

Occupational Attainment and Career Mobility over the Life Course in Germany

A Case for Latent Growth Curve Analysis

Introduction

Analyses of social mobility processes aim to enhance our understanding of the mechanisms underlying social inequality. Previous studies have focused on either intragenerational mobility (e.g., average career trajectories across the life course) or intergenerational mobility (i.e., transmission of values and resources). However, social mobility stems from a mixture of both processes. Firstly, the human capital received from one's parents may not only determine the level of occupational prestige at early career stages, but also intraindividual development over time. Secondly, job history determines the human capital that can eventually be transmitted to the next generation.

Hence, intragenerational and intergenerational mobility are intertwined and should thus be analyzed simultaneously in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of mobility processes. An increasingly important analytical framework that is capable of this, is a latent growth curve (LGC) analysis. LGC analysis is able to address three issues that have plagued previous social mobility research: the simultaneous modeling of processes of intragenerational and intergenerational mobility, the estimation of the association between initial level and subsequent development of prestige and the consideration of both within- and between-subject variance by estimating individual career trajectories.

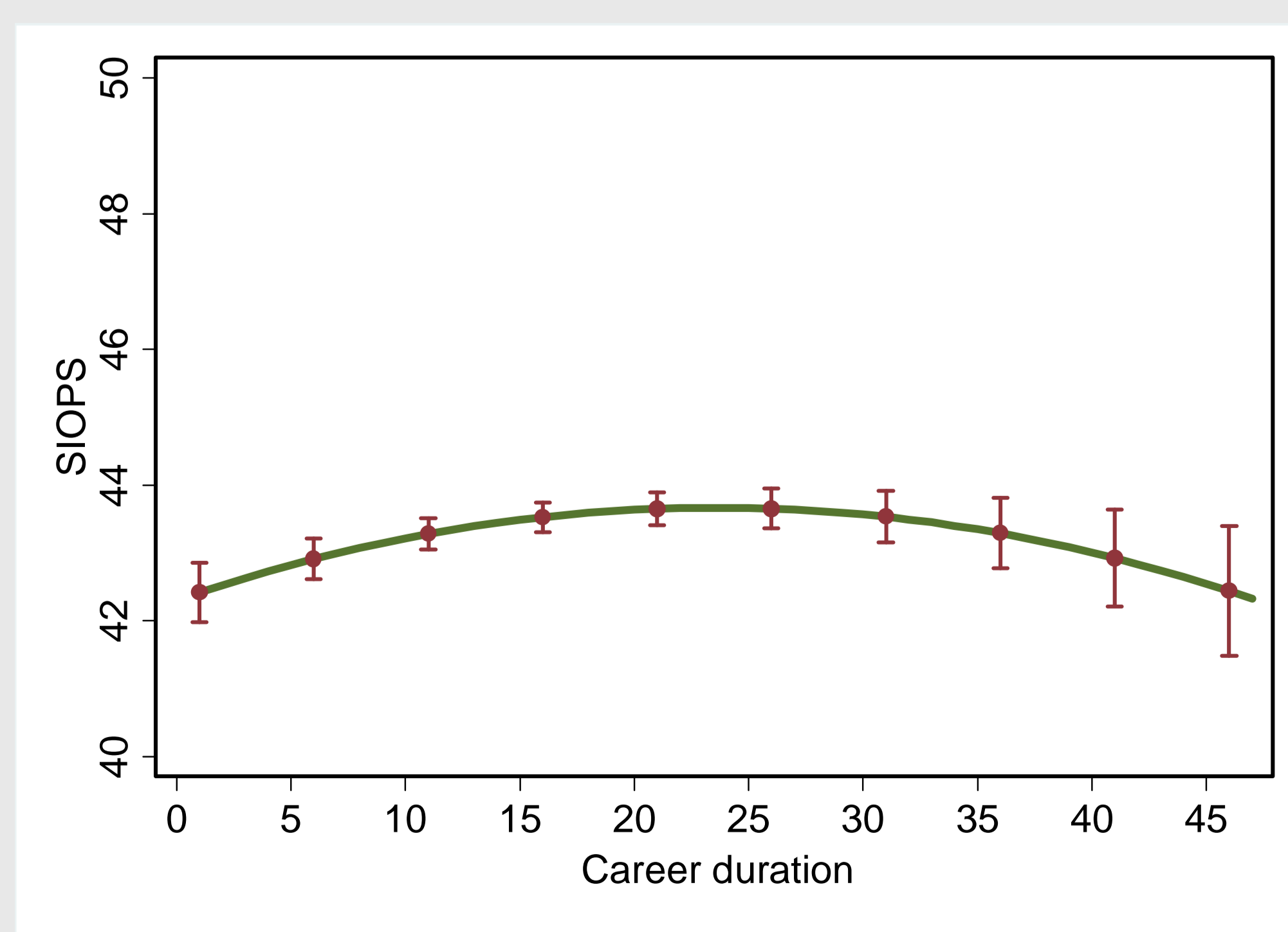
Method

The study is based on all SOEP waves from 1984 through 2009. The sample is comprised of $N = 153,761$ person-year episodes from $N = 24,385$ employed individuals. Using a multilevel LGC approach, means and variances of the initial level (intercept) and longitudinal shifts (slope) of occupational prestige – measured by the Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale, SIOPS – are estimated. Effects of both time-varying and time-constant covariates on the intercept and slope are considered.

