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The price of the ticket revised: Family members' experiences of upward social mobility

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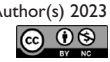

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a revived sociological interest in assessing the lived experience of upward social mobility. Several qualitative accounts have highlighted the negative emotional imprints of upward mobility, whereas quantitative researchers have suggested that the picture is far more optimistic. However, both strands of literature rely too narrowly on the perspectives of the upwardly mobile individuals themselves. Against this empirical strategy, which is expressed in recent works on upward social mobility, this article turns attention on the family members of those who experienced upward mobility. Drawing on biographical interviews with upwardly mobile individuals and their family members, the article explores, firstly, the participants' diverging experiences and assessments of upward mobility, and secondly, how the process affects not only the emotional life of the upwardly mobile individuals themselves, but also of those who are commonly seen as having been 'left behind'. In doing so, the article shows that including the voices of family members can refocus social mobility research on the wider psycho-social costs and consequences of what are often portrayed as stories of individual 'success'.

Keywords

family members, meritocracy, social class, social mobility, symbolic power

Introduction

In recent years, there have been revived sociological debates on how to assess the consequences and lived experience of upward social mobility. Against today's political climate of celebratory 'social mobility talk' (for a critique, see Ingram & Gamsu, 2022; Littler, 2018; Payne, 2017), a growing body of qualitative research has understood the trajectories of social mobility as ambivalent, complex and often bumpy experiences, rather than being smooth and straightforwardly beneficial (Cole & Omari, 2003; Curl et al., 2018; Fercovic, 2022; Ingram, 2011; Lawler, 1999; Mallman, 2017a; Morton, 2019; Walkerdine,

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2003). In particular, authors such as Reay (2013, 2018) and Friedman (2014, 2016) have focused on 'the price of the ticket' and called for a 're-examination of the mobility experience'. In contrast, several researchers in the quantitative tradition have empirically questioned these qualitative perspectives. Building upon large-scale panel data, Chan (2018), Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019) and Gugushvili et al. (2019) have argued for a far more optimistic assessment of the effects of upward mobility and the well-being of individuals.

However, this article is not intended to fuel this age-old division between the value of survey data and biographical accounts of upward mobility, between the 'acculturation' hypothesis and the Durkheimian paradigm of 'dissociation'. Rather, my aim here is to move beyond these dichotomies and shift attention *away* from an empirical focus on upwardly mobile individuals. In fact, despite a number of critical analyses of the relational implications of upward social mobility (Lawler, 1999; Reay, 2018; Walkerdine, 2003), it is surprising that both quantitative and qualitative accounts of social mobility tend to empirically centre rather narrowly on the experiences of the upwardly mobile individuals themselves (Curl et al., 2018, p. 895; Morton, 2019). Thus, although upward social mobility affects and is affected by numerous actors, from parents, to siblings, to friends in the old community, who occupy various different class positions, we still know little about how these individuals make sense of a friend or family member moving up the class structure.

Against this backdrop, this article turns its attention to the family members of upwardly mobile individuals – and examines how family members perceive what are often portrayed as stories of individual 'success'. By including their voices in the research design, I argue that this approach can help shed new light on the debate of the lived experience of upward social mobility – and provide a promising avenue for assessing the wider consequences and benefits of the process of social mobility. In particular, I analyse how mobility affects not only the emotional life of the upwardly mobile individuals themselves, but also that of their close relatives who remain at the bottom of the class structure. As upward social mobility can constitute distinctive symbolic baggage for those who are not themselves moving upward, 'the price of the ticket' appears in a new light.

I begin this article by offering a critical exposition of the recent upward social mobility literature and proceed to introduce readers to my empirical approach. In subsequent sections, I illustrate through my empirical data that including the voices of family members can contribute, firstly, to our understanding of how upward social mobility can serve as a wider, more 'collective' triumph, and secondly, to our analysis of its emotional effect. Finally, I draw out the broad academic implications of this work and call for a social mobility research agenda that both goes beyond studying only experiences of upwardly mobile individuals themselves – and engages in emancipatory reimaginations of the process.

Upward social mobility research and its empirical focus

The question of how to evaluate the upward social mobility experience has been a recurring debate in sociological research (Goldthorpe, 1980; Hopper, 1981; Sorokin, 1959). In

recent years, a burgeoning number of studies using a qualitative methodology have revived this discussion. Often building upon Sorokin's (1959) 'dissociative thesis', the classic work by Sennett and Cobb (1972) or Bourdieu's (2008) notion of a 'cleft habitus', recent studies have paid attention to the emotional consequences of upward (educational) mobility (Friedman, 2014, 2016; Reay, 2013, 2018). In doing so, they offer an empirically sensitive and politically committed analysis of social-space travel and its gendered and racialised dimensions (Cole & Omari, 2003; Curl et al., 2018; Friedman, 2022; Ingram, 2011; Lawler, 1999; Mallman, 2017a; Morton, 2019; Walkerdine, 2003). Moreover, a growing body of research beyond the context of the UK and USA has shed light on how these experiences and meaning-making processes play out in different international settings (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2023; Born, 2023; Burns et al., 2023; Fercovic, 2022; Jin & Ball, 2020; Naudet, 2018; Schneider et al., 2022; Shahrokni, 2018; Sohl, 2018).

