On the eve of its transition to democracy, South Africa ranked “among the most unequal societies in the world” (Seekings and Natrass, 2006: 188). And during the first 18 years of its democracy, South Africa’s already unparalleled degree of inequality has *risen* considerably, despite hopes that democratisation and the enfranchisement of South Africa’s poor, black majority would work to redress the pernicious economic legacies of apartheid (Seekings, 2011a: 22). South Africa’s Gini coefficient—a commonly used measure of income inequality that is derived from the Lorenz Curve and ranges from 0 in completely egalitarian societies to 1 in societies where a single individual receives all of the income—was 0.66 at the end of apartheid, 0.68 in 2000, and 0.7 by 2008 (Leibbrandt et al. 2010: 32).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the Gini index may actually *underestimate* the growth of income inequality in South African society. The Gini coefficient is better able to capture changes in the middle of the income distribution than at the tails. Thus, if the rich are getting comparatively richer or the poor are getting comparatively poorer, as appears to be happening in South Africa (Leibbrandt et al., 2010: 26), then the Gini coefficient will underestimate the degree of inequality (Seekings, 2011b: 29).

South Africa’s persistently high and growing levels of inequality have unsurprisingly led to significant space being dedicated to analysing the nature of this inequality and its repercussions for South African society. Scholars have highlighted the changing composition of this inequality. Towards the end of apartheid, South Africa’s distribution of income began to “reflect race far less than class” (Seekings, 2008a: 22) because of “the expansion of educational and employment opportunities for black South Africans” (Seekings, 2008c: 40). While aggregate inequality has risen since South Africa’s democratic transition, this growth in inequality is a result of increasing *intra-*, as opposed to *inter-*racial disparities (see Table 1), a trend that began before the end of apartheid (Seekings and Natrass, 2006: 300). The Theil-T Index for inequality - which analyses the percentage of the Gini coefficient that is derived from within-group versus between-group inequality - indicates just how profoundly South Africa’s distribution of income has been deracialised. Whereas in 1975 intra-racial inequality accounted for 38 percent of total inequality, by 1996 intra-racial

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<sup>1</sup> Although there is much variation in reported Gini coefficients, these variations are largely attributable to the methodology employed and there is general “agreement” about the rising levels of inequality in post-apartheid South Africa (Van der Berg, 2010: 12).

inequality represented 67 percent of aggregate inequality, and by 2008 this figure had climbed to 70 percent (Whiteford and Van Seventer, 2000: 17; Leibbrandt et al., 2012: 30).<sup>2</sup>

This trend reflects the growing economic power of sections of South Africa's previously marginalised black population and the partial deracialisation of South Africa's class structures. The proportion of income going to South Africa's white population fell from 71 percent to 48 percent between 1972 and 2001, while the proportion of income going to Africans rose from 20 percent to 38 percent (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 304; Leibbrandt et al., 2006: 102). Consequently the middle and upper classes in South Africa have become increasingly more integrated since the end of apartheid (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 336). The "middle class," for example, which was only 29 percent black in 1994, was nearly half black by 2000 (Garcia-Rivero, 2006: 66). Similarly, whereas Africans made up only 28 percent of the top two income deciles in 1995, they constituted over 45 percent of the top two deciles in 2000 (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 306). Although inequality is still correlated with race (Simkins, 2011: 107), as Landman et al. (2003: 7) conclude, "The main driver of inequality currently in SA is no longer the Black/White divide, but rather the intra-group divide between rich Blacks and poor Blacks."

Although important, analyses of the changing nature of South African inequality and South Africa's distribution of income are ultimately limited. As Louw, Van der Berg and Yu (2007: 549) emphasise, "Analysing the income distribution at any given moment using cross-sectional data generates a static picture only." That is, although these studies offer insights into *what* is changing in South African society, they offer less insight into *who* is benefiting from these changes and *why* these changes are occurring (Woolard and Klasen, 2005: 866). And the study of these trends in South Africa - the study of social mobility - may ultimately provide greater insight into the evolution of post-apartheid South Africa than studying inequality alone. As Birdsall and Graham (2000: 5) note, "Mobility provides a better measure of changing opportunities than do the traditional measures of inequality, and [...] understanding mobility is critical to the discussion of inequality and of what to do about it." Unfortunately, the study of social mobility in South Africa is very "limited and generally more ad

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<sup>2</sup> Bhorat and Van der Westhuizen, in contrast, argue that inter-racial inequality has actually been increasing. However, they offer no explanation for why their "admittedly provisional evidence" does not conform to the predominant trends found in the literature (Bhorat and Van der Westhuizen, 2010: 57).

hoc” (Woolard and Klasen, 2005: 896; see also, Louw, Van der Berg, and Yu, 2007: 549).

Although the existing literature on social mobility is limited, investigating the nature of social mobility in South Africa is enormously important. Inequality is not de facto detrimental. As Birdsall and Graham (2000: 6-9) argue, inequality can be both “constructive” and “destructive.” “Constructive inequality” fosters economic growth by encouraging creativity and production. In contrast, “destructive inequality” restrains growth by limiting the opportunities available to individuals. Although it is nearly impossible to disaggregate these two kinds of inequality, “a good indirect approach [to discovering the nature of inequality] is to analyse access to opportunity by measuring the extent and nature of social mobility.” It is thus impossible to fully understand the nature and impact of South Africa’s extremely high levels of inequality without first investigating the nature and impact of social mobility in South Africa.

Perhaps more importantly, social mobility has profound repercussions for the robustness of South Africa’s nascent democracy. Scholars have increasingly highlighted the negative relationship between income inequality and democratic consolidation. Muller, for example, (1997: 152; see also, Muller, 1988) has suggested that “high levels of income inequality are [completely] incompatible with the development of a stable democratic political system” (see also, Boix and Stokes, 2003; Boix, 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Houle, 2009). Social mobility, by making high levels of inequality more acceptable to the masses, may counteract the deleterious effects of inequality on democracy and democratisation (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006: 245-6; see also, Boix, 2003: 14, 140). As Fukuyama (2011: 85) describes, there is a school of thought that believes that “single time-point measurements of income inequality such as the Gini coefficient are less important than the question of intergenerational social mobility” for democratic longevity. Thus, the degree of social mobility in South African society can offer insights into the strength of South Africa’s democracy. Further, with little hope of ameliorating South Africa’s high levels of inequality in the foreseeable future, the robustness of South Africa’s democracy may depend in part on South Africa’s ability to foster equality of opportunity and social mobility.

Investigations of social mobility have repercussions that extend beyond the study of inequality in South Africa. South Africa has invested an enormous number of resources in ameliorating the racialised legacies of apartheid and leveling the economic playing field. The government has enacted a number of

policies, including affirmative action programs, and has made large investments in education, housing, service delivery and infrastructure, in order to redress the gross inequality of opportunity inherited from apartheid.<sup>3</sup> The study of social mobility in South Africa can thus reveal whether these policies are working and whom they are benefiting. In the words of Burger, Burger, and Van der Berg (2003: 1), it can reveal “to what extent the new system has managed to effectively eradicate the remnants of apartheid-era racial discrimination” - and can perhaps offer insights into why certain policies have failed to achieve their desired goals and the most efficacious ways to redress apartheid’s legacies (see Woolard and Klasen, 2005: 866 for a more detailed discussion).

Yet, despite the profound importance of a socially mobile society for the vitality of post-apartheid South Africa, “almost no work has been done on mobility in South Africa” (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 262). This paper thus attempts to augment the existing literature on social mobility in South Africa by investigating perceptions of social mobility in a single South African city, Cape Town. This paper differs from previous explorations of social mobility in South Africa by focusing primarily on *perceptions* - as opposed to statistical trends - of social mobility in Cape Town’s African community through twelve in-depth ethnographic interviews with individuals from diverse mobility backgrounds.

The paper sets forth a discussion of the existing literature and highlights the major shortcomings of the current academic approach to social mobility in South Africa. It then discusses the methodology of this study and offers a brief sketch of the study participants. Finally, the paper discusses its major findings and describes the perceptions of social mobility among the twelve interviewees. This final section is divided into three parts: firstly, the paper describes how the respondents conceptualise the economic stratification of South African society; secondly, it critically examines mobility pathways emphasised by the respondents during the interviews; and finally, it explores perceptions of both intra- and intergenerational mobility among the interviewees. Although this paper does not claim to be a comprehensive sketch of social mobility in South Africa, it offers initial findings on perceptions of social mobility in Cape Town and suggests a potentially fruitful path for social mobility scholars to pursue.

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<sup>3</sup> Breen and Jonsson (2003: 223) defined “inequality of opportunity” as “a person’s chances to get ahead ... unrelated to ascribed characteristics such as race, sex, or class.”

## **A Review of the Existing Literature: Seeking Objective Trends; Ignoring Subjective Facts**

There are two dominant approaches to the study of mobility (Morgan, 2006: 4-5). The first - known as “social” or “class” mobility and favored by sociologists - analyses movement between social classes, often defined in terms of occupational categories. The second - known as “economic” or “income” mobility and favored by economists - investigates changes in individual or household income over time. Although sociologists and economists conceptualise mobility in different ways, in practice both approaches share more similarities than differences. Income is, of course, closely related to occupational class. And as Morgan (2006: 4) contends, when income mobility is “analysed as cross-classifications of quantiles”, as it often the case, both “methods are quite similar in spirit” (Morgan, 2006: 5).

Furthermore, although sociologists and economists tend to focus on different outcome variables - one on changes in social class, the other on changes in income - both analyse mobility through similar paradigms. Mobility researchers from both disciplines distinguish intra-generational mobility, or the changes that occur to an individual or household’s “social class or earnings during their own working lives” (Pearce, 2011: 4), from intergenerational mobility which is “the degree to which an individual’s socio-economic status depends on his or her parents’ status” (Girdwood and Leibbrandt, 2009: 1). Both economists and sociologists disaggregate absolute rates of mobility from relative rates. While absolute mobility measures the degree to which an entire society gains or loses over time, relative mobility reflects the extent to which individuals gain or lose relative to others from different socioeconomic and class positions.

The sociological literature on mobility is, however, considerably more developed than the economic literature. The most important contribution to the literature on class mobility is Goldthorpe et al.’s (1980) analysis of mobility in Britain (see, Seekings and Nattress, 2006: 263). Goldthorpe et al. concluded that although Britain experienced considerable absolute mobility during the decades following World War II due to changes in its post-war occupational structure, relative rates of mobility remained fairly constant (Goldthorpe et al., 1980: 251-2). Goldthorpe et al.’s work, however, was less significant for its findings than for its methodological approach: Goldthorpe et al. developed a class schema based on occupation and analysed both intra-generational and intergenerational movement among and between these seven occupational classes.

