Intergenerational Social Mobility and Happiness across Cultures: A Comparison between the United States of America and Scandinavian Europe

Jasper Dhoore & Henk Roose

Department of Sociology, Ghent University, Korte Meer 5, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

1. Introduction

Research on the relation between intergenerational occupational social mobility and subjective well-being (SWB) is thriving, as indicated by a growing number of publications on this issue during the past decade (e.g. Becker and Birkelbach, 2018; Chan, 2018; Hadjar and Samuel, 2015; Iveson and Deary, 2017; Nikolaev and Burns, 2014; Zang and de Graaf, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017). These empirical studies show little consensus when it comes to the consequences of intergenerational social mobility for SWB: while some authors suggest that upward mobility is beneficial for SWB (e.g. Nikolaev and Burns, 2014), others find no such relationship (e.g. Zang and de Graaf, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017). In a similar vein, some researchers suggest that downward mobility is negatively associated with SWB (e.g. Nikolaev and Burns, 2014), while others do not (e.g. Zang and de Graaf, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017).

Most empirical attention for the relationship between occupational social mobility and SWB has gone to the analysis of single countries. Apart from some exceptions (e.g. Author A, 2019; Hadjar and Samuel, 2015; Marshall and Firth, 1999), few recent studies have investigated if the consequences of occupational social mobility differ across societies. So, little is known about the importance of the context for the relationship between social mobility and SWB. Furthermore, an exploration of a moderating role of context may help to improve our understanding of the mixed findings from single country studies. To explore the importance of context for the consequences of social mobility for SWB, we compare the United States with the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden).
The United States and the Scandinavian countries are interesting cases because they differ in a number of ways that may prove to be relevant for the subjective experience of social mobility. Firstly, the United States is an archetypical example of a success-oriented society in which great emphasis is placed on individual accomplishments and achievement (Spence, 1985). The Scandinavian countries are characterized by more egalitarian values (Schwartz, 2006; Triandis, 1996, Triandis and Gelfand, 1998; see also Nelson and Shavitt, 1992). Culturally salient values moderate the relationship of events and experiences with SWB (see Oishi, 2000; Oishi, Diener, Suh et al., 1999, Oishi, Diener, Lucas et al., 1999). A great cultural salience of success and achievement may make occupational success or failure more important markers for people’s SWB. Secondly, the United States are characterized by higher income inequality than the Scandinavian countries (Aaberge et al., 2002). Social mobility is claimed to be more important for people’s well-being when the differences between the income of social positions are greater, because it makes social mobility a more significant event (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015). Thirdly, these contexts exemplify different welfare state regimes: a liberal welfare state regime in the United States and a more generous social-democratic welfare state in the Scandinavian countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The welfare state can reduce the importance of social class in society (Esping-Andersen, 1990), and in turn make social class mobility less important for people’s SWB (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015). Taken all of these contextual differences, we expect that social mobility will be more important for people’s SWB in the United States than in the Scandinavian countries.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Social mobility and SWB

An early effort to link the consequences of social mobility with well-being comes from Sorokin’s (1927) classic study. He argues that social mobility involves a difficult adaptation to the newly acquired position and therefore leads to mental strain. These
adaptations are so intense and demanding for the socially mobile that “their nervous systems crumble under the burden of the great strains required of them” (Sorokin, 1927, 515). Because downward and upward social mobility comprise adaptation problems, Sorokin (1927) claims that both will lead to mental strain. The perspective that social mobility, downward and upward, has detrimental consequences is commonly called the dissociative hypothesis (Ellis and Lane, 1967).

