

Social Mobility Among United States Immigrants: A Psychology of Working Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate subjective social mobility among U.S. immigrants—here referred to as shifts in experiences of marginalization and economic constraints before and after immigration—and assess how mobility is related to a host of theoretically informed predictors and outcomes. Surveys were completed by 242 employed U.S. immigrants who had been in the United States for an average of 11.65 years. A latent profile analysis was conducted which identified four groups with different social mobility types: subjective upward mobility, privileged, underprivileged, and subjective downward mobility. Four times as many participants experienced downward versus upward mobility (38.4% vs. 10.3%), with the majority maintaining a privileged (21.9%) or underprivileged (29.3%) status. Additionally, the downward mobility group had significantly lower work volition, work need satisfaction, and decent work compared to other groups. Implications for counseling practice, advocacy, and research for socially mobile immigrants are discussed.

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Significance of the Scholarship to the Public

This study focused on immigrants' experiences of social mobility and how their experiences are related to their work experiences. Contrary to the "American dream," participants were four times more likely to experience downward versus upward mobility. Immigrants who experienced downward mobility after coming to the United States were less likely to feel free to make career choices, obtain decent work, and meet their needs at work compared to other groups. These results suggest the importance of attending to downward mobility as a common experience of immigrants, especially around the likelihood of feeling more marginalized in the United States.

Approximately 13.5% of working adults in the United States are immigrants (American Immigration Council, 2024; Das-Munshi et al., 2012; Kandel et al., 2022; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018), including those with graduate degrees in high-tech positions and refugees seeking improved economic, living, and social conditions (American Immigration Council, 2024; Jacquez et al., 2021). Although many immigrants may come to the United States seeking upward social mobility, a recent meta-analysis and study using national data each found that immigrants were more likely to experience downward social mobility (Das-Munshi et al., 2012; Nicklett & Burgard, 2009). Indeed, understanding immigrants' social mobility may be more complex than changes in objective socioeconomic statuses based on their changed systemic contexts and social positionality. For instance, immigrants who seemingly achieve upward mobility by obtaining a job with higher income in the United States may subjectively experience downward social mobility due to underemployment (Das-Munshi et al., 2012). Additionally, immigrants tend to face multiple forms of discrimination, such as racism, xenophobia, and linguistic marginalization, which shape their perceived social mobility (Garrison et al., 2023; Kim, Autin, et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2023). Therefore, it is critical to understand immigrants' subjective social mobility by considering a matrix of resources, power, and privilege (Kim, Autin, et al., 2023).

To our knowledge, most studies in this area of scholarship have focused on the relation between objective social mobility and mental health in the general population (Islam & Jaffe, 2024). Thus, little is known regarding immigrants' subjective social mobility, and how it relates to their vocational development and work experiences. However, knowing the relations among subjective social mobility, vocational development, and work experiences in immigrants is critical because (a) subjective social mobility better predicts psychological outcomes (Kim, Shein, et al., 2023), (b) immigrants' perceived social status is complex due to changes in the matrix of privilege and oppression based on their immigration process, (c) the degree of their subjective social mobility may inform their ability to have work-related choices and access to decent work, and (d) their work experiences in the United States may be a catalyst for social mobility.

Without exploring the interaction between their social mobility and work experiences, immigrant workers' marginalized experiences may remain invisible (e.g., seemingly achieved upward mobility by obtaining higher income but became underemployed and more exposed to unsafe working conditions), which restricts attention from psychologists, practitioners, and advocates. In the current study, we addressed this gap by assessing U.S. immigrant's subjective social mobility (i.e., measuring their experiences of economic constraints and marginalization in their country of origin and in the United States), guided by the psychology of working framework/theory (PWF, PWT; Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016) and literature on social mobility (Kim, Shein, et al., 2023; Liu & White, 2017; Perez et al., 2023). We used latent profile analysis to construct groups according to different subjective social mobility types, compared factors that may predict group membership, and examined how group membership relates to experiences with work and working.

Conceptualization and Theoretical Framework

Subjective Social Mobility

Social mobility reflects a change in an individual's socioeconomic status over the lifetime (intra-generational mobility) or in relation to family members (inter-generational mobility; OECD, 2018). Conceptually, individuals could experience upward or downward mobility, which would have downstream effects on their work-related and general well-being. For example, individuals who experience downward mobility have a greater chance of experiencing major depressive disorder and lower subjective well-being (Nicklett & Burgard, 2009; Zhao et al., 2017). Conversely, upwardly mobile people often improve their status by gaining better employment, which can lead to greater job satisfaction and commitment (Nelson et al., 2006; Zhai et al.,

2021). However, people who seemingly achieve upward social mobility by obtaining more prestigious jobs with higher incomes may experience subjectively lower social statuses. They may continue to feel distance by not discovering their community, inequity from privileged groups, and adaptation to new positions, which may relegate people to a lower position in society (Jayatilake et al., 2014; Nelson et al., 2006; Scandone, 2021). Despite these complex social mobility processes, there is no universally agreed upon method of assessing mobility. Indeed, contemporary studies (e.g., Destin, 2019; Kim, Shein, et al., 2023) have encouraged researchers to focus on subjective social mobility because subjective measures more accurately predict psychological outcomes. Incorporating this suggestion, recent studies have measured subjective social mobility as occurring between two time points, comparing childhood and adult experiences, including changes in subjective social status (Kim, Shein, et al., 2023).

