

Relocation and the Uproot of Social Capital: Insights from a Swiss Panel

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Background and hypotheses

Individuals who frequently change residence during childhood are reported to be more exposed to the risks of developing health problems later in life (DeCandia, Volk and Unick, 2022; Roy, McCoy and Raver, 2014). However, this association between residential moves and poor health outcomes have been questioned due to a wide range of methodological issues, including cross-sectional study designs, recall bias and parental reporting, attrition rates of highly mobile groups, difficulty in separating out the effects of residential change and other stressful events, to name just a few. Also, the hypothetical impact on health is likely to be a function of how residential mobility is conceptualized, with definition varying greatly from one study to another (for a systematic review, see: Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008; Simsek, Costa and de Valk, 2021): frequency of moves, distance moved, reasons to move, characteristics of the neighbourhoods of origin and destination, and time since the last residential change. Finally, from a more substantial point of view, Dong et al. (2005: 1104) highlight that “frequent moving may be a marker for various family problems” that pre-exist and are exacerbated by a residential move. In other words, the linkages between residential instability and health outcomes depend on unobserved variables and confounders that have been often overlooked by existing research.

As a result of the above, the exact nature of the relation between residential mobility in childhood and health status years later remains unclear. What is more, results from longitudinal analyses introduce some nuances with regard to the deleterious role of residential moves. In fact, changing residence can have positive effects, implying upward social mobility and an improvement in housing and neighbourhood conditions (Hansen, 2013; Sharkey and Sampson, 2010). A study on 7,108 American adults who were followed for 10 years indicates that individuals’ responses to residential mobility change according to underlying personality traits (Oishi and Schimmack, 2010). Specifically, negative health externalities were only observed in introverts, a finding that the authors relate to the difficulties of re-establishing close social relationships in the new social setting. Such a disruption of social connections has been shown to be particularly detrimental when relocation happens during middle childhood since moving to a new school requires a complex readjustment to new teachers and peers (Anderson et al., 2014).

All in all, despite diverging conclusions extracted from the literature, scholars agree that “although moves may be driven by positive (e.g., birth of a child or a job promotion) or negative (e.g., divorce or substantial loss in income) forces, they nonetheless bring transitions and adjustments” (Coley and Kull, 2016: 1206). This paper looks at two aspects of this transitional period by assessing the impact of residential mobility during childhood on processes of identity formation and social capital accumulation. An indirect relationship is anticipated between residential trajectories during the early stages of life (0-16 years old) and psychological distress in adulthood, mediated by the sense of belonging and the ability to access and mobilize social contacts in case of need. Empirical testing is based on structural equation modelling and directed acyclic graphs with a sample of 6,090 individuals who completed the Swiss Household Panel survey.

Taking the bioecological and life course epidemiology perspectives into account (Ben-Shlomo, Mishra and Kuh, 2014; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), which state that developmental processes occur within a set of interconnected environments (family, school, residential community, etc.), and that changes in one context (e.g., due to a residential move) may entail durable effects over multiple contexts, we posited the following hypotheses:

- (a) Residential relocation in the early stages of life, especially during middle childhood, has enduring effects on psychological distress.
- (b) Residential mobility provokes a shift in individuals' self-definition from collective to personal attributes (Easthope, 2009; Oishi, Lun and Sherman, 2007), leading to a decrease in their sense of belonging to a community.
- (c) Frequent residential moves during childhood alter the structure of social networks (Nisic and Petermann, 2013; Pettit and McLanahan, 2003), which may reduce the ability to access and mobilize social capital resources.
- (d) Residential moves negatively affect the sense of belonging, which in turn increases psychological distress.
- (e) If residential instability reduces the supportiveness of social networks, then psychological distress increases.

Although implications of residential mobility for the self and social connections have been studied before, the novelty of our approach lies in testing these two mechanisms together to assess their mutual and respective influence on psychological distress over the life course.