Early empirical investigations of the dissociative hypothesis were hampered by the methodological problem to isolate the effect of social mobility from social position of origin and destination (Houle and Martin, 2011). This is called the identification problem (Blalock, 1966). Stimulated by the development of Diagonal Reference Models (DRMs), a statistical technique that overcomes the identification problem (see Sobel, 1981), the dissociative hypothesis has recently received new empirical attention. Nonetheless, studies using DRMs unanimously reject the dissociative hypothesis: they find no evidence for detrimental consequences of intergenerational upward and downward occupational social mobility. This is the case for research that examines SWB (e.g. Zang and de Graaf 2016; Zhao et al., 2017), but also for research that explicitly focuses on distress and depression (Houle and Martin, 2011; Gugushvili et al., 2019), physiological reactions to stress (Präg and Richards, 2019), and other measures for dissociation including social isolation, utilitarian individualism and social disorientation (see Daenekindt, 2017).

The notion of downward and upward social mobility as two interchangeable experiences is challenged by the “falling from grace hypothesis” (Newman, 1989; see also Houle, 2011), and the recently developed “rising from rags hypothesis (Gugushvili et al., 2019). The “falling from grace hypothesis” is coined by Houle (2011) and is based on Newman’s (1989) qualitative study on intragenerational downward social mobility in the United States. In her ethnographic study Newman (1989) points at the psychologically and
socially damaging impact of skidding down the occupational ladder. She argues that downward mobility is associated with feelings of failure, stress, social disorientation and loss of control. Hence, the falling from grace hypothesis predicts that downward social mobility is the only mobility trajectory that will provoke problems for people’s well-being (see Houle, 2011).

Downward social mobility may also lower SWB via the mechanism of social comparisons (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015). This argument is built on Reference Group Theory (Merton and Kitt, 1950) and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). The general idea is that “being more successful than significant others will boost well-being levels while being less successful than significant others will decrease well-being” (Samuel et al., 2013, p. 78). Research suggests that the significant others whom the socially mobile compare themselves with, can be the family of origin (Dolan and Lordan, 2013; McBride, 2001). For instance, Dolan and Lordan (2013) suggest that if downwardly mobile people compare their income with that of their parents, they report lower SWB.

In contrast with downward social mobility, upward mobility may have positive effects for people’s well-being. Gugushvili et al. (2019) call this the ‘rising from rags’ hypothesis. Although their argument is developed specifically with depression in mind, the idea of beneficial effects of upward social mobility may also apply to SWB. Firstly, in line with the theory on social comparisons that is outlined above, being more successful than their parents may enhance the well-being of the upwardly mobile (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015; Nikolaev and Burns, 2014). Secondly, the achievement of success has been found to be associated with happiness (Weiner, 1985). Thirdly, Gugushvili et al. (2019) link upward mobility with less depressive symptoms because it may generate a greater sense of control of life. This argument may also apply to SWB, given that research shows that a greater subjective sense of control of life is associated with more happiness (Larson, 1989).
As we have discussed above, ‘the falling from grace’ and the ‘rising from rags’ hypotheses relate downward and upward social mobility with negative and positive states, respectively. These negative and positive consequences of social mobility may be reflected in a person’s SWB. More specifically, SWB comprises positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1997; Diener et al., 1999). According to Diener et al. (1997: 25) “a person is said to have high SWB if she or he experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experience unpleasant emotions such as sadness and anger.

Contrariwise, a person is said to have low SWB if he or she is dissatisfied with life, experiences little joy and affection, and frequently feels negative emotions such as anger or anxiety.” Thus, negative and positive states are involved in people’s SWB. Therefore, we believe general SWB is an ideal marker to investigate the negative and positive consequences of downward and upward social mobility respectively.

In a study on intergenerational social mobility and SWB, Nikolaev and Burns (2014) find evidence that is in line with the falling from grace hypothesis and the rising from rags hypothesis. They find that downward mobility has a negative effect on SWB, and upward mobility positive effects. However, they do not use DRMs in their analyses, and so, their study might suffer from the same methodological problems as early studies on the dissociative thesis. Zang and de Graaf (2016) and Zhao et al. (2017) do employ DRMs and find that intergenerational social mobility, upward or downward, is not associated with SWB. However, the studies from Zang and de Graaf (2016) and Zhao et al. (2017) do not only differ from Nikolaev and Burns’ (2014) study with respect to the methods that they use. They also focus on very different societal contexts: the United States (see Nikolaev and Burns, 2014) and China (see Zang and de Graaf, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017). The focus of these studies on different societies may contribute to the mixed findings that these studies present. Empirical research that investigates the importance of the macro-level context is scarce and evidence is
mixed. Some researchers find a moderating influence of the context (see Hadjar and Samuel, 2015), while others do not (see Dhoore et al., 2019; Marshall and Firth, 1999). We want to contribute to this research by comparing the United States with Scandinavian Europe.

