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# Introduction

## STRIVERS

Each of us starts off in a particular position in society. That position is determined by where and when you are born, the socioeconomic and educational level of your parents, your race, and your gender, among other things. Social scientists have produced vast amounts of evidence showing that these factors play a significant role in determining life prospects. In the United States, if you were born in the bottom fifth of the income scale in Charlotte, North Carolina, between 1980 and 1982, your chances of making it to the top fifth were 4.4 percent. If you had been born in San Jose, California, instead, your chances would have increased threefold.[1] Today, if you are born in the bottom tenth of the income scale and you are White, the probability that you will stay there is 17 percent. The probability goes up to 42 percent if you're Black.[2] If you are a woman born in the last 35 years, your chances of going to and completing college are higher than if you are a man. This is especially

1. Chetty et al., "Where Is the Land of Opportunity?"
2. Bowles, Gintis, and Osborne-Graves, *Unequal Chances*, 165.

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true if you are a woman born to a wealthier family.[3] The data are dizzyingly complex. [4] What we know with a high degree of certainty is that if you were born in the United States within the past 20 years to a poor Black or Latino[5] family in an economically and racially segregated neighborhood, you are very likely to end up not far from where you started. Your children are likely to end up there too. The apple, as the saying goes, does not fall far from the tree.

The thought that your life opportunities will be determined by the accident of birth is diametrically opposed to the ideal of equal opportunity at the heart of the American Dream. As a society, we have viewed our educational institutions as *the* way of equalizing the prospects of those born into disadvantage. Optimists think education has the power to transform those prospects. They argue that we should focus on preparing more disadvantaged children to attend college because higher education has the power to propel them into the middle class. Pessimists think that schools can do very little to remedy the economic, social, and political injustices that exist more broadly across society and come to be reflected in it—segregated neighborhoods, lack of access to quality healthcare, racism, and poverty. They argue that many students born into disadvantage will never attend college, while those who do will face too many obstacles in their path. Optimists think that education has the power to transform lives; pessimists point out that this is the exception rather than the rule.

Education transformed my life prospects. I was born in a working-class neighborhood of Lima, Peru. The homes of secretaries and cab drivers shared the streets with factories emanating plumes of smoke. My grandmother had come to this neighborhood from Arequipa—a smaller city in the mountains of Peru. She

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3. Bailey and Dynarski, "Inequality in Postsecondary Education."

4. The "bible" on this is Duncan and Murnane, *Whither Opportunity?*

5. Some prefer to use "Latinx" as a gender-neutral term to refer to those who have ancestral roots in Latin America. Though I am sympathetic to the rationale for using "Latinx," I have used the term "Latino," as most Latinos currently use this term to refer to their own community.

got pregnant young, married, quickly divorced, and raised two children while working full-time as a secretary at a movie theater. To my grandmother's disappointment, my mother got pregnant while she was still a teenager. While my mother found her footing, my grandmother, with the help of our extended family, raised me. Despite these challenges, our relative standing in Peruvian society was somewhere between working class and middle class. As my grandmother repeatedly points out, we never had to go hungry. Many Peruvians weren't so lucky. Nevertheless, the statistics would suggest that I was fated to repeat the story: I would barely finish high school, probably have a child young, and then work hard for the next 50 years just to make ends meet.

Luck intervened. My mother and aunt immigrated to Europe. There my aunt met and married a generous and wealthy man, and they helped pay for much of my education from that point on. Thanks to them, I was able to attend one of the most exclusive international schools in Peru from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. But Lima in the 1980s was economically depressed. Terrorism meant that our daily lives felt dangerous. My school was surrounded by armed guards, and cars were inspected for bombs as they entered. For as long as I can remember, my grandmother told me that to have a better and safer life I had to go abroad, though she didn't know exactly how this was going to happen. Fortunately, the college counselor at my school did. In my junior year, she called me into her office and explained to me that with my grades, I could get a good scholarship to attend university in the United States. So I joined the ranks of immigrants looking for a better life here. I became the first person in my family to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree, from Princeton, and then a doctorate, from Stanford. I am now a philosophy professor making a comfortable living in one of the richest countries in the developed world. I made it unusually far from the tree into which I was born.