Goldthorpe et al.'s methodological framework has since been extended beyond Britain. Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), who analysed occupational mobility in twelve industrialised countries, found that although there was variation in absolute rates of mobility across the twelve countries, relative rates of mobility, as in Goldthorpe et al.'s analysis of class mobility in Britain, were generally constant. Goldthorpe et al.'s and Erikson and Goldthorpe's findings on absolute and relative rates of class mobility, however, do not appear applicable to all countries; Breen and Luijckx (2007), for example, found increasing rates of relative mobility in Germany, contrary to Erikson and Goldthorpe's findings in other European countries. Additionally, Costa-Ribeiro and Scalon (2001) found a similar trend in Brazil.

Despite the robust international literature on class mobility, little analysis has been done on social mobility in South Africa, in no small part because of a lack of available data (Seekings and Natrass, 2006: 264). Schneier (1983) observed significant upward occupational mobility for Africans in Soweto and three townships around Cape Town - Nyanga, Langa and Gugulethu - but concluded that mobility among Africans was not equally distributed. Those in Soweto were more mobile than those in the Cape Town townships, and permanent residents in all four townships were considerably more mobile than "hostile dwellers," who were primarily contract workers and thus had no legal right to permanent residence in urban areas (*ibid*: 107-9). Schneier also found that Africans from relatively privileged backgrounds were much better prepared to take advantage of the increasing opportunities available to black Africans than those from less privileged backgrounds (*ibid*: 45-6). Schneier's work, however, is ultimately limited: although his analysis indicates that there was an expansion of opportunities for black South Africans in the early 1980s, his conclusions were based on relatively small samples around just two urban areas.

Crankshaw (1997), using data from the Manpower Surveys beginning in 1965, conducted a much more comprehensive analysis of occupational mobility in South Africa during apartheid. Crankshaw, who was primarily concerned with documenting the movement of Africans into white class strata, indicated that there was significant upward mobility of Africans into primarily white occupations towards the end of apartheid, which accounted for the significant increase in the average wages of Africans during the same time period. But the basis of Crankshaw's analysis, the Manpower Surveys, exclude many black-dominated occupations, including farm employees, domestic workers and the self-employed, and fail to collect data on the occupational background of the survey's participants, thereby limiting the scope of Crankshaw's analysis of

intra- and intergenerational class mobility. Also, both Schneier's and Crankshaw's studies focus on occupational mobility during apartheid. Thus, although their work provides important context for the study of class mobility in post-apartheid South Africa, it offers little insight into the fundamental changes in access to opportunity that was facilitated by the advent of democracy and the effect that these changes have had on social mobility.

Ziervogel and Crankshaw (2009) attempt to plug this large gap in the existing literature by analysing intergenerational occupational mobility in post-apartheid South Africa with data from the 2000 Khayelitsha/Mitchell's Plain Survey (KMPS), a representative survey of adults over the age of 18 in the Mitchell's Plain Magisterial District that included retrospective data on parents' occupational status. Ziervogel and Crankshaw observed a significant degree of downward intergenerational mobility among respondents and concluded that class advantage was generally not transmitted from parents to their children (Ziervogel and Crankshaw, 2009: 247-8). However, Ziervogel and Crankshaw's findings are, by their own admission, not generalisable to the rest of Cape Town, let alone South Africa; because Mitchell's Plain and Khayelitsha have a disproportionate number of working class (and unemployed) respondents, "the sample will therefore tend to highlight downward mobility" and overlook the upwardly mobile (*ibid*: 248).

In contrast to sociologists, economists are generally less interested in issues of individual mobility (Stiglitz, 2000: 36). Furthermore, analysis of income dynamics requires panel data, which are generally less available for developing countries (Bourguignon, Goh, and Kim, 2006: 349). Unsurprisingly, the literature on income mobility in South Africa is thus quite limited. The literature that does exist, however, can be divided into two categories based on the data sets analysed: those that examine trends of social mobility in the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD) and its follow up survey, the KwaZulu-Natal Income Dynamics Survey (KIDS); and those that utilise the National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS) for their investigations. PLSLSD surveyed a representative sample of households in KwaZulu-Natal - South Africa's most populated province - and households first surveyed in 1993 were re-interviewed in 1998 and again in 2004 by KIDS (Agüero et al., 2007: 789). NIDS sampled a nationally representative sample of individuals in 2008 and re-interviewed the same individuals in 2010/2011 in order to track changes in income over the two-year period (Finn, Leibbrandt, and Levinsohn, 2012: 1). Analysis of panel data generally provides insights into changes in income over relatively short periods of time; the availability of retrospective data in the

NIDS sample and of multi-generational data in both PSLSD-KIDS and NIDS, however, can reveal longer term and intergenerational mobility trends.

KIDS was designed primarily to uncover trends in poverty in KwaZulu Natal and not to investigate income mobility (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 323). Most studies analysing PSLSD-KIDS data, thus, seek to trace movement into and out of poverty in KZN. Carter and May (2001: 2002) found that there was little social mobility among the poor between 1993 and 1998: in the PSLSD-KIDS sample, up to 38 percent of households were trapped in chronic poverty and an additional 35 percent of households were transitorily poor. In a subsequent study of poverty in KwaZulu-Natal, Adato, May and Carter (2006: 230-1) largely confirmed Carter and May's findings. Adato, May and Carter concluded that, although there was a "modest pattern of upward structural mobility," there were "relatively large amounts of structural poverty... consistent with the hypothesis that social exclusion and ineffective social capital are an important legacy of apartheid." Although May and Woolard (2007: 22) found that poverty in their panel of people in KZN fell between 1998 and the third wave of the study in 2004, they ultimately reported little change in chronic and transitory poverty over "the eleven year period of the survey."

Similarly, Agüero et al. (2007: 797, 808) reported that 45 percent of households were transitorily poor and 53 percent of poor households were chronically poor - that is, 28 percent of households in the sample were poor in all three waves of the study. Although Agüero et al. found that there was some degree of upward intergenerational mobility among those interviewed, intergenerational mobility in poor households was more limited and there was significant downward intra-generational mobility among those living near the poverty line. The usefulness of PSLSD-KIDS data in the study of mobility in South Africa, however, is ultimately questionable. Attrition rates among KIDS participants were extremely high between each successive wave, introducing potential bias into the sample. As Agüero et al. (*ibid*: 790) conclude, "the KIDS study is not a fully representative sample of the Africans and Indians living in KwaZulu-Natal, let alone of South Africa in its entirety." Furthermore, PSLSD was not designed to be a panel survey, which ultimately circumscribes the usefulness of longitudinal analyses of the PSLSD-KIDS data.

Scholars interested in income mobility in South Africa have more recently turned their attention to the National Income Dynamics Survey, which was developed in large part to better understand these mobility dynamics (Woolard and Leibbrandt, 2006: 8; Finn, Leibbrandt, and Levinsohn, 2012: 1). Although

analysis of NIDS data is still very much in its infancy, initial results indicate that the degree of social mobility in South Africa is relatively low. Finn, Leibbrandt and Levinsohn (2012), for example, analysed the first two waves of NIDS to gauge intra-generational mobility in South Africa. Their findings paint a mixed picture of the degree of social mobility in South Africa: their analysis found significant movement in the middle of the income distribution, but the majority (70 percent) of South Africans in the bottom quintile remained in that quintile, and over three-quarters of those in the top quintile remained among the richest 20 percent of South African families (*ibid*: 12 and 18). Although Finn, Leibbrandt and Levinsohn did not perform a multivariate analysis in order to determine the characteristics that make certain families more mobile than others, they highlight the role of household size and employment as the two biggest drivers of income mobility (*ibid*: 21-2).

Analysis of NIDS data, however, suffers from a number of shortcomings. Not only is two years - the amount of time between the two available waves of NIDS - an inadequate time frame to fully uncover the nature of social mobility in the rapidly changing post-apartheid environment, but as Woolard and Leibbrandt (2006: 12) highlight in their prospectus for NIDS, “You generally need 3 waves of a panel to start to ... tease out mobility pathways.” Only two waves of NIDS have been conducted. With time and the continuation of NIDS, we should expect these issues to no longer impact future analyses of NIDS data and for NIDS to play an increasingly important role in the understanding of income mobility in post-apartheid South Africa.

Despite the dearth of data on occupational and income dynamics in South Africa, the degree of intergenerational class and income mobility can be measured indirectly through educational mobility, about which there is significantly more data (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 330). Because educational level is highly correlated with both occupational attainment and average wages in South Africa (see Birdsall and Graham, 2000: 15; Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 330; Keswell and Poswell, 2004), educational mobility can potentially provide insights into the nature of South Africa’s social mobility. Although Nimubona and Vencatachellum (2003) found little educational mobility among poorer families in the KIDS survey, most analyses report a significant degree of intergenerational educational mobility in South Africa. Louw, Van der Berg and Yu (2007), analysing educational mobility between 1970 and 2001, found a considerable degree of educational mobility among black South Africans, although there were still large racial disparities at the tertiary level. Similarly, Girdwood and Leibbrandt (2009), analysing data from

the first wave of NIDS in 2008, report significant educational mobility across race, age, geotype and gender, with Africans experiencing more educational mobility than their white counterparts.

Educational mobility, however, may ultimately be a poor proxy for social mobility in post-apartheid South Africa. Although Girdwood and Leibbrandt (2009: 6, 11, 22) reported a considerable degree of educational mobility in their analysis of NIDS data, this increased educational attainment did not translate into occupational mobility, especially for Africans. Seekings and Nattrass (2006: 332) offer a possible explanation for this observed trend: “It might well be the case that people with identical educational qualifications have different prospects in the labour market because of the different information, attitudes and networks that they inherited or acquired from their contrasting social backgrounds.” Thus, those who have experienced considerable educational mobility may be at a relative disadvantage in the labor market because they lack the necessary social capital.

Additionally, not all educational backgrounds are similarly perceived by employers; two individuals, for example, may have same number of *years* of schooling, but one individual may command a premium in the labor market because of the reputations of the institutions that he attended or his area of academic focus. And Keswell and Poswell (2004: 835 and 844) concluded that educational achievement has little impact on average wages before the tertiary level, indicating that access to tertiary education, not educational mobility per se, has a more profound impact on social mobility in South Africa

In an attempt to seek easily measured rates of mobility, the existing literature has largely neglected to study perceptions of social mobility in South Africa, an area of study that is a common trend globally (Strauss, 2006: 4). Although there is a vibrant debate in the social psychology literature about to what degree perceptions reflect and shape reality (see Jussim [1991] for a more detailed discussion), it is generally accepted that, in the words of Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976: 4), “The relationship between objective conditions and psychological states is very imperfect and that in order to know the quality of life experience it will be necessary to go directly to the individual himself.” And perceptions of social mobility appear particularly dissociated from objective trends (Graham, 2000: 227; Heath, de Graaf and Li, 2010: 30).

Ultimately, it is subjective perceptions of social mobility, not objective trends, which have a more direct impact on society (Lipset and Bendix, 1991: xxii).

