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Introduction to the Special Issue

Robin Tillmann* and Marieke Voorpostel*

1 Social stratification, social inequalities, and persistent social inequalities

The study of persistent social inequalities is of political and societal interest because it provides insights into processes leading to marginalization in society. Social inequalities can be persistent or cumulative over domains, as well as over time and generations. A decade ago, Levy and Suter (2002) pointed out that one of the main shortcomings of stratification research in Switzerland was the rather poor treatment of the temporal dimensions of the phenomenon. We aim to fill this gap in Swiss stratification research. This special issue addresses a variety of domains in which persistent social inequalities manifest themselves, such as education, labour market, material rewards, health, and quality of life.

The introduction is structured as follows: section 1 is dedicated to a brief description of the theoretical framework. The longitudinal data used in this special issue are presented in section 2. Finally, section 3 gives an overview of the contributions.

1.1 The field of stratification research

The study of social stratification, social mobility, and social inequalities is one of the main themes in sociology. Social stratification – i. e., the systematic ranking of people or groups of people within a society – is a universal phenomenon (see, among others, Cherkaoui 1992; Kerbo 2003). This ranking is associated with unequal access to and distribution of resources such as educational attainment, employment, and material rewards, and leads to unequal outcomes in many domains of life, such as those related to health and quality of life.

Four main questions constitute the field of stratification research (see Sørensen 1986, 70–73). The first question concerns the origin of inequality (see, for example, Davis and Moore 1945; Lenski 1966; Tumin 1967). Here, the debate is mainly a conceptual one, with very little connection to empirical research. Yet despite disagreements regarding the origin of inequality, stratification scholars generally agree that it results in a structure of social classes, occupations, or some other measure of social position. The second question is both theoretical and methodological and focuses on how socioeconomic position is best operationalized when studying the

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consequences of this positioning within the social structure (see, among others, Levy and Joye 1994; Hauser and Warren 1997; Wright 2005 or Rose and Harrison 2009).

The third question refers to the effects or consequences of where an individual is located in the social structure. The empirical literature is abundant on this topic (see, for example, Weeden and Grusky 2005; for Switzerland, Levy et al. 1997; Stamm et al. 2003). The fourth main question concerns social mobility, or the movement of people among unequal positions in society (“classics” are Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Breen 2004; for Switzerland, Levy et al. 1997, 235–316). Studies in this area focus on mobility patterns, status attainment, or, more recently, mobility over the life course (Widmer et al. 2005; Mayer 2009).

1.2 Topics addressed in this special issue

This special issue is dedicated to the last two main questions – the consequences of social stratification and the study of social mobility – with a primary focus on mobility and the life course.¹ Studies that focus on persistent inequalities generally look at cumulative social inequalities across domains, the life course, and generations. The contributions included in this issue address the following three topics: 1) intergenerational transmission of social inequalities, 2) social inequalities over the life course, and 3) inequalities regarding the distribution of social goods.

The first topic – the intergenerational transmission of social inequalities – is a classic one, going back to the work of Sorokin (1927).² In this framework, the analysis of inequality in opportunities basically means the study of mechanisms that are reproduced across generations and that distribute individuals over social positions which constitute the class structure. Recent international studies in this field clearly show that origin effects are stronger at earlier rather than later educational transitions; that education mediates an important part of the association between (social) origins and (social) destinations; that women experience more social fluidity than men; and that the pattern of social fluidity is principally shaped by inheritance, hierarchy, and sector effects (Breen and Jonsson 2005, 236). However, in international studies, such as the central book on social mobility in Europe edited by Breen (2004), the Swiss case is missing. The contributions in this issue help to fill this gap.

The second topic is more recent, going back to the rise of the life course paradigm in the social sciences during the mid-sixties. In this framework, the topic of social inequality is approached by analyzing cumulative advantages and disadvantages over the life course (see Burton-Jeangros and Widmer 2009). More generally, sociologists consider individual life courses to be regularities produced

1 Most articles published in this issue were first presented as papers at the 2011 6th International Conference of Panel Data Users in Switzerland.