I am well aware that my case is an anomaly. The social and economic structures within which we live often pose overwhelming challenges for students born into poverty. In order for more

students from disadvantaged backgrounds to have a chance at succeeding in school and beyond, we must mitigate those challenges. But there are also lessons we can learn about the path of upward mobility from the anomalous cases of those who do manage to succeed. What I have learned, from my own life as well as from others who have gone through this experience, is that transcending the circumstances of one's birth comes with a heavy cost felt across many aspects of our lives that we value—relationships with family and friends, our connection to our communities, and our sense of identity. I call these the ethical costs of upward mobility. Understanding what these costs are, why they matter, and how to contend with them is the subject of this book.

## Strivers

For most young people, the end of high school marks the beginning of a new phase in their lives. If you are one of the fortunate ones, college, with its promise of transformation and self-discovery, is just on the horizon. You might have heard funny and exciting stories from your parents, your friends' parents, or your neighbors about their own college experiences. You are probably looking forward to choosing your classes, joining social clubs, maybe becoming a member of a sorority or fraternity, and finding a major that suits your interests. Of course, you realize that you will have to work hard and be more independent than you have ever been—do your own laundry, feed yourself, and choose your classes. You might even be attending college thousands of miles away from home. You might be expected to work part-time to help pay for your living expenses, maybe by taking on a work-study job at the library. But all you have to worry about, your parents tell you, is taking advantage of this unique experience.

If you are a low-income or first-generation student, the end of high school also marks the beginning of a new phase in your life. College holds the promise of self-transformation, but also the possibility of transforming your life circumstances. You are, as I will

call you, a striver. Your parents might not be entirely sure of what lies ahead, but they hope that you will be able to take advantage of opportunities that weren't available to them. They have not shared stories with you about their favorite professors, how they chose their major, or what it is like to attend Greek parties; you will have to figure out those aspects of college on your own. They expect you to get a college degree, but they might also expect you to help out at home, whether by working or by taking care of younger or sicker members of the family. You might have to take on large amounts of debt or work many hours to afford college. You probably have already been independent in many ways that are alien to your better-off classmates—you may have worked to contribute financially at home, taken care of siblings or relatives, or navigated many aspects of the college application process without parental help. Despite this, your parents might be nervous about you going off to college far away, preferring that you stay nearby. You've heard from family and friends that college is your ticket to a more comfortable life, but you have seen few people in your life succeed in that path. You are excited to go to college, but figuring out how to make it through and how to pay for it is daunting.

These sketches are highly schematic versions of two distinct experiences a student entering college might have. Many students fall somewhere in between these poles. Just as there is a variety of types of institutions of higher education that students attend—community colleges, technical schools, liberal arts colleges, public universities, and private universities—there is also a diversity of experiences among students pursuing postsecondary education. Some students who grow up in comfortable middle-class homes still struggle to afford college, working upward of 30 hours a week or taking on large amounts of debt to make ends meet.[6] Other working-class students are fortunate to end up at a university with a large endowment and find themselves enjoying privileges they

6. For a comprehensive, often-heartbreaking, look at the financial experiences of college students, see Goldrick-Rab, *Paying the Price*.

never imagined they would have. Dreamers, as they are known, go to college with the fear of being deported hanging over their heads, regardless of how well-off they are. My analysis focuses on the experiences of strivers because I believe that critically examining their case throws into sharp relief several crucial aspects of the experience of upward mobility that have been underappreciated.

