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## Giving (positive) meaning to downward and horizontal occupational mobility to maintain individual well-being

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### Abstract

This study addresses some limitations related to knowledge of the circumstances that contribute to perceptions of downward or horizontal occupational mobility as a positive experience, increasing work satisfaction, labour market security, and maintaining subjective well-being. In pursuing this objective, seven working-life biographies are examined that demonstrate causes of occupational mobility, the investment needed for transition and stabilisation, as well as attitudes towards the destination occupation. Although a sense of meaningful work helps individuals accept a reduced income, interviewees treat it as a transitional period, seeing a possibility for at least some increase in salary. Maintaining one's original social networks while accepting a less qualified occupation also contributes to preserving individual well-being. These aspects are more pronounced in women's life stories. A more ambiguous attitude can be seen in the experience of men who encountered occupational and financial decline. While decision-making awareness, confidence in one's choice, and control of the process helps to stabilize potential frustration caused by decline, some isolation from previous networks appears in the keeping of distance, reducing contact intensity, or staying abroad for longer periods. Perhaps to regain their subjective sense of well-being, the former implements the principle of 'discrete stages' in their social life, a notion that reflects the situation of their working life.

**Keywords:** occupational mobility; downward mobility; intragenerational mobility; meaningful work; subjective well-being; Latvia

## 1 Introduction

This article focuses on different sources of positive consequences based on seven examples purposively selected from a larger number of interviews conducted under the umbrella of research into contemporary occupational mobility trajectories in Latvia between November 2019 and 2020. They support the argument that downward mobility cannot be seen merely as a decline in the social status and subjective well-being of individuals, and horizontal mobility as the maintenance thereof. The narratives presented here were collected from individuals who have experienced occupational, thus intra-generational mobility within the Latvian

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labour market since 2009, applying the working-life biographical interview method. Most cases demonstrate occupational transition as the result of the changing needs or interests of individuals more than external circumstances – that is, mobility was largely viewed as a deliberate decision.

The reasoning for this study is threefold. The first stems from current state-of-the-art mobility experience research across Europe. Academic literature has dedicated overwhelming attention to upward mobility (De Bellaigue et al., 2019), but recent mobility trends indicate the need to balance pre-existing knowledge with an investigation of the experience of mobility in the opposite direction. This is especially crucial for Central and East European countries, in particular Latvia, whose inhabitants are today experiencing downward mobility more than upward mobility (Bukodi & Róbert, 2007; Bukodi et al., 2020).

Second, the experience of crossing social class boundaries – upward and downward – is largely associated with detrimental social and psychological consequences (Daenekindt, 2017, see Houle, 2011 for a broader overview). In Eastern Europe, this presupposition was once true due to the clash of experience that resulted from the social and economic transformations of the 1990s (see, e.g., Aarelaid-Tart & Bennich-Björkman, 2011), but should be reviewed under the present conditions more than three decades later. More recently, Becker and Birkelbach (2018) argued that a feeling of internal control over the mobility process may reduce potentially harmful effects associated with transition, but found this assumption to be true only for upward mobility. Moreover, this demonstrates a failure of explanations for the absence of the same trend for the downwardly mobile in the respective sample. Indeed, the authors call for further research to explain the maintenance of a sense of well-being for this group. Substantially, a potential explanation of previous findings is the fact that most results about the negative effects of social mobility emerged from studies that applied a limited number of occupational distinctions (see e.g., Houle, 2011) which led to more or less significant changes in individuals' social environment (Friedman, 2014). However, contemporary social processes may lead to mobility that is measurable on a micro level (Weeden & Grusky, 2005) or involve some other more specific distinctions among transitional groups such as the field of education. Such mobility also brings a loss of human capital (Kambourov & Manovskii, 2009) and a need to fill occupation-specific knowledge gaps (Medici et al., 2020). However, what is missing is an examination of whether these conditions have the same effects on individuals' social ties and subjective well-being that are observed when applying highly aggregated occupational divisions.

Third, a leading role in research on the consequences of mobility is played by quantitative approaches (e.g., Becker & Birkelbach, 2018; Daenekindt, 2017; Houle, 2011), but the above-mentioned knowledge gaps call for the contribution of qualitative inquiry, as pursued by this study.

In tracking the working-life stories presented here, the article examines the following research question: which circumstances in individuals' lives lead to a positive perception of the downward or horizontal occupational mobility experience, and to maintaining individuals' subjective well-being? Moreover, the examination of occupational mobility in a contemporary East-European country, a category to which Latvia belongs, may bring a different perspective to the debate about the consequences of occupational mobility.