But while the qualitative literature on upward mobility has contributed significantly to contemporary theoretical debates on intersectionality, habitus and the affective experiences of inequality, it did not take long for critical voices to be raised against it. Building upon large-scale panel data, Chan (2018, p. 198), for instance, has questioned the view that 'social mobility comes at a high price to the individuals who experience it'. As he emphasises, 'there is simply no support [for this] in the data' (p. 200; see also Dhoore et al., 2019). In a similar vein, Gugushvili et al. (2019, p. 302) have found lower levels of depressive symptoms among upwardly mobile individuals, arguing that 'it is puzzling that the "dissociative thesis" . . . is still quite popular, especially in qualitative sociology'. Moreover, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019, p. 33) have described 'claims of the negative effects of upward mobility' as 'not well grounded at all', indicating that the 'reliability and representativeness' of these qualitative studies 'have to be regarded as highly questionable'.

While there are good reasons to challenge this empirical dichotomy between survey data and biographical accounts,[1] my aim here is to problematise the empirical focus of *both* strands of literature. Although they use different methods of data collection and often differ in their results, both qualitative and quantitative accounts tend to build on rather selective perspectives and experiences when examining the 'price of the ticket': those of upwardly mobile individuals. While some authors do analyse the relational consequences of upward mobility and consider the family and community in their discussion (Lawler, 1999; Reay, 2018; Walkerdine, 2003), the literature relies almost exclusively on the accounts of those who have been predefined as upwardly mobile (e.g. Curl et al., 2018; Dhoore et al., 2019; Friedman, 2014, 2016; Gugushvili et al., 2019; Mallman, 2017a; Morton, 2019; Schneider et al., 2022). These 'successful' individuals form the starting point of the enquiry and – in many studies – are the fundamental unit of analysis when assessing the experience of upward mobility. And while it is, of course, important to understand how this specific group of people navigates through social space, the literature not only risks reducing the evaluation of upward social mobility to the well-being and personal satisfaction of the upwardly mobile individuals, but, crucially, ignores the voices and experiences of those who accompany the process of upward mobility.

This general reluctance to consider the lived experiences of other individuals in the context of upwardly mobile people is particularly surprising, given the fact that many

narratives of climbing themselves suggest that the whole process of upward mobility affects and is affected by numerous actors with fundamentally different positions in the class structure. In fact, changes in the relationship between socially mobile offspring and their family members have been a recurring theme in several academic, autobiographic and fictional works. For instance, focusing on strivers in Australia, Mallman (2017b, p. 19) stresses that 'family relationships perhaps suffer the most under these class-mobility dynamics'. Diane Reay (2013, p. 673) states: 'While I wanted to do well academically I did not want to leave my family behind.' And French sociologist Didier Eribon (2013) expresses regret in several places in his celebrated transclass autobiography, *Returning to Reims*, that he did not manage to talk to his father. As he puts it:

> [H]ow did he see our own relationship as it became more and more difficult, more and more distant, and finally non-existent? . . . It's too late to spend time lamenting this. But there are plenty of questions I would now like to ask him, if only because it would help me write this book. (Eribon, 2013, pp. 34–35)[2]

Indeed, when upwardly mobile individuals express their feelings of betrayal and guilt towards their old community or report how they struggle to maintain ties with friends and family members at 'home' (e.g. Curl et al., 2018; Friedman, 2014; Lee & Kramer, 2013), it is hard not to wonder about the implications for those commonly referred as 'the left behind': How do they make sense of a friend, sister or daughter moving up the 'social ladder'? What do they sacrifice, how do they benefit from the 'ticket' and, more broadly, how does this relate to their own biography and ontological security? As the American philosopher Jennifer Morton (2019, p. 161) concludes on the very last page of her book on the ethical costs of upward mobility: 'Yet the more I discover about the experiences of strivers, the more questions I am left with – not about the strivers, but about their parents, friends, and communities.'

Even at best, when critical authors such as Shahrokni (2018), Mallman (2017b) or Reay (2018) construct alternative, collective understandings of social mobility, the lack of attention to other people's voices quickly result in a sharp discrepancy between their empirical analysis and the (upwardly mobile-centred) methodological approach they use. Shahrokni (2018), for instance, refers to the 'family-based strategies of social mobility' (p. 1178), and goes on to argue that upward mobility contributes 'to fulfilling the former generation's wants, symbolically repairing some of the hardships and injustices [experienced by family members]' (p. 1189). Ironically though, we learn of these 'collective roots and rewards' (p. 1175) only through the voices of the upwardly mobile individuals themselves – whose mothers', fathers', grandparents' or community members' voices remain utterly unheard.

