Out of Sight, Out of Mind?
Continued Observation of Life Courses by Tracking and Interviewing Expatriates
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Out-Migration from Germany
While the in-migration rate in Germany is subject to high variability, the out-migration rate is relatively constant. Since 1965, every year 0.6 to 1 percent of the German population has moved to a foreign country (see Fig. 1). Since the 1990s, out-migration has been on the political agenda because of (higher) skills shortages and unemployment. Beyond this political interest, emigrants are an interesting group of panel respondents because they show more action than most others.

In 2002, a first attempt was undertaken to identify SOEP drop-outs abroad by contacting German registration offices asking for participants’ new address. Starting in 2005, the first expatriates received a questionnaire called “Your Life Outside Germany” with questions about their reasons for moving and about their living conditions abroad.

Fig. 1: In- and out-migration rates from 1950 to 2007

Out-Migration of SOEP Participants
From 2002 to 2006 there were 3,294 participants who left the SOEP study, 288 of whom were counted as drop-outs from SOEP because they had “moved abroad.” So far, 67 respondents who left the SOEP study between 2002 and 2006 were located abroad (see Fig. 2).

The questionnaire “Your Life Outside Germany” was sent to them. As of December 2008, 32 questionnaires had been sent back.

Fig. 2: SOEP sample selection

Reasons for Moving Abroad and Life Satisfaction
Respondents were asked about their reasons for moving abroad and about their life satisfaction in their new location.

Overall, people who answered the questionnaire felt comfortable in the country to which they had moved. This trend might be the result of a bias in answers and responses.

Fig. 3: Target countries, register data and SOEP participants

Living Conditions in Germany and Abroad
For this analysis SOEP data from the last year before people moved were compared to answers in the questionnaire “Your Life Outside Germany”.

Fig. 4a: Reasons for moving abroad

Fig. 4b Regret moving abroad

Outlook
With the study “Living Outside Germany” the SOEP Study fills a gap in the currently available longitudinal data on migration. The pilot study shows that the current study design allows for identification of around 10 percent of the SOEP participants who have moved abroad. And the pilot study shows that it is possible not only to identify, but also to interview SOEP participants abroad (by “snail mail”).

In-depth analyses show that response selectivity is not a problem of gender, marital status, target country, or employment status, but one of age, foreign-born status, and qualifications. However, these biases can be controlled for by weighting.

With the next “wave” of emigrants who will be interviewed with a short mail survey, we will have about 50 respondents. This will make some multivariate analysis feasible.

The small number of emigrants who will re-migrate back to Germany highlight the importance of yet another kind of pretest: qualitative in-depth interviews with those re-migrants. Currently, the SOEP Survey Group is seeking a partner who is interested and able to do qualitative research on migrants. This pretest will not only be interesting in terms of substantial results; it will also be of interest as a pre-test combining quantitative and qualitative research methods for a small subsample of SOEP.

Fig. 5a: Overall contentment & health status after moving abroad

Fig. 5b: Employment status before and after moving abroad

References