Data and methods

Data source

Data are drawn from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), a large-scale survey carried out annually by the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences. After its first edition in 1999, three refreshment samples were added respectively in 2004 (SHP_II), 2013 (SHP_III), and 2020 (SHP_IV). This study focuses on the SHP_III sample for which retrospective residential trajectories of 6,090 individuals aged 16+ are available. The sample is representative of the Swiss population and is stratified by Switzerland's seven major statistical regions. Everyone had the same inclusion probability within each major geographic region (random sampling). Respondents sampled for the SHP_III completed a life calendar covering their entire life course starting from birth. The visual structure of the life calendar encompassed a two-way grid with the temporal dimension in years in rows, and various domains of life in columns. As for the residential domain, respondents were asked to provide information about the occurrence and duration of each residential event prior to the panel study, as well as information about the geographical location of their residential stays at the cantonal and regional levels. Other domains included in the life calendar are living arrangements, family events, residential permit, partner relationships and civil status, professional activity, and health.

Measures

The analysis covers the period between the first wave with the SHP_III sample in 2013 and the more recent edition of the panel study in 2021. The SHP survey includes a *core* group of questions that are asked each wave, and a *rotating core* asked every three years. Additionally, respondents sampled for the SHP_III were presented with two ad hoc

modules in 2014 on identity formation and anomie, which were asked again in 2018 and 2021 and that we might suppose will be integrated into the rotating core of future editions of the panel.

The outcome variable in our model is a composite mean score of two measures extracted from the following questions: *‘Do you often have negative feelings such as having the blues, being desperate, or suffering from anxiety or depression?’*; and *‘Are you often full of strength, energy, and optimism, if 0 means “never” and 10 “always?”* (reverse-coded).

Residential mobility between 0 and 16 years old is our exposure variable. It is defined in two different ways which are tested separately in our models to address cumulative versus time-specific effects. On the one hand, we looked at the frequency of moves based on the assumption that the negative impact on psychological distress increases with each additional move. On the other hand, we incorporated a focus on residential mobility grouped by age range (before the age of 6, between 7 and 11, and between 11 and 16) to verify whether relocation is more disruptive depending on the timing of the residential event.

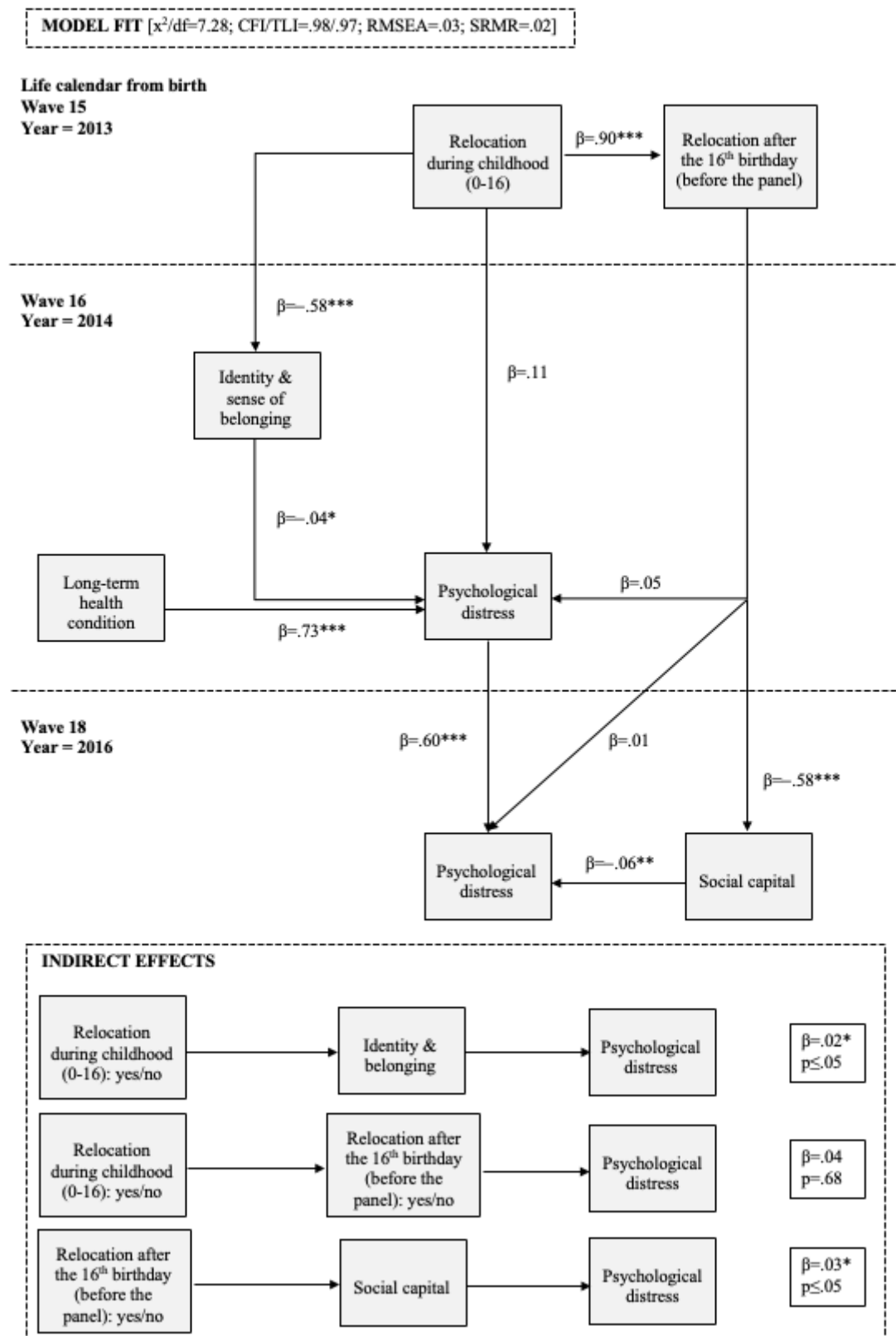
The proposed model contemplates two mediating variables. Although different facets of the concept of social capital were considered, the focus is on its emotional and instrumental support role. Respondents were asked to what extent on a 10-point scale they might expect *‘understanding by talking with you’*, or *‘practical help, meaning concrete help or useful advice’* from relatives or close friends in case of need. A second mediating variable relates to the sense of belonging to different locations: the municipality of residence, the canton, the linguistic region, the urban/rural context, and Switzerland in general. The exact question states: *‘to what extent is belonging to the [above] locations important for your identity’* and respondents were asked to rate on a 10-point scale.