Perceptions of social mobility not only have a profound influence on an individual's views of the economic system in which he or she operates, but these perceptions also have a significant impact on his or her voting behavior (Birdsall and Graham, 2000: 5). Furthermore, as Graham (2000: 228) argues, subjective mobility trends “can [also] have long-term effects on incentives and allocation structures.” And for post-apartheid South Africa, examining perceptions of social mobility and inequality appears particularly important because perceptions of economic inequities and mobility have profound repercussions for social and political cohesion (Behrman, 2000: 77; Burns, 2009: 7).

There has been some work done internationally on perceptions of social mobility (see, e.g., Graham, 2000 [Latin America and Peru]; Mateju, 2000 [Eastern Europe]; Webb, 2000 [Peru]; Heath, de Graaf and Li, 2010 [Britain]). Most of the available literature, however, is based on responses to survey questionnaires that tend to highlight the dissociation between objective and subjective mobility and fail to uncover the potential repercussions of this dissonance for society. Therefore, although surveys are perhaps more functional, they ultimately lack the nuance and insight that in-depth, open-ended interviews can provide. The little work done on perceptions of social mobility in South Africa tends to suffer from these same shortcomings.

The few authors who have indirectly waded into the difficult task of trying to catalogue perceptions of social mobility in South Africa have discovered that in fact perceptions do differ greatly from reality. Burns (2009: 7-12), in an attempt to uncover perceptions of social cohesion in South Africa using data from the first wave of NIDS, concluded that there was “an expectation of significant upward economic mobility” among South Africans in all locations of the income distribution; only 18 percent of those in the lowest quintile, for example, expected to remain there over the subsequent two years, with over two-thirds of these individuals predicting that their income would gain at least 17 percent compared to the average South African. These expectations, however, appear largely unfounded in the existing literature (*see, supra*, at 8-10).

Similarly, Bray et al. (2010: 217-9), who examined expectations of educational attainment among Cape Town youth and their parents, found that respondents also tended to greatly overestimate their educational potential. Posel (2012: 5-11), in her exploration of subjective wellbeing in South Africa using data from the first two waves of NIDS, found that individuals were particularly bad at estimating their current location within the income distribution (many

underestimated their comparative wealth). Moreover, in 2008, nearly three-quarters of these individuals expected to experience upward relative mobility within two years; this number had fallen to 50 percent by 2010, presumably reflecting the impact of the global economic downturn on the economy of South Africa.

To date, Wale (2012) has engaged in perhaps the most concerted effort to uncover perceptions of social mobility in South Africa. In her chapter in the forthcoming *Classifying Soweto*, a collection of essays on conceptions of class in townships outside Johannesburg, Wale drew on qualitative interviews with a non-random subset of the 2,550 respondents who were part of a 2006 survey run by the University of Johannesburg that was designed in part to uncover perceptions of class mobility. Wale demonstrates that class consciousness is deeply rooted in concepts of “consumption” and that these conceptions of class in Soweto profoundly impact definitions of mobility (i.e. mobility is viewed through the prism of material acquisition). Wale ultimately argues that respondents presented both “individualistic explanations” of social capital that highlighted the importance of hard work and determination and “structural explanations” that emphasised the high barriers of unemployment and access to capital. Although Wale’s research is an important contribution to the investigation of perceptions of social mobility in South Africa, it ultimately differs significantly from this paper; instead of focusing on respondents’ mobility experiences as this paper does, she instead focused on self-described class position of the interviewees when drawing conclusions.

Although a few authors have attempted to uncover perceptions of social mobility in South Africa, this important task has been largely neglected by South African scholars, as in much of Africa. As the social anthropologist Peter C. Lloyd (1974: 4) bemoaned (in characteristically colonial and gendered terms) over 35 years ago in the introduction to his classic study of inequality and social mobility in Nigeria:

‘Whatever might be the validity of [the existing literature], conspicuous by absence from this literature is any discussion of the African’s own view of his society. What does *he* think about the inequalities described above? How does *he* view his opportunities? His actions, in accepting his society or protesting, are founded upon his image of this society and we cannot understand or explain them satisfactorily save in terms of this image.’

In South Africa at least, Lloyd's observations remain mostly true.

This study seeks to address this yawning gap in the current literature on social mobility in South Africa. Through twelve in-depth ethnographic interviews with black South Africans, this study attempts to uncover perceptions of social mobility in Cape Town. However, this study is not merely interested in whether or not South Africans believe that they are economically mobile; by surveying a number of individuals from diverse economic backgrounds, this paper begins to investigate how selected black South Africans in one part of the country conceptualise their economic environment, why they believe certain individuals are mobile while others are not, and what they believe should be done to facilitate mobility.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to gauge perceptions of social mobility among black individuals in Cape Town, South Africa. Although black Africans represent a minority (27 percent) of Cape Town residents (Biddlecom and Bakilana, 2003: 7), they constitute the vast majority (80 percent) of South Africans. Black South Africans were the individuals most disadvantaged by apartheid policies, both economically and socially. Thus, black South Africans' perceptions are particularly important to the study of social mobility in South Africa.

In order to gauge perceptions of social mobility, a series of twelve in-depth ethnographic interviews were conducted with individuals from diverse economic backgrounds during May and June of 2012. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were developed specifically to probe how the interview subjects conceptualise their economic position in South African society. Many of these questions were adapted from the 2005 Cape Area Study (CAS) survey questionnaire. However, unlike the CAS, individuals were not asked to choose from a number of prescribed responses; rather, those interviewed were given an opportunity to formulate their own answers to the questions and to elaborate on their responses at length. Ultimately, the questions served as a guide during the interviews rather than a formal script.

Figure 1: Conceptualisation of mobility experiences in Cape Town

	<b>Unsuccessful Outcome</b> <i>Proxy:</i> Unemployment or Underemployment	<b>Successful Outcome</b> <i>Proxy:</i> Employment or UCT Student
<b>Disadvantaged</b> <i>Proxy:</i> Unemployment	CATEGORY 1	CATEGORY 2
<b>Advantaged</b> <i>Proxy:</i> Employment or Middle/Upper Class Family	CATEGORY 3	CATEGORY 4

Because the focus of the study was social mobility, the study sought to interview a sample of individuals with diverse mobility experiences. To accomplish this goal, the population was divided into four categories depending on both background and outcome (see Figure 1). The first category consists of individuals who were from “disadvantaged” backgrounds and have experienced little, if any, upward mobility (have had relatively “unsuccessful” outcomes); the second category consists of individuals who were from “disadvantaged” backgrounds, but have experienced a considerable degree of upward mobility (have had relatively “successful” outcomes); the third category consists of those who were from “advantaged” backgrounds but have since experienced considerable downward mobility; and finally, the fourth category consists of those who were from “advantaged” backgrounds and remain in their “advantaged” position today. Because there is little significant downward mobility for those already near the top of the income distribution (Seekings and Natrass, 2006: 336; see also Finn, Leibbrandt and Levinsohn, 2012: 18), the third category - those who were from “advantaged” backgrounds but have had “unsuccessful” outcomes - is less relevant to the South African experience and was thus largely disregarded during the study.

Those interviewed from the first two categories (i.e., those from “disadvantaged” backgrounds) were randomly selected from participants in the fifth wave of the Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS). CAPS, a joint effort of the Population Studies Center in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town (UCT), is a longitudinal study of originally about 4,800 randomly

selected Cape Town residents who were between the ages of 14 and 22 when the study began in 2002. The study has since completed five waves, the most recent of which was in 2009 (Lam et al., 2008 2; <http://www.caps.uct.ac.za/>).

This study's sample was first restricted to only black African young people surveyed in wave five of CAPS. Because the focus of the study is social mobility, the sample was further restricted to include just those who were under the age of 25 in 2009 (who were born after 1984), as those who are most likely to have nuanced expectations about their futures. Finally, unemployment at the time of data collection in 2009 was used as a proxy for "disadvantaged" background. The remaining 409 individuals were then randomised and individuals were sequentially contacted until four interview subjects were identified for each category. During this process, unemployment and underemployment were used to proxy for "unsuccessful" outcomes, or a lack of considerable upward mobility, while full-time employment was used as a proxy for "successful" outcomes. It should be noted that only those who had at least one phone number that was the same as the numbers recorded in 2009 were contacted for interviews, introducing potential bias into the sample of individuals selected.<sup>4</sup>

A different approach was taken in order to identify subjects for the third group of interest for this study: those from "advantaged" positions that have had "successful" outcomes, or those in category four. According to Seekings (2011a: 27), "A major concern with any survey is the difficulty of interviewing rich households." And as Seekings indicates, there is no reason to believe that this non-response among wealthier households is non-random. Furthermore, some of those in the CAPS study who came from "advantaged" backgrounds were university students, many of whom most likely left Cape Town upon completion of their degrees. Thus, because of the potentially confounding effects of these biases, interview candidates for category four were selected through purposive sampling. The individuals targeted for category four were UCT students from either middle or upper class backgrounds, who had been in Cape Town for at least two years. Although attending UCT is an imperfect measure of "success" in the social-mobility sense, students at UCT can *expect* successful outcomes when they graduate and enter the labor market and most likely have already begun to internalise these successful outcomes.

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<sup>4</sup> Having the same phone number for three years suggests a certain degree of financial security, as it implies that an individual was able to pay his or her phone bills during the three-year interim.

Each of the twelve individuals selected to participate in this study were interviewed for approximately one hour. The arguments that follow are based entirely on a careful examination and coding of these interviews. This qualitative analysis sought to identify continuities and discontinuities among the different groups interviewed and to uncover gender, location and age-based patterns. Although this study lacks statistical significance and only represents the perceptions of social mobility of black Africans in one South African city, it offers preliminary insights into an underexplored subject and offers one potential model for future inquiries.

## **A Brief Introduction to the Study's Subjects**

The twelve interviewees ranged in age between 20 and 29 years old. Although most of the interviewees from disadvantaged backgrounds were either born in Cape Town or had lived in Cape Town for a significant period of time, none of the UCT students had lived in Cape Town for longer than two years. No deliberate attempt was made to recruit a gender-balanced sample; thus two more men were interviewed than women. All the interviews were conducted in English except for one, which was conducted in Xhosa through a translator.

All of the UCT students interviewed lived in UCT residence halls in Cape Town's southern suburbs and were all third-year students, although none of them was studying for the same degree. UCT-1 is a 20 year-old male studying business science from a medium-sized city near Johannesburg, where he attended a primarily white high school. His mother works for the Department of Education and his father is a high school principal. UCT-2 is a 20 year-old medical student from Mpumalanga, where his father is an engineer in a mine and his mother is a primary-school teacher. UCT-3 is a 21 year-old woman from a wealthy household. Her father is an executive at an investment bank and her mother is a university professor, and she is studying for a social science degree at UCT. Finally, UCT-4 is a 20 year-old female from Durban. Her mother is a nurse and single mother, and at UCT she is studying social science.

