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## Success at Work, Life Patterns, and Overall Life Satisfaction: Changes in the Lives of Men and Women since the 1980s in West-Germany

By Angelika Tölke\*

### Summary

*This paper focuses on the structural relationship between family building and upward mobility. Typically this relationship is analyzed for women only, while we include men as well. With new patterns of intimate partnerships and non-traditional families, on the one hand, and a changing labor market, on the other hand, new assertions about their connection have emerged. Using SOEP-data, the possible change in that relationship is investigated in two years, 1986 and 1996. In addition, the influence of success at work and the private life pattern on overall satisfaction with life is analyzed.*

### 1. Introduction

As life patterns and labor market conditions have changed over time, researchers of family behavior and occupational and professional career development have advanced new assertions about the connection between intimate relationships and occupational mobility. For the most part, these new theories have only implicitly acknowledged the role that changes in life patterns and labor market have played in determining occupational and career choices. Demographically, more men and women remain childless and remain unmarried. From the perspective of career advancement, childless men and women are seen as being more flexible in their time management, as having better chances to continue their education, and as being more mobile geographically. For these reasons, it is commonly assumed that childless men and women are at an advantage in pursuing their occupational careers. However, little empirical evidence has been collected to see if these assumptions are borne out in individual experiences.

This paper examines how career advancement and self-reported life satisfaction differ between married and unmarried individuals who choose to remain childless and those who have children. We focus on differences between men and women and over time in the association between life patterns, career advancement and life satisfaction.

This study adds to the literature on family and occupational mobility research because we study men, as well as women. When men are studied, their work histories are typically assumed to be independent of intimate relationships — at least as far as occupational research and la-

bor market theories are concerned. Consequently, few empirical studies consider the possible association between these two life domains for men. Some family theories, in particular those subsumed under the more general heading of family economics, provide at least an implicit theoretical framework.

Theoretically, a gender specific division of labor may benefit all family members. Assuming that women and men have abilities that are differentially rewarded in the labor market and at home, both sexes take advantage of those differences by employing their abilities where they yield the highest return. Marriage and family provide support for the career of men by relieving them from the everyday responsibilities of housework and childcare. In return, men provide financial support for the family. Wives have an interest to encourage and promote their husbands' occupational career as they and their children benefit from the professional success of the husbands.

As patterns of intimate partnerships and non-traditional families have become more common, fewer people live in a (traditional) family during their middle age (Bertram 1997). In addition, the activities of every day life has changed across generations, even for people who live in a traditional family. Many more married women and mothers are employed now than in past years and a gender specific division of labor is no longer an unquestioned norm.

Rapid economic changes have occurred as well. Many western countries have made a shift from a relatively static to a more dynamic economy. In the past 20 years, we have seen a globalization of business and of companies, and especially information technology has developed rapidly. In the past, we presumed an orderly growth in national economies. The idealized company was a large, stable, hierarchical pyramid (cf. Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle 1999). Companies sought to build stable, and long-term workforces by developing intracompany "career planning" systems. Career trajectories were seen as a succession of related jobs arranged in a hierarchy of prestige or status, through which persons moved in a — more or less — predictable sequence. Professional abilities and know-how tended to be company-specific. The hierarchical sequences of jobs were seen as under the employer's control. The counterpart was a loyal "organization man." Career planning for both the employers and the employees followed a predictable path. Today the key to success has become flexibility and innovation for companies, as well as for individuals. While most workers in Germany may still develop careers based on specialized occupational skills or with the intent of advancing in a given corporation, employees increasingly take on temporary jobs in order to learn new skills, work with new people, or de-

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velop relationships that benefit both their company and increase opportunities to change jobs. In this process, original qualifications and past experiences may become less important determinants of mobility.

## 2. Data and Methods

The following analyses use data from the ongoing German Socio-Economic Panel (Schupp and Wagner 1995). To consider changes across time, we use data from 1986 and 1996. Only employed men and women aged 30 to 50 years are selected. These age groups correspond to individuals born between 1936 and 1956 in the 1986 sample, and those born between 1946 and 1966 in the 1996 sample. The occupation held at the time of each survey is compared to a respondent's first occupation. Changes in the occupation between these two points in time in the individual life course allow for the construction of an upward mobility measure.<sup>1</sup> For 1986, the sample size is 1,225 men and 633 women and for 1996, the number of cases is 1,170 men and 766 women.

