

Life Course Research and Social Policies

Volume 9

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Life course research has been developing quickly these last decades for good reasons. Life course approaches focus on essential questions about individuals' trajectories, longitudinal analyses, cross-fertilization across disciplines like life-span psychology, developmental social psychology, sociology of the life course, social demography, socio-economics, social history. Life course is also at the crossroads of several fields of specialization like family and social relationships, migration, education, professional training and employment, and health. This Series invites academic scholars to present theoretical, methodological, and empirical advances in the analysis of the life course, and to elaborate on possible implications for society and social policies applications.

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Social Dynamics in Swiss Society

Empirical Studies Based on the
Swiss Household Panel

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Preface

It is indeed a pleasure to write the preface to a book celebrating 20 years of the “Swiss Household Panel (SHP).” For about 20 years, I was responsible for one of SHP’s twins: the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), which is also a household panel. With each additional comparable household panel, like SHP and SOEP, researchers are able to improve their studies by making international comparisons that advance our understanding of the world.

In order to facilitate international comparative analyses, SHP was one of the first Cross-National Equivalent File (CNEF) partners. The CNEF – which originated at Syracuse University, later at Cornell University, and now based at the Ohio State University – provides access to harmonized data from a number of panel data studies. These include SHP, the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Study (HILDA), the German SOEP, the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UK HLS), and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) in the USA. Data from the Korea Labor and Income Panel Study (KLIPS) and the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (RLMS) are also available.

The CNEF continues to expand access to data. Interesting household panel studies or cohort studies are underway in Africa and Asia, including, to name a few, the “Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS),” panel household surveys in Thailand and Vietnam (which are financed by the German Science Foundation, DFG), the “Coping with Shocks in Mongolia Household Panel Survey,” and the World Bank’s “LSMS Panel Surveys.”

The fact that the panels in CNEF are comparable is not a lucky accident, but rather an important feature of the worldwide social and behavioral sciences research infrastructure. A concerted effort ensures that these panel studies are comparable in terms of the basic setups and the questionnaires.

The one outlier is the oldest study, the PSID, which is less comparable to the other studies. This is a surprise because, without any doubt whatsoever, the PSID was the role model for all household panel studies that followed. However, the newer studies learned from the experience of PSID. Thus, while the PSID only interviews the head of the household, all of the younger studies interview all adult household members.

The book at hand is an excellent example not just of SHP's inherent research power, but also the power of international comparisons. In this book, readers will find articles about "health, well-being, and life satisfaction," "resources, work, and living conditions," as well as "politics and attitudes." Three articles exploit international comparisons: a longitudinal analysis of cohabitation and marriage in Switzerland and Australia; an analysis of wealth, savings, and children among Swiss, German, and Australian families; and a study on home ownership and wealth in Germany and Switzerland.

Scientists use SHP's excellent data to carry out research: both local and foreign researchers focusing solely on Switzerland as well as teams of authors from multiple countries making comparative analyses. Thus, in the book at hand, readers will find papers written by authors from Australia (The University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology), Germany (University of Mannheim and German Institute for Economic Research – DIW Berlin), Italy (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca), the Netherlands (University of Amsterdam and Utrecht University), and the USA (Ohio State University and University of Colorado, Boulder).

SHP is part of a growing worldwide community of excellent researchers who analyze household panel data. These analyses make a difference in the scientific community. Many of these analyses also make a difference in local and national societies. In the future, the results of these studies will also make a difference to global society. As a member, if not a hub, of the global network of panel studies, SHP is poised to contribute significantly to science and to society.

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