

---

---

## There's Downward Mobility among White People? Who Knew?!

---

KEVIN T. LEICHT

*University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign*  
kleicht@illinois.edu

Twenty-first-century American sociology can be lazy. The half-baked American journalism that follows from lazy sociology can be lazy. Jessi Streib is not lazy. She has produced a wonderful book that should be required reading for anyone in sociology who claims to be studying social inequality.

Streib's research questions in *Privilege Lost: Who Leaves the Upper Middle Class and How They Fall* are simple, but the implications are far from it. If we follow white youth born into the upper middle class, how many of them maintain their class position and how many are downwardly mobile? And then, what combination of circumstances separates the maintainers from the downwardly mobile?

Streib relies on a multi-method data collection that, in her capable hands, yields some rich insights that are sure to inspire more and better social inequality research. The data for this book start with the National Survey of Youth and Religion, a nationally representative survey of 13- to 17-year-olds (N=3,370). From the survey, her research team followed 267 teens for 10 years, conducting four separate waves of interviews. The research Streib reports on in her book comes from a subset of these interviews with 107 white, upper-middle-class youth, youth for whom at least one parent had a college education and a professional job, defined using the Department of Labor's O\*NET categories 4 and 5, jobs requiring the most education, experience, and preparation.

The heart of the analysis in *Privilege Lost* comes from the four waves of largely qualitative interviews with these 107 white youth of upper-middle-class origin as this group matures into 23- to 28-year-old young adults. As with the families of origin, Streib defines class maintenance as attaining a four-year college degree, acquiring a professional job, or being enrolled in graduate school (more on that one later), or marrying

*Privilege Lost: Who Leaves the Upper Middle Class and How They Fall*, by **Jessi Streib**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 181 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780190854058.

someone who has a four-year college degree and a professional job.

Streib's book starts with a startling observation—one-half of the youth in the National Survey of Youth and Religion who were from white, upper-middle-class homes experience downward mobility. Not zero. Not ten percent. *One-half*. Streib points to some well-established reasons why class reproduction might be more difficult than it would first appear. Of the three avenues/markers of upper-middle-class status—a college degree, a professional job, and marrying a college-educated professional—only the first has expanded, as admission standards to all but the most selective colleges have shifted (75 percent of all four-year colleges and universities in the United States will admit anyone who applies who meets minimum criteria). The volume of high-quality, professional jobs has not expanded to absorb the number of college graduates available. Instead, college graduates have taken nonprofessional jobs (where, mysteriously, the educational requirements rose to meet the availability of graduates). And marrying into the upper middle class is more difficult because marriage rates have declined and assortive mating boundaries have hardened. High-school-educated secretaries are no longer “swept off their feet” by young executive Vice Presidents of Silicon Valley start-ups.

So downward mobility is real and not trivial. Who falls, why do they fall, and why don't they see it coming?

As Streib navigates her interview data (53 percent of her interviewees are on class

reproduction trajectories and 47 percent are downwardly mobile), she focuses on two main concepts: inherited resources and identities. Inherited resources are the financial, academic, and social capital that parents pass on and the ability of the child to receive those resources. Although all the parents are classified as “upper middle class,” they have different resource strengths and weaknesses. Some parents communicate directly about what they know and what they have learned. They pass on cultural and social capital readily. Other parents don’t do this at all (they are more hands-off), and some parental partners differ in their actual possession of that capital and their willingness or ability to pass it on.

Identities are about the youth, their agency, their receptiveness to ideas from parents and others, and their personal views of what they are trying to become. The youth in Streib’s analysis vary widely in what their parents communicate, how receptive they are to the message, and what the environment around them will otherwise reward.