Results

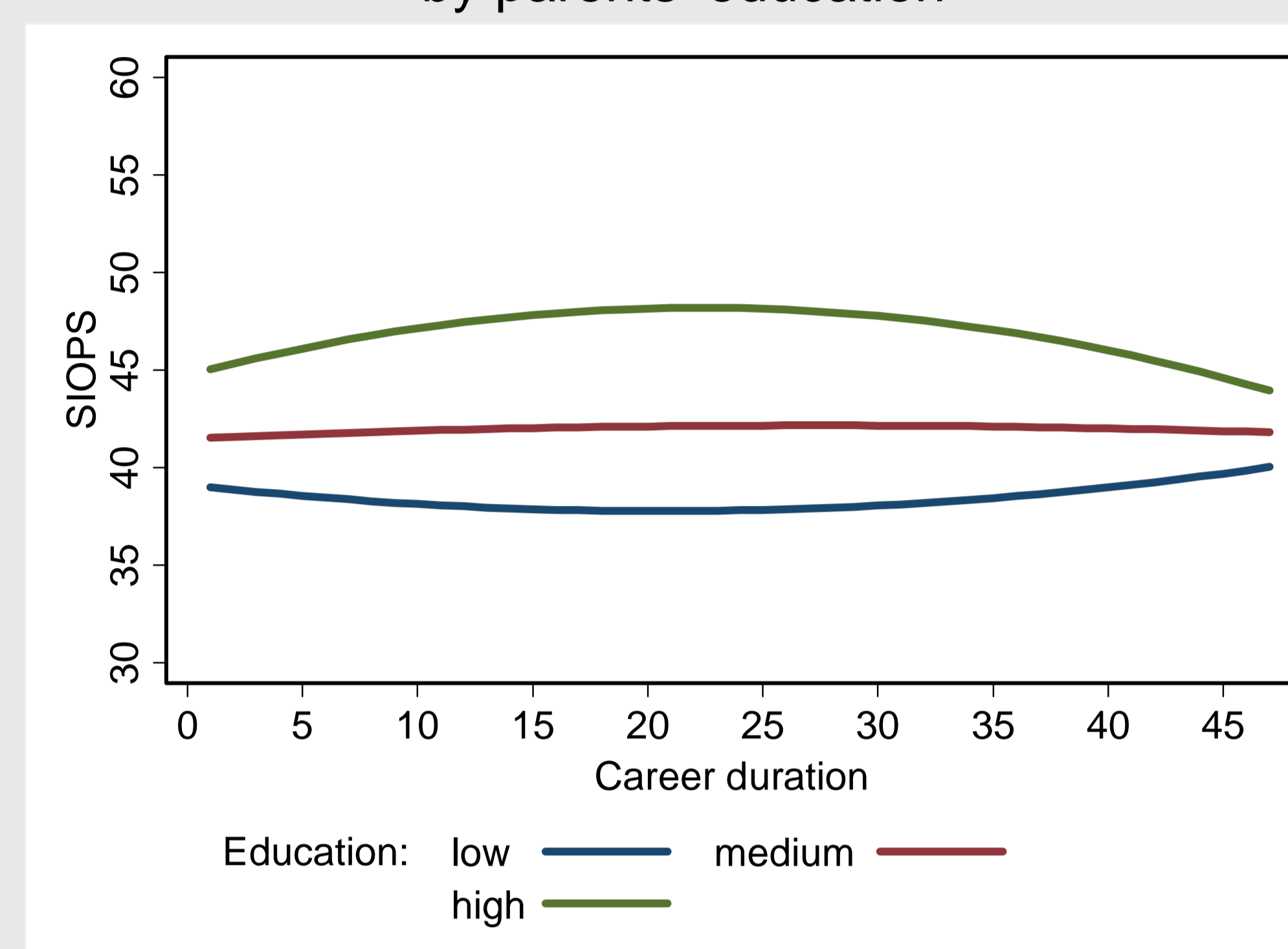
Across individuals, an inverse U-shaped average prestige trajectory is found (for a graphical illustration, see Figure 1). The negative association between intercept and slope suggests that the higher the initial prestige, the lower the chances of further upward mobility, likely because of the limited number of top positions.