Psychology of Working

The PWF and subsequent PWT (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016) were developed to highlight the working experiences of individuals from marginalized groups, focusing on how interlocking systemic and contextual barriers can impact access to decent work attainment. The more recently developed PWT suggests that an individual's level of economic constraints and marginalization experiences across their lifetime are the key drivers of securing decent work. Decent work refers to employment that meets the minimum thresholds for acceptable employment: safe working conditions, adequate compensation, free time and rest, organizational values that match family and societal values, and access to healthcare (Duffy et al., 2016). The theory proposes that individuals who encounter higher levels of these structural barriers will be less likely to attain decent work in part because of having less choice in their career decision-making (work volition) and fewer resources to adapt to the world of work (career adaptability). To date, hundreds of researchers conducted their study using the theory, mainly supporting these propositions, with the exception of a more minimal role played by career adaptability (Duffy et al., 2023). Findings also suggest that securing decent work leads to work-related and general well-being, including job satisfaction and life satisfaction, because work meets an individual's needs for survival, social contribution, and self-determination (e.g., Autin et al., 2019; Kozan et al., 2019).

Some studies using a psychology of working frame have specifically focused on immigrant populations in the United States, highlighting how their marginalized identities relate to struggles with workforce entry and experiences within the workplace (Autin et al., 2018, 2021; Kim, Autin, et al., 2023). However, in the theory and vast majority of PWT informed research,

experiences of economic constraints and marginalization are often assessed either as lifetime constructs or across a specific period of time. These approaches thereby discount the possibility that one's experiences with economic constraints or marginalization may change. One notable exception is the recent work of [Perez et al. \(2023\)](#), who used a PWT frame to assess social mobility for a general sample of U.S. workers, assessing their experiences of economic constraints and marginalization in childhood to adulthood. This study did not focus on immigrants, assessed mobility on a different time scale, and had a limited sample with regard to gender and racial diversity. However, their PWT informed conceptualization of mobility is a match to what we used in the current study: an assessment of participant's subjective experiences of economic constraints and marginalization before and after immigrating to the United States (therein referred to as social mobility).

Subjective Social Mobility of U.S. Immigrants

As noted above, immigrants often come to the United States seeking improved living conditions, greater access to healthcare, and financial stability (e.g., upward mobility; [Goodman et al., 2017](#); [Shaw et al., 2021](#)). Some immigrants do achieve upward social mobility by obtaining jobs with higher pay and prestige ([Das-Munshi et al., 2012](#)), and may also expect intergenerational social upward mobility for their children ([Tran et al., 2019](#)). However, immigrant's subjective experiences of social mobility appear to be complex. For example, some immigrant workers experience underemployment, where their jobs become less socially desirable and do not match their educational levels or skills ([Das-Munshi et al., 2012](#)). Other immigrant workers report the disappearance of accumulated wealth, with new incomes limiting participation in activities that they used to do in their country of origin ([Aycan & Berry, 1996](#)).

Moreover, immigrants in the United States tend to face downward social mobility due to oppressive policies (e.g., anti-immigration policies and immigration policies that favored White immigrants; [Yakushko, 2009](#); [Yoon et al., 2023](#)) and concurrent discrimination, such as anti-immigrant or refugee rhetoric, racism, sexism, linguistic marginalization, classism, and xenophobia ([d'Abreu et al., 2021](#); [Garrison et al., 2023](#); [Misra et al., 2021](#); [Nilsson & Jorgenson, 2021](#); [Sanchez et al., 2018](#)). As such, many immigrant women and youth are exposed to sexual assault, domestic violence, and trafficking ([Becker Herbst et al., 2018](#); [Goodman et al., 2017](#)). Additionally, immigration and resettlement inherently means people experience some level of separation from their culture and social networks, which can explain their psychological distress regardless of their country of origin ([Pérez-Rojas et al., 2021](#); [Schwartz et al., 2011](#)). Overall, immigrants are more likely to live in poverty, have limited access to healthcare and higher education, and suffer from psychological

distress, which relegates them to a less powerful position in society (Eggerth et al., 2012; Esses, 2021; Misra et al., 2021; Yoon et al., 2023).

Such systemic barriers and consequent marginalization also apply to immigrants' vocational development and job search process. For example, some young immigrants receive Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023), which provides temporary work authorization for undocumented youth that may lead to greater access to higher education and decent work (Hernández-Torres, 2018). However, many DACA recipients face barriers to financial aid and access to internships and career development programming (Autin et al., 2018; Enriquez et al., 2019; Morales Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021). Other systemic barriers include retaking courses and taking language tests, such as the Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL), and demonstrating their educational "equivalency," which is often inaccessible due to the financial costs and time associated with these requirements (Dean, 2018).

Moreover, immigrants are likely to have indecent experiences within the workplace. For example, they are more likely to encounter hazardous and discriminatory working conditions (Baran et al., 2018), work in low-paying jobs (Capps et al., 2003), receive fewer benefits (i.e., healthcare, paid time off, etc.), and have limited legal protection (i.e., sufficient breaks and safe working conditions; Misra et al., 2021; Rami et al., 2023; Smith-Appelton et al., 2021). Immigrants are disproportionately represented in jobs with limited flexibility (i.e., construction, agriculture, and other service jobs; Doãn et al., 2021) and are often forced to work while injured, given that they could risk losing their jobs (Smith-Appelton et al., 2021; Snipes et al., 2017). Finally, immigrants often report mental, physical, and sexual abuse in their workplace due to power differentials and the fear of losing their job or deportation (Baran et al., 2018; Eggerth et al., 2012).

In this sense, immigrant's experiences of economic constraints and marginalization may fluctuate before and after coming to the United States. Certainly, some immigrants may see improvements in their social mobility. However, many others may experience oppressive conditions and marginalizing experiences that can lead to reduced well-being and opportunity, thereby thwarting upward mobility.