I also focus on this group of students because a large part of the inspiration and motivation to write this book came from my experiences as a professor at the City College of New York (CCNY)—a large public university in the heart of Harlem—where many of my students are strivers. Townsend Harris, the founder of CCNY, declared that it was a place in which "the children of the rich and the poor take their seats together and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct, and intellect."[7] When it was founded, CCNY was free to attend and became known as the "Harvard of the Poor." It is no longer free, but the college has tried to stay true to its mission by retaining very low in-state tuition. CCNY is now part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, which includes other four-year colleges, community colleges, and a graduate school with internationally renowned scholars and researchers. It serves over a quarter of a million students.[8] Of those, 78.2 percent are students of color, 38.5 percent come from families that make less than $20,000 a year, and 30 percent work more than 20 hours a week while in school. Additionally, 42 percent of our students are the first in their families to go to college. For many of these students, college is the path to the middle class.

CCNY students are a joy to teach. They bring insight and experiences into the classroom that consistently surprise me. Though there are certainly differences in academic preparation

7. City College of New York, "About Us."
8. City University of New York, "Profile of Undergraduates."

between my students and those I taught at my previous post at an elite liberal arts college, the most striking differences concern how much my students have to contend with outside of the classroom. Many of my students are negotiating extremely challenging conflicts between the demands of their families, friends, and community and those of their education. When my students are tired or absent, it isn't because they were out partying late, but because they needed to help take care of a sister, attend to a cousin in the hospital, or deal with emotionally charged and complicated dynamics at home. I've had students reveal to me that they are homeless, recovering from brain injuries, working 50-plus hours a week, and struggling to pay their mortgage. In a recent class I taught on the philosophy of race, we had a heated discussion about the differences in the disadvantages Americans face on the basis of race versus those on the basis of class. A bright young Latina told the class why she thought class mattered more than race—her mother had become disabled and was no longer able to work, so my student was now the principal breadwinner for her family, while attending college full-time. It's too much, she told us with tears in her eyes. Our ensuing discussion was incalculably enriched by her contribution, but it also revealed how challenging the path through college is for many of our students.

Strivers are born into families that face many of the challenges that working-class and poor families grapple with in this country. They are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed; to lack access to good healthcare, affordable childcare, and other benefits that professionals enjoy; and to live in neighborhoods with underresourced schools that serve other working-class and poor students. In the United States, disadvantage tends to be concentrated and segregated. In order to seek a better life for themselves, strivers must often enter different communities—those in which opportunities for advancement are available. As a result, a central aspect of the striver's experience is that of negotiating the distance

between the community into which he or she was born and the one into which he or she seeks entry.[9]

## The Ethical Costs of Striving

Most of us know that overcoming the circumstances of one's birth requires effort, time, and money. Working-class families make incredible sacrifices so that their children can access the opportunities that come from going to college and getting a degree. Much of the conversation about higher education focuses on college affordability, for good reason. The financial costs of college for strivers and even for many middle-class families these days are staggering.[10] Yet strivers face other costs along the path of upward mobility that are equally important, though rarely discussed. These costs are ethical; that is, they concern those aspects of a life that give it value and meaning—relationships with family and friends, connection to one's community, and one's sense of identity.

These ethical costs are the often-unacknowledged yet painful sacrifices that strivers must make as they journey along their path. Why are these costs ethical? Quite simply because they involve aspects of what, for most of us, count as essential elements of a good life. Family, friendship, and community—the aspects of a striver's life that we will consider—are vital to our flourishing as people. And this is why philosophers going back to Plato and Aristotle have been interested in these essential elements of our lives.[11]

Recognizing these costs as ethical allows us to understand why they are not easily accounted for in the way that financial or other

9. Princeton University Press's house style uses "he or she" when the gender of the subject is undefined. I do not mean for this choice to exclude nonbinary people who prefer to be referred to as "they." I realize that this is not an ideal solution and that some might feel excluded. However, I am committed to using "they" for persons who indicate such a preference.