The interviewees from disadvantaged backgrounds, in categories 1 and 2, all live in townships in the Khayelitsha vicinity. All of those in category 2 were employed at the time of the interviews in 2012, but not all of the individuals were equally happy with their employment. KS-1, for example, is a 28 year-old woman who works as a protection officer at Metrorail. She is extremely happy with her job and most of her friends are co-workers. Although she has no

children of her own, she supports her mother and two brothers, in addition to an uncle who is also in Cape Town, and a grandmother in the Eastern Cape. She is in the process of building a house for her family. In contrast, KS-2 is a 27 year-old woman who is married with a son. Together, they live in an informal shack in Greenpoint. Although she leads a sales team at a retail store, she has a degree in management and cannot find work in her desired field. The third individual interviewed in category 2, KS-7, is a 27 year-old man who has two children but is unmarried. He works full time as a bookbinder but aspires to be a fashion designer. Finally, KS-8 is a 29 year-old man who works six days a week at a post office in Haut Bay. Because of his previous experiences with unemployment, he is happy with his job and is able to support his two children and wife, and still set aside money every month for his mother.

All of those interviewed in category 1 were either unemployed or underemployed in mid-2012. KU-3 is a 25 year-old woman who is married to a taxi driver and together they have a four year-old daughter. Although she has had some experience in the formal workforce, she is currently unemployed and her daughter lives with her mother for financial reasons. KU-4 is a 24 year-old man who is a student at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. He can only occasionally find “part time” jobs, although he needs the income to help support himself and his studies. KU-5 is a 29 year-old carpenter who is only able to find transient work. Although he migrated from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town twelve years ago, he speaks very little English and the interview was conducted in Xhosa. He has no children but supports his sister and her child. Finally, KU-6 is a 27 year-old man who works as a gardener. He used to be able to find steadier work for up to five or six months at a time, but now has only “one garden” to tend. KU-6 was probably the poorest interviewee; he repeatedly mentioned that there were days when he did not have anything to eat and that he had “nothing.”

*Table 1: Categorisation of interviewees*

	Relatively Unsuccessful Outcome	Relatively Successful Outcome
Disadvantaged Background	KU-3, KU-4, KU-5, KU-6	KS-1, KS-2, KS-7, KS-8
Advantaged Background		UCT-1, UCT-2, UCT-3, UCT-4

## **Results: Perceptions of Social Mobility Among Black Individuals in Cape Town**

This section offers findings from a detailed analysis of the twelve interviews conducted in the study.<sup>5</sup> Through a close reading of the interviews, similarities and differences among the three groups of interviewees are probed. The section is divided into three parts. First, how respondents conceptualise the economic stratification of South African society is explored, highlighting the continued association of wealth and race for many of those interviewed. Then, mobility pathways emphasised during the interviews are critically examined. Finally, this section ends with an investigation of expectations of both intra-generational and intergenerational mobility among the twelve respondents, which appear to be closely related to previous mobility experiences.

### **“It [is] still blacks at the bottom and white people at the top”: Conceptions of the Economic Stratification of South Africa**

Although this paper is primarily concerned with perceptions of social mobility among black individuals in Cape Town, social mobility has important relative dimensions (Pearce, 2011: 4). It is therefore necessary to first explore how interviewees conceptualise the economic stratification of South African society, to try to uncover the respondents’ frame of reference, before interrogating how these individuals imagine their own mobility. In order to facilitate discussion

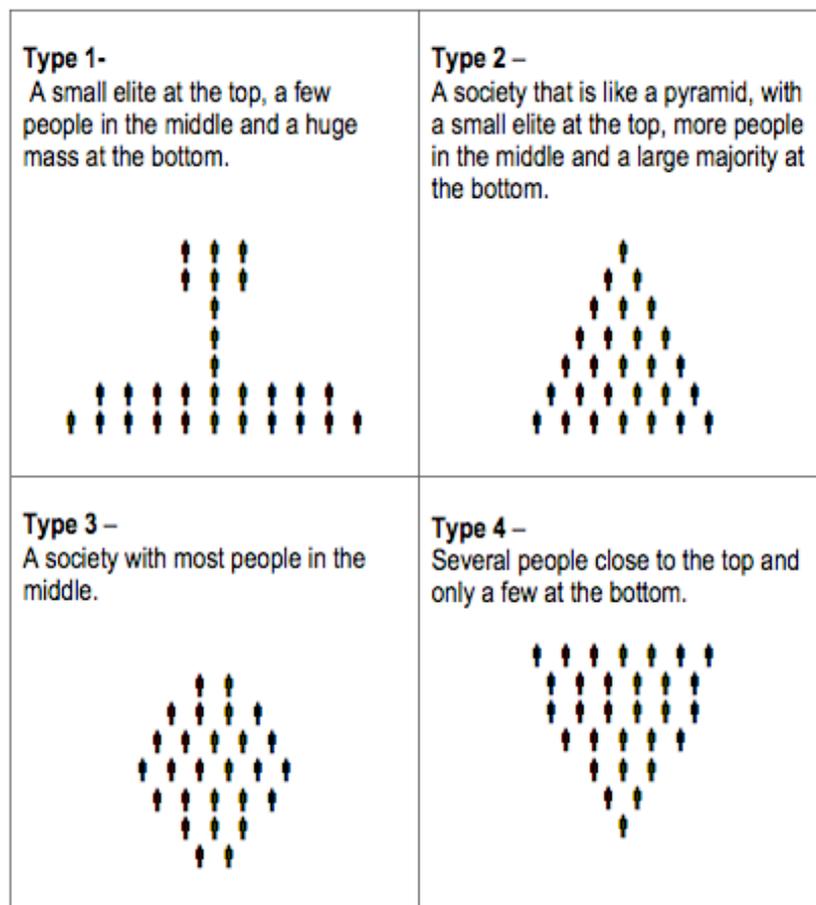
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<sup>5</sup> Transcripts of the interviews are available upon request through the Center for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town.

about the distribution of income in South African society, respondents were given a copy of Figure 2, which was used in the 2005 Cape Areas Study, and read a version of the following:

These four pictures show different types of society. The first picture represents a society with a small elite of rich people at the top, a few people in the middle, and a large number of poor people at the bottom. The second picture represents a society that is like a pyramid, with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and a lot of poor people at the bottom. The third picture shows a society in which most people are in the middle. The fourth picture shows a society with lots of people at the top, some in the middle, and very few at the bottom. Which of these pictures, in your view, describes South Africa today?

*Figure 2: Pictures depicting different models of the economic stratification of South African society*



Although analysis of CAS data found “only a weak relationship between self-placement on the rich/poor scale and how respondents saw society” (Seekings, 2007: 24), there appears to be a correlation between mobility experiences and how individuals conceptualised the distribution of wealth in South Africa. Table 2 shows that seven of the eight individuals in category 1 (those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced little mobility) and category 4 (those from advantaged backgrounds who have had “successful” outcomes) chose type 1 when asked how they would describe South African society. On the other hand, three of the four interviewed from category 2 (those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced some degree of upward social mobility) selected type 2.<sup>6</sup>

*Table 2: Conceptualisation of the distribution of income in South Africa by mobility category*

Category	Type 1 (# of individuals)	Type 2 (# of individuals)	Type 3 (# of individuals)	Type 4 (# of individuals)
1 (KU)	3	1	0	0
2 (KS)	1	3	0	0
4 (UCT)	4	0	0	0

In their responses, the interviewees gave some indication as to why conceptions of South African society’s economic stratification may be influenced by experiences of social mobility. Those who had experienced little social mobility - those in categories 1 and 4 - tended to emphasise the insurmountable gap between rich and poor that ultimately precluded the emergence of a middle class.

For example, UCT-2, the medical student, lamented “the huge gap between the rich and the poor ... [Thus,] there is no place for your middle-class [] South African, per se, because it’s stretched out so much. You have the two extremes and no middle class.” UCT-4, the industrial sociology major, concurred: “I think if you’re at the bottom, there is a very little chance of you getting up” because “there’s a big gap between the rich and the poor - that’s why there’s not a lot of middle income people.” Similarly, KU-3, the unemployed wife of the

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<sup>6</sup> Seekings (2007: 24) found that CAS respondents chose type 2 most often (38 percent of the time), followed closely by those who chose type 1 (30 percent of the time).

taxi driver, described how “there is just those few people with money ... [and] all of us are at the bottom because we’ve got nothing at all. Even there is no work, there is nothing, so it’s a lot of us at the bottom.”

In contrast, those in category 2, perhaps because they have experienced some degree of upward mobility, could better imagine pathways from the bottom to the top and thus highlighted the presence of a robust middle class by selecting type 2. KS-8, the postal worker, recognised that “there are not too many people in South Africa who have got wealth” and that “most of [the people] ... have got nowhere to dig, they’ve got nowhere to go to,” but “in the middle are those who are trying to make it and trying by all means. ... Those in the middle are those who is trying.” And KS-1, the Metrorail employee, described how she “know[s] there is a middle class” by saying, “There are rich people” and “there are still people who don’t have” but there are also “the people who are not rich, [but] are working hard now to get the balance, to be able to send the children to school, to be able to get decent medical help or whatever things like that.”

Although there was disagreement over how exactly South African society was stratified economically - particularly over whether or not there was a robust middle class - there was general agreement on the racialised nature of this stratification. Nearly all interviewees identified the top of the distribution as being predominantly white and the bottom as being entirely black. KS-2, for example, argued that “the whites [were at the top]. The white is the richest,” while the blacks were “in the lower level.” Similarly, UCT-1 indicated that he would “characterise [the distribution of wealth] from a racial point of view”. He described how being “rich” meant being in “the top class, living in the nicer suburbs, your Constantias, where there are very few black people” while being “poor” meant “living in the townships, where you won’t find a white face.” Although most recognised that there were black Africans at the top of the distribution, they tended to argue as KU-4 did, that “it’s just a portion of black people who are rich. The majority though are poor and then also coloured people - the majority are poor.” UCT-4 summarised the general sentiment of the majority of the respondents well: “I’d say black people are at the bottom, ... a good mixture in the middle, and at the top, a lot of white people and maybe [a few of them] of them are black.” Thus, as UCT-2 ultimately concluded, “It [is] still blacks at the bottom and white people at the top. ... [It is split] along racial lines, very racial.”

However, these perceptions of a racialised distribution of wealth in South Africa do not reflect reality. Although the apartheid government deliberately

structured the labor market, growth path and welfare benefits of South Africa to benefit white constituents, beginning in the 1970s race became increasingly less important for reproducing privilege (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 6, 91). In fact, by 2000, the upper classes were nearly as black as they were white (see Garcia-Rivero, 2006: 66; Seekings and Nattrass, 306). As Nattrass and Seekings (2001: 47) conclude, “In South Africa, black and white are *no longer* synonymous with rich and poor” (emphasis in original).