2 Especially conducted in the framework of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility.

by institutions and structural opportunities. Life course patterns overall represent “the sequence of participation (...) in various life domains that span from birth to death, e. g.: school enrolment and the sequences of education and training activities; entry into the labor market, employment careers, and interruptions of labor force participation, and retirement; growing up in families, leaving parental homes, partnership formation, marriages, and parenthood; and regional mobility” (Diewald and Mayer 2009, 6). This issue includes three contributions addressing this field of research. They show that the life course perspective considerably adds to our understanding of the dynamics of inequality.

The third topic – concerning distributional inequalities of different social goods, rewards, living conditions, and behaviours – is also a classic topic in stratification research. This domain is concerned with many dimensions of inequality, such as income and wealth, health, and lifestyles and consumption. One contribution of this special issue on income inequality falls in the domain of this third and final topic.

2 Longitudinal data used in this special issue

As pointed out by Breen and Jonsson (2005, 235), “Our knowledge about the world is never better than the data on which it is based.” Therefore, it is useful to outline the main longitudinal data used in the contributions included in this issue. Such data are a necessary condition for the study of persistent social inequalities.

Aside from the contribution by Angelone and Ramseier, which uses data from the Zürcher Langschnittstudie, the contributions of this special issue are all based on large longitudinal representative surveys at the national level: the TRAnsition from Education to Employment (TREE) survey, the COmpetence and COntext (COCON) survey, and the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). TREE and COCON are cohort studies, and the SHP is a household panel survey. The longitudinal nature of the data makes it possible to assess persistent social inequalities. Moreover, special characteristics of the datasets, such as information on several household members and information on the life course, provide the unique opportunity to study accumulation processes across generations and over the life course. Table 1 summarizes the design features of these nationally representative longitudinal surveys in Switzerland.

3 Overview of the contributions

3.1 Intergenerational transmission of social inequalities

This special issue contains four articles related to the intergenerational transmission of social inequalities. Two contributions (Falcon and Jann & Combet) focus on the

Table 1 Overview of longitudinal surveys used in the contributions to the Special Issue on persistent social inequalities

Surveys	Start Year	Type (panel length)	Unit of Data Collection	Sample Size	Target Population	Survey Topics
Swiss Household Panel (SHP)	1999	single panel	household + all members	SHP_I: 5 000 households, 7 800 persons SHP_II: 2 500 households, 3 600 persons	general population	housing, living standard, living conditions, employment, income, health, social networks, education, political values and behaviour, life events, social origin, leisure, etc.
Transitions from Education to Employment (TREE)	2001	cohort study, annual (2001–2007, 2010)	individual	5 500 persons	young school leavers in 2000	education, employment, labour market, transition from school to labour market
Swiss Survey of Children and Youth (COCON)	2006	cohort study, every 3 years	school + household + individual	3 100 persons	children and youth	life course transitions (school enrolment, transition to apprenticeship, labour market entry)

Note: The SHP is located at the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences FORS. The project is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The Swiss Study of Children and Youth (COCON) is located at the Jacobs Center for Productive Youth Development of the University of Zurich, and is partly financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The TREE (Transitions from Education to Employment) project is currently based at the University of Basel, and is also co-funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

classical topic of intergenerational social mobility, while the other two (Falter and Angelone & Ramseier) focus on the effect of parental background on educational outcomes.

Falcon's article, based on an impressive set of databases, is dedicated to a cohort study of intergenerational social mobility over the past century and examines whether social mobility has increased in Switzerland over time. She demonstrates that there is no increase in social mobility over birth-cohorts – i. e., there is no reduction in inequalities of opportunity over time, contrary to what is found in some other industrialised countries. Yet, the situation of women has improved during the period considered.