Moreover, despite making frequent references to the work, contemporary social mobility literature tends to offer a rather limited reading of Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's (1972) classic *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. What distinguishes Sennett and Cobb's compelling account is that it paradoxically points to a very much broader understanding of the consequence of upward mobility in a class society than simply noting that the strivers 'feel terribly ambivalent about their success' (p. 37). Take, for instance, the narrative of Bertin, a father of five children who works six days a week and two days a

night; a man Sennett and Cobb introduce to the reader as someone who 'feels that his experience . . . has in itself no power to gain his children's respect' (p. 122). By 'sacrificing' himself, the authors hold, Bertin's only power is 'to give his wife and children the material means to move *away* from him' (p. 122, my emphasis), 'that they become *unlike* him' (p. 128, my emphasis). Even more pessimistically, Sennett and Cobb go on to argue that 'if the father's sacrifices do succeed in transforming his children's lives, he then becomes a burden to them, an embarrassment' (p. 133) – and illustrate this claim with the narrative of a father fearing that his boys in college will now have power over him ('because you got an education under you, you gonna push me around'; p. 133). But while it might be perfectly possible to understand these fathers' sentiments of inferiority precisely as the price of the ticket, it is remarkable that these perspectives remain widely unexplored in today's social mobility literature.[3]

Outline of the research

Against this tendency in the literature, my approach here seeks to avoid prioritising the experiences of the upwardly mobile individuals themselves or study them as isolated actors. Rather, my aim is to examine the lived experience of upward social mobility from the perspective of their family members – and shed light what social mobility research can learn when we supplement or even replace the conventional focus on the viewpoint of a single 'successful' individual. As Curl et al. (2018, p. 895) conclude in their study of the cross-class interactions of upwardly mobile individuals: 'Research including the direct perspectives of family members and friends whose loved ones have experienced upward mobility is also needed.'[4]

This article builds upon fieldwork with 44 upwardly mobile individuals from various stigmatised neighbourhoods in Germany (Born, 2023), several family members and long-term residents in a marginalised urban area.[5] This research was conducted between 2020 and 2022 in the context of a larger research project on the intersections of urban marginality and social mobility in Germany. In particular, the data presented here come from around 34 hours of interview data collected with eight family members interviewed and their upwardly mobile relatives.[6] All names used in the article are pseudonyms and anonymity has been maintained for all respondents.[7]

In line with conventional understandings of the process, upward mobility was defined in terms of the interviewees' status of origin (parents' occupational status as unskilled and semi-skilled workers or skilled craftspersons and employees who complete simple tasks and with no higher education entrance qualification) and their status of destination (interviewee's occupational status as highly qualified employees or professionals and executive employees; university graduates). The upwardly mobile participants were recruited via alumni networks of scholarship programmes and foundations and, because of the research's initial focus on urban marginality, with the help of community centres, schools and charitable organisations in two of the urban neighbourhoods of origin. The one- to four-hour long interviews with the upwardly mobile individuals were conducted in German and in various settings; namely, face-to-face (in homes, parks, cafes and workplaces) or, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, via Zoom. All interviews began with a single, narrative-inducing question ('tell me your life story'), encouraging respondents

to speak extensively and freely. This open-ended phase was followed by a semi-structured part focusing on their neighbourhood of origin, specific aspects of their trajectory and their perceptions of inequality.

After the interviews, I asked several socially mobile individuals if they would help to organise a biographical interview with a family member in their original neighbourhood. Although I was able to generate a number of contacts through this strategy, my recruitment approach was clearly accompanied by serious limitations. In particular, one can assume that socially mobile individuals who had a rather bad relationship or no relationship at all with their relatives were unlikely to give me their family members' contact details. Furthermore, my initial focus on spatial processes and marginalised urban neighbourhoods made the social situation far more comfortable, but it led to the exclusion of possible movers among the family members.

My sample included four mothers, two fathers and two siblings. Apart from one sibling (who was also upwardly mobile), the participants had a considerably lower class position than the upwardly mobile individuals I interviewed. The parents overwhelmingly worked (or had worked) in routine service positions. All interviews with family members were conducted in (or near) their homes, and in one case, via phone. These conversations featured a semi-structured part about the neighbourhood, followed by an open biographical part, including a shorter section about their family members. Throughout the interview, I was careful to make the interview feel informal and more like a normal conversation: I not only asked questions, but expressed my feelings, commented when appropriate and went 'off topic'. The aim was not to ask for specific details but to create an open conversation in which the family members could talk extensively and were given as much space as possible. During the interviews I did not mention any specific information from the interview I had already conducted with the upwardly mobile participant. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Diverging perceptions of upward mobility

Examining the perspectives of family members of upwardly mobile individuals can help shed new light on several contemporary issues in social mobility studies. One of these is the question of whether and how individual class mobility can be seen as a 'triumph' for more than just the upwardly mobile individuals themselves. Despite its competitive and individualistic ethos (Littler, 2018; Sandel, 2020), a growing body of empirical work with upwardly mobile respondents indicates that individual social mobility can be associated with 'collective roots and benefits' (Shahrokni, 2018, p. 1175) and understood as an 'intergenerational family project' (Fercovic, 2022, p. 125; see also Rondini, 2016). But how do family members, and in particular parents, perceive the fact that their offspring has moved 'up' and 'out'? Do they understand it as their 'success' as well and do they share the 'familialist concept of success' (Shahrokni, 2018, p. 1175) that is often articulated by the upwardly mobile individuals themselves?