2.2 The United States versus the Scandinavian countries

In this study we compare the United States and the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden). These countries share some characteristics, for instance, both are individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001). However, both settings also differ with respect to some macro-level characteristics that may be important to how social mobility is subjectively experienced.

A first macro-level characteristic is situated at the cultural level: the cultural orientation towards achievement. The United States are often depicted as a stereotypical example of a success-oriented society (Spence, 1985). The achievement of success is a central element of the American Dream (Hochschild, 1995). For many Americans, achieving success means attaining a higher position on the social and economic ladder via upward mobility (Samuel, 2012). The Scandinavian countries more strongly emphasize egalitarian values compared with the United States. This is shown in an empirical study of Schwartz (2006) in which the cultural orientations of societies are compared. The cultural orientation of the United States stresses mastery and hierarchy more in comparison with the Scandinavian countries. Evidence for a different orientation towards achievement is also provided in a mixed-method, cross-national comparison of Denmark and the United States by Nelson and Shavitt (2002). Their study suggests that achievement values are less important in Denmark than in the United States.

Differences in the cultural salience of values may moderate the indicators that affect people’s SWB (Oishi, Diener, Suh et al., 1999). More specifically, from the perspective of the
values-as-a-moderator model in SWB theory, it is argued that the determinants of SWB are dependent upon culturally salient values (Oishi, Diener, Lucas et al., 1999; Oishi, 2000; see also Oishi, Diener, Suh et al., 1999). The central premise is that satisfaction in domains that are congruent with a person’s values are more heavily weighted for his/her general satisfaction than domains that are not congruent with his/her values (Oishi, Diener, Suh et al., 1999; see also Oishi, Diener, Lucas et al., 1999). Given that values are affected by the cultural context in which they are situated (Oishi, Diener, Suh et al., 1999; Oishi, 2000), the markers of people’s SWB may vary across cultures (Oishi, Diener, Suh et al., 1999). Early mobility research discussed the idea that cultural orientation towards achievement and success may moderate the subjective consequences of social mobility (for example see Bean et al., 1973; Seeman, 1977). Considering the greater salience of achievement values, social hierarchy and social status attainment in the North American culture compared with the Scandinavian culture, we expect social mobility to be a more important predictor of SWB in the United States than in Scandinavian Europe.

Secondly, the level of income inequality in a society may affect the strength of the relationship between social mobility and SWB (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015). Earnings are unequally distributed between occupations (Weeden, 2002) and between social classes (Hout et al., 1993; Weeden et al., 2007). Thus, given that occupations and social classes are associated with earnings, we may assume that upward or downward social class mobility will often be accompanied with income gains or losses, respectively. We postulate that income gains or losses may be larger in societies that are characterized by greater income inequality. These greater distances between the income of social positions may make social mobility a more severe event (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015). In other words, the bigger the distance between positions in a society, the bigger the distance people can climb or fall. Income inequality is higher in the United States compared with the Scandinavian countries, as is reflected in their
GINI index coefficients (GINI index coefficients of the year 2010 based on World Bank (2019) data: United States 40.4%; Denmark 27.2%; Norway 25.7%; Sweden 27.7%). Therefore, we expect that the association between social mobility and SWB will be larger in the United States compared with Scandinavian Europe.

