Leuphana Universität Lüneburg

Sufficiency in the Housing Sector

A Qualitative Exploration of Downsizing Practices in the Empty Nest Phase

Master Thesis by Mareike Andert

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Abstract

The social and ecological housing crisis requires a paradigm shift. A central lever is the reduction of the increasing per capita living space with high resource and energy consumption. A relevant target group are empty nesters – people who remain in the family house after their children have moved out. To enable them to downsize, the provision of alternative housing options (AHO) is considered a crucial sufficiency measure, which currently has significant research gaps. This paper analyses the societal conditions that enable people to move from a family house into a smaller dwelling in AHO based on an explorative qualitative interview case study with individuals who have realised downsizing. The results suggest that such downsizing can be conceptualised as a process of various interplaying components, i.e. push and pull factors, overcoming obstacles. While the idea of moving originated at the individual level, its realisation is to be situated at the systemic level. The AHO played a central role in realising the downsizing as a new material infrastructure with a higher quality of life through community and age-appropriate living. A tentative model was developed that can be embedded into existing transformation theoretical notions. Current societal conditions seem to not fully exploit the "AHO" measure. To make it more effective for a transformation, it must be more strongly situated at the systemic level, supported by systemic measures, ensure communal areas and participation and critically address ownership issues. This is discussed in the context of a solidary in contrast to the imperial mode of living.

Keywords

Sufficiency, Social Innovation, Empty Nest Phase, Imperial Mode of Living, Downsizing, Housing

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List of Abbreviations

SFH:	Single-family house (Einfamilienhaus)
DFH:	Double-family house (Zweifamilienhaus)
SDFH:	Single/Double-family house
AHO:	Alternative Housing Options (Ersatz-/Alternativwohnraum)
IML:	Imperial Mode of Living
SML:	Solidary Mode of Living
a.t.	author’s translation
ch.	chapter

1. Introduction

Housing is, on one hand, a human right and must therefore be guaranteed (DIMR, n.d.). However, there are immense social challenges such as adequate and affordable housing (HBS, 2023). On the other hand, housing is one of the main drivers of climate and environmental crises in Germany due to land use, building material, and heating consumption, leading to greenhouse gas emissions (UBA, 2023a), land sealing, and other environmental impacts (Kenkmann et al., 2019, 2024; UBA, 2024d). These are often externalised (Brischke & Bierwirth, 2024) and are socially unevenly distributed (Beermann et al., 2021; EEA, 2022). Due to these high environmental costs (UBA, 2024b), the mode of housing – especially dwelling in large living spaces – can be conceptualised as an expression of an imperial mode of living (IML) (Brand & Wissen, 2017). The IML describes how negative impacts of one's own mode of living are externalised along structurally anchored lines of exploitation and discrimination, and their deep cultural, infrastructural, and institutional entrenchment.

The dominant response to the mentioned environmental impacts is technical approaches aimed at improving efficiency and reducing the negative impacts of housing (e.g. Fischer & Stieß, 2019a). For example, sustainable building materials are to be used, and energy efficiency increased (Audenaert et al., 2012; dena, 2023; Knudstrup et al., 2009; Whang & Kim, 2014). This is relevant but not sufficient, as the following example illustrates: While the energy demand per square meter of living space has decreased over the past, the increased per capita living space counteracts efficiency gains (Figure 1).

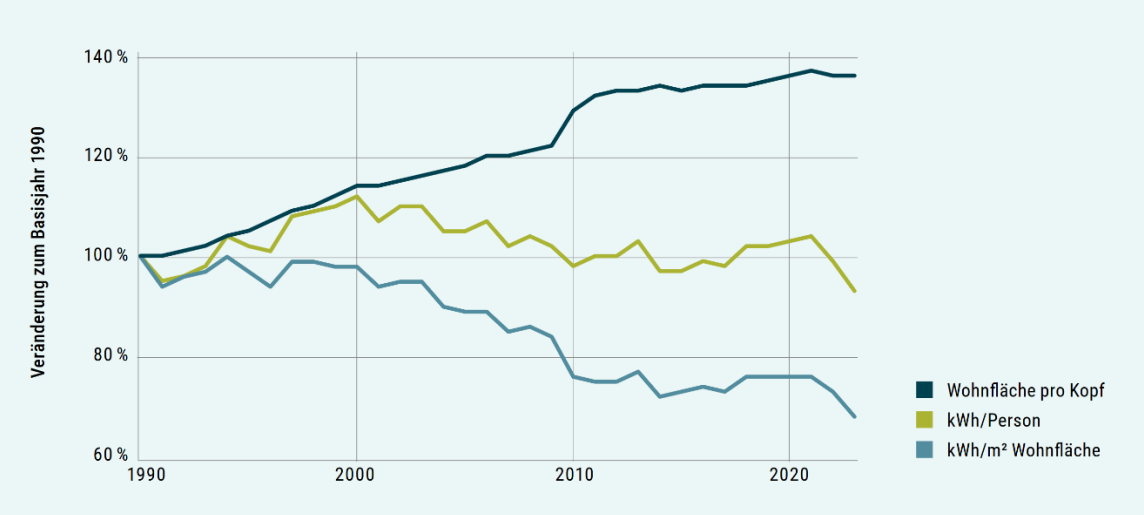

Figure 1: The steadily increasing living space counteracts efficiency gains. Development of heating demand per person, living space per capita, and heating demand per living space for the housing sector in Germany compared to 1990. (Source: EnSu, 2025, p. 9, based on AG Energiebilanzen, 2024; Destatis, 2022).

In addition to such technical solutions, it is necessary to address the social drivers of increasing per capita living space. One of the main reasons for the increasing per capita living space is that parents remain in single-/double-family homes (SDFH) when their children move out, occupying a space that they previously lived in as a family – an empty nest (Kenkmann et al.,

2019, 2023). Due to the baby boomer generation of the 1960s, this empty nest effect is increasingly relevant (Stieß et al., 2019), leading today to nearly 60% of single-family homes (SFH) being occupied by one or two persons (Destatis, 2019b; Loidl & Rehle, 2023). Even though "the challenge has been known since decades and the necessary technological means are available, neither modern architecture nor the institutional setting has been adapted to deal with it" (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019, p. 289). Remaining in the SDFH during the empty nest phase not only has negative ecological but also negative social consequences, as SDFH and their locations are usually age-inappropriate due to e.g., stairs or poor local supply options (e.g. BBSR, 2023; Brischke, 2018; Kenkmann et al., 2023; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019).

Reducing living space is considered essential for transformation (e.g. Fuhrhop, 2023; Gröne, 2018; Lettenmeier et al., 2014; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019; Sandberg, 2018; Stieß et al., 2019, 2022; Thomas et al., 2019) and can be conceptualised as a sufficiency strategy (e.g. Sandberg, 2021). Sufficiency is about reducing consumption and production levels through social innovations and changed social practices while adhering to ecological upper and social lower limits (Lage et al., 2023). Sufficiency has a significant ecological and social lever in housing: less land, material, and energy demand, and enabling age-appropriate living, communal areas, or intergenerational living (e.g. Fuhrhop, 2023; Kenkmann et al., 2023). Sufficiency can thus be used as a far-reaching strategy to enable and normalise downsizing in the empty nest phase and contribute to a solidarity mode of living (SML) (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, 2019b) in contrast to IML. The political level is central for this (Michaelis et al., 2024; Schneidewind et al., 2013; SRU, 2024).

There are numerous sufficiency measure proposals aimed at promoting a reduction in living space, such as incentives for remodelling, repurposing, or moving (Zell-Ziegler et al., 2025). However, there are significant research gaps, particularly regarding the evaluation and enabling factors for such downsizing. The sufficiency measure "alternative housing options" (AHO) for the empty nest phase is attributed particular relevance (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Lage et al., 2025; Stieß et al., 2019; Tetzlaff, 2025). By providing adequate smaller housing options, various obstacles to downsizing during the empty nest phase can be overcome. A space-reducing move can free up underoccupied spaces for families and reduce the construction of new SDFH, thereby conserve land, resources, and greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, the social housing shortage can be addressed through the freed-up spaces and age-appropriate living in the empty nest phase, as AHO can ensure barrier-free accessibility, local supply, or community (e.g. Fischer & Stieß, 2019a, 2019b; Kenkmann et al., 2023; Loidl et al., 2025; Stieß et al., 2019). To my knowledge, however, the "AHO" measure has hardly been implemented in municipalities (e.g. Gemeinde Weyarn, n.d.-b; Loidl et al., 2025; Nestbau AG, 2025) or failed (Leichsenring, n.d.), has not been evaluated, and actual enabling factors for downsizing have not yet been examined. Therefore, I focus on the following research question:

What are the societal conditions that enable people to move from a family house into a smaller dwelling in alternative housing options?

The aim is to show the societal conditions under which downsizing is currently happening and to explore the process of change in relation to sufficiency in the broader context of IML. I answer my research question through an explorative qualitative interview case study with individuals who moved from a SDFH to a smaller apartment in AHO during the empty nest phase. The results of my case study of actual enabling factors for downsizing confirm existing hypothetical surveys, expand on them, and highlight gaps. I argue that the societal conditions that enable moving are currently too much shaped by chance and individual voluntariness and that moving in the empty nest phase must be made both systemically more attractive and remaining in the SDFH systemically less attractive for a SML.

The thesis proceeds as follows: In chapter 2, I address social and ecological challenges; in chapter 3, I explain the theoretical approach: housing as IML as a broader context of the thesis and sufficiency as a central analytical concept. In chapter 4, I discuss the method. In chapter 5, I present the results and discuss them in chapter 6. In chapter 7, I summarize the results and provide an outlook. The limitations of the research regarding theory, method, and results are not bundled in a separate chapter but are mentioned at the appropriate place to make them directly apparent to the reader.

2. Housing Trends & Challenges

There are various social challenges in the housing sector. Suitable and affordable housing is scarce, as especially in cities land, property, and rental prices are rising rapidly (HBS, 2023; Holm, 2018). Buildings no longer serve solely the purpose of housing but have become financial products (Cohen, 2021; Holm, 2018). The existing housing stock often does not meet the needs of the population (Holm et al., 2018), and living space is distributed unevenly among different population groups (Sagner & Voigtländer, 2023).

Despite the social housing crisis, per capita living space has dramatically increased over the past decades in many countries of the Global North (Bradbury et al., 2014; Cohen, 2021). While it was 15 square meters per capita in Germany after World War II; it was already 35 in 1991, and by 2023 nearly 48 square meters (BBSR, 2023). According to forecasts, this trend will continue (Müther & Waltersbacher, 2025; Ürge-Vorsatz et al., 2015). A connection between increasing per capita living space and perceived housing quality only exists to a certain extent, as housing satisfaction has stagnated for some time (Figure 2) (BBSR, 2023).

Reasons for the increasing per capita living space include demographic developments and inadequate housing supply (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019) as well as various interrelated trends: larger residential units in new buildings, an increasing number of SFH that have more space than apartments, smaller households, and increasing ownership, which comes with larger living space than renting, as well as age, cohort, and empty nest or remanence effects.

Older households often combine several of these drivers and occupy above-average living space (Bierwirth & Thomas, 2015), as in contrast to other life phases, changing living situations is not normalised. Empty nesters are thus a relevant target group (e.g. Stieß et al., 2019).

The underoccupied living space is mostly in ownership and is found both in rural and urban areas (Lage et al., 2025). In Germany, the share was 33% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024)[1], over 20% in densely populated cities, 36.5% in smaller towns and suburbs, and nearly 50% in rural areas (Statista, 2024a). Although the public debate about the housing market is characterised by the claim that there is too little housing, which must be addressed with new construction (e.g. Bundesregierung, 2022; Bundestag, 2025), the social housing crisis is based not on a lack but rather on a distribution crisis (Architektenkammer BaWü, 2022; Lage et al., 2025).

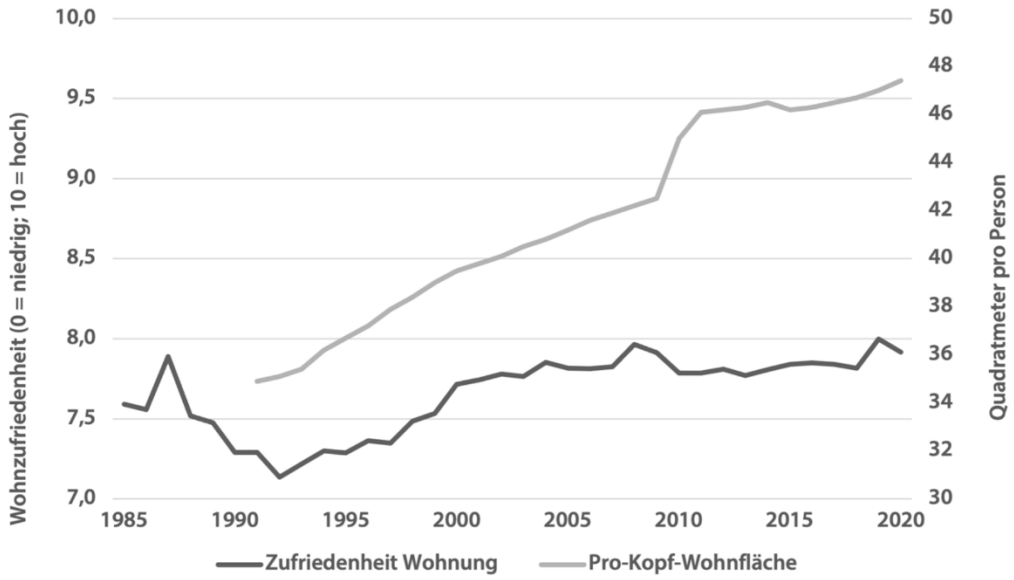

Figure 2: Housing satisfaction vs. living space in Germany from 1985 to 2020.(Source: BBSR, 2023, p. 25, based on Liebig et al., 2022; Statista, 2024b [2022]).

As mentioned, in Germany especially empty nesters live in large, underoccupied living spaces since they do not adjust their living situation after their children move out, for example, due to a lack of role models or housing alternatives (Kenkmann et al., 2023). Senior citizens make up 22% of the total population and live on average in nearly 70 square meters (Kenkmann et al., 2023), with 13% living in more than 100 square meters per capita (Sagner, 2021). Nearly 60% of the approximately 16 million SFH – which make up about 80% of residential buildings (dena, 2025) – are occupied by only one or two people (Destatis, 2019a, 2019b) – thus empty nests. It is roughly estimated that over half of the owners in SFH are over 55 years old, and half of them no longer use more than two rooms in the house; one in three even has an unused separate flat (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Sunderer et al., 2018). Thus, there are potentials (Peter et al., 2021) of so-called *invisible living space* (Fuhrhop, 2023, a.t.) that need to be mobilised.

[1] An apartment is under-occupied if it is considered too large for the needs of the household living in it, i.e. there are too many rooms, especially bedrooms (Eurostat, 2024).

While older people may find their large living space burdensome (Fischer & Stieß, 2019a; Kremer-Preiß et al., 2011), many families live in overcrowded apartments (Brischke & Bierwirth, 2024; Sagner & Voigtländer, 2023). The aging population has age-specific housing needs regarding infrastructures for mobility, health services, local supply, leisure, and social meeting places and social contacts (Kenkmann et al., 2023). In SDFH, these needs are often no longer met, as they are too large and not barrier-free, and often lack good infrastructure due to decentralised location. Additionally, high housing and energy costs can be financially burdensome (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019). In homogeneous and aging residential areas, there is also a risk that elderly people may become isolated and no longer manage their lives independently (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Potz & Scheffler, n.d.).

In addition to the social challenges, there are also ecological ones. The building sector is energy- and resource-intensive and significantly contributes to exceeding planetary boundaries (Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström et al., 2009): Approximately 40% of greenhouse gas emissions in Germany are attributed to the manufacturing, construction, modernization, and use of buildings (Ramseier & Frischknecht, 2020). The building sector significantly contributes to land sealing (Destatis, 2024), raw material consumption (BBSR, 2023; Lutter et al., 2018), and waste generation (UBA, 2023b), jeopardizing climate (UBA, 2025) and land use targets (UBA, 2024c), biodiversity, and sustainability on multiple levels (Brischke & Bierwirth, 2024).

Large living spaces are associated with higher environmental burdens, as more (settlement) space is needed, as well as more energy and resources for construction, operation, and maintenance (Krausmann et al., 2020; Röck et al., 2020; Ürge-Vorsatz et al., 2015). SFH have a particularly high ecological footprint (BBSR, 2023) and cause almost twice as much CO2 emissions as an apartment in a multi-family house (Anderson, 2014). When the area of all SFH in Germany is summed, they account for about 30% of settlement and traffic areas, equivalent to the area of the federal state of Thuringia (Nagel, 2025). The fact that many SFH are inhabited by older individuals leads to further negative ecological implications, as they spend more time at home and have a higher heating and energy demand. Additionally, older SFH are often in poor energy condition (Kenkmann et al., 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

Due to the high per capita living space, I first conceptualize living during the empty nest phase as an expression of the IML (ch. 3.1), which serves as the broader context for this thesis. Then, I discuss sufficiency, my central analytical concept (ch. 3.2). I understand sufficiency as a radical policy-making strategy to enable a SML. Sufficiency can occur through different notions of transformation. Next, I focus on sufficiency in the housing sector and the sufficiency measure “AHO” for the empty nest phase (ch. 3.3). The approach of the thesis is summarised in the Figure 3.