Before referring to the experiences of the family members and to situate their perceptions, I want to quickly sketch that a 'collective framing of effort' (Fercovic, 2022, p. 125) was also evident in many of my conversations with upwardly mobile individuals. Indeed, several interviewees emphasised the collective dimensions of their trajectories

and the vital role played by their family members, friends and benefactors. The following statement by Mareike was typical:

> I wouldn't dismiss it as a typical rags to riches story [*Tellerwäscher-Geschichte*], as a personal thing. Many more people were involved. As I said earlier, if you think of Ms Hanke [a former teacher], my university friend Sara, my mother, lots and lots of people; this is something we did together.

The importance of family support was evident among respondents whose parents had immigrated to Germany. Dario, for instance, went further, noting that his whole journey was a 'family thing' and would have been 'impossible without my parents'. He told me that they had always put 'everything' into his education and were willing to give something up themselves so they could support him. While he illustrated this with several vivid examples during the interview, the importance of his family was probably most strikingly shown when he explained how they paid for him to have private tutoring:

> We really had very little money back then. [. . .] But when I had problems at school, not in all subjects, of course, they said, 'We'll take a little money from somewhere, take what little we have saved and pay for tutoring, send you there once a week for three hours or so' – 'so you don't get kicked out of high school'.

At the interview he said he therefore hoped that he would soon be able to 'pay them back'. Significantly, when I asked him at the end of the interview what goals he had in his life, he talked almost exclusively about his parents. Echoing the 'sense of moral duty' that Shahrokni (2018, p. 1178) also found among her sample of upwardly mobile ethnic and racial minority students (see also Schneider et al., 2022), Dario stressed: 'A house for them back home would be nice.'

However, when we include the interviews with the family members, a more complex picture emerges. In general, these interviewees assessed the process of upward mobility in overwhelmingly positive terms and expressed their satisfaction and happiness by frequently pointing out that they were 'really proud'. Take, for instance, Dario's father, who said: 'Clearly, he is very successful. And I am, we are very happy about that. This success. That is unique. I am very proud of him; there is no other way to put it.' Mareike's mother explained that she is 'sometimes sorry that she [Mareike] is not living close by' but emphasised that 'all of this makes you feel, yes, I'm very proud of her career'. Similarly, Ulrich, Martin's father, celebrated his son's trajectory as something he liked to 'rave about for hours'. In fact, telling me about their 'successful' sons and daughters functioned for many parents as a liberating moment in the interviews. They often turned to a far more positive language when referring to their own children and they seemed much more comfortable talking about them than about their own biography.

And yet, among all interviewees, Damla's mother appeared to be the only parent in my fieldwork who spoke of the connection between her own actions and the upward mobility of her children. As she stressed, it had always been her aim that her children should be better off than she had been in her first years in Germany:

> I've paid attention, always made sure they're not out with the wrong type, hanging around outside. There were quite a few here [in our neighbourhood]. I always said, 'watch out who you're out there with'. If you don't pay attention to that, it sucks away your future. [. . .] And then school was always the most important thing, school was always first, then the rest, that was always very important to us. [. . .] Always paid attention to that! I have always said, 'Only when the homework is done, we can talk about this or that.' Because I knew myself that without a German school, without a German school certificate, there are stones everywhere!

Here, the second point in Damla's mother's account – the importance of 'German' schooling – was strongly reminiscent of the narratives found by Lena Sohl (2018) in her study of class mobility in Sweden. While Sohl (2018) also focused on upwardly mobile individuals themselves, most of her interviewees also stressed that their parents had encouraged their children to study at school and university – aiming not only to leave behind the working-class status, but also to counter their experiences of racism and racialisation.

But while Damla's mother seemed convinced that her efforts to ensure that her children did well in school had paid off, most interviewed family members conceptualised upward social mobility in rather different terms. In sharp contrast to the upwardly mobile individuals themselves, the whole process was understood as an individual endeavour, as something that was outside their control. Compare, for instance, the following passage from Mareike's mother with her daughter's account quoted above:

Mareike's mother:	Yes, this is a good question, how do I explain this? [. . .] She is a very strong and determined person – when she sets her mind to something, it works out, she does it, it becomes something. Clearly, she always gets her own way, yeah, she wins against everyone, so, very smart, she knows all these things.
Interviewer:	What role do you play in all this?
Mareike's mother:	Me? To be honest, she now has to explain to me how this works [points to her mobile phone and laughs].

I asked Dario's parents straight out:

Interviewer:	But wouldn't you say that you yourself put work, some work into it so that it all worked out so well for him?
Dario's father:	My son, you know, he's a real fighter, he did it all, all on his own, he always had that energy, energy and resolve together, if you understand what I mean. Both together. We haven't done much for him. It was his energy and calmness.
Dario's mother:	He is a fighter! Always has been!

