Schmitz, Alina; Hoffmann, Rasmus

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ABHANDLUNGEN

Children's Upward Educational Mobility as a Booster for Parents' Subjective Well-Being in Later Life

Alina Schmitz · Rasmus Hoffmann

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Abstract Many European countries have experienced sustained educational expansion. Although the subjective well-being of upwardly mobile individuals has been studied, less is known about the implications of intergenerational mobility in education on parental well-being. Using multivariate regression models based on the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (SHARE), this study examines whether children's educational mobility is associated with their parents' well-being, as measured by life satisfaction, and if so, whether low-educated parents profit more than middle-educated parents, and through which mechanisms.

Parents with upwardly mobile children reported higher life satisfaction than those with nonmobile and downwardly mobile children. The effect was slightly stronger for parents with low education than for those with medium education. For parents with more than one child, each additional upwardly mobile child amplified the positive association with life satisfaction. However, we were unable to identify the substantial mechanisms responsible for the association between children's educational mobility and parents' life satisfaction. Emotional closeness, financial support, and instrumental help were associated with parental life satisfaction in general but did not differ enough between parents with and without upwardly mobile children to explain the mobility-related difference in parental life satisfaction.

Intergenerational mobility in education represents a potentially relevant and "new" category of social inequality in old age, as social class in later life may also be affected by the educational capital of adult children. We discuss the need for further

✉ A. Schmitz
Department of Social Sciences, TU Dortmund University
Emil-Figge-Str. 50, 44227 Dortmund, Germany
E-Mail: alina.schmitz@tu-dortmund.de

R. Hoffmann
Faculty of Social Sciences, Economics and Business Administration, University of Bamberg
Kapuzinerstraße 16, 96047 Bamberg, Germany
E-Mail: rasmus.hoffmann@uni-bamberg.de

studies to understand the role of educational mobility for parental well-being in later life.

Keywords Life satisfaction · Intergenerational transmission · Family relations · Educational expansion · SHARE

Bildungsaufstieg als Booster für das elterliche Wohlbefinden im höheren Alter

Zusammenfassung In vielen europäischen Ländern hat in den letzten Jahrzehnten eine starke Bildungsexpansion stattgefunden. Während das subjektive Wohlbefinden von Bildungsaufsteigerinnen und -aufsteigern bereits intensiv untersucht wurde, ist wenig darüber bekannt, wie intergenerationaler Bildungsaufstieg mit dem Wohlbefinden von geringer gebildeten Eltern zusammenhängt. Anhand multivariater Regressionsmodelle auf Basis des *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (SHARE) untersuchen wir, ob die Bildungsmobilität der Kinder mit dem Wohlbefinden der Eltern – gemessen an ihrer Lebenszufriedenheit – in Verbindung steht. Zudem analysieren wir, ob Eltern mit niedriger Bildung stärker vom Bildungsaufstieg ihrer Kinder profitieren als Eltern mit mittlerer Bildung und welche Mechanismen diesen Zusammenhang erklären könnten.

Eltern mit aufwärtsmobilen Kindern berichteten eine höhere Lebenszufriedenheit als Eltern mit nicht-mobilen oder abwärtsmobilen Kindern. Der Effekt war bei Eltern mit niedriger Bildung etwas ausgeprägter als bei Eltern mit mittlerer Bildung. Zudem verstärkte sich der positive Zusammenhang mit der Lebenszufriedenheit, wenn Eltern mehr als ein Kind mit höherer Bildung hatten. Die zugrunde liegenden Mechanismen dieses Zusammenhangs konnten nicht vollständig identifiziert werden. Emotionale Nähe, finanzielle Unterstützung und praktische Hilfe durch Kinder standen zwar generell in Verbindung mit der elterlichen Lebenszufriedenheit, unterschieden sich jedoch nicht ausreichend zwischen Eltern mit und ohne aufwärtsmobile Kinder, um die mobilitätsbezogenen Unterschiede in der Lebenszufriedenheit vollständig zu erklären.

Intergenerationale Bildungsmobilität stellt eine potenziell relevante und „neue" Dimension sozialer Ungleichheit im Alter dar, da die Lebenslage im späteren Leben auch vom Bildungskapital der erwachsenen Kinder beeinflusst werden kann. Unsere Ergebnisse unterstreichen die Notwendigkeit weiterer Forschung, um die Rolle intergenerationaler Bildungsmobilität für das elterliche Wohlbefinden im höheren Lebensalter besser zu verstehen.

