American Psychologist

ISSN: 0003-066X

2021, Vol. 76, No. 6, 904–916
https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000881

The Cultural Dynamics of Declining Residential Mobility

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We discuss the cultural power of changes in nation-level residential mobility. Using a theoretically informed analysis of mobility trends across the developed world, we argue that a shift from a culture full of people moving their residence to a culture full of people staying in place is associated with decreases, among its residents, in individualism, happiness, trust, optimism, and endorsement of the notion that hard work leads to success. We use the United States as a case study: Although the United States has historically been a highly-residentially mobile nation, yearly moves in the United States are halved from rates in the 1970s and quartered from rates in the late 19th century. In the past four decades, the proportion of Americans who are stuck in neighborhoods they no longer wish to live in is up nearly 50%. We discuss how high rates of mobility may have originally shaped American culture and how recent declines in residential mobility may relate to current feelings of cultural stagnation. Finally, we speculate on future trends in American mobility and the consequences of a society where citizens increasingly find themselves stuck in place.

Public Significance Statement
This article examines the role that residential mobility may play in shaping cultural values. We discuss how residential mobility may foster an ethos built on dynamism, optimism, and the belief that hard work leads to success; we examine the relationship between shifting levels of mobility and feelings of optimism, well-being, trust, and individualism; and we speculate about how American culture, one specifically formed by mobility, may continue to change as more and more residents find themselves stuck in place.

Keywords: cultural change, relational mobility, residential mobility

> Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. . . . Movement has been its dominant fact. (Turner, 1921, p. 37)

Culture consists of "explicit and implicit patterns of historically derived and selected ideas and their embodiment in institutions, practices, and artifacts" (Adams & Markus, 2004, p. 341). As cultural diversity in the self, emotion, cognition, and behavior have become more central in psychological science (Heine, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989), researchers have increased their focus on the factors underlying the stability and change of cultures (see Kashima et al., 2019; Varnum & Grossmann, 2017; for recent reviews). The present article focuses on one particular factor underlying cultural change: changes in residential mobility, or the percentage of residents who changed their residence in a certain period of time. We review evidence demonstrating that a more mobile society, characterized by repeated interactions with strangers and an inability to access the deep social history of a place, creates socioecological conditions that are associated with individualism, optimism, and tolerance, whereas a more stable society, in which everyone knows everyone and has for years, if not generations, is associated with stability, security, and a strong sense of the difference between ingroups and outgroups. By dint of the differential circulating of people through a society, high levels of

Editor's note. This article is part of the special issue "Psychological Perspectives on Cultural Change" published in the September 2021 issue of *American Psychologist*. Michael E. W. Varnum and Igor Grossmann served as guest editors of the special issue, with Lillian Comas-Díaz as advisory editor.

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residential mobility can facilitate the formation of a truly national culture (e.g., Choi & Oishi, 2020; Oishi, 2010).

What happens, then, when mobility levels change within a society? How does it shift a culture? We use the experience of the United States as a test case. Once characterized by its residential mobility, the United States is in the midst of a decades-long slowdown in mobility, with 2020 shaping up as the most residentially stable year on record, nearly halved from rates in the 1970s (Foster, 2017). Along with this decline has come a near-doubling in the number of Americans who feel trapped in their neighborhoods, wanting to move but finding themselves unable to follow through (Foster, 2018). Based on the literature on the effects of residential mobility reviewed, we would expect that Americans today should be less individualistic, less trusting, unhappier, more insular, less risk-taking, more cynical, more suspicious, and more pessimistic than those in the past. Looking both at contemporaneous cultural production and at long-running survey data, we find evidence that this is, in fact, the case. Building a stronger case for a causal role of changing mobility, we present evidence from a suite of industrialized nations, as well as results from researchers conducting agent-based simulation models, finding that when mobility is higher in society, so too is individualism, trust, optimism, a sense of individual freedom, and a sense that hard work leads to success.

Finally, after discussing limitations and future directions in this work, we speculate about the future of a United States where current trends continue—a nation where only the rich are able to move freely and where more and more people are stuck in place—and on what sorts of events may shift the nation back toward the openness and dynamism that has been its historical calling card.

Cultural Dynamics

How and why do cultures change? Cultural dynamics have been often conceptualized in two ways. One approach focuses on the ways that ideas and practices enhance success in a given environment[1] (Kashima et al., 2019). For instance, the agricultural practice of the turnips-barley-clover-wheat rotation spread in the 18th century England because it increased crop production (Allen, 2008). Similarly, some cultural changes are results of adaptive responses to changing ecological pressure (e.g., Sng et al., 2018; Varnum & Grossmann, 2017). Researchers argue, for example, that the cultural norm of tightness (strict rules and regulations) and punitive religious beliefs spread in tandem with environmental and societal challenges such as natural disasters or infectious disease because tightness increases social order and punitive religious beliefs encourage large-scale cooperation, which both help a society navigate these difficult situations (Jackson et al., 2021).