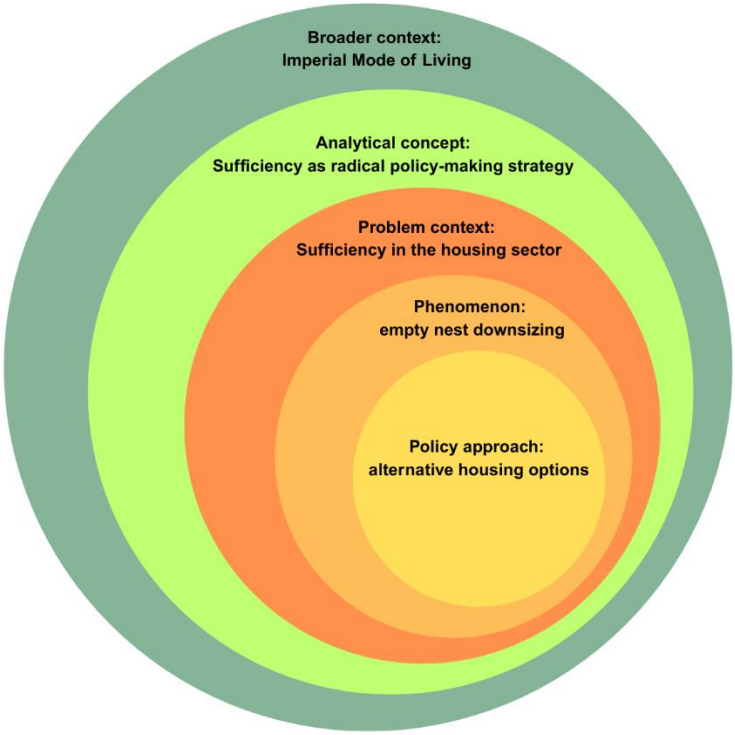

Figure 3: My approach to the thesis. The concept of IML serves as the broader context and sufficiency as the analytical concept. Sufficiency in the housing sector is the problem context in which I explore the phenomenon of downsizing of empty nesters in SDFH with regard to the policy approach of AHO. Own illustration.

3.1 Living Large as an Expression of an Imperial Mode of Living

The term IML (Brand & Wissen, 2017) originates from critical social sciences and represents a fundamental critique of the capitalist economic system, which aims at growth and profit (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019b), its "destructive character" (Brand et al., 2021, p. 274), and global inequality. These inequalities are reflected in capitalist production and consumption modes (Brand et al., 2021) and are anchored and stabilised through everyday practices, knowledge, desires, material infrastructures, political institutions, state structures, and pseudo-solutions (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019b). The IML of countries in the Global North with their high greenhouse gas emissions and raw material consumption, structure "societies in other places in a decisively hierarchical way" (Brand & Wissen, 2021, p. 52). These dividing lines do not only run between the Global South and North but also along, e.g., socio-economic milieus (Jahn et al., 2020). In a nutshell:

> *the standards of a 'good' and 'proper' life, which often consists of the imperial mode of living, are shaped by everyday life, even when they are a part of comprehensive societal relations, and especially of material and social infrastructures. (Brand & Wissen, 2021, p. 53)*

Thus, the term "links people's everyday life with the partly globalizing societal structures" (Brand & Wissen, 2021, p. 54). It reflects that production and consumption norms are shaped by power relations that have become so normalised that they are no longer perceived as such. The IML is largely invisible, and the exploitative consumption has long become a matter of course, but is not globally generalisable (Brand & Wissen, 2017). This makes it "impossible" (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 7, a.t.) to live in a way that does not exploit people and nature. Especially in wealthy societies, one encounters "everywhere" obstacles and lives "day by day

at the expense of others […], even when one tries not to do so" (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 7, a.t.). The IML describes how individual actions are embedded in societal structures and thereby restricted, even if a certain freedom of choice remains (Brand & Wissen, 2017).

A large living space – as a manifestation of the IML – and especially living in a SDFH have been promoted and normalised for decades through political measures, funding programs, ideal images, and other incentives (Cohen, 2021; Loidl et al., 2025; Loidl & Rehle, 2023) and will likely continue to be (e.g. AfD, 2024; CDU/CSU, 2023). By now, the SDFH in Germany is deeply entrenched infrastructurally, culturally, politically, and socially (Fischer & Stieß, 2019a; Loidl et al., 2025). Although since 2010 there have been more SFH than families in Germany (Lage, 2024), it remains by far the most built type of residential building (dena, 2025). The majority of Germans want to live in a SFH (Interhyp, 2023). They are considered a status symbol (Bourdieu, 2006) linked with ideal notions (Loidl et al., 2025) and are appreciated for their space and often preferred over apartments (Kuhlmann, 2019; Newton et al., 2017).

The status quo of housing – regarding remaining in the SDFH in the empty nest phase – is thus inscribed both deeply in the societal and political culture and in material infrastructure, whose negative (environmental) costs (UBA, 2024b) are externalised (Brischke & Bierwirth, 2024) and made invisible. The "perverse mismatch between available housing stocks and residential requirements" (Cohen, 2021, p. 173) cannot be quickly resolved. There are lock-ins and path dependencies (Brand et al., 2021; Brand & Wissen, 2017), and little ambitious approaches to *green lifestyles* in housing dominate (Hagbert & Bradley, 2017). Material infrastructures thus significantly shape the way of living and are therefore crucial for a change – also in housing. Brand (2020, p. 118, a.t.) argues that:

> *Societal conditions are needed […] to be able to live a free life in a free society and no longer externalize the negative effects of one's own mode of living at the expense of others and nature. But such a culture of self-limitation only arises in relation to corresponding political and economic frameworks and institutions, namely those conditions that enable people to have material and political participation.*

The growing per capita living space does not represent an "inevitable" (Cohen, 2021, p. 176) development. Growing prosperity could also have manifested itself more in design or proximity to amenities (Cohen, 2021).

A SML – in contrast to IML – is based on principles of democratisation, redistribution, commoning, re-production, dependence on human and nature, and sufficiency (Brand et al., 2021; I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c). It can be realised by focusing on human needs, everyday practices and desires, material infrastructures, democratically controlled institutions, and is generalisable in contrast to the IML (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c). It is about "enabling the conditions for a good life *for all* rooted in the actual freedom of not having to live at the expense of (human and non-human) others" (Brand et al., 2021, p. 276). Due to the inscriptions in culture, politics, and infrastructure, the way of housing is deeply entrenched, and a shift toward SML is a complex undertaking. It requires a paradigm shift in the building sector (BBSR, 2023; Fuhrhop, 2023; Kenkmann et al., 2023).

3.2 Sufficiency as a Strategy for Transformation

To tackle the described challenges and enable a SML in housing, strategies are needed. For transformation, efficiency, consistency, and sufficiency are available as strategies in sustainability sciences (Döring & Ott, 2001). The following introduces sufficiency as the central analytical concept of this thesis. First, I discuss sufficiency (ch. 3.2.1) and distinguish it from efficiency and consistency (ch. 3.2.2), before addressing different understandings of transformation that sufficiency can be based on (ch. 3.2.3). Then, I delve deeper into my understanding of sufficiency in this thesis: sufficiency as a strategy to overcome the IML in favour of SML (ch. 3.2.4).

3.2.1 Sufficiency – Various Strands of Research

Whereas efficiency and consistency are clearly defined, sufficiency is a vague concept that is discussed, conceptualised and categorised very differently in the literature (Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen, 2022; Lage, 2022). Sachs (1993) introduced it into the German sustainability discourse in the 1990s as a critique of the inadequate environmental integrity found in other sustainability approaches. Despite all the vagueness and contradictions that sufficiency concepts can contain, some aspects are shared. Sufficiency approaches recognise ecological constraints, entail certain ideas of social and ecological change and are often associated with a *good life for everyone*, the *right amount* (Böcker et al., 2020; I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c) as well as an *enough* (Hartmann, 2024; Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen, 2022).

Consumption and production practices are to be changed and quantitatively limited through social innovations (Lage, 2022). Not always (Fischer & Grießhammer, 2013; Kanschik, 2016), but often sufficiency thereby connects the notion of social limits and ecological boundaries (Spengler, 2016): Sufficiency recognises ecological limits in terms of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009) as well as social limits in terms of needs and social satisfaction (Max-Neef et al., 1989). Sufficiency is based on a strong understanding of sustainability (Döring & Ott, 2001) since planetary boundaries are recognised, and the three sustainability dimensions are hierarchically structured according to ecological, social, and economic criteria, usually accompanied by a more or less explicit critique of economic growth ranging from degrowth to agrowth (Lage, 2022).

So far there are some literature reviews on the conceptualisation of sufficiency, dealing with sufficiency in the context of business (Niessen & Bocken, 2021), the notion of *enoughness* (Hartmann, 2024), regarding economic scale and economic actors (Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen, 2022), sufficiency rebound effects (Sorrell et al., 2020) as well as types of consumption changes – “absolute reductions, modal shifts, product longevity, and sharing practices” (Sandberg, 2021, p. 5) – and the relation of sufficiency and transformation (Lage, 2022). The latter two are especially useful for my endower.

3.2.2 Efficiency, Consistency and Sufficiency

While the predominantly technical approaches of efficiency and consistency aim to optimally utilise resources as well as use renewable and recycled resources and close material cycles, sufficiency represents a “socio-culturally-organizational strategy” (Leuser & Brischke, 2018, p. 5, a.t.) that primarily aims at changing the way we produce and consume. In contrast to the relative and technology-related measurement of efficiency, sufficiency considers absolute social and ecological boundaries (Lage, 2022) and is derived from human needs (BBSR, 2023). In a sufficient society, it is not merely about satisfying existing needs with less or different resource expenditure. It is about discussing needs anew and thinking beyond consumption needs (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c).

So far, sustainability efforts generally focus on efficiency and consistency measures (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019) as they align with the dominant solution narrative of *green growth* (King et al., 2023), where environmental impacts are to be reduced through technical innovations while simultaneously achieving economic growth (Parrique et al., 2019). Since absolute decoupling has not yet been evidenced (Vogel & Hickel, 2023), efficiency and consistency must be questioned as sole strategies for transformation. Rebound effects (Santarius, 2012) and economic growth diminish or counteract energy and resource efficiency gains (de Haan et al., 2015; Fischer & Grießhammer, 2013; Holtsmark & Skonhoft, 2014; Parrique et al., 2019).

Moreover, focusing on efficiency and consistency measures leads to conflicts between different sustainability goals, such as climate neutrality through wind turbines and biodiversity protection (IZW, 2019). The technical focus causes social and ecological concerns to be played against each other (Zell-Ziegler & Förster, 2018). Environmental and climate policies with efficiency and consistency measures are thus compatible with the current capitalist economic system and neoliberal structures (Brand & Wissen, 2024; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014; Sandberg, 2018). However, they run the risk of addressing symptoms rather than the roots of the problems (Blühdorn, 2011) and supporting a problematic green growth narrative (Parrique et al., 2019). The sufficiency idea can therefore stand in contrast to the current politics and economic growth orientation (Gorge et al., 2015; Princen, 2005).

Sufficiency is attributed multiple benefits or co-benefits (Lage & Graef, 2022) and is therefore treated as a multi-solving strategy (EnSu, 2025): Efficiency rebounds can be avoided or at least mitigated (Heyen et al., 2013; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019), absolute resource consumption can be minimised in a directional way, and ecological and social goals can be achieved simultaneously (Davenas & Spinrath, 2025; EnSu, 2025; Linz, 2004), also in housing (Bohnenberger, 2021; Spinrath & Davenas, 2025). Sufficiency goes hand in hand with the claim to promote social justice and increase quality of life through more public wealth rather than private luxury (Böcker et al., 2020). Moreover, sufficiency measures often come with lower costs and mean higher economic resilience, as they lead to less dependence on imports (EnSu, 2025;

Wiese et al., 2024). Some scientists therefore see sufficiency as the most important of the three sustainability strategies (e.g. Böcker et al., 2020; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019; Newell et al., 2021; Schröter et al., 2017). Although sufficiency is increasingly discussed as a complementary strategy to efficiency and consistency (e.g. IPCC, 2022; SRU, 2024), it still plays a minor role in realpolitik (Zell-Ziegler et al., 2021), which as outlined has a technical focus.

3.2.3 Sufficiency – Different Notions of Change

Since the societal conditions in which sufficient change in the housing sector is currently possible are the subject of this thesis, I will address different notions of transformation. Sufficiency understandings can – like transformation (e.g. Geels & Schot, 2007; Sommer, 2023; Sommer & Welzer, 2014; Wright, 2010) – be based on different notions of social change (Lage, 2022), depending on which actors and objects are considered central, what role is attributed to the state, and what scope they encompass. Transformation notions can explicitly aim to overcome capitalist relations (e.g. Wright, 2010), i.e. the IML – or not and follow more of a notion of transition (e.g., Multi-Level Perspective Geels et al., 2017).

What various approaches of change share is that niches – "which differ radically from the dominant existing system but are able to gain a foothold" (Geels et al., 2017, p. 1242) – are central (Geels & Schot, 2007; Redecker, 2018; Sommer, 2023; Wright, 2010), as alternative modes of living can thus be developed and tested. Niches can expand, diffuse into society, and thus shift power relations (Geels, 2019; Geels et al., 2017; Redecker, 2018; Wright, 2010). Brand & Wissen (2024, p. 235, a.t.) refer to "transformative cells" in this context, while Wright (2010, p. 4) speaks of "real utopias". Both of these niche concepts explicitly include that alternative modes of living can be experimented with in the existing system and are supposed to go beyond capitalist conditions (Brand & Wissen, 2017, 2024) to demonstrate that "another world is possible" (Wright, 2010, p. 255).

Similarly, sufficiency entails certain forms of transformation. Lage (2022) clusters the existing literature on sufficiency into three sufficiency-oriented strategies with differences in the object and subject of transformation (Table 1). This demonstrates that sufficiency as a strategy can use different levers, actors, state relations and mechanisms depending on the underlying understanding of transformation. By this, sufficiency becomes a better operationalizable concept regarding social change and is useful for my endower.

The first identified approach toward transformation is about changes in individual behaviour that allow for a more sufficient lifestyle – a "niche-oriented" (Lage 2025, p. 10, a.t.) bottom-up approach (Lage, 2022). Accordingly, individuals are responsible for changing and reducing their lifestyle and consumption habits by developing niche innovations, which are tested and incrementally diffuse into society (Alexander, 2015; Gossen & Kropfeld, 2022) – an action *beside* the state (Lage, 2024). Due to their responsibility and ability to act, this applies in particular to privileged individuals (Lage, 2022). Since the modern mode of living is deeply embedded in

culture, infrastructure and institutions, as explained by the IML, it is however questionable if changes relying on individual consumption patterns are possible and could spread to result in a wider cultural transformation (e.g. Linz, 2013; Shove et al., 2015; SRU, 2024).

According to the second – a policy-making approach (Lage, 2022) – politicians should change institutional and infrastructural framework conditions to enable sufficient action (e.g. BBSR, 2023; Böcker et al., 2020; Kopatz, 2016; Lorek & Fuchs, 2013; Michaelis et al., 2024; Schneidewind et al., 2013; Spengler, 2018; Tröger & Reese, 2021). This should occur through various policy instruments with different scopes (Cohen, 2021; Jitsuchon, 2019; Schneidewind et al., 2013). Therefore, politics is required to make the sufficient option the most apparent – an action *with* the state (Lage, 2024). By this, "unsustainable infrastructures or institutions are politicized rather than unsustainable behavior" (Lage, 2022, p. 10). The underlying idea is that action and structure interact (Giddens, 1984). It is debated to what extent individual freedoms are paternalistically infringed upon (Muller & Huppenbauer, 2016) or secured in the long term (Linz, 2013; Spengler, 2018). However, this approach lacks to explain how this change happens since it basically relies on policymakers who realise that sufficiency is necessary (Lage, 2022) and a state capable of solving current crises. This is questionable (Brand et al., 2021) as the state can be both part of the solution, e.g. by providing infrastructure, but also part of the problem, as it has encoded and thus manifested current unsustainability, i.e., the IML (Princen, 2005).

Thirdly, sufficiency can be conceptualised as a critique of capitalism, power, and domination – a "power and domination-critical" (Lage, 2024, p. 10, a.t.) social-movement approach. Sufficiency is viewed in this context as a central social organisational principle, as an alternative approach to the prevailing growth-oriented society (Princen, 2005) with a focus on common goods rather than ownership (Sachs, 1993). Change happens here *against* the state. It is not about individual policy measures but rather structures of discrimination and exploitation should be overcome (Salleh, 2009). Due to this broadness, change in this approach "seems quite unlikely and unclear" (Lage, 2022, p. 12).