The Present Study

In the current study, we aimed to examine immigrant workers' subjective social mobility and explore the relations between subjective social mobility and experiences in the world of work (Kim, Shein, et al., 2023; Perez et al., 2023). Specifically, we gathered data on participants' perceptions of their economic constraints and experiences of marginalization before and after they immigrated to the United States. Latent profile analysis was conducted to

analyze the data and best practices (Spurk et al., 2020) were used to identify and name social mobility profile groups based on experiences before and after immigration. Similar to previous studies on subjective social mobility (Kim, Shein, et al., 2023; Perez et al., 2023), we hypothesized at least four profiles would emerge from the data: individuals with sustained privilege (low economic constraints and marginalization before and after immigration), individuals with sustained barriers (high economic constraints and marginalization before and after immigration), and groups who are upwardly and downwardly mobile (economic constraints and marginalization rising or falling after immigration).

After these were constructed, we conducted a series of analyses to examine how these groups may differ from one another. First, we were interested in several exploratory questions concerning the types of immigrants that may be more or less mobile. Specifically, we examined differences according to educational attainment, years since immigration, and reasons for immigrating to the United States. For example, perhaps those with greater education (due to more job opportunities) or those who have been in the United States for a longer period of time (due to having more opportunities to be socially mobile) would evidence greater upward mobility. Second, we were interested in group differences across key PWT suggested outcomes: work volition, decent work attainment, and work-related need satisfaction. Consistently, studies using a PWT framework have shown that those who have greater lifetime experiences of marginalization and economic constraints are less likely to feel choice in their career, have less access to decent work, and are less likely to feel their work is meeting their needs (Duffy et al., 2023). Based on PWT propositions and findings from previous studies (e.g., Perez et al., 2023), we hypothesize that participants in this study who are in the privileged or upwardly mobile groups will evidence greater levels of volition, decent work, and need satisfaction than those in high barriers or downwardly mobile groups.

Method

Participants

A total of 242 participants were recruited via the online research recruitment platform, CloudResearch. CloudResearch allows researchers to post surveys to qualified participants, who can volunteer to take the surveys for pay. The majority of the participants were full-time employed adults ($n = 174$, 71.9%), currently residing in the United States, followed by part-time ($n = 44$, 18.2%), self-employed full-time ($n = 15$, 6.2%), and self-employed part-time ($n = 9$, 3.7%). The average age of the sample was 36.37 years ($SD = 9.84$). For gender, 124 (51.2%) participants identified as women, 113 (46.7%) identified as men, 2 (.8%) identified as transgender men, 2 (.8%) identified as

transgender women, and 1 (.4%) identified gender identity not listed. In terms of race/ethnicity, 66 (27.3%) identified as White, 68 (28.1%) as Asian/Asian American, 34 (14.1%) as Hispanic/Latina, 27 (11.2%) as Asian Indian, 20 (8.3%) as African/Black/African American, 6 (2.5%) as Arab American/Middle Eastern, 2 (0.8%) as Pacific Islander, 14 (5.8%) as multiracial, and 3 (1.2%) as Other (e.g., West Asian, Caribbean), and 2 (0.8%) None reported participants. The average yearly household income in U.S. dollars was for the sample as follows: Less than \$25,000/year (14, 5.8%), \$25,000–\$75,000/year (100, 41.5%), \$76,000–\$125,000/year (70, 29%), \$126,000–\$175,000/year (41, 17%), \$176,000–\$200,000/year (8, 3.3%) and over \$201,000/year (7, 2.9%). One (0.4%) participant reported as “I don’t know” regards to the average yearly household income. We compared the income of our sample to the overall income U.S. Census data for the year of 2021 in the United States, which included all adults (citizens and noncitizens) currently living in the United States. Here the median household income was \$70,784 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a), which suggests that in terms of household income our sample may be fairly representative of the U.S. population.

Regarding educational attainment, the majority of participants had completed a college degree ($n = 110$, 45.5%), followed by a professional degree ($n = 76$, 31.4%), some college ($n = 37$, 15.3%), trade/vocational school ($n = 7$, 2.9%), high school graduate ($n = 10$, 4.1%), and less than high school ($n = 2$, .8%). Although not intended, our sample ended up being much more highly educated than the representative U.S. population. In our sample approximately 76% had completed college or an advanced degree, but according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau (2022b) only around 37.9% of individuals in the U.S. had this level of educational attainment. We discuss how this may have affected our results at length in the discussion, implications, and limitations. We asked participants what their current occupation was and coded these responses based on larger themes that existed in the narrative replies. We looked for themes that were common groupings within occupation profiles of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Most of the participants were working in IT/computer science (e.g., IT analyst, engineer, web designer; 20%), Office/administrative support (e.g., office assistant, administrative assistant; 10%), Business/corporate/manager (e.g., accounting, director, assistant manager; 10%), Healthcare/medical (e.g., nurse, pharmacists, dental hygienist; 9%), and Education/library (e.g., teach, college professor; 4%). The remaining participants were from a large variety of other occupations which weren’t easily group into larger categories. We coded country of origin prior to immigration and grouped the sample accordingly: Asia ($n = 101$, 42.3%), Europe ($n = 61$, 25.5%), Central America/Caribbean ($n = 30$, 12.6%), North America ($n = 20$, 8.4%), South America ($n = 15$, 6.3%), and Africa ($n = 12$, 5.0%).

Instruments

Marginalization Experiences. The degree to which participants felt marginalized before and after immigrating to the United States was measured with an adapted version of the Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale (LEMS; Duffy et al., 2019). The scale consists of three items to which participants respond on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). First, participants were presented with the following prompt:

We are interested in the degree to which you consider yourself to be marginalized in the United States. By marginalized, we mean being in a less powerful position in society, being socially excluded, and/or having less access to resources because you are a member of a specific group, have a specific identity, or life history. This often occurs due to one's gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, religious beliefs, physical appearance, or being a part of other minority groups/identities. With this definition in mind, please respond to the following items below considering the experiences you have had before and after immigrating.