Although many cultural changes related to ideas and technology have clear adaptive and communicative advantages (Fast et al., 2009; Schaller et al., 2002), some cultural changes arise out of changes in the sorts of behaviors that an environment allows. For instance, the number of multigenerational households has decreased in the United States (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015) and in Japan (Ogihara, 2017; see also Hamamura, 2012), not because living alone is more adaptive but in part simply because more people could afford to live independently of their parents. Indeed, during the 2008 recession there were widespread reports of divorced couples being forced to live together, not by choice but because they simply could not afford to live separately (https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Parenting/story?id=6913228&page=1). In a similar vein, one can look at increases in the use of individualism-related words such as "individual," "self," and "unique," and decreases in collectivism-related words such as "obliged" and "obedience" (Greenfield, 2013), as a reflection of increases in average occupational status and education among Americans (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015). As fewer Americans needed to oblige someone in their everyday lives, Americans became less obliging.

The Case of Residential Mobility

The extant literature on cultural dynamics has rarely examined changes in residential mobility, despite substantial empirical work in psychology (e.g., Adam, 2004), sociology (Gillespie, 2016), anthropology (Goldschmidt, 1971), and political science (Orbell & Uno, 1972). In the sections that follow, we lay out research that suggests how residential mobility puts pressure on a society, shifting both its adaptive functions and environmental affordances.

Reforming Yourself Anew—Mobility and Individualism

Residential mobility reshapes the ways that people are able to understand each other, forcing them to interact as individuals instead of using the shorthand that comes from sharing a deep history (Oishi, 2010). Moving to a new place breaks a myriad of social bonds, including bonds of kinship and bonds of community, as a mover necessarily leaves one's prior social networks, including parts of one's family behind.

In the act of replacing these broken bonds, residential mobility forces an individual to recreate themselves among strangers; to quickly build a reputation and make friends; to navigate a world on one's own merits, without relying on one's kin; all in the knowledge that should they move again, the social work they had put in would be lost (Oishi, 2010). In a residentially stable world, a person has the luxury of

[1] Of course, cultural adaptation is not perfect, as there have been ideas and practices that were popular for a long time yet ultimately not fitness-enhancing, such as blood-letting or foot-binding. There is also randomness in culture, as in nature (e.g., random mutations).

defining themselves as part of a set of overlapping roles and lineages, all of which are likely legible to a local observer, whereas in a residentially mobile world, a person is on their own. People who have been relocated more often in their early lives are more likely to think of their core self as defined by context-free personality traits (i.e., "I am hard-working" or "I am intelligent") than being defined in terms of contextually-grounded interrelationships (i.e., "I belong to a sorority" or "I write for the newspaper") and have better interactions when they feel that their interaction partner has grasped something about their personality than something about their personal roles (Oishi et al., 2007).

Scholars have speculated that the basic idea of having an individual self, distinct from one's social roles, is an outgrowth of changes in economic structure leading to increased residential and occupational mobility. Europeans lived exceedingly stable lives before the Middle Ages, where the role to which you were born was the role in which you died and the role by which everybody knew you. People simply thought of themselves *as* their roles, as a farmer or as a mother, say, and sought meaning in the fulfillment of those assigned duties (Taylor, 1989). With the rise of mobility, however, came a partial erasure of those roles—in leaving a place you were able to obscure your origins and present yourself as something other than had been preordained by birth. By opening up a space between one's self and one's societal place, and by forcing people to make a distinction between the thing a person presents themselves as and the thing that they fundamentally are, mobility laid the groundwork for the historical development of the individual self (Baumeister, 1987; see Goldschmidt, 1971 for similar arguments about selfhood in non-European populations).

Choosing Your Friends—Residential and Relational Mobility

Living in a residentially mobile world means living with social volatility. Instead of working to build a limited number of deep friendships, which leaves one potentially vulnerable to losing a major part of one's friendship network should either party move, it may make more sense to build a larger number of less-intense friendships, more robust to any one person's relocation (Oishi & Kesebir, 2012). Through this act of seeking out new friendships, a clustering of the residentially mobile can create a society in which there are lots of people looking for lots of relatively low-commitment friends (Thomson et al., 2018). This may create a high level of what is known as relational mobility, defined as the ease that people feel that they have to enter into new relationships and leave old ones behind. In a less relationally mobile society, people are thrown into social networks by the circumstances of their lives—by where they live, by their class or role in society, by their family ties, and so on. In a more relationally mobile society, by contrast, people can actively choose the people they connect with and can form relationships based on shared interests, romantic attraction, or mere whim and caprice (see Yuki & Schug, 2020 for a review).

If one has more potential relationship partners, the competitive pressures of operating in a deeper "friendship market" for relationships may alter the way that they interact with others (see Barclay, 2016 for a review). In such a rich market, one has to actively compete for friends. This means that the first impression one generates becomes key (Falk et al., 2009), and both small-group simulations and experiments show, for example, that when it is easier for people to form new ties and break old ones, they are more likely to cooperate with others to avoid being ostracized, with even the mere threat of relationship change enough to increase cooperation (Bednarik et al., 2014).