Trajectory of transformations	**Object of transformation**	**Key actors for transformation**	**Strategic logic regarding the state**
Bottom-up approach	Individual consumption and cultural change → niche innovations	Individuals, businesses, grassroots movements	Beside the state
Policy-making approach	Mode of consumption including framework conditions (infrastructures, institutions etc.) → adequate infrastructure	Political decision makers	With the state
Social-movement approach	Structures that suggest economic growth, externalization, exploitation and discrimination → overcome structures	Social movements	Against the state

Table 1: Different understandings of transformation that can underlie sufficiency. Own illustration based on Lage (2022, p. 12) and Lage (2024).

Lage (2022) illustrates the synergies of the three approaches for a sufficiency-oriented change and advocates for a mix of the three approaches. Similarly, Wright (2010) argues that change can only occur from the interplay of various trajectories of transformations. Depending on the understanding, sufficiency is more or less compatible with capitalist growth societies: While individual sufficiency practices and sufficiency policies can be "already realised here and now," sufficiency understood as an "overarching societal organizational principle" (Lage, 2024, p. 15, a.t.) is rather incompatible. It is central "what the saved resources are replaced with. Seen in this light, sufficiency policy needs or encompasses the creation of growth-independent structures" (Lage, 2024, p. 15, a.t.).

3.2.4 Sufficiency as One Strategy to Tackle the Imperial Mode of Living

In this thesis, I understand sufficiency as a political strategy (Schneidewind et al., 2013) of strong sustainability, through which consumption and production levels are reduced and redistributed with the help of changed social practices and social innovations to ensure both ecological upper and social lower (Millward-Hopkins et al., 2020) boundaries (Lage et al., 2023), thus helping to enable a *good life for everyone* beyond the IML (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c). This corresponds to a radical policy-making approach (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019) that aims to overcome existing capitalist, growth-oriented relations (Parrique et al., 2019) and externalization (Salleh, 2009), thus the second sufficiency approach with proximity to the third (ch. 3.2.3; Lage, 2022). By embedding sufficiency strategies in the broader context of IML, it can be explained how historical, cultural, material, and infrastructural lock-ins hinder a sufficient transformation, as well as the crucial role of material infrastructure in housing for changing the mode of living. The apparent contradiction as to why change is such a complex undertaking, despite solutions being apparent, can also be explained by the manifestation of the IML. Also, levers can be identified: To overcome the IML and enable an SML, profound changes in the form of far-reaching sufficiency alternatives and policies are needed. These need to happen within the existing capitalist system but go beyond to liberate and emancipate from existing structures (Brand, 2020; Brand & Wissen, 2024; Wright, 2010) and differ from pseudo-solutions (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019b). Sufficiency, likewise:

> *Solidarity limitation is needed in the form of rules that push back the imperial mode of living in its expansive character and enable people to live without exploiting others and nature.* (Brand & Wissen, 2024, p. 214, a.t.)

Regarding housing, appropriate living space must be available. Recognising that the housing status quo is subject to an IML means expanding the policy-making approach (Lage, 2022) by addressing important aspects: political or state actors will not be sufficient (Newell et al., 2021) to tackle the IML, as the state's capabilities for change are limited (Brand et al., 2021), hence power-critical perspectives are needed (Lage, 2024), and overcoming the IML will involve deprivileging (Böcker et al., 2022) and struggle. To shift power relations and structurally implement change, pressure from emancipatory actors, such as social movements, is needed

(Lage, 2024). In addition to sufficiency, principles of democratisation or commoning are also central to overcome the IML (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c).

Overall, the thesis is conceptually dense through the concepts of sufficiency, IML, SML, which are partly still vague and difficult to grasp. To not further increase the complexity, sufficiency rebounds, which are described alongside to efficiency rebounds (Alcott, 2008; Sorrell et al., 2020), as well as criticism of the IML-concept (Sablowski, 2018) have been disregarded.

3.3 Sufficiency and Housing

In this chapter, I will address sufficiency in the housing sector, which is a relatively new research field (Choguill, 2007; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019). Current research examples range from the conceptualization of consumption changes (Sandberg, 2021) to evaluations of sufficiency potentials in the housing sector (e.g. Bierwirth & Thomas, 2015; Brischke et al., 2016; Kenkmann et al., 2019) and arguments against the necessity of new constructions (Fuhrhop, 2023) up to the integration of ecological and social problems (Bohnenberger, 2021).

Sufficiency in housing can be directed to the design and the use phase (Bierwirth & Thomas, 2015) and can be categorised into two main dimensions: building sufficiency, focused on reducing per capita space and preserving existing building structures; and energy sufficiency, which includes energy-efficient appliances and user behaviour (BBSR, 2023). From this, five themes are derived: development of existing structures before new construction, reduction of per capita space demand, adaptability, low-tech and energy-saving user behaviour. Brischke & Bierwirth (2024) add considerations on the integration of mobility and social infrastructure in housing design (see Bohnenberger, 2021).

The inadequacies of efficiency and consistency described in chapter 3.2.2 are also evident in the housing sector through a focus on technical solutions (Hagbert & Bradley, 2017), such as improved building efficiency or approaches to circular economy (Audenaert et al., 2012; dena, 2023; Knudstrup et al., 2009; Whang & Kim, 2014). As already mentioned, the continuously increasing living space erases efficiency gains in heating. Therefore, reducing or stagnating per capita living space is one, if not the most important strategy in housing, as size has a significant impact on the environment (see ch. 2). Scenarios show that the emission reduction targets by 2050 will be best achieved if a reduction in per capita living space is modelled (BBSR, 2023; Purr et al., 2019). According to a study, reducing per capita living space to 40 square meters by 2030 represents one of the most effective additional measures in the area of building and dwelling (Fischer et al., 2016). If the average living space in Germany were to decrease by 0.5% annually or even by 3%, older households could save 13% or 38% in energy each year (Kenkmann et al., 2019, 2023).

Linking back to the definition in chapter 3.2.4, sufficiency as a strategy in housing aims to take account of individual housing needs, to redistribute, and to avoid further consumption of resources such as land and building materials (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019) with the help of

changed social practices and social innovations (Bohnenberger, 2021). I thus understand sufficiency as a radical policy strategy to achieve a socially and ecologically appropriate living space that enables age-appropriate living within planetary boundaries toward a SLM.

3.3.1 Targeting the Empty Nest Phase

As demonstrated, reducing living space in the empty nest phase is a key lever since many empty nesters live in large spaces. Besides, life events such as children moving out (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Stieß et al., 2022) are attributed considerable potential in sustainability research as a "window of opportunity" for a "'de-routinisation' of everyday consumption practices" that can be transferred into "sustainable everyday practices" (Jaeger-Erben, 2010, p. 4, a.t.). Alternatives to the SDFH for people in the empty nest phase include sufficiency options such as remodelling the house to accommodate more people, renting out parts of the SDFH, and moving to a smaller apartment while providing the SDFH for larger households (e.g. Zell-Ziegler et al., 2025). This can come with both social and ecological benefits (BBSR, 2023; Fuhrhop, 2023; Kenkmann et al., 2023).

Such changes in living space consumption are not yet well-studied (Sandberg, 2018), but for example, Hagbert (2016) analysed the potential willingness of people to downsize in tenant-owned housing associations in Sweden, revealing notable openness to downsizing: two-thirds of participants in a qualitative interview study expressed a willingness to consider moving to a smaller flat, and 40% indicated in a questionnaire a willingness to live simpler. Furthermore, Kenkmann et al. (2023, p. 16, a.t.) conclude in a meta-analysis based on 21 hypothetical surveys on "Living in Old Age" that a "relevant part of people in the empty nest phase" can imagine a move, whether to an apartment, assisted living, a care home, or forms of communal living. The share varies significantly between the surveys (Figure 4). The more specific the questions asked, the lower the agreement. General questions thus achieved higher values. The respondents of these hypothetical surveys preferred to remain in their homes, but it holds: "The younger people are, the more likely they are to be interested in moving and starting a new life" (Kenkmann et al., 2023, p. 16, a.t.). So far, only a few studies have examined why people consider moving, identifying primarily age and health reasons as well as the size of the current family house (Figure 5) (Kenkmann et al., 2023).

My thesis follows on from these standardised hypothetical surveys, goes a step further, and examines actual enabling factors in a qualitative case study to "design" (Jahn et al., 2020, p. 94, a.t.; see Stieß et al., 2022) the transformation.

This general willingness faces various and well-researched obstacles as to why people do not simply move (BBSR, 2023; Brischke, 2018; Brischke et al., 2016; Fischer & Stieß, 2019b, 2019a; Kenkmann et al., 2023, 2024). A change in housing is particularly difficult because decisions about living space size are rarely made, usually occur in private ownership, and are closely linked to personal identity (Bourdieu, 2006). Obstacles include emotional attachment

to the SDFH and the surrounding area, high relocation costs and effort, lack of awareness, and feared social problems. These personal obstacles must not be underestimated to avoid negative social and psychological effects (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020; Westin, 2021). Moreover, there are structural obstacles such as the lack of suitable smaller apartments (Fischer & Stieß, 2019a; Kenkmann et al., 2019; Peter et al., 2021). Additionally, municipalities, which are key actors in providing infrastructure, often do not own land or buildings to steer the housing market, and zoning plans are hard to change (Kenkmann et al., 2023). Some of these obstacles reflect a manifested IML.

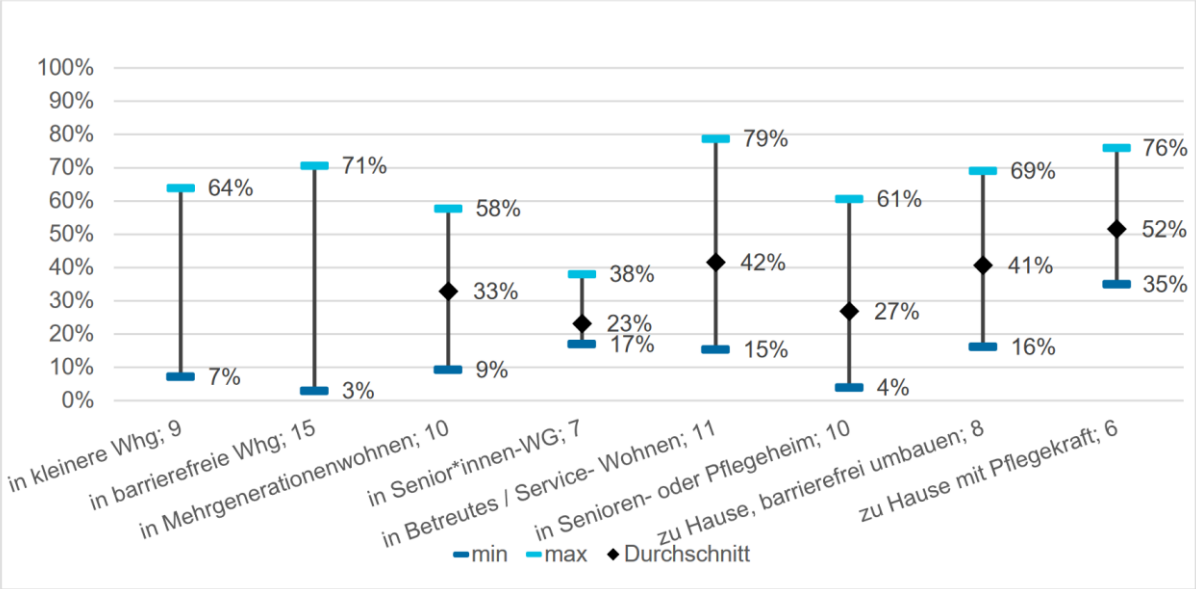

Figure 4: Housing options for empty nesters. Summary of an evaluation of 21 surveys on attitudes towards different housing options, i.e. the extent to which respondents could imagine moving and to where. The answer options "yes", "completely" or "rather" were summarised. The results of the surveys vary, as the ranges show. The more specific the question was, the lower the agreement. General questions thus achieved higher values. The numbers behind the options indicate how many surveys dealt with the topic. (Source: Kenkmann et al., 2023, p. 17).

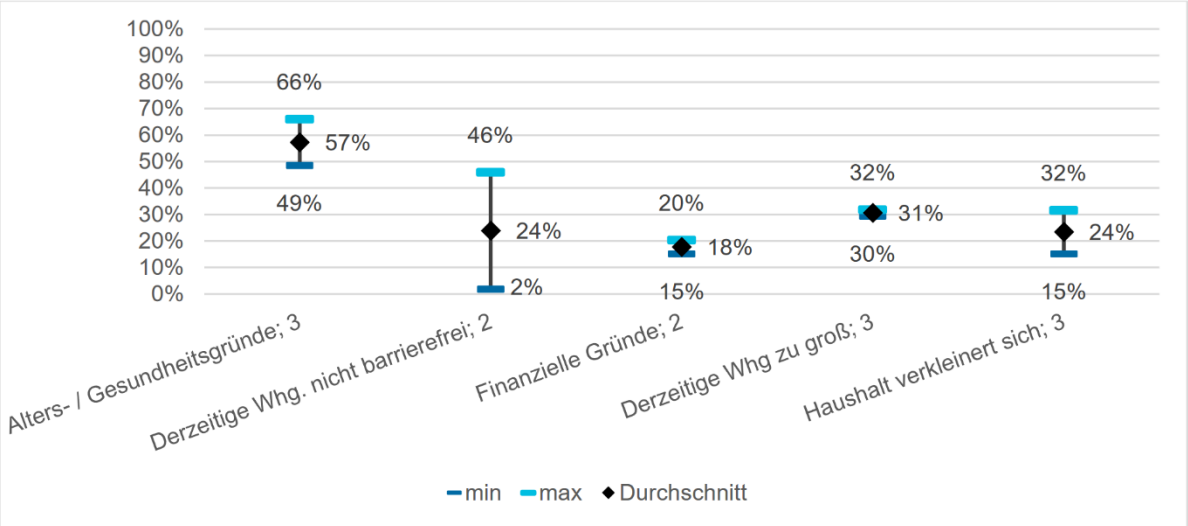

Figure 5: Reasons to move for empty nesters. Summary of an evaluation of 21 surveys on why people are considering moving out of a SDFH: age and health reasons, not-barrier-free, financial reason, flat too big, shrinking household. The numbers behind the options indicate how many surveys dealt with the topic. (Source: Kenkmann et al., 2023, p. 18).

3.3.2 Alternative Housing Options

Housing represents a social infrastructure that requires material infrastructure. Among diverse sufficiency policies for the housing sector (Zell-Ziegler et al., 2025), AHO for empty nesters are seen as key to mobilise underoccupied living space (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Lage et al., 2025; Stieß et al., 2019; Tetzlaff, 2025). The measure “AHO” refers to created housing as an alternative to the SDFH for empty nesters, allowing them to move. This should free up their SDFH for families, prevent ecologically harmful new constructions of SDFH, and distribute living space more equitably. AHO can include flats in multi-family homes or intergenerational housing projects (Kenkmann et al., 2023). In some hypothetical surveys, intergenerational living was particularly attractive as an alternative to the SDFH (e.g. Sunderer et al., 2018).

AHO address fundamental key obstacles to downsizing as it can provide affordable, smaller, barrier-free, and adequate living space for elderly people close to their known (social) environment with infrastructure for supply and social contacts (e.g. Kenkmann et al., 2023). It changes infrastructural framework conditions, which can open up space for new practices beyond the IML of dwelling in a SDFH. The measure “AHO” relies on consumption changes in the form of reduction, sharing, and modal shifts (Sandberg, 2021), as it involves a reduction of living space through a shift in housing type, which can also include sharing practices. To provide such AHO, municipalities are key actors (Kenkmann et al., 2023). From an ecological perspective, it is important to prioritise non-construction measures (BBSR, 2023; Fuhrhop, 2023).

4. Methods & Data

As outlined, enabling factors for downsizing have only been investigated in hypothetical surveys so far. Thus, the perspective of individuals who have realised downsizing to AHO during the empty nest phase has not yet been researched to my knowledge. Because of that I answer the research question through an explorative qualitative interview case study using the example of an AHO-project in the Bavarian village Weyarn called “Wohnen am Klosteranger” (Gemeinde Weyarn, n.d.-b). This approach is appropriate as neither do I aim for hypothesis testing nor comparison, but explorative insights into a complex phenomenon. A qualitative exploration with interviews is valuable as it can provide such in-depth insights (Kruse, 2015; Yin, 2018) of realised downsizing for the first time and it allows me to focus on the perspective of people and the societal conditions that enabled them to move from SDFH into a smaller dwelling in AHO. So, I analyse downsizing from the retrospective. My unit of analysis are individual senior citizens who downsized.

Regarding case studies, intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies can be heuristically differentiated, which allows understanding a certain case, analysing an issue and refine theory, or exploring a phenomenon through multiple instrumental cases respectively (Stake, 1998).

Instead of having an intrinsic interest in the AHO-project in Weyarn, I am interested to get insight into the phenomenon of downsizing. Therefore, the approach of the collective case

study is appropriate for my endower as it allows to combine multiple instrumental cases – senior citizens who moved – to "better understand[…]" and "inquire into the phenomenon" (Stake, 1998, p. 89) of downsizing in-depth utilising the example in Weyarn.