## 2 Literature review

Occupations are perceived as the deployment of a set of certain skills associated with similar wages (le Grand & Tählin, 2013; Weeden, 2002), that assign individuals prestige, social power, and status (Freeland & Hoey, 2018; le Grand & Tählin, 2013), thus have a broad influence on an individual's social life conditions and outcomes (Weeden & Grusky, 2005). Thus, vertical transition between occupations can be designated as upward or downward according to a mutual hierarchical relationship. In contrast, passing from one occupation to another at the same hierarchical level is perceived as horizontal mobility (Van Der Waal & De Koster, 2014). Quantitative measurement of the consequences of mobility has long been a subject of interest to social scientists, who tend to use aggregated scales with a limited number of occupational groups (e.g., Houle, 2011), or to investigate mobility among educational levels (e.g., Daenekindt, 2017). This infers long-distance mobility between a former and a current occupation (Jarvis & Song, 2017). This tradition might impact the results that are obtained in terms of the interpretation of the consequences of mobility – the greater the distance, the greater the changes the individual may have to cope with. Moreover, with the exception of some early studies, scholars tend to describe the detrimental implications of mobility on the social life and well-being of individuals largely based on working-class or minority groups' upward mobility experiences (see review in Friedman, 2014). As downward mobility is perceived as the loss of an individual's status, prestige, and income (Newman, 1999), the impact of these negative effects on an individual's social and psychological well-being are usually examined in the light of the 'dissociative' thesis (Sorokin, 1959; see a more recent contribution by Daenekindt, 2017) or the 'falling-from-grace' thesis (Newman, 1999). In general, both theses consider that changes in social affiliation require impossible-to-implement adaptation to the values, attitudes and lifestyle of the destination class that may harm pre-existing informal ties (Sorokin, 1959), unless other members of the original social network such as relatives, friends, and colleagues experience a similar status transition (Blau, 1956). Facing these challenges, harm occurs to the individual's subjective well-being – i.e., to the perception of satisfaction with various specific domains of their life and feelings of happiness (Becker & Birkelbach, 2018).

The more neutral 'acculturation theory' (Blau, 1956; Houle, 2011) considers an individual's adaptation to the values, attitudes, and behaviour of the destination class. Moreover, acculturation theory suggests that the negative effects captured by the dissociative and falling-from-grace theses describe the acculturation process *per se*, while the individual accommodates to the destination class position (Houle, 2011).

Examining these hypotheses over recent decades, scholars are inconclusive about the direction of mobility and its effect on an individual's social and psychological state (see reviews in Becker & Birkelbach, 2018; Houle, 2011), claiming the need to look for other explanatory variables (e.g., Becker & Birkelbach, 2018). The results mentioned above have been obtained on the basis of quantitative investigations, and new hypotheses continue to be sought. For example, Becker and Birkelbach (2018) test internal locus of control (decision-making and the management of life-events by individuals themselves) as a significant determinant of the psychological resilience of the upwardly mobile. However, a few studies have searched for new explanations through employing a qualitative approach. Among them, Friedman (2016) specifies that the lived experience of mobility varies according to transition trajectory and individual characteristics such as original class, gender, and ethnicity. Gradual mobility pro-

vides a smooth transition and incorporation of the original social and cultural background into the new experience (Friedman, 2016). However, these findings still do not close the knowledge gap about the lived experience of the *downwardly mobile*, leaving the *horizontally mobile* completely outside this discussion.

Focusing primarily on the consequences of occupational mobility, explanatory variables can be found in the individual and organizational settings of work in the destination occupation. Hence, the meaningful work construct emerges as positively loaded (Bailey et al., 2019), linking ‘meaning in work’ (Chalofsky, 2003) with individual-level outcomes such as life-satisfaction and well-being (e.g., Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Steger et al. 2012). Moreover, according to a comprehensive review presented by Bailey et al. (2019), ‘meaning in work’ can be examined both as largely depending on an individual’s durable internal attitudes (Steger et al. 2012), or in relation to specific workplaces, suggesting that engagement with organizations may generate a sense of meaningfulness (Duchon & Ashmos Plowman, 2005). The meaning ‘of work’ and ‘in work’ may also change over time according to the importance of other roles which individuals play (see Bari & Róbert, 2016). Here, acceptance as a deliberate strategy, and strengthening due to support from family and important others (Bereményi & Durst, 2021) can be purposively adapted to reframe meaning and handle the disagreeable consequences of downward mobility (see Almevall et al., 2021; Bereményi & Durst, 2021). This position may be permanent or temporary as individuals apply various strategies to deal with their downgrading such as adopting ‘getting by’ (staying in a lower position), ‘getting on’ (advancing), or ‘going nowhere’ attitudes (Brown, 2016). Moreover, social classes may be heterogeneous, so despite diverse educational levels and occupations, individuals may have close interpersonal ties and be part of the same social networks (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004). Thus, nowadays, the relationship between occupational mobility and the potential loss of an individual’s original social networks may be considered more blurred (see e.g., Rözer et al., 2020). Considering these arguments, the author maintains that the concept of ‘meaningful work’ and accompanying adjustments of individual perceptions of positions could further explain the conferral of meaning to and maintenance of well-being in relation to the experience of downward or horizontal mobility, as long as the related dynamics are more precisely operationalized based on the results of qualitative research.