10. Goldrick-Rab, *Paying the Price*.

11. For a wonderful contemporary reengagement with these questions, see Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. For the classics, start with Plato, "Republic"; Aristotle, "Nichomachean Ethics."

costs are. Take, for example, student debt. It is certainly a stressful and common experience for students—strivers and, increasingly, those who are middle class—to accumulate debt while in college.[12] But we also know that students who do graduate college are more likely to be employed and to make more money than if they hadn't earned a degree. This debt is a long-term investment in their future. The short-term cost is offset by future gains. But, as we will see in chapter 1, the ethical costs strivers bear cannot be thought of in this way because they involve ethical goods that are not easily replaced. The weakening or loss of relationships with family and friends and ties to one's community are not easily compensated for by making new relationships or entering new communities.

Furthermore, those ethical costs are borne not only by strivers, but by their families and communities too. Initially I thought that many of my students at CCNY would do so much better academically if they went to a residential college away from home. Evidence supports this conjecture.[13] But I came to realize that this would come at a very serious cost. These students are sources of support, love, and inspiration to family, friends, and neighbors, and those relationships are sources of meaning and value in the lives of those whom they love. In turn, these experiences enrich my students' perspectives. The path upward for them is much more complicated than simply walking away.

## Changing the Narrative

After completing my doctorate, I got a position as a visiting assistant professor at Swarthmore, an elite liberal arts college. My students there were fantastically well-read, intelligent, and academically well-prepared. I expected that. What I hadn't expected was how professional many of them already were. A few weeks into my

12. Goldrick-Rab, *Paying the Price*.
13. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line*.

first semester, a very polite and smart young woman came into my office to tell me that the class dynamics weren't working for her. She was right—I had made the novice mistake of letting a few vocal students dominate the discussion. We talked about how I might go about changing those dynamics. What surprised me wasn't that this student had noticed that the class wasn't working—it was painfully obvious—but that she was able to come into my office and very calmly and clearly tell me what wasn't working. Some might scoff at her sense of "entitlement," but this would dismiss too easily what is actually a real set of professional skills that would serve this student quite well as she moved through college and, I have no doubt, into a successful career. She understood how to deal with authority figures and institutions, how to make sure her needs were heard, and how to advocate for herself. And she did all of this without ever seeming disrespectful. College was a place that she could navigate easily.[14]

Then I moved to New York to teach at City College. My students here are like those at Swarthmore in many respects, though they have a lot more to contend with outside of school. One key difference concerns the challenges they encounter in navigating their path to a degree. I have to try very hard to get my students to come talk to me during office hours. But those who need that interaction the most, those who are having trouble in class, will often simply disappear halfway through the semester. They get easily frustrated with themselves and view the challenges they confront as a negative reflection of their abilities, rather than as an expression of the difficulty of the topic, a failure on my part to explain it clearly, or a consequence of the difficult situations they contend with at home. It wouldn't occur to most of them to walk into my office and tell me that the class isn't working for them. As we will learn in chapter 2, these differences I have noticed in how students interact with me and with the institution, how they deal

14. For an excellent book on how well-off students are taught this kind of "ease," see Khan, *Privilege*.

with setbacks, how frequently they ask for help, how confident they are in their own opinions, and how comfortable they feel in the classroom environment are confirmed by what social scientists have found. This is not to say that my average CCNY student is deficient culturally or socially; rather, the point is that the culture and social world of college can be more difficult for them to navigate than it is for the privileged students at elite universities who have grown up preparing for this environment.

My efforts to better understand the challenges that my CCNY students face led me to the research that is the point of departure for this book. I was privileged as a college student in many ways that they are not, but nonetheless I identify with many of the ways in which they struggle. The first day I stepped off the airport shuttle at Princeton was also the first time I ever set foot on a college campus. My grandmother had cried at the airport while I tried to reassure her that everything would be fine, but neither of us had any idea what I was in for. On the shuttle, my anxiety started simmering as I overhead another first-year student chat away on her cell phone in at least three different languages with a confidence I could only aspire to have. Phillips Andover was mentioned several times. I didn't know then that it is one of the most exclusive boarding schools in the United States, if not the world. Feeling inadequate barely an hour into this new world, I lugged my embarrassingly large and heavy suitcase to the third floor of Blair Hall, shut the door, and wept on the bare mattress. It hit me for the first time that I was in a foreign country and that I would have to figure it out all by myself.

