Occupational Attainment and Career Mobility over the Life Course in Germany
A Case for Latent Growth Curve Analysis

Abstract:
The present study analyzes processes of social mobility across the life course using latent growth curve (LGC) Modeling. Based on repeated measurements of occupational prestige, both the variances of random intercepts (i.e., initial prestige level) and slopes (i.e., career mobility) of individual career trajectories are estimated and modeled as a function of various time-varying and person-level determinants. The main strength of this approach is that it considers both inter- and intragenerational mobility in a combined analytical framework. Although these two mobility mechanisms are likely to be interdependent, they have mostly been addressed in separate studies previously. By modeling individual career trajectories while distinguishing between within- and between-subject variances, LGC analysis avoids issues in previous studies (e.g., the overestimation of mobility across the life course) and is also capable of dealing with highly stable career trajectories (i.e., those with little intraindividual change over time).

The analysis is based on GSOEP waves 1-26, including N = 24,000 individuals. An important finding is a negative covariation between the intercept and slope parameters. This means that the higher the initial prestige score at the onset of the career, the lower are the odds of further career advancements, probably owing to the narrowing of opportunity structures at the higher positions within the occupational system. Furthermore, mobility processes are largely confined to the early stages of career development, shortly after a graduation or vocational training has been obtained. In line with previous research, initial placement of individuals within the occupational system is strongly dependent upon respondents' own and their parents' education; remarkably, higher parental education also facilitates the odds of subsequent upward mobility (i.e., a positive slope) concerning occupational prestige, beyond its effect on initial prestige (i.e., the intercept). Finally, low-prestige jobs bring about an elevated risk of subsequent episodes of unemployment; even the fairly high upward mobility of unemployed respondents does not compensate the comparative disadvantage inherent to low-prestige positions.

In summary, LGC modeling of occupational careers from a life course perspective has the potential to extend and integrate past research on social mobility by linking processes of intergenerational transmission of human capital to career mobility across the life course.
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