

Social Mobility and Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

The role of social mobility in subjective well-being (SWB) is still rather under-researched. Investigating this complex relationship requires longitudinal research designs. However, panel datasets, particularly those with an international scope, are scarce. Sorokin's dissociative thesis is a prominent starting point in social science research on social mobility and SWB. It suggests that social mobility has negative consequences for SWB, as both upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals experience alienation from their social origin and feel distant from their new social position. A prominent counter thesis derived from economic works argues that SWB increases with upward social mobility, as a higher social position offers better opportunities to produce SWB. The current literature, based mainly on single-country studies, has yielded mixed findings and points to the importance of context (e.g. country and culture).

Introduction

The question of how positions in the social hierarchy are related to subjective well-being has received great attention, certainly since the time of Aristotle and maybe even earlier with thoughts regarding the highest outcome for a person's life. Modern empirical research has identified socio-economic background, social position or social status, and related factors, such as education or income, as the main drivers of subjective well-being (Frey & Stutzer, 2005; Tan et al., 2020). Less thoroughly studied is the impact of social mobility in terms of the effect on subjective well-being of changes between the rungs of the social ladder, typically indicated by positions within the occupational hierarchy of a given society, both within and across generations. In this encyclopedic review article, we will consider past, present and future research on the association between social mobility and subjective well-being, with a particular focus on intergenerational mobility. The section on the past discusses general classical frameworks and hypotheses on the link between social mobility and subjective well-being. The section on the present summarizes some of the current research on social mobility and subjective well-being, while the section on the future identifies gaps in knowledge and outlines desiderata for future research. We will follow a problem-centered approach throughout and will highlight some of the main developments, findings, and challenges. We use the term subjective well-being (SWB), as this is an umbrella term that encompasses both happiness, an affective aspect that is closer to a feeling, and satisfaction, a cognitive aspect that results from a thoughtful evaluation and comparison of conditions (e.g., previous and current levels of one's own resources and the resources of others). However, both the affective and the cognitive aspects relate to evaluation processes as outlined in the definition of Diener et al. (1999) that frames SWB in terms of "how people evaluate their lives—both at the moment and for longer periods," which is a "broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction" (Diener et al., 1999, p. 277).

Past

Before we turn to classical hypotheses on the association between social mobility and SWB, we provide a brief overview of the theories on how social position and SWB are related. These concepts mostly follow a need or comparison logic (see the review by Kraus (2018)). The term "social position" refers to societal hierarchies, understood as systems of social relations, with a special focus on power relations and interest relations (Farkas, 2022). According to this conceptualization, different social positions are associated with different chances of realizing certain interests and different possession of and access to resources (e.g.,

assets, power, and social networks) in order to achieve certain goals and produce subjective well-being. Changes in social position, that is, social mobility, will imply changes in the chance of achieving SWB.

The classical conceptions of social position of Marx and Weber, centering on social class as a social position framework, imply that social position is linked to subjective well-being, although neither classical thinker explicitly established a class–SWB link. Considering Marx, we could argue that if one social class possesses the means of production (as the bourgeoisie does), and another social class does not but instead becomes alienated from the work processes, the outcomes of this work and from themselves (as the working class does), this will co-determine the difference in subjective well-being between these social classes (Marx, 1844/2010). Considering Weber (1921-22/1978) with his more fine-grained social class typologies, we can presume class differences in SWB relating to the resources of different social classes, their interests, and their lifestyles.

A more recent, but nevertheless classical theory is the Social Production Function (SPF) theory (Ormel et al., 1999) that derives major drivers of well-being from a rational resource perspective. It can be characterised as a ‘need theory’ as it relates to Maslow’s need concept (1970). With the foundational assumption that human beings universally strive for (subjective) well-being (physical well-being and social approval), the theory centers on five first-order instrumental goals to achieve well-being, namely stimulation (maintaining a certain arousal level), comfort (absence of deficits regarding food, drink, and a safe and comfortable living environment), status (control over scarce resources), behavioral confirmation (being in line with one’s own expectations and the expectations of significant others), and affection (having emotional relationships with other people). The aspect that is most relevant to social position (and socio-economic background) is the status dimension, which is prominently situated among the first-order goals mentioned above (Lindenberg, 1996; Ormel et al., 1999). However, social position also links to the other first-order goals in the production of well-being, as a privileged social class position often implies a higher income, which allows for greater comfort, better integration into stimulating work and leisure activities, and even a larger social network characterized by close emotional ties (Samuel & Hadjar, 2015; Samuel & Hadjar, 2016).