In a similar vein, a third potentially relevant contextual characteristic that may moderate the relationship between social mobility and SWB is situated at the level of social policies: the welfare state regime (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015; see also Schuck and Steiber, 2018). In order to link the welfare state regime to the consequences of class mobility, it is necessary to define classes. According to Weber classes are a number of people who share similar life chances which are determined by their position in the market (Gerth and Mills, 1946). The welfare state regime can redistribute these life chances, and make them less dependent on the market, as is discussed by Svalfors (2004: 119): “The welfare state redistributes resources and life chances, and regulates risks stemming from market dependency. In this way, it intervenes in various ways in the processes that connect class position with social outcomes. Through social insurance, which safeguards against market dependency, and through financing and delivery of public welfare services, welfare policies change the relation between class, resources and risks.”

So, as Svalfors (2004; see also Esping-Andersen, 1990) suggests, the welfare state can reduce the importance of social class by redistributing life chances and by making life chances less dependent on people’s market situation. Empirical research shows that welfare states can also intervene in the link between stratification and social outcomes such as SWB, and health (e.g. Olafsdottir, 2007; Samuel and Hadjar, 2016). For instance, in a study on 30 European countries Samuel and Hadjar (2016) show that status differences in SWB are smallest in social-democratic welfare-state regimes. Moreover, it is argued that class mobility will be more important for people’s SWB in contexts where class differences are larger.
because it “is a more serious life event that will likely induce more pronounced identity problems and a stronger loss of class ties” (Hadjar and Samuel, 2015: 51). Therefore, we expect that social mobility will matter more for SWB in welfare states that promote people’s welfare to a smaller degree. Research from Schuck and Steiber (2018) partly confirms this idea. In their study on 18 European countries they find that educational social mobility only affects life satisfaction in the conservative welfare state regime of Continental Europe in which social status differences are maintained. However, their results are based on a selective sample of people aged 25 to 34, so, it is not clear if these results also apply to older populations.

The United States and the Scandinavian countries have been classified in different welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The United States are a typical example of the liberal welfare state. This regime is characterized by modest benefits, means-tested assistance that are linked with social stigma, a dominant role for the market and is weakly de-commodifying (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In addition, the United States offer a low level of health care services (Bambra, 2005). The Scandinavian countries are representative of the social democratic welfare state regime. In contrast with the liberal welfare state, “the social democrats pursued a welfare state that would promote an equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs as was pursued elsewhere.” (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 27). This model is characterized by universalistic welfare programs, a weak role of the market for welfare, a high de-commodification (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and a high level of health care services (Bambra, 2005). Considering that the social democratic welfare state regime is more generous than the liberal welfare state, we expect that social mobility will be more important for SWB in the United States than in the Scandinavian countries.

3. **Hypotheses**
Our theoretical arguments at the individual and macro-level lead to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Downward social mobility is negatively associated with SWB.

Hypothesis 2: Upward social mobility is positively associated with SWB.

Hypothesis 3: The associations from upward and downward social mobility with SWB will be larger in the United States than in the Scandinavian countries.

4. Data, Measures and Methods

4.1 Data

To obtain information for the United States we employed pooled data from the General Social Survey (GSS) years 2006 until 2016 (Smith et al., 2017). The GSS 2006-2016 is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and comprises information for the adult English or Spanish speaking population living in households in the United States. Before 2006 the Spanish speaking adults were not part of the target population. Therefore, GSS waves older than 2006 were not used for the analyses. Data for Scandinavian Europe were retrieved from the fourth wave of the European Values Study collected between 2008 and 2010 (EVS, 2016). The EVS 2008 comprises data for 46 countries/regions in Europe (Brislinger et al., 2011), including the Scandinavian countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden. To attain sufficient cell-frequencies for the analyses, data for the three Scandinavian countries were pooled. The analyses were restricted to people aged between 25 and 64 because these respondents are more likely to be active on the labor market. Given that we use a measure of social position that is based on occupation, people who never worked are omitted from the analyses. In addition, respondents with missing values on any of the variables in our analysis were omitted from the analyses. This results in a final (unweighted) sample of 8597 individuals for the United States and 2245 for Scandinavian Europe.
4.2 Measures