Figure 1: Average occupational prestige with 99% confidence intervals for selected career durations



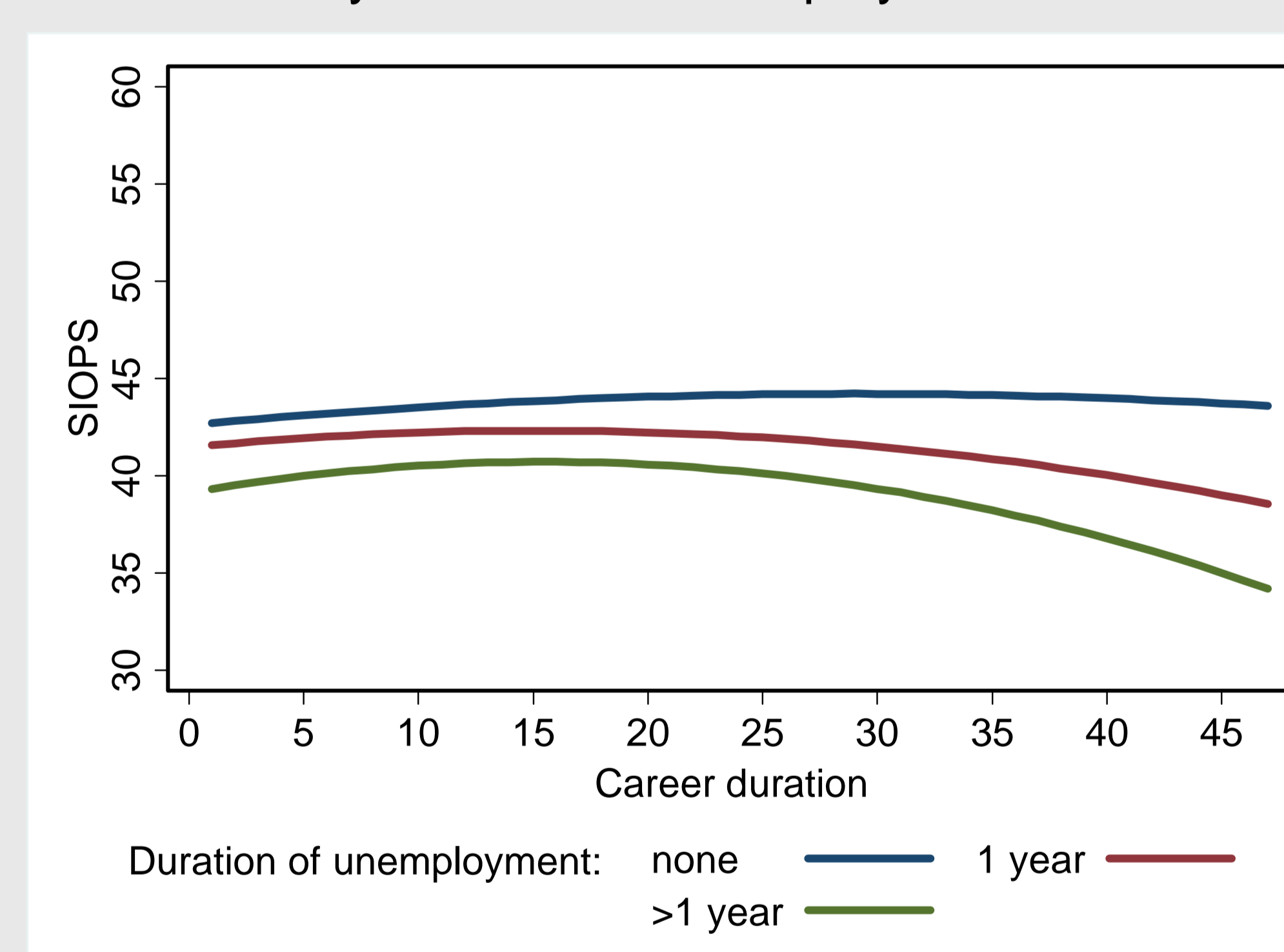
Regarding gender differences, the analyses show that although men's first jobs are characterized by a higher prestige, this does not translate into sustainable differences between men's and women's trajectories. In terms of respondents' education, positive effects are found both on the intercept and on the slope. In terms of intergenerational mobility, parental education is associated with a higher initial level and a steeper upward trend concerning occupational prestige (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Predicted occupational prestige trajectories by parents' education



Furthermore, whereas non-German respondents start out at a lower prestige level than Germans, subsequent career trajectories of both groups are rather similar. As expected, unemployment episodes clearly decrease the odds of subsequent upward mobility (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Predicted occupational prestige trajectories by duration of unemployment



Finally, the growth curve intercept is determined by the temporal and spatial context. For instance, a high-prestige career start is more likely in economically prosperous years and in Western (as opposed to Eastern) Germany, probably owing to more favorable opportunity structures.

Summary and Conclusion

The application of the LGC framework extends previous research by simultaneously estimating intragenerational and intergenerational social mobility. The analyses reveal a high degree of stability across time, with fairly high average prestige scores and high occupational mobility occurring at early career stages. Hence, mobility is strongly affected by both own and parents' education. In summary, the findings suggest that social inequality, reflected by differences in occupational prestige at the outset of the career, does not wane but tends to be reproduced across and within generations.