### Measurement of upward mobility

The following empirical analyses are based on a transformation of the widely used German "Occupational Status Classification"<sup>2</sup> into career ranks (Table 1).<sup>3</sup> The "Occupational Status Classification" is based on both employment status and occupational function and takes into account such factors as source and level of income, job security, and degree of autonomy at work. The 21 categories of this partially ordered list are transformed into five ordinal career ranks (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 1993; for a comparison with other scales see Wolf 1995). The main determinants for this transformation are the educational requirements for entry-level access to a position and the extent of supervisory and/or managerial authority. In this analysis, a person is defined to have experienced upward mobility if his or her career rank at the time of the survey

(1986 or 1996) is higher than the career rank associated with his or her first reported job.

### Measurement of life satisfaction

Although the original scale measuring life satisfaction has 11 levels, we generated a dichotomous dependent variable that equals 1 if a person reported life satisfaction in one of the three highest levels of the scale and 0 otherwise. This variable thus measures self-assessed satisfaction with life at the time of the survey. It is unclear if it is correlated with a more permanent measure of satisfaction.

### Method

Since the dependent variable is constructed as a simple dichotomy, we use logistic regression to estimate the probability that upward mobility occurred between the placement in the first occupation and time of interview in 1986. As in all regression models, the estimated effect of any specific (independent) variable is contingent upon the other variables included in the model. In particular, high correlation among independent variables (multicolline-

<sup>1</sup> Those who started at the highest career level (see below) were excluded because they cannot advance. Employees in East-Germany, marginally employed people, farmers, and people working in a family business without a formal contract, were not included because of their different conditions for career development; for other reasons widows were excluded as well.

<sup>2</sup> This classification was first used by the German Census Bureau in 1971 (MZU71) and has become a standard component in social science surveys in Germany. Pappi (1979) provides a detailed discussion of the underlying concepts and related operationalizations.

<sup>3</sup> The general practice in career mobility research is to use an occupational prestige ranking (e.g., Treiman-Scale, Wegener-Scale). In these rankings, the occupational activities are scored but not the status or the position in the hierarchical dimension. As the focus is the hierarchical dimension, we did not use a prestige ranking scale.

Table 1

**Transformation of the "Occupational Status Classification" into Career Ranks**

Career Rank	Worker (skill level)	Civil Servant	Employee (duties)	Self-Employed (number of employees)
1 (lowest)	un-/semiskilled			
2	skilled	low level	simple	at most 1
3	foreman	middle level	qualified	9 or less
4	master craftsman	high level	highly professional; industry foreman	10 or more
5 (highest)		executive level	extensive managerial	free-lance, academic

Source: Schema of Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik (1993) modified by the author.

arity) should be avoided to arrive at meaningful estimates. In our analysis, we find high correlation between marital status, presence of children, and hours at work. For this reason, we constructed new variables combining the information on marital status, presence of children, and characteristics of the spouse (Table 2). In regression models, categorical independent variables require the choice of a particular coding scheme. In the models presented below, indicator coding is used (cf. Menard 1995). There, the effect of one particular category (the reference category) is arbitrarily set to zero. The coefficients for the other categories represent the effect of each category compared to the chosen reference category.

### 3. Results — Upward Mobility<sup>4</sup>

Table 2 reports the frequency of career mobility and life satisfaction in the sample of working men and women in 1986 and 1996. As measured here, one out of every two men experienced upward mobility. This figure was almost the same in both the 1986 and 1996 samples. By contrast, in 1986 fewer than one in three women (31 percent) had moved to a higher career level from her first job. This figure remained almost the same ten years later. In 1996 only slightly more than one in three women (34 percent) had experienced upward career mobility relative to her first job. We next turn to the logistic regression results that allow us to present the partial correlation between mobility, life satisfaction and selected covariates while holding other factors constant.

#### Family of origin

Contrary to the “Individualisierungsthese” (Beck 1986) — predicting that the family of origin will lose its structural significance for the development of their children — there remains a strong association between career mobility and resources in the family of origin — even in adult life for both men and women. In both the 1986 and 1996 samples, fathers who completed an apprenticeship/college degree had sons who were more likely to experience upward career mobility. Differences across time were more evident for women. In the 1986 sample, the educational attainment of the father was not correlated with career mobility of daughters. By 1996, this is no longer true. While the upward career mobility of women was still uncorrelated with the educational attainment and occupation of fathers, women in the 1996 sample were more upwardly mobile if their initial occupation put them in a lower employment status than occupied by their father. Whether these are causal effects cannot be answered with the data used in this analysis. The increased statistical association is, however, consistent with anecdotal evidence that parents now more strongly encourage their daughters, as they always have their sons, to pursue professional ca-

reers. The difference in the results between the 1986 and 1996 samples is also consistent with the general reduction in family size. As families have fewer children, they may invest more in each child than in the past.