### **3 Research background: employment and occupational mobility trends in Latvia**

Latvia, similarly to other Central and East European countries, is a potentially interesting space for research on occupational mobility experience caused by specific labour market features and mobility trends. Restructuring of the economy in the 1990s brought about several crucial systematic changes in work-related values, the demand for occupations, their prestige and remuneration (Koroļeva et al., 2014). At that time, occupational mobility was a means of maintaining previously guaranteed – but now increasingly uncertain – employment opportunities. A large share of the population felt this to be a stressful and difficult process, especially those in less well-educated and minority groups. Moreover, due to the changing socio-political conditions that Latvia experienced throughout the twentieth century, various generations were convinced of the unpredictability of life and the need to be ready for change (Aarelaid-Tart & Bennich-Björkman, 2011).

Inheriting the tradition of high female participation in the labour market established under the socialist system, Latvian women's participation in full-time employment throughout their lives remained high even after the economic restructuring of the 1990s. Thus, occupational mobility applied equally to men and women (Šumilo et al., 2007).

However, relatively little data is available to characterize the occupational mobility rate over time. Before the economic recession of 2009, Latvia was among those countries with the highest level of job mobility experience during work-life (~ 80 per cent), with around half of the workforce being downwardly mobile (Bukodi & Róbert, 2007). The economic turbulence of 2009 also brought more downward than upward occupational mobility to Latvia (Pohlig, 2020). However, the incidence of horizontal mobility may have increased over the last five years since specific recruitment and retraining programmes for other-sector professionals were introduced by industries dealing with their labour shortages.

A number of social processes explain these trends at present. Having a small economy, Latvia has been more likely to be open to external influences, resulting in continuously changing demand for occupations (Šumilo et al., 2007). This is also reflected in the flexibility of educational requirements. Since the training system is largely non-vocational-specific (Bukodi & Róbert, 2007), the assessment of candidates' suitability for jobs is left to employers, except in regulated professions such as medicine or architecture. This can lead to lower costs of occupational mobility than expected (see Kambourov & Manovskii, 2009).

Besides this, the economic changes of the 1990s and beyond allowed young people to experience rapid career growth (Aarelaid-Tart & Bennich-Björkman, 2011), which sometimes led to breaking points in the middle of the working life. Here, additional reasons for mobility have emerged, from dissatisfaction with work content, lack of opportunities for further growth (Šumilo et al., 2007), and burnout stemming from stringent job performance requirements and difficulties reconciling work and private life over a longer period of time (Žabko, 2021/2022).

#### 4 Data and method

The article is based on empirical data collected through working-life biographical interviews for ongoing doctoral research on contemporary intragenerational occupational mobility patterns in the Latvian labour market. The aim of the original study was to identify coping strategies for dealing with the knowledge gap that emerges when moving from one occupation to another. Research participants were required to have changed their occupation since 2009, thus within the ten years since the last major economic turbulence in Latvia. The search for interviewees was based on the use of personal networks combined with the snowball method. Each participant read and signed an informed consent form; audio records of interviews were fully transcribed.

A crucial task of the study was defining the reference point for determining the fact of occupational mobility. Unlike most studies based on the hierarchy of occupations (e.g., Becker & Birkelbach, 2018; Houle, 2011), the aim of the study – to determine the persistence of the knowledge gap – demanded a different approach. The classification also had to be sufficiently sensitive, but not fragmented. This was achieved by applying the 'narrow field' level of ISCED classification (UNESCO, 2014), thereby allowing detection of the mobility of interviewees across 29 educational fields. The step could also be considered a novelty in relation to the current state-of-the-art.

After selecting participants according to the given criteria, 38 interviews were conducted between November 2019 and 2020. Most interviewees acknowledged that they had decided to move to another occupation due to their own needs, such as changing vocational interests, finding working conditions unacceptable, or facing health problems, thus claiming their decisions to be voluntary. This finding may be a limitation of the study as the given recruitment methods were not able to reach those who felt forced to change occupation due to the risk of unemployment or a decrease in the demand for their occupation.

Assessing the collected coping strategies also revealed the need to determine the direction of mobility when this was observed, whether vertical or horizontal. This demanded a return to existing classifications of occupations and the identification of a similar, sufficiently sensitive, scale of measurement. The widely referenced big-class schema developed by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), in the eleven-point version, was selected for this purpose. The advantage of this scale is its most accurate consideration of the abstraction level of working tasks (see Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004) allowing for differentiation among higher and lower grades of professionals, technicians and routine non-manual employees, skilled and non-skilled manual workers (see Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). As a result, the working-life stories that were collected could be classified as follows: 15 interviewees moved downward, 21 horizontally and two upward; this breakdown is an uncontrolled side effect of the interviewee recruitment process.

For the purpose of demonstrating the circumstances that allow for considering a downward (and horizontal) mobility experience as positive, valuable, or maintaining a sense of well-being, seven cases were purposively selected for more nuanced examination in this article. For the six downwardly mobile examples, variety was also ensured in the perception of the consequences and diversity of narrators in terms of their gender, age, educational, ethnic and language background. A single example of horizontal mobility was added, as an occupational change was implemented by a medium-skilled adult of mature age, more likely to be immobile.