SWB. The GSS and EVS datasets both comprise a single-item measure of general happiness. In line with Oishi, Diener and Lucas (2007) we consider the terms SWB and happiness to be interchangeable. In the GSS happiness is measured by the question “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” In the EVS happiness is measured with a very similar question, namely: “Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy, or not at all happy?”. Thus, the GSS and EVS contain very similar single item measures of happiness. A slight difference is that the item in the GSS contains three response categories, while the EVS contains four. To make these questions comparable across both datasets we collapsed the answering categories into a dichotomous variable consisting of the categories happy (GSS: very happy and pretty happy; EVS: very happy and quite happy) and not happy (GSS: not too happy; EVS: not very happy and not at all happy). In both datasets, most respondents reported that they were happy (United States 87.9%; Scandinavia 93.5%).

Social class of origin and destination. Social class position was based on the EGP-scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Erikson et al., 1979). The aim of the EGP-scheme is to “bring together occupations whose incumbents are typically involved in broadly similar market and work situations” (Erikson et al., 1979: 416). In the EVS 2008 an eleven-class version of the EGP-scheme for respondents and their father/mother was already included in the dataset. To code this the EVS team employed a syntax from Ganzeboom and Treiman (1996). In the GSS we had to construct this variable ourselves. To do this we utilized a syntax from Morgan (2017) which uses information on the 2010 US Census Occupational Classification codes and self-employment to code a ten-class version of the EGP-scheme. For both datasets we collapsed the extensive EGP-schemes into a three-class version of the
scheme that consists of the following categories: the service class (I and II), the intermediate class (IIIa, IIIb, IVa, IVb, IVc and V) and the working class (VI, VIIa and VIIb) (see Goldthorpe, 1987).

In line with the conservative approach of social class positions (see Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992), we measured the social class of origin using the occupation of the father of the respondent when the respondent was growing up. An exception to this rule was when respondents were only living with their mother when they were growing up. In that case the social class position of the mother was employed as the social class of origin of the respondent. People who were not living with any of their parents when they grew up, were not included in the analysis. Social class of destination was measured using the occupation of the respondent at the time of the interview. For people who were not active on the labor market but who had worked before, we used their previous occupation. Examples are people who are unemployed, retired or housekeepers. People who have never been active on the labor market were omitted from the analyses.

*Intergenerational social mobility.* Based on social class of origin and destination we constructed a categorical variable that indicates if people had been upwardly mobile, downwardly mobile or immobile (reference category). Upward mobility was defined as intergenerational social mobility from the working class to the intermediate class or the service class and intergenerational social mobility from the intermediate class to the service class. Downward social mobility was defined as intergenerational social mobility in the opposite direction.

*Control variables.* Sex (male = 1; female = 0), age (55 to 64 = reference category), marital status (married = 1; not married = 0) and employment status (employed = 1; not employed = 0) are controlled for. To control for country-level heterogeneity between the countries in the pooled Scandinavian dataset we include n-1 country dummies. Similarly, we
include $n$-1 wave dummies in the analysis for the United States to control for heterogeneity between the different waves of the GSS.

### 4.3 Methods

We employ Sobel’s (1981; see also 1985) DRMs to empirically assess the association between social class mobility and happiness. DRMs have been shown to be superior to

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Descriptive statistics (percentages)</th>
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<td>United States</td>
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<td>Happiness</td>
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<td>Happy</td>
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<td>Not happy</td>
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<td>Social class of origin</td>
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<td>Service class</td>
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<td>Intermediate class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
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<td>Social class of destination</td>
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<td>Service class</td>
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<td>Intermediate class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service class</td>
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<td>Social mobility</td>
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<td>Downward</td>
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<td>Immobile</td>
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<td>Sex</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>35-44</td>
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<td>55-64</td>
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<td>Employment status</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
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<td>Not employed</td>
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<td>Marital status</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>Not married</td>
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Age ≥ 25 & ≤ 64
Standard deviation in parentheses
Descriptive analyses for the United States were weighted using the recommended weights ‘WTSSNR’
Descriptive analyses for Scandinavian Europe were weighted the recommended weights ‘weight_g’ and population weights (own calculations using Eurostat (2019) data for the population in 2008)
Analyses performed using SPSS 24
conventional regression techniques to model the consequences of social mobility (Schuck and Steiber, 2018; van der Waal et al., 2017). DRMs are in line with the classical idea in mobility theory that an effect of social mobility has to be separated from the effects of social position of origin and destination (see Duncan, 1966: 91). Sobel’s (1981: 896) baseline model is specified as follows:

