

Introduction to the Special Issue: Exploring Life Courses in Their Making

Einführung zum Sonderheft: Erforschung von Lebensläufen in ihrem Entstehungsprozess

Introduction au numéro spécial: Explorer les parcours de vie dans leur devenir

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1 General Context

[T]he opportunity should not be missed to equip Switzerland with a longitudinal survey of transitions at national level [...]. Transition pathways to employment are becoming increasingly complex. To understand young people's decisions and options, and to take them into account in policy decisions, appropriate analytical instruments are needed. (OECD 1999, 53)

At the end of the 1990s, more than two decades ago, the OECD made the cited recommendation in the context of an extended review of how member countries then managed their youth's transitions from education to work. It may be seen as one of the legitimacy cornerstones fostering the launch of the TREE study (Transitions from Education to Employment) at the turn of the millennium (TREE 2016a; 2016b; Gomensoro and Meyer 2017; Hupka-Brunner et al. 2021; TREE 2021). Up to this point, the scientific and political representation of the Swiss education and transition system's functioning and underlying mechanisms had been at best fragmentary, largely relying on patchy, mostly cross-sectional data that hardly lent themselves to even adequately describe the system as a whole – let alone providing explanations as to the how and why of its functioning.

The launch of TREE was not the only initiative marking a shift of paradigm in the Swiss social sciences at the time. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, Switzerland gradually caught up on substantial gaps with regard to the development of the social sciences in general, including their empirical bases and their infrastructures (Farago

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2018). The respective initiatives led, among other things, to the implementation of the Research Priority Program “Switzerland: Towards the Future” (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation SNF), the launch of the Swiss Household Panel and, later on, to the founding of the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS; Farago 2018.). In line with these developments, TREE gradually expanded into a life-course data infrastructure, now including two cohorts of school leavers (one from 2000 and one from 2016) whose pathways are followed over time.

2021 marked the twentieth anniversary of the TREE study (see www.tree.unibe.ch). On the occasion, TREE hosted an international anniversary conference.¹ Parallel to the conference, a call for papers was launched for the present special issue of the Swiss Journal of Sociology (SJS), inviting to submit contributions with the following foci: a) Medium- and long-term effects of earlier transitions on subsequent educational and labour market pathways, especially with respect to the cumulation of multiple social inequalities (cumulative [dis-]advantages); b) Interdependencies and spill-over effects between various life domains (e. g., education, work, family, health, social integration, self); c) Impact of institutional opportunity structures on individual outcomes of education and labour market outcomes; d) Historical, cross-national or cross-regional comparisons; and e) Methodological issues with regard to (multi-cohort) panel data. The call further specified that, given the occasion of the special issue, contributions drawing on TREE data would be particularly welcome.

2 Contributions to the Special Issue

The present special issue comprises seven contributions drawing on a wide range of theoretical, analytical and methodological approaches and covering most of the major foci defined in the call for papers. With respect to the empirical basis for their analyses, four contributions draw on TREE data (of one or both cohorts), one (Gayle/Connelly) on data from two British birth cohort studies, one (Zimmermann/Prein) on data of the German youth panel survey AID:A² and one (Achatz/Schels) on administrative data from the German Federal Employment Agency. The large majority of the selected contributions address the institutional mechanisms at work in the strongly tracked, VET-dominated education and transition systems of Germany and Switzerland, particularly and persistently bearing witness to the marked path-dependencies and the striking social inequalities that these systems give rise to. Furthermore, three contributions (Achatz/Schels, Gayle/Connelly and Scharenberg/Rollett) highlight the analytic (added) value of cohort comparisons.

1 4th International TREE Conference: Life Course in the Making, held on 11/12 November 2021 in Bern. See www.tree.unibe.ch/events for details.