The collection of working-life biographies presumed an exploration of narrators' education and work path since early adolescence, including the reasoning behind their choices, attitudes of their parents and peers in respect of these decisions, as well as a description of the working routine and relationships within organizations. To finalize, the narrators were asked to compare their former and current occupation in terms of prestige, financial viability, complexity of work, and knowledge required. Based on these comparisons, the feeling of interviewees about the direction of their transition was detected and, through the data analysis, contrasted with the mobility patterns as defined by the author. Narrative analysis, coherent with the interview method (Lieblich et al., 1998), was used for data exploration. In demonstrating mobility experience that emerged from collected working-life stories, selected cases were aggregated into three clusters of positive reasoning extracted from the interviews, aligned with the concepts examined in the literature review.

## **5 Results: clusters of positive reasoning in relation to downward and horizontal mobility**

### **5.1 Meaningfulness of work**

Emilia (female, 30 years, married with young children) came from a lower-middle class family, but since childhood had faced challenges caused by studying at a prestigious school in the

city centre. Although interested in medicine, due to the difficult financial circumstances of her parents Emilia started studying public relations, which allowed her time and space for work. Emilia worked in advertising for seven years, rising to be a key account director. Over the years, emotional tension and exhaustion accumulated as the specifics of her job contradicted her inner need to 'be excellent so that everyone is happy with my work'. In reality, this was not possible: 'Everyday life was very stressful, I was like a taskmaster all the time – you would never be good enough for anyone because you were an account manager, you stood in between the client and the executive, among these creative people, from whom you had to get a result'.

Following advice and significant support from her spouse, Emilia left her job and start studying rehabilitation medicine. She turned her studies to midwifery with the birth of her first child, following her new and intimate insights. Since then, Emilia had been studying and volunteering as a midwife for three years, seeing if the job was suitable for her. Volunteering gives her an opportunity to plan her shifts at work, thus allowing her to balance work and domestic responsibilities. Emilia is aware that her choices have downgraded her position, first and foremost, financially. 'Many midwives are puzzled, as I have left such a very lucrative job for one of the lowest paid [in Latvia]. [...] I know what it means to make big money, but you are in a very, very bad place emotionally. If I had to choose again now, I would choose this [midwifery] again, because it brings me energy and joy'.

Although Emilia acknowledges that the work of a midwife is less prestigious in society, she believes that this societal perception is undeserved in that it stems from a lack of public knowledge about the role and responsibilities of a midwife. Through her statements 'I want these beautiful moments with a normal labour' and 'my hands are the first to await this little baby', it is clear that Emilia assigns high value to her work, giving her a sense of meaningful work and contributing to the 'greater good' (Duchon & Ashmos Plowman, 2005; Steger et al., 2012), and increasing her well-being (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Steger et al., 2012). These considerations strengthen her position when she is confronted within her wider social network about why she did not choose the hierarchically superior position of a doctor, which would better correspond to her previous professional level. However, she rejects the idea of becoming a doctor, believing that it is exactly the specifics of midwifery work that she is looking for and finds meaningful.

Emilia's closest social ties support her choice; however, maintenance of her former social status, income, and network is supported by her spouse, who has maintained his work in advertising, and her additional job as a marketing freelancer. However, within a wider informal network and among previous and current colleagues, Emilia encounters different attitudes towards her choice, which sometimes, especially in relation to the older generation of medical staff, involve distrust of her goals and some resistance in terms of her developing a new professional network. Despite this, she purposefully tries to overcome these obstacles, largely applying the soft skills she developed for work in advertising. 'I knew how to approach people; it [marketing] actually gave me a very good schooling, which is also useful for me in this [new] job – namely, how to communicate with people from a variety of classes and occupations. You just know how to adapt, because you have always had to adapt'.

Notably, some years after leaving the advertising profession, Emilia agreed to provide marketing services to a couple of individual clients as a freelancer in tandem with her work as a midwife. She justifies this decision with multiple arguments. Besides the financial gain, she acknowledges that this allows her to maintain a connection with the creative industry,

satisfies her longing for the uplifting feeling of completing a campaign, and allows her to maintain the advertising skills that would be needed in future to promote herself as a mid-wife. Her long-term goal is to provide private midwifery services, allowing her to earn more than in a public hospital, demonstrating her commitment to further development described by Brown (2016) as a strategy of 'getting on' in her occupational market.