What then explains this disconnect between perception and reality? Part of the discontinuity can perhaps be attributed to the unique demographics of Cape Town. Although there are nearly as many non-whites as whites at the top of the income distribution *nationally*, the “urban privileged,” according to Seekings (Forthcoming: 12), “are in Cape Town, [still] predominantly but not exclusively white. In other parts of the country this category is more thoroughly multi-racial.” But this explanation may have less salience than initially appears. All of those in category 4 - those from advantaged backgrounds now attending UCT - are not originally from Cape Town but they still conveyed a deeply racialised understanding of the distribution of income. Moreover, many of the black Africans at UCT come from relatively well-to-do backgrounds. But this too seems to have had little impact on the perceptions of interviewees in category 4. As UCT-2 observed, “At UCT, you see a lot of black people here and you think there’s a lot of people making it. But personally I think that it’s a very small amount looking at South Africa as a whole.”

Additionally, these perceptions may reflect the views espoused by South Africa’s political leaders. As Seekings and Nattrass (2006: 342-5) and others have highlighted, South African politicians continue to fallaciously assert that the distribution of wealth in South Africa has changed little since the height of apartheid. Perhaps most famously, then-Deputy President Thabo Mbeki famously argued in his “Two Nations” speech,

‘We ... make bold to say that South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. ... The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor’ (Mbeki, 19 May 1998, as quoted in Hadland and Rantao, 1999: 188).

As recently as June 2012, South Africa's current president, Jacob Zuma, asserted that "the economic power relations of the apartheid era have in the main remained intact. The ownership of the economy is still primarily in the hands of white males as it has always been" (26 June 2012). Maurencia Gillion, a senior ANC leader in the Western Cape, echoed Zuma's position to *The New York Times* (Polgreen, 2012) later that day: "The rich white people [in Overstand] live in their beautiful holiday homes. The rest are in slums, in squatter areas. Even after 18 years, in reality apartheid remains."

During this study's interviews, however, a third and perhaps more salient explanation emerged in that many of the respondents conflated race with class - they ascribed white characteristics to *all* those at the top of the income distribution and ascribed black characteristics to *all* of those at the bottom. For example, KU-5 asked, "[Who are the] people who have money? ... They are white." And KS-7 described how "black *is* poor" (emphasis added). This association of class with certain racialised characteristics was perhaps most clearly articulated by UCT-3, who painted black people in the relatively small middle class as "having a crisis of identity," caught between black (being in the lower class) and white (being in the upper class):

'People that are in the middle class, hav[e] a crisis of identity: "Who am I?" Because if you go back to the township and use twang or speak with an accent or you articulate properly, it's like you're making yourself better and you're moving away from the blackness. And when you go to school you get the same thing because you're louder by volume than the other people. ... "I'm black but I'm not black enough to be black." There's a class where you're ghetto, you're model C, you're coconut: there are certain places where you're black, but you're not black enough to be black.'

This trend has been documented by others. Alexander (2007: 104) argues that this conceptualisation of class is common among "township youth" and the word "coconut" - a fruit that is black on the outside and white on the inside - is frequently used to describe upper class black South Africans (see e.g., Matlwa, 2007). Thus, the racialised perceptions of South Africa's economic stratification expressed by the interviewees could, in part, reflect the tendency to ascribe different racial characteristics to different classes.

*Summary Table 1: Economic stratification*

	Relatively Unsuccessful Outcomes	Relatively Successful Outcomes
Disadvantaged Background	Most respondents from category 1, because they had experienced little upward mobility, tended to emphasise an insurmountable gap between the rich and the poor that ultimately precluded the emergence of a middle class by selecting type 1. Respondents stressed that those at the top of the income distribution are mostly white, while those at the bottom are all black.	Those in category 2, because they have experienced some degree of upward mobility, could better imagine pathways from the bottom to the top, and thus highlighted the presence of a robust middle class by selecting type 2. Respondents from category 2, however, also viewed the upper classes as predominantly white and the lower classes as predominantly black.
Advantaged Background		All respondents from category 4, because they had experienced neither upward nor downward mobility, also highlighted the large gap between rich and poor and lack of a middle class by selecting type 1. Those in category 4, despite being exposed to a large number of successful black individuals while at UCT, still conceptualised the distribution of income in distinctly racial terms.

## **“The long and winding road”: Pathways to Success (and Failure)**

During the interviews, the respondents emphasised a number of characteristics of the upwardly and downwardly mobile. A close reading of the interviews was undertaken in an attempt to identify the key mobility pathways stressed by interviewees. Respondents highlighted three paths that often led to economic success: education, hard work, and connections to government officials and employers. They repeatedly argued that social grants hindered upward mobility.

This section critically examines the pathways identified by the interviewees, paying careful attention to how mobility experience influences conceptualisations of these pathways.

## **“Education is the key for everything!”**

The relationship between educational achievement and standard of living in South Africa is well documented (Louw, Van der Berg and Yu, 2007: 549; Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 265). Bhorat (2004: 951) found that employment is positively and exponentially related to educational level, and Statistics South Africa (2010: x) found that median monthly income increased with level of education. Keswell and Poswell (2004: 835 and 844), however, point to the particular importance of tertiary education for upward mobility. They found that while the marginal rate of return for education is near zero for lower levels of education (less than 10 years), the return on education for those with tertiary qualifications increases markedly.

Because of the strong correlation between education and standard of living, it is perhaps unsurprising that all of those interviewed recognised the importance of education to upward mobility. Education was understood as a prerequisite for gaining access to the labor market, and ultimately for economic success. As KS-2, the sales associate, argued, “It is possible [for a poor person to become rich]...if you study, [you] get a job, [then] it’s possible.” Her sentiment was echoed by KU-5, the unemployed carpenter: “People in general get jobs when they are educated.” Therefore, KU-5 saw education as the defining characteristic between the rich and the poor: “If you take a closer look, most people who are rich are those who are educated and then the poor are those who are uneducated.” As KS-7, the book binder, concluded, “Education is the key for everything! Any job! ... The door is open. You put the key inside the door [and it] will open!”

Among those in categories 2 and 4, however, there was a creeping awareness that education alone was no longer enough to achieve upward mobility. This reflects Girdwood and Leibbrandt’s (2009: 6, 11, 22) finding that, despite high degrees of educational mobility in South African society, there has been much less occupational mobility. Most attributed this trend to increasingly stringent qualification demands set by prospective employers. KS-2, the same woman who argued that a poor person could become rich through education, also described how good jobs were hard to find for educated individuals because in

“most of the cases [employers] say [you] need experience, maybe five years of experience.” “How will you get experience of three years or five years,” she bemoaned, “when you are coming from university?” UCT-3 argued, “Even now, currently, it’s not enough to get a degree, whether it’s a master’s degree, an honors degree. It doesn’t really hold much value, because companies are asking for experience.” According to KS-8, the postal worker, this reality is increasingly discouraging individuals from seeking an education:

‘There are people you find, they are educated, they’ve got diplomas, they’ve got degrees and then they tell [you], ‘I can’t get a job!’ and then you like ‘How?’ and they say they don’t know ... And the other person is going to be like ‘Why should I bother to go to school? Because there is a guy who has got Masters and degrees sitting there—he doesn’t get a job!’

Ultimately, however, most still viewed education as beneficial. “Nowadays they want experience. But how can you get experience if you don’t have the job?” KS-1 asked. “But I think it’s better to be educated than not.”

Despite the general consensus on the importance of education to upward mobility, there was widespread disagreement over why those from poorer backgrounds did not then get educated. Those in categories 1 and 2 - those from disadvantaged backgrounds and, thus less educated on average - faulted structural disadvantages, mainly poverty and lack of resources, for hindering educational mobility. KS-7 argued, “Education is there for everybody, but [you need] money—if the money is there for everybody, everybody will find [education].” Most in category 2 - those who had already experienced a degree of mobility - focused primarily on the prohibitive cost of tertiary education. KS-2 described how “there is a lot of people ... who can’t afford universities.” Similarly, KS-7 contended that “there are many good people, ... [but] they just passed Grade 12. ... Now they have got no cash to go and study—to go into university or colleges.” In contrast, those in category 1 - those who have experienced less mobility - emphasised how poverty prevented individuals from attaining even lower levels of education. As KU-3, the unemployed wife of the taxi driver, described:

‘The parents don’t even have money for the children to go to school. ... Some of them dropped out from school because of hunger. You know? Or because of statuses—some of them they go to school and they don’t have shoes and “why should I go to school? I’ve got no shoes! I’ve got no clothes on my back!” Some of them end up thinking that they go look for a job and drop out of school.’

Although those from advantaged backgrounds recognised the presence of structural barriers, they tended to blame individuals for not taking advantage of the educational opportunities available to them, and their communities for not supporting their educational aspirations. UCT-1, the business science major, recognised the high “cost of becoming skilled” but ultimately attributed high dropout rates to shortsightedness: “There’s pressure from parents who say actually go get a job by the time they’re in ninth grade and they’re actually legally able to drop out they say, ‘Go get a job, there needs to be money in the house.’ It’s very short-sighted and I think that’s one of the main issues in South Africa, a lot of the black race is short-sighted rather than long-sighted.” Similarly, UCT-2, in response to a question asking why certain individuals fail to enroll in varsity, replied,

‘There is always the story of black South Africans being complacent and not utilising the opportunities that they’ve been given. It’s the conditions that people live in. You’re not groomed to think varsity is the best option; you’re groomed to think that getting a job and making money is because of the situation that you’re in.’

The truth, however, probably lies somewhere in the middle. Seekings and Natrass (2006: 330) identify a confluence of factors that hinder educational mobility among the lower classes, including a lack of a “culture of learning” in poorer areas, parents who are less motivated, less spending (and probably ability to spend) on education among the poor, and home environments that fail to encourage students. But these views potentially reveal a fundamental paradox in South African society: although most of those interviewed correctly recognise the importance of education to mobility, there appear to be deep structural (and perhaps behavioral) barriers preventing a large portion of South Africans from achieving this mobility through education.

*Summary Table 2: Education*

	Relatively Unsuccessful Outcomes	Relatively Successful Outcomes
Disadvantaged Background	<p>Respondents in category 1 recognised the importance of education for upward mobility. However, those in category 1 highlighted the large structural barriers—in particular, poverty—to educational attainment.</p>	<p>Although those in category 2 also stressed the importance of education for upward mobility, most believed that education alone did not guarantee economic success. However, those in category 2 stressed the prohibitive cost of tertiary education as the major barrier to educational achievement.</p>
Advantaged Background		<p>All respondents from UCT were confident that their UCT education would ensure economic opportunity later in life, but also recognised that for some, education alone was not enough to guarantee this opportunity. Although those in category 4 recognised the presence of structural barriers to educational attainment, they ultimately faulted individuals and their communities for not valuing education and failing to capitalise on the educational opportunities available to all South Africans.</p>

## **“Black South Africans are lazy”: Working Hard to Move Up?**

During the interviews, two very different conceptualisations of social mobility emerged. Those in categories 2 and 4 - those who had either experienced social mobility themselves or were from relatively advantaged backgrounds - tended to offer “individualistic” explanations, meaning the opinion that “individuals are responsible for their relative positions within” society, for social mobility and believed that social grants hindered upward mobility by insulating individuals from this individual responsibility. In contrast, those who had experienced little mobility and remained disadvantaged - those in category 1 - recognised the importance of hard work, yet tended to emphasise “structural” explanations for their lack of mobility and saw social grants as necessary protection from an unsympathetic economic system (Wale, 2012: 156).