This explorative interview case study strongly focuses on the societal conditions, while the ecological potentials will be assumed based on the literature. Generally, several stakeholder groups are relevant to the "AHO" measure, such as those who move into it, those who provide it and the construction industry. Due to my focus on the former, the users of the AHO, the provider and production side are side-lined and only indirectly considered through the IML and a systemic level.

In the following, I present the sample (ch. 4.1), the project in Weyarn as the basis for the case study (ch. 4.2), the data set (ch. 4.3) and data analysis (ch. 4.4), including limitations.

4.1 Sampling

Based on my research question, I created the following sampling criteria for the interviewees: people in the empty nest phase who moved from a SDFH to a smaller apartment in AHO. I treat SFH and double-family homes (DFH) equivalently.

Although researchers and practitioners are calling for AHO (e.g. Kenkmann et al., 2023; Lage et al., 2025; Stieß et al., 2019), such projects seem to exist hardly in practice so far. Thus, it was difficult to find AHO-projects for the case study. To identify potential projects, I searched the internet and literature as well as called relevant people, such as those from the Öko-Institut and the Wüstenrot Stiftung, as well as municipal representatives and architects. Eventually, I selected the project "Wohnen am Klosteranger" in Weyarn. This was, apart from another project with too few people for interviews, the only one meeting the AHO-criteria. Gaining access to the field was difficult and took several months: I contacted the residents twice with letters that were sent via the property management, as well as once with a notice on the bulletin board – both were unsuccessful. Ultimately, I was able to gain access to the individuals through a local politician and community worker from Weyarn.

4.2 Example: Alternative Housing Options in Weyarn

The Bavarian village of Weyarn has nearly 4,000 inhabitants and is located 38 kilometres southeast of Munich at the northern foothills of the Alps. The project "Wohnen am Klosteranger" (Gemeinde Weyarn, n.d.-b; MvB, n.d.) has been developed beside the grounds of the former Augustinian Canonry, which adjoins the village centre. It consists of several sub-projects on a plot area of 47,733 square meters. The housing units include seven multi-generation houses with each ten barrier-free condominiums of varying sizes (between 47 and 101 square meters), about 30 units in the prelature, and 45 semi-detached and terraced houses. The project was implemented in various phases between 2014 and 2020.

The aim of the project is to "specifically steer local development in the inner area of the village and avoid land consumption outside the centre" (Stadt München, n.d.). It was deliberately built

densely in favour of communal open spaces. Through the project, especially in the multi-generation houses, people of different generations are intended to live together neighbourly. The architecture should create the basis for this through spaces in the outdoor and indoor areas. The house corridors of the multi-generation houses are modelled after the “Fletz” – the hallway in old farmhouses – as a meeting point for residents. Through a central access core of the houses and flexible room usage, a more effective design of living space is promoted. The construction program also includes two underground garages, a car-free “Klosteranger”, green spaces, an orchard, and a community garden, trees, playgrounds, and a football field. In addition, a supermarket and other public areas such as a monastery café, the citizens' vault in the former monastery brewery, and a small bistro with a terrace at the supermarket are included and are intended to promote community. The municipality finances a position for a community worker who supports newcomers and seniors in the municipality. This includes, for example, advice on all questions related to aging or the creation of common meeting points such as a weekly pétanque game and a communal lunch for seniors in the citizens' vault. The local heating supply is ensured with regional forest waste through a wood chip power plant. The project was developed with citizen participation in the form of workshops, which was already well established in Weyarn before and includes various thematic working groups (Gemeinde Weyarn, n.d.-a; Stadt München, n.d.).

4.3 Data Set

Based on previous research and my research interest, I created an interview guide with open questions to allow the individuals to talk (Bogner et al., 2014) about their housing situation before and after the move, the decision to move, and the role of AHO. The guide consists of four blocks, each with a guiding question and various sub-questions (Table 2; Appendix I) and is oriented towards Kruse (2015). The blocks can be rearranged, depending on the course of the interview. I discussed the guide with two fellow students, provided it to my supervisors for feedback, and conducted a pre-test to ensure that all relevant aspects are covered and that the questions are understandable and open but not suggestive or influencing. The pre-test took place under real conditions with a person ready to move (P1) outside of the case study and was therefore not included in the analysis. The guide was supplemented with a few sub-questions after the pre-test.

Subject block	Aspects of content	Guiding question
1: Housing situation before the move	Housing situation before the move, hard facts	How did you live before you moved into this flat in Weyarn?
2: Living situation before the move	Living situation before the move, soft facts	What was life like in the family house?
3: Decision to move	Reasons for moving out of the house, obstacles	Why did you decide to move?
4: Factors that led to moving/ role of AHO	Motivation, reasons for moving in and the role of AHO, reduction	Why did you move to a flat in Weyarn?

Table 2: Structure of the interview guide by thematic blocks addressing various content aspects that were queried through guiding questions. The complete guide with sub-questions is in Appendix I. Own illustration.

For the analysis, I conducted six interviews with seven people (P2-P8) who had moved from a SDFH into an apartment on “Klosteranger” in Weyarn. I interviewed two people in a double interview (P3-P4). My data set therefore consists of seven people. The reasons for the small-n are that because of the scope of this thesis I could not aim for *theoretical saturation* (Glaser & Strauss 1980), but more to get a first glance into this field and, it was generally difficult to gain access to people matching the sample criteria. The seven people I interviewed were all people possible from the AHO-project in Weyarn.

In such a case study, it is essential to find a sensible path between generalisation and theory formation on one hand and an understanding of the case itself on the other (Stake, 1998). As this is a small-n case study, the latter is the main aim and generalisation is limited and also context- und culture-specific for Germany, as housing culture in other countries is quite different (Appolloni & D’Alessandro, 2021).

The interviews were conducted in German via Zoom or telephone in March 2025. They lasted between approximately 30 and 75 minutes (Appendix V). I transcribed the interviews with AI support using the data protection-compliant NoScribe software, then checked them manually and anonymised the real names (Appendix II).

4.4 Data Analysis

In order to analyse the interviews, I conducted a qualitative content analysis based on Kuckartz (Kuckartz, 2014; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2024). Qualitative content analysis is described as the systematic and methodologically controlled scientific examination of texts, images, films, and other media. This understanding is based on a constructivist view of the world. My explorative analysis with a small data set requires a qualitative, interpretative and iterative approach as well as inductive coding because it is not so much theoretically pre-structured. Kuckartz’ approach is valuable for this because of its flexibility and openness which allows for an identification of semantic and latent themes in the data, an iterative process as well as inductive development of coding categories and an explorative and grounded analysis seeking to uncover deeper meanings. My goal with this qualitative content analysis was to identify such thematic patterns, then group and present those which are important for my research interest. I aim for narrative output, which interprets and makes sense of the data, not simply summarising it. Thereby I am not concerned about counting the occurrences of themes but rather to get an understanding of the meanings and patterns present in my data set.

In an iterative coding process, I systematised the qualitative data into main codes and subcodes, which is detailed in the Appendix III. To identify blind spots and ensure quality, I discussed the codes and results with fellow students and presented them to the supervisors. I coded the data several times at intervals to ensure intra-coder reliability (inter-coder reliability could not be tested) carrying out the coding runs until the categories were reasonably systematised. I analysed the data using the MAXQDA software (see Appendix IV).

5. Results

In the following, I systematically present the results of my explorative interview case study along the inductively developed categories of qualitative content analysis. First, I compare the living situation before and after the move (ch. 5.1). Then I show reasons for the move – systematised by push and pull factors, including the role of AHO (ch. 5.2), the decision-making process (ch. 5.3) and the impact on the social environment (ch. 5.4). For the sake of transparency, I will provide information on who and thus how many interviewees stated a fact, but as this is a qualitative study, this does not constitute an argument. I capture the main results in a tentative model (Figure 6). The quotes are translated into English to facilitate reading flow; the citation references refer to the MAXQDA file (Appendix IV).

5.1 Comparison of Living Situations

All interviewees lived for several decades with their children in the self-built SDFH before moving to the smaller condominium – the living space was reduced in all cases due to the move. They are married and moved as a couple, or in one case, widowed (Appendix V). The move took place a few years ago. The distance from the house to the apartment is mostly close (same or neighbouring village) or medium (<40 km) and only once far (>40 km). The individuals who lived in a DFH lived in one case with the mother-in-law until her death and in another case with a family friend. In most cases, the children had already moved out when the interviewees moved. The SDFH were all sold to families, except one, which was given to the son (Table 3).

Person	Type of house	Living space of house in sqm	Living space of flat in AHO in sqm	Distance house to AHO	House passed on to
P1	Used as a pre-test and excluded from analysis.				
P2, P5	SFH	120	78 (for 2 persons)	medium, <40 km	son
P3, P4	DFH	110 (own part only)	90 (for 2 persons)	medium, <40 km	other family
P6	SFH	>200	80 (for 2 persons)	far, >40 km	other family
P7	DFH	240 (total)	102 (for 2 persons)	same or next village	other family
P8	SFH	200	112 (for 1 person)	same or next village	other family

Table 3: Comparison of living situations of the interviewees in SDFH and AHO. Own illustration.

Generally, all interviewees mentioned the generous space as an advantage of living in the SDFH, as well as features like garden, cellar, terrace, hobby room, guest room, individual room for each child, two bathrooms, and a fireplace. Additionally, the possibilities that arose from this were mentioned, such as keeping pets, living with a family friend in the house, a beautiful family life, freedoms and independence, distance from neighbours, accommodating guests, and the ambiance. The good location of the SDFH was also discussed regarding commuting, connections, leisure activities, proximity to in-laws for childcare, local supply, or the view. The interviewees positively noted that they could plan the house according to their own ideas and enjoyed living there, albeit with differences. While one person spoke of their “life’s work” (P6,

Pos. 22), another stated that it had suited their partner better (P7). Disadvantages of living in a house were also mentioned, albeit rarely (P2, P5-P8): the work involved in owning a SDFH and deficiencies in the surroundings, such as the distance to the mountains, lack of local supply, unappealing region, and street noise.

5.2 Reasons for Moving

The analysis revealed that the decision to move can be systematised as a conglomerate of different components. I categorise the reasons for moving as push factors of the previous dwelling situation in the SDFH and as pull factors of the new dwelling situation in AHO.

Push factors are defined as factors, which make living in the house less attractive and generate the idea of moving – i.e. they push the people out of their SDFH. I subdivided them into such push factors which are mainly related to the persons themselves (personal push factors), to the house (domestic push factors) and to reasons related to a general social and civic awareness (social push factors).

Pull-factors are defined as those factors, which make downsizing more attractive and help to realise the idea of moving, i.e. they pull the people into the AHO. I subdivided them into pull-factors related to the new flat, the housing estate and to the village and its surrounding.

I also differentiate between an individual and systemic level to which the factors can be assigned: The individual level refers to the persons themselves and individual aspects, i.e. when it is about their personal situation or emotions. The systemic level goes beyond individual life, i.e. when the context the persons are embedded is relevant and society or policies play a role. One difference is that, except for the social ones, the push factors from the interviews are at the individual level, while the pull factors can be categorised at the systemic level.

In the following, I will display the various push (ch. 5.2.1) and pull factors (ch. 5.2.2), and then the role of the AHO in the decision to move (ch. 5.2.3).

5.2.1 Push Factors

While the personal push factors differ between the interviewees, the domestic push factors are more uniform. Social push factors only occur marginally in the interviews.

5.2.1.1 Personal Push Factors

The idea to move was triggered, shaped, and solidified by various, sometimes overlapping events – experiences, life breaks, or aging. These factors varied between interviewees and occurred on an individual level. Among these, I combine both one-time and sudden experiences as well as accompanying experiences, as they were expressed by the interviewees as initial prompts. Here is an example, how an interviewee came up with the idea to move:

> *I started thinking 15 years ago about how I actually want to live when I get older. I come with physical limitations; I have a disability ID. I just saw my parents, who moved early into a senior-friendly, barrier-free housing complex in the area, in the same place they lived, how they were able to settle in there. And on the other hand, my mother-in-law, after my father-in-law died, was just typically sitting on the bench in front of the house and, despite the main road and despite us as neighbours, was alone. And I absolutely did not want that. (P2, Pos. 30)*

In summary, such personal push factors included the (in-law) parents, who served as negative (P2, P5) or positive role models (P2), health limitations (P2), ups and downs in a long-term marriage (P2), or a burglary in the house that facilitated letting go (P6). The partner's desire and persuasion to move was also triggering: The partner, was "breathing down my neck" (P3, Pos. 81) and acted as a "driving force" (P5, Pos. 33). Further life breaks included the death of the spouse (P7), the birth of grandchildren with the "impulse" of the daughter to "relocate" the grandparents (P6, Pos. 32) to care for the grandchildren, as well as the (upcoming) move out of the own children (P4, P8), raising the question, "what do we do with the huge house?" (P8, Pos. 38). The special house situation – a DFH built with a family friend – was also mentioned as a decisive trigger to actively think about future living (P3-P4). Additionally, personal push factors included aging itself (P3-P7), lack of strength to manage a house (P7), the desire to live quieter in old age, but not alone (P2), the realisation that a different life phase is now beginning (P2, P7), the wish to be fit enough to settle in a new place (P2, P4-P5), and planning and residential security in old age (P2).

5.2.1.2 Domestic Push Factors

In addition to the mentioned personal push factors, domestic push factors emerged, expressing a burden from the house and pressing to move. These were similar among interviewees. All interviewees perceived the house and garden as increasing burdens: the house was felt to be "too big" (P2, Pos. 22; P7, Pos. 50; P8, Pos. 32) since "rooms were standing empty" (P8, Pos. 32) and there was "too much space for the residents" (P8, Pos. 32), which made "a lot of work" (P4, Pos. 49). The work associated with it was perceived increasingly negatively (P2-P5, P7-P8) – such as shovelling snow, repairing hail damage, maintaining the roof. Increasing repairs on the aging house, where one had to "constantly do something" (P5, Pos. 69), also represented a financial burden. And "the older one gets, the less one feels like doing it all oneself" (P4, Pos. 49). Painful memories associated with the house after the death of a partner were also discussed: "I was suddenly alone in the house. And it was not only too big and too much for me; it was also too much in terms of memories" (P7, Pos. 50). The person described the feeling of being overwhelmed as follows: "I could really only live for the house and garden, then back to the house, and always starting over again" (P7, Pos. 50).

Additionally, the garden was increasingly felt to be "too big" (P2, Pos. 22; P7, Pos. 50; P8, Pos. 32) – since "the older one gets, the less one feels like messing around in a 700 square meter garden" (P4, Pos. 223). Furthermore, it was often explicitly stated that past advantages of the house and garden had turned into disadvantages (P3-P4, P8), such as that gardening "is becoming less and less of a hobby and more and more of a chore" (P8, Pos. 32).

In contrast, one interviewee did not express any domestic push factors (P6). Another stood out, as she reported that the size of the house was still suitable even after the children moved out; just the garden was too large, and the house circumstances needed to be clarified (P3).

Regarding domestic push factors, gender differences emerged regarding which tasks in and around the house and garden were predominantly done or could be done (P5-P7) – certain tasks, e.g., repairs, “that ultimately the husband took care of” (P5, Pos. 27) or the wife.

5.2.1.3 Social Push Factors

Furthermore, some interviewees mentioned social push factors on the side. They expressed the desire that a family with children could move back into the house, using the space and not wasting it (P3-P4, P7-P8). It was described as “completely crazy” to “live alone in a house” and that “not only because we have a housing shortage in the country […], but simply because it is not feasible for one person” (P7, Pos. 138). For this interviewee, it was “completely normal” that “one should downsize as one gets older” (P7, Pos. 138). In contrast to social push factors, the interviewees did not mention ecological push factors.

5.2.2 Pull Factors of Alternative Housing Options

Alongside the various push factors, pull factors of the AHO contributed to the idea to move, enabling the relocation plan to be realised. These were weighted differently but are more uniform among the interviewees and represent a mix of the apartment itself, the housing estate, and the location. This indicates that for the interviewees, living always consists of the apartment and the surroundings, and it is difficult to separate them.

5.2.2.1 Pull Factor: Age-Appropriate Apartment

All interviewees emphasised that the apartment in the alternative housing was “really good” (P4, Pos. 18), “really great […] totally beautiful […] totally modern” (P5, Pos. 53), “optimal” (P6, Pos. 50), “fantastic” (P7, Pos. 102). The equipment and design convinced them all: barrier-free access was often highlighted, as well as the layout of the high and bright rooms. Features such as a second bathroom, guest room, view, terrace or balcony, private garden, and underfloor heating were positively noted. One crucial aspect for all was that they could still plan and design parts of the apartment themselves. The fact that these are new buildings (P8) and owned properties (P2, P6) was also stressed. The size of the apartment was mostly described as suitable (P3-P5, P7, Table 3), it is “not too small, not too big” (P4, Pos. 187). However, once the lack of a third room was criticised, which was compensated by the terrace (P6).

The new apartment had to be more attractive than the house in many ways. Because there were high expectations among the interviewees (P3-P5, P8): “if I downsize […], then I wanted to have an apartment, that fits 100 percent” (P8, Pos. 36).