While these conceptual considerations emphasize the importance of different types of resources, social comparison as a source of SWB is only implicitly taken into account. Thus, an explicit understanding of status as a positional good (Hirsch, 1977) may add to these conceptualizations. As regards the comparative nature of SWB in particular, status and upward social mobility mean a better position for social comparison (Festinger, 1954): higher social classes, that is, people who have higher status, or/and

people being upwardly mobile, are more able to positively evaluate their status relative to others (e.g. Samuel et al., 2013; Samuel & Hadjar, 2016).

In the past, three hypotheses have guided much of the research on social mobility and its association with SWB:

Dissociative/dissolution hypothesis. Based on the mobility research by Sorokin (1959), upward social mobility, as well as downward social mobility, goes along with a dissociation from the class of origin or parental class. As outlined by Gugushvili et al. (2019), socially mobile people may experience a lack of integration into both the social environment of their original position (or class) and the social environment of their position of destination. Such processes of dissociation be accompanied by alienation from and a lack of belonging to (Centers, 1949; Jackman & Jackman, 1973) the class of destination, causing feelings of anxiety, distress, and depression, and eventually a lower SWB. Part of this process of dissociation and disintegration relating to social mobility in either direction is social isolation, which is another major factor that reduces SWB (Ellis & Lane, 1967). As both a lack of integration and social isolation relate to lower levels of SWB, the dissolution hypothesis predicts that intergenerational mobility reduces SWB.

Rising from rags hypothesis. A counter hypothesis postulated by Gugushvili et al. (2019), vis-à-vis research findings that contradicted the dissociative hypothesis (e.g. Chan, 2018; Ward et al., 2016), assumes that the positive effects of upward social mobility (e.g. stronger sense of control in life, feelings of confidence to tackle barriers, orientation towards lifestyles of the higher social position, and a sense of gratitude to the new socio-economic environment) outweigh the negative effects (e.g. increasing distance from the social position of origin).

This argument can also be supported by referring to explanations focusing on economic resources (e.g. Blau, 1956): if current social position — in terms of resources — is the strongest driver of SWB, upward social mobility should go along with an increase in SWB and downward mobility with a decrease in SWB. Again referring to Social Production Function theory (Lindenberg, 1996; Ormel et al., 1999), social mobility towards a higher social position would go along with positive feelings of recognition, value, and prestige in the eyes of others and in the self-perception of the individual (Anderson et al., 2012). Intragenerational or intergenerational upward social mobility would then be assumed to produce status and, thus, SWB. A positive effect of upward social mobility on SWB can also be derived from sociological mobility theories (e.g. Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Treiman, 1970) that center on the “status maintenance motive” as a major motivational factor behind educational attainment and occupational mobility.

In the same vein, inter-individual and intra-individual social comparisons can serve as mechanisms: upwardly mobile people more likely perceive themselves as being more successful than

others, while downwardly mobile people more likely perceive themselves as being less successful than others (Samuel et al., 2013). Comparisons of former and current status or parents' status and own status may have the same outcome.

Falling from grace hypothesis. Newman (1988) focused specifically on the negative consequences of downward social mobility, and introduced the falling from grace hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the positive rewards of upward social mobility outweigh the negative consequences, and thus only downward social mobility is likely to reduce SWB (Newman, 1988, 1999). The falling from grace hypothesis posits that downward social mobility leads to increasing distress and feelings of insecurity, as individuals experience a loss of control over their situation (Gugushvili et al., 2019). Furthermore, unintended downward mobility results in a comparison between former levels of control and a reduced level of control associated with the new social position. As a consequence of these combined mechanisms, increasing distress, feelings of insecurity, and loss of control, downward social mobility decreases SWB.