But I had another advantage that I have noticed many strivers lack—I had a narrative that allowed me to conceptualize my experience in a helpful way. Even though my family could not offer me guidance about the transition to college, they had prepared me for being an immigrant, and that framing, it turned out, was incredibly useful. Everybody in my immediate family had emigrated for economic opportunities—my great-grandfather from a canyon in the depths of the Andes to the closest regional city; my grandmother from that city to Lima, the capital; and my mother and

my aunt from Peru to Europe. I was taught that to access opportunities for upward mobility I would have to eventually move far from home and that it would be hard and lonely work. This way of understanding my experience prepared me to confront some of the toughest challenges I faced. Crucially, unlike the narrative of upward mobility students are often offered, the narrative I was offered was much more honest about the ethical costs I would face.

The traditional narrative of upward mobility in this country acknowledges the academic and financial hurdles that strivers have to overcome to succeed, but it does not do a good job of preparing students for the emotional, psychological, and ethical challenges they will confront. We rarely tell students that their success may come at the expense of some of the things that they hold most dear—their relationships with family and friends, their connection to their communities, and their sense of who they are and what matters to them. Many of us who play a role in the education of strivers operate with a very narrow and reductive view of the challenges they face. I believe that we need to reconceive this narrative to be more honest with students about the challenges they will confront in these other important areas of their life.

In this book I outline the elements of a new narrative of upward mobility, one that is honest about the ethical costs involved. Each of the first four chapters addresses one particular element of this narrative. The first involves recognizing the ethical costs of upward mobility as distinct. Chapter 1 describes these costs and presents an argument for why they are different from other costs that strivers face on their path. The second element of the ethical narrative involves situating those ethical costs in their appropriate context. Chapter 2 argues that these ethical costs are unfairly leveled on students born into disadvantage for three contingent reasons: socioeconomic segregation, an inadequate safety net, and cultural mismatch. This chapter shows us that many of the ethical costs strivers face are not a necessary feature of striving itself but are instead dependent on how opportunities are unequally distributed in the United States. The third element of the ethical narrative

involves navigating one's evolving identity. Chapter 3 focuses on the idea of codeswitching—changing how one behaves as one moves between the community one is attempting to join and the one in which one's family and friends reside—in order to avoid incurring ethical costs and retain a sense of one's identity. I argue that this is an ethically fraught exercise that must be done with care. Strivers need to be reflective about what they value in order to avoid compromising in ways that they will come to regret. The fourth element of the ethical narrative, explored in chapter 4, is the need for strivers to think about their potential complicity within the social structures that make it hard for others who are disadvantaged to succeed. I argue that strivers are in a unique position to improve those structures because of the skills and knowledge they acquire on the path upward. Chapter 5 weaves these elements together to present an ethical narrative of upward mobility that is more honest about the true nature of the costs of moving up and the responsibility we all bear for those costs.

## Methodology

This book is a work of ethics insofar as it contends with topics that concern the valuable and meaningful aspects of a human life, but in writing it I also hope to illuminate important aspects of the experience of upward mobility in a way that will speak to those who are striving—first-generation and low-income college students—and those of us who are concerned with enabling these strivers to succeed—professors, administrators, and policymakers. My hope is that this book will move us to embrace a new narrative of upward mobility through education, one that is honest about the true costs as well as the benefits of this enterprise.[15]

15. My approach has been inspired by Meira Levinson's approach to philosophy of education, which takes as its point of departure the actual lived experiences of teachers and students rather than abstract philosophical theorizing. See, in particular, her *No Citizen Left Behind*.