If this sounds complicated, it is; and there are considerable uncertainties as this volatile brew of parental resources and evolving youth identities comes together. On top of these uncertainties, Streib adds another. There are different types of communities, liberal and conservative. Youth tend to adopt identities that their resources allow and that their communities reward. In liberal communities (think college towns and cities on the coasts), identities revolve around education, jobs, and delayed marriage. In conservative communities (think the South and some parts of the Midwest), identities revolve around early marriage, family, and then work. In the latter case, education is only valued because of its relationship to work or because it may improve one’s marriage prospects.

At this point, Streib makes another observation that is one of the central insights of the book. Youth tend to adopt identities that make virtues of their resource weaknesses, and the ways identities are narrowed depends on their community. Because youth create identities that make virtues out of their resource weaknesses, they don’t direct their energies toward acquiring resources they don’t already have. Enacting identities

that make virtues out of resource weaknesses tends to lead to downward mobility. In effect, Streib’s youth take the attitude that “if I don’t have it, it must not be important” or, worse still, “nobody needs that—it’s a waste of time!”

The analysis that follows is almost unprecedented in its depth and insight. Rather than mix all this together as a soup, Streib’s analysis yields a set of youth social types that reflect youth agency, parental resources and communications skills, and community reinforcement. The analysis of social types makes for compelling reading that would be easy for students to understand, while still dealing with the complexities of the overall analysis.

Chapter Two addresses the group Streib labels “professionals.” These youth identify as would-be professionals, their parents have considerable resource strength in financial, human, and cultural capital, and the parents communicate readily and pass knowledge on to their children. These families tend to live in liberal areas, and both the community and the parents emphasize school, college, and professional work before marriage. These kids are the programmed, active, high-achieving, high-pressure ones you read about in newspapers and popular accounts of young people in twenty-first-century America (see Lythcott-Haims 2015; Lareau 2011). This group leans heavily toward class maintenance and preserves the resource strengths passed on from parents and facilitating communities.

Chapter Three addresses the group Streib labels “stay-at-home mothers.” This group has families that possess some academic or institutional knowledge, but they are embedded in environments that reward stay-at-home motherhood over academic or professional achievement. These youth have stay-at-home, less-educated mothers who spend most of their time with the children and hands-off, professional fathers. If the children go to college at all, they rarely have the cultural and human capital to succeed. If they sneak through, they might meet a professional man, marry him, and maintain status. The more likely result is they do not succeed at college, they do not find professional jobs, and they end up with nonprofessional husbands via assortive

mating mechanisms. Youth in this group claim they don't need academic success or professional achievement to obtain the "Mrs. degree" (making a virtue of resources they don't have) because they want to be stay-at-home mothers. They only later discover that (unlike their mothers' generation) you now need a college degree to marry someone who is a college-educated professional and stay in the class you came from.

Chapter Four addresses the group Streib refers to as "family men." These are the male equivalents of the stay-at-home mothers. Their parents have few human and cultural capital advantages, and they make virtues of those weaknesses, don't invest in their own professional lives, and throw themselves into the family roles their conservative communities endorse. If they have inherited resources, they might eke through and remain in the upper middle class. Work is simply a way of providing for a family, and schools (including colleges) are there mostly to promote relationships and dating. Those that get college degrees in this group manage to scrape by with a semblance of class maintenance. The others discover the twenty-first-century reality that it takes money to be a family guy, that men without credentials are pushed away from professional jobs, and that they are continually in an economic competition with people who worked harder at school and invested in work.

Chapter Five addresses the group that Streib refers to as "rebels." Rebels are almost uniformly male, and they openly reject parents and institutions. Their parents tend to be hands-off, and the rebel inherits little of the academic skill or institutional knowledge necessary to succeed. They do little to acquire resources they grew up without and instead rebel against the idea that they need any of those resources. Not surprisingly, if you spend your time avoiding the acquisition of resources that will help you maintain your parents' class status, you don't reproduce their class status. This group suffers from what the author refers to as "life course change." Early on in their lives, rebellion doesn't matter. You don't get kicked out, and you don't academically fail (see also Arum 2009). Then these youth enter life phases where rebelling

inside institutions that are gateways to the upper middle class is not appreciated anymore—employers don't like rebels. They sit around waiting for somebody to offer them a life-changing job.