2 Aufwachsen in Deutschland (Growing up in Germany).

To start with, the paper of *Gayle and Connelly* contributes to the sociological understanding of social inequalities with regard to test scores achieved in primary education. Comparing test data of two British birth cohorts born thirty years apart (1970 and 2000), they find similar negative relationships between social class and test scores for both cohorts. They conclude that these findings are consequential because “these children enter secondary school with restricted capabilities in logical thinking, concept formation and abstract reasoning”. According to the authors, this finding also gives rise to some (political) concern, “given that there are 30 years of educational sociological debates and educational policy efforts between the two cohorts that have apparently been unable to change this relationship”.

In another cohort-comparative analysis drawing on the two TREE cohorts from 2000 and 2016, *Scharenberg and Rollett* look at schools as differential learning environments for students’ development and at how they influence students’ transition from lower- to upper-secondary education. For both cohorts, they find that lower-secondary tracking leads to differential developmental environments resulting in educational inequalities. According to the authors, both social and academic school composition predicted successful transitions over and above individual student characteristics. Compositional effects were in part differentially predictive depending on students’ track affiliation, thus underlining the mechanisms of social segregation associated with early tracking. In line with other analyses comparing the two TREE cohorts (see e. g., Gomensoro and Meyer 2021), the results suggest that despite substantial reforms in the education system, the basic mechanisms of inequality at work in Swiss secondary education seem to persist.

In the third cohort-comparative paper, *Achatz and Schels*, drawing on German labour market register data, analyse changes of patterns among three cohorts of German students making the transition from lower- to upper-secondary education between 2009 and 2013. The results show overall improved odds of a smooth transition across the three cohorts – in parallel to a gradual improvement of general labour market conditions throughout the observed period. However, the odds stably and strongly depend on the track that students have previously attended at lower-secondary level: Despite the overall general improvement, the (considerable) difference with regards to the odds of a smooth transition between low-track (*Hauptschule*) and intermediate-track (*Realschule*) students persisted. Similar to the paper of Scharenberg and Rollett, this contribution underlines the extent to which lower-secondary tracking influences the subsequent stages of educational pathways.

The two following papers, both based on data of the second TREE-cohort (TREE2), examine students’ and parental educational aspirations. *Ackermann and Benz* investigate the development and adjustment of students’ educational aspirations in the first years of post-compulsory education at upper-secondary level. They show that these are highly responsive to the attended track in lower- as well as in upper-secondary education. While students in general education programmes at upper-

secondary level tend to stick to their aspirations, their counterparts in vocational programmes exhibit considerable adjustments – both upwards and downwards – of their educational aspirations.

Kamm, Gomensoro, Heers and Hupka-Brunner, on their part, analyse the role parents play with respect to the educational success of their children. They do so by drawing on a mixed-methods study combining quantitative data from the TREE2 main survey and qualitative data collected among a TREE2 subsample in the context of the TREE add-on study PICE (Parental investment in children's education).³ The authors investigate how parental investment – defined as parental aspirations, family resources and parental strategies – contributes to educational success. The analysis shows that migrant families prefer academic to vocational education and training (VET), while native families seem to place higher trust in the VET system. Moreover, the contribution develops a typology of strategies that parents with limited resources adopt to foster their children's educational success.

Contrary to the contributions outlined thus far, *Zimmermann and Prein* focus on (first) cohabitation with a partner as an outcome of transition to adulthood. Drawing on data from the German youth Survey AID:A⁴, the authors find that young men do not undertake this step until they reach a certain level of economic security. Among male respondents of the study, moving in together is usually preceded by entering permanent employment, while there is no similar correlation among young women. In their conclusions, the authors address the persistent gender-based division of labour: Despite rising female labour market participation, it still seems to be the (main) responsibility of men to ensure a breadwinning status for economically dependent family members.