#### Age

Career mobility of men is strongly correlated with age in both periods but a significant association is observed for women only in the 1996 sample. These patterns in the data are consistent with hypotheses about the relationship between career advancement and labor force attachment. If men are less likely to interrupt their labor force participation, they will be more likely to advance in their careers than women simply because they have more accumulated experience. Career mobility may be uncorrelated with age for the sample of working women in 1986 because women in that cohort were more likely to interrupt their careers (BMFSFJ 1998:123). Consequently, biological age is less correlated with work experience in this cohort. By 1996, working women had spent more continuous time in the labor force and so the correlation between biological age and work experience is stronger. This stronger correlation may explain the stronger statistical association between age and career mobility among working women in the 1996 sample.

#### Education

In general, schooling and vocational training is positively correlated with upward mobility. For men, this association was present and of similar strength in both 1986 and 1996. For women, the correlation between schooling and career mobility increased between 1986 and 1996. In 1986 the level of schooling was uncorrelated with career mobility. Women who had vocational training or a college degree were more likely to experience upward career mobility. Among women who worked ten years later, career mobility was more strongly correlated with level of schooling.

#### Men’s marital status and couple constellations

The association between a man’s career mobility, marital status and the presence of children arises from at least two conflicting sources. On the one hand, marriage and family may make a man more productive in his job. On the other hand, childless workers may face fewer demands on their time outside the job. As Table 2 shows, in 1986, working married men were more likely to experience career

<sup>4</sup> Here we report selected results from our regression analysis. Full results are available from the author on request. Even results shown in the same column in Table 3 are based on several different logit regressions.

Table 2

**Selected Variables: Characteristics and the Distribution**  
(in percent)

		Women, 1986	Women, 1996	Men, 1986	Men, 1996
Father's education	no training	22.0	21.5	21.6	23.8
	vocational training/college degree	78.0	78.5	78.4	76.2
Respondent's first position lower than father's position	No	69.3	49.9	72.2	70.4
	Yes	30.7	50.1	27.8	29.6
Schooling	lower secondary school	59.6	43.9	60.6	48.5
	intermediate school	27.2	35.8	19.7	25.5
	upper secondary school	13.2	20.4	19.8	26.1
Educational training	no training	22.4	16.3	10.3	10.1
	vocational training/college degree	77.6	74.9	89.7	89.9
Career level in first job	low/middle level (1 and 2)	62.6	53.7	70.4	66.6
	high level (3 and 4)	37.4	46.3	29.6	33.4
Start negative	placing in first job adequate	77.2	81.6	73.5	81.3
	placing in first job below educational attainment	22.8	18.4	26.5	18.7
Marital status	married	71.9	68.0	83.0	71.4
	married, separated	2.2	2.5	1.6	2.0
	single	12.6	16.8	10.5	19.8
	divorced	13.4	12.7	4.9	6.8
Children	no child	27.5	28.7	22.4	27.5
	at least one child	72.5	71.3	77.6	72.5
Part-time (only women)	full time	57.7	52.3		
	part time	42.3	47.7		
Life pattern	married, child	58.8	55.7	74.2	62.7
	married, no child	13.1	12.3	8.8	8.6
	cohabitation/ living apart together	7.7	19.6	4.9	17.4
	single, no partner	9.1	6.7	8.0	7.6
	divorced, no partner	11.3	5.7	4.1	3.6
Husband's success (only women)	unmarried	28.1	32.0		
	married, husband unemployed (incl. missing)	17.3	21.7		
	married, husband succeeded	26.9	23.1		
	married, husband did not succeed	27.7	23.2		
Husband's career rank (only women)	unmarried	28.1	32.0		
	married, husband high position	33.6	32.1		
	married, husband low/middle position	38.2	35.9		
Wife's employed success (only men)	unmarried			17.0	28.6
	married, wife unemployed			50.1	39.8
	married, wife succeeded			8.6	9.5
	married, wife did not succeed			24.3	22.1
Upward mobile	no	69.0	65.9	50.4	50.3
	yes	31.0	34.1	49.6	49.7
Life satisfaction (11 levels)	low	47.0	48.2	43.4	54.3
	high (3 highest levels)	53.0	51.8	56.6	45.7
N of cases		636	766	1,225	1,170
Source: Authors calculations from 1986 and 1996 German Socio-Economic Panel.					