Chapter Six addresses the group Streib calls "artists and athletes." This is an identity adopted by youth with relatively low economic resources. Almost all the young people in this group are downwardly mobile, breezing through college before discovering that they are unable to find a professional job or even a stable job as an athlete or artist. Most are aspiring to victory in a winner-take-all labor market where (at most) a few thousand participants (in a labor market of 160 million people) are making a viable living. College here was simply a means of performatively displaying the artist or athlete identity. They claim not to be interested in money, and they fail to develop the skills necessary to make any. This lack of interest in money (or the ability to make any) makes them poor marriage prospects. When confronted with the fact that there are few or no prospects tied to their chosen passion, most simply double down on the identity and flounder.

Chapter Seven is devoted to "Explorers," youth pulled in multiple directions at once (e.g., the would-be professional in a conservative community who wants to be both a professional and a full-time mother). Women in conservative communities could balance the contradictory messages they receive if parents gave them adequate resources; but in the absence of that, this identity is a recipe for downward mobility. One either ends up a stay-at-home mother (see Chapter 2) or in a professional career (a variation of Chapter 1), but not both. Because of their communities of origin, these women fear not marrying and not dating, and the pull of family and marriage detracts from their academic work or ruins it. If this group maintains their status position it is almost always via marriage, but a college degree is needed to do that. This group is also a victim of life course change—as with the rebels, schools reward exploring, but professional workplaces and marriage aren't explorations.

Streib addresses the exceptions in Chapter Eight. This is the least satisfying chapter in the book, though it still has some important

insights. There are a small number of people whose parents are so monied that adopting artist, athlete, rebel, or explorer identities has little effect on their economic prospects. But our author points out that this is far from the modal outcome. That which the child does not want to do, and that which the parents don't communicate with the child about, ends up not getting done.

The conclusion points to several things Streib has learned from her extensive data collection. Streib highlights the need for more within-class studies and more open discussions of resource transmission and culture, something that social science has avoided under the guise of not "blaming the victim" (an almost worthless concept at this point). She also rightly points out that the downward mobility shown here is not all that far down (at least as of the mid-20s) and that we could actually lower the stakes in this perpetual competition by committing ourselves to treating all workers decently rather than all trying to scramble into a lifeboat and row away.

Overall, the book punctures some bubbles that, in some quarters, are now made of cement. In the process I had several other reactions to the book. My first overwhelming reaction was, "and we think the POOR are culturally dysfunctional?!" At minimum, many of the parents in Streib's analysis seem to be experts at turning something into nothing and snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. In fact, Streib points out that neither the parents nor the youth perceive generational change or life course change and simply go about their business like everything is going to work out fine. Generational change means that strategies that worked for the parents (find a college-educated guy and marry, but don't go to college yourself; spend your teenage years looking for a mate, and then work only to support them, and so forth) aren't available as options for these youth. Life course change means that the activities that schools as institutions reward at earlier times in life are not rewarded later on. Companies don't hire rebels, explorers, artists, or athletes, and (in the current climate) these types aren't good marriage material either; but schools reward them. Schools and institutions reinforce or even seem to promote identities under the

mistaken impression that youth will "grow out of it" and that eventually Junior will "find himself," without realizing they are reinforcing dysfunctional identities and not making other alternatives more attractive (see Arum 2009).

My second observation is that Streib does not use the word "reproduction" even once. Why? Because class maintenance is not "reproduction." In fact, this book is an advertisement for Anthony Giddens's claim that the term "reproduction" should be scrubbed from the sociology lexicon. Social life is not copied at a Xerox machine. It changes and it lives. It may be maintained, but it is emphatically not "reproduced." That's lazy sociology's term for, "I still don't like the demographics of the winners, so that's my conclusion" without examining what's actually going on.

