

# The Relationship Between Childhood Socioeconomic Status, Upward Mobility, and Psychological Stress

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## Background

- Low socioeconomic status (SES) in childhood is a major risk factor for poor health in adulthood (Gilbert et al., 2015).
- The detrimental effects of early life poverty on health persist even when people achieve upward socioeconomic mobility (Miller & Chen, 2013).
- Recent research finds that upwardly mobile adults have even **worse health** than individuals who maintain a low SES throughout their lives (Chen et al., 2022).
- Excessive psychological stress unique to the experience of upward mobility might contribute to this effect.

## Hypothesis

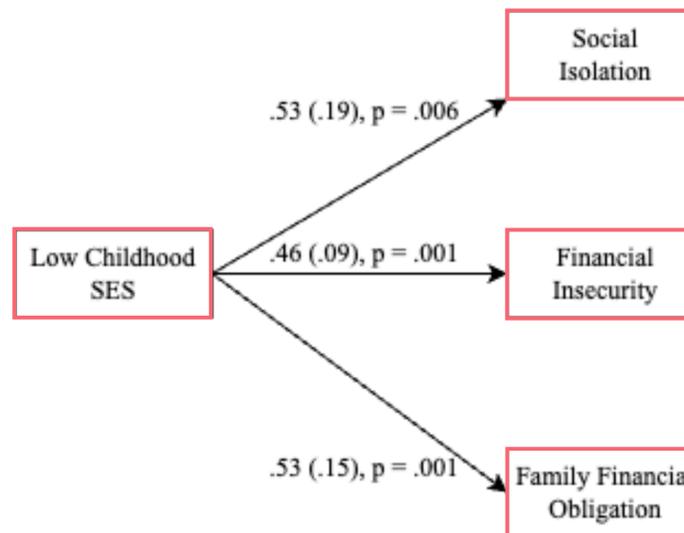
We predicted that upward mobility would cause greater psychological stress in adults from low SES childhood environments, compared to adults with high childhood SES.

## Method

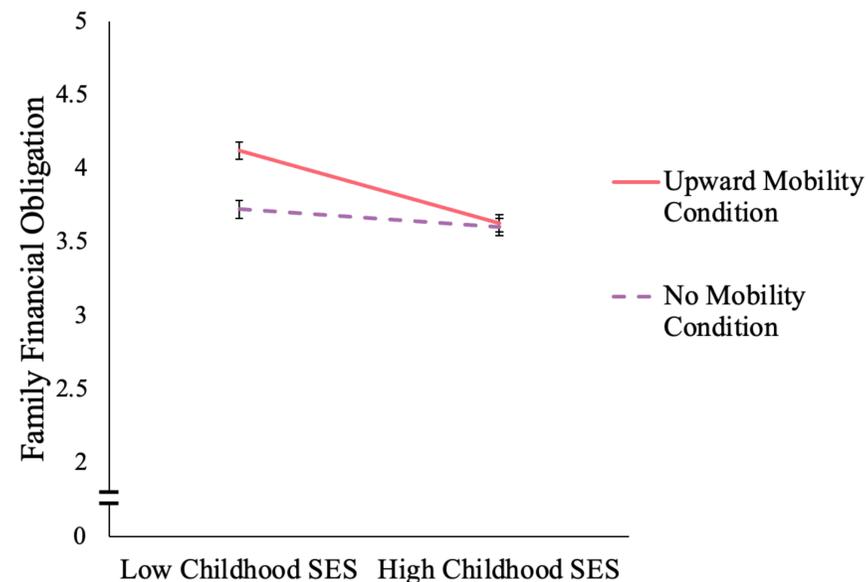
- Upward socioeconomic mobility was experimentally manipulated in a sample of undergraduate students ( $n = 129$ ) and in a sample of both current and non-college students ( $n = 384$ ).
- Participants were randomly assigned to imagine and describe their life at a significantly higher SES than their childhood environment (upward mobility condition) or at a similar SES to their childhood (no mobility condition).
- Participants rated their stress, based on common challenges reported in previous interviews with adults who have achieved upward mobility.



## Stress in Upwardly Mobile Students



## Upward Mobility Stress in Adults



## Results

- Compared to undergraduate students from high SES backgrounds, students with low childhood SES reported greater social isolation, financial insecurity, and financial obligation to support their family or origin.
- In both current and non-college students, upward mobility caused an increased burden of family financial obligation, specifically among people with low childhood SES.
- Childhood SES was not associated with financial strain in the no mobility condition.

## Conclusions

- Upwardly mobile college students experience greater psychological stress than their peers from high SES backgrounds.
- In particular, adults with low childhood SES feel obligated to financially support their families when they achieve upward mobility.
- In addition to physiological impacts of low childhood SES, psychological stress associated with upward socioeconomic mobility may contribute to poor health outcomes in people who achieve higher adult SES.

## References

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