Then participants answered three items for before and after. Examples include, "Before immigrating to the United States, I had many experiences that have made me feel marginalized" and, "After immigrating to the United States, I had many interpersonal interactions that have often left me feeling marginalized". Scores from this scale have evidenced higher internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .92 - .93$) across a variety of samples and correlate in the expected directions with indicators of economic constraints and discrimination experiences, such as marginalization experience based on their Latinx identity and women of Color (Autin et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2022). In the current study, the estimated internal consistency reliability of scale scores were .96 (before) and .97 (after).

Economic Constraints. The degree to which participants felt economically constrained before and after immigrating to the United States was measured with an adapted version of the Economic Constraints Scale (ECS; Duffy et al., 2019). The original scale consists of five items answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants answered the five items related to their experiences before and after immigration. Example adapted items include, "Before immigrating to the United States, I had very limited economic or financial resources" and "After immigrating to the United States, I have struggled financially". Scores from this scale have evidenced higher internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .93 - .94$) across a variety of samples (e.g., people of Color and incoming college students) and correlate in the expected directions with indicators of racial

identity or status based-marginalization experiences and social status (Autin, Williams, et al., 2022; Duffy et al., 2019). In the current study, the estimated internal consistency reliability of scales scores was .96 (before) and .94 (after).

Work Volition. The degree to which participants felt choice in their career decision making was measured by the four-item volition subscale of the Work Volition Scale (WVS; Duffy et al., 2012). Participants answered items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items include, “I’ve been able to choose the jobs I have wanted” and “I feel able to change jobs if I want to.” The subscale has been used in a variety of studies using a PWT framework, finding scale scores to be reliable ($\alpha = .91 - .97$) and correlate in the expected directions with marginalization experiences, economic constraints, and career adaptability (Autin, Williams, et al., 2022; Duffy et al., 2018). In the current study, the estimated internal consistency reliability of scale scores was .93.

Decent Work. The Decent Work Scale (DWS; Duffy et al., 2017) was used to assess participants’ perceptions of their work as decent. The scale has five, three item subscales which participants answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items include, “I feel emotionally safe interacting with people at work,” “I am properly paid for my work,” and “My organization’s values align with my family values.” Duffy et al. (2017) and a variety of other studies have shown scale scores to evidence good internal consistency reliability at the subscale and total scale level (total scale $\alpha = .80 - .89$) and correlate in the expected direction with indicators of work-related well-being, such as life satisfaction (Kozan et al., 2019). In the current study, the estimated internal consistency reliability for the subscale scores were as follows: interpersonally and physically safe working environments ($\alpha = .85$), hours that allow for free time and rest ($\alpha = .90$), adequate compensation ($\alpha = .95$), organizational values complement family and social values ($\alpha = .94$), access to health care ($\alpha = .96$). Additionally, the estimated internal consistency reliability of the total scale scores was .93.

Need Satisfaction. The degree to which participants felt that their work was meeting needs for survival, social contribution, and self-determination was measured by the Work Need Satisfaction Scale (WNSS; Autin et al., 2019). The WNSS contains 20 total items and is made up of five four-item subscales each measuring survival needs, social contribution needs, and the three self-determination needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Participants were presented with the statement, “My work allows me to:” and were instructed to rate each of the items based on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items, one from each

respective subscale, include the following: “Have the resources to provide nutritious food for myself and my family,” “Make a contribution to the greater social good,” “Feel like I am good at my job,” “Feel like I fit in,” and “Do tasks the way I want.” [Autin, et al. \(2019\)](#) found scores on the subscales and total scale to evidence strong internal consistency reliability (subscales in the range of $\alpha = .82 - .95$) and to correlate with other measures of need satisfaction and life satisfaction. In the current study, the estimated internal consistency reliability scores for the five needs subscales and total scale in the current study were as follows: Total (.96), survival (.94), social contribution (.92), competence (.93), relatedness (.95), autonomy (.93).

Reason for Immigration. As an exploratory analysis, we were interested in whether people’s reasons for immigrating to the United States may be related to their social mobility. We asked participants, “What was your/your family’s reason for immigration?” Our research team met and analyzed the responses, looking for common larger themes. After the discussion, the research team found five primary themes for those who provided a reply: A better life (81, 33.5%), family (57, 23.6%), work (50, 20.7%), education (32, 13.2%), and safety (22, 9.1%). Each theme was transformed to a categorical variable.

Procedure

After receiving Institution Review Board approval to conduct the study from the authors’ university, we gathered data via CloudResearch. One benefit of CloudResearch compared to some other platforms is it gives researchers the ability to recruit specific participants based on their diverse variables such as gender, age, and so forth ([Litman, 2017](#)), which in the case of the current study was U.S. immigrants. Given frequent concerns about the validity of surveys gathered online, a recent review by [Douglas et al. \(2023\)](#) compared data gathered via a variety of popular online platforms (e.g., MTurk, Prolific, CloudResearch) with more diverse samples ([Chandler et al., 2019](#)). The researchers found that when paying volunteers at least \$2.00 for survey completion on CloudResearch, there was a high proportion of “high quality respondents.” We limited viewing the survey only to volunteers on CloudResearch who (a) were employed and (b) had immigrated to the United States.

