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Life Course Events and the Reproduction of Social Stratification

Questions of inter-generational social mobility are central to the sociological analysis of social inequality. Social mobility is commonly defined as the movement of individuals (or social units) among social positions over time, whereby these positions form a structure of social inequality. Hence, social mobility and immobility can be regarded to be indicators of the persistence of social advantage and disadvantage within a society.

An alternative approach to study social inequality starts from a life-course perspective and focuses on intra-generational developments. The timing of life events (not least: demographic events) plays a central role in life-course research, and empirical studies have repeatedly shown inter-dependencies between life events like parenthood and completing particular levels of education as well as significant social differences and historical changes with regard to the incidence and the timing of these events.

There have been successful attempts to combine analyses of inter-generational and intra-generational social mobility, but, astonishingly, macro-sociological research on the historical development of social stratification has made little use of this knowledge and has paid comparatively little attention to aspects of time; apart from the distinction between various birth cohorts, social mobility research has largely been based on ‘ahistorical’ and pairwise comparisons of individuals from the generations of parents and children.

In contrast to mainstream research on stratification, this paper proposes an analysis of historical developments in inter-generational social mobility and reproduction using life-course related information. In doing so, the paper combines a traditional concept of social mobility with a demographic research perspective. The West German society in the 20th century serves as an exemplary case.

In *conceptual* terms, the paper discusses how (micro-level) information about social differences in life course patterns can be used for a description of macro-social change. Rather than a conventional analysis of inter-generational social mobility, this analysis is one of inter-generational social reproduction, starting with a description of life-course patterns in the parents’ generation and asking about the consequences for the following generation(s). Central to this are demographic aspects like how ‘origin contexts’, i.e. parental unions, are formed, whether there are any children at all and when they are born as well as these children’s relative chances of education and of attaining particular social positions. Hence, the paper models the micro-level process of inter-generational social reproduction by distinguishing between partial processes of social selectivity, such as union formation, fertility, and children’s educational attainment. On the basis of this information, the paper discusses in greater detail how these differences and trends translate into the timing and the speed of the social reproduction of social collectivities.

In *theoretical* terms, the paper raises (once again) the question as to what extent different patterns of social reproduction can be linked to individual strategies and time horizons of securing and transmitting social status. There is also a general conclusion regarding institutional explanations, which is to think more carefully about possible relationships between specific institutions and a wider range of social mechanisms.

In *empirical* terms, the paper describes (exemplarily) historical developments of inter-generational social reproduction in West Germany during the mid- and late 20th century. As there is no comprehensive data source that contains all the information needed to analyze our research questions, the analysis follows a multi-stage procedure: In a first step, specific features of the life course (or the partial processes of social reproduction) are estimated separately using different data sources. These consist of aggregate data from official population and social statistics since 1945 as well as individual-level data from surveys like the German Life History Study, and the paper presents results of social differences in demographic behavior, educational or status attainment and historical trends in the timing of life events. In a second step, the results of these estimations are statistically combined in order to get an estimate of the overall process of (micro-level) social reproduction. In a third step, this combined dataset is used to analyze the forms and the speed of the reproduction of social collectivities.

Preliminary results indicate a relatively high degree of historical stability in individual-level inter-generational reproduction of social advantage and disadvantage in West Germany towards the end of the 20th century. While background-specific chances of access to certain levels of education have been major determinants of the level of social reproduction, there have been important contributions also of other (demographic) partial processes to the final outcomes, i.e. the chances of transmitting social advantage and disadvantage. Moreover, it shows that the analysis of inter-generational social transmission has to be careful about distinctions like gender-differences in the odds of social transmission and comparisons of two generations versus multi-generation comparisons. Yet another set of question is concerned with consequences of individual chances for the social reproduction of collectivities, i.e. differences between groups/social classes and with regard to historical changes. It is therefore intended to compare these results with substantive findings from conventional research.

It has also already become obvious, however, that an analysis like the one proposed here poses high demand on the scope and the quality of available data, and a discussion of these methodological aspects will complement the paper.