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When does downward occupational mobility hurt less?

Downward occupational mobility is a generally under-explored subject in careers research. This study examines how job satisfaction evolves before, during and after a downward career transition and how the pattern is moderated by individual and contextual factors. Drawing on the UK Household Longitudinal Study which followed respondents from 40,000 households over the last decade, our fixed effects analysis shows that downward occupational mobility has negative effect on job satisfaction that lasts for several years following the transition. However, the detrimental effect of downward occupational mobility on job satisfaction is



mitigated when the event is preceded by a spell of unemployment or when individuals reside in regions with high levels of unemployment. These results likely reflect individuals' tendency to evaluate their careers in the context of their employment history as well as their peers' labour market experience. This study highlights the relativity of subjective well-being function, as self- and social comparisons feature prominently in how people judge their lives.

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About the author

Ying Zhou is Professor of Human Resource Management and Director of the Future of Work Research Centre at Surrey Business School at the University of Surrey. Her research is focused on job quality, occupation, and employee well-being.

Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Study) is one of the largest longitudinal datasets in the world which recently featured a [blog](#) based on this paper.

DOWNWARD OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY AND JOB SATISFACTION: WHEN DOES IT HURT LESS?

Ying Zhou, Min Zou, Mark Williams

This study underlines the importance of work and employment for protecting individuals' subjective well-being. The evidence that a downward career transition does not hurt when it is preceded by an episode of unemployment suggests that individuals have inherent needs to engage in paid work.

Active labour market policies aimed at helping unemployed people re-enter the labour force can play an important role in mitigating the deleterious effect of unemployment. In addition, the finding that direct transitions from higher into lower socio-economic class occupations lead to prolonged periods of frustration points to a need for policies to reduce the risks for downward career mobility, for example, by expanding high-quality vocational training and containing the spread of precarious work.

Finally, although this study shows that downward mobility hurts less in regions with higher levels of unemployment, it should be pointed out that chronically high unemployment implies diminished long-term prospects for everyone.

While social comparison may provide a temporary psychological relief, the scarcity of high-quality work opportunities will ultimately impede the development of capabilities, ambitions, and overall well-being.

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