mobility than single men who worked. Relative to married men, men who were divorced or separated were less likely to experience career mobility but the difference was not statistically significant. Interestingly, career mobility of men with children did not differ significantly from men without children, holding other things constant. This lack of difference seems to suggest that the factors included here, education, starting occupation, father's education and occupation, may capture any differences among men who do and do not choose to have children that are sometimes attributed to the gender specific division of labor in the family. In the 1996 sample of working men, the correlation between career mobility and marital status or presence of children is no longer statistically significant. In the 1990s, unmarried workers were a prominent topic in both the media and in social science research and, according to some, they were likely to be the most successful workers in terms of career mobility. Our data, however, provide no such empirical evidence. In the sample of men working in 1996, unmarried men are no more likely to have experienced upward career mobility than working married men.

Though the association between a married man's career mobility and the employment status of his wife is positive, the association is not statistically significant. This association may be due to many factors. For example, there is evidence that there is positive sorting when people choose mates. Thus, men who are more productive may seek out women who are more productive as well. In addition, while some argue that a man's productivity is augmented less if his wife works, there is evidence that women serve "double duty." That is, there is not much difference in the hours of housework and child care undertaken by women who do and do not work (BMFSFJ 1998:127).

#### Women's marital status and couple constellations

Because women who work also seem to take the bulk of the responsibility for work done at home, it is generally thought that women who remain single will also experience greater career mobility. This simplistic conjecture is not borne out in the data. Holding other things constant, in both 1986 and 1996, employed married women are no less likely to be upwardly mobile than employed unmarried women. More insight into women's career development can be gained by including information about the husband. Women married to an upwardly mobile husband are significantly more likely to reach a higher career rank themselves than women married to a man who did not advance. The same is true when one compares unmarried women with women married to a man who has advanced in his own career. Contrary to what many social scientists have hypothesized, among women who worked, unmarried and childless women experienced no greater career mobility than married women.

In the sample of women who worked in 1986, women with children experienced less upward career mobility. Once one includes information about the husband's career, the presence of children is no longer correlated with upward career mobility (for space reasons this result is not shown in Table 3). Among women who worked in 1996, those who worked part-time were less upwardly mobile than those who worked full-time. Finally, upward career mobility was higher among both 1986 and 1996 working married women whose husbands had a high position or were upwardly mobile. As shown by Tölke (1998), women married to men in higher status jobs are less likely to be employed in both 1986 and 1996. The employment rate for this group is about 15 per cent lower than for women married to men in a low status position. Employed women with husbands in jobs that had high occupational status were more likely to experience upward career mobility than were women with husbands in low occupational status jobs.

#### 4. Overall Satisfaction with Life

Life satisfaction, as measured here, is not strongly correlated with many of the variables included in our analysis. The model of life satisfaction in the sample of men working in 1986 yielded a set of coefficients that (jointly) were not statistically different from zero. Only occupational variable was correlated with life satisfaction. Holding other factors constant, men who occupy a lower occupational position relative to their father report being less satisfied. Working men in 1996, with more highly educated fathers reported being more satisfied with their lives than did working men whose fathers were less educated.

Although life satisfaction among working men in 1986 did not vary across men who were married and unmarried, life satisfaction in 1996 did differ across these two groups. Working married men in 1996 reported being more satisfied with life than did unmarried men who worked in 1996 (for further empirical evidence on the advantages enjoyed by married men see Waite 1996). Besides marital status, only the presence of at least one child was correlated with the life satisfaction of men. Men with at least one child reported being less satisfied with life than did men without children.

Among women in both 1986 and 1996, life satisfaction is strongly correlated with marital status, the presence of children and the success of their husband's career. Other factors show no significant association with life satisfaction. Women without husbands in 1986 and 1996 report being less satisfied than do married women. In the sample of 1986 women, single women did not differ significantly in their life satisfaction relative to married women. By 1996, single women reported being less satisfied than married women. In 1986, women with children reported being less