Group Selections—Mobility and Inter/Intragroup Relations

A society made up of the residentially and relationally mobile coheres differently than one made up of people who never end up moving. People who have just moved to a place may be less interested in coming together for long-term action and may be less interested in investing in their communities. Whether because they may not yet be fully integrated into their new locale, because they may not have built up the necessary social capital, or because they are foreseeing a time when they may leave a place, they may be less willing to sink resources into something they will not be able to see come to fruition (Oishi et al., 2007). More residentially stable areas, by contrast, show a stronger sense of collective efficacy in coming together to solve social problems (Sampson et al., 1997).

Being less rooted in a community or set of organizations, however, frees up people from worrying quite as much about the approbation of their neighbors (e.g., Wu et al., 2016). If someone lives in the same place for the bulk of their life, one major misstep can affect their reputation for years, if not generations, while having a bad reputation matters much less when the people holding these opinions can simply be left behind (Hruschka & Henrich, 2006). Similarly, if one can only choose from among the same small set of social partners, one will have to continue to interact with them no matter what, so maintaining their collective good opinion is vital; but if one can easily abandon old groups, then one can always just leave haters behind (San Martin et al., 2019). Research, for example, shows that those who are more relationally mobile are less likely to feel shame—the emotion triggered by social control (Sznycer et al., 2012) and are less sensitive to social rejection (Sato et al., 2014). Residential and relational mobility, in other words, lead to a greater sense of behavioral freedom and a live-and-let-live approach to policing the behaviors of others.

This easy-come-easy-go sense of the world extends to other groups that a person may wish to join. If people will be joining a group for just a few years then moving on, or if the lynchpin of a group is liable to leave at any moment, then organizations that require profound investment of time and resources to join and maintain may be especially fragile (Oishi et al., 2015). This freedom to enter and exit groups is likely to lead to a de-emphasis on the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups: Those who have moved more have an increased willingness to help outgroups at the expense of their ingroup (Li et al., 2019), and those who have moved more, who live in more mobile areas, and who live in a more relationally-mobile society tend to trust those they do not really know, whereas those who live in a more residentially stable society are more likely to distrust outsiders (Li, 2017; Yamagishi, 1998).

A more mobile society, then, is theoretically one that is less rooted in specific places, in which people are more free to express themselves and in which people extend each other the benefit of the doubt. It is a society where people are more interested in abstract rules of behavior than on the benefits that accrue to specific ingroups and outgroups. However, a more mobile society finds it harder to come together to solve problems (Oishi et al., 2007), and can be more interested in shallow appearance than deep interpersonal communion (Oishi et al., 2012). Moreover, residential mobility and the pressures of recreating one's life brings its own psychological costs, with movers tending to be more anxious, unhappier, more impulsive, and lonelier, with worse educational and health outcomes, than those who have chosen a residentially stable life (see Choi & Oishi, 2020 for a review). Mobility, in other words, can bias a society toward anomic cosmopolitanism, while a more stable society trends toward social cohesion.

Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay—How Mobility Actively Shapes Society

A more mobile society also differs from a more stable society simply by means of differential selection. Not everyone is interested in uprooting their lives in hopes of something better elsewhere—movers need to be able to imagine that their new life will be better than the old (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016). Nonmovers are more risk-averse, generally speaking, than movers (Clark & Lisowski, 2017), and nonmovers tend to be less open to new experiences than movers are (Jokela, 2009). A mover, someone willing to break their current social ties in favor of rebuilding on their own elsewhere, is also likely to be more individualistic than is a nonmover (Kitayama et al., 2006; Knudsen, 2019). The very act of relocating can deepen these differences—for example, a longitudinal study found that college students who did study abroad were both initially more open to experience than those who did not, and that this gap widened over time (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013); and moving leads to movers, already more likely to aspire to a better life, to double down harder on those goals (Czaika & Vothknecht, 2014).

The shift of ambitious, open, individualists from one place to another has an impact on both the communities that people come from and the ones that they move to. The places that people tend to migrate to take on the personality of their immigrants, becoming more individualistic in the process (Kitayama et al., 2006), which then draws more people with similar personalities, creating a self-sustaining cycle that shapes even the personalities of current residents (e.g., Jokela, 2020). As individualists in a society leave, those who remain are likely to be less individualist and, and so the movement of individualists, by their absence, tilts their old society away from individualism (Knudsen, 2019).

Mobility does not have to be chosen to shape a society. Even forced mobility may have some similar cultural consequences, albeit for somewhat different reasons. Take, for example, one residue of American slavery. A key element of the American chattel slavery system in place until the end of the Civil War was the slave auction, in which individual or small groups of people were sold and then wrested away from their previous communities and extended families (e.g., Kolchin, 1993). Those who were enslaved therefore had to frequently adapt to new social situations and form new family structures, all of which could be sundered by the actions of their enslavers (e.g., DuBois, 1909; Malone, 1992). As a consequence of this upheaval, one might then expect a more individualist ethos to take hold, as the ties and shared contexts that would help to form a more collectivist approach would be stifled by slaveholders. There may be some evidence for the residue of this process in contemporary African American society: A large meta-analysis shows that African American participants have far higher rates of individualism than European American participants, even while participants from African countries in the set of studies were more collectivistic and less individualistic than those from European ones (Oyserman et al., 2002).

