



How People Get Ahead Despite Difficult Circumstances

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Researchers have found that social mobility – people getting ahead in life compared to where they start – has recently become more difficult for many groups. Those living in areas of concentrated poverty find it especially hard to break through barriers created by poor schools, substandard neighborhoods or public housing, and missing job opportunities. Immigrants to the United States have, however, overcome such barriers and have found ways to get ahead. I spent three years studying Latin-American immigrant women living in public housing in East Boston and South Boston. I discovered that most of those in my study were getting ahead – and I wanted to learn how they did it. My investigation allowed me to point to five factors that, taken together, enable social mobility in challenging circumstances. Those most likely to get ahead, I find, are self-starters who see themselves as struggling immigrants, enjoy supportive social ties, and reach out through networks that link them to other, dissimilar people and communities. Each of these factors can be elaborated and illustrated from my research interviews.

Self-Starters Who See Themselves as Engaged in Struggle

Self-propelling people know how to negotiate networks to get ahead, as was evident for all the socially mobile women I studied. Consider Camila, for example, a second-generation Dominican in South Boston who told me about a time when she was very angry about a situation at work. She was given an evaluation that did not include information she had been asked to provide in a previous self-assessment, and she was told to sign an evaluation that did not properly describe her actual responsibilities. The omitted information included the training of all new cashiers, head tellers, and the assistant manager; indeed, she was still a teller, yet was troubleshooting for all the other tellers at the branch. “I asked to speak to the manager and instead she had me go through the assistant manager. Why, why can’t she just deal with me directly? How am I going to advance if what I do is not documented? She added the missing information and “I told them I wouldn’t sign it unless it was included or they discussed this with me.” Camila “signed the evaluation once they told me that they would increase her grade from three to five, just one behind the Head Teller.” Camila was certainly an example of a self-propelling person in action, and I found others like her.

Similarly, I found that socially mobile self-starters tended to see themselves as struggling immigrants. As one of my informants put it, “my parents sacrificed to bring us here so that we could have a better future.” This outlook helped people work ever harder in order to live up to the sacrifices and expectations of their parents.

Social Support

Those who get ahead do so within a broad network of supporters. Julia, a second-generation Salvadoran in East Boston was working and going to college. As a young mother, she relied on “an army” of family members to put together a patchwork of childcare for Bobby, her son. This “army” included her mother and stepfather, an aunt and an uncle and Bobby’s father and his family. At one point, Julia’s mother went as far as to quit her part time job in order to be home for Bobby in the afternoons after Julia found out that her uncle had hit Bobby while taking care of him. Bobby’s father and his family moved further away and this placed limits on their availability for childcare.

When asked why there were so many people willing to help her, she replied that “they love him (Bobby) and they know that I have to work...they know that I am not out partying...I am very lucky to have such supportive family...living with my family keeps me from having to pay for childcare and housing...plus I rely on my mother, she supports me and gives me a lot of emotional help...like, when one of us comes home after having a bad day and stuff...I know I count on my mother a lot but she counts on me as well.”

Social Leverage in Ethnic Communities

Those who get ahead make active use of all supportive ties in their networks. Josefa, a first-generation Afro-Honduran woman in South Boston found out that there are people with information about better jobs among those in the lowest paid janitorial workforce. Josefa had limited English language skills and she was working without benefits in a modest hotel when she learned about her current job in an upscale hotel through a weak tie -- a coworker. As Josefa explained: "There was this Bosnian man...he tells me that I am young and can speak better English and that I should get out of that dead-end job and go to the [upscale hotel] where they are hiring. This job is giving me many opportunities, I have to speak English...I also get to meet so many people...there are so many things to do around there."

In effect, this co-worker and fellow immigrant became a leveraging bridge connecting Josefa to a different type of employment, opening new opportunities for her. For the first time, she had access to private health insurance, paid vacation, holidays and overtime in a unionized workplace. Through a job-based credit union, Josefa was also able to develop a line of credit and get her own banking account; and her new job helped Josefa improve her English skills and exposed her to a diverse group of people in her busy and trendy neighborhood.

Making the Most of Ties to Different People

Beyond relying on fellow ethnics, those who get ahead also use ties to other communities. When Camila was younger and living in South Boston, Sister Magdalena, an Irish-American nun, helped her family get access to resources in South Boston. As Camila explained, "She would come to the house to let us know about programs...Then she is the one that got me into the Young Entrepreneurs club...it was a club that taught us how to produce and market products. It was just me and my brother and all the rest were white kids...We learned to make jewelry and then took a trip to New York City to buy the supplies. Then we came back and sold the jewelry to area businesses. I learned so much with that trip".

In sum, I learned that the people I studied were able to get ahead in difficult circumstances because they saw themselves as engaged in struggles and made full use of supports within and beyond their communities. Arguably, such ingredients allow all populations to flourish.

Read more in Silvia Domínguez, *Getting Ahead: Social Mobility, Public Housing and Immigrant Networks* (New York University Press, 2011).