\[ Y_{ijk} = p \cdot \mu_{ii} + (1 - p) \cdot \mu_{jj} + \epsilon_{ijk} \]

In this baseline model the association of social class of origin (i) and destination (j) with happiness is modelled. In Sobel’s (1981) DRMs immobile people are considered to be the core members of social classes (van der Waal et al., 2017). The happiness (\( Y_{ijk} \)) of people off the diagonal in a mobility table (socially mobile individuals) is a weighted average of the mean happiness of people on the diagonal (socially immobile individuals) in their social position of origin (\( \mu_{ii} \)) and destination (\( \mu_{jj} \)) (Sobel, 1981, 1985). The relative salience of the social class of origin and destination for the happiness of the socially mobile is presented by the origin (p) and destination (1-p) weights, which are constrained to sum to 1 (Sobel, 1981). An origin weight (p) that is significantly greater than 0.5 indicates that social position of origin is most salient for the happiness of the socially mobile. Conversely, an origin weight significantly smaller than 0.5 indicates that social position of destination is most salient. When the origin weight is not significantly different from 0.5, we cannot reject that the happiness of the socially mobile equally depends on the origin and destination classes.

Sobel’s (1981; 1985) baseline DRM models the relationship of happiness with social class of origin and destination. Social mobility variables are added to this baseline model to investigate if mobility effects exist over and above the effects of original and current class position. In our first model we add dummy variables for upward and downward mobility (up
Control variables are added to the model as covariates \( I \). This model is specified as follows:

\[
Y_{ijk} = p \cdot \mu_{ii} + (1 - p) \cdot \mu_{jj} + \beta_{up} + \beta_{down} + \sum \beta_{l}x_{ijkl} + \epsilon_{ijk}
\]

Because we employ a dichotomous dependent variable, Sobel’s baseline model is modified to the following specification in which \( \pi(x) = E(Y|x) \) presents the conditional mean of the dependent \( Y \) (happiness) given the value on \( x \) (Daenekindt and Roose, 2013: 317):

\[
\pi(x) = \frac{e^{p \cdot \mu_{ii} + (1-p) \cdot \mu_{jj} + \beta_{up} + \beta_{down} + \sum \beta_{l}x_{ijkl} + \epsilon_{ijk}}}{1 + e^{p \cdot \mu_{ii} + (1-p) \cdot \mu_{jj} + \beta_{up} + \beta_{down} + \sum \beta_{l}x_{ijkl} + \epsilon_{ijk}}}
\]

5. Results

Table 2 presents the parameter estimates from the logistic DRMs for our dependent variable happiness. The diagonal intercepts show the logit for being happy versus not being happy for the immobile in the different social classes. These show that the logit for being happy versus not happy is larger for people in the higher social classes. For instance, in the United States the logit for being happy versus not happy for the immobile in the service class is 1.950. For the immobile in the working class this is .768. Happiness is socially structured both in the North American and Scandinavian context. However, the differences between the service and the working class is larger in the United States.

The origin weight parameter informs us about the extent to which the happiness of the mobile individuals represents the happiness of their social class of origin. In both the United States and Scandinavian Europe the weight parameter is not significantly different from 0.5. This means that the social class of origin and destination have an equally large influence on the happiness of the socially mobile.
The mobility parameters show that upward social mobility is not associated with happiness in both contexts. Therefore, we reject our second hypothesis, which predicts that upward social mobility is associated with higher levels of happiness. Our results for downward social mobility however, show that downward social mobility is associated with less happiness in the United States (-.474), but not in Scandinavian Europe. This is in line with our first hypothesis which predicts a negative association between downward social mobility and happiness. This also partly confirms our macro-contextual hypothesis, which predicts that the association between social mobility and happiness is greater in the United States than in the Scandinavian countries. It appears that this is only the case for downward social mobility.