Lisa (female, 43 years, married, with adolescent children) came from an educated middle-class family and knew from an early age that higher education was a must. After her studies, Lisa worked as an accountant for almost 20 years before deciding to change her profession to become a beautician. For this purpose, although possessing a master's degree in finance, she returned to education at a lower – secondary vocational – level. Before this decision, Lisa had reached the position of senior accountant. Lisa describes her work as responsible and exhausting, boosting her decision to make a change in her working-life trajectory, concluding 'I had served everyone so much, both businessmen and the State Revenue Service, and the State Treasury ... I just wanted to be free of it'. However, Lisa's decision to change occupation was multifaceted. Her health problems, worsened by this exhausting work, were combined with the comprehension that 'you are [I am] almost 40 years old and you [I] have to work until 70 years old, do the same for another 30 years...' and the fact that 'I have mastered everything and the only thing that left for me [in this job] is changes in taxation.' These lessons demonstrate a loss of commitment to the accounting profession which Lisa faced before the decision to change.

Earlier, Lisa had revealed her interest in beauty care, attending informal training sessions for several years and gradually establishing relationships with some professionals within the industry. For entry to the occupation of beautician, Lisa completed vocational training relying on her spouse's support and savings, temporarily worsening the family's financial situation. At the time of interview, Lisa had been working as a beautician for more than two years. While initially an employee, unable to accept the organizational culture of her workplace a year later Lisa opened her own beauty care salon. Soon, she also received an invitation to work as a trainer in a vocational school, demonstrating rapid 'getting on' (Brown, 2016) in the new occupation.

Although her case is considered to be downward mobility in terms of education and the abstraction level of the occupation (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004), Lisa relates incongruously to this statement. She considers that there are limitations to developing as a beauty care professional as Latvia does not provide tertiary education opportunities in this area. Also, in terms of employment, she feels that she is back in business. Lisa admits that her current occupation gives her freedom and the opportunity to do exactly what is meaningful in her work – 'I like beautiful things, a beautiful environment' (see Duchon & Ashmos Plowman, 2005). Although her financial situation has stabilized, Lisa does not compare the income of her present and former occupations, but she also does not reject the idea of returning to accounting if 'something new turns up', demonstrating stronger commitment to following her aspirations than before.

Prior to the economic recession in 2009, Steven (male, 44 years, married, with adolescent children) was a client manager in the area of the wholesale of construction goods. Formerly, he completed vocational training, but experienced occupational mobility in the late 1990s and early 2000s, moving from art to industrial metalwork and wholesales later on due to weak demand for his work. The year 2009 brought redundancy and unemployment, and Steven used this time to learn the trade of an electrician. Starting work in real-estate man-



agement, within ten years Steven was gradually promoted from a line electrician to a branch manager, replacing manual work with office work. However, these changes did not give Steven satisfaction; he lost motivation because office work was not interesting for him and he felt the need for more technical and manual tasks (see Nixon, 2006). It took Steven a long time until – becoming inspired by the thinking of younger colleagues that one should change workplace every few years – he applied for a vacancy which allowed him to return to the position of a line electrician with some office duties. In this, it was difficult to trace how conscious Steven's choice to change jobs was, but he had found meaning in this change, feeling satisfied with the result. According to Steven, the new job is much more interesting and technologically advanced – the new workplace has state-of-the-art electronics and energy-saving equipment, which requires him to learn how it is built and should be serviced.

Steven's employment experience can be considered as fluctuating within a range of several occupational categories. Although the recent transition from branch manager to line electrician should be considered a downgrade, Steven himself believes this to be growth, thus echoing the observation of Chan and Goldthorpe (2004, p. 389) about the occupational rank-ordering of individuals in society based on the presence of 'manuality' at work. According to this approach, occupations that include work involving abstraction are more highly valued. Here, Steven assigns a greater value to his occupation when it encompasses working with more the abstract advanced technologies. Although Steven strongly considers himself to be an electrician, upon retirement he would probably return to the art of metalwork, thus demonstrating a long-lasting commitment to his initial – unfortunately, in low demand – occupation.

The above cases, together with the fact that a sense of meaningful work can reduce feelings of occupational downgrading as evident from social scientists' occupation classifications (see e.g., Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992), show that individuals may be concerned to maintain their previous social status, such as their original social networks. Similarly, occupational decline, as established by the main occupation, may be conditional upon the individual retaining their previous occupation as a side job.

## 5.2 Increased labour market security

Jane (female, 60 years, divorced) grew up in the Soviet era in a rural area and, following the advice and example of her parents, completed vocational training as a salesperson. She had worked in sales for over 30 years when due to health problems she felt she could no longer spend long working hours standing up. Jane found a post as babysitter and worked at this for a year, maintaining her informal social network that had been developed earlier. This led to her receiving another job offer from a former colleague who had started developing a small business as a manicurist, and had received an unexpected level of customer interest by selling discount stock. Although she knew the main principles of offering manicures from her own experience, Jane doubted whether she could work as a professional in this area. However, following the insistence and emotional support of her former colleague, Jane passed the training hurdle and overcame initial difficulties starting work. At the time of interview, she had been working as a manicurist for eight years.