Finally, the act of mobility itself may also help to forge a pan-national ethos. As they arrive in a new place or travel back home, migrants bring with them the successful social adaptations they have learned elsewhere, allowing such adaptations to spread throughout a population (e.g., Kitayama et al., 2010; Wilkerson, 2010). At the same time, in their search for familiarity among the chaos of a new environment, the residentially mobile also promote a homogenization of their new communities—research, for example, shows that there are far more chain stores in residentially mobile parts of America (Oishi et al., 2012). By allowing new innovations to freely-circulate throughout a nation, and by encouraging their new communities to change to fit their needs, movers can create a national, not just a regional, culture.

The Case of the United States of America

The United States of America provides a test case for the cultural power of residential mobility. From the very beginning of

its history, the United States has been characterized by a willingness and ability to move to find a better life (e.g., von Friedeburg, 1995). White Americans of the 18th and 19th centuries moved houses and communities to an almost unfathomable degree. Throughout the 19th century, as many as 40% of Americans may have moved year over year. For example, in one Illinois county, only about 20% households living there in 1840 stayed to 1850; in a different Ohio city, only 7% of people voted in both the 1850 and 1860 elections in the same district; in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston, only half of household heads enumerated in 1880 could be found in 1890; and in New York City, "Moving Day," the First of May, was an unofficial city holiday (Fischer, 2002). A generation later, the same process was repeated with the Great Migration of Black Americans, in which an estimated six million people moved between around 1915 to 1970 (likely more than half of the Black population in the United States), leaving the Jim Crow South for a new life among strangers in the North and West (Wilkerson, 2010).

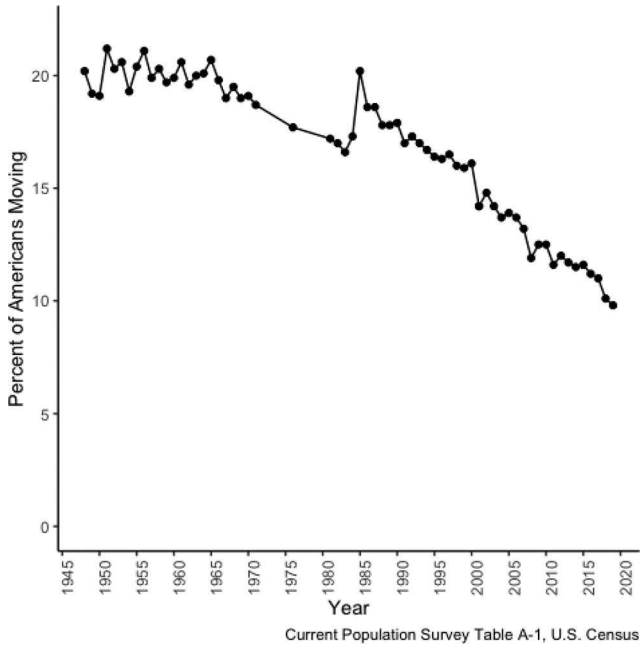
American culture shows the residue of this mobility. The picture of a nation full of friendly individualists who are welcoming to strangers, who are able to connect with others based on their interests, who are open to new experiences, who judge each other on the content of their character but also who believe that abstract moral principles must apply to all people, not just those in certain groups or places, and who therefore strive to be a shining city on a hill setting an example that all can and should follow, is one familiar from the high-minded rhetoric of American political leaders (e.g., Kennedy, 1961; Reagan, 1989).

Americans, in fact, are among the most individualistic people in the world (Hofstede Insights, 2020), highly trusting of strangers (Torpe & Lolle, 2011), strong believers in egalitarianism, (Hofstede Insights, 2020), optimistic about what the future will bring (Gallup, 2020), risk-taking, and entrepreneurial (Shane, 1993). Americans historically tend to believe, to a degree unmatched by other nations, that big societal problems can be solved simply through technology (e.g., Segal, 2017)—in 2018, a full 91% agreed that "science and technology will help improve life for the next generation" (Gallup, 2020).

Americans are also unusually religious compared with other industrialized countries (Fahmy, 2018)—more likely to believe that there is a higher power that is judging everyone equally. This universalism extends beyond religion, as Americans seem unusually-likely to believe that all people, everywhere, are essentially the same (see Henrich et al., 2010) and to believe that what has worked well for Americans, socially, economically, technologically, and politically, should be directly applied to people around the world without regard to the local context (e.g., Immerwahr, 2019).

As shown in Figure 1, in recent decades, however, residential mobility has slowed. The percentage of Americans moving from one address to another has decreased almost

Figure 1
Annual Rate of American Residential Mobility, 1948–2020



50% since 1970 (Foster, 2017; see also Fischer, 2002), leaving the United States as merely average in its mobility among industrialized peers (Alvarez & Liseke, 2021). Whereas in the 1800s, up to 40% of Americans may have moved residences in a year (Fischer, 2002), by 2019 only 9.8% changed addresses according to the U.S. Census' Current Population Survey (United States Census, 2020), making it the most residentially static year on record.

Who Moves, Who Doesn't, and Why?