Present

In our discussion of the present research, we focus on the association with intergenerational social mobility — changes in social position between generations. To examine the impact of intergenerational mobility on subjective well-being, it is necessary to construct a measure of the relative performance or social position of the offspring compared to the parents. While some research uses educational attainment (Nikolaev & Burns, 2014; Schuck & Steiber, 2018), the majority employs social class differentials to measure social mobility (Hadjar & Samuel, 2015; Iveson & Deary, 2017; Li, 2016; Marshall & Firth, 1999; Zang & de Graaf, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017). The variety of different operationalizations may constitute one major cause of the divergent findings, as we will detail later. The two studies which define intergenerational mobility using educational attainment both rely on repeated cross-sectional data and find positive effects of intergenerational upward mobility and a negative impact of intergenerational downward mobility (Nikolaev & Burns, 2014; Schuck & Steiber, 2018).

Research that uses social class to construct a relative measure of achievement shows mixed empirical evidence: whereas some research suggests that intergenerational mobility has no effect on SWB (Iveson & Deary, 2017; Marshall & Firth, 1999; Zang & de Graaf, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017), Hadjar and Samuel (2015) report a negative effect of intergenerational upward social mobility on SWB for the UK.

A longitudinal study of US high school graduates by Houle (2011; Houle & Martin, 2011), which considered the dependence between prior and current social class as well as control variables (e.g. cognitive ability, marital status, and unemployment), did not find a positive link between social mobility

and psychological distress. The results indicated instead a strong link between current class and distress level, suggesting that upward social mobility may lead to an increase in SWB, while downward social mobility may result in a decrease.

Posel and Casale (2011) indicate an interesting aspect in their South African study. They considered both past upward social mobility and anticipated future upward social mobility. There was a strong positive effect of past upward social mobility on life satisfaction and a smaller — but still profound — positive effect of expected future upward social mobility. A Chinese study by Huang et al. (2017) indicates a similar mechanism in its finding that an expectation of the possibility of upward social mobility moderated the link between social status and SWB as well as that between subjective social status and SWB.

Nikolaev and Burns' (2014) results on the basis of the US General Social Survey indicate that downward social mobility goes along with a lower SWB, while upward social mobility is associated with a higher SWB. The negative effect of downward social mobility appears to be stronger than the positive effect of upward social mobility.

The comparative paper by Hadjar and Samuel (2015) employed panel data from the UK and Switzerland and considered intragenerational and intergenerational social mobility. The findings suggest that upward social mobility plays only a limited role in regard to life satisfaction, as no evidence for a significant positive link between upward mobility and SWB was found. Instead, there was one indication in support of the dissociative hypothesis for the UK sample: intergenerational upward mobility, when the individual has achieved a higher social class position than their parents, appeared to be negatively associated with SWB.

The study by Li (2016), with its focus on social mobility, social networks and SWB, also provides evidence for the dissociative hypothesis. Compared to being stable in a privileged social class position (salariat/service class), all other mobility patterns appear to be associated with a significantly lower SWB. This includes upward social mobility towards the salariat/service class, downward social mobility from salariat/service class towards lower classes, and being in a stable middle/intermediate class or in a stable working-class position.

Vanhoutte and Nazroo (2016), comparing England and the US, found ambivalent and context-specific results. While a moderate downward social mobility was clearly associated with a lower satisfaction with life (an aspect of SWB), a moderate upward social mobility was not associated with satisfaction with life in England, and was even negatively associated with satisfaction with life in the US.

Research by Dhoore et al. (2019) suggests that mobility itself has no impact on SWB and thus appears to be neither SWB-reducing nor SWB-increasing, while social class shows the expected effect with members of the service class exhibiting the highest SWB. The authors conclude that these findings back the acculturation thesis of Blau (1956), which assumes that people increasingly adopt the values and lifestyles of the class in which they are or to which they transition during a mobility process.