Although Jane's mobility can be considered rather horizontal, as a manicurist she feels much more in demand in her occupation than as a salesperson. Her situation has improved significantly in financial terms; thus, she has lived through the experience that the reward from similar occupations is 'not tightly linked to the complexity of [the] occupation's knowledge base' (Weeden, 2002, p. 55). Jane has also developed in social terms as her work has helped to expand and diversify her informal network: 'A manicurist is also a kind of salesperson, but it is completely different. For example, you spend three minutes with a person at the counter, but more than an hour here. So, I say, those girls are no longer clients, they are my friends'.

Among the circumstances that influenced Vanessa's (female, 33 years, married, with a young child, ethnic and language minority background) choice of physics were financial considerations such as the number of state-subsidized places because her family could not pay for her and sister's tertiary studies. Further, starting work at a scientific institute, as Vanessa explains, is natural for students of physics who are completing their baccalaureate, but this work 'dragged in' smoothly, pulling her towards master's and doctoral studies.

Vanessa worked in science for 10 years, evolving from a novice engineer to a researcher. For the last five years, Vanessa has been combining science with work in the IT industry. Vanessa admits that she enjoyed experimenting and participating in international conferences, but at the same time perceived a lack of mentoring from her supervisor, who worked abroad, while additionally she found that her older colleagues' resistance to new ideas was disappointing. Besides this, at a public scientific institute 'the question of money was acute', with wages largely depending on research grants. Faced with career uncertainty and instability like other young scientists around Europe (see, e.g., Ruiz Castro et al., 2020), Vanessa did not feel secure in academia and as she started her family life looked for a job with more stable earnings. With the recommendation of her sister to a potential employer, Vanessa found a job at an IT company as a test engineer and worked in this position for eight years. Her choice to change her occupation was unintentional; it was a circumstances-driven decision – the offer of a suitable job fit the need to change her occupation.

Although the transition from a physics researcher to a test engineer may be seen as downward mobility, both in terms of education and degree of work abstraction (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004), Vanessa believes that the changes in her working life are not very significant. She is proud of her doctoral degree and admits that work in science could generally be considered more prestigious and intellectually demanding. Simultaneously, Vanessa emphasizes that in financial terms, the opportunities are inverted – income from work in IT is incomparably higher than from science. In Vanessa's view, the cognitive skills that are developed in physics make it easy to adapt to other technical industries, so a well-paid IT industry job is a natural choice for many physicists. Demonstrating her ability to adapt to the IT industry, Vanessa admits that 'My sister sent me a book, saying that I would have to take a test based on it. After physics, this book is very easy to read – like a fairy-tale at night'. While working in IT, she also met many of her former workmates, including former colleagues at the research institute, so her social network remained relatively unchanged.

In clarifying her decisions, Vanessa displayed two features. First, she is concerned with work security – a stable income, clear responsibilities, and teamwork with a mentor. Her sense of security in the IT industry is supported by the presence of her sister – both have studied together and also work in the same company. Second, from the beginning, Vanessa demonstrated a high level of commitment to learning, in contrast to the situation with

physics. Emphasizing the IT field's need for continuous professional development, she enjoys training and collecting various forms of certification. Although less important to Vanessa herself, she acknowledges that the IT industry is also characterized by a different organizational culture, where new ideas are encouraged and discussed. Since the birth of her child some years ago, she believes that her connection with science has been severed and she now belongs to the IT industry, where she plans to develop further.

### 5.3 Other layers of subjective well-being and the acceptance of downgrading

There is also a third group of reasons that alleviate the feeling of downward mobility or facilitate its acceptance that are not directly related to work content or security. This contribution is made by the internal locus of control (Becker & Birkelbach, 2018), which involves a deliberate decision to move to a lower-skilled job due to other overarching life goals or benefits and applying it as a survival strategy in times of particularly unfavourable conditions.

Since the late 1990s, Mischa (male, 58 years, second marriage, ethnic and language minority background), who completed vocational training irrelevant in a market economy, worked in broadcasting, evolving from being a journalist to holding a director's position. Through his working life he also had various side jobs, demonstrating a trend to having multiple jobs that is typical of inhabitants of East European societies (Bari & Róbert, 2016). After more than 20 years of service, due to his different vision of management to that of the company owners, Mischa felt forced to leave his job at the age of 55 years old, having no options for the future. Mischa believed that finding a job at his age could be more difficult due to his previously rich work experience and weak knowledge of the Latvian (national) and English language, so he looked at a variety of jobs, including one as a logistics specialist, identified through his social ties. Mischa felt familiar with the industry as he had worked in this area for a couple of years in the early 1990s (leaving this work due to a highly unpredictable business environment). Realizing that other potential jobs might be even lower-skilled, he says he is satisfied. Moreover, feeling successful in a new job, he explained: 'I am a universalist, I can succeed in any field of employment that is interesting to me. Although with age the ambitions become less. At the age of 58, I can no longer start from scratch'.