We built the survey itself on Qualtrics which also included an informed consent page and participants were provided with the criteria for participation. The criteria stated that participants had to be 18 or older, employed (full-time or part-time), and residing in the United States after immigrating. We originally posted the survey on CloudResearch with a participant payment of \$1.00 for completion. However, this was not a strong enough incentive to recruit a large sample and we raised the incentive several times, with a final

group receiving \$3.50. The average participant payment was approximately \$2.50, and the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. We had an initial sample of 322 participants start the survey. However, several validity check questions were included in the survey. These involved two items asking participants to select a specific response and one item at the end of the survey asking participants if they took the survey seriously. After removing 68 people who failed any of these validity check items and 12 people who were not fully or partially employed, we had a final total of 242 participants. Requests for data and study materials can be made by emailing the lead author.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The preliminary analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 28.0. We examined the data for missing values, skewness and kurtosis, outliers, linearity assumptions, and correlations. Amongst the individual constructs, 23 values were missing data for need satisfaction, 10 for decent work, two for work volition, and five missing for years since immigration. There were no missing data from the remaining constructs. We conducted the Little's Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test to assess if the missing data were random or not random. The MCAR results indicated significance, $\chi^2(1304) = 1619.777, p = 0.00$. Given this finding, we compared the means between groups with missing variables and groups without missing variables. However, there were no significant differences among the groups among all key study variables and as such we kept all participant data included in the analyses. There were no study variables that approached the threshold of skewness $> |3|$ or kurtosis values $> |10|$ (Weston & Gore, 2006). One univariate outlier was found with a z-score greater than $|3.29|$ on the needs variable, and years since immigration variable. The case of needs variable was lower (0.46%) than 1%, and years since immigration variable case was close to (0.42%) 1% of values, which indicates normal extreme values in a sample (Osborne & Overbay, 2004). All subsequent analyses were conducted with and without the univariate outliers and no significant differences were found. As such, all participants' data were retained. The results of descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation for study variables are seen in Table 1.

Although not a key aim of the current study, upon inspection of the descriptive statistics we did notice possible differences for the entire sample in terms of their experiences of economic constraints and marginalization before and after immigrating to the United States. We conducted (1) between economic constraints experiences before immigration and after immigration and (2) marginalization experiences before immigration and after immigration. We found significant differences between marginalization experiences

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of LPA Indicators and Study Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Economic constraints - before	-							
2. Economic constraints - after	.09	-						
3. Marginalization - before	.44**	.02	-					
4. Marginalization - after	.10	.37**	.12	-				
5. Work volition	.13*	-.38**	.09	-.32**	-			
6. Needs	.14*	-.34**	.09	-.26**	.66**	-		
7. Decent work	.11	-.44**	.14*	-.37**	.56**	.70**	-	
8. Years since immigration	.10	.13*	.10	.09	.09	.11	.08	-
M	17.93	16.15	8.95	12.14	19.17	98.70	76.00	11.65
SD	9.02	7.58	5.41	5.38	6.50	21.29	17.42	7.46
N	242	242	242	242	240	219	232	237

Note. $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .05^{*}$.

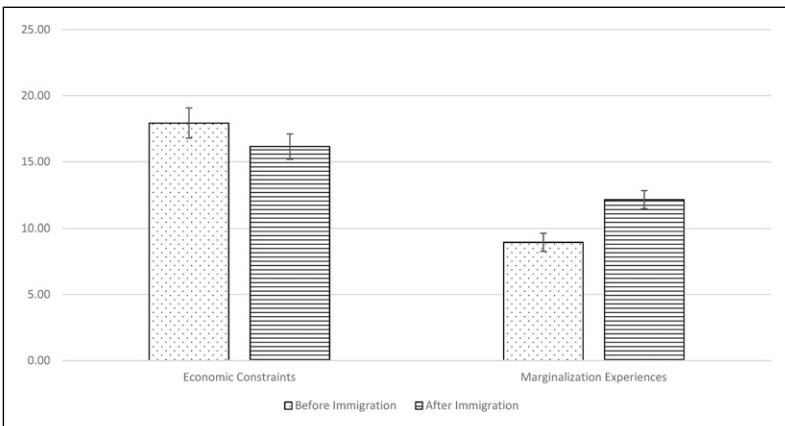


Figure 1. Comparison of Economic Constraints and Marginalization Experiences Before and After Immigration for Total Sample.

Note. 95% confidence interval bars represented.

before immigration ($M = 8.95$, $SD = 5.41$) versus after immigration ($M = 12.14$, $SD = 5.38$), [$Z = -6.393$, $p < 0.001$] and economic constraints before immigration ($M = 17.93$, $SD = 9.02$) versus after immigration ($M = 16.15$, $SD = 7.58$), [$Z = -2.367$, $p = 0.018$]. Participants felt significantly more

experiences of economic constraints and marginalization in the United States than in their country of origin (see [Figure 1](#)).

Latent Profile Analysis of Immigrant Groups

Latent profile analysis (LPA) was conducted to identify different profiles of the immigrant groups using MPlus 8.0. LPA identifies latent subpopulations showing varying degrees of indicators formed as profiles within a population based on variables ([Spurk et al., 2020](#); [Wang & Hanges, 2011](#)). The quantitative criteria used to determine the number of profiles include entropy ([Celeux & Soromenho, 1996](#)), Akaike information criterion (AIC; [Akaike, 1987](#)), Bayesian information criterion (BIC; [Schwarz, 1978](#)), bootstrapped likelihood-ratio test (BLRT; [McLachlan & Peel, 2000](#); [Nylund et al., 2007](#)) and adjusted LMR (Adjusted Lo-Mendell-Rubin test; [Lo et al., 2001](#)).