The indirect relationship between residential trajectories and psychological distress, mediated by the constructs of identity and social capital, was controlled for sex, possible adverse events related to chronic health issues or family disruptions, two measures of social mobility (i.e., improvement in housing conditions, and household income increases), and residential trajectories after the age of 16.

Expected findings

Statistical processing of panel data involved structural equations (see Figure 1) and follow-up tests with directed acyclic graphs (still working process).

Figure 1. Schematic visualization of one of the empirical models tested at the time of this writing.



Preliminary results show that frequent residential moves during childhood *per se* are not a risk factor for psychological distress, not even when respondents keep moving after their 16th birthday, thus questioning a correlation between residential instability and the outcome variable. Provisional model outcomes reveal instead that residential instability influences the process of identity formation, especially if the relocation implies a change in the linguistic region. A lower sense of belonging among movers acts as a significant mediator in the relationship between childhood mobility and psychological distress. In other words, frequent residential mobility between 0-16 years old is detrimental to psychological distress only if movers start feeling that they do not belong anywhere. Sensitivity tests show that if the feeling of social isolation turns into a sense of anomie (alienation), the risk of psychological distress increases substantially.

On the other hand, it was found that rather than disrupting social capital resources, residential moves play a role in their rearrangement. The feeling of relying on supportive networks positively correlates with residential moves during childhood unless they are accompanied by other traumatic events (e.g., family break-ups).

At the time of this writing, further tests are under consideration to verify whether the detrimental role of residential instability might be a function of children's age (i.e., it is time-specific), and if it might be particularly deleterious starting from the compulsory schooling age (6+ years old). Also, the linkages between residential trajectories and psychological distress are likely to be sensitive to adjustments for social mobility with members of families that move downwards being less able to re-build their social connections. Finally, considering that, according to the literature, women tend to record higher scores on the psychological distress scale, we will also investigate possible sex-based differences in the mechanisms that link residential mobility to our dependent variable.

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