Schlüsselwörter Lebenszufriedenheit · Intergenerationale Transmission · Familienbeziehungen · Bildungsexpansion · SHARE

1 Introduction

Education is a key determinant of a person's life chances, including the chances of living a long life with high subjective well-being (e.g., Mackenbach et al. 2017; Hoffmann and Kröger 2021; Hoffmann et al. 2020; Schmitz and Brandt 2022). Since the mid-twentieth century, many Western countries have experienced a sustained educational expansion due to modernisation and evolving labour markets, increasing *intergenerational mobility in education*, in which many individuals surpass their parents' educational attainment (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2019). Prior studies on the well-being impact of intergenerational mobility, as measured by overall life satisfaction or depressive symptoms, have mainly focused on upwardly mobile individuals themselves and do not come to consistent results: Some show that upward educational mobility is associated with increased well-being, others find no differences to the nonmobile, and others find reduced well-being among upwardly mobile individuals (e.g., the overviews in Gugushvili et al. 2019; Iveson and Deary 2017; Schuck and Steiber 2018). However, educational mobility occurs within a family context, and the shift in educational attainment may also have implications for the parents of the upwardly mobile (Born 2024). This view is grounded in the 'linked lives' concept, which emphasises that parents and children influence each other's lives reciprocally and continuously throughout the life course (Elder et al. 2003; Gilligan et al. 2018). When children complete their education (usually between the ages of 25 and 30), their parents are already in midlife or older, frequently at an age at which the risk of financial or physical limitations increases. In this context, a child's upward educational mobility may help substitute for their parents' lack of resources (Sabater et al. 2020; Thoma et al. 2021; Zheng et al. 2023). Yet the dynamics of upward educational mobility and family relations are complex. Higher educational attainment of children may not always translate into direct benefits for their parents, as intergenerational mobility can also lead to conflicts or estrangement. Differences in cultural, social, or political outlooks may emerge, creating emotional distance and potential resentment (Born 2024; Friedman 2014, 2016), which may reduce parents' sense of connectedness with their children and negatively affect parental mental well-being. In addition, such strains can affect the children's willingness to provide support to their parents, reducing the potential benefits that parents can derive from their children's upward mobility in education.

Based on a representative sample of Europeans aged 50 years and older, this study provides insights into the relationship between intergenerational educational mobility and parental life satisfaction. We analyse heterogeneous associations across different education groups and explore mechanisms that may account for the association between children's upward educational mobility and parental life satisfaction: emotional closeness with children, the receipt of financial support, and instrumental help from children. By exploring these dimensions, this study provides insights into how educational mobility shapes family dynamics and well-being, investigating both potential resources and stressors for parental well-being in the context of intergenerational mobility in education.

2 Background

2.1 An Intergenerational Perspective on Educational Mobility

Upward mobility in education is often portrayed as a path to success and well-being (for a critical perspective, cf. Ingram and Gamsu 2022). However, sociological research has consistently argued that upward mobility can also bring challenges. Based on Sorokin's (1959) *dissociative hypothesis* and Blau's (1956) *acculturation hypothesis*, studies emphasise that upward mobility is primarily a psychosocial stressor, as it can lead to difficulties in adapting to a new social environment and estrangement from the original milieu (e.g., Curl et al. 2018; Friedman 2016). From this perspective, it is argued that family estrangement, along with loneliness and reduced subjective well-being, could be the 'price of the ticket'. Most qualitative studies highlight the negative 'emotional imprint of social mobility' (Friedman 2016, p. 129) and estrangement from family members (e.g., Bourdieu 2004; Friedman 2014, 2016). In contrast, other studies find that (at least certain groups of) upwardly mobile individuals maintain close family relationships (Spiegler 2018). Quantitative research on social relationships is scarce, but one study from the United Kingdom (Chan 2018) offers an optimistic view, showing that upwardly mobile individuals maintained close relationships with their parents. While these findings indicate that upward mobility in education cannot only affect the upwardly mobile individuals themselves, their parents' perspective has rarely been addressed. This is a significant gap, as many parents make a major contribution to their children's educational success and could also benefit when their children 'give something back' to them later in life. At the same time, however, they may also feel 'left behind' and suffer estrangement from their children and reduced relationship quality, which may also affect children's willingness to support their parents (Born 2024; Carr 2004; Jørgesen et al. 2019). Against this background, this study focuses on intergenerational upward mobility in education and parental well-being, as measured by overall life satisfaction.

2.2 Intergenerational Educational Mobility and Older Parents' Well-Being

The influence between parents and children is reciprocal and extends across the entire life course, but with changing social roles as parents age (Elder et al. 2003; Gilligan et al. 2018). In social mobility research, this is reflected in the concept of the *social foreground*, which suggests that older adults are influenced by the socioeconomic resources of their adult offspring (Jørgesen et al. 2019). Children are typically the main source of practical and emotional support for older adults (Bauer et al. 2023; Brandt et al. 2023), which may protect against declines in well-being in the face of age-related stressors (Quashie and Andrade 2020). However, it is not the presence of children that matters but the quality of the relationship and the potential for (mutual) support (Uchino et al. 2015).

