Educational Health Inequality in Germany: Cumulative Advantage Over the Life Course and Rising Importance Across Cohorts

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Abstract

The cumulative advantage hypothesis predicts health gaps across educational levels to widen with age. A recent addition, the rising importance hypothesis, further posits that this relationship has become stronger across cohorts. Longitudinal evidence in support of both hypotheses is largely limited to the United States. German studies – mainly based on cross-sectional designs – have reported health gaps to remain stable or even to converge with age. This study presents more rigorous tests for the hypotheses of cumulative advantage and rising importance in the German context, drawing on longitudinal data from the German Socio-economic Panel Study (N = 9,615 respondents comprising 68,865 panel observations) to disentangle age and cohort effects on trajectories of self-rated health and physical health. Our results contradict previous findings for Germany. As predicted by both hypotheses, health gaps between higher and lower educated people widened with age, and this divergence was most pronounced among recent cohorts. We conclude that educational health inequality in Germany is profoundly – and increasingly – shaped by processes of cumulative advantage.

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