

The Price of Ascending America's Class Ladder

Being upwardly mobile can come at a cost to people's relationships with the family, friends, and community they grew up with.

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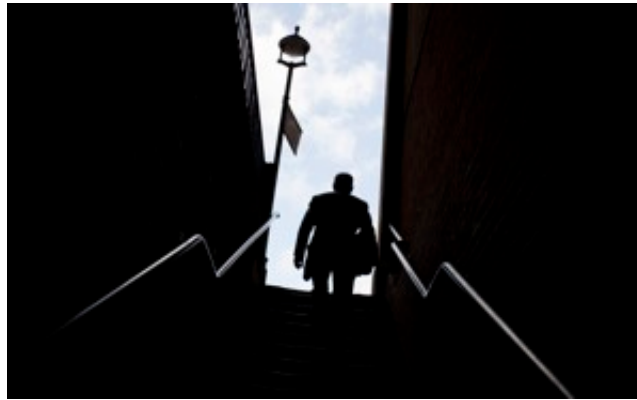
Brian Snyder / Reuters

Jennifer Morton was born in Lima, Peru, raised in a household that she considers “somewhere between working class and middle class,” and—thanks in part to the generosity of some extended-family members—went to a premier private school. Her education there catapulted her to Princeton, where she became the first person in her family to get a bachelor’s degree. She’s now a professor herself, teaching philosophy at the City College of New York.

There is a special place in the American imagination for stories like Morton’s, in which gumption is rewarded and opportunity is capitalized on. But Morton considers the standard, vaunted narrative of ascending America’s class ladder to be “fundamentally dishonest,” as she explains in her new book, [*Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*](#).

It’s a conclusion she reached after reflecting on her own experiences, those of her low-income and first-generation college students, and her interviews with other “strivers,” as she calls them, who have embarked on and established careers. “We rarely tell students that their success may come at the expense of some of the things that they hold most dear,” she writes, referring to the costs that being upwardly mobile can exact on people’s relationships with their family, friends, and community, as well as on their sense of self. She discusses these costs not to deter people from pursuing higher education and well-paid careers, but to note that such pursuits are not downside-free.

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I recently spoke with Morton about the price of upward mobility, and what it

illuminates about how opportunity is distributed on college campuses and throughout the country. The conversation that follows has been edited for length and clarity.

Joe Pinsker: What is missing from the traditional American narrative of upward class mobility?

Jennifer Morton: Inherent in that narrative is the idea that you're moving up in the world and getting more and more valuable things in your life, but there is little recognition of what you're trading for it. Of course, we recognize that on the path of upward mobility, people invest a lot financially and expend a lot of effort. But there's very little attention paid to the ways in which strivers end up paying in other areas of their lives that are meaningful and valuable—their relationships to friends, to family, and to their communities. We don't really tell students that that will be difficult, and in ways that sometimes they don't quite expect.

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Pinsker: You write that the conventional American-immigrant narrative prepared you well for the reality of being upwardly mobile. How so?

Morton: I think that the immigrant narrative can prepare you for feeling out of place. For example, I came to the United States for college, and when I got to Princeton, I definitely felt like a fish out of water. But in a sense, I was prepared for that because I was coming to a foreign country—I knew that, as an immigrant, there would be some culture shock and some feelings of loneliness.

But I think what happens with some first-generation college students and others who come to college and experience that same sense of dislocation is

that they might not have something to attribute it to—something that can frame their experience in a way where it's clear that it's not about them as individuals not belonging, but that they come from a different place, with perhaps different cultural norms. I, on the other hand, was ready to be an outsider.

Pinsker: What else would a more honest narrative of class mobility include?

Morton: I think one feature that we often don't acknowledge is the effect on the people on the other end, the people who are in a striver's original community. I mean, there are things to be gained: Of course friends and family feel proud when one of their own goes on and achieves a certain measure of success. And there might even be financial rewards—I interviewed a few people who would send money back home. But I think the potential effect on these relationships, and how they might fray with distance, is often something that we don't talk about.

Pinsker: In the book, you argue that being upwardly mobile doesn't in and of itself have to introduce trade-offs like this. What is it about the way American society is set up that makes this the case?