When trying to understand patterns of residential mobility, it helps to think both about *who* is moving and *why* they want to move (e.g., Alvarez & Liseke, 2021). Some groups in society, such as the young and unattached, are more likely to be mobile (e.g., Bernard et al., 2014), and so as a population ages, leaving fewer young people in the composition, migration rates themselves decline simply because the prime movers make up a smaller fraction of the population. Within the United States, however, demographic shifts explain a fairly limited proportion of the recent decline in overall mobility (Foster, 2017).

Instead, some researchers suggest that mobility can be modeled as a process of diffusion and so is higher when there are large disparities of opportunity within a nation, as people rush from areas of low opportunity to areas of high opportunity, and is lower when opportunities are more evenly distributed throughout (Greenwood, 1975). Changes in the overall labor market that have made it harder for people to switch jobs have had a strong effect on American mobility (Molloy

& Smith, 2019). Similarly, the increase in dual-earner households has also made it harder for people to move, as the difficulty of solving the two-body problem can make it hard to find satisfactory jobs in a new locale (Mincer, 1978). Furthermore, an increase in Internet penetration and the rise of remote work may additionally allow people all the benefits of a nationwide job search without having to undergo a costly set of moves (Cooke & Shuttleworth, 2018).

Moving, after all, *is* a costly process, and so a prospective move is reliant on having the financial resources to relocate, the prospect of a better job to move to, and being able to both sell one's house (if one isn't a renter) and finding new accommodations in one's new community (e.g., Molloy et al., 2017). A rise in American housing prices and an increase in income inequality that has concentrated more wealth into fewer American hands (therefore leaving the rest of the nation with fewer resources with which to finance a move) are both implicated in declines in American residential mobility (Bayoumi & Barkema, 2019).

For an individual, the act of moving or staying in place is a complicated one—people have to want to move, have the resources to move, and have somewhere to move to—and the many stages of the decision do not always line up (Carling & Schewel, 2018). Often, however, staying in place is an active choice. Most people like where they live: 66% of respondents in the 2015 Gallup World Poll agreed that the area in which they lived was ideal for them, and 74% of Americans in the 2016 Gallup Daily Tracking Poll agreed that their current domicile was ideal for themselves and their family (Gallup, 2020). People stay where they are because they like the neighborhood, have relatives close by, are secure in their social relationships, feel connected to local values, have a job that they enjoy—and may think that moving to a new place, where they may not have a job lined up or may not feel at home in the culture, is simply not worth the risk (see Schewel, 2020 for a review). Not moving, in other words, can either be something that someone positively chooses or it can be something that is imposed from outside.

Many Americans, unfortunately, still want to move but find that urge stifled. Instead of being free to relocate as they like, they are increasingly stuck in places they no longer wish to be. According to one analysis, Americans today, relative to those in 1970, are 45% less likely to move when they expected to, and between 1970 and 2011, those who had expressed a desire to move were actually more likely to remain in the places they had intended to leave than to actually have left those places behind (Foster, 2018; Mateyka, 2015). Americans, it seems, are finding themselves increasingly locked into places that they wish to escape.

Theoretical Predictions Regarding the Effects of Declining Mobility

As residential mobility slows down, how might a culture and psychology change in response? We take the United States as a case study, hypothesizing that as the affordances of the social ecology of the country shifts from one rooted in mobility to one rooted in stability, so too will the cultural values of Americans shift away from those fostered by mobility.

We predict that a turn toward residential stasis should change the ways that individuals relate to each other and to their broader communities: If a person hopes to move in the future, we expect that they should spend less time deepening their friendships, as those links could still be severed by the desired move. However, if they do not end up moving, they will be forced to interact with the same small subset of people, and therefore we predict that they should develop the sense that their friendship options are more limited and that they need to conserve the friendships that they already have. Unable to pick groups as easily, this relational stasis should lead, according to theory, to an increase in concern for one's ingroup. In identifying more with one's ingroup, we expect that people should feel increased ethnocentrism and xenophobia and decreased openness. By staying in the same neighborhoods, individuals should, moreover, be presented with the type of repeated long-term interactions with others that create reputations and reputational concerns. Without the social support that comes from deep friendships, these neighborhoods may be getting all the anxiety of social control without the benefits of having confidants to turn to.

Similarly, those still desirous of a move, even if they remain in the same place, may not wish to make the same level of investment in their local communities as those who are happily there for the long term, preventing the development of civic engagement, social capital, and neighborhood efficacy that are traditionally fostered by extended residential stability. If one still thinks that leaving is a possibility, why spend the effort? Even if they did wish to engage, the very ability to form connections with others may be thwarted by the norms, institutions, and environments that were designed for a more mobile society. It may be harder to come together and form deep friendships or high-commitment groups when the existing institutions are already biased toward low-commitment and easy entry and exit. The full relational benefits of living in a highly-stable environment may only be unlocked when the social environment can channel people into repeated, positive interactions (e.g., Schoppa, 2013).

In sum, then, based on the literature on how residential and relational mobility shape the psychology of groups and individuals (e.g., Oishi, 2010; Yuki & Schug, 2020), we would expect this increase in stuck-ness to lead to a decrease in happiness and optimism and an increase in stress, anxiety, and ill-being; a tightening of social norms and an increase in distrust of others; a decrease in individualism and an increase in groupishness; a decrease in civic engagement; and an increased sense that the American experiment is somehow broken.

