

When is the grass greener on the other side? A longitudinal study of the joint effect of occupational mobility and personality on the honeymoon-hangover experience during job change

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- The impact of occupational mobility on post-turnover job satisfaction trajectory depends on the direction of travel on the occupational class ladder.
- Upward occupational mobility (defined by a change of occupation from a lower to higher skilled occupational class) leads to a significant increase in job satisfaction upon initial turnover. However, the 'honeymoon effect' dissipates over time.
- Downward occupational mobility does not generate a 'honeymoon effect' upon turnover. Instead, it results in dissatisfaction that lasts for several years after the transition.
- Compared to upward and downward occupational mobility, lateral occupational mobility (defined by a change of occupation within the same occupational class) has least impact on subsequent job satisfaction trajectory.
- The effect of occupational mobility on job satisfaction is moderated by the individual's personality traits, particularly in terms of neuroticism.
- While emotionally stable employees quickly return to their baseline job satisfaction regardless of the direction of occupational mobility, those high in neuroticism react more strongly to both upward and downward mobility. The effect is particularly striking for downward mobility, which is followed by a steep decline of job satisfaction that lasts for at least four years after turnover.
- Downward occupational mobility has stronger and more enduring effects on job satisfaction compared to the transient positive effect of upward occupational mobility. In other words, bad is stronger than good.

Figure 1 shows the effect of upward, lateral and downward occupational class mobility on job satisfaction trajectory for all employees based on the British Household Panel Survey which followed approximately 10,000 individuals annually between 1991 and 2008. It can be seen that job satisfaction typically declines sharply in the year prior to a job change (t-1), which suggests that low levels of job satisfaction triggers turnover. Consistent with our expectation, upward occupational mobility generates a significant 'honeymoon

effect' at the time of turnover (t), while downward occupational class mobility has no such effect. The pattern of adaptation, however, shows an interesting asymmetry between the effect of upward and downward mobility. While individuals who moved up the occupational class ladder returned to their baseline well-being by the third year after turnover, those who moved downwards suffered a prolonged loss of well-being that continued for at least four years after the transition.

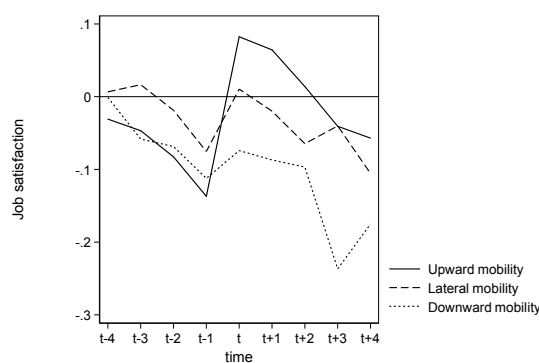


Figure 1. Effect of upward, lateral and downward occupational mobility on job satisfaction (all employees)



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Turning to the moderating role of personality, we found that neuroticism exacerbated the negative effect of downward mobility. Figure 2 compares the job satisfaction trajectories of individuals who reported the highest (top 20%) and lowest (bottom 20%) neuroticism scores following each type of mobility. While there are hardly any differences in job satisfaction among emotionally stable workers regardless of their direction of occupational class mobility, those who are highly neurotic experienced stronger reactions to both upward and downward mobility, with the gap between the two groups diverging over time. An intriguing finding in Figure 2 shows that the negative effect of downward mobility emerged not at the time of turnover but in the subsequent years.

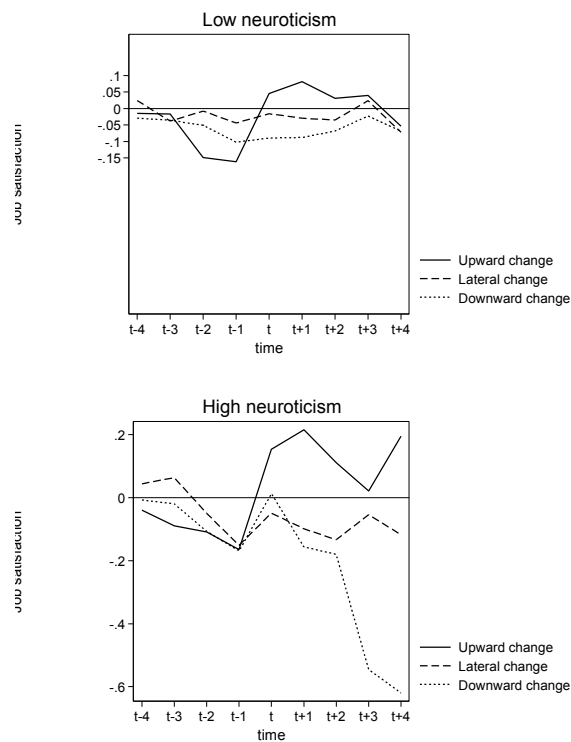


Figure 2. Effect of upward, lateral and downward occupational mobility on job satisfaction by level of neuroticism: top fifth vs. bottom fifth

IMPLICATIONS

When individuals change their careers, they should avoid overestimating the positive characteristics of other occupations and underestimating those of their own. Unless the transition involves an improvement in objective job quality, they are unlikely to find the grass greener on the other side. From a management perspective, the onus should be on employers at the recruitment and selection stage to

offer a fair representation of not just what the job involves, but also what it could potentially involve, particularly when the recruit is changing career. For government, the publication of a range of job quality indicators by detailed occupation categories based upon high-quality representative data can make the implications of career changes more transparent.



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