Regarding the apartment, it was also emphasised that it offered various advantages over the house and was “better in all respects” (P4, Pos. 187). Many interviewees described the AHO overall as more age-appropriate (P2-P7). A pull factor for moving was that a smaller apartment requires less work (P3-P5, P7-P8) and that one does not want to “worry” (P5, Pos. 69; P8, Pos. 52) anymore in old age. There is less work in a small apartment as everything is “quick

as a flash" "spotlessly clean" (P6, Pos. 52). The apartment represents "something much more pleasant, easier, and better to live in for my advanced age" (P7, Pos. 82). Thus, the apartment is associated with less work, or this is taken over by the caretaker, which is "ideal if one is no longer so fit" (P3, Pos. 134). One interviewee described it as follows:

> *I close my door behind me, and I don't have to worry about anything anymore. I don't have to worry about mowing the lawn, buying heating oil, or scheduling chimney sweeping. I don't have to worry about the garden. […]. When I retire […], I wanted to have my independence. (P8, Pos. 52)*

Thanks to the downsizing, the burden of the house is lifted (P6-P7) – a "financial, physical, and emotional burden" (P7, Pos. 106), which represents a relief and makes life "uncomplicated" and "easier to manage" because "one is not getting younger" (P7, Pos. 106). Due to the downsizing, various devices were "decluttered", and the interviewee now "does without" them, but without "crying" (P6, Pos. 94). For discarded devices, alternatives were found – for example, instead of repairing clothes with the sewing machine, they are taken to the tailor, or chips are made in the oven instead of the deep fryer (P6).

Downsizing is associated with "freedom" and "independence": "One is freer in an apartment than with a house" (P8, Pos. 30).

> *I close my door behind me; when the weather is nice, my wife and I are out hiking or traveling or doing something else. And I don't have to worry about who puts the trash can in front of the door, for instance, or anything like that. I am simply freer. And we both enjoy that. (P8, Pos. 52)*

Moreover, downsizing is perceived as "lifetime-saving" (P6, Pos. 52): "the house absorbs an incredible amount of time. And now we have more free time, which we can fill in other ways" (P6, Pos. 96). Thus, there is more time for leisure activities, which is seen positively (P6, P8). During the interviews, there were also general reflections on the necessary living space in old age, with statements such as: "There are a few rooms that you really use: bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, living room. That is actually enough," because "one hardly needs more in old age" (P5, Pos. 63; see P2). One person expressed that a more significant reduction of living space would have been "too much" (P8, Pos. 82). When asked about red lines for a relocation, the interviewees did not mention a too small living space.

5.2.2.2 Pull Factor: Communal Housing Estate

Regarding the housing estate, all interviewees highlighted its beautiful overall design, which is suitable for aging (P2-P7). The distance between the houses played an important role for privacy, allowing for a combination of retreat and interaction (P2, P6, P8) – "one lives right in the middle, but still has the privacy protected" (P6, Pos. 54). The communal areas, especially the community garden (P2-P6), the underground garage (P2-P4, P7), and the fact that the estate is car-free (P3-P4, P8) were also positively highlighted. Additionally, the location of the housing estate was central with age-appropriate and walkable local supply for shopping, healthcare, or gastronomy (P2-4, P6-P8), which would not have always been the case when remaining in the SDFH (P7-P8).

The theme of community and social contacts was relevant for the interviewees. The principle of multi-generational living was a key pull factor or at least a positive aspect for many (P2-P4, P6-P7), as it resembles cooperative living – "there is the opportunity to engage and […] there are communal rooms" (P2, Pos. 32) – but has the advantages of ownership (P2). A communal and lively environment is seen particularly beneficial in older age:

> *It is all one complex, so a green space with paths and a community garden and everything communicative, so that everyone knows each other. And there are so many young people there because of these families, families with small children. It is very lively. And I find that nice for old people, when you don't just see old people around you. (P3, Pos. 249)*

The ease with which social contacts can be established and maintained in the housing estate was highlighted as a central added value (P2-P7), for example, through the community garden, shared activities on and off the estate such as barbecuing, playing cards, bowling, or pétanque, the monastery café, or during shopping:

> *We have a very nice relationship with the people who live here. And that is an important factor, especially at our age. We are not away for eight hours a day professionally. So, it's nice; you meet people in the garden or at Edeka or here on the shared premises. Those are very nice communication opportunities. (P6, Pos. 54)*

An advantage of the apartment is also that the neighbours are closer than in SDFH (P5), which make mutual support easier, for instance, with pet sitting (P5), helping with homework (P6), or running errands (P6):

> *Providing smaller services for each other has become so natural now, without asking for money or keeping track of it. Just like that, because the people who also rent here say they consciously chose this multi-generational model, so that one does not live in a bubble where only young people live or only old people. Nobody wants that; the old don't want that either. It's very nice that people of different ages live together and exchange ideas. (P6, Pos. 88)*

This neighbourly community was in few cases only realised afterwards or was even stronger than expected (P3-P8). It was described as a "stroke of luck" (P8, Pos. 84) and a "gain" (P6, Pos. 86) since "really more valuable friends" (P6, Pos. 86) were found. Some neighbours are connected in a WhatsApp group to help each other (P5). It becomes evident that community is central and arises even though the number of communal areas is relatively limited. The "Fletz" in the multi-generation houses and the community worker were not explicitly mentioned in the interviews.

Furthermore, some positively highlighted that they could participate in planning the estate (P2, P5, P7-P8), also allowing for contacts to be established even before moving in (P5).

5.2.2.3 Pull Factor: Lively Location

In addition to the apartment and the housing estate, the location was mentioned by all interviewees as a pull factor. For some, it was decisive that the AHO are close to their old life, where they are "rooted" (P8, Pos. 50), and do not have to adapt to a new environment (P7-P8):

> *I felt like I was letting go of the external burden, yet still being right in the village, so I don't have to get used to a new environment, […] but I actually only have advantages. (P7, Pos. 68)*

> *The fundamental decision was influenced by the fact that the apartment I am now in is right in the village, exactly where I lived as a child. (P7, Pos. 90)*

For others, it was important that the "connection to the old" (P3, Pos. 132) remains, meaning that the old life is close enough to continue with familiar activities regularly – this feeling was

also present even with a one-hour drive (P3). For yet others, the newly gained proximity to grandchildren was an “absolute gain” to be able to “participate in their lives” (P6, Pos. 36).

Among the partly decisive pull factors of the location were also the leisure activities offered by the “attractive area” (P6, Pos. 32) with a great environment for local recreation and proximity to the mountains for hiking (P2-P6, P8). The town of Weyarn was positively highlighted in the interviews as a “totally active community” (P2, Pos. 54) since “democracy is practiced, even on a small scale” (P2, Pos. 54) through working groups in which one can get involved “very easily” (P2, Pos. 54) – for example, gardening in the community garden or in the library. It became evident that senior citizens want to be active:

> *Because when you have been professionally active for 45 years like I have, you can’t just do nothing from one day to the next. […] I personally needed something to do to have structure in my daily routine. I felt like you’d totally fall apart if you’re just at home. But now we each have a task or multiple tasks, and our calendar is now fuller than during work times. (P6, Pos. 50)*

Additionally, the friendly villagers were stressed (P2-P6), making the new residents feel comfortable. The theme of newcomers vs. locals and city dwellers vs. villagers was also discussed, which harmonises well in Weyarn (P3-P4, P6). The historically ambiance of the village of Weyarn, as well as its proximity to the city of Munich, were also mentioned (P3-P4).

5.2.3 Role of the Alternative Housing Options

The presented pull factors already indicate that the AHO in Weyarn were relevant. Indeed, it played an important to decisive role in realising the idea of moving for all interviewees. At this point, the systemic level comes into play, as the AHO provided as new infrastructure. Thanks to the AHO, the vague idea of moving became tangible for the interviewees and could be realised because it was (finally) the right fit (P2, P4-P5, P7-P8). For example, it was expressed:

> *Well, I have been driving through the countryside for years […] and always said, ‘you don’t want to live there, and you don’t want to live there’. But I couldn’t find a place where I said, except for this one, ‘I want to live there’. (P4, Pos. 166)*

> *Throughout the time after my husband’s death, Weyarn residents continually approached me and said, ‘Look, there is an apartment available,’ and I must honestly say, I would never have done that. Not at all. Then I would have stayed in the house. For me, it was really this whole ensemble that was built and the idea behind it and also the way it was executed that was crucial for me. (P7, Pos. 96)*

> *There was an exposé, and we said we want this apartment. If we get that, then we will do it. Otherwise, we would have reconsidered. […] If we hadn’t gotten the apartment, then the decision could have turned out differently.” (P8, Pos. 58)*

For indecisive and hesitant interviewees, the alternative new build gave the final push (P3, P5): “it was just so beautiful that I could immediately say ‘yes’” (P3, Pos. 125).

Generally, there were high expectations for the new apartment (P3-P5, P8), which could be met by the thoughtful new buildings in Weyarn. This is particularly relevant because it was expressed that one was “grateful” (P6, Pos. 62) to have gotten the apartment since it was difficult to find something adequate (P3-P4, P6). Also, that it was once again ownership and not rent was partially explicitly mentioned as relevant (P2, P6). Here, a gender aspect is also observable, as it was important for a female interviewee, due to the small pension, to acquire ownership so that the apartment remains affordable even in the case of an early death of the

husband. Cooperative apartments were not an option for her, as the rental burden could potentially remain high after the husband's death (P2).

The fact that the individuals moved to AHO in Weyarn from different distances shows that the location of AHO can be attractive for various reasons, not just for people from the same neighbourhood, although the people in Weyarn had a right of first refusal. People tended not to have any concrete alternative considerations to living in Weyarn (P3, P5-P8). If they did, they only had vague plans to look further afield if things did not work out in Weyarn (P2, P4, P7). Sometimes the answers were inconsistent since it remained unclear whether alternative considerations existed or not.

5.3 Decision as a Process

The decision-making process represented an intense process for all interviewees. First, I will address obstacles that stood in the way of moving (ch. 5.3.1), then various phases of decision-making (ch 5.3.2), the apartment search, and the moving process (ch. 5.3.3) as well as the current view on the decision to move (ch. 5.3.4).

5.3.1 Obstacles

Various unsettling questions arose for the interviewees, when they started to think about a move such as how life in an apartment would be since they had always lived in SDFH (P8) and hesitations about having less space than in the house with "huge cellar" (P5, Pos. 41). For the widowed person, it was difficult that the partner "would never" have given up the house: "in the nights when I couldn't sleep, and there were many, I also had the problem that he wouldn't have wanted it. 'You're doing something he wouldn't have wanted'" (P7, Pos. 58). Other personal obstacles included the existing social network of "sports buddies" (P5, Pos. 43) as well as the familiar environment and activities that had been "maintained for years" (P3, Pos. 71) and were not to be given up. Strong emotional attachments to the house – a "feel-good house" (P6, Pos. 22) or the "beloved" (P3, Pos. 111) garden – made moving difficult (P3, P6) and made it "hard to sell the whole thing" (P6, Pos. 22). One person stated that "the letting go process was not really difficult because the alternative was a disaster" (P7, Pos. 60). Three interviewees stated they had no (stronger) obstacles (P2, P4, P8). The sale of the SDFH was either perceived as a laborious act (P7) or as quick and coincidental (P3-P4). Additionally, it was expressed that the apartment search was long and laborious (P2-P4, P6) – which represents a structural obstacle.

5.3.2 Different Phases

The interviewees perceived the decision-making process as one with various phases. While this occurred individually, it shows patterns. Often it was a multi-year process (P2, P4, P8) – the idea to move "accompanies" the individuals "for many years" (P2, Pos. 32) and "matures" (P4, Pos. 14). The length of the process is regarded positively (P2, P4, P7-P8), as it is "not a decision that one can make from one day to the next, but you have to think long enough about

it so that it fits" (P2, Pos. 88). Less frequently, it was a quick process (P3, P6), which was once also felt as "too fast" (P3, Pos. 15) and "very sudden" (P3, Pos. 17). Regarding decision-making, various phases can be distinguished that did not always represent a linear process but rather a mental "back and forth" (P6, Pos. 40). In all couples, there was a driving force (P2, P4, P8) that pulled the other partner (P3, P5-P6) along and convinced them. Some individuals recognised that a different life phase was dawning, making downsizing sensible (P7-P8). Initially, the decision to move was made, and then the decision about where (P2-P4, P7-P8). It was expressed that the process involved actively asking the question of 'where to' and imagining how life would be elsewhere (P3-P4, P6-P7). This was sometimes perceived as very exhausting and burdensome (P6-P7). In one case, parts of the house were initially rented out before the decision to move was finally made (P7). Renting as a potential alternative to selling the house was hardly mentioned (P6).

5.3.3 Apartment Search & Moving Process

The interviewees searched through newspapers and the internet, as well as directly on-site by car for an apartment (P2-P4, P6). The search took a long time, and it was also expressed that it takes time to see where exactly to go. Either the individuals stumbled upon the apartments by chance through an information board (P2, P5-P6) or through personal contacts to Weyarn (P3-P4, P7-P8). When buying the apartment, there are two groups: those who had to buy spontaneously under time pressure from fear that the apartment would otherwise be sold elsewhere (P3-P4, P6) and those who took their time and got to know the place better before making the purchase decision or already knew the location (P2-P5, P8).

Another pattern of the process showed that compromises had to be made. On one hand, compromises between personal expectations and reality. For example, the timing of the move was pushed forward (P3, P8) to seize the "unique opportunity" (P8, Pos. 32), or missing amenities were accepted – such as the lack of a fireplace (P3-P4), missing hobby room (P2, P3), or a missing third room (P6). One interviewee even reinterpreted and compensated the missing third room by a "huge terrace" (P6, Pos. 34). If guests are hosted, they are accommodated in a hotel (P6). On the other hand, compromises between the couples had to be found regarding different living and location needs (P2, P5). Additionally, conditions were negotiated between spouses, such as being able to pursue existing activities "three times a week" (P4, Pos. 18).

Also, moving into the AHO usually represented a process in various respects: One interviewee described a rental apartment as a transitional solution until suitable ownership was found (P6). Besides, the newly purchased apartments were not immediately used by some interviewees but were initially rented or stood empty for a long time (P2-P6). The retirement of the husband, in particular, was often decisive for the timing of the move (P2, P5-P6, P8).

5.3.4 Current View on the Decision to Move

Although some disadvantages of the new apartment were mentioned, such as high ancillary costs (P7), that it is not quite one's own (P7), and things that are missed (P2-P7), these were deemed negligible by the interviewees. When asked if it was the right decision to move, all stated that the advantages clearly outweigh the disadvantages and highlighted positive aspects. The move is seen as a gain and the absolute right decision that has "not been regretted for a second" (P8, Pos. 66). It was counted among the "three best decisions" (P2, Pos. 74) in life, which is "not questioned at all", as it is "even better than before" (P3, Pos. 107) and "this is the best thing that could happen to us" (P4, Pos. 252). It was also stated that it is a different life phase, which is simply different from the previous life, regardless of the apartment (P2, P7).

5.4 Pioneers: Impact on the Social Environment

As already mentioned, in all couples, there was one partner who convinced the other. A similar picture emerges regarding the social environment. Family, friends, and acquaintances reacted mostly negatively, and the idea of downsizing encountered misunderstanding and resistance (P2-P7). Positive comments were rarely made (P6, P8). The interviewees did not mention that those negative reactions from the social environment had an inhibiting effect. In one case, this resistance even "solidified" (P7, Pos. 100) the decision. Finally, the individuals from the social environment revised their negative opinion after the realised move and then evaluated it positively (P2-P4, P6-7); some individuals from the social environment were even inspired and can now imagine living in Weyarn themselves or are generally considering downsizing (P2), as they are "a little envious that they haven't done it yet. And they are thinking about whether they should do it" (P3, Pos. 208). The interviewees thus inspired their social environment to think about downsizing and acted as pioneers.

6. Discussion

The focus of the conducted interview case study was the exploration of the current societal conditions that enable people to downsize. In summary, the results show that the current societal conditions for moving from a SDFH to AHO during the empty nest phase are determined by a complex interplay of various components at the individual (development of the idea to move) and systemic level (realisation of the moving aspiration), which are illustrated as a tentative model in Figure 6: Personal push factors, arising from coincidental and diverse events, triggered the idea of moving, shaped, and consolidated it. Then, quite uniform domestic push factors made moving more urgent. While social push factors played a minor role in the downsizing process, ecological ones did not seem to do so at all. Moreover, quite uniform pull factors of the AHO – of the apartment itself and the surroundings – made the move desirable. Although the systemic level with the provision of AHO comes into play late in the decision-making process, it is then the crucial enabling factor for the individual moving aspirations. Without the provided AHO, the interviewees would have found it more challenging or in some cases may

not have moved at all. For the interviewees, an increase in quality of life is particularly relevant among the pull factors, for example, through less work and more opportunities for communal living. All interviewees view the completed relocation positively. Additionally, they acted as pioneers for their social environment. Besides, the move freed up the SDFH for families.