Morton: The way that American society is set up concentrates opportunities in some communities and concentrates disadvantages in others. And I think that's what makes it hard for those who grew up in communities in which disadvantage is concentrated to find opportunities for advancement and retain a connection to their own communities—the opportunities for advancement are somewhere else.

More and more, we're becoming segregated, and not just in terms of what neighborhood you live in. When you're upwardly mobile, you're entering a different world, in which people are not just better off economically, but are friends with people who come from a similar economic class, are marrying

people from a similar economic class, are sending their kids to school with people from a similar economic class. And that kind of segregation makes it so that finding opportunity often requires you to enter these communities that might seem very disconnected from your own.

Pinsker: In the book, you make a bunch of references to a culture of college—a sort of code of behavior for being a successful student. This culture is often invisible to people born into affluence, but its existence is very apparent to those, like first-generation college students, who weren't exposed to it growing up. How would you describe some of the features of this culture?

Morton: Some of this has to do with the mechanisms by which a lot of academic opportunities are distributed. For example, to get a certain scholarship or to get into graduate school, often you have to ask for letters of recommendation. And getting good letters of recommendation really depends on developing a relationship with a professor over time. Writing good papers, raising your hand in class and making a comment—sure, that can help. But if you are coming into a professor's office hours, if you're emailing with them, that can really help establish the bond that will get you a good letter of recommendation. A lot of first-generation college students have no idea that that's what they're supposed to be doing—they didn't grow up learning that.

Another example is being assertive in class—putting forward your own opinion, raising your hand. In college, that's not a sign of not understanding, but something that professors look upon positively. So what participation means can be very opaque to students who are not familiar with college culture.

We give students a lot of autonomy in college, assuming that they know what choices they have to be making and where to seek advice. But for students who haven't dealt with an institution like a college before, that can be quite

daunting. I remember, my first year at Princeton, going to a math class that I got placed into based on a test I took. The professor never made eye contact and just wrote on the board. I was so confused, and I thought, *I can't afford to screw this up—I'm just going to drop this class*. I didn't think to talk to the graduate assistant or go back to the adviser who put me in this class. And, of course, I couldn't turn to my family to ask them for advice, because they had no idea either. In that situation, you just make the choice that seems the least risky.

Pinsker: What do you think it would look like in practice for this culture of college to change? You mention office hours and letters of recommendation—would you want a system where there aren't as many rewards attached to being a regular attendee of office hours or where recommendation letters don't carry so much sway?

Morton: I like those suggestions—I think recommendation letters could play less of a role. One big [change I'd suggest], actually, is valuing good teaching. We talk a lot about good teaching in K–12, but we don't really reward good teaching in higher ed. A lot of the system depends on either researchers who are rewarded for investing in their research or adjunct and temporary faculty who are scrambling to make ends meet and have to teach hundreds of students in order to do that. If we focused on good pedagogy, that would significantly alter some of the culture in the classroom. For instance, if there are only a handful of students who are always talking and are always getting your attention, it can be a sign you're not doing something right as a teacher.

It can be difficult because professors tend to be the kind of people who have succeeded in higher education as it's already structured. So I think that the dominant culture should be different, that it should be more inclusive. We need more people from marginalized backgrounds, from communities that have been historically disadvantaged, to be in positions of power on campus

in order to see that change.

Pinsker: In the context of your own teaching, how do you think about the influence you now have over that dominant culture?

Morton: Educators are often in a fraught position because on the one hand, you want your students to succeed, particularly when you're teaching students who, if they got a college degree and somewhat learned to "play the game," it could really bring them financial stability. On the other hand, you're thinking, *I wish the rules weren't set up this way*. And part of what you're helping students do is to think critically about their environment and the ideologies that are around them. So as a teacher, you're playing both sides, to some extent.

Personally, I like the idea of pushing the boundaries from within your role. There's a more radical argument that you should teach your students to dismantle the system, to take it all down. And the problem with taking that perspective is that for students who are in this vulnerable position, a lot depends on them succeeding. I admire the ones who protest and organize—I think that's wonderful. But I don't think that's advice that I would offer to all of my students. Getting them to positions where they feel more secure can allow them to be a bit more revolutionary in a strategic way.

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