Research on the impact of intergenerational educational mobility on family relations and parental well-being remains limited. Theoretically, adult children's education could influence parental well-being in later life through various material and nonmaterial mechanisms (see the reviews in Potente et al. 2023; Thoma et al. 2021; Sabater et al. 2020; Jørgensen et al. 2019). Torssander (2013) highlights three primary pathways: social influence, access to resources, and social support. First, better-educated children may shape their parents' *lifestyle and use of health care, as well as foster adherence to medical treatment* (Friedman and Mare 2014; Torssander 2014), thereby promoting parental health and subjective well-being. Second, better-educated children may have higher incomes (Devereux and Hart 2010), enabling them to provide *financial support and access to additional material resources for their parents*. Third, better-educated children may provide more *effective instrumental help*, which can be critical to the well-being of older adults, particularly as functional limitations increase with age (Zheng et al. 2023). However, qualitative studies indicate that upward mobility can contribute to feelings of estrangement within families (e.g., Friedman 2014, 2016), as (at least some groups of) upwardly mobile individuals experience detachment from their roots (Kupfer 2012; Spiegler 2018). From this perspective, children's resources are not necessarily available to their parents (Born 2024; Simandan 2018), and the potentially poor relationship quality with upwardly mobile children may result in reduced parental well-being. In addition, feelings of inferiority towards their 'more successful' children and shame about their own lower social position may further reduce parental well-being (Carr 2004; Born 2024).

Empirical evidence on the impact of intergenerational mobility on parental well-being is scarce. Most studies have focused on health outcomes (e.g., Elo et al. 2018; Potente et al. 2023; Thoma et al. 2021; Wolfe et al. 2018), while very few studies examine parents' subjective well-being. In general, the existing studies indicate that children's higher education is linked to parental well-being, as measured by fewer depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction in different contexts (Lee et al. 2017 for Taiwan; Sabater and Graham 2016 for Europe; Yahirun et al. 2020 for the United States; Wang 2024; Zheng et al. 2023 for China). Some studies indicate that the association between children's education and parental depressive symptoms declines with age (Yahirun et al. 2020; Lee et al. 2017), which may be due to selective mortality and attrition among older adults with low educational attainment.

2.3 This Study

This study examines the association between intergenerational upward mobility in education and parental life satisfaction. In the first step, we test whether the life satisfaction of parents of upwardly mobile children differs from that of parents of nonmobile or those with downwardly mobile children while accounting for key characteristics of the parent's current conditions. While our study focuses on upward educational mobility, we first investigate different mobility patterns (upward, nonmobile, and downward) simultaneously. We hypothesise that downward educational mobility of children is associated with lower parental well-being, while upward educational mobility is associated with higher parental well-being compared to parents with nonmobile children, as suggested by previous studies (Pollmann-Schult 2023; Zheng et al. 2023).

In the second step, we investigate the effects of upward mobility in more detail. We explore heterogeneous associations across different educational groups. We expect the association between children's upward mobility and parental life satisfaction to be stronger for low-educated parents than for middle-educated parents. Low-educated parents have likely limited socioeconomic resources, so they could particularly benefit from their children's upward educational mobility (Sabater and Graham 2016). Furthermore, we test whether there is a dose-response relationship between the number of higher-educated children and parental life satisfaction, which would further support the plausibility of a causal link. Even if the returns to education may have changed across cohorts (but see, e.g., Becker and Blossfeld 2022, who found a sustained positive effect of higher education on career opportunities in Germany), we assume an overall positive correlation between children's upward mobility and parental well-being, although the strength of this association may vary across cohorts and national contexts.

In a third step, we explore potential mechanisms that explain the link between children's upward educational mobility and parental life satisfaction, focusing on three pathways that have been discussed previously: emotional closeness, financial support, and practical help (Potente et al. 2023; Thoma et al. 2021; Torssander 2013; Sabater et al. 2020; Jørgensen et al. 2019). We expect that the higher life satisfaction of parents with upwardly mobile children is partly explained by the financial support and practical help provided by their higher-educated children. However, we expect emotional closeness to be lower due to the estrangement processes that have been described in previous studies (Born 2024; Friedman 2014, 2016).

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data

Our analyses are based on the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (SHARE), a multidisciplinary study of the population aged 50 years and older in Europe and Israel. Data are collected every 2 years through computer-assisted personal interviews. The first wave of SHARE took place in 2004 with 11 European countries participating, and many more countries joined in subsequent waves (Börsch-Supan et al. 2013; SHARE-ERIC 2024). We included data from waves 6 (2015), 8 (2019/2020), and 9 (2021), which collected detailed information on the parent–child relationship in the social network module and allowed linking of this information with specific children by the generated variables from SHARE (this was not possible for wave 4, which also collected information on social networks). We conducted cross-sectional analyses based on pooled data from three waves, including 27 countries spanning Europe from north (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) to south (Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta) and from west (Austria, Germany, Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg) to east (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, Croatia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia).

3.2 Sample

In the first part of our analysis, we included all respondents aged 50 years and older with complete information on all variables of interest who reported having at least one child with a completed education (those under 25 years and those being in education were excluded), regardless of the respondent's level of education. This resulted in a sample of 136,856 observations from 80,398 respondents (person-year data). For the second and third parts of the analysis, we further restricted the sample to observations from respondents with low and medium educational attainment who had upwardly mobile and/or nonmobile children (those with downwardly mobile children were excluded). This resulted in an analytical sample of 100,906 observations from 59,711 respondents. The third part of the analysis focuses on the characteristics of the parent–child relationship, so we further restricted the sample to respondents who provided information on their children in the social network module, resulting in an analytical sample of 48,144 observations from 30,279 respondents.