Table 3

Summary Table of Logistic Regression Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Variables	Upward Mobility				Satisfaction with Life			
	Women, 1986	Women, 1996	Men, 1986	Men, 1996	Women, 1986	Women, 1996	Men, 1986	Men, 1996
Age	ns	+**	+**	+**	Ns	ns	ns	ns
Father's education	ns	ns	+	+**	Ns	ns	ns	+**
Father higher than respondent	ns	+**	+**	+**	Ns	ns	—**	ns
Schooling	ns	+**	+**	+**	Ns	ns	ns	ns
Educational training	+**	+**	+	+	Ns	ns	ns	ns
High career level in first job	—**	—**	—**	—**	Ns	ns	ns	ns
Start negative	+**	+**	+**	+**	Ns	ns	ns	ns
Marital status	ns	ns	6+**	ns	9+*	12+*	ns	16+**
Children	—**	*	ns	ns	—**	+	ns	*
Alternative								
Part-time (women)	—**	—**			Ns	ns		
Life pattern	1+**	4+*	7+**	ns	+	13+	ns	
Husband's success	2+**	5+**			10+*	14+**		17+**
Husband's career rank	3+**	ns			11+*	15+**		
Wife's employed success			8+**	ns				ns
Upward Mobile					Ns	ns	ns	ns
N of cases	636	766	1,225	1,170	636	766	1,225	1,170

<sup>a</sup> Legend: significant positive,  $p < 0.05$  (+\*);  $p < 0.01$  (\*\*); significant negative,  $p < 0.05$  (—\*);  $p < 0.01$  (—\*\*); not significant (ns).  
Only significant differences between categories are listed (higher probability ? lower probability):  
1. = single, cohabitation, married/no child ? married/child  
2. = married/husband success ? married/husband no success  
3. = married/husband high rank ? married/husband no high rank  
4. = single ? married/child  
5. = married/husband success ? married/husband no success  
6. = married ? single  
7. = married/child ? single, cohabitation  
8. = married/wife success ? unmarried  
9. = married ? divorced  
10. = married/husband success ? unmarried  
11. = married/husband high rank ? married/husband no high rank  
12. = married ? divorced, single  
13. = married/child ? single, divorced  
14. = married/husband success ? married/husband unemployed, unmarried  
15. = husband high ? unmarried  
16. = married ? single, divorced  
17. = married/child ? single, divorced  
Source: Summarized table of the author's calculations from 1986 and 1996 German Socio-Economic Panel.

satisfied than did women without children. In 1996, women with children reported slightly higher life satisfaction than did women without children but the difference in the correlation between life satisfaction and having children was not statistically different from zero. One might conjecture about the possible cause in the shifting association between the presence of children and life satisfaction in 1986 and 1996. In particular, it is now more socially acceptable in Germany for mothers to work. In addition, laws or/and company policies have changed to accommodate or protect working women. While we only conjecture here about the role such changes might have played in changing the life satisfaction of mothers, the emphasis in recent years on gender equality and challenges of combining family and work may have been important.

Finally, a woman's life satisfaction is strongly associated with the success of her husband. Women married to more successful men, and to men who are more upwardly mobile, report much higher levels of life satisfaction than do women married to less successful men.

## 5. Conclusion

Empirical social science research often focuses on individual decision-makers. Researchers sometimes do not consider the full scope of family situations when measuring outcomes. Our results identify many of the correlates of career mobility and life satisfaction that are linked to the family situation. Career mobility and life satisfaction are both positively associated with being married. We found no evidence to support the hypothesis, popular in the 1990s, that unmarried individuals would enjoy a career advantage over married individuals. Unmarried men had less upward career mobility in 1986 than did married men. By 1996, there was no difference. Whether the conjectured advantage will be found in 2006 remains to be seen.

For women the evidence presented here is mixed. Career mobility and life satisfaction are both strongly correlated with the success and career mobility of husbands. Married women were more happy than unmarried women in both 1986 and 1996. One clear trend is that womens'

educational attainment is more strongly associated with upward career mobility among working women in 1996 than it was among women who worked in 1986.

The analysis presented here is limited in several important ways. First, we have not accounted for the intricate process by which men and women choose different marital, reproductive, educational and occupational paths. Men and women reveal their different preferences when they choose to marry (get divorced or remain single), get education (begin work), have children (remain childless),

participate in the labor force (full-time or part-time) or stay home to raise children. It is not surprising then to find differences in career mobility and life satisfaction among men and women who, by their very actions, differentiate themselves from each other. Without a careful and detailed analysis of each of these transitions, any causal interpretation is doomed to fail. Our findings contribute descriptive evidence that may motivate a greater attention to life course and life patterns in studies of gender inequality and studies of the life course.

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