Through his story of seeking a new job and strengthening his position in logistics, Mischa demonstrates a variety of adaptation strategies for achieving his goals. First, he has a certain approach to dealing with his lack of English-language skills – he works with international partners such as those looking for a Russian-speaking people for companies or uses *Google translate* to manage conversations. Second, when seeking a job, Mischa prepared several versions of his CV tailored to each particular industry, and downplayed his experience, excluding information which might cause employers to reject him as over-qualified. Third, Mischa still examines various job offers and evaluates additional job opportunities, especially due to the decrease in demand for transportation due to COVID-19. He receives these job offers from his diverse social network, although, fourth, he appears to be avoiding some of his former colleagues, limiting the circle of persons who know of his current employment status and position.

Accepting his current position, Mischa believes that working life consists of several cycles that offer certain lessons. He admits that he lost his first family due to his high workload in the mid-2000s, so Mischa is satisfied that now he is able not to think of work all day

long. Having passed through an adaptation period in the field of logistics, he evaluates his income level as similar to when he worked in broadcasting, emphasizing that the period when he earned the most was in the 1990s. Summarizing Mischa's position, it corresponds to the 'getting by' strategy (Brown, 2016), as no intention to advance in the future was detected in his narration.

Although the last case is somewhat similar, Tony (male, 45 years, married) has chosen a different approach, finding himself stuck with the solution that was chosen. Before changes to the ownership structure of his employer, for more than ten years Tony served as a logistics manager at a large-sized enterprise. Due to his loyalty to the previous owners, Tony did not find it possible to cooperate with the new ones, but had no ideas about the future. He decided to become a truck driver, assigning to this work the need for a sense of business intelligence:

Logistics in general was interesting, so I decided to stick to it as well. [...] However, I did not start my own business, because I realized that I lack experience to some extent. So, I decided to look at how it was done elsewhere in the world. But the problem is that you can't get into any factories because people are protecting their production and warehousing. Then there was the idea of working a bit as a truck-driver across Europe. So, I got the driving licence quite quickly and got inside all the factories from the 'backyard'.

For the next seven years, Tony's working life was about transportation – he evolved rapidly from a regular driver to a driver instructor, and then a driver base manager with a large number of subordinates. While working, he spent most of his time abroad, then, under pressure from his family, tried to find a job in Latvia. Failing in this, Tony returned to regular truck-driving. Summarising, he refers to this period as 'temporary work'.

Although Tony admits that he has experienced some downturns, both in terms of qualifications and financially, he describes his emotional state the following way: 'I don't feel frustrated comparing myself to where I could be and what I could do', and 'I am not particularly oriented towards the past'. However, listening to Tony's story, some sense of 'falling-from-grace' (Newman, 1999) persisted in the emotional dynamics he imparted to each stage of his employment. Working as a logistics manager prior to driving he described as dynamic and interesting:

It was such a cool adventure all those years. We worked at a pretty big avant-garde company because we could really make money. There was also an opportunity to get familiar with modern technologies and to explore everything. There was also a kind of development in corporate terms, we were bought and merged [...], then we were bought again [...] and merged with others.

Working as a logistics manager also coincides with Tony's achievements in other areas of life – he graduated from university, purchased a family house in a prestigious district, had savings, and said of himself that 'I was a satisfied tomcat who goes and takes what he needs'. The story about truck-driving had a different tone, involving the acceptance needed to maintain a sense of well-being (Almevall et al., 2021). In this respect, Tony tried to find self-motivating moments in his daily work routine, saying 'Scandinavia is interesting purely in terms of technical driving skills' and 'I have always been interested in socio-anthropological portraits a bit; I like to look at people using archetypes'. However, some alienation from the original social environment can be sensed in Tony's conclusion that he no longer finds it possible to return to work in the Latvian labour market:

If we put together an offer from [a local employer] at 2000 EUR per month, where you really have to sit at the computer and swear at other men, or you can drive around beautiful France and enjoy a good time, good relationships, where you don't have anything to worry about, and you earn twice as much, then the choice is quite clear.

Tony is convinced that he will definitely change his occupation again. He has a dream of moving to live abroad, thus demonstrating a desire to move away from the Latvian environment and former social networks. However, implementing the idea is hindered by his spouse, who is not ready to move and lose some of the usual comforts of life and social ties:

I am going to change now, but there is a question about the family, how to organize it properly. The wife, on the other hand, is not ready to start living elsewhere. She is very well settled down. She has both a house and a car, she has a garden and neighbours, everything is really cool. But in the middle of the city of Bordeaux there is a vineyard, everything smells there, in the morning croissants, in the evenings there are such eateries [...] There is a wonderful atmosphere. People speak an incomprehensible language, but you can learn it.

Tony demonstrates that he has thought about what to do next. He is aware that the 'entry level in any case does not allow him to seek a very high salary, but it allows access to local social networks'. Tony has been aware of the importance of social networking since adolescence, and he demonstrates the presence of communication and networking skills throughout his narration about his own working life. He is convinced that 'as long as you do not compete directly with them [natives] for pay, it is very easy to get into the social environment'. Although this last statement by Tony somehow conforms to the 'getting on' strategy observed by Brown (2016), Tony's case can more precisely be defined as a 'getting away' approach, presuming some horizontal and even spatial movement.