Lower values from AIC and BIC with higher entropy (1 being a perfect classification; between 0.60 and 0.80 indicated as appropriate) present a better fit ([Clark & Muthén, 2009](#); [Jung & Wickrama, 2008](#)). The model is not indicated as a better fit than the model with one less profile for nonsignificant ($p > 0.05$) results in BLRT or adjusted LMR. Profiles were first generated by assessing the quantitative criteria and examined qualitatively among the researchers to determine the final LPA profile model. Specifically, in their review of LPA techniques, [Spurk et al. \(2020\)](#) suggested using researcher expertise to make final determinations on profile construction if several solutions are statistically similar. In the present study, the LPA indicators were economic constraints before immigration (ECB), economic constraints after immigration (ECA), marginalization experiences before immigration (MB),

Table 2. Comparison of Models in Latent Profile Analyses

Model	Entropy	AIC	BIC	SABIC	Log likelihood	LMR LRT p	Bootstrap LRT p
1-profile model		2759.057	2786.968	2761.610	−1371.528		
2-profile model	0.842	2661.118	2706.474	2665.266	−1317.559	0.0000	0.0000
3-profile model	0.779	2634.270	2697.071	2640.014	−1299.135	0.0021	0.0000
4-profile model	0.836	2602.126	2682.371	2609.465	−1278.063	0.0064	0.0000
5-profile model	0.846	2574.283	2671.973	2583.218	−1259.141	0.1374	0.0000

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion, BIC = Bayesian information criterion, LMR = Lo-Mendell-Rubin, LRT = Likelihood-ratio test.

and marginalization experiences after immigration (MA). We used the standardized scores (z-scores) of the indicators for easier comparison of the score differences across the indicators. We ran LPA and generated the quantitative statistics for models with four profiles. The four-profile model was identified as having the best fit using the quantitative criteria (AIC, BIC, entropy, BLRT, and LMR). The results of the quantitative criteria are presented in Table 2. We tested the 5-profile model to evaluate that the 4-profile model was the best fit. A qualitative comparison of the 5-profile model showed two classes (class 4 and 5) which were not exactly replicated, but very similar to each other. Considering the overlap between two classes, the 4-profile solution emerged as the best fit, meeting both quantitative criteria and qualitative criteria, including interpretability, theoretical coherence, parsimony, discrimination, and profile size.

The final profiles are presented in Figure 2. The first group identified had high values on economic constraints and marginalization before immigration, but low values after immigration ($n = 25$, 10.3%). This was named the *Subjective Upward Mobility* group. The second group had low values on all four indicators ($n = 53$, 21.9%) and was named the *Privileged* group. The third group had high values on all four indicators ($n = 71$, 29.3%) and was called the *Underprivileged* group. The fourth group identified participants who had low economic constraints and marginalization prior to immigration, but high values after immigration ($n = 93$, 38.4%). This was named the *Subjective Downward Mobility* group.

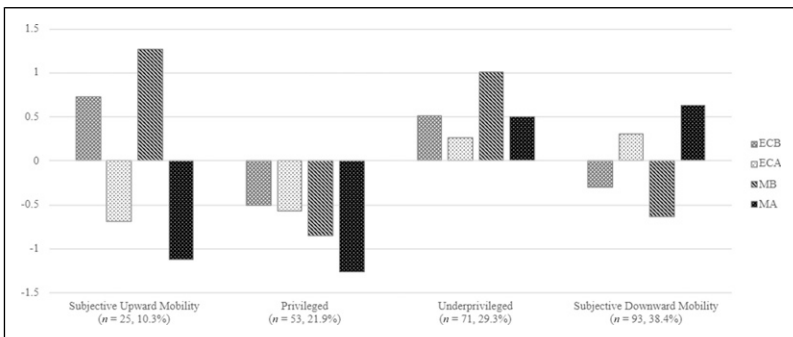


Figure 2. Social Mobility Profiles.

Note. Variables are z-scored for ease of comparison. ECB = before economic constraints, ECA = after economic constraints, MB = before marginalization experience, MA = after marginalization experiences.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Each Profile Group and the Bonferroni Post Hoc Statistics

Profile	1	2	3	4	Post hoc
Work volition	22.36 (5.46)	21.92 (4.99)	18.71 (6.35)	17.08 (6.80)	4 < 1 ; 3, 4 < 2
Need satisfaction	112.13 (13.02)	105.33 (16.34)	96.56 (23.99)	92.87 (21.08)	3, 4 < 1; 4 < 2
Decent work	88.36 (12.76)	83.12 (12.96)	74.70 (18.16)	69.66 (17.15)	3, 4 < 1; 4 < 2
Years since immigration	12.48 (7.09)	9.64 (6.62)	12.29 (7.65)	12.10 (7.80)	-

Note. All post hocs for continuous variables are significant at $p < .05$ with Bonferroni correction. 1 = Subjective Upward Mobility, 2 = Privileged, 3 = Underprivileged, 4 = Subjective Downward Mobility.

Group Differences

The profile group differences among outcome variables were examined using the Kruskal-Wallis test (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952). This test is a nonparametric test that examines different groups among continuous variables not meeting the normality assumptions (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952; Nahm, 2016), and was assessed using SPSS 28.0. Based on the results, the omnibus effects of profile group on work volition $\chi^2(3) = 26.79$, $p < .001$, need satisfaction $\chi^2(3) = 21.36$, $p < .001$, decent work $\chi^2(3) = 37.22$, $p < .001$, and years since immigration $\chi^2(3) = 7.66$, $p = .054$ were significant. Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons were conducted to test the relations between profile groups and outcome variables. As noted in Table 3, results indicated that for work volition, the Subjective Upward Mobility group ($M = 22.36$, $SD = 5.46$) and the Privileged group ($M = 21.92$, $SD = 4.99$) were significantly higher than the Subjective Downward Mobility group ($M = 17.08$, $SD = 6.80$). The Privileged group ($M = 21.92$, $SD = 4.99$) were significantly higher than the Underprivileged group ($M = 18.71$, $SD = 6.35$). For need satisfaction, the Subjective Upward Mobility group ($M = 112.13$, $SD = 13.02$) and the Privileged group ($M = 105.33$, $SD = 16.34$) was significantly higher than the Subjective Downward Mobility group ($M = 92.87$, $SD = 21.08$). Additionally, the Subjective Upward Mobility group ($M = 112.13$, $SD = 13.02$) was significantly higher than the Underprivileged group ($M = 96.56$, $SD = 23.99$). For decent work, the Subjective Upward Mobility group ($M = 88.36$, $SD = 12.76$) and the *privileged* group ($M = 83.12$, $SD = 12.96$) was significantly higher than the Subjective Downward Mobility ($M = 69.66$, $SD = 17.15$). The Subjective Upward Mobility group ($M = 88.36$, $SD = 12.76$) was significantly higher than the Underprivileged groups ($M = 74.70$, $SD = 18.16$). Finally, there were no significant group differences in years since immigration. Chi-squared