Indirect Evidence

Historical survey research suggests that these hypothesized changes have in fact been occurring in American society over the previous few decades. When the Gallup Organization started the Gallup World Poll in 2006, American respondents expected that their lives five years later would be quite rosy, ranking in the top four of nations worldwide and just fractionally less optimistic than Brazil, the country with the highest expectations for the future. By 2019, however, Americans had dropped down to 16th internationally, falling behind nations not known for their optimism, such as Switzerland and Saudi Arabia (Gallup, 2020).

As our model predicts, contemporary Americans report more fatigue, anxiety, and depression than their predecessors. Between 1952 and 1993, anxiety increased substantially among American adults and children (Twenge, 2000), and Americans were more depressed and reported feeling more pain and fatigue in 2000 than in 1988 (Twenge, 2015). In 2019, 50% of Americans reported feeling frequently stressed in the previous day—precisely the same levels of stress reported by people living in Iraq (Gallup, 2020).

As expected, Americans today are less trusting of others and less civically oriented than they used to be (Twenge et al., 2014), and American social capital and involvement in civic organizations has been in a steady decline since the late 1960s (Putnam, 2000). As American civic orientation and general trust decreased, egocentrism seemed to have increased. A large college survey, for example, showed that American college students in the 2000s and the 2010s were more likely to attend college to "make more money" than college students in the 1960s and 1970s (Twenge & Donnelly, 2016). With declines in trust and civic engagement have also come a decline in the American taste for risk, as the number of American start-up companies has decreased since the early 2000s (Cowen, 2017).

As trust in strangers has declined in the United States, tribalism has come to replace it. The use of individualist words in the Google nGram corpus—one way of measuring individualist thought—has been decreasing, and collectivist words increasing, since the 1980s (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015). Americans are placing more emphasis on their group identities than in previous decades, and these identities are driving politics in ways that haven't been seen in generations (Sides et al., 2018). Ethnocentrism may be on the rise in the United States, especially among Republicans (e.g., Forscher & Kteily, 2020). Combined with the radical increase in political polarization since the 1970s (e.g., Klein, 2020), the political distinction between ingroups and outgroups has become especially salient and motivating. American politics is now strongly inflected by moralized fear of the opposing political party and willingness to inflict harm on opposing partisans (e.g., Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). Even associating with opposing partisans has become verboten: In 1960; only about 5% of Democrats or Republicans would be at all upset if their child were to marry someone from the other party, but by 2010 a full half of Republicans and a third of Democrats said that they would find that prospect upsetting (Iyengar et al., 2012).

This fear of one's fellow Americans, and sense that they simply do not share the same values, has at least some analogue in the way that they feel about where they live. The idea of breaking up the United States into smaller, more culturally-homogeneous countries is having an intellectual comeback in the 21st century (Kreitner, 2020), and research shows that there is an increasing divide between residentially static and residentially mobile in the degree that they wish to associate with people from different places (Lee et al., 2018; see also Jacobs & Munis, 2020).

A sense of unwanted stasis can lead to a feeling that one's country is somehow not living up to its promise. Americans are increasingly likely to question whether it is possible to succeed in this country by simply working hard (Hanson & Zogby, 2010). In the 1950s, for example, 87% of Americans reported that they agreed that there was plenty of opportunity for the average person to get ahead in life, and that anyone who worked hard could go as far as they wanted. By 2013, only 52% of Americans agreed (Dugan & Newport, 2013). This trend has been noted by the rest of the world—in a 2005 survey of the residents of 16 countries, asking what country they would recommend that a young person should go if they wanted to live a good life, the United States was the leading choice of just one nation, with Canada and Australia far more likely to be nominated as the real land of opportunity (Kohut & Stokes, 2006).

Direct Evidence

Direct Evidence 1: General Social Surveys, 1972–2018

The review of the existing findings has provided some preliminary support for our theoretical predictions. However, this evidence mostly demonstrates that the general trend of declining residential mobility has coincided with general cultural trends, without convincingly ruling-out any potential third-variable explanations. No researchers, to our knowledge, have established that declines in residential mobility are causally linked to these psychological changes.

Using the data from the General Social Survey (GSS), a long-running nationally-representative cross-sectional survey of Americans, we (Buttrick et al., 2021, Study 1) analyzed responses from 1972 to 2018, formally testing whether the declining annual rate of residential mobility indeed predicted a decline in trust, sense of fairness, and happiness among a nationally representative sample of Americans over time. We found that, as residential mobility declined, so too did levels of happiness, fairness, and trust among Americans. At least in the case of happiness, we have evidence that this relationship is causal, with decreased residential mobility Granger-causing

decreased happiness. This relationship was particularly robust when we used the annual rate of interstate mobility—the sorts of big moves that can completely reorient a life. Although the decline in residential mobility coincided with the decline in perceived fairness and trust, by contrast, the associations between mobility and fairness/trust in the United States over the last five decades, in this dataset at least, may be driven by general time trends.