Despite my somewhat pushy question, like Mareike's mother and other family members that I interviewed, Dario's parents were surprisingly silent about their own efforts and the energy and trade-offs that they had made during the process of their son's upward mobility. Whereas Dario gave a whole series of examples of how his parents had supported him during his move up the 'social ladder', neither of his parents seemed to rate their own contribution as being particularly helpful or influential. This was the same in

the narrative of Martin's father, who said, back then 'we did not do anything special [. . .] if he needed something, we were there, yes', before saying that he believed that 'Martin was clearly the architect of his own good luck'.

To some extent, the social situation of the interview and a certain modesty on the part of the participants may explain the strong contrast between what the upwardly mobile informants said and what their family members said. Yet it was also clear that the family's conceptualisation of upward social mobility was linked to the prevailing commonsense understanding of the process as a strongly individual project. By internalising the individualised narrative that 'you have to swim yourself', which is dominant in public and political discourses in Germany (Atalay, 2021), one could argue that the parents also misrecognised and minimised their own roles and sacrifices within the process of their offspring's upward mobility. As a consequence, there was little evidence that the parents in my study understand their child's upward mobility as a proxy for their own efforts and hard work (Rondini, 2016). Nor did they understand it as a 'family project of restoration' (Reay, 2018, p. 156) or a collective success (Shahrokni, 2018). To put it bluntly, most parents I interviewed simply did not claim any responsibility for facilitating this success. Rather, the parents echoed the hegemonic discourse and saw the whole process predominantly as an individual 'triumph' – not theirs, but that of their offspring as individual, independent and self-sufficient subjects. This finding was particularly remarkable given the fact that I included only parents who still had regular (and, in many cases, good) contact with their children.

Of course, this is not to say that the informant's social mobility did not gratify family members to some extent. It is perfectly possible to associate their broad feelings of pride and happiness with positive consequences for them in their own subjective well-being. Moreover, having someone in the family – preferably one's own child – as one who had 'made it' was seen as a social fact that people would recognise and valorise. While family members were reluctant to discuss whether and how they had benefited from their higher social status in terms of economic, social or cultural resources, the process of upward social mobility did come with symbolic gains. For instance, family members were able to distinguish themselves from other people with a working-class status, thus providing support for Shahrokni's (2018) observations on the wide-ranging symbolic benefits of this elevated status. As Dario's father told me: 'You don't find these [families with an upwardly mobile son] here [in the high-rise neighbourhood] very often, I can say.'

More broadly, however, the family members' own conceptualisation of upward social mobility as an individual endeavour underlines the process's limited capacity to 'empower' or 'emancipate' more than the few lucky individuals themselves. Perhaps unsurprisingly in light of today's political discourses (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022), what emerged most clearly from the family members' narratives was that they themselves reproduced the contemporary image that upward social mobility was the result of individual merit and success, not a triumph for the whole family. In light of this, how can scholars point to the 'collective benefits' of individual upward social mobility? This optimistic conclusion is not only at odds with the broader implications of today's social mobility agenda and its underlying meritocratic ethos (Brown & James, 2020; Littler,

2018; Sandel, 2020), but, as my data indicate, also empirically at odds with the perceptions of family members who have not experienced class mobility.

Emotional imprints

Shifting the emphasis away from the upwardly mobile individuals themselves can also refocus the discussion on the psycho-social costs of upward social mobility. If we study other actors involved in the process (rather than the striving individuals), then new forms of emotional costs come into focus. Even when upwardly mobile individuals move up the 'social ladder' without pain, we can still speak of its negative consequences on other groups that are emotionally affected. Although the price of the ticket may not paid by the upwardly mobile individuals themselves, it may be payable by family members, communities or other subjects. That there is no evidence for the dissociative thesis does not necessarily mean that there are no emotional costs to upward mobility when we include more actors in our analysis than just the upwardly mobile people themselves.

Although in many family members social mobility was accompanied by positive feelings towards their relatives, my empirical data show that this did not erase their sentiments about their own social position in relation to the upwardly mobile individual. As the family members' class position generally remained at the lower end of the social space while their sons, daughters or siblings were moving up, many family members endured sentiments of inferiority, humility and shame about their own position and their value within the dominant symbolic structure. The process of social mobility reinforced their sense that they were socially devalued and their self-blame for their social position: thus pointing to the 'violence which [was] exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). But these feelings did not become a shared, homogeneous experience that was always experienced by these families. Instead, the interview data show that these adverse side-effects, the symbolic violence that accompanied upward social mobility, were manifested in various ways and at specific certain moments, at some times more strikingly than at others, but they were largely hidden.

Perhaps, this was illuminated most vividly when I met Mehmet, Burkan's younger brother. Right after I turned on the voice recorder, he said: 'Burkan has certainly already told you everything you want to know. [. . .] He can talk about these things much better than me, anyway.' After I insisted that I wanted to talk to someone who has lived in the area and that Burkan couldn't help because he had moved out of the neighbourhood, Mehmet was still not convinced that it was worth talking to him:

> Unlike Burkan, I've never done anything like this before, like something for research. My life here is, I don't know if what I'm telling you is of any interest at all. So his [Burkan's] life is certainly a bit more exciting. I mean, that all is not a problem – but just let me know if you feel, during our conversation, 'Oh, it doesn't make any sense talking to [me]', and if I can't help in your project, let me know.