Interviewees from categories 2 and 4 repeatedly stressed that opportunities, and thus upward mobility, were available for those willing to work hard for them. KS-1 described how

‘There [are opportunities] if you are willing to work for it. ... You have to work hard. ... There is no other way around it. Anything can get you to the top, if you work hard on it. Because even now at my position at Metrorail as a protection officer, I know that if I work hard, then there is a chance that I will get the opportunity to get something more.’

Similarly, UCT-1 argued,

‘I think it’s initiative and perseverance at the end of the day. You know, if you’re wanting to stick it out and you’re able to stick it out then you’ll enjoy the fruits at the end of the day by getting that job. If you’re continuously trying to push yourself then you’ll be able to get to where you want to be.’

Those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have not experienced upward mobility, e.g. those who have not been able to take advantage of these “opportunities”, are thus seen as “lazy.” KS-2 argued that “before we did not have a lot of people who were having those opportunities and now we have the opportunities, a lot of opportunities. [It’s] just that the people don’t use them.” As UCT-3 concluded, in response to a question about why South Africans do not take more “initiative,” “South Africans are *lazy*...Black South Africans are

lazy. They are complacent. They feel they are entitled. They're dreamers and they're not implementers." These perceptions are not unique to this sample and seem to be widely held by those who have experienced some degree of social mobility. An analysis of labor market dynamics in Cape Town (Seekings, Forthcoming: 13) identified at least one individual who expressed very similar sentiments about the black unemployed.

Interestingly, nearly all of those who believed that hard work could facilitate mobility faulted social grants for facilitating the "laziness" of those with relatively unsuccessful outcomes. South Africa inherited an extraordinarily expansive, if racialised, welfare system from its apartheid past (Matisonn and Seekings, 2002: 2-3). These generous levels of social spending were not only maintained after South Africa's transition to democracy, but were greatly increased, driven primarily by an unprecedented doubling, in real terms, of spending for means tested social assistance programs between 1994 and 2006 to nearly 3.5 percent of GDP. The rapid growth in social assistance spending is most directly attributable to the introduction of the Child Support Grant (CSG) in 1998, which by 2006 reached over 8 million children (Seekings, 2008b: 29-32).

Although social grants in general were faulted for hindering social mobility, particular ire was directed at the CSG. KS-8, for example, described how there are

'Those people [who] are just like "I am going to depend on a pension!" You see? Some of them in the bottom I will take them as—I won't say they are lazy—I will take them as the people ... who don't want to go and find something. Ja, because there are those people who say "I am what I am so why should I!" you know? "I've got a pension, so why should I bother?"'

Similarly, as KS-1 argued in response to a question about why more people in Khayelitsha were not working,

'Some are waiting for the government money—because teenagers are having children waiting for the grant money. You don't see them opening up a place maybe to sell fruit and veg—they don't do that. You don't see them going to find work. Most of the time they just live month to month waiting for whatever grant money they are going to get from the government.'

As she also argued earlier in the interview, “If the government can stop that grant money, especially the youngsters ... will get up and go and find work, finish school.”

It is important to note that these views do not necessarily reflect growing neo-liberal sympathies among Cape Townians and opposition to social welfare spending generally. Rather, they reflect the largely incorrect belief that young women purposefully get pregnant in order to receive government grants (see Richter, 2009: 92). UCT-1 argued that “people [] live in a bubble of ... ‘The more kids I have the higher the grant is going to be.’” UCT-2 concurred: “Women are given grants for having children ... That’s not going to help ... I know people who get children just so that they can get a grant.” The negative views of the CSG were compounded by the impression that mothers did not spend the grant money on their children. UCT-3 argued, “I think that very few people - in my personal experience and I’ve seen people - very few of them actually use that money” correctly. And KS-7 asserted that when “you give that lady [a grant], she will say ‘it’s my money’ ... [And] she goes and drinks with the other boyfriend!”. Ultimately, however, most felt that the money spent on grants should be put to more productive *social* uses. As UCT-3 concluded, “We’re financially constrained ... and yet government finds projects that don’t really equip us. ... We spend 62 billion, if I’m not mistaken—yea, 62 billion—on grants, and that’s about four percent of our GDP. ... We are blocking other venues of development because we could use the same amount of money for something else, for education for example, or for health.”

Wale (2012: 156-7), who found a similar trend in her study of class in Soweto, argues that “the assumption underpinning this view is that the opportunities of a better life are there for the taking. Responsibility is [thus] placed on the individual to” take advantage of these opportunities. Williams (2006: 430, 440; see also Wale, 2012: 159) offers a potential explanation for why this individualistic understanding of social mobility may be so prevalent. The media, which Williams argues “select[s], defin[es], and communicat[es] pertinent issues in society,” has valorised the free market and presumably capitalism’s emphasis on the individual, while downplaying structural obstacles. Thus, it is possible that those in categories 2 and 4 are merely conceptualising their own success within the popular discourse about the topic. And Williams’ (2006) framework may also help to explain why so many of those in categories 2 and 4 attributed the failure to achieve upward mobility to the CSG, which is often ridiculed in the media (Richter, 2009: 94).

In contrast, those from category 1 tended to offer structural explanations for their lack of mobility. They highlighted the fickleness of life, emphasised the dearth of available opportunities, and argued that social grants were a necessary hedge against bad luck. KU-4, although recognising the importance of “do[ing] whatever” he could to seek out opportunities, ultimately felt that hard work was inadequate because these opportunities “aren’t easily accessible for poor people. People can’t access the opportunities.” As he concluded, “These things you don’t know when they happen but you just pray and hope that maybe one day you can be somewhere.” Similarly, KU-5 bemoaned that “I would like to see myself rich, but I don’t know what I can do” because, as he argued earlier, “there are [some] opportunities, but there are not many.” He concluded that the government should “increase the old age pension. And also increase the child support grants ... so that [we] don’t struggle too much.”

*Summary Table 3: Hard work*

	Relatively Unsuccessful Outcomes	Relatively Successful Outcomes
Disadvantaged Background	Those in category 1 tended to offer structural explanations for their lack of mobility and stressed the importance of social grants as a necessary hedge against life’s fickleness and a dearth of available opportunities.	Those in category 2, because they had experienced some degree of upward mobility, stressed that opportunities were available for those who were willing to work for them. They faulted those from category 1 for not taking advantages of the opportunities available to them and social grants for facilitating this indolence.
Advantaged Background		Those in category 4 similarly presented an individualistic understanding of social mobility in South Africa: those who failed to experience mobility lacked initiative and perseverance; social grants promoted this “laziness.”

## **Social Capital and Government Patronage: a More Meritocratic Top, a Nepotistic Bottom**

Respondents from the three mobility categories highlighted the importance of government patronage, nepotism and social capital for upward mobility, but opinions were not uniform across all of the categories. While those from advantaged backgrounds tended to view their opportunities for mobility as mostly meritocratic, those from disadvantaged backgrounds were much less optimistic. Individuals in category 2, despite emphasising the potential for hard work and education to yield success, argued that the probability of success was undermined by nepotism, connections to government contractors and a lack of social capital. Those from category 1 ultimately felt that their lack of social capital greatly circumscribed their opportunities for climbing the social ladder.

Although those in category 4 recognised social capital and government patronage as an important mobility route, they still saw abundant opportunity for meritocratic advancement. UCT-4, for example, argued that some of those who have reached the top did so because of “who [they] know” and “who they were previously affiliated with.” But she also highlighted that there are individuals who gained “opportunities when they were once at the bottom”, independent of government and network connections. Similarly, UCT-1 argued that “there are definitely ... two separate groups of the black middle to upper class. [There are] those who have benefited through the government and then there are those who have done it for themselves.” Interestingly, Black Economic Empowerment and affirmative action - two government programs established to remedy past disadvantages in the employment and business sectors - were not seen as weakening South Africa’s meritocracy. Rather, these programs, according to UCT-2, were seen as “empower[ing]” individuals and thus bolstering meritocratic paths. UCT-2’s major complaint about the programs is that more “black people are ... not [] empowered.” As UCT-1 described, “It’s so difficult to obtain wealth, from a very, very closed, I would go so far as to say white, wealth-held majority” that such structures are necessary so that more people can “start up your own thing” and stand on their own.

While emphasising hard work and education as fruitful paths to upward mobility, those in category 2 believed that their potential for mobility was ultimately circumscribed by nepotism and a lack of access to social capital. KS-2, who earlier argued that there are “a lot of opportunities, [it’s] just that people

don't use [them],” described how personal connections still played a prominent role in the hiring process:

‘It’s not easy to find jobs nowadays, unless you know somebody who is already there and [he] make[s] a way for you to get in. It’s working like that in these days. If you do not know anybody in that department or in that company, it’s less [likely you will] get a job there, even if you have experience. In most cases they take people they know, like relatives or whoever they know.’

Similarly, KS-8, who asserted that “if you get education ... then you [can] get a job,” later qualified his statement:

‘Most of the time it’s all about people getting in a job when they know somebody. Because most of the time you just find people—they apply for a job, but they don’t get the job and then you get people who have got the job, but they [are] not qualified to have the job.’

Those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced little mobility ultimately blame their lack of progress on this cronyism and nepotism. KU-3, the unemployed wife of the taxi driver, describes how jobs are distributed in her neighborhood: “If I get a tender then I call all my cousins in the Eastern Cape [and] I forget about those who are already here and so it sort of becomes a family thing.” Thus, KU-3 argues that the possibility that she will experience upward mobility is “zilch! Zero-point-zero ... [because] the people who are there, they’ve got their own brothers and sisters that if there is anything that is coming—it can be anything—they are calling their brothers and sister now. And [then] we don’t have money.” Similarly, KU-6, the gardener, sees little hope of a better future:

‘There is no one in here—where I stay—who [will] come from there and take me to work. [Instead,] they bring his cousin in Eastern Cape to start on the job the following day. But I am living with her here and she knows that I am not working, but he can’t take me to that job...She take her cousin from Eastern Cape. That’s why it’s so difficult, because if somebody knows [that] [KU-6] doesn’t work, why don’t you take [KU-6] to that job? You prefer your cousin from Eastern Cape.’