3.3 Variables

The outcome variable was subjective well-being as measured by overall life satisfaction: "*On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means completely dissatisfied and 10 means completely satisfied, how satisfied are you with your life?*" This global measure is a widely used indicator in quality-of-life research (Steptoe et al. 2015). Education was measured by the highest level of education using the *International Standard Classification of Educational Degrees* (ISCED-1997; United Nations 1997). We grouped the educational qualifications into three categories: low (ISCED-97 levels 0–2: preprimary, primary, and lower secondary education), medium (ISCED-97 levels 3–4: upper secondary and postsecondary education), and high (ISCED-97 levels 5–6: tertiary education). We categorised respondents based on the educational attainment of their children relative to their own. Specifically, respondents were classified as having no intergenerational mobility if their children's educational attainment matched theirs, as experiencing downward mobility if their children had lower educational attainment, and as experiencing upward mobility if their children had higher educational attainment. For parents with multiple children, respondents were classified as having upwardly mobile children if they had at least one child with a higher educational attainment. This category includes those with one upwardly mobile child in addition to nonmobile or downwardly mobile children, as we already expect a well-being benefit from one higher-educated child. In contrast, a classification of nonmobile or downwardly mobile for parents with multiple children applied only if this mobility pattern was consistent across all children. Parents with both nonmobile and downwardly mobile children were categorised as having mixed mobility patterns.

We further accounted for the parents' current sociodemographic characteristics, health status, and socioeconomic conditions: gender, age, marital status, number of health-related limitations in activities of daily living (ADL; including six activities: dressing, walking, bathing or showering, eating, getting in or out of bed, using the toilet), home ownership, and the question of whether the household had difficulties

Table 1 Explanatory variables for parental life satisfaction

Variable	Measurement and coding
Sociodemographic characteristics, health, and socioeconomic conditions	
Gender	0 = male, 1 = female
Age	In years, continuous
Marital status	0 = married, in a relationship, 1 = widowed, divorced, single
Limitations in activities of daily living	0 to 6 health-related limitations in activities of daily living, continuous
Home ownership	0 = no, 1 = yes
Making ends meet	0 = easily, 1 = fairly easy, 2 = with some difficulty, 3 = with great difficulty
Yearly household income	Equivalence-weighted, continuous
Country of residence	Country dummy variables
Education and children's educational mobility	
Respondent's education	0 = high (ISCED 5, 6), 1 = medium (ISCED 3, 4), 2 = low (ISCED 0–2)
Children's education	0 = downward educational mobility, 1 = no mobility, 2 = upward educational mobility, 3 = mixed patterns
Parent–child relationship	
Emotional closeness	1 = not very close, 2 = somewhat close, 3 = very close, 4 = extremely close
Financial help from children within the preceding 12 months	0 = no, 1 = yes
Practical help from children within the preceding 12 months	0 = no, 1 = yes

in making ends meet as a measure of subjective material resources (Litwin and Sapir 2009). Additionally, we accounted for the equivalence-weighted yearly household income using the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development equivalence scale (Hagenaars et al. 1994), for which we relied on an imputed measure of the total yearly income provided by SHARE (see De Luca et al. 2015 for details). We also controlled for the country of residence by including country dummy variables.

In the third part of the analysis, we considered several variables as potential mediators of the assumed association between children's upward educational mobility and the parents' life satisfaction. These included three indicators of the respondents' relationship with their children: emotional closeness, the receipt of financial transfers (of at least €250), and the receipt of practical help from the children in the preceding 12 months. For respondents with more than one child, we calculated the average emotional closeness. For the receipt of financial support and practical help, we measured whether the respondent had received this support from at least one of the children. Table 1 provides an overview of the measurement and coding of the variables.

3.4 Method

We estimated linear ordinary least squares regression models with life satisfaction as the dependent variable. For some parts of the analysis, we successively added specific sets of variables to the models. This allows us to analyse the extent to which the relationship between children's educational mobility and parental life satisfaction changes when additional variables are taken into account. Our analysis is a cross-sectional analysis of pooled SHARE waves, rather than a longitudinal analysis of intra-individual changes over time. It is beyond the scope of this study to establish causal effects, but it provides insights into the complex associations between intergenerational mobility, parent–child relationships, and parental life satisfaction. A longitudinal analysis would provide information only for parents whose children were still in education at the start of the observation and completed their education in a later wave. We do not necessarily expect the formal attainment of the educational qualification to be the key determinant of parental life satisfaction. Rather, the positive effects of upward educational mobility (e.g., increased opportunities for financial support from parents) and its potential negative effects (e.g., family estrangement) are likely to materialise later, so we focus on associations from a cross-sectional perspective (see our detailed reflections on this in the discussion section). The pooling of waves was appropriate because each wave provided many new observations. For those individuals for whom multiple observations were available (because they participated in more than one wave), it must be taken into account that observations of the same individual at different times are correlated. We therefore applied clustered standard errors at the individual level, which correct for intra-individual correlations and allow for unbiased results of significance tests (Brüderl and Ludwig 2014). We controlled for the survey wave and country (to account for any wave- or country-specific variation). We did not apply survey weights, given the pooling of waves and the fact that we aimed to analyse overall associations. The replication files for the analysis can be found online.[1]