Table 2. Parameter estimates from the logistic Diagonal Reference Model for dependent happiness in the United States and Scandinavian Europe (1 = happy; 0 = not happy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Scandinavian Europe</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagonal intercepts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$\mu_{11}$: Service class</td>
<td>1.950 (.172)**</td>
<td>2.739 (.323)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\mu_{22}$: Intermediate class</td>
<td>1.003 (.127)**</td>
<td>2.409 (.310)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\mu_{33}$: Working class</td>
<td>.768 (.138)***</td>
<td>1.957 (.305)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weight parameters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin (p)</td>
<td>.566 (.115)$^a$</td>
<td>.727 (.520)$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobility parameters (Ref = immobile)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward</td>
<td>-.006 (.106)</td>
<td>-.013 (.329)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward</td>
<td>-.474 (.110)***</td>
<td>-.264 (.307)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.067 (.072)</td>
<td>-.199 (.147)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (Ref = 55-64)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>.439 (.105)***</td>
<td>.647 (.215)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>-.060 (.099)</td>
<td>.490 (.206)$^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>-.238 (.095)$^*$</td>
<td>.036 (.190)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>.647 (.074)***</td>
<td>.819 (.167)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1.179 (.071)***</td>
<td>1.041 (.152)***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

$^a$ Weight parameter not significantly different from 0.5
Parameter estimates are logits
Selected age ≥ 25 & ≤ 64
Analyses for Scandinavian Europe were weighted the recommended weights ‘weight_g’ and population weights (own calculations using Eurostat (2019) data for the population in 2008)
Analyses for the United States were weighted using the recommended weights ‘WTSSNR’
Models for the United States are controlled for survey year dummies (not shown)
Models for Europe are controlled for country dummies (not shown)
Analyses performed using R statistics 3.2.2
6. **Discussion and conclusion**

The objectives of this study were twofold. Firstly, we aimed to investigate how intergenerational social class mobility is associated with SWB. Secondly, by comparing two distinct contextual settings, the United States and the Scandinavian countries, we wanted to explore if the macro-level context in which social mobility takes place moderates this relationship. Based on some marked contextual differences between these settings, including the cultural orientation towards achievement and success, the level of inequality and the welfare state regime we expected to observe larger consequences of social mobility in the United States compared with the Scandinavian countries.

In line with a previous study from Nikolaev and Burns (2014) we found that downward social mobility is indeed associated with lower SWB in the United States. This finding provides evidence for the “falling from grace hypothesis” which predicts that downward social mobility is harmful for people’s well-being. However, in Scandinavian Europe, no association between downward social mobility and SWB was found. This confirms our macro-level contextual hypothesis for downward social mobility: downward social mobility has greater consequences in the United States than in the Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, we found no association with upward social mobility and SWB in either context. This casts doubt on the recently developed “rising from rags hypothesis” when applied to SWB (see Gugushvili et al., 2019) and is not in line with the findings from Nikolaev and Burns’ (2015) study from the United States. A possible explanation for these divergent findings is lies in the fact that their study uses conventional techniques while our study employs DRMs. Research has shown that conventional regression techniques can produce faulty results when used to estimate the consequences of social mobility (Schuck and Steiber, 2018; van der Waal et al., 2017).
Thus, in the United States, we find evidence for negative consequences of downward social mobility for SWB, but not for positive consequences of upward social mobility. This finding is in line with the theory of loss aversion, which predicts that the negative consequences of income losses for people’s well-being exceed the positive consequences of income gains (Boyce et al., 2013; Vendrik and Woltjer, 2007). Our findings for the United States suggest that these ideas on the relationship between income losses and gains and well-being may also apply to social mobility in general. Moreover, it may be the case that the culture of the United-States in which success is appraised fosters the rejection of the downwardly mobile in their position of origin and destination and in this way inhibits integration in their new social class, but also that it promotes the acceptance of the upwardly mobile by others in their new position (Bean et al., 1973). In light of developing a better understanding of the consequences of social mobility for SWB, our study has two central implications.