## 6 Discussion and conclusions

As the probability of downward mobility in Latvia is greater than for the upward type (Bukodi & Róbert, 2007; Pohlig, 2020), it is important to track the impact of these processes on individuals' social and psychological state. Since downward mobility is somehow neglected in academic debate (De Bellaigue et al., 2019), especially in terms of comprehension of what individual strategies promote the giving of positive meaning to lived experience, this study offers insights that expand this knowledge by examining both downward and horizontal mobility cases.

The novelty of the study stems from the investigation of both less examined – downward – mobility patterns and a society that has a certain pre-developed readiness for change (Aareleid-Tart & Bennich-Björkman, 2011). The selected cases offer insight into the complexity of these experiences and perceptions of the consequences of mobility. The first lesson of this study is the relativity of downward mobility, which simultaneously involves both loss in one important area of an individual's life and gain in another, thus strongly demonstrating the multi-dimensionality of the consequences. The examples discussed here show that positive meaning is obtained through the meaningfulness of work, including contributing to the 'greater good' (Duchon & Ashmos Plowman, 2005; Steger et al., 2012) and the application of advanced technologies, stronger labour market protection, and an acceptance of moving

downward (Almevall et al., 2021) adhering to one's own values or goals. Importantly, a move between occupations of the same complexity can even be subjectively perceived as an upward move if any aspects of an individual's employment improve.

Although there are no quantitative data about gender as a determinant, in this study, downgrading for meaningful work was specific to women. However, the interviewees are applying a 'getting on' (Brown, 2016) strategy, seeking growth financially and at least partly professionally in the destination occupation. Although this involved a period of completely leaving the original occupation, taking up another, and growing in the new area, previous work can be maintained as a side job. In addition to financial benefits, this helps sustain, at least partly, the original social ties needed to ensure individual well-being. Interestingly, in certain occupational groups, the desire to take special care to maintain social ties appears differently – for example, downgrading from science to a more applied IT industry job did not involve significant change in this respect. However, horizontal mobility to an occupation that presumes the need for 'people processing' (see Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004) can expand the original network and make it more diverse.

Conversely, downgrading due to personal values or more ambitious goals, in this study, is largely common to men. In both cases disclosed in this article the interviewees had achieved high occupational status, so the reasoning for accepting their downgrading and maintaining their subjective well-being was particularly important. Here, the key point is sustaining an internal locus of control (Becker & Birkelbach, 2018) over the process and the choice, and awareness of greater goals and future perspectives. Part of this process involves making a clear distinction between the different stages of working life, assuming that they also bring certain lessons. As the original occupations of the interviewees could be considered meaningful, attitudes to the destination occupation regarding further perspectives may vary. Both the 'getting by' strategy described by Brown (2016) and the modified 'getting on' approach could be observed. As to the last of these, since a strong component appears to be further movement onward (horizontally and spatially) the movement could be classified as a 'getting away' approach. In the absence of belief in further advancement in the destination occupation, a desire to keep some distance from part of former social networks was observed (a similar pattern for the upwardly mobile was observed by Bereményi & Durst, 2021) that might possibly link individuals to a period of life that has already passed. Focusing on the current stage of life is essential for maintaining a sense of well-being in these narratives.

As quantitative research is at the forefront of social and occupational mobility studies, an important issue is further translating these qualitative findings into meaningful analytical categories. Some, such as technological advancement and people-processing at work, are easily identifiable. Others that cover types of losses and gains may be time-consuming in terms of developing and testing reliable measurement scales. Another issue that arises from the discussion and empirical data presented here is the nature of the approach that is applied to detect the fact of occupational mobility. A multidimensional approach which can be used to detect the directions of change involved in occupational mobility challenges the measurement scales used so far in social (quantitative) research. The final issue is hypothesizing the impact of common societal experiences such as socioeconomic transformations on the subjective perceptions of various processes at the individual level. It would be worth examining whether a working population that has experienced more downward mobility in their life course is also characterized by higher resilience and a more stable sense of subjective well-being.

The limitations of this study stem from the number of cases that are dealt with and the region covered. Cases selected for this article complement each other, gradually demonstrating various benefits of the mobility experience. Within the collection of narratives are relatively many examples of horizontal mobility that included a downturn in the early stages of transition due to loss of human capital (Kambourov & Manovskii, 2009). Together with cases of downward mobility, most of them were justified by the search for meaningful work. Less common were cases involving the search for more labour market security or other reasons. The composition of the study does not allow conclusions to be made about the prevalence of such reasons within the wider population. To date, no measurements have been implemented to determine to what extent such findings are specific only to the Central and Eastern Europe or Latvia as a country within the latter region. The properties of the Latvian labour market, such as the high likelihood of downward mobility (Bukodi & Róbert, 2007; Pohlig, 2020) and frequently changing demand for occupations (Šumilo et al., 2007), may make the results of this study strongly idiosyncratic.

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