4 Results

4.1 Sample Description

The mean life satisfaction score for the total sample was 7.8 on a scale of 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), which means that the majority of the respondents were fairly satisfied with their lives in general (Table 2). Almost 60% of the sampled individuals were women, and the average age was 68.8 years; 16% were born before the year 1940, 68% were born between 1940 and 1960, and 16% were born after 1960; 73% lived with their partner, while the remaining 27% were single, divorced, or widowed. The average number of limitations in ADL was 0.2. Around 80% of the respondents were homeowners. The majority of 63% reported that it was (fairly) easy to make ends meet, while others reported some

[1] https://osf.io/x7vkq

Table 2 Characteristics of the study sample

Variable	
Life satisfaction (mean [range, SD])	7.8 (0–10; 1.7)
Female (%)	57.6
Age (mean [range, SD])	68.8 (50–102; 9.4)
Year of birth of the respondent (%)	
Before 1940	16.3
1940 to 1960	67.5
After 1960	16.2
Living together with partner (%)	72.6
Limitations in ADL (mean [range, SD])	0.2 (0–6; 0.7)
Homeowners (%)	79.8
Household ability to make ends meet (%)	
Easy	31.7
Fairly easy	30.7
With some difficulty	26.9
With great difficulty	10.8
Yearly household income (in €; mean [range, SD])	19,606 (0–4,312,317; 30,402)
Education (%)	
Low	34.9
Medium	42.5
High	22.6
Children's educational mobility	
Only nonmobile children	30.2
Only downwardly mobile children	5.3
Mixed mobility patterns	10.2
At least one upwardly mobile child	54.3
Year of birth of children (%)	
Before 1960	4.5
1960 to 1990	84.7
After 1990	10.9

Source: SHARE, own calculations; $n = 136{,}856$ (person-year data; not weighted)

(27%) or great difficulty (11%). The average yearly household income amounted to € 19,606. The majority of the respondents had a low (35%) or medium (43%) level of education, while 23% had a high level of education. In terms of children's education, 30% of the sample had same-level educated children (nonmobile children), 5% reported having children with a lower level of education (downwardly mobile children), and 10% had both lower and same-educated children and were therefore classified as having mixed mobility patterns. The remaining 54% reported having at least one child with a higher level of education (upwardly mobile children). The majority of the children (85%) were born between 1960 and 1990.

Table 3 Multivariate regression analysis: Children's mobility patterns and parental life satisfaction

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
Own education (Reference: high)				
Medium	–0.33***	0.02	–0.14***	0.02
Low	–0.63***	0.02	–0.28***	0.02
Intergenerational mobility in education (Reference: no mobility among all children)				
Downward mobility among all children	–0.22***	0.02	–0.15***	0.02
Mixed mobility patterns	–0.10***	0.02	–0.06**	0.02
Upward mobility of at least one child	0.18***	0.01	0.08***	0.01
Current socioeconomic conditions				
Home ownership, ability to make ends meet, income	Not included		Included	
R-squared	0.12		0.17	

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Models controlled for gender, age, country, marital status, and limitations in activities of daily living. Source: SHARE, own calculations; $n = 100{,}906$ (person-year data; not weighted). *SE* standard error (clustered at individual level)

4.2 Children's Educational Mobility Patterns and Parental Life Satisfaction

In the first step, we tested whether the life satisfaction of parents of upwardly mobile children differed from that of parents of nonmobile or downwardly mobile children. The multivariate regression analysis, controlling for gender, age, country, marital status, and limitations in ADL (Table 3; model 1), shows an educational gradient in life satisfaction. People with medium and especially low levels of education reported lower life satisfaction than those in the high-education group. Not only the respondent's own education but also their children's educational mobility patterns were related to life satisfaction. Compared to parents with no educationally mobile children, those with downwardly mobile children reported lower life satisfaction, as did respondents with mixed mobility patterns among their children. In contrast, respondents with upwardly mobile children reported higher life satisfaction. When the respondents' current socioeconomic conditions (home ownership, ability to make ends meet, and income; model 2) were introduced into the model, the coefficient estimates for the association between children's educational mobility and parental life satisfaction fell sharply. Nevertheless, respondents with downwardly mobile children and those with mixed mobility patterns still reported lower life satisfaction, while respondents with upwardly mobile children reported higher life satisfaction.