The importance of social capital, or informal networks and connections, for securing employment in South Africa is well documented (see Seekings and Nattrass, 2006: 280-7). As early as 1984, McCartan, through a series of interviews with 43 employers in the Eastern Cape, observed that informal networks played a large role in the hiring processes of both skilled and semi-skilling workers. Similarly, Standing, Sender and Weeks (1996: 338), in their analysis of survey responses of 500 manufacturers in Cape Town, Durban, Gauteng and Port Elizabeth, found that 41.4 percent of manufacturers utilised family and friend networks to fill their vacancies, while only 7.3 percent considered applicants with no prior relation to the firm. And it appears that those looking for work have adjusted their approach accordingly: Erasmus (1999: 60), in his survey of 2,000 unemployed individuals, concluded that most black South Africans “relied [mainly] on family and friends” to seek and secure employment.

The role of informal networks in securing employment appears particularly important in Cape Town. In their analysis of Khayelitsha and Mitchell’s Plain Survey responses, Seekings and Nattrass (2006: 284-6; see also Schöer and Leibbrandt, 2006) found that nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that their first job came through help from either friends or family, and nearly 60 percent of respondents reported that they got their “previous” job through these social networks. Perhaps more interestingly, 91 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Employers employ the friends and relatives of their existing workforce rather than other people.” Furthermore, Magruder (2007: 18-21, 28-9), in his analysis of familial network effects among respondents of the Cape Area Panel Survey, found that a father’s employment status had a “substantial” impact on his son’s employment status, indicating the importance of familial connections in securing work.

Wittenberg (2002: 1193-4) offers one possible explanation for why social networks are so crucial to gaining employment in South Africa. “In a situation in which potential employers become swamped with applicants” with identical qualifications, as in South Africa, Wittenberg argues, “virtually *any* formal method of screening applicants becomes problematic.” In such situations, he continues, “not many employers would be willing to bear the[] kinds of costs [necessary] to ensure that insider networks do not determine the job allocation process.” And this explanation gives some indication of how the seemingly contradictory views held by those in categories 2 and 4 - that individual merit, hard work, and educational attainment can yield success but social networks are still crucial for upward mobility - can coexist. Social networks are important

for securing unskilled employment because of the surfeit of identically qualified applicants. However, because of South Africa's extremely large skills mismatch (see, Banerjee et al., 2008), if an individual is able to distinguish himself through hard work or education and progress past the bottom occupational rungs, then individual merit may become comparatively more important than network connections.

*Summary Table 4: Nepotism, social capital and government connections*

	Relatively Unsuccessful Outcome	Relatively Successful Outcome
Disadvantaged Background	Those from category 1 ultimately felt that their lack of social capital greatly circumscribed their opportunities for climbing the social ladder. This view largely reflects reality in South Africa: unskilled positions tend to be allotted through social networks.	Individuals in category 2, despite emphasising the potential for hard work and education to yield success, argued that the probability of further mobility was undermined by nepotism, connections to government contractors and a lack of social capital.
Advantaged Background		Although those from category 4 recognised the potential for social networks and government connections to facilitate upward mobility, respondents still saw abundant opportunities for meritocratic advancement and commended affirmative action programs and BEE for fostering this advancement.

## Expectations of Intra- and Intergenerational Social Mobility in Cape Town

Expectations of intra-generational mobility largely reflect previous mobility experience and the perceived accessibility of the key mobility pathways identified during the interviews. Perhaps more surprisingly, expectations of intergenerational mobility - perceptions of whether the next generation will be more successful than the previous one - were also largely related to previous mobility experiences. This section further examines these patterns and identifies the possibility of a “mobility trap” developing in Cape Town.

All of those in category 4, or those from advantaged backgrounds with successful outcomes, believed that they could reach “the top” if they desired. UCT-4 described how her “stubborn[ess]” and “education” “differentiates [her] from everyone else at the bottom.” Similarly, although UCT-3 indicated that her likelihood of getting to “the top” was increased because she “come[s] from a rich family,” she also highlighted her educational background and hard work: “I think the mere fact that I’m at UCT—I got there by my own marks, I’ve kept myself by my own merits—I think that in itself speaks volumes for me” and her potential.

Interestingly, most of those in category 4 conceptualised their mobility as a distinctly *intergenerational* process. Despite couching social mobility in “individualistic” terms, stressing the importance of hard work and capitalising on opportunity, they recognised that their successes are ultimately the product of their parents’ and grandparents’ successes and values. As UCT-1 described,

‘Both of my [grand]parents were domestic workers. So, both of my parents were able to jump onto the middle class, and through their endeavors to make life better for the family we’ve been able to get between the middle and the top classes. ... There’s definitely been a shift in where we fall within South African society and I’d like to make that go further.’

Furthermore, all of those in category 4 believed that this intergenerational upward trend would continue. As UCT-4 related,

‘As a parent, you strive to give your kids what you didn’t get. So my mom didn’t get a chance to go to UCT and I’m getting that. I think, my kids should go to Harvard. ... [My children] will have more access to the things that I didn’t have when I was growing up, but I’ll still have the same principles that my mom gave me, like “education is important” and “these are your options.” ... So, I think they have [an even] greater chance of being at the top.’

Similarly, those from disadvantaged backgrounds who had already experienced some upward mobility, e.g. those in category 2, saw significant opportunity for continued upward mobility for both themselves and their children. KS-1 described, “At my position at Metrorail as a protection officer, I know that if I work hard, then there is a chance that I will get the opportunity to get something more ... I can work hard to be something else in that company.” But she also conceded that her mobility was ultimately limited: she admitted that she might not reach all her goals because “I only finished matric. I couldn’t afford to go to university or college or whatever.” Yet, even if her own mobility were limited, she believed that her success would ensure that her children’s mobility would not be: “My children will afford [education], because I will save for them to go there” and then they will be “able to afford what they want.”

KS-2 expressed nearly identical sentiments: although “there is a chance for” her to reach the top, “because I think I have study, it’s just that I need experience. If I could get experience, I will get a good job” “that will [take] me higher,” her success was still reliant on a degree “luck.” But even if her mobility faltered, her kids’ success would not,

‘...because I will make sure that my kids are studying very hard to get [] the right jobs and even if they don’t study I will make sure that they have their own businesses. I will push them ... You see now, it’s easier for us—the new generation—to make things happen than before ... Because now we have the knowledge now to do some things ... [that] our parents’ [didn’t].

Those in category 1, however, were significantly less optimistic about their prospects for upward mobility. KU-3, for example, asserted that the chances she will “get a proper job and the right skills” are “zilch. Zero-point-zero.”

Similarly, KU-4 conceded that despite his efforts, there is “not a good likelihood” that he will get to the top. And KU-5, although he felt that “I still have some chances [of leaving poverty], if I can get a proper job,” thought the chances of him getting a “proper job” were extremely low “because I am uneducated. Because in most places they are looking for educated people.”

Not only did those in category 1 express pessimism about their prospects for upward mobility, but they also have substantially lower ambitions than those in categories 2 and 4. KU-6 asserted, “I don’t want some money to be rich, no! I just want money to afford—not just taxis, no, just money to afford. I can use the train.” Similarly, KU-4 described, “I mean even for me I don’t want to be up there. I don’t want to rule or something. I just want to attain a better living.” These views suggest that those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced little social mobility have largely accepted their circumstances: their hope of upward mobility is so distant that their aspirations have adjusted accordingly.

Perhaps more interestingly, those in category 1 were equally pessimistic about their children’s prospects of mobility. As KU-3 indicated, her children have little prospect of mobility, even if her economic position improves somewhat: “I’m doing everything, creating my own family. So now, if my child would be poor, I’m the foundation. She will be poor because I am poor. If I am average she will be average because I’m average.” “I think it starts with the parents, truly,” she continued. Although KU-5 was slightly less pessimistic than KU-3 - or example, he felt that “if I have a proper job and I am a permanent worker and I get paid well, then I can educate my children” and they can become successful - he too argued, “If I do not work then the child will not have [the] chances” of moving up. These views point to the existence of a perceived intergenerational “mobility trap” in Cape Town. And this mobility trap may, in fact, be self fulfilling: if parents feel that there is little hope that their children’s socio-economic status will differ from their own, then they may be less inclined to invest significant resources in their children’s future, thereby making these perceptions reality.

Overall, perceptions of social mobility in Cape Town were largely dependent on previous mobility experiences and the perceived accessibility of a number of key mobility pathways, primarily education. This section demonstrated the large gulf between those who have experienced any mobility and those who have not: while those who have experienced a degree of social mobility during

their lifetimes believed that either they or their children could reach “the top,” those who have not did could not fully imagine breaking the cycle.

*Summary Table 5: Perceptions of social mobility in Cape Town*

	Relatively Unsuccessful Outcome	Relatively Successful Outcome
Disadvantaged Background	Not only were those from category 1 pessimistic about their chances for upward mobility, but they also have substantially lower ambitions than those in categories 2 and 4. Perhaps more importantly, those in category 1 were equally pessimistic about their children’s prospects of mobility, which points to the development of an intergenerational “mobility trap” in Cape Town.	Those from category 2 saw significant opportunity for continued upward mobility for themselves. Even if they believed that their own mobility was ultimately limited, however, respondents from category 2 were optimistic that their success would guarantee the upward mobility of their children.
Advantaged Background		All of those in category 4 believed that they could reach “the top” if they desired. Recognising that their successes were ultimately the product of their parents’ and grandparents’ successes, those from category 4 were hopeful that their children would continue to thrive as well.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to probe perceptions of social mobility in one part of South Africa. Although the existing literature on social mobility is limited, investigating social mobility is enormously important for understanding the nature of South African inequality, evaluating the robustness of South Africa’s democracy and gauging the efficacy of many post-apartheid policies. *Perceptions* of social mobility among South Africans may ultimately have a more direct impact on South Africa’s economic and political systems than objective trends on which the vast majority of previous research has been

focused. This paper thus attempted to augment the existing literature on perceptions of social mobility in South Africa by investigating subjective mobility among black individuals in a single South African city, Cape Town, through twelve in-depth ethnographic interviews.

This paper differed from prior research on perceptions of social mobility by focusing on interviewees' mobility experience, as opposed to economic position. To accomplish this goal, the population was divided into four categories based on background and outcome. This study focused on perceptions of social mobility among three of these groups: those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have had relatively unsuccessful outcomes, or those in category 1; those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have had relatively successful outcomes, or those in category 2; and those from advantaged backgrounds who remain in their advantaged positions, or those in category 4. Because there is little significant downward mobility for those already near the top of the income distribution, the third category - those from advantaged backgrounds who have had relatively unsuccessful outcomes - is less salient to this study.

