



# Occupational mobility chains and the role of job opportunities for upward, lateral and downward mobility in Switzerland<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the rarely studied relationship between job vacancies and inter-firm upward, lateral, and downward status mobility in an occupationally segmented labor market, taking Switzerland as the example. To conceptualize mobility mechanisms in this type of labor market, we introduce the concept of “occupational mobility chains” and test its validity. This concept provides the backdrop for developing time-dependent measures of individual job opportunities based on *Swiss Job Monitor* data. We link these measures with career data taken from the *Swiss Life History Study* and employ event history analysis to test different propositions of the ways in which status mobility is contingent on the number and the status of vacant positions. Results support our assumption that in occupationally segmented labor markets vacant positions affect status mobility only to the degree that they are located *within* workers’ occupational mobility chains.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how job vacancies affect *inter-firm* status mobility in the occupationally segmented Swiss labor market, where status mobility is predicated on a change of occupation. Our analysis of the rarely studied relationship between vacancies and between-firm status mobility distinguishes between upward, lateral, and downward mobility, testing whether and how these three mobility types are contingent upon vacant positions.

To address the role of vacancies for career mobility processes, sociological research mostly draws on vacancy chain models, emphasizing the role of vacant positions within institutionalized job sequences or job ladders. From this perspective, career mobility is contingent on vacant positions as well as the number and characteristics of competitors (Chase, 1991; Rosenfeld, 1992; Stewman & Konda, 1983). These models and the respective empirical research mainly focus on mobility within firm-internal labor

markets (ILMs).<sup>1</sup> They are of limited use, however, when between-firm status mobility processes in occupationally segmented labor markets (henceforth referred to as OLMs) are of interest. For this type of mobility and labor market we propose the new concept of “occupational mobility chains” (henceforth referred to as OMCs). Showing affinities to Spilerman’s (1977: 559ff.) broad concept of “career lines,” OMCs specify the conditions under which status mobility may occur despite the strong occupational segmentation of the labor market.

We are aware of three studies, conducted by Allmendinger (1989), Blossfeld (1987) and Wolbers (2008) who have examined the effects of vacancies on occupational status mobility. All of them use highly aggregate macro-level proxies, such as GNP or the unemployment rate. Allmendinger finds a positive effect of labor demand on upward mobility for Norway, the US and Germany; Blossfeld reports positive effects for Germany on upward, lateral, and – rather surprisingly – also on downward mobility. Wolbers finds weak negative effects of the unemployment rate on upward and positive effects on downward mobility.

Research on how individual and family characteristics, such as race, sex, human capital, child birth, personality (Dekker, de

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<sup>1</sup> For an exception see Harrison (1988) who analyzed aggregate mobility flows between occupational groups in external labor markets.

Grip, & Heijke, 2002; Gelissen & de Graaf, 2006; Kalmijn & Luijkx, 2006; McBrier & Wilson, 2004; Sicherman & Galor, 1990; Wilson, 2009; Wilson & Roscigno, 2010) or displacement (Lippmann & Rosenthal, 2008) affect occupational status mobility is more extensive, however. Other studies document differences in upward mobility mechanisms between types of labor markets (Sørensen & Tuma, 1981) as well as within and between organizations (DiPrete & Krecker, 1991). Noteworthy enough, most of these studies do not systematically compare upward, lateral, and downward status mobility; exceptions being Blossfeld (1987) and Gelissen and de Graaf (2006).

For mobility outcomes other than occupational status mobility, research has addressed the significance of vacancies. This body of research also relies on highly aggregate and indirectly measured indicators of labor demand, such as occupational change (DiPrete, de Graaf, Luijkx, Tählin, & Blossfeld, 1997; DiPrete & Nonnemaker, 1997; Kye, 2008), unemployment, worker supply or GDP (Gesthuizen & Wolbers, 2010; Yu, 2010), and industrial ecology (e.g., firm size, firm closure, merger, and industrial growth) (Fujiwara-Greve & Greve, 2000; Haveman & Cohen, 1994; Shin, 2007; Stovel & Savage, 2006). The results, mostly for the US, generally show that demand forces substantially affect job mobility within and between firms, occupations, and industry.

Overall, previous research on different types of mobility demonstrates that demand-side factors do matter. However, empirical evidence of demand-side effects on status mobility taking into account labor market segmentation is still missing. This paper attempts to partially fill this gap by proposing the new concept of occupational mobility chains (OMCs) to investigate status mobility processes in occupationally segmented labor markets. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to conceptualize status mobility mechanisms in OLMs. By introducing time-dependent measures of vacant positions at the level of labor market segments we will be able to test empirically the implications of this concept for status mobility. Switzerland is the empirical reference as it is a prototypical case of an OLM.