test of independence was conducted to compare profile groups across educational attainment and reason for immigration variables. The tests showed that there were no significant differences in profile groups for either of these variables.

Discussion

In the current study, we sampled a diverse group of working adults who had immigrated to the United States and had been living in the United States for an average of approximately 12 years. Our primary goal was to construct profile groups concerning participants' perceptions of being economically constrained and marginalized before and after immigrating. We then used these social mobility groupings to explore how profile membership related to a host of categorical and continuous variables. At a basic level, the results of our study allow for an examination of immigrant subjective social mobility prevalence and type, in particular with our specific sample which was more highly educated. To begin, in the sample as a whole, participants were more marginalized here in the United States than they were in their countries of origin, which is consistent with a meta-analysis study proposing that immigrants tend to experience downward social mobility due to their subjective experiences (Das-Munshi et al., 2012). These results provide evidence corroborating the widely researched idea that the immigrant experience within the United States is commonly associated with heightened levels of marginalization and discrimination (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). Importantly, 10.3% of the sample fell within the subjective upward mobility group, 21.9% of the sample fell within the privileged group, 29.3% of the sample fell within the underprivileged group, and 38.4% of the sample fell within the downward mobility group. Although there is no universally agreed method for examining social mobility, the results highlight the possibility of distinguishing different subjective social mobility types by using the perceptions of economic constraints and marginalization before and after immigration.

Furthermore, nearly four times as many immigrants within our sample fell within the subjective downward mobility group than the upward mobility group. These results indicate it was more common for immigrants sampled to experience higher economic constraints following immigration, perhaps connected to the heightened levels of marginalization experienced after immigration. This finding highlights how common marginalization occurs even with immigrants who are more highly educated, as was our sample. Some researchers proposed that social mobility has not been as prevalent as people generally assumed (Kraus & Tan, 2015). Consistently, some studies have found that the vast majority of their participants did not experience any social mobility (Chetty et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2023; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2012). In comparison, our results demonstrate greater mobility amongst this

sample, with approximately 48.7% showing either upward or downward social mobility. This may suggest that for U.S. immigrants, more mobility exists in general, and unfortunately this mobility was much more likely to be downward in the current sample due to their exacerbated experiences of marginalization and economic constraints.

We looked at several variables that could potentially be linked to profile membership. These included: educational attainment, reason for immigration, and years in the United States. Results indicated that these constructs did not significantly relate to participant's likelihood to be members of a particular subjective social mobility group. This highlights the reality that immigrants in our sample who specifically immigrated for work purposes (and therefore reasons more closely related to economic mobility) were no more likely to find success in attaining upward mobility than those who immigrated for various other reasons (i.e., better life, family, education, and safety) or those with greater educational attainment. Such results suggest that external factors may have a greater relation with immigrants' economic mobility than the personal factors explored in this study, which may be an avenue for future research. Surprisingly, years in the United States also did not relate to their likelihood of being in certain social mobility groups. This might be because the duration of staying in the United States was not an accurate proxy variable to indicate the level of acculturative stress and or vocational opportunities that they could have, which are key factors of vocational development for immigrant workers (Kim, Autin, et al., 2023). We encourage future researchers to consider the subjective variables instead of using the years in the United States as a proxy variable.

PWT variables such as work volition, need satisfaction, and decent work attainment were all significantly related to profile membership. The subjective upward mobility and privileged mobility groups demonstrated higher work volition, need satisfaction, and decent work than the underprivileged and downward mobility groups. This indicates that an increase in economic constraints and marginalization was related to lower instances to satisfy needs and finding work that respects the rights of immigrants within our sample. These associations are consistent with research on U.S.-born populations experiencing high and low levels of economic marginalization (Duffy et al., 2020). Overall, such results as those discussed above align with key PWT propositions and point to the deleterious effects that experiencing both marginalization and economic constraints can have on experiences in the world of work.

Limitations

The current study and associated results need to be considered in light of several limitations, which may offer directions for future research. First, our

sample was small, which occurred due to our research team having limited access to gather a larger sample of U.S. immigrants. Although this sample size was sufficient for our analyses (Spurk et al., 2020), the findings and implications need to be considered with caution and future studies should attempt to gather much larger samples. Second, we gathered participants solely through internet surveys, and recruited more privileged immigrant workers. Although the sample was diverse in ethnicity, most participants had obtained college or advanced degrees and been in the U.S. for an average of 11.65 years. The overrepresentation of samples with college or advanced degrees may be because more privileged immigrants may have greater access to internet surveys (Yoon et al., 2023). Third, we did not gather data about their documentation status, which is another limitation that restricted us from identifying the interlocking privilege and marginalization that our participants faced. This may contribute to the difficulty of generalizing the results to the overall immigrant population based on the lack of documentation status information. Because 40% of low-wage immigrant workers are undocumented (Capps et al., 2003), future studies should consider using different research methodologies for immigrants from marginalized communities, such as collaborating with immigrant communities (Hernández et al., 2013).