Direct Evidence 2: The Panel Study of Income Dynamics 2005–2015

Over the last 30 years, researchers have shown that only half of prospective movers in the United States were able to actually successfully change residences (Foster, 2018). Worry about the future may be exacerbated by the frustration engendered by one's failure to be able to move. Analyzing more than 16,000 respondents in the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (a large, nationally-representative longitudinal household survey of Americans), we (Buttrick et al., 2021, Study 2) found that reporting wanting to move but remaining at the same address in the next year predicts disbelief in the idea that hard work can help a person get ahead, even controlling for a host of potential third variables such as the rurality of their environment, their socioeconomic status, their health, their religiosity, and their age, gender, marital status, and race. The effect of immobility on cynicism, moreover, gets stronger as people are stuck in the same place for longer. Wanting to move but being unable to leave leads people to wonder about whether their other efforts in life will be rewarded. Actually having made a move, on the other hand, predicts an increased view that one's life is flourishing (that is, that one has greater self-reported purpose in life, more supportive relationships, feeling more engaged in one's daily activities, providing greater happiness to others, feeling capable in important activities, feeling that one is a good person living a good life, being optimistic about the future, and feeling respected) and a decrease in outgroup resentment.

Direct Evidence 3: World Values Survey and the Gallup World Poll

The data we have presented to this point raises the clear question of whether the declining rate of residential mobility is unique to the U.S. or generalized to other developed countries. Alvarez et al. (2021) examined this using OECD data from 1996 to 2018, finding that across this period, some nations have increased their mobility (e.g., Finland, Hungary, and the U.K.), some have decreased their mobility (e.g., Japan, Canada, and Italy), some have stayed relatively stable (e.g., Poland, Korea, and Austria), and some have a more complex relationship with mobility over time (a "U" shape, e.g., The Netherlands, Germany, and Norway; or an "inverted-U" shape, e.g., Spain and Slovakia). These divergent trends provide an empirical opportunity to test whether the psychological correlates of residential mobility we observed in the United States are replicated across a wide variety of industrialized nations.

Buttrick et al. (2021, Study 3) used this same OECD mobility dataset, along with approximately 200,000 participant responses from the Gallup World Poll and the World Values Survey, to answer this question. We found that in years when mobility is higher than average (even controlling for immigration and GDP-per-capita), people in that country are more likely to express individualistic values, to say that they are more optimistic about their future, experience less daily stress, and are more satisfied with their ability to make friends. Furthermore, in years of higher mobility, they are more likely to say that hard work leads to success, to see their community as a better place to start a new business, to feel that they are more free to choose what to do in their lives, to place more trust in outgroups (but not to increase their trust overall), and to have volunteered their time to some organization. Although we cannot say that residential mobility is a causal factor in these data sets, owing to limitations in the underlying data, shifts in residential mobility appear to be associated with our predicted shifts in beliefs across these diverse national contexts.

Direct Evidence 4: Agent-Based Modeling

Because of the limited availability of suitable long-term data sets, some researchers have used computer simulations to examine the role of residential mobility in cultural change. For instance, Macy and Sato (2002) set up an agent-based model that manipulated both the local rate of residential mobility and the size of the community, and then modeled transaction costs, opportunity costs, and the payoff from a partner's cooperation. These simulations found that, as simulated residential mobility moved from 10% of the population (in line with current American rates of mobility) to 30% (more akin to the rates of American residential mobility in the early part of the 20th century), willingness to interact with a stranger and trust in strangers generally both dramatically increased in turn. Similarly, De et al. (2015) manipulated residential mobility in an evolutionary game simulation, testing the success of individualists (who rely on individual-level past information) versus collectivists (who rely on group-level identity). At low mobility rates, "collectivists," who cooperate only with ingroup members, dominated the population. As the mobility rate increased, "individualists," who ignore ingroup status and cooperate with outgroup members, began to dominate. These studies show how mobility may have a causal role inducing more trust and openness toward strangers (see also Hruschka & Henrich, 2006).

In sum, looking across longitudinal and panel survey data, across nationally representative American and international respondents, and across empirical, observational, and simulation-based approaches to understand the cultural effects of changes in residential mobility, we find a consistent set of patterns. When mobility has decreased, or is lower

than normal levels, a culture is a less dynamic place: more risk-averse, more suspicious of outsiders, more groupish, more cynical and more unhappy, with people who feel less free to live their social lives as they see fit.

Difficulties in Studying the Cultural Effects of Mobility

The major element holding back further research on the cultural effects of residential mobility is a lack of reliable underlying data on cross-national historical patterns of mobility. Only relatively industrialized nations appear to collect reliable-enough longitudinal estimates of mobility, meaning that it is far more difficult to model these cultural changes in countries that may have different mobility patterns than those in the OECD. Although we would expect that these findings would generalize across the board, we currently do not have the means to answer this question. American data are the best-preserved that we know of, and even there we see limitations. Although data related to American residential mobility regarding the 18th and 19th centuries do exist in somewhat patchy form (e.g., Fischer, 2002), a reliable annual rate of residential mobility, indexed by the U.S. Census, is available only from 1948. These limited time-series data make it difficult to draw strong conclusions regarding the cultural effects of residential mobility in the longer term.