## 2. Theoretical considerations

We start from the basic theoretical assumption that opportunities for status mobility strongly depend on the characteristics of the labor market in which mobility processes take place (e.g., Miller, 1982; Rosenfeld, 1992). For OLMs, we argue that skill-specific labor demand is more important for status mobility than aggregate labor demand (see also Halaby, 1988, p.11). Furthermore, the direction of individual status mobility (i.e., upward, lateral or downward) is likely to be contingent on the status of the vacant positions. In order to elaborate these basic assumptions, we will first conceptualize the Swiss OLM. Next, we explicate the concept of OMCs and discuss the role of vacancies for status mobility in this type of labor market. We conclude this section with an outline of the significance of job context and human capital for mobility processes.

### 2.1. The Swiss OLM

The Swiss labor market (like the German one) shows a profound segmentation by occupation-specific formal credentials. This type of labor market is perhaps best described by Sengenberger's (1987) concept of the tripartite labor market, distinguishing three main segments, namely the occupation-specific, the peripheral, and the firm-internal labor market. The *occupation-specific segment*, by far the largest in Switzerland, is subdivided in itself into some hundred occupation-specific subsegments, each of which is based on an occupation-specific formal credential. Access to jobs in these subsegments is generally limited to people

holding the specific occupational credential (Blossfeld & Mayer, 1988; Buchmann & Sacchi, 1995; Buchmann, Sacchi & Kriesi, 2002; Kriesi, Buchmann & Sacchi, 2010). Consequently, there is limited mobility *between* most occupational subsegments. Mobility usually presupposes the time-consuming and costly acquisition of an additional occupation-specific credential. Between-firm mobility *within* occupational subsegments, however, is largely unrestricted as credentials are institutionalized and skills can thus easily be transferred between employers. The *peripheral segment* includes unskilled jobs for workers without post-obligatory educational credentials, imposing no restrictions for mobility within this segment. In the *internal labor-market (ILM)*, characteristic of large firms, skilled workers are recruited for entry port positions at the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy based on their occupational certificate. From there, they may climb up institutionalized career ladders. As small and medium sized firms strongly prevail in Switzerland (Buchmann, Kriesi, & Sacchi, 2009; Levy, Joye, Guye, & Kaufmann, 1997), the scope of ILMs is rather limited in the Swiss labor market and their role in accounting for individual mobility processes, being overrated in general (Blossfeld & Mayer, 1988; Kerckhoff, 1995), should thus be particularly modest.

Despite institutional restrictions to mobility between most occupational subsegments in OLMs, research shows that occupational mobility and, consequently, status mobility (as status is tied to occupation) does occur in the Swiss OLM, encompassing upward, lateral or downward mobility (Sheldon, 2005). Occupational mobility is relatively frequent between *akin* occupations (i.e., those characterized by relatively similar task and skill profiles) and rare otherwise (Buchmann & Sacchi, 1995; Leibundgut, 1986; Sheldon, 2005).

### 2.2. OMCs

To conceptualize the clusters of relatively permeable subsegments composed of occupations with akin skill and task profiles, we introduce the notion of OMCs. It refers to Spilerman's (1977:551) broad concept of career lines and refines it for OLMs. Spilerman conceives of career lines as sequences of jobs. Workers holding a job within such a sequence have greater chances of moving to the next position in the sequence than other workers. Career lines thus provide mobility pathways "common to a portion of individuals in the labor force" (Spilerman, 1977:560). In contrast to vacancy chain concepts, career lines are applicable to mobility between firms, industries, and occupations (see also Kerckhoff, 1995). Whether mobility does indeed occur, depends on the vacancy structure within a worker's career line.

OMCs represent "career lines," linking a number of mutually permeable subsegments in the occupation-specific segment of the labor market and thus providing opportunities for occupational mobility. Fig. 1 illustrates our concept of OMCs. The occupationally segmented labor market is represented with two dimensions: occupational status and occupational specialization. While the former refers to the vertical dimension of stratification, the latter relates to the horizontal dimension of the division of labor. OMCs are represented by links (i.e., lines) between small clusters of occupational subsegments (i.e., boxes). Vertical links indicate pathways for upward/downward mobility; horizontal links those for lateral mobility. OMCs thus provide opportunities for mobility between occupational subsegments that are not rigidly sealed off from each other. If two occupational subsegments within a mobility chain offer the same status, opportunities for lateral mobility occur. Avenues for upward or downward mobility arise when subsegments with different status belong to the same mobility chain. In essence, the concept of OMC, conceived for the external labor market, is complementary to the concept of job ladders in ILMs.

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