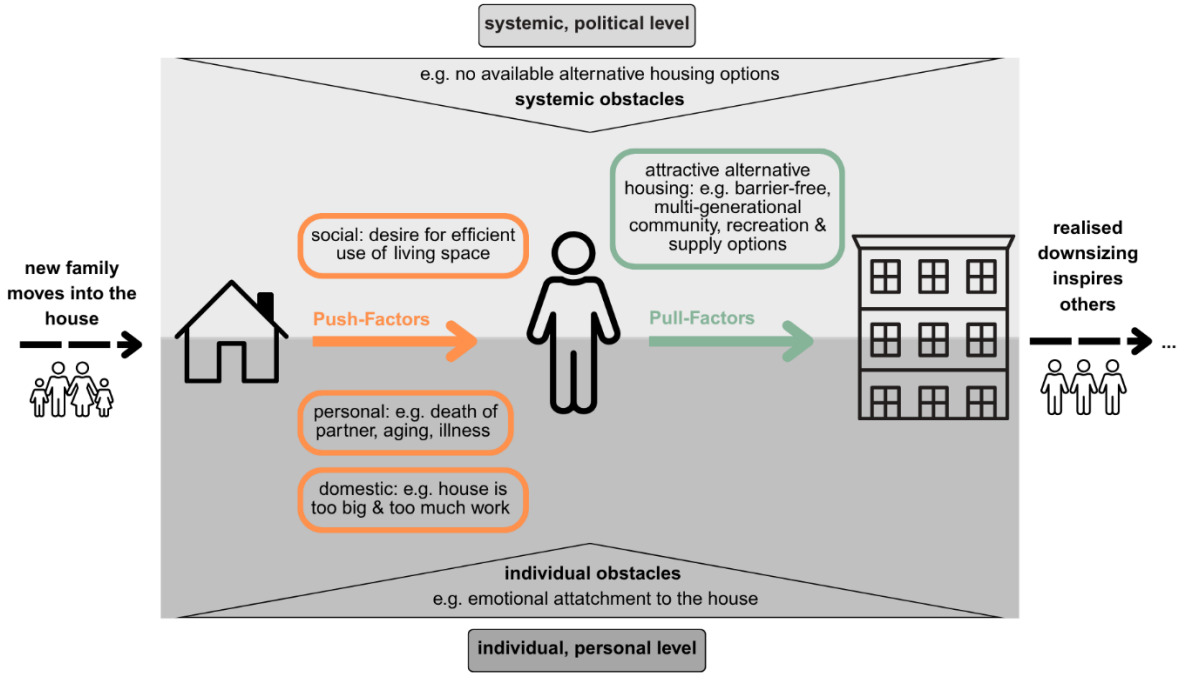

Figure 6: Tentative model, which maps the current societal conditions for downsizing in the empty nest phase based on the results of the explorative interview study. It shows the process of moving from a SDFH into a flat in AHO. The moving process consists of several components: systemic and individual obstacles, which are overcome by push factors, i.e. personal, domestic, and social, as well as pull factors of the AHO, i.e. the apartment, the estate and its surrounding. The push factors trigger and consolidate the idea of moving; the pull-factors further consolidate and help to realise it. The components can be attributed to an individual and a systemic level. Additionally, the people who downsized took a pioneering function as they inspired their social environment with the idea of downsizing. Also new families moved into the vacant family house. Own illustration.

In the following, I discuss the identified components that hindered or enabled moving (ch. 6.1), the push-pull dynamics (ch. 6.2), the identified levels and their notion of transformation (ch. 6.3), as well as the function as pioneers (ch. 6.4). I then broaden the perspective and examine my results in the broader context of the IML (ch. 6.5) and conclude with considerations on how the societal conditions can be enhanced to upscale the measure “AHO” (ch. 6.6).

6.1 Downsizing as an Interplay of Various Components

Since current literature suggests that realised downsizing has not been analysed yet, but only hypothetical surveys exist (Kenkmann et al., 2023), my case study allows for the first time to gain a multi-faceted and systematic picture of the societal conditions of realised downsizing aspirations in the empty nest phase as well as deep insights into this decision-making process, which points towards sufficiency. It was not only possible to identify various components that played an enabling role, but also to record initial relationships in terms of how the decision-making process took place and at what level this can be assigned – individual or systemic level.

Through the exploratory qualitative approach, my case study can affirm and complement the results of the existing hypothetical surveys (Kenkmann et al., 2023) and other relevant literature on downsizing and identify gaps, as shown below.

Based on the interviews, I conceptualised the move as a process consisting of various components. This allowed for a plausible representation of the results. Conceptualising a decision not as an event but as a process makes sense due to central psychological findings. It is known that decisions are complex processes (Adinolfi, 2021; Bamberg & Schulte, 2019). Various psychological approaches agree that behavioural changes represent a (non-linear) process of various steps through which obstacles can be overcome (Bamberg & Schulte, 2019), such as the theory of change (Lewin, 1952), the transtheoretical model (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997), or the stage model of self-regulated environmental behavioural change (Bamberg, 2013b, 2013a). My results also suggest that obstacles were overcome through the interplay of various push and pull factors: The idea was triggered, shaped, consolidated, and then realised.

The personal and systemic obstacles identified in my case study – such as emotional attachment to the house and difficulties in finding AHO – align with the hypothetical surveys (Kenkmann et al., 2023) and relevant literature (ch. 3.3.1). Additionally, the compromises mentioned during the apartment search, as well as the negative reactions from the social environment, could also represent obstacles to a move, which were not expressed by the interviewees as such. In contrast to the hypothetical surveys, the obstacles in my analysis had already been overcome and were also expressed to varying degrees; for most interviewees, they were less present than suggested by the hypothetical surveys. This could be explained by various aspects and would need further investigation: It could be that the obstacles were generally less present, or memories have faded as they moved some time ago. Biases could also have occurred, such as choice-supportive bias, meaning that one is more likely to remember the positive attributes of the chosen option rather than the negatives (Lind et al., 2017; Mather et al., 2000); these biases seem to be stronger among older individuals (Mather & Johnson, 2000).

Similarly, the domestic push factors – in my terminology – align with the findings from the existing hypothetical surveys, such as that the SDFH is too large or the financial costs of it (Kenkmann et al., 2023). Additionally, I was able to identify a variety of personal and social push factors that were relevant for the development of the idea and the decision to move, such as the death of a partner, illness, or the birth of grandchildren, thus gaining a more nuanced picture than previously available. In other words, various push factors can confront individuals with the idea of moving, trigger and shape the idea.

The reduction in living space seems to be rather indirectly decisive for the interviewees. More important appear to be various other factors that motivated the relocation, which are explicitly or implicitly related to downsizing. This confirms what Stieß et al. (2019, p. 8) state:

Large dwelling space alone, even if it is perceived as too much, appears for most of the SFH-owners not to be an immediate trigger to action. Housing considerations for the retirement age are embedded in a broader context.

Moreover, I was able to identify various dimensions of systemic pull factors, thereby showing what housing needs people in the empty nest phase have and what is attractive for them – both for the apartment itself and the immediate and broader surroundings. Crucial were age-appropriate living in the form of barrier-free accessibility, local supply, social contacts, and financial security, which enhance quality of life. Such pull factors were also found to be central for downsizing in some of the hypothetical surveys (Kenkmann et al., 2023), but they have been only hypothetical and also underexplored and could now be presented and expanded upon in greater detail in my case study.

Almost all interviewees moved from the nearby area to the project in Weyarn. Interestingly, the location was also perceived as close to their previous life, even if the old home was a few kilometres to an hour's drive away, if the connection to the old life remained. In other words, the AHO only really had to be right next to the SDFH for a few interviewees. In contrast, existing literature usually emphasises the neighbourhood level, i.e. that the AHO should be in the immediate proximity (Fischer & Stieß, 2019b, 2019a; Kenkmann et al., 2023). In one case, the location of Weyarn was far away from the SDFH, but still suitable, as the children and grandchildren now live there; this can also be found in the literature (Fischer & Stieß, 2019b).

It should be noted that although the interviews and my heuristic present a certain sequence and linearity, the decision to move does not represent a monocausal, deterministic process; rather, the identified components can interact – as was explicitly shown in some of the interviews. My ability to evidence the relationships and interactions between, e.g., the different push factors is limited. Thus, the tentative model must be regarded as a first attempt to organise this complex decision-making process.

Moreover, it is not possible to sharply separate between systemic and individual level as they partially overlap. This also applies for the push and pull factors, which were organised according to the interviewees' statements, but are closely interconnected. For example, the interviewees expressed community as a pull factor of the AHO; non-community could correspondingly be a push factor, but was not explicitly stated. In some cases, the interviewees mentioned both manifestations, which were then coded accordingly, such as that the SDFH required a lot of work (push factor) and the apartment required less (pull factor). Additionally, the identified push factors represent a mixed bag that includes both what one would traditionally understand as triggers and factors that represent more of an observation process, as well as social aspects, to distinguish it from the domestic push factors. Although very rarely, ambivalences occurred in the interviews, such as when interviewees mentioned multiple initial push factors or different sequences of the decision-making process at different points in the interview. This points to the complex nature of the decision and the role of interactions.

Overall, my case study confirms what experts demand (e.g. Kenkmann et al., 2023; Tetzlaff, 2025): The measure “AHO” seems central for the realisation of downsizing aspirations in the empty nest phase. Thus, the potential that the hypothetical surveys (Kenkmann et al., 2023) claim becomes more tangible: It seems possible to reduce obstacles and enable downsizing in the empty nest phase by the provision of AHO.

6.2 Push & Pull regarding Downsizing

According to my systematisation of the results, individual push and systemic pull factors were particularly reasons for the realised downsizing. In the debate about measures for social and ecological transformation, push and pull dynamics are central – especially in relation to policies. An interplay of push – restricting, “making environmentally unfriendly behaviour less attractive” – and pull measures – enabling, “making environmentally friendly behaviour more attractive” (Schuitema & Bergstad, 2019, p. 299) – is regarded as effective (Banister, 2008; Steg, 2007). In other words, “policies aiming for the ‘creation’ of new and for ‘destroying’ (or withdrawing support for) the old” (Kivimaa & Kern, 2016, p. 206); also regarding sufficiency measures (Böcker et al., 2020; Leuser & Brischke, 2018). Since such push and pull dynamics appear highly relevant for a transformation, I examine in the following existing knowledge on this and link it with my explorative results to further investigate into the existing societal conditions of downsizing.

6.2.1 Push Factors

According to the analysis, the idea to move arose among the interviewees through personal push factors at the individual level, such as the children moving out, the spouse's desire to move, or the birth of grandchildren. In sustainability research, such life events are generally regarded as central for a “de-routinisation” (Jaeger-Erben, 2010, p. 4, a.t.) of practices. Research on housing sufficiency specifies the empty nest phase as particularly relevant for a change in housing situation (e.g. Stieß et al., 2022). My results also suggest that especially retirement (of the husband) and life-altering events – illness or death of the partner – are important.

Theories of (environmental) psychology regard such individual experiences that trigger behavioural change as central. Sutherland et al. (2012) create a “Trigger Change Model” (Hidano et al., 2019, p. 2). This describes that positive or negative, one-time or repeated events can interrupt existing behaviour patterns and initiate changes, representing not linear but iterative processes. They distinguish three triggering factors based on the example of farmers: “those relating to the life course of the farm household (e.g. succession, retirement, fluctuations in labour availability)”, “those relating to the farm business (e.g. land availability, commodity prices, regulations, subsidy schemes)” and those “reflecting challenges to moral beliefs about the purpose and practice of farming,” e.g., “shock events, like a disease outbreak” (Sutherland

et al., 2012, p. 146). These findings also resonate with my results, such as the husband's retirement, renovation costs, or the death of the partner.

While the “Trigger Change Model” also includes systemic triggers, the push factors identified in my case study remain almost exclusively at the individual level. Aside from the social push factors, which seemed to play a subordinate role, no push factors were mentioned that point to a more systemic level. For instance, none of the interviewees reported a municipal informational event on housing alternatives for the elderly; let alone are there currently structural push measures in the form of bans, incentives, or removal of subsidies that incentivise or regulate downsizing and sufficiency in housing (Franke, 2022) in the empty nest phase.

This focus on the individual level is often criticised, as it side-lines the systems and structures in which people act, and the individual has relatively little power (Bamberg et al., 2021; Chater & Loewenstein, 2023; SRU, 2024). “[F]ocusing on individual-level solutions has led behavioral public policy astray”, title Chater & Loewenstein (2023), which can stand in the way of transformation. Linz (2013) also argues that sufficiency research has long overestimated individual behavioural changes and underestimated the power of structures, routines, or practices. The social push factors, although less present in the interviews, are the only ones that can be assigned to the systemic level. The interviewees' desire for another family to utilise the space in the SDFH shows that housing as a societal issue played a (small) role in the decision.

In contrast to social push factors, ecological push factors, such as awareness of land or energy consumption, did not appear in the interviews. It can be assumed that the interviewees lack knowledge about ecological sustainability or sufficiency in the housing sector. This finding is also supported by Stieß et al. (2022) in a survey. Bierwirth & Thomas (2015, p. 76) state that the motivation for empty nesters is not the reduction of living space per se, but rather “the ‘natural consequence’” because they “also might look for security and care in a community or want to reduce strains of housekeeping to stay independent as long as possible”. This lack of ecological framing of downsizing aligns with earlier research (Hagbert & Femenías, 2016; Sandberg, 2018; Wankiewicz, 2015). Sandberg (2018, p. 162) argues in her study on public texts about small-sized dwellings that:

> *Downsizing was presented as a desirable change for the individual or a necessity unrelated to environmental concerns. This suggests that downsizing is not perceived as a facet of environmentally sustainable housing.*

In contrast to my results, however, other studies conclude that ecological considerations are key for consumption changes (Casey et al., 2017; Dalpian et al., 2015; Guillard & Roux, 2014) and central to promote (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014). It remains to be investigated whether ecological framing in housing – i.e. ecological push factors – could improve the societal conditions so that more individuals develop the idea to move.

Thus, even though the current societal conditions enable the interviewees to develop the idea to move at the individual level, this reveals gaps: Personal push factors must exist for such a thought process to be initiated. To put it bluntly, it may not suffice for a transformation that a

life-altering event must first occur for the idea of moving to arise. Stieß et al. (2022, p. 174, a.t.) also criticise that there are no societal “negotiation arenas” where living needs can be discussed, but that housing is considered a private matter.

Although systemic push measures are often perceived as “less fair and acceptable” (Schuitema & Bergstad, 2019, p. 299) than pull measures, they are relevant for a change, because they “are often more effective in changing behaviour” and are “more likely to have positive collective outcomes” (Schuitema & Bergstad, 2019, p. 299). Transformation can be “accelerated” by “actively phasing out existing systems” (Geels et al., 2017, p. 1244). To increase acceptance, complementing policies are needed (Schuitema & Bergstad, 2019). Research on traffic transformation shows that sustainable mobility must be made more attractive while simultaneously making non-sustainable mobility less attractive (Steg, 2007). Thus, a sufficient housing transformation can only, or at least better, occur if existing options are not only supplemented but also simultaneously reduced (Böcker et al., 2020). Since the measure “AHO” largely lacks “structural strategies” (Steg, 2007, p. 4) – the idea of moving relies on chance and personal initiative –, it can be stated that the societal conditions show a need for improvement.

Moreover, although my case study suggests that push factors triggered and shaped the idea for a move, their role for social change is hardly captured in various theories that represent transformation. The popular transition model *Multi-Level Perspectives*, which describes the interplay of niche, regime, and landscape (Geels et al., 2017), does not include such push factors as drivers of transformation. How the idea for a niche innovation arises remains open, and it generally “tends to give less attention to actors” (Geels & Schot, 2007, p. 414). The trajectory of transformations by Wright (2010) also do not explicitly incorporate this. For a holistic view, it is essential to investigate how such push factors could be integrated there.

6.2.2 Pull Factors

The measure “AHO” represents a sufficiency pull measure, as it makes a different behaviour – living in less space – “more attractive” (Schuitema & Bergstad, 2019, p. 299) through the provision of life-phase-appropriate infrastructure, but relocating is entirely voluntary. The interviewees attributed various pull factors to the AHO that enhance their quality of life, such as barrier-free accessibility, local supply, and community. That communal and intergenerational living is particularly attractive for senior citizens is also a result of hypothetical surveys on downsizing moves (e.g. Sunderer et al., 2018), which is confirmed by my results.

These findings align with literature indicating that housing is not just about the roof and the four walls but encompasses more. The distinction between the technical *house* and social *home* is emphasised in this context (Ellsworth-Krebs et al., 2015) as housing satisfaction is not solely about living space but includes subjective factors like atmosphere, aesthetics, and access to amenities – e.g., daily services, recreation, mobility – or social interaction. This influences

perceived quality and is shaped by lifestyle, biographies, and personal needs (Peter & Bierwirth, 2021; Schmitt et al., 2006), which can also change over time (Hasse, 2019). Lage (2025) shows in the context of the sufficiency measure *minimum occupancy rates* in Swiss cooperatives, that downsizing can be positively associated with less work, greater accessibility, higher building standards, or suitable neighbourhood infrastructure and the development of adequate infrastructure concerning the needs of people and a sense of community, which is reflected in my results. Findings from Bagheri et al. (2024) regarding flat exchange, moving bonus, and moving advice also align with my results. There, central enabling factors were local ties, neighbourhood stability, and adequate, e.g., barrier-free offers.

