

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Research in Social Stratification and Mobility

journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/rssm>

Does upward social mobility increase life satisfaction? A longitudinal analysis using British and Swiss panel data

Andreas Hadjar^{a,*}, Robin Samuel^{b,c}^a *Institute of Education and Society, University of Luxembourg, Route de Diekirch, BP2, L-7220 Walferdange, Luxembourg*^b *Institute of Sociology, University of Bern, Fabrikstrasse 8, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland*^c *Social Research and Methodology Group, University of Basel, Petersgraben 9/11, CH-4051 Basel, Switzerland*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 August 2014

Received in revised form 4 December 2014

Accepted 15 December 2014

Available online 20 December 2014

Keywords:

Social mobility

Subjective well-being

Social production function theory

Dissociative hypothesis

Longitudinal data

ABSTRACT

A main assumption of social production function theory is that status is a major determinant of subjective well-being (SWB). From the perspective of the dissociative hypothesis, however, upward social mobility may be linked to identity problems, distress, and reduced levels of SWB because upwardly mobile people lose their ties to their class of origin. In this paper, we examine whether or not one of these arguments holds. We employ the United Kingdom and Switzerland as case studies because both are linked to distinct notions regarding social inequality and upward mobility.

Longitudinal multilevel analyses based on panel data (UK: BHPS, Switzerland: SHP) allow us to reconstruct individual trajectories of life satisfaction (as a cognitive component of SWB) along with events of intragenerational and intergenerational upward mobility—taking into account previous levels of life satisfaction, dynamic class membership, and well-studied determinants of SWB.

Our results show some evidence for effects of social class and social mobility on well-being in the UK sample, while there are no such effects in the Swiss sample. The UK findings support the idea of dissociative effects in terms of a negative effect of intergenerational upward mobility on SWB.

© 2014 International Sociological Association Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a major goal of human actions as already outlined in ancient times by Aristotle (approx. 330 BC/2012; see also Tatarkiewicz, 1976). It is even the most important goal according to the social production function theory of Lindenberg and his colleagues (Lindenberg, 1996; Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Verbrugge, 1999). Consequently, the pursuit of SWB is a

crucial factor of decisions and actions. An important motive of social (and spatial) mobility is to improve one's life situation and thereby SWB. Since SWB is both an outcome and contributing factor and, thus, a key prerequisite for educational attainment and a successful occupational career (Andres & Wyn, 2010; Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, & Diener, 2005), a feedback loop between mobility and SWB appears to be plausible (Diener, 2009; Keller, Samuel, Semmer, & Bergman, 2014; Samuel, 2014). People climbing up the "social ladder" should arrive at more positive evaluations of their lives as they are gaining access to further rewards in various forms, such as prestige and desirable lifestyles. But can we find evidence that upward social mobility increases their SWB?

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: andreas.hadjar@uni.lu (A. Hadjar), robin.samuel@unibas.ch (R. Samuel).

Status is a major first-order-instrumental goal and its attainment increases SWB. This is a core assumption of the social production function theory by [Lindenberg \(1996\)](#) and his colleagues ([Ormel et al., 1999](#)). Yet, from the perspective of the dissociative hypothesis ([Houle & Martin, 2011](#); [Lipset & Bendix, 1959](#); [Sorokin, 1959](#)), upward social mobility may be linked to identity problems, distress, and reduced SWB since people who climb up the “social ladder” lose their ties to their class of origin. Dealing with the question of whether or not one of these arguments holds, we will look at both intergenerational and intra-generational upward social mobility applying the same theoretical frameworks to the two types of upward social mobility and their links to life satisfaction. Not all events of intragenerational upward mobility are necessarily events of intergenerational upward mobility. An illustrative example may be the case of the son of medical doctors who first becomes a mechanic and later in life does further education to become a car seller setting up his own business.