Third, it is amazing the number of "third rails" Streib sensitively addresses in this short book, while insisting that we need to be investigating much more than most inequality research focuses on now. Some examples:

*There is actual social inequality within groups, and there is more economic inequality within ascriptive groups than there is between them. If we really want to understand inequality, understanding within-group inequality is necessary and important, as Streib points out (see also Leicht 2016). Far too much research now could be described as "Harry Potter Sociology"—we study race (gaps), gender (gaps), and that which dare not be named.*

*Culture does have something to do with mobility chances. Not talking about culture doesn't make culture go away. Claiming one is "blaming victims" is simply another form of making a virtue out of necessity, much as Streib's upper-middle-class youth are doing. More importantly, how many other cultures turn weaknesses into virtues? Isn't turning weaknesses into virtues an endogenous preference choice? ("We do A because they do B.") Some of these choices (learning algebra) are actually better than others (learning to throw a football 80 yards), mobility-wise. Some of our choices simply happen because we don't like the cultural characteristics of the group that is making other choices ("only nerds know math").*

*Communities have a lot to do with mobility chances.* Big question: Are those communities that cannot maintain their preferred lifestyles (stay-at-home mothers and family men) now fueling the MAGA movement?? After all, the very decisions these communities made in the parental generation have not produced good results in the next generation. Why not just fix the system so it “works like it used to”?

*The soup that produces upward and downward social mobility does not automatically work its magic, as if by osmosis.* There are agents involved. If agents don’t do certain things, then good outcomes tend not to happen.

*You can lead young horses to water, but you can’t make them drink.* Money can be there. Knowledge of all sorts can exist in a household. But in more cases than we would care to admit, those things are not passed on. In some cases, all those messages and all that money are passed on, and they are rejected.

*There is actual downward mobility among dominant groups.* It affects nontrivial numbers of people, including people we view as “privileged” (a term that increasingly refers to the actions of a demographic group the speaker disapproves of). In a labor market with 160 million people, we’re talking

millions. More white Americans fell into poverty after the 2008–2009 Great Recession than there are African Americans and Hispanics of any social class (Leicht 2016).

There are also a couple of missing pieces and some questions or assertions I would make. Graduate school is not upward mobility or class maintenance—it’s a European welfare state for aimless upper-middle-class youth with no labor market attached to it. Where are the rent-collecting parents doing kids’ homework? And aren’t colleges and universities complicit in promoting these unrealistic expectations?

Overall, American sociology has much to learn from Streib. We best learn it before we become irrelevant.

## References

- Arum, Richard. 2009. *Judging School Discipline: The Crisis of Moral Authority*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lareau, Annette. 2011. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leicht, Kevin. 2016. “Getting Serious about Inequality.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 57:211–31.
- Lythcott-Haims, Julie. 2015. *How to Raise an Adult*. New York: Henry Holt.

---

## The Bitterness of “Sugar”: How Type 2 Diabetes Became Racialized Risk

CHRISTY L. ERVING

University of Texas at Austin  
christy.erving@austin.utexas.edu

---

Perhaps ironically, when I turned to the first page of *Sweetness in the Blood: Race, Risk, and Type 2 Diabetes*, I was sitting in a waiting room at the doctor’s office. The nurse and doctor I encountered that day both asked about the book and expressed sincere interest in it. I also felt personally connected to the book prior to reading it, as Type 2 diabetes, its focus, is a health problem that hits close to home. As a self-identified African American woman and health disparities scholar, it has been communicated to me through multiple mediums that I am “at risk” (a term I find more problematic upon

*Sweetness in the Blood: Race, Risk, and Type 2 Diabetes*, by **James Doucet-Battle**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 208 pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9781517908492.

reading this book), and, like the author, I have a family history of the disease. My mother was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes when she was 45 years of age. Prior to that, my mother’s mother was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. So as I began reading the