Fourth, we recommend exploring the lives of immigrants who experience intersectional multiple forms of marginalization (e.g., the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and documentation status). Immigrants who face intersectional marginalization are more vulnerable to internal, interpersonal, and structural barriers in their vocational development, such as wage discrimination and limited career decisions of immigrants of Color (Kim, Autin, et al., 2023; Rosenblum et al., 2016), linguistic marginalization in their career development of immigrants of Color whose English is not fluent (Garrison et al., 2023), and lack of access to career-related resources due to the fear of deportation after disclosure of their undocumented status (Buenavista, 2018). Finally, we assessed immigrant's feelings of economic constraints and experiences of marginalization retrospectively versus actually having this data when they were living in their initial country. A much stronger study would be able to track these experiences across time in real time, assessing how immigrants feel in the United States and having them complete surveys while in their initial country.

Implications for Practice, Advocacy, Education and Training, and Research

Practice. The findings of this study have several implications for counseling and vocational psychologists alike who work closely with the immigrant populations, in particular those who may have higher educational attainment. First, experiences of marginalization for our sample were higher after

immigration. This result shows immigrants experience a great deal of marginalization in the United States in general, most likely due to wide reaching systems of oppression that affect immigrants regardless of other social status indicators (d'Abreu et al., 2021; Misra et al., 2021; Nilsson & Jorgenson, 2021; Sanchez et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2023). It would be important for psychologists working with this population to be cognizant of the systems of oppression that compromise this population's work experience and mental and physical health. Second, different mobility types were found in the present study. It is generally believed that immigrants move to the United States for the "American dream", but the reality of what many immigrants experience may differ from this common aspiration (Kraus & Tan, 2015). Only 9.8% of participants were in the subjective upward mobility group and 37.4% were in the subjective downward mobility group in this study. Those in the downward mobility group reported having less volition in their career decision making, being less likely to have their basic needs met at work, having less decent work. Not only in working adults, but immigrant youth also experience less freedom to develop career goals and lack opportunities to attend college due to their low socioeconomic familial status (Hill et al., 2003). Thus, practitioners should consider the potential discrepancy in what their clients may have expected before immigration and the reality after immigration. It would also be helpful to consider the impact of the clients' shifts in social status (i.e., economic constraints and marginalization) after immigration on their career-related experiences and overall mental and physical health in both working adults and youths from immigrant family backgrounds.

Advocacy. From a larger advocacy perspective, our findings can inform how counseling psychologists may be able to better work with their clients situated within larger systems. One key avenue at the individual level involves the validation of oppression and marginalization that are likely happening due to the U.S. system clients occupy versus any internal, individual attributions. A second avenue for counseling psychologists to consider is moving outside of the therapy room and being more involved in broad advocacy efforts to improve the working lives and conditions of U.S. immigrants. At a local level, this may involve boosting recruitment and retention efforts of immigrant employees, as well as ensuring onboarding into new organizations is as easy as possible. Psychologists can have a role in creating outreach programs for immigrant workers to share their concerns, learn how to connect to resources in the community, and increase their critical consciousness that social mobility is not based on individual issues but based on broad systemic issues. Also, this may involve becoming involved in organizations that promote pay equity and fair treatment for immigrant workers, ideally leading to larger policy changes effecting a broad array of individuals. In addition, psychologists can support immigrant youths' career goals by collaborating with the academic advisors to

monitor their class credits and develop career plans by helping them connect with academic resources (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009).

Education and Training. The results of this study may also have implications for education and training. It is common that counseling psychology trainees will work with immigrants—either as college students or working adults—who present with career related concerns. Our results suggest that at least for working adults, these concerns may stem from experiences of economic constraints and marginalization within a larger system. As such, it is imperative that trainers educate students on larger structural and system factors that have major effects on how marginalized individuals experience the world. This often means moving beyond the typically individually focused psychological curriculum to bring in reading and training from scholars and practitioners who have a more sociological lens on human behavior. Educating students with a comprehensive understanding of the macro-level of sociocultural factors will support the development of a holistic view of the career development process for immigrant working adults and youth.

Research. Finally, the results of our study may have implications for researchers who continue to conduct studies using a PWT lens as well as scholars interested in immigrant populations. From a PWT perspective, these findings point to the important distinction between experiencing marginalization and economic constraints at different time points of one's life. It may benefit future researchers to not assume these experiences are the same across the lifespan, and instead assess them over specific periods of time. From an immigrant perspective, these findings point to the importance of measuring experiences of marginalization, even for those who have secured higher levels of education or prestigious employment. Although some immigrants may attain affluent economic status through upward social mobility, the degree of marginalization experienced may differ. Interviewing and analyzing the stories of the working immigrant population will provide more insight into subjective social mobility experiences. Given how systems of oppression work in the United States, it was clear that even for our educated sample marginalization was still very prevalent and damaging. Future researchers are advised to continue trying to understand the lives of working immigrants, especially those the study failed to adequately capture—immigrants with less educational attainment.

Conclusion

In the present study, we aimed to understand the experiences of subjective social mobility and work-related outcomes of the immigrants after moving to the United States. As a result, four groups of subjective social mobility

(upward mobility, privileged, underprivileged, and downward mobility) were identified. Overall, the downward mobility group experienced less work volition, need satisfaction, and decent work compared to other groups, especially those with sustained privilege or those who experienced upward mobility. These results offer novel insights on immigrant's experiences of mobility, and how this translates to experiences in the world of work.

Author's Note

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