4.3 Upward Intergenerational Mobility in Education and Parental Life Satisfaction

In the second step, we investigated upward mobility patterns in more detail and focused on respondents with medium and high levels of education (as those with

Table 4 Multivariate regression analysis: number of upwardly mobile children and parental life satisfaction (low- and medium-educated parents)

	Beta	SE
Education (reference: medium)		
Low	–0.18***	0.01
Number of children with higher education	0.05***	0.006
R-squared	0.17	

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$
Models controlled for gender, age, country, marital status, limitations in activities of daily living, home ownership, ability to make ends meet, and income. Source: SHARE, own calculations; $n = 105{,}921$ (person-year data; not weighted). *SE* standard error (clustered at individual level)

Table 5 Multivariate regression analysis: differences by parental educational level (low- and medium-educated parents)

	Beta	SE
Main effects (Reference: medium education, no mobility)		
Low education	–0.21***	0.03
Upwardly mobile children	0.06***	0.02
Interaction effect		
Low education × upwardly mobile children	0.07*	0.03
R-squared	0.17	

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$
Models controlled for gender, age, country, marital status, limitations in activities of daily living, home ownership, ability to make ends meet, and income. Source: SHARE, own calculations; $n = 100{,}906$ (person-year data; not weighted). *SE* standard error (clustered at individual level)

high educational attainment cannot have upwardly mobile children). We examined whether there was a dose–response relationship between the number of higher-educated children and parental life satisfaction and further explored whether especially low-educated parents profited from their children's upward educational mobility as compared to the middle-educated. The multivariate regression models to explore the dose–response relationship (Table 4) show that even when controlling for respondent's educational attainment, sociodemographic characteristics, marital status, limitations in ADL, current socioeconomic conditions, and the overall number of children, each additional higher-educated child was associated with higher life satisfaction, although the effect size was rather small.

In addition, we estimated a model with an interaction term testing whether the effect of children's upward educational mobility on parental life satisfaction varied according to the level of parental education when controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, health, and socioeconomic conditions (Table 5). We found that the life satisfaction of parents with upwardly mobile children was slightly higher among the low-educated compared to the middle-educated, as indicated by the positive interaction effect.

4.4 Intergenerational Mobility in Education and the Parent–Child Relationship

The following analyses examine whether aspects of the parent–child relationship contribute to the association between children's upward mobility and parental life satisfaction. When comparing parents with nonmobile and upwardly mobile children, no substantial differences were found in terms of emotional closeness, financial support, or practical help from the children (Table 6). The average level of emotional closeness was 3.4 (on a scale of 1 = not very close to 4 = extremely close), indicating that most parents felt a strong connection to their children regardless of their children's educational attainment. Very few respondents received financial support from their children, with no significant differences between parents with nonmobile and upwardly mobile children. Practical help from children was more common, with about one in ten parents receiving this type of assistance, though this also showed no statistically significant differences based on children's educational mobility.

The multivariate models (Table 7) show that greater emotional closeness with children was generally associated with higher life satisfaction, while receiving practical help was associated with lower life satisfaction. However, when the characteristics of the parent–child relationship were added to a model that already included sociodemographic characteristics, health, and socioeconomic conditions (model 1),

Table 6 Descriptive statistics of the parent–child relationship (low- and medium-educated parents)

	Nonmobile children	Upwardly mobile children
Emotional closeness (mean [SD])	3.4 (0.6)	3.4 (0.6)
Receipt of financial support from children (%)	3.0	3.4
Receipt of practical/personal help from children (%)	12.7	14.0

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Chi-square test for categorical variables, T-test for numerical variables. Source: SHARE, own calculations; $n = 48{,}144$ (person-year data; not weighted)

Table 7 Multivariate regression analysis: parental life satisfaction, children's upward mobility, and the parent–child relationship (low- and medium-educated parents)

	M1		M2	
	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
Education (reference: medium)				
Low	–0.14***	0.02	–0.13***	0.02
Upwardly mobile children (reference: no mobility)	0.09***	0.02	0.08***	0.02
Parent–child relationship	Not included		Included	
Emotional closeness	–	–	0.19***	0.02
Financial support	–	–	0.11	0.06
Practical/personal help	–	–	–0.29***	0.03
R-squared	0.18	–	0.19	–

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Models controlled for gender, age, country, marital status, limitations in activities of daily living, home ownership, ability to make ends meet, and income. Source: SHARE, own calculations; $n = 48{,}144$ (person-year data; not weighted). *SE* standard error (clustered at individual level) the coefficient estimate for the association between children's upward mobility and parental life satisfaction remained largely unchanged (model 2), so these aspects did not contribute to the higher life satisfaction among parents with upwardly mobile children.

5 Discussion

Parents with upwardly mobile children reported higher life satisfaction than parents with nonmobile or downwardly mobile children. The positive effect increased with the number of upwardly mobile children and was especially strong among low-educated parents, although the effect sizes were rather small. We explored emotional closeness, financial support, and practical help as potential mechanisms for this association but found that they did not vary enough between parents with and without mobile children to explain the mobility-related differences in parental life satisfaction. Contrary to prior qualitative research linking intergenerational mobility with family estrangement (Born 2024; Friedman 2014, 2016), we did not find that overall emotional closeness was lower when children were upward mobile. While family estrangement may be a problem that affects specific groups, e.g., when there is an extreme rise in children's education from very low-educated family backgrounds, this did not apply to the vast majority of respondents in our sample. It is also plausible that feelings of estrangement coexist with feelings of pride and happiness regarding the children's educational success, leading to an overall positive evaluation of the parent–child relationship.

