

European Population Conference (EPC) 2026 (3–6 June 2026 Bologna, Italy)

Title: Stuck in Place, Feeling Bad? Unrealized Moving Desires, Spatial Immobility, and Subjective Well-Being within Couples

Elias Hofmann^{1,2}

¹ Federal Institute for Population Research (BiB), Wiesbaden, Germany

² University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

Extended abstract:

Background and Theory

Spatial immobility is a common feature of individuals' life course. Within couples, involuntary staying—or 'tied staying'—has been identified as a prominent outcome of joint mobility decisions (Cooke, 2013), particularly when partners' moving desires diverge (Coulter et al., 2012). Despite this relevance, migration research has been characterized by a 'mobility bias' (Schewel, 2020), often treating immobility merely as the absence of movement rather than a meaningful outcome in itself. This bias also extends to research on subjective well-being (SWB). Most studies focus on the life satisfaction (LS) consequences of relocation, overlooking the well-being implications of involuntary staying. As a result, the LS outcomes of immobility remain understudied. Acknowledging the role of the couple household in shaping (im)mobility outcomes, this project addresses this gap by examining how mismatches in partners' mobility desires shape LS outcomes.

One of the few studies directly addressing this question, Borsellino et al. (2024), show that involuntary staying is associated with declines in LS, emphasizing that migration enables individuals to pursue personal goals and improve their life circumstances. However, in realizing their moves, individuals are constrained by institutional barriers, structural factors, and life-course conditions such as employment, education, or family ties. The resulting gap between aspirations and outcomes manifests in lower LS. While Borsellino et al. (2024) highlight the importance of such constraints for individuals' LS outcomes, their analysis remains largely individual-focused. A couple-level perspective on the well-being effects of immobility, accounting for partners' mobility preferences, is still missing.

Family migration research provides a useful framework for this inquiry. Spatial mobility decisions are typically made at the household rather than the individual level, emerging from within-couple negotiations about utility. Within this context, a partner's reluctance to move can constrain the other's ability to realize their own mobility preferences. This reasoning leads to the '**Constrain Hypothesis**': individuals who wish to move but remain immobile will experience *similar* or even *stronger* LS declines when their partner prefers to stay than when they also want to move, as the partnership becomes a barrier to fulfilling personal goals and aspirations.

However, immobility may also be the outcome of consensual decision-making within couples. For instance, from the perspective of bargaining theories (Nisic & Melzer, 2016; Ott, 1992), immobility reflects cooperative deliberation within couples rather than mere constraint. When staying is a shared decision, individuals may be compensated in other domains—through emotional support, appreciation, or the redistribution of household responsibilities—which can offset the LS costs of unmet desires. This logic underpins the '**Compromise Hypothesis**': the negative effect of unrealized mobility desires on LS will be *weaker* when partners prefer not to move, as staying reflects a mutual understanding emerged within an active process of deliberation within the couple, rather than a mere restriction imposed by external forces.

Together, these hypotheses capture two contrasting logics—constraint versus compromise—through which immobility can emerge in couples. The study seeks to disentangle these theoretical mechanisms and assess how partner disagreement over mobility preferences affects subjective well-being.

Data and Methods

The analysis draws on data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), a nationally representative panel survey that has tracked individuals and households annually since 1991. The UKHLS is well suited for this research because it collects detailed information on both partners' mobility desires each year, asking whether respondents would like to move. These repeated measures allow insights into how preferences evolve and enable a direct comparison of partners' desires, capturing whether couples agree or disagree about moving.

The study focuses on the first sustained mobility desire—cases in which respondents express a wish to move in two consecutive years. This strategy avoids capturing short-lived sentiments (e.g., temporary dissatisfaction with housing or work) that may not represent stable desires. Extending the approach of Borsellino et al. (2024), changes in LS are examined from the year before the first expression of the moving desire ($t-1$) to the second year of sustained moving desire ($t+1$).

In the first step, the analysis compares individuals who moved within this period (actual movers) with those who remained in place despite their desire to move (involuntary stayers). Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions estimate average differences in LS change between these groups, controlling for potential confounders such as age, relationship duration, household income, and key life events (e.g., marriage, childbirth, or children leaving home) between $t-1$ and $t+1$. In the second step, the 'Constrain' and 'Compromise' Hypotheses are tested against each other by incorporating partners' mobility preference as an interaction term. These models assess whether the LS effects of staying differ depending on whether the partner also wanted to move, or preferred to stay.

Given the potential of gendered dynamics—both in the desire to move and the SWB outcomes of involuntary staying—within households, separate models will be estimated for women and men. Additional robustness checks will distinguish between couples interviewed jointly versus separately about their mobility desires, following concerns by Coulter et al. (2012) regarding possible reporting bias. To isolate the effect of residential immobility, individuals who adopted other forms of spatial mobility (e.g., long-distance commuting) will be excluded in additional analyses.

Expected Findings

Based on prior research and the theoretical considerations above, several expectations regarding the findings are developed. First, consistent with the general pattern found by Borsellino et al. (2024), partnered individuals who wish to move but do not are expected to report lower LS than those who relocate after having formed a desire to do so. Second, partners' preferences should moderate this effect. In line with the '**Compromise Hypothesis**', I expect LS declines to be weaker when partners also prefer to stay, as individuals are compensated by their partner for the costs of involuntarily staying put.

There may be gender differences in these patterns. Women's LS may be less negatively affected by staying for a partner if the decision is seen as relationally supportive, whereas men may experience greater LS losses when their mobility is curtailed.

Discussion and Implications

This project contributes to several strands of research at the intersection of mobility, subjective well-being, and couple decision-making.

First, it advances conceptualizations of immobility as an active, negotiated outcome rather than merely the absence of movement. By explicitly adopting a household perspective, it extends prior research linking couple households to place rootedness (Cooke, 2013), providing insights into the within-couple deliberations that underly staying behaviour.

Second—and more specifically—, it deepens our understanding of how unrealized desires are managed within couples. By distinguishing between consensual compromise and constraint, the study sheds light on how partners negotiate competing aspirations and whether those who stay for their partner receive relational compensation that buffers LS losses. This connects to broader debates about the link between unrealized intentions and subjective well-being.

Third, it contributes to well-being research by emphasizing the role of partners' preference in LS outcomes of immobility, thereby addressing the 'mobility bias' in subjective well-being research.

References:

- Borsellino, R., Charles-Edwards, E., Bernard, A., & Corcoran, J. (2024). Understanding the association between (im)mobility and life satisfaction in Australia. *Population, Space and Place*, Article e2820. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2820>
- Cooke, T. J. (2013). All tied up: Tied staying and tied migration within the United States, 1997 to 2007. *Demographic Research*, 29, Article 30, 817–836. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2013.29.30>
- Coulter, R., van Ham, M., & Feijten, P. (2012). Partner (dis)agreement on moving desires and the subsequent moving behaviour of couples. *Population, Space and Place*, 18(1), 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.700>
- Nisic, N., & Melzer, S. M. (2016). Explaining Gender Inequalities That Follow Couple Migration. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(4), 1063–1082. doi:10.1111/jomf.12323
- Ott, N. (1992). *Intrafamily Bargaining and Household Decisions*. Springer.
- Schewel, K. (2020). Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies. *International Migration Review*, 54(2), 328–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319831952>