Jann and Combet also make an important contribution to our knowledge of the temporal development of the effects of social origin. Like Falcon, the authors base their analysis on several datasets, but use different statistical techniques. They

provide insight into the process of intergenerational status transmission and its development over time, and highlight interesting gender differences in this area. They show declining effects of social origin on class for women up until the birth cohorts between 1950 and 1960, after which the effects rise again. The effects for men have remained stable.

Two articles on educational attainment deal with the effects of social origin, giving specific attention to cumulative processes. Sociological literature on intergenerational transmission tends to focus on the highest level of education that is attained. Falter, however, stresses that schooling is a cumulative process for which the probability of remaining in the school system depends on previous educational transitions. His analysis is dedicated to the influence of parental background at various stages of the schooling system. On the whole, his study shows that parental background matters for most transitions, but its influence varies according to gender in particular.

Angelone and Ramseier analyse the reproduction of social inequalities at the early stages of individuals' school careers, focusing on the German language and mathematics performance of pupils according to the educational attainment of their parents. These researchers also conclude that educational development is still unequally distributed according to social background.

3.2 Social inequalities over the life course

Three articles belong to the field of social inequality over the life course. Kriesi and Buchmann focus on earlier stages in the life course and link educational success to wellbeing in adolescence. They demonstrate that certain components of educational success are indeed related to wellbeing in late adolescence, although their effect is moderate compared to the importance of gender, personality traits, and socio-emotional resources. Interestingly, it is not educational goal attainment as such that matters, but rather how adolescents cope with goal failure.

Heeb and Gutjahr look at poverty in a dynamic way by examining trajectories of poverty. It is often suggested that poverty trajectories have become more diverse and individualized, but the researchers show that this is not the case, at least not in Switzerland. They find that poverty trajectories are closely related to social inequalities and life events.

In their study, Della Bella, Lucchini, and Assi dynamically address the relationship between socio-economic status and health. They demonstrate that individual health trajectories tend to become less heterogeneous as people age; while there is a clear positive relation between health and income, the advantage of higher income groups decreases over time, at least in the younger cohorts.

3.3 Distributional inequalities of social goods

Finally, the paper by Grabka and Kuhn takes a dynamic perspective on income inequality, comparing Switzerland and Germany. The focus here is on changes in income inequality over time and between countries. The researchers show that, while inequality in Germany strongly increased between 2000 and 2009, it barely increased in Switzerland.

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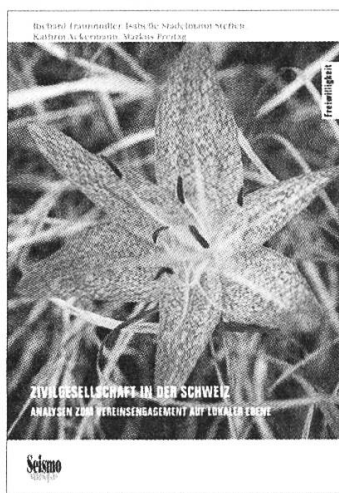
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Die Studie leuchtet schweizweit die lokalen Bestände und Bedingungen des freiwilligen Vereinsengagements aus. Neben einer Erhebung der Vereinsstrukturen in über 1200 Kommunen wurden in 60 repräsentativen Gemeinden auch die Bürgerinnen und Bürger zu ihrem Vereinsengagement sowie zu ihren Einschätzungen bezüglich des Vereinslebens befragt. Im Zentrum steht die Analyse der lokalen kulturellen, strukturellen und politischen Rahmenbedingungen von Freiwilligkeit. Insbesondere wird der Versuch unternommen, lokale Instrumente zur Förderung der Freiwilligkeit mit dem tatsächlichen Engagement der Einwohner in Bezug zu setzen und einen Eindruck über die Wirksamkeit kommunaler «Engagementpolitik» zu vermitteln. Während das Ausmass lokaler Freiwilligentätigkeit eine grundlegend kulturell bedingte Grösse darstellt, besteht die Wirkung politischer Gestaltungsversuche in der egalisierenden Ausweitung freiwilliger Tätigkeit auf breitere Bevölkerungsschichten.

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