A central idea driving this book is that narratives are powerful tools in shaping our understanding of ourselves and our future. It is important, then, that the ideas in this book are not only backed up by arguments or evidence from the social sciences, though I provide both, but also illustrated by the stories of real-life strivers. I interviewed 28 strivers—some in person, others through Skype or e-mail, and still others by phone. I approached these conversations as a philosopher interested in the perspectives of those who had experienced the profound transformative effect of education on their life prospects. I wanted to know how they looked back on the sacrifices they had made in order to succeed. But these interviews were not intended to serve as a rigorous, systematic empirical study of the experiences of first-generation students. Rather, they are meant to show us that narratives of upward mobility are far more ethically complicated than is generally acknowledged.

So many of those who got in touch with me told me that they did so because they felt that this project was important. Many of them wished that they had had a book that would have helped them make sense of their experiences. I have given all the participants pseudonyms—the asterisk accompanying a newly introduced name indicates this—and I have tried my best to keep their words as they wrote or said them. I learned so much from their stories, and their words have made this book incalculably richer. To them I am eternally grateful.

I refer to my own experience throughout because this was my entry point into the topic of this book. I am a person of color, a first-generation college graduate, and an immigrant. However, my experience is not typical of the striver's path in many ways. As someone who has been educated in elite institutions all of my life, whose family has become much wealthier since I was born, and who has largely adapted and assimilated to the educated, American upper-middle class, I am not claiming that my own journey is representative of the experiences of most students of color, immigrants, or those born into poverty. I infuse my story into this book because I think it is important that in a work concerning the ways

in which our backgrounds and educational experiences shape us, the voice and experiences of the author are clearly revealed. But I do so also because this book originated from an empathetic impulse—as I tried to understand my students, I saw some of the challenges I confronted magnified in their experiences. I wanted that connection to remain a part of the text.

Finally, I include stories drawn from my experience teaching strivers. I do so for two reasons. The first is that I want to show how the ethical costs discussed in this book play out in the interactions students and professors have in the classroom. I hope that these vignettes will help other educators reading this book to draw connections to their own classrooms. The second is that much of what I have learned about strivers I have learned from my students. They are the motivation and inspiration for this book. Without them, the ideas in this book would have been impoverished.

The way we typically conceive, or misconceive, of the path of upward mobility does a disservice to strivers. As I will argue in this book, the traditional narrative of upward mobility obscures the true costs that they will face and consequently is fundamentally dishonest. But the central argument of this book also has deep political implications. Inequality in the United States is not only growing, but becoming increasingly entrenched in families and communities. Education is one tool to mitigate that intergenerational entrenchment. Through education, children can be given the knowledge and skills to ascend into a better socioeconomic position than that of their parents. Those who succeed might be able to help their families and serve as role models for others in their community. This is the promise of education for upward mobility, but it ignores the true costs of this model to low-income communities.

For those born into families and communities that are heavily disadvantaged, moving up the socioeconomic ladder often involves moving away. This is especially true if strivers want to provide their own children with access to better schools and safer neighborhoods than they grew up with. But this impulse,

while understandable, undermines vital resources disadvantaged communities need to create opportunities for advancement from within. When those who gain the social, economic, and cultural knowledge to improve their socioeconomic standing move away from disadvantaged communities, valuable human capital walks away with them. This phenomenon is often called "brain drain," but the deleterious effect on the fabric of social relationships within the community is more than economic. What is drained out of the community is also a son, a sister, a cousin, a neighbor, a babysitter, a mentor. These bonds within the community have the potential to enrich the lives of those who live in it, and when upward mobility is in tension with these bonds, the community suffers. In this book, I argue that we need a new narrative of upward mobility. But what I hope to have convinced you of by the time you reach the conclusion is that what we need is a new model of upward mobility, one that lifts communities and not just individuals.

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