In the following two-and-a-half hours of conversation with him, Mehmet continued to give a defensive account of his 'average, normal life'. In contrast to his brother, Mehmet

did not go to university and his current (part-time) job attracts a mediocre wage. And, significantly, after summarising with candour his career and all its, as he put it, 'unsteadiness' and 'breaks', he told me:

> Now, you know! Very different to Burkan. Very different! Compared to that, of course, what I tell you about what I do is a bit of crap, not so much of, yes. Well, I can't compete with that, I guess, I just don't do it that way – it's just not for me. I, I have to say that.

What was striking about talking to Mehmet then was his profoundly preoccupied presentation of his life story compared with that of his brother. In this light, he saw himself as a disappointing brother. As he put it in a follow-up meeting: 'I am the bad guy in my family'.

At this point, some might be tempted to understand Mehmet's testimony as a vivid example of what Michael Sandel (2020) has called the 'losers' of meritocracy. But simply describing Mehmet as a 'loser' would not only reproduce the dominant symbolic economy that Sandel actually intends to critique, but also to reduce Mehmet's rich account to a plain and bleak categorisation. In fact, Mehmet's narrative is also full of both implicit and explicit moments of joy, helpfulness, solidarity and humour. However, it is hard to deny that the fact that someone in his immediate environment from the same background, the same family and the same neighbourhood had 'made it' left Mehmet with a sense of lacking value and eroded self-esteem. Thus, it was not only in the context of a society where meritocratic narratives and educational success are highly valorised, but also in the context of a family with his upwardly mobile brother that Mehmet made sense of his own life, his merits and what he saw as his own deficiencies. His experience of the process of social mobility strengthened this painful concern: the 'demoralizing thought that [his] failure is [his] own doing, that [he] simply lack[s] the talent and drive to succeed' (Sandel, 2020, p. 26). Expressed in an exaggerated way, he found himself in the situation where, to use the words of Michael Young (1958, p. 108), 'the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self-regard'.

Clearly, one reason why the relationship between Mehmet and Burkan was particular telling is that competition and comparisons are common among siblings, especially if they are close in age. However, a close reading of my interviews with other family members in my sample suggests that Mehmet's feeling was not an exception. For instance, a lingering pathologised feeling of inferiority was noticeable when Damla's mother had difficulties describing the current position of her (second, not interviewed, but likewise upwardly mobile) daughter:

Interviewer:	What does she [your other daughter] do?
Damla's mother:	Yes, she also went . . . [to university], studied [. . .] Now, yes, now she works for a company, medicine. But what exactly I can't say, what exactly she does there, yes, I don't know, I don't understand, you would probably understand better [laughs]. But it is in Düsseldorf. You know, I, she tried to explain me several times. [. . .] Sorry, I can't explain it better. I now feel like, I feel like stupid, as being her child, her stupid mother that don't understand these things.

Similarly, Ben's mother bluntly mentioned how her son was experiencing 'what I did not *manage* to do' (my emphasis). Echoing what Mallman (2017a) has described as the 'inherent vice' in his study of how working-class students negotiate university culture and their own identities, the notions of 'did not manage' and 'stupid mother' clearly pointed to the family's nagging sentiment that they were intellectually flawed or inferior.

However, most of the 'gentle violence' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 1) of upward social mobility operated in subtle, unconscious ways. When I asked Dario's parents if they had visited their son in the prestigious university town where he did his master's degree, his father told me:

> No, we did not go, did not go at that time. Did not want to disturb him there during his studies and with his colleagues in [university name].

Here, the notion of 'disturb' got to the core of how the symbolic power of upward social mobility often operated. In fact, it underlined the father's impression of inadequacy and illegitimacy, a feeling that his own actions would not have a good impact on his 'successful' son. In other words, he accepted the view that, in the new high-class environment and field of his son, he, with his cultural and symbolic deficiencies, would be a burden rather than a support for Dario. Significantly, Dario's father was not alone in this. Similar notions were evident in several family members' narratives. Mehmet, for instance, told me that he 'wouldn't bring him [my brother] any luck'. Equally, Mareike's mother described a situation (after Mareike started studying) where it reached the point where she would be 'rarely able to give [her daughter] advice', adding that 'for a mother, this is a strange situation'.

At the same time, several upwardly mobile individuals seemed aware that the process of upward mobility came with emotional difficulties for their parents. Mareike herself, for instance, noticed that her mother 'has become shyer towards me'. And in a context similar to that of Dario, an interviewed upwardly mobile individual, Dennis, who studied in the UK noted of his non-visiting mother:

> I don't think money would have been the problem at all, why that wasn't the case [that my mother didn't visit me in England]. She would have, we would have managed that quite easily. [. . .] I think it was more her fear that it was a completely different world there, university in general, where she didn't feel [at] home, then also the language, that she would be ashamed because in her world there was never a university, and really only limited English.