Firstly, our findings imply that the national context seems to impact how downward social mobility is subjectively experienced by people. We have found that downward social mobility is detrimental for people’s SWB in the United States, but not in Scandinavian Europe. Based on the literature, we have developed three potential pathways that may explain this moderating influence of the context. Perhaps the greater importance that is attached to success and achievement in the United States make occupational failure a more serious event in the North American context compared with the more egalitarian oriented Scandinavian context. Going down the occupational ladder may also generate more detrimental consequences for people’s well-being when it leads to a greater loss of recourses, which may be the case in the United States that is characterized by more income inequality than in Scandinavian Europe. Finally, the more generous welfare state of the Scandinavian countries may also make social class less important for well-being than in the less generous welfare
state that is present in the United States, which may reduce the disadvantages of downward social mobility. Yet, because we compare only two contextual cases, our suggestions for possible intervening factors in this moderating process of the macro-level context is tentative. Future research would benefit from further investigating the mechanisms that can explain why the relationship between social mobility differs across contexts. Our study has provided the first necessary information for such explanatory studies, by showing that context does matter for impact of downward social mobility on SWB, in a way that generates clear differences in these effects between the United States and the Scandinavian countries.

A second implication of our findings is that they demonstrate that, in the United States, the consequences of social mobility for SWB appear to be dependent on the upward or downward direction of the social mobility trajectory. We have found that downward social mobility is detrimental for people’s SWB and that upward social mobility is not. In his classical dissociative hypothesis Sorokin (1927) has posited that downward and upward have detrimental consequences for people’s well-being. Our findings question Sorokin’s notion of upward and downward social mobility as two identical experiences. Instead, our findings suggest that the consequences of social mobility are more complex, and that the direction of the mobility trajectory should be taken into account when investigating how social mobility is subjectively experienced.

A limitation of this study is that we are not able to distinguish between social causation or social selection explanations for the association between downward social mobility and SWB we have found, because of the cross-sectional nature of the data. Social selection explanations are common in health research, and predict that healthy individuals are more likely to climb the social ladder, while the unhealthy are more likely to skid down the social hierarchy (see Blane et al. 1993; Claussen et al. 2005; Warren 2009). In our study, the selection hypothesis may serve as an explanation for association between downward social
mobility and SWB: unhappy people may be more likely to be downwardly socially mobile. However, although not entirely undisputed (e.g., Dohrenwend et al. 1992), research on health mainly points at causation effects (e.g., Blane et al. 1993; Claussen et al. 2005; Eaton et al. 2001; Fox et al. 1985; Warren 2009).

In summary, by comparing the United States with the Scandinavian countries, our study illustrates that the macro-level context affects the relation between downward social mobility and SWB. Downward social mobility is detrimental for a person’s well-being in the United States, but not in the Scandinavian countries. The main conclusion of this study touches the core of sociology: context matters for the subjective experience of downward social mobility.

Notes

1. Morgan’s coding is not an exact replication of the original EGP-scheme, it is an “EGP for our time, tailored to the labor market of the United States” (Morgan, 2017: 11).

2. In Morgan’s (2017) original coding of the EGP-scheme an eleven-class version of the scheme is constructed, which includes a separate ‘military’ class that contains all members of the armed forces. This class is not present in the original EGP-scheme (see Erikson et al., 1979). Moreover, the idea that all members of the armed forces share similar market and work situations is questionable. Therefore, we do not include this class into our analyses. This means that for the GSS, respondents who’s social class of origin or destination is the ‘military class’ are omitted from the analyses (1.8%).

References