We conclude this special issue with an innovative methodological contribution. *Unterlerchner, Studer and Gomensoro* develop and compare two methods to study the link between educational pathways and later income on the labour market. While sequence analysis (SA) provides a comprehensive view on trajectories, it might fail to identify key trajectory characteristics to explain income. In order to overcome this methodological shortcoming of SA, the authors suggest feature extraction and selection (FES) as a new validation method. The authors claim that FES, contrary to SA, is able to directly identify relevant key characteristics, but concede that the number of selected features may be overwhelming.

3 A Brief Conclusion and Outlook

Among other things, the present special issue illustrates the substantial expansion of longitudinal data sources throughout the past two decades – and the equally

3 See www.pice.unibe.ch for detail.

4 Aufwachsen in Deutschland (Growing up in Germany).

substantial analytical gain to be drawn from them. Apart from the British Birth Cohort Survey (BCS) that the contribution of Gayle and Connelly draws on, none of the panel datasets analysed in this issue would have been available twenty years ago. As Burton-Jeangros and Widmer (2009) put it in the first special issue on life course that the Swiss Journal of Sociology published:

Although inequality research was mostly synchronic for a long time, interest in processes that occur in time and space and the consequential development of longitudinal methods [...] paved the way to a reconsideration of the main tenets of social stratification and social mobility research by including individual and collective time in the equation. The life-course paradigm insists upon the import of events, transitions, stages, and trajectories in the study of the structuring of individual lives. (Burton-Jeangros and Widmer 2009, 184)

As things stand today, we do not only have more longitudinal data, but also more multi-cohort panel data. No less than three contributions in this issue draw on data following up several cohorts based on comparable survey designs (Gayle and Connelly drawing on British birth cohort surveys, Scharenberg and Rollett drawing on TREE as well as Achatz and Schels drawing on German Federal Employment Agency data of three subsequent school leavers' cohorts). In addition to being able to analyse processes and developments rather than states, multi-cohort data allow us to better understand and identify the role of macro-context factors in individuals' (and cohorts') life courses, thus contributing to disentangle the age-period-cohort problem inherent to longitudinal and life course research (see e.g., Bell and Jones 2015).

Against this background, TREE's launch of a second school leavers' cohort in 2016 (and thus its extension to a multi-cohort design) has been a significant step towards improved data sources for life course research in Switzerland. Even though the implementation of the second cohort is relatively recent, we should keep in mind that the longitudinal observation of both TREE cohorts is ongoing. By the mid-2020s, the first cohort (TREE1) will have reached an average age of approximately 40 and will have responded to a total of 11 survey waves. With the advent of biographical middle-age and a cumulative panel observation span of 25 years, the TREE1 data will increasingly lend themselves to the analysis of various phases of the life course such as the progress of family formation or the development of further stages of respondents' professional career, including lifelong education. Initially conceived and designed as a panel survey capturing school-to-work transitions in Switzerland, TREE1 is thus gradually developing into full-blown life course study.

As to the second TREE cohort (TREE2), born around the turn of the millennium, the data will cover an observation span of about ten years by the mid-2020s. In step with each additional panel wave, the potential of the TREE data multiplies. Owing to the multi-cohort design of the study, the data lend themselves for cohort

comparison not only at a descriptive level, but also in view of research questions pertaining to how changing macro-contexts affect the observed trajectories and the dynamics between structure and agency in which they unfold. In view of the reforms and changes in the education system, the labour market and society as a whole, it also seems immensely promising to have a cohort-comparative look, e. g., at the issue of reconciliation of family and work – and gendering of life courses in general. The observation of the two TREE cohorts over a (prospective) span of several decades are furthermore promising for analyses of life courses across several biographical phases and transitions, thus allowing, e. g., to investigate path-dependencies and the development of cumulative (dis)advantages in more depth and detail.

The present Special Issue of SJS may serve as a stepping stone for further life-course research based on longitudinal cohort data such as TREE. The contributions in this issue tap into the analytic potential of such data and provide methodological guidance, yet they only scratch the surface. The significance of life-course data infrastructures grows with each wave of data collection and a wealth of future insights along the lines discussed above is to be expected.

4 References

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