Again, what emerged most clearly here was how the process of upward mobility and the widening social distance between parents and children were intertwined with experiences of vulnerability and inadequacy at certain moments and in some contexts. As Rodrigo (1974, p. 15) put it almost 50 years ago:

> At each step, with every graduation from one level of education to the next, the refrain from bystanders was strangely the same: 'Your parents must be so proud of you.' I suppose that my parents were proud, although I suspect, too, that they felt more than pride alone as they watched

> me advance through my education. They seemed to know that my education was separating us from one another, making it difficult to resume familiar intimacies. Mixed with the instincts of parental pride, a certain hurt also communicated itself.

Of course, this does not mean that the family members I interviewed were jealous of or angry with each other. And not all family members experienced this symbolic violence in the same way or to the same degree. For Martin's father, for instance, shame about his own position that was reinforced by his son's upward mobility was shed relatively easily. Without my questioning him directly about this during the interview, he felt it necessary to explain to me the different structural conditions in relation to his son's trajectory: 'back then [to my age], this [doing a high-school certificate and going to university] would have not been possible for us'. By referring to the very different states of meritocracy and equality of opportunity existing in previous decades and the current time, he was able to find a sophisticated explanation for why he ended up in a very different social position from his son. In fact, after listening to Martin's father and his structural analysis of both of their biographies, it would be incorrect to argue that Martin's social mobility had evoked or intensified negative feelings in his father.

However, many other parents were not able to cope in a similar way. Instead, the relational lens vividly illuminates how the emotional imprints of class inequality were reinforced and perpetuated by the family members who experience social travel as outsiders rather than participants. Far from 'healing the hidden injuries of class' (Rondini, 2016), the feelings of several family members about their own social position and biography in relation to the upwardly mobile individuals among them point not only to a pessimistic picture of the process of upward mobility. Crucially, they also present challenges to scholars who focus solely on the well-being of the upwardly mobile individuals themselves when assessing 'the price of the ticket'.

Conclusions

In this article, I have examined the process of social mobility from the perspective of the family members of upwardly mobile individuals. Much of the growing literature on the lived experience of social mobility relies too narrowly on the perspectives of these individuals themselves. In this way not only does the social mobility literature risk reproducing conventional understandings of the process, it also excludes the experiences and voices of a range of different actors such as family members and communities who may also be affected by social-space travel. By incorporating both family members and upwardly mobile individuals in this study, my aim was to shed new light on the costs and benefits of the process. In doing so, I captured the diverging perceptions of upward social mobility between upwardly mobile individuals and their family members – and showed how family members conceptualised the whole process predominantly as individual success stories according to current dominant beliefs. Perhaps most importantly, my inclusion of family members' accounts highlights the wide-ranging emotional imprints that accompany upward social mobility. Even though the families were undoubtedly proud and happy that a family member had succeeded, this did not erase their feelings about their own social status in relation to the upwardly mobile individual. Instead, this success

aggravated and accelerated the feelings of the family members that they themselves lacked value and they blamed themselves for their lack of social mobility.

Echoing the sociological debates around a cleft habitus (Friedman, 2016, p. 145), I stress that we should not draw too-far-reaching psychological judgements about family members from these findings. While social mobility was accompanied by painful psycho-social moments, to describe these experiences in broad terms such as 'social suffering' (Bourdieu, 1999) is not to attend with sensitivity to the evidence. Similarly, there are some limitations of this exploration. First, my strategy of recruiting family members via the upwardly mobile individuals themselves did not allow me to include families whose relationships were severely disrupted or even broken by this occurrence. Similarly, ethnographic fieldwork in these families could have contributed towards a deeper understanding of how symbolic power may have manifested itself not only in spoken words but also in everyday practices. In addition, further research is required to pay close attention to the impact of race and gender and to compare my findings in the German context with different international settings.

In his classic *Learning to Labour*, Paul Willis (1978, p. 128) argues that upward mobility may mean something only 'to the individual', stating that 'to the class or group at its own proper level, however, mobility means nothing at all'. Yet empirically focusing on family members suggests a more complex, if not more pessimistic, assessment of the process. For those who are not themselves moving up, upward social mobility can constitute distinctive values, categorisations and (self-)portraits of 'losing out', being 'stuck in a rut', or even 'left behind'. Rather than meaning nothing at all or (as public policy tends to assume) acting as an inspirational role model, individuals who move socially upward can load those remaining at the bottom of the class structure with demoralising and humiliating symbolic baggage as a result. Seen from this perspective, the catch phrases about the price of the ticket appear in a different light.

These analyses underline the importance to call for a social mobility research agenda that goes beyond studying only the upwardly mobile individuals themselves to include the voices of those who are *not* moving 'up'. In fact, including family members should only be a starting point for a broader evaluation of what are commonly portrayed as individual success stories. As Lawler and Payne (2018, p. 6) note on the current state of social mobility discourse: 'Few questions are asked about the daily experiences of those currently immobile.'[8] While this is not to say that perspectives from 'below' do not exist in sociological research (Mckenzie, 2015; Paton, 2014), it is hard to ignore the fact that they are rarely considered or brought into the picture when discussing and quantifying the well-being impact of the upward social mobility ideal. But if social mobility research is to offer a holistic evaluation of the phenomena, these voices and lived experiences must be included as well. In societies where the political and policy rhetoric around social mobility has become so prevalent, this multidimensional perspective is more pressing than ever.