In our study, financial transfers from children to parents were very rare and did not differ much between the low-educated parents with and without upwardly mobile children. However, the measure in SHARE may be insufficiently specific because respondents were asked only whether they had received a financial transfer of at least €250 from their children (yes or no). There may be considerable variation in the actual amount of money transferred, hiding mobility-related differences. Finally, a source of life satisfaction is not only the actual financial transfers but also the security of knowing that one can rely on the children's financial resources if needed. This sense of security extends to practical help, the last of the three mechanisms we tested. The good feeling of being able to receive and rely on such help from one's children may be as relevant to life satisfaction as actually receiving such help. However, parents who received such help reported lower life satisfaction, which likely reflects underlying health issues rather than a detrimental well-being impact of help itself (Jessee 2023). In addition, upwardly mobile and nonmobile children did not differ concerning the provision of practical help, which could result from children's unwillingness (or inability) to provide this support, e.g., due to factors such as greater geographical distance or difficulty balancing work and family responsibilities among highly educated children, particularly among high-educated daughters (Nadim and Midtbøen 2023).

However, we would need more variables on specific mechanisms to explain our main finding that parents with upwardly mobile children have greater life satisfaction. The difference between parents with and those without upwardly mobile children can be explained by two distinct groups of factors: first, *unmeasured factors on the pathway from upward mobility and parents' life satisfaction,* and second, *common background factors.*

First, our dataset does not capture parental pride in children's educational and economic success—an important variable for our research question that is distinct from emotional closeness. This pride can enhance well-being even without a very close relationship, as it affirms a parent's sense of having raised a successful child, validating their 'good parenting' efforts long after active child-rearing. Another missing variable is the reduced worry for parents of upwardly mobile children about their children's ability to make a living. A comprehensive emotional perspective on parental life satisfaction would not focus solely on what parents receive from their children but also on the independent joy of witnessing their children's success (Zheng et al. 2023). This may be especially true for low-educated parents, who could take pride in their children's achievements particularly because they may have had fewer resources to support them directly. This explanation could also account for the finding that especially low-educated parents benefit from their children's upward mobility.

Second, shared genetic characteristics may affect both children's educational attainment and parents' life satisfaction. Krapohl et al. (2014) found that the high heritability of educational attainment can be partly explained by personal characteristics such as personality and well-being, which may also be heritable on their own. Marioni et al. (2016) found common genes for education and longevity. The latter may be related to life satisfaction through health as a common background factor. Additionally, nongenetic factors such as self-efficacy and the value parents place on pursuing a career may influence both their life satisfaction and their children's educational mobility.

5.1 Absolute Versus Relative Educational Mobility and Contextual Differences

We focused solely on absolute mobility—whether children achieve a higher educational level than their parents—without accounting for shifts in the overall educational distribution over time, i.e., between the two generations under study. However, the impact of absolute mobility (the educational difference between parents and children) on life satisfaction may depend on these societal trends. Being among the few upwardly mobile individuals in a cohort might bring unique social prestige because education is seen as a positional good that enhances relative social position (del Mar Salinas-Jiménez et al. 2011; Shavit and Park 2016), while massive expansion of education may imply a certain 'inflation' of educational qualifications with potentially lower (financial) returns to education. Previous empirical results on how the difference between absolute and relative mobility changed in the decades that matter for the two generations in our study provide complex findings. In their cross-national European comparative study, Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) found no clear trend in absolute or relative mobility between 1960 and 1970, whereas Breen (2004) observed constant absolute mobility and increasing relative mobility from 1970 to 2000 in several European countries. For German birth cohorts born between 1920 and 1978, Pollak (2010) reported high and stable absolute mobility but later specified (Pollak 2012) that relative mobility increased for cohorts born between 1920 and 1950 (similar to the parents in our sample) and slightly decreased for cohorts born between 1960 and 1980 (similar to the children in our sample). In the United Kingdom, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2016) showed that when education was measured relative to the educational distribution, the link between class of origin and class of destination was more stable over time than when education was measured in absolute terms.

These differences between historical periods and generations are as significant as differences between countries. Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) found considerable variation across European countries in absolute mobility but little variation in relative mobility, whereas Breen (2004) found a convergence across countries in absolute mobility between 1970 and 2000 alongside strong international variation in relative mobility. International differences are a mixture of economic-cyclical specifics, such as in Germany, where the rapid economic recovery and growth after World War II (*Wirtschaftswunder*) may have particularly benefitted the parental generation in our sample, and cultural differences may affect intergenerational relations and transfers in general. With regard to cultural differences, Zheng et al. (2023) conclude as their main finding based on Chinese data that 'whether my children are living well' is more important than 'what they could give me' (Zheng et al. 2023, p. 1). This relates to our argument that there are distinct types of child-related emotions that influence parental life satisfaction and that the relative importance of these emotions varies across individuals, as well as across cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

However, the need for support from adult children in later life may differ across country contexts. Studies have shown that intergenerational transfers primarily flow from parents to their adult children (Albertini and Kohli 2013; Wong et al. 2020). Not only these transfers but also transfers in the opposite direction from children to their parents vary among welfare state regimes, following a complex pattern involving transfer likelihood, intensity, different types of transfers (such as time and money), and co-residence arrangements (Albertini et al. 2007). In countries with a higher level of public transfers and services, children tend to give less support to their parents (Deindl and Brandt 2011). Generally, the mutual dependency on support is greater in familialistic and conservative welfare states (such as in Southern Europe and parts of Western Europe) than in Scandinavian countries (Brandt 2012).