Gugushvili et al. (2019), who focus on the outcome of depressive symptoms, find that downward intergenerational social mobility goes along with depressive symptoms and thus a decline in SWB, while upward social mobility is associated with less depressive symptoms and thus a higher SWB, but only for men. While they provide some possible arguments for this gender difference, such as the suggestion that status and mobility may matter less for women, they conclude that their results instead support the “falling from grace” hypothesis.

Overall, the results generated by the present research appear to be ambivalent and methodology- and context-specific.

Future

Assessing the association of social mobility with SWB includes several challenges that may be addressed in future research.

A first challenge arises because intergenerational mobility is defined in terms of the relative performance or social position of the child compared to the parents. As empirical evidence shows that parental resources (Brüderl et al., 2019) and a person’s own resources influence SWB, disentangling whether an individual’s SWB level is mainly influenced by social origin (i.e., parental resources), their own resources, or the relationship between the two (i.e. intergenerational mobility) is complicated. Thus, scholars studying the effects of intergenerational mobility on SWB face a similar challenge to that of researchers who want to disentangle the effects of age, period, and cohort on a given outcome: a linear dependency problem. A possible “best practice” methodology that can still be refined is the diagonal mobility model (DDM; also known as diagonal reference model, DRM) approach (Sobel, 1981), which attempts to retrieve the relative weights of origin, destination, and upward and downward mobility to estimate the genuine effect of mobility, independent of class of origin and class of destination (e.g. modeling mediating factors for the mobility–SWB link directly; taking into account the proportion of mobile people; Zang et al., 2023). Future research could use bounding approaches, which have become popular in the age–period–cohort literature (Fosse & Winship, 2019).

Secondly, research on the influence on SWB of social position, status, social class, and inter- as well as intra-generational social mobility has mostly relied on (repeated) cross-sectional data, whereas only a few studies have been able to exploit panel data and follow individuals over time (e.g. Hadjar & Samuel, 2015). However, using panel data may help to deal with unobserved heterogeneity and to identify temporal aspects of SWB changes due to social mobility (e.g. anticipation and lag effects). These missing insights from longitudinal analyses and international comparisons in the linkages between social class, social mobility, and subjective well-being could be generated by future research.

Moreover, and thirdly, many countries have their own panel studies (e.g., the German Socio-economic Panel/SOEP, the Korean Labour & Income Panel Study/KLIPS, the South African National Income Dynamics Study/NIDS, and the Swiss Household Panel/SHP). Because of their distinct methodological features, most data sets do not allow for an international comparative analysis of the linkages outlined above. While there are some notable exceptions, these often have limitations concerning age range or the geographical region covered (e.g., the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe/SHARE), and a global panel study would allow more conclusive studies to be conducted into how societal characteristics and policies impact the links between social class, social mobility, and SWB. This ambitious survey project would require the design and use of culturally sensitive, valid, and reliable, but standardized, measures for SWB, social class, and social mobility.

Fourthly, SWB is often rather parsimoniously operationalized in existing data sets, particularly in trend or panel surveys (e.g., the two-item measure of SWB in the European Social Survey or the single item measure of life satisfaction in the SOEP). Future research should better exploit and test the complexity and likely multidimensional nature of subjective well-being in relation to social mobility.

Fifthly, subjective theories should more frequently be considered when the links between socio-economic aspects, such as social class and related income, and SWB are analyzed. As Kraus (2018) points out, subjective perceptions and attitudes/values regarding this link may be crucial factors explaining “blind spots” and counterintuitive findings. This implies that more mixed-method research should be conducted combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to capture both systematic differences and mechanisms and subjective idiosyncrasies in experiencing social mobility.

Sixthly, and relating to the previous point, the question of how social mobility and social position are measured deserves more attention. For example, Andersson (2018) revealed that respondents’ perceived general social status may differ from their perceived social status among neighbors and friends, with differential consequences for SWB (Zang et al., 2023). New measurements of social position may

have to go beyond conventional status or class concepts, transcending occupational and economic dimensions and considering subjectively experienced realities in increasingly diverse societies.

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