Furthermore, residential mobility is not an independent force in changing a culture of course—it is one of a set of interlocking socioecological factors that have all been shown to predict cultural change, such as changes in residential settlement patterns (Buttrick et al., 2020; Greenfield, 2013), changes in religiosity, socieoeconomic development, and pathogen prevalence (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015), and changes in economic structure (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Because these factors should all be expected to affect each other (i.e., residential mobility should be affected by increases in national wealth, while also affecting settlement patterns), future work untangling the reciprocal relationships between these factors and the cultures that they create will be of primary importance.

Nevertheless, some trends, at least within the United States, are fairly clear. Whereas some economic indicators show clear cyclical patterns (e.g., unemployment rate, GDP growth rate), the annual rate of residential mobility in the United States, along with trends in American happiness, fairness, and trust, are on a fairly stable decrease from 1948 to 2020. While changes in residential mobility, happiness, fairness, and trust from year to year are small, nevertheless they are fairly consistent, and through this compounding they result in a large change over a longer time period, much like changes in cultural tightness (Jackson et al., 2021), individualism-collectivism (Greenfield, 2013; Grossmann & Varnum, 2015), and moral language (Buttrick et al., 2020).

One promising avenue for future research lies in unpacking the large variations in residential mobility within the United States. For instance, according to the 2000 Census, 57% of residents of Nevada moved in the five years previous, whereas only 35% of Pennsylvania residents changed residences during the same period. Research has shown that these state-level variations in mobility are also associated with regional variations in other constructs: interest in other cultures (De et al., 2015), tightness-looseness (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014), procommunity action (Oishi et al., 2007), the popularity of megachurches (Oishi et al., 2015), and national-chain stores (Oishi et al., 2012). Most relevant to the current analyses, residents of mobile U.S. states reported higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness than those of residentially stable U.S. states ($r = .33$, $p = .02$ in Talhelm & Oishi, 2014). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the general trends we reported above are more applicable to the less mobile parts of the United States.

In future work, it will be important to test (a) whether the decline in mobility leads to declines in happiness at smaller levels of analyses, such as across cities, (b) whether there are exceptions to the general patterns (e.g., where residents of a city are on average becoming happier, even though the mobility of that city is in decline), and (c) if so, what might reverse the link between declining mobility and happiness.

The Future of Residential Mobility?

Barring a remarkable change, the United States seems likely to continue its turn toward residential stasis. The parts of American society that have historically been the most mobile—White men and young people—are the very parts of American society that have showed the largest decreases in mobility over the last thirty years (Foster, 2017). Furthermore, research shows that the longer a person lives in a place, the less likely they are to move (Clark & Lisowski, 2017). Mobility is, in some sense a learned behavior, and those who are moved when young (before the age of 17) are far more likely to move in later life (Bernard & Vidal, 2020). A generation that is raised to stay put is likely to continue on that path, and given that both the youngest and most mobile parts of American society are themselves slowing their moves, and that the peak age at which Americans move is getting ever older (Foster, 2017), it appears that all demographic trends point toward a more rooted America.

Many of the structural forces that drove earlier American mobility, moreover, have weakened, such as the availability of cheap land on the frontier (Hirschman, 2005) and the demand for cheap labor in the North (Tolnay, 2003). Accentuating this diminishment, current American governmental policy puts up many barriers to movement, such as underinvestment in affordable housing and increases in state-by-state occupational licensing (e.g., Kleiner & Krueger, 2013; Yglesias, 2012).

If the United States continues to trend toward a situation where only the wealthier are able and motivated to move (e.g., Foster, 2017), then decreasing mobility may end up further driving the difference between the haves and have-nots. Immobility can trap the poor in badly provisioned neighborhoods, with less pressure on local government to invest in services. Parents in these neighborhoods then have to deal with a neighborhood handicap as they raise their own children, making it harder for these children to gather the resources move to better-provisioned neighborhoods, perpetuating a vicious cycle of stasis (e.g., Sharkey, 2013) that makes it harder for these children to climb the economic ladder (e.g., Chetty et al., 2014). In future work, then, it will be important to further examine whether assisted residential mobility can stop this self-reinforcing cycle (e.g., Ludwig et al., 2013).

There are elements on the horizon, however, that may reverse this trend. Climate change is increasingly altering the landscapes in which people live, making certain places less and less habitable (e.g., Rigaud et al., 2018). Although there is a complex relationship between ecological conditions and human migration, one that scholars are still beginning to unpack (e.g., Shah, 2020), the effects of a changing climate may contribute to a new set of migrations in the not-too-distant future as people flee from areas increasingly buffeted by floods, hurricanes, wildfires, droughts, intense heat, and other climatic events (e.g., Lustgarten, 2020). These displaced people, if given the resources to move (e.g., Molloy et al., 2017), may be increasingly forced into new communities, living among strangers and learning to operate in new environments, recreating themselves, and, potentially, their society.

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Received October 2, 2020
Revision received May 14, 2021
Accepted May 14, 2021 ■