5.2 Limitations and Outlook

5.2.1 Contextual Influences

Related to what has been described in the previous section, it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate cohort- and country-specific associations (also given the differing timing and pace of educational expansion in the SHARE countries), as well as to take into account relevant contextual factors that may shape the pattern of transfers from children to their parents. Future studies can explore the moderating impact of different levels of educational expansion (relative mobility) across birth cohorts and countries. A promising endeavour would be to concentrate the analysis on a subset of specific countries where the economic and cultural context of specific cohorts is well researched and can be incorporated into the analysis. Future studies could also investigate specific social contexts in greater depth, e.g., the mobility-related experiences in migrant families (for an overview of the methodological challenges for quantitative empirical research on older migrants, see Bilecen in this issue) or the relevance of gender (see King and Calasanti, this issue, for a discussion of the intersection of gender roles and age as a social category) shaping mobility-related associations with parental well-being in later life.

5.2.2 Causality

In their study of children's education and parental longevity, Potente et al. (2023) highlight the difficulty of identifying causal effects, noting that the link between children's education and parental health may stem from unobserved characteristics that affect both children's education and parental health. Potente and colleagues observe that most studies do not include comprehensive control variables for parental socioeconomic status (SES). 'At the same time, however, the question remains to what extent these SES indicators are actually confounders and not pathway variables by which children's education exerts its positive effects and whether accounting for them biases the findings for children's education' (Potente et al. 2023, p. 2). Thus, even when controlling for parental SES in our study (home ownership, the ability to make ends meet, and income), we cannot guarantee that we controlled for every possible confounder. To address such methodological issues, recent studies have relied on quasi-experimental designs based on school reform policies (e.g., Potente et al. 2023), sibling fixed-effects models (Torssander 2013), or shared frailty models to estimate shared unobserved family components (including genes) that influence both children and parents (Kröger et al. 2018). In terms of causality, however, we would argue that our results on a dose–response relationship (a higher number of upwardly mobile children amplifies parental life satisfaction) lend further support to the plausibility of a causal link. A next possible step is to compare low-educated parents with children moving up 'one step' on the educational scale with parents whose children moved up two steps. This could also provide further insights into the trade-off between the potentially positive effects of upward mobility and the negative effect of greater emotional distance.

5.2.3 Timing

Another limitation is that we did not apply a precise and theoretically justified timing between cause and effect in our model. Our cross-sectional analyses use the educational attainment of the children as a predictor of current parental life satisfaction. Even if we had used longitudinal data, it would have been theoretically unclear what time lag in children's educational mobility would affect parental life satisfaction, as both are processes rather than fixed states. From a life course perspective, many different factors may be involved in shaping the effects of educational mobility on life satisfaction, with processes with latency and accumulation further complicating the question of timing. Effects depend not only on the parents' experience but also on the children's, such as how long it might take for educational attainment to translate into financial stability and the capacity to support parents. This complexity makes it difficult to predict when the effect will peak, end, or be ideally measured. Future research with more comprehensive data could empirically test different time lags between children's educational mobility and parental life satisfaction to clarify such timing effects.

In conclusion, most studies on social inequality over the life course focus on how the parental generation (origin) shapes their children's social destination and well-being. While this focus is foundational to mobility research, our paper illustrates that the 'reverse effect'—how children's mobility affects parental outcomes—deserves more attention. Upward educational mobility represents a potentially relevant and new category of social inequality in old age, as social class in later life can be impacted by the educational capital of one's adult children. Understanding this reciprocal dynamic could open new avenues for research on social inequality in old age across generations.

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Alina Schmitz Dr. phil., Postdoctoral Researcher, TU Dortmund, Department of Social Sciences. Fields of research: Health and well-being, social inequality, cross-national research. Publications: No socioeconomic inequalities in mortality among Catholic monks: A quasi-experiment providing evidence for the Fundamental Cause Theory. Journal of Health and Social Behavior 66(3), 2025 (with M. Luy and P. Lazarevič); From attitudes to social networks: The link between national gender-role attitudes and gender differences in social relationships. Social Networks 76, 2024 (with E. Cohn-Schwartz).

Rasmus Hoffmann Dr., Professor of Sociology, with special emphasis on Social Inequalities, University of Bamberg, Institute for Sociology. Fields of research: Public health, demography and life course research, with a focus on the relation between socioeconomic status and health. Publications: Handbook of Health Inequalities Across the Life Course (ed.). Cheltenham 2023; Gesundheit und Mortalität. In: Handbuch Sozialstrukturanalyse, eds. P. Böhnke and D. Konietzka. Wiesbaden 2024.