All interviewees stressed the strong relationship between race and class in South Africa. Most believed that the top of the income distribution is predominantly white and the bottom is entirely black. These views are consistent with the reality in Cape Town but increasingly inconsistent with the national reality. They suggest that the rapid deracialisation of South Africa's class structures that began near the end of apartheid is largely unrecognised by many black individuals living in Cape Town. Although South Africa still has a long way to go before the systemic economic disadvantages of over 40 years of apartheid policies are fully redressed, this finding suggests that if South Africa's leaders continue to stress the lack of economic progress for black South Africans, these views of the racialised stratification of income will be reinforced and social cohesion in South Africa could be negatively impacted.

Despite the widespread belief that the top of the income distribution was mostly white, all of the interviewees identified a number of pathways to upward mobility. Not all of the respondents, however, agreed on the accessibility of these pathways. Those in categories 2 and 4 tended to conceptualise mobility in individualistic terms; they believed that upward mobility was available to those willing to work hard and motivated to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to all South Africans. Those who have not taken advantage of these opportunities were thus viewed as "lazy," and South Africa's extensive system of social grants was often blamed for facilitating this laziness.

In contrast, those who had experienced little mobility and remained disadvantaged - those in category 1 - recognised the importance of hard work and education for economic success, but tended to offer structural explanations for their lack of mobility and faulted their lack of social capital and the rampant nepotism in Cape Town for exhausting the few opportunities available to them. Ultimately, those in categories 2 and 4 were optimistic about the potential for continued upward mobility for themselves and their children, while those in category 1 expressed little hope of a better future, either for their generation or the next. The views articulated by those in category 1 indicate the troubling possibility of the development of a “mobility trap” in Cape Town, especially if perceptions of immobility further inhibit their poor prospects for actual mobility.

These two antithetical conceptualisations of the process of social mobility in Cape Town - the primarily individualistic understanding of mobility held by those in categories 2 and 4 and the structural understanding espoused by those in category 1 - may make it more difficult for South Africa to engage in serious structural reforms. Because these findings indicate that a significant portion of Cape Town’s black population may believe that the playing field has already been leveled, that any individual can be successful through hard work, there may be little will or even incentive among the Cape Townian, and potentially South African, political and economic leadership to seriously address the deep structural legacies of apartheid. These contrasting views about the nature of economic opportunity in Cape Town could adversely affect the cohesiveness of post-apartheid South Africa, especially if those in category 1 continue to feel alienated by the existing economic system.

Furthermore, although equal numbers of individuals were interviewed in each category, all of these mobility experiences are not equally represented in society. The official unemployment rate in South Africa is around 25 percent, and the unofficial rate, which includes those who have given up looking for work, is above 35 percent of the population (Statistics South Africa). Moreover, as Johnson (2009: 61) observes, the employment rate “counts people as employed if they have but a single hour’s paid work (say, washing and polishing a car) in a week,” a category of individuals that this study labeled the “underemployed.” These figures indicate that the first category - those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced little upward mobility (who remain unemployed or underemployed) - is *substantially* larger than each of the other categories. Thus, although those in categories 2 and 4 were quite optimistic about their future mobility prospects, these preliminary results suggest that there is a significantly larger group of individuals who have little hope of upward

mobility and are discontented with the current structure of the South African economy. The disproportionate size of category 1 indicates the possible extent of the mobility trap identified in this study and that a large portion of the Cape Townian, and potentially South African, population is at great risk of being left out of future economic gains.

The unique focus of this study on mobility experience as opposed to relative class position makes it difficult to compare its findings to the international literature, but perhaps unsurprisingly, it appears that South Africa's deeply racialised history may impact perceptions of social mobility among black residents of Cape Town, and possibly South Africa more generally, in distinctive ways. The end of apartheid and the advent of democracy removed the single largest barrier to economic opportunities for black South Africans: their race. Thus, there appears to be greater expectations of intergenerational mobility and greater optimism among black Cape Townians in post-apartheid South Africa than in more economically advanced countries, where hope of mobility is much lower (see, Heath, Graaf and Yaojun, 2010). Furthermore, because all black South Africans were economically disadvantaged under apartheid, the relative socioeconomic position of black Cape Town residents does not seem to impact perceptions of mobility in similar ways that it does in other areas of the world (see, Graham, 2000; Webb, 2000).

These findings in Cape Town, however, probably cannot be generalised to the rest of South Africa. Cape Town's social structure is atypical for South Africa (Seekings, 2007: 5-6). Although a majority of South African citizens are black, up until the 1970s Cape Town was 90 percent white and colored. Even today, after massive immigration from the Eastern Cape, black people comprise a minority of the city's population. Because of this distinct history, "Cape Town has a distinctive cultural character" (*ibid*: 5), which undoubtedly influenced this study's findings. Furthermore, Cape Town is not economically representative of South Africa either. Cape Town has much larger upper and intermediate classes. The poor of Cape Town are well-off relative to the poor in rural areas. And in Cape Town, race still largely overlaps with class, making "it difficult often to distinguish between the effects of race and class" (*ibid*: 6).

Moreover, the results of this study are based entirely on interviews with black individuals. Although probing black perceptions of social mobility is particularly important because black individuals constitute the vast majority of South Africa's population and were the group most disadvantaged by apartheid policies, this study reveals nothing about perceptions of social mobility among

coloured or white South Africans, who comprise minority racial groups nationally, but together comprise a majority of Cape Town's population. The age cohort interviewed also limits the significance of these findings: as Graham (2000: 243-4) observed during her study of perceptions of social mobility in Latin America, "Younger generations tended to be ... more optimistic about the future [and their children's future] than older ones," perhaps reflective of the disproportionate educational and economic opportunities available to younger cohorts in increasingly globalised markets. Furthermore, Bray et al.'s (2010: 217-9) findings on perceptions of educational attainment in Cape Town may indicate that as individuals grow older, they may grow less optimistic about their future prospects for upward mobility. Finally, this study's findings were ultimately based on a relatively small number of interviewees that lacks any statistical significance. Thus, although the views expressed during the interviews may be somewhat representative of the particular cohort analysed - black Cape Town residents between ages 20 and 30 - they are not necessarily representative of black Cape Town residents more generally, let alone the rest of the South African population.

The limited generalisability of these results suggests that this study should only be a starting point for further inquiry. Researchers interested in perceptions of social mobility in South Africa should consider analysing how these perceptions differ among various age cohorts; how location affects conceptualisations of social mobility, in particular whether rural South Africans (who comprise nearly half of the country's population) have a similar understanding of their mobility; whether residents of areas more "typical" of the social and cultural character of South Africa than Cape Town have different views of their economic opportunities; and whether different subgroups of South African society have similar aspirations and expectations about their futures. Additionally, future research should consider utilising broader-based and more statistically robust, but perhaps less nuanced, methods such as survey instruments, in order to complement a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews. Ultimately, this study, in addition to offering initial findings on perceptions of social mobility among black South Africans in Cape Town, more importantly suggests a potentially fruitful and vital path that scholars of social mobility can pursue elsewhere in South Africa.

# Appendix A:

## Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews

### Preliminary Data:

1. Name
2. Age
3. How do you support yourself?
4. In order to gauge material goods that people have:
  - a. Do you have a TV? (If so, what kind: widescreen vs. older model)
  - b. Do you have a cell phone? (If so, a smartphone?)
  - c. How do you listen to music?
  - d. Do you have a car? (If so, what kind?)
5. Number of dependents (Try to parse out whether he/she is supporting people in other parts of country):
  - a. Do you send money to family members who do not live nearby?
  - b. Who are these family members? How much money do you send them per month?
6. Where do you live?

### Interview Questions:

1. These four pictures show different types of society. The first picture represents a society with a small elite of rich people at the top, a few people in the middle, and a large number of poor people at the bottom. The second picture represents a society that is like a pyramid, with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and a lot of poor people at the bottom. The third picture shows a society in which most people are in the middle. The fourth picture shows a society with lots of people at the top, some in the middle, and very few at the bottom.
  - a. Which of these pictures, in your view, describes South Africa today?
  - b. Where would you situate yourself in that picture?
  - c. Is this the same way society looked 10 years ago? What about 20 years ago?
  - d. In your understanding of the economic makeup of society, where would you place most of the white people? Where would you place most of the black individuals? If you remove all the black people, what picture would you say best describes white society? What about black society?
  - e. How do you think society should look? Where would you like to be in this hypothetical society?

- f. What are the chances that you'll reach the top? What about your children? What are the chances you'll be in the bottom? What about the middle?
2. Personal financial situation
  - a. Is your overall financial situation today better, the same or worse than it was five years ago?
  - b. Why has it gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse over the last five years?
3. Differences between rich and poor
  - a. How large do you think the differences between rich and poor are?
  - b. Have these differences gotten bigger or smaller in the last 5/10/15 years?
4. Future predictions
  - a. Do you think that the number of poor people in South Africa in five years time is going to be larger, the same or smaller than it is now?
  - b. What about the number of rich people?
  - c. The number of middle class?
5. Material possessions
  - a. What material possessions do you think defines someone as rich in South Africa?
  - b. What about poor?
  - c. What about middle class?
6. Government intervention
  - a. Do you think that the government is doing too much, enough, or too little for poor people in South Africa?
  - b. Do you think they're doing too much, enough, or too little for rich people in South Africa?
  - c. What do you think the government should do differently for the poor?
  - d. What do you think the government should do differently for the rich?

7. Economic status of South Africa's black Africans
  - a. Do you feel that the number of black middle class and rich people has increased, decreased, or remained the same in the last 10 years?
  - b. How do black people become middle class or rich?
  - c. Why are some people rich and others poor?
  - d. How does one become richer?
  
8. Hypothetical questions
  - a. What kind of car would you like to buy if money were no limit?
    - i. Why do you want that car?
    - ii. How will people respond if you drive around with that car?
  - b. If I give you R5000 tomorrow what would you spend it on? If you had to give it away, to whom would you give it?
  
9. Additional questions
  - a. For UCT students: What would your family think if you came home with a white girlfriend or boyfriend? Is this different from how other people in your neighborhood would react?
  - b. For those in categories 1 and 2: When you were younger, what did you want to be when you grew up and why? Why have you (not) achieved these ambitions? What are your aspirations now? What is the likelihood that you will reach them?

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The **Democracy in Africa Research Unit** (DARU) supports students and scholars who conduct systematic research in the following four areas: public opinion and political culture in Africa and its role in democratisation and consolidation; elections and voting in Africa; the development of legislative institutions; and the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on democratisation in Southern Africa. DARU has also developed close working relationships with projects such as the Afrobarometer (a cross-national survey of public opinion in fifteen African countries) and the Comparative National Elections Project, which conducts post-election surveys over 20 countries across the world.

The **Sustainable Societies Unit's** (SSU) mission is to explore the social and institutional dimensions of economic development and the interaction between human society and the natural world. Focus areas include: winners and losers in South African economic growth and the interplay between ecological and economic concerns. The SSU was previously known as the Social Surveys Unit and still works on a number of survey projects, including the Cape Area Panel Study.

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