In most of the currently available population surveys, researchers include life satisfaction as a measure related to SWB. This is the cognitive component of SWB based on an evaluation of past, present, and future conditions ([Campbell, 1981](#); [Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2005](#)). Longitudinal analyses based on panel data will allow us to reconstruct life satisfaction trajectories after events of upward mobility taking into account previous levels of life satisfaction. Analysing the question of how social mobility affects life satisfaction, we consider two countries: the UK and Switzerland. Both settings are linked to distinct notions regarding social inequality and upward mobility. The UK is a representative of the liberal welfare state regime ([Esping-Andersen, 1990](#)), where discourses on class and upward social mobility are highly salient in the political and in the public sphere ([Gerteis & Savage, 1998](#); [Li & Devine, 2011](#)). Switzerland is a special case characterised by elements of liberal and conservative welfare regime types, where class differences and mobility presumably matter less. This is maybe due to the rather high standard of living. The UK ranks 19th on the inequality-adjusted Human Development Index while Switzerland comes in 7th ([United Nations Development Programme, 2013](#)).

The innovative potential of our study lies in (a) the consideration of both intergenerational and intragenerational mobility and its relation to SWB, (b) the longitudinal perspective involving large panel datasets, and (c) the comparison of the UK and Switzerland considering key elements on the macro level (society) such as class consciousness.

Following this introduction, we theorise the link between upward mobility and SWB. We consider two approaches and derive two contrasting hypotheses. This is followed by a brief description of how the UK and Switzerland differ in aspects that are important to the examined link between upward mobility and SWB. We postulate a third hypothesis on what we expect in regard to the mobility-SWB link comparing the UK and Switzerland. In a next step, we present the datasets and measures employed. Multilevel models with fixed effects serve to analyse the research questions. Finally, we discuss the findings and limitations of this study.

2. Upward mobility and subjective well-being

It is a widely held belief that status and wealth affect subjective well-being (SWB) positively. This is reflected in the efforts of many people to transcend their social background. By being upwardly mobile they hope to benefit from various rewards they believe to be associated with desirable societal positions. However, findings from a range of disciplines provide evidence that these benefits are not to be taken for granted. Contrary to popular opinion, it has been established that there is a diminishing marginal utility of rewards associated with social mobility such as income ([Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002](#); [Frey & Stutzer, 2002](#)). [Easterlin \(2005\)](#) finds even zero marginal utility when analysing consequences of income increases from a longitudinal perspective. Taking into account sociological and socio-psychological perspectives further questions whether upward mobility is associated with higher levels of SWB. But does leaving one’s class of origin have only positive consequences? [Houle \(2011\)](#) derives different hypotheses regarding the impact of (intragenerational) social mobility on SWB. According to the dissociative thesis—based on the mobility research of [Sorokin \(1959\)](#)—a negative link between upward mobility and SWB can be expected, since even upwardly mobile individuals may “never become fully accustomed to life in a new and alien class position” ([Houle, 2011](#), p. 758). Thus, they may experience feelings of anxiety, strain, and distress instead of a boost in SWB. Following the two other hypotheses outlined by [Houle \(2011\)](#), no link between upward mobility and SWB is expected because only downward mobility may be assumed to go along with feelings of distress and failure ([Newman, 1988](#)). Furthermore, mental health may be shaped by their current social class position rather than by mobility patterns ([Blau, 1956](#)). In this sense, there is disagreement as to how upward social mobility affects SWB. Our study revolves around two competing hypotheses pertaining to the effects of intragenerational and intergenerational upward social mobility. We derive them drawing on the rational choice perspective of social production function theory and the dissociative hypothesis, which has evolved from the classical inequality and conflict perspective. A third rather exploratory hypothesis relates to a country comparison and is backed by a look at institutional characteristics of the UK and Switzerland.

2.1. The rational perspective of the social production function theory

The main objective of social production function theory ([Lindenberg, 1996](#); [Ormel et al., 1999](#)) is to provide a rational perspective on human decisions and behaviour. At the centre of this theoretical framework lies the assumption that all individuals strive for subjective well-being (SWB) as a universal goal. This goal is reached via five instrumental first-order goals: first, stimulation/activation as the maintenance of an optimal arousal level; second, comfort in terms of absence of physiological needs; third, status understood as control over resources; fourth, behavioural confirmation defined as compliance to the expectations of reference groups and one’s own identity; and fifth,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/999556>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/999556>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)