Such pull factors or attractive benefits accompanying sufficiency measures that are ascribed to the project in Weyarn are referred to in research as *co-benefits* (Lage & Graef, 2022). Lage & Graef (2022) argue that co-benefits function as catalysts for sufficiency policy. They investigated how citizens justify sufficiency in participatory processes and identified numerous co-benefits that also appeared in my interviews. Accordingly, there is a "desire for community and participation" (Lage & Graef, 2022, p. 51, a.t.) present in housing, which can be satisfied by "intergenerational, socially and culturally mixed forms of housing" plus compensatory "private retreat options" (Lage & Graef, 2022, p. 52, a.t.). The "ideal image of a community" (Lage & Graef, 2022, p. 51, a.t.) includes a neighbourhood community, lively public spaces, and short distances for shopping, medical visits, or leisure activities. This is intended to promote everyday encounters, prevent loneliness, and enable independence for senior citizens. Kenkmann et al. (2023, p. 11, a.t.) also describe social contacts as an "important resource" for independence, practical support, and the well-being of older people against loneliness. Since older people are often less mobile, short distances are particularly important. In a city of short distances (e.g. Jacobs, 1992) with meeting places and social mixing (Sennett, 2018), a trusting neighbourhood community can emerge, fostering resilience (Edel et al., 2023; Jacobs, 1992). Generally, sharing practices, e.g., communal spaces, are not only associated with positive impacts for the environment (Klocker et al., 2017; Williams, 2007) as housing space is reduced (Marckmann et al., 2012), but also for people themselves. It fosters social interaction and a sense of community (Lietaert, 2010; Williams, 2008).

Exactly these co-benefits convinced the interviewees about the project in Weyarn: The multigenerational housing project in Weyarn partly reflects this "ideal image of a community" (Lage & Graef, 2022, p. 51, a.t.) with, on the one hand, the community garden, neighbourly social contacts, the nearby café, walkable infrastructure, and leisure opportunities around Weyarn, and on the other hand, the age-appropriate private apartments. Thus, the project in Weyarn fulfils the needs for participation and community while allowing for privacy, preventing loneliness in old age, and enabling independence.

The project in Weyarn also advertises this community on the websites, highlighting the community garden and the “Fletz,” which aim to “enable communication among residents” and “casual encounters” (Stadt München, n.d.); likewise, the central location of the estate, which allows for “the participation of residents in village life” (Stadt München, n.d.). According to the interviewees, the AHO in Weyarn as a new material infrastructure does indeed facilitate social contacts. Additionally, technical infrastructure such as the WhatsApp group mentioned in the interviews facilitates participation. This shows that social structures can be built on material infrastructure.

Some interviewees positively described the opportunity to participate in both the planning of the residential estate in Weyarn and the furnishing of their own apartment. Through such participation housing needs can be addressed more effectively, which is seen central in the context of housing sufficiency: “Sustainable design for sufficiency-optimised homes is based on co-creation, co-design and synergistic learning – standard solutions and one-size-fits-all designs will not be sufficient” (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019, p. 290). It is therefore essential

> *to include the (future) inhabitants of homes to be newly built or redesigned in due time, i.e. before the planning and design processes have reached a state when significant adaptations are no longer possible. (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019, p. 291; see Böcker et al., 2020, 2022)*

The relevance of the interplay between push and pull factors for downsizing (Figure 6) is underscored by existing research. However, there are gaps in the measure “AHO” in that the societal conditions contain few systemic (push) factors.

6.3 Notions of Sufficiency: Individual & Systemic Level

Transformation processes can follow different logics depending on which actors are to initiate the change and what scope is thus possible with respective advantages and disadvantages (ch. 3.2.3). Regarding the measure “AHO”, it is individuals who develop the idea and move, as well as municipalities or developers who provide the AHO. In the following, I discuss how the logics of the societal conditions of the move, as shown in the interviews, can be theoretically framed in terms of transformation.

The idea to move was generated by personal experiences, so the interviewees were on their own to develop the idea of the alternative practice of downsizing in the empty nest phase. Accordingly, they voluntarily changed their consumption behaviour, which corresponds to the bottom-up approach of sufficiency (Lage, 2022) and follows a niche approach. They act “as autonomous agents of choice and change” (Lage, 2022, p. 14) and the idea of moving arises *beside* or *independently* from the state (Wright, 2010). However, the actions of the interviewees are not free from conflicts – as the bottom-up approach suggests (Lage, 2022) – since they face resistance from their social environment. While the current societal conditions are enough for the interviewees to develop the idea of moving, it is questionable whether this would apply to a larger number of people due to the need of personal events or would hinder the upscaling of AHO.

Niche developments are essential, but they have limitations (Lage, 2022) – a “niche-driven bias” (Geels & Schot, 2007, p. 415) – as they risk remaining “isolated” (Schot & Geels, 2008, p. 28). Criticism of the bottom-up approach is that individuals have too little power for transformation. The development of ideas by individuals is politically, economically, and socio-culturally embedded (e.g. Røpke, 1999) and thus “supra-individual” (Lage, 2022, p. 9). The idea for a move thus depends on social norms and institutions, for example.

The bottom-up and policy-making approaches of sufficiency should therefore be thought of as complementary, so that “neither neglecting consumer involvement, nor delegating responsibility to them since neither option offers solutions to the sustainability challenges” (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019, p. 287).

In contrast to the development of the idea, the realisation of the move is embedded in a systemic level, as downsizing to Weyarn is only made possible or significantly simplified by the newly created AHO, which reduce obstacles. In other words, the AHO create new attractive framework conditions for the interviewees and opens up the option for a more sufficient mode of living in the empty nest phase. Literature also often argues that adequate infrastructure reduces obstacles and enables sufficiency action (ch. 3.2.3; e.g. Lage, 2022). Thereby actions of individuals are strongly influenced by political frameworks and less by their knowledge or beliefs (SRU, 2024). These structure-agency relationships (Geels & Schot, 2007; Giddens, 1984) can link the artificial separation of my results into individual and systemic levels: The niche idea of moving requires the appropriate framework conditions for realisation, as illustrated by the *Multi-Level Perspectives* (Geels, 2019). The moves are thus the “outcomes of alignments between developments at multiple levels” (Geels & Schot, 2007, p. 399). At the same time, this action shapes the structure again (function as pioneers, ch. 6.4).

The realisation of the move corresponds to the policy-making approach of sufficiency (Lage, 2022): The change thus occurs *with* the state (Wright, 2010), which provides the appropriate infrastructure. My analysis thus strengthens transformation theories that assume that individual action is embedded in enabling framework conditions and practices, allowing (individual) niche activities to be successful (Brand, 2020; Geels, 2019; SRU, 2024; Wright, 2010). Everyday practices, institutions, and infrastructures mutually condition each other, and an interlocking change is needed in all areas (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c). As described (ch. 3.2.3), the state is an ambivalent actor in this (Brand et al., 2021; Brand & Wissen, 2024; Princen, 2005).

While the current societal conditions enabled the interviewees to downsize in the empty nest phase, it seems likely that only incremental change will be permitted due to the lack of systemic factors. To upscale the measure “AHO”, there needs to be a stronger integration of the policy-making and social-movement approach towards a radical policy-making approach (ch. 3.2.4). Living in the empty nest phase must not be individualised; rather, a “holistic understanding of behaviour, […] that bridges the individual and systemic” (Newell et al., 2021, p. 9) is needed.

By combining the different notions of sufficiency (Lage, 2022, 2024) and transformations (Wright, 2010), synergies can be utilised: The interplay of various actors – e.g., individuals, niche actors, politicians, activists – can amplify momentum for change. How gaps can be specifically addressed will be discussed in chapter 6.6.

6.4 Individuals Function as Pioneers

The case study demonstrates that the interviewees not only acted within certain societal conditions that enabled them to move but also actively shaped these conditions (Giddens, 1984) and functioned as pioneers, i.e. push factors, for their social environment. How the actions of individuals can stimulate social change is the subject of various considerations about transformation. Through their idea to move and realisation of moving, the interviewees function as *pioneers* (Smith, 2006), *frontrunners* (Grin et al., 2010; Wittmayer et al., 2017), *niche actors* (Geels & Schot, 2007) or *relative outsiders* (Geels, 2019). These are, according to sustainability sciences, central actors who motivate others to also make other – more sustainable – decisions through their behaviour (Geels, 2019; Wittmayer et al., 2017).

In contrast to the literature, where, for example, individual, political, or activist actors actively take their position as pioneers (Grin et al., 2010; Wittmayer et al., 2017), this seemed more like a by-product for the interviewees. However, this is also reflected in transformation considerations: Wright (2010) describes that historically social change came about through two interacting processes: “cumulative *unintended by-products of the actions* of people operating under existing social relations” as well as “cumulative intended effects of *conscious projects of social change* by people acting strategically to transform those social relations” (Wright, 2010, p. 207). Also, in the project in Weyarn – viewed as a small slice of a transformation – this duality of the process is evident. The interviewees “engage in actions not in an effort to change the world, but to solve specific problems which they face” (Wright, 2010, pp. 207–208). The actors who provided the AHO intended social change and can be assigned to the second process.

Through the actions of the interviewees – breaking out of the common practice of remaining in the house – moving from a SDFH to a smaller apartment has become normalised in their environment as the “routines and practices” of those pioneers “gradually trickled down and changed regime rules” (Geels & Schot, 2007, p. 406). Such niche activities are considered key for transformation processes (Sommer, 2023). The interviewees are pioneers who exemplify a more sufficient mode of living as “real utopian alternatives” (Wright, 2010, p. 6), making it visible to their environment that “another world is possible” (Wright, 2010, p. 255, 268). The utopia – age-appropriate dwelling in the empty nest phase – is lived within the existing system and seems to go beyond it (Brand & Wissen, 2024; Wright, 2010) at the same time, as a new mode of dwelling is established that has not yet existed in broader society. The negative reactions from the social environment of the interviewees illustrate how little a change in living in the empty nest phase is established in society.

It is also explicitly known for the housing sector that such pioneers are central, as people would be more willing to move if it were culturally normalised and structurally and economically more strongly promoted (Brischke, 2018; Karlen et al., 2022; Kremer-Preiß et al., 2011; Leuser et al., 2016; Peter et al., 2021): “Community projects have a large radiance: they are prominent niche projects that gain great recognition and serve as inspiration for others” (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 45, a.t.). The individual level of action of the interviewees thus gains a political dimension. The interviewees are transformation subjects because they begin to transform societal conditions – namely the one’s of IML – on a small scale. This demonstrates that it can be useful for enabling a transformation to connect to people's everyday life and needs (Brocchi, 2021; Görgen et al., 2017), rather than preaching such a transformation comprehensively.

6.5 Downsizing in Weyarn in the Light of Imperial Mode of Living

Since there is currently “no recipe” (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 10, a.t.; see 2019b) for a SML, the following will only sketchily consider downsizing in the project in Weyarn, based on the idea of a SML that includes “caring, community-oriented, democratic, and sufficient” (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 44, a.t.) as principles and remains within planetary boundaries.

As described, the project in Weyarn meets social needs of the interviewees on less living space – in some cases, better than the SDFH due to, e.g., community and barrier-free accessibility. Additionally, it mobilises under-occupied living space in the SDFH. It can be argued that multi-generational living in Weyarn meets needs such as participation and security through other satisfiers (Max-Neef et al., 1989; Stieß et al., 2022) – those that now have less costs for others and the environment; for example, participation could be satisfied through working together in the community garden instead of the status symbol of a SDFH.

The ecological impacts of the move cannot be quantified based on my case study but only assumed. The interviewees downsized from an above-average high per capita living space (55 to >200 square meters per capita) in a house to values that are quite close to the German average of 48 square meters (UBA, 2024a) – except in one case (P7) (Table 4). They now also live in a more ecologically friendly multi-family house instead of the SDFH.

The debate over what constitutes a sufficient – socially and ecologically – appropriate amount of living space is complex and shaped by multiple factors. It is a political question, subjective, and context-dependent (Cohen, 2021; Zimmermann, 2018). Zimmerman (2018) defines a sufficient per capita living space as between 10 to 35 square meters per person, with smaller households more likely at the upper limit and larger households at the lower end. The minimum corresponds to the legal minimum in some federal states in Germany; the maximum is derived from stagnating housing satisfaction and ecological considerations. Others suggest with 14 to 20 square meter an even lower range for a sufficient amount (Cohen, 2021). The defined maximum of 35 square meters by Zimmerman (2018) is missed by all interviewees. Five interviewees reach the *partially sufficient* range, while two others are significantly above it (Table 4).

Living space per capita in sqm	Rating of the living space	Interviewees in alternative housing option in Weyarn	Interviewees SDFH
>60	not sustainable	P7	P2-P8
45 – 60	not sufficient	P8	-
35 – 45	partially sufficient	P2-P6	-
10 – 35	sufficient	-	-
0 – 10	minimalistic	-	-

Table 4: (Not-)Sufficient living space. The two left columns show benchmarks of the per capita living space in relation to sufficiency from Zimmermann (2018, p. 48). The two right columns compare this with the living spaces of the interviewees before and after the move. Own illustration.

Through the downsizing move, ecological harmful new construction of SDFH with accompanying settlement area was potentially avoided (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Nagel, 2025), as almost all interviewees made space for a family, thus also resulting in redistribution. Due to the adequate local supply, it can be assumed that fewer shopping trips are made. Additionally, communal areas like the community garden can save resources (Daly, 2017). Mixed housing, such as the multi-generational living in Weyarn, also increases the flexibility and adaptability of neighbourhoods and is thus more future-proof (Böcker et al., 2020; Christ & Lage, 2020).

Overall, it can therefore be assumed that the interviewees externalise fewer environmental costs because of the downsizing while at the same time enjoying a higher quality of life. The principle of sufficiency for a SML is thus established. The co-creation employed in the planning of the project in Weyarn can also be seen as a strategy against the IML in terms of democratisation, and there are also small approaches toward commoning present through the care of the community garden.

However, the infrastructural, institutional, and cultural manifestation of the IML continues to be evident at various points: Firstly, the AHO still have relatively large living space in new buildings and high rooms, for which resources were and are needed. To what extent the interviewees challenge dominant consumption norms through the downsizing remains open. Sandberg (2018) finds that a reduction in consumption can be associated both with the challenge of existing norms and with their conformity. The high demands on the equipment and quality – new construction, guest room, or separate bathroom – make it clear that the interviewees take the privileges of an IML for granted. The move is perceived positively as downsizing and not as de-privileging, even though they are aware of the significant change brought about by the move, possess less material stuff, and received incomprehension from their environment. The smallest apartment in the complex in Weyarn is 47 square meters – so there is no *sufficient* amount (Zimmermann, 2018) for a single person available. To what extent there would be a willingness for smaller apartments if it existed remains open here as well.

Secondly, the community garden in Weyarn does not substitute for a private garden or balcony but rather provides an additional option. These non-replacing but supplementary options are problematised in the literature: “On a practical level, sufficiency options are often added to

existing ones in a growth-oriented modernity" (Lage, 2024, p. 16, a.t.). Thirdly, all the apartments are owned and high-priced. In other words, one must be able to afford to live there, which was possible for the interviewees since they were privileged and could sell their SDFH. The high prices of the AHO can be likely attributed to capitalist structures a lot due to, for example, high land prices driven by a profitability logic (HBS, 2023; Holm, 2018). For a SML, it is essential to question and overcome logics of capitalist ownership in favour of socialised and cooperative housing (Brand & Wissen, 2024; Edel et al., 2023) as well as self-managed collective ownership (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c).

Fourthly, the idea of downsizing still depends too much on individual factors. Since the search was generally a lengthy process for individuals, it seems that too few adequate AHO are available. Thus, improved infrastructure is needed so that individuals can more easily take steps out of the IML.

Despite the limitations, the measure "AHO" is not a mere "pseudo-solution" (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 11, a.t.). Through its provision – multi-generational living with communal areas on smaller living space – as well as the realised downsizing by individuals, it can be stated that the IML has been somewhat pushed back by the principle of sufficiency. Initial approaches to the principles of democratisation and commoning (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c) have also become evident. Thus, the AHO in Weyarn create a "real utopia" (Wright, 2010, p. 4), which is opposed to the IML, which usually often appears to have "no alternative" (Brand & Wissen, 2024, p. 210, a.t.). The AHO in Weyarn make visible that living in a SDFH during the empty nest phase is not inevitable and without alternative, but that another mode of living is possible. In Weyarn, an alternative story of living in the empty nest phase is told – a story that was also inspiring and convincing for the interviewees' social environment (ch. 6.4).

Such projects are seen as essential for a transformation, as they "change the notions of what is normal and the constraints that impose the imperial mode of living on us" (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 79, a.t.) and demonstrate "concrete alternatives for the future in the here and now" (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 6, a.t.). Thus, the examined downsizing to AHO can be seen as a building block for a SML.

