

Social Inequality in Well-Being over the Life Course

Abstract submitted to the SOEP User Conference 2016

in Berlin, June 22-23, 2016

Fabian Kratz, Gerrit Bauer and Josef Brüderl

Department of Sociology, University of Munich (LMU)

Contact: fabian.kratz@soziologie.uni-muenchen.de

Abstract

Social inequality can be defined as differences in physical and social well-being. Both forms of well-being are assumed to be “basic human needs” (Adam Smith). Building on Smith’s ideas, the more recent theory of social production functions (Lindenberg, 1996) states that in order to achieve high levels of physical well-being and social appreciation, humans draw on primary intermediate goods, mainly health care, housing conditions, wealth and social relations. Further secondary intermediate goods (in western societies mainly education, employment and income) affect primary intermediate goods. Humans striving for well-being thus try to accumulate primary and secondary intermediate goods. The success in accumulating secondary intermediate goods depends on ascriptive characteristics as for instance social origin.

Most research on social inequality has so far focused on intermediate goods as outcomes. Following the theory of social production functions, we argue, that inequality research would profit from a complementary look on the “final outcome”: well-being. Therefore, we will analyze in this paper inequalities in well-being. Further, inequality research often has been static. It is obvious, however, that inequalities may change over the life-course. Therefore, the second major point of our paper is that we will analyze how well-being inequalities develop over the life course.

In this vein we investigate – using SOEP data – how well-being (happiness) trajectories differ by social origin, and how intermediate goods mediate these effects over the life course. We test three competing hypotheses. The cumulative advantage/disadvantage hypothesis states that happiness differentials increase with age. An opposing reasoning argues that negative life events act as an equalizer. Hence, happiness differentials decrease over the life course. A third hypothesis states that personality traits cause stable, unmediatable differentials. We estimate random effects growth curves, modelling flexible age-happiness profiles. Preliminary results show that happiness differentials between persons with high and low social background increase with rising age. This finding is in line with the cumulative advantage hypothesis.

Key words: well-being, inequality, social origin, life-course, age-period-cohort effects