Ultimately, as important as it is to critique the way that the dominant hegemony of social mobility plays out within different positions in social space, scholars need, at the same time, to attend to the progressive and emancipatory reimaginations of class mobility. It is not only the case that the 'ticket' has a 'price' – but, as a burgeoning number of studies have underlined, that the contemporary narrative of social mobility turns out to

be an essentially reactionary political project (Brown & James, 2020; Littler, 2018; Sandel, 2020). As Ingram and Gamsu (2022, p. 202) have recently put it: 'the social mobility agenda is the enemy of equality'. Against the power of common-sense conceptualisations of social mobility in neoliberal societies and in (quantitative) academic work,[9] a crucial endeavour of critical (social mobility) research might be, therefore, to elaborate, following Gramsci (1971), a kernel of 'good sense' – and engage in what Imogen Tyler (2015) has called a 'scholarship of declassification'. In a recently published article, Louise Folkes (2022), for instance, has shown how a working-class Welsh community constructed alternative narratives of class mobility that highlighted the value of being anchored to place and kinship. Similarly, focusing on young women in Australia and their aspirations for 'good enough' local futures, Signe Ravn (2022, p. 1248) has asked 'whether immobility is . . . necessarily indicating a lack of agency'. But rather than being positioned at the edges of the social mobility literature, a critical research agenda requires us to place these counternarratives at the core of the discourse. In fact, not to anticipate the possibilities of alternative, rescripted social and political imaginaries is as much an act of self-delusion as the romantic and celebratory views of conventional social mobility in contemporary political discourses.

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Notes

1. Arguably, it is not even a contradiction or a dichotomy for both stances to be 'true' in general. It might be possible for individuals who have achieved upward social mobility to be happy overall, while at the same time experiencing psychological and emotional wounds. As Savage (2021, p. 211) points out: 'it is perfectly possible [for someone who is upwardly mobile] to feel proud of [their] achievements while also being mindful of the slights and snobbery that [they] might be subject to'.
2. A whole series of literary accounts have considered family relationships as the key to upward mobility struggles (to remain in the French context, most famously, Annie Ernaux or, recently, Édouard Louis; in Germany: Deniz Ohde's [2020] *Streulicht* and Christian Baron's [2020] *Ein Mann seiner Klasse*). Remarkably, some of these authors have decided to include their parents' perspective in later novels, such as, for instance, Annie Ernaux's brilliant *A Man's Place* (1992) and *A Woman's Story* (2003) or, more recently, Édouard Louis' *Who Killed My Father* (2020) and *A Woman's Battles and Transformations* (2022).
3. When sociological research discusses parents in the context of social mobility, the literature focuses almost exclusively, and in separate terms, on the informant's early parenthood and the

parental attitudes to their children's education (Irwin & Elley, 2013; Lareau, 2003). Rondini's (2016) PhD thesis on low-income, first-generation students at a small private college in the USA stands as a rare exception. Building upon interviews with working-class parents of these undergraduates, Rondini (2016) paints a rather optimistic picture: not only did the parents feel a sense of 'redemption' for their own shortcomings, but they also used their children's accomplishments in college as 'proxies' for their own success as parents.

4. See also Mijs (2016, p. 29), who points out: '[R]esearch needs to be more open to analyze directly the formation of winners and losers through meritocratic practices. What do these experiences of winning and losing do to the individuals involved?'
5. While I do not have space here to go into detail, my 'Cubist approach' is motivated by Pierre Bourdieu's relational epistemology and follows in particular Matthew Desmond's (2014, p. 554) contributions towards (qualitative) relational enquiry by incorporating 'at least two types of actors or agencies occupying different positions within the social space and bound together in a relationship of mutual dependence or struggle'.
6. To illustrate my argument, I later include a single statement by Dennis, an upwardly mobile interviewee, whose family I did not manage to interview.
7. 'To ensure that releasing data does not jeopardize the interests of another family member' (Margolin et al., 2005, p. 158), I also decided to exclude a number of sensitive interview statements from the conversations and omit interview data that could be harmful to familial relations (see also Hall, 2014).
8. See also Savage and Flemmen (2019, p. 98), who argue that 'the way that [social mobility] is implicated in people's identities is considerably under-researched'.
9. In fact, much of the (quantitative) social mobility literature neither challenges what Robert Mare (2011, p. 20) has characterised as 'a strong mid-twentieth century American middle- and working-class bias', nor questions what exactly upward mobility is in the first place (for a critique see Savage & Flemmen, 2019). Gugushvili et al. (2019), for instance, do not hesitate to call their finding that upwardly mobile men are less likely to develop depressive symptoms the 'rising from rags argument'. Similarly, when one sees (book) titles such as *Pathways to Success*, *Clearing the Path* or *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* in huge letters, one cannot help but wonder if these are not reprints authored by Horatio Alger or Samuel Smiles.

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