6.6 Enhancing Societal Conditions for Downsizing

In the case study in Weyarn, individuals were able to reduce their living space through the pull measure "AHO". The fact that they all searched for something suitable for a long time and that the social environment reacted with incomprehension reveals the dominance of the status quo living and the IML: Housing alternatives and downsizing during the empty nest phase seem to not be integrated into the system and currently rely largely on individual actions. Central identified gaps, for which political conclusions will be drawn below, are the lack of systemic measures (ch. 6.6.1–6.6.3) and the design of AHO that needs improvement (ch. 6.6.4). To

enable a SML, it seems crucial to locate this in the tension between *within* and *against* the current system (see ch. 3.2.4).

6.6.1 Making Downsizing More Attractive

Since it was individual and coincidental whether the interviewees came up with the idea of moving, an important step would be to establish systemic factors so that people are confronted with the possibility of moving and an alternative to staying in the SDFH is normalised. This could be achieved through local advertising campaigns, informational events (Kenkmann et al., 2019), or collaboration with multipliers (Stieß et al., 2022) such as churches, sports clubs, or doctors, as well as pioneers who have already moved. Therefore, structures must be built that create push factors to upscale the measure in the sense of a radical policy-making sufficiency approach. Stieß et al. (2019, p. 8) aptly state:

> *On an individual level, this means empowering SFH-owners to actively engage with their housing situation. On a societal level, this would include a revision of the idea of the family house as a home for life, encouraging residents even in the higher age groups to consider more closely the option to move, and promoting new forms of sharing living space such as subletting or co-habitation.*

The fact that ecological reasons played no role for the interviewees indicates another gap that can be politicised. While ecological traffic or energy transformations are deeply embedded in societal and scientific discourse, a housing transformation is less so. Even though there are partly ambivalent findings on this (Sandberg, 2018), it seems sensible to strengthen ecological aspects in the public discourse. After all, housing has significant environmental impacts, and ecological considerations can serve as motivation for downsizing (e.g. Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Casey et al., 2017; Dalpian et al., 2015; Gorge et al., 2015; Guillard & Roux, 2014; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014). Sandberg (2018, p. 163) states, “framing small-sized dwellings as ‘environmentally sustainable housing’ can drive reductions in dwelling sizes”. Bagheri et al. (Bagheri et al., 2024, p. 311) argue that both social and ecological benefits of sufficiency “should be communicated, so that people voluntarily follow the measures on the basis of the information they have” (see also Stieß et al., 2022). The social co-benefits remain central to articulate (Böcker et al., 2020; Lage et al., 2023; Lage & Graef, 2022).

Moreover, obstacles to downsizing can be reduced by providing practical support in finding AHO and the moving process, for example through counselling services, workshops, moving helpers, loan provision, and transition loans, or platforms with information about apartments (Practical Guide: Paar, 2020; Stieß et al., 2019). Support in the apartment search can also positively influence the intention to move (Karlen et al., 2022; Kenkmann et al., 2019). Housing administrations that provide such services already exist in some cities, such as Göttingen (Stadt Göttingen, n.d.).

6.6.2 Making Empty Nests Less Attractive

AHO should not only be provided, thus creating an incentive, but remaining in the SDFH during the empty nest phase should simultaneously be made less attractive. Downsizing in the empty

nest phase should become the default option. Through so-called "phase-out policies" (Geels, 2019) such as bans, regulations, removal of implicit or explicit subsidies, or targeted financial incentives, living in the SDFH during the empty nest phase should be made unattractive, and moving encouraged. For instance, KfW-funding could be redesigned, such as eliminating the installation of age-appropriate elevators in SDFH (KfW, n.d.) and instead subsidising downsizing. Bagheri et al. (2024, p. 311) recommend “importing already practiced and accepted social norms from other European countries” such as the Swiss minimum occupancy rate. Additionally, there are considerations for taxing living space (Neßler & Brokow-Loga, 2022; see for criticism Fischer et al., 2016), which goes beyond a sufficiency amount and a reintroduction of the misallocation tax that previously existed in Germany (Bagheri et al., 2024). A maximum living space could also be discussed (Neßler & Brokow-Loga, 2022). What sounds radical is already a reality for social assistance recipients: two-person households should live in a maximum of 65 square meters (Kosick & Kosick, 2025).

Push policies are often avoided, and voluntariness is emphasised, but the claim of sufficiency policy should be to incentivise sufficient and deprivilege non-sufficient practices (Böcker et al., 2020; Lage et al., 2023), in other words, to pursue a radical policy-making approach. Thus, a transformation will

> *not happen simply as an accidental by-product of unintended social change; […] it will be brought about conscious actions of people acting collectively to bring it about. (Wright, 2010, p. 268)*

In light of the diverse crises, society must negotiate whether the privileges of a few individuals in housing should continue to be tolerated or not.

6.6.3 Housing Transformation as a Collective Process

There needs to be scientific and societal engagement on how redistribution in housing can be implemented, how to address distribution struggles, and how to promote private luxury in favour of public prosperity (Böcker et al., 2020):

> *The politicising nature of stressing that this is* for everyone*, as opposed to* just a few*, can help society accept the necessary restrictions on freedoms that the common good requires (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019a, p. 90).*

A housing transformation must be an open and collective process. Conflicts will be unavoidable, as powerful interests stand in opposition (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019b) and it is about de-privileging (Böcker et al., 2022). It is also central that more AHO are created, as the more AHO there are, the more this alternative practice becomes visible as ”real utopia” (Wright, 2010, p. 4) and lived practice and can become part of public discourse.

Additionally, municipal action needs to be reconsidered so that they are able to regulate and dynamize the housing market and provide AHO at all (Kenkmann et al., 2023). For this, municipalities should implement proactive land policy, as Vienna does for example, and establish land moratoriums to prevent new land sealing. Furthermore, development plans should be easier to modify, and conceptual guidelines should become the standard, as well as absolute land use targets. Municipalities can preferentially allocate AHO to senior citizens in SDFH

(Kenkmann et al., 2023). Since municipalities are under fiscal growth pressure (Knak, 2021), their financing needs to be guaranteed differently – growth-independent.

It is central that housing does not remain a private issue but becomes politicised, and value systems change regarding how housing needs are met. “Negotiation arenas” (Stieß et al., 2022, p. 165, a.t.) are needed so that housing does not remain a private matter, as was the case with the interviewees. Social movements can play a key role as emancipatory actors to point beyond IML-conditions (Brand et al., 2021; Brand & Wissen, 2024). Since housing is already politically politicised in some aspects – see “Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen” (n.d.) – synergies with ecological dimensions can arise. Social movements can politicise housing more strongly, open conflict fields, promote social justice, and exert pressure on the system (Brand et al., 2021). A coalition between social and ecological issues – such as already in place between the climate movement and the labour union Verdi (Wir fahren zusammen, n.d.) for a traffic transformation – seems promising. Another promising example from Baden-Württemberg: numerous environmental and agricultural associations have recently come together under the motto “Ländle Leben Lassen” for a sustainable land and soil policy (Ländle Leben Lassen, n.d.).

Since the measure “AHO” currently correspond to the bottom-up and policy-making approach, it is necessary to integrate the social movement approach (ch. 3.2.3). Pressure from social movements can politicise housing and lead to the recognition that a housing transformation cannot proceed without conflict and is compatible with the current system (Hagbert & Bradley, 2017). That the identified societal conditions in which the interviewees acted do not contain this third notion of transformation is not surprising, as it is the least dominant (Lage, 2024). The bottom-up and policy-making approach should acknowledge that fundamental societal structures must be overcome for sufficiency not to be diluted or remain a niche (Lage, 2022). Therefore, it should not be focused on single sufficiency measures but acknowledge sufficiency as a far-reaching principle – a cross-cutting issue to tackle the IML in the empty nest phase. If individuals perceive housing as a societal task, they may be more supportive of radical policies such as occupancy requirements (Lage, 2025), which could also apply to AHO.

6.6.4 Designing Alternative Housing Options

Municipalities must provide adequate, affordable, and life-stage-appropriate AHO for the empty nest phase so that the apartment search becomes easier than it was for the interviewees. Wherever possible, new construction should be avoided in favour of the conversion of existing buildings or densification (BBSR, 2022) and space-saving, effective layouts considered (BBSR, 2023; Fuhrhop, 2023) to keep environmental costs minimal.

To fully exploit sufficiency for AHO, I will present potentials in communal spaces, co-design, and the question of ownership, which seem to need improvement in Weyarn. This also points towards the integration of the social movement approach.

In Weyarn, mainly the community garden and the “Fletz” exist as communal spaces. To reduce living space, more such communal areas should be considered in the planning that make private spaces obsolete (Brischke et al., 2022; Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020; Lage & Leuser, 2019). For example, a laundry room could be shared, so private bathrooms no longer need space for a washing machine; communal hobby and craft rooms could allow for smaller private living rooms, and a rentable guest room can reduce the number of rooms in the apartment. At the same time, this strengthens community and counters “the human isolation in the imperial mode of living” (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019c, p. 20, a.t.). An interviewed person (P6) involuntarily does without a third room and now books a hotel for guests. This person also considers the terrace as a third room. This shows that reframing can be used as a strategy.

The possibility to co-design the apartments and the estate, which was positively perceived by some interviewees and whose positive effects are also discussed in research (Lage, 2024; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019), could be further promoted in planning processes of AHO:

> *Creative and structured communication processes help building trust between planners, designers and architects on one hand and the inhabitants (not individually but as collective) on the other. […]. [P]ro and contra arguments of sufficiency solutions need to be openly considered and final solutions agreed upon commonly. (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2019, p. 291; see Brischke et al., 2022; Christ et al., 2024)*

Cooperative collaboration between state and societal actors (BBSR, 2023) seems valuable. For good participation in the planning of AHO, attention should be paid to certain criteria that participation research has worked out (Arnstein, 1969; Uittenbroek et al., 2019).

Additionally, there are potentials in ownership structures. From a sufficiency and SML perspective, socialised and cooperative models are preferable to ownership, as they question existing structures, can make systems fairer and more resilient, place individuals and needs at the centre, and thus enable more ambitious changes in housing (Brand & Wissen, 2024; Edel et al., 2023; Lage & Best, 2024). Lage & Graef (2022) emphasise that communal ownership can promote affordability. One person (P7) also mentioned in the interview the high ancillary costs in Weyarn despite ownership, which could be addressed through cooperative housing. In this context, it is also essential to explore how security beyond ownership can be guaranteed. In an interview (P2), a perceived weakness of cooperatives was revealed: too high rental burdens after the husband's death, which the wife can no longer bear. Therefore, communal living forms must be able to provide social security for women with low pensions, as they are more affected by old-age poverty (Destatis, 2023):

> *An unconditional social infrastructure [e.g. affordable housing] would immediately eliminate social insecurity […]. This is […] why we should oppose the commodification of fundamental social services and press for them to stay in public or community hands and remain universally accessible. (I.L.A. Kollektiv, 2019a, p. 93)*

To overcome unsustainable housing practices in AHO, power and ownership relations must be questioned, and the management and distribution of (public) resources – such as land – must be discussed. However, such questions are still excluded in currently prevailing modernisation discourses (Brand & Wissen, 2017), as well as ownership questions in sufficiency in practice and research (Lage & Best, 2024).

7. Conclusion & Outlook

To effectively address the housing crisis with its diverse social and ecological challenges, a paradigm shift is needed. The sufficiency measure “AHO”, which is intended to enable downsizing in the empty nest phase and free up *invisible living space*, is considered central to this. However, there are significant research gaps. To answer my research question – “*What are the societal conditions that enable people to move from a family house into a smaller dwelling in alternative housing options?”* – I conducted an explorative qualitative case study and interviewed individuals who moved from a SDFH to a smaller apartment in AHO during the empty nest phase, using a project in Weyarn as an example.

According to my findings from Weyarn, the current societal conditions can be conceptualised in such a way that first, the idea of downsizing emerged, formed, and solidified through a conglomerate of predominantly personal and domestic push factors. While personal push factors were diverse, the domestic push factors were more homogeneous. Social push factors played a subordinate role, and ecological push factors were not mentioned. The intention to move could then be realised through the provided AHO. They had various pull factors that relate to their availability and design, as well as the immediate and broader environment. The pull factors were very similar among the interviewees. Central were the improvement of quality of life through age-appropriate living and community in multi-generational houses. Contrary to the literature, the AHO did not necessarily have to be in the same place, if the previous life was still reachable or other reasons made the location attractive. Additionally, the interviewees perceived it positively to have participated in the planning of the apartment and housing complex. Through this processual interplay of push and pull factors, obstacles to moving were overcome. Although the decision-making process was quite individual, patterns emerge: the push factors for the idea to move included personal events, such as strokes of fate, and occurred strongly on an individual level. No interviewee spoke of counselling services or similar. Only during the realisation of the downsizing aspiration did a systemic level come into play: the AHO played an important to decisive role for the interviewees, as it created altered framework conditions that made it possible to turn the idea of moving into action, which would otherwise have been difficult or may not have happened. The downsizing was perceived as relieving by the interviewees. Another important finding is that the interviewees acted as pioneers, as they inspired their partners and social environment to consider their own downsizing.

Through my explorative case study and systematisation of the decision to move as a process, a multifaceted and systematic picture of the social conditions for downsizing in the empty nest phase can be obtained for the first time, along with deep insights into this sufficiency decision-making process, presented in a tentative model. Key factors that hindered and enabled the move and initial relationships of these were identified. My case study thereby can reinforce results (e.g., regarding obstacles and domestic push factors) from relevant literature and

hypothetical surveys on downsizing (e.g. Fischer & Stieß, 2019b, 2019a; Kenkmann et al., 2023), complement them (e.g., regarding further obstacles, push and pull factors, and the role of AHO), and identify gaps (e.g., the centrality of triggers, push factors and systemic measures).

Due to the in-depth insights presented, the explorative qualitative case study approach proved to be valuable. Heuristic, methodological, and theoretical limitations were addressed where appropriate.

Overall, the measure "AHO" seems central to the realisation of downsizing aspirations. This also makes the potential that hypothetical surveys and experts (Kenkmann et al., 2023; Tetzlaff, 2025) outline for downsizing moves more tangible: the provision of AHO can reduce obstacles and enable downsizing in the empty nest phase, thus freeing up living space in SDFH for families to use again. By embedding my research in the IML, the measure “AHO” could be critically positioned, showing that the manifestation of the IML makes change difficult. However, AHO in Weyarn is not a mere pseudo-solution, as it offers a more sufficient, partly more democratic, and communal alternative to staying in the SDFH during the empty nest phase. Thus, the sufficiency measure “AHO” can be seen as a relevant building block for a SML in housing.

My results are compatible with transformation theory approaches. It was shown that individual psychological explanations and systemic approaches need stronger linking. Moreover, the results suggest that the current societal conditions are too dependent on individuals and coincidence and are not sufficient for a transformation, as they are likely to promote only slow, incremental change. The potential of AHO therefore do not seem to be fully exploited. To promote a SML, my case study suggests that no step of the downsizing – generation of idea, decision-making, search for AHO, or realisation – should be individualised. Systemic measures are needed that confront empty nesters with the idea of moving, as well as phase-out policies that make living in the family home during the empty nest phase unattractive. Sufficient AHO must be available that promote communal spaces, co-design, and critical discussions of ownership forms. The measure “AHO” should occur on various levels – *alongside*, *with*, and *against* the state – to normalise downsizing. It is crucial to pursue an integrated approach that considers individuals, politics, and social movements as mutually supportive actors – a radical policy-making approach. In this way, niche actors – individuals who want to move – and social movements – those who politicise housing socially and ecologically – can jointly contribute to changing power relations and facilitate structural change through political measures and altered discourses.

Future research should consider whether the findings from the case study in Weyarn can be transferred to other contexts. Since my case study shows many similarities with the hypothetical surveys and relevant literature, as well as with the pre-test interview, there seems to be a certain generalisability. Furthermore, it is important to explore the interplay of push and pull

factors for overcoming obstacles, accompanying systemic measures that make staying in the SDFH unattractive, generate the idea of moving, and facilitate its realisation, and various notions of transformation of AHO. For this, long-term studies that accompany individuals before, during, and after downsizing would be valuable, in addition to the hypothetical surveys and my case study from the retrospective.

To further reduce private living space, it is necessary to analyse perceptions and needs regarding communal areas – ideally on-site, not as I did by phone. Further studies can provide insights into what downsizing means for individuals, what understanding of sufficiency they have, what consumption norms apply in downsizing, and the relationships between living space and housing satisfaction. Additionally, the tension between housing security and ownership should be examined, and how collective ownership forms can provide security – including potential gender differences. Furthermore, unintended effects, sufficiency rebounds (Alcott, 2008; Sorrell et al., 2020), and social distribution effects of AHO should be examined. The provider side of AHO, as well as the role of the production side and various obstacles to sufficiency in housing (BBSR, 2023; Stengel, 2011; Tröger & Reese, 2021) should also be critically analysed.

Such research can contribute to improving the societal conditions for AHO and making downsizing in the empty nest phase increasingly a “real utopia” (Wright, 2010, p. 4), aiming to make a SML in housing the norm. Age-appropriate living can thus become a lived reality rather than a luxury for the few.

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