MA in Social Sciences (IC3JM)

Social Stratification II

(358-17101)

Winter Term, 2025–2026

Thursday, 15:00–18:00, Room 18.1.A01

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Overview

The influential life course perspective implies a dynamic view on population processes and socio-economic outcomes, emphasizing the changing roles of historical context and within-family interdependencies. In modern societies, each life stage from childhood over adolescence to adulthood and retirement is subject to specific timing and sequencing effects, including important patterns of heterogeneity. Understanding the mechanisms that shape social inequality through major biographical transitions remains one of the key challenges for social science research. While the focus lies on the education and the labor market, the seminar also touches upon the family and health domains. A key analytical issue is to distinguish the influences of individual agency and structural constraints on life outcomes. This seminar offers an advanced approach to current debates in the life course and social stratification literature, including recent insights from cross-country comparative studies.

Course Requirements

Class Participation:

This is a graduate-level course following a seminar format (not a lecture), although there will also be some class exercises and short presentations by the instructor. Thus, active participation is an essential requirement. All readings in the syllabus are mandatory, and students should be prepared to raise questions and/or make reflected comments on the weekly reading assignments. Students' active participation in the critical discussion of the course material is crucial. Each student will be assigned the responsibility to co-moderate the class debate on one of the course readings (together with the instructor).

Stinchcombe Test:

The eminent US sociologist Arthur Stinchcombe is cited with the statement that a good sociologist should be able to stipulate various competing explanations for a relevant social phenomenon. This exercise consists in preparing and delivering a 15-minute presentation about three alternative hypotheses that might explain a stylized social fact (which can either be self-selected or picked from a set offered by the instructor).

Writing Clinic:

Students have to hand in a written seminar paper at the end of the semester. To facilitate the timely execution of this task and help develop academic writing skills, the course includes a three-part writing clinic. For this interactive activity, brief early drafts of different pieces of (what will become) the seminar paper are circulated and discussed in class. For every Thursday session of the writing clinic, each student has to share the respective draft document with the group by Tuesday night (on the Aula Global course forum) to allow enough time for reading. The writing clinic is based on reciprocity and lives from students providing constructive feedback to each other. It culminates in in the final sessions of the course, when all students present their seminar paper projects.

Final Seminar Paper:

The final seminar paper can either follow a short or full format. A short paper resembles the front-end of an empirical research article: it raises a research question that fills a gap in the existing knowledge, justifies its relevance and discusses the previous literature on the topic. Moreover, it briefly outlines a theoretical framework, spells out one or several hypotheses before describing a research design that could be used to test expectations against available data. Such short papers should have an extension between 3,000 and 5,000 words; alternatively, full papers that additionally include original empirical analyses are between 6,000 and 10,000 words long. The standard in terms of execution is higher for short papers than for full papers; in other words, it is harder for short papers to obtain a high grade. The seminar paper should be seen as an opportunity to move own project ideas forward and, possibly, begin a paper that can become a Master's Thesis.

Grading:

Class participation including co-moderation: 30%
Stinchcombe test: 15%
Writing clinic: 20%
Final seminar paper: 35%.

Syllabus

PART I: THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

Session 1: The life course approach

Introduction to the course

Kohli, M. (2007). "The institutionalization of the life course: Looking back to look ahead." *Research in Human Development*, 4(3-4), 253-271.

Vandecasteele, L. (2011). "Life course risks or cumulative disadvantage? The structuring effect of social stratification determinants and life course events on poverty transitions in Europe." *European Sociological Review*, *27*(2), 246-263.

Class exercise: Social Stratification Quiz

Session 2: Life course and early inequality

Bernardi, L., Huinink, J., & Settersten Jr, R. A. (2019). "The life course cube: A tool for studying lives." *Advances in Life Course Research*, *41*, 100258

Bernardi, F. (2014). "Compensatory advantage as a mechanism of educational inequality: A regression discontinuity based on month of birth." *Sociology of Education*, 87(2), 74–88.

Class exercise: Understanding regression tables

PART II: EARLY LIFE COURSE AND EDUCATION

Session 3: Inequality and schooling

Von Hippel, P. T., Workman, J., & Downey, D. B. (2018). "Inequality in reading and math skills forms mainly before kindergarten: A replication, and partial correction, of 'Are Schools the Great Equalizer?'" *Sociology of Education*, 91(4), 323–357.

Passaretta, G., & Skopek, J. (2021). "Does schooling decrease socioeconomic inequality in early achievement? A differential exposure approach". *American Sociological Review*, 86(6), 1017-1042.

Mini-lecture: Age, period and cohort effects

Session 4: Educational expectations

Domina, T., Conley, A., & Farkas, G. (2011). "The link between educational expectations and effort in the college-for-all era." *Sociology of Education, 84*(2), 93-112.

Controversial takes:

Rosenbaum, J. E. (2011). "The complexities of college for all: Beyond fairy-tale dreams." *Sociology of Education*, *84*(2), 113-117.

Domina, T., Conley, A., & Farkas, G. (2011). "The case for dreaming big." *Sociology of Education*, *84*(2), 118-121.

Mini-lecture: Data sets for stratification research

Session 5: Educational trajectories

Carbonaro, W. (2005). Tracking, students' effort, and academic achievement. *Sociology of Education*, *78*(1), 27-49.

Burger, K. (2021). "Human agency in educational trajectories: Evidence from a stratified system." *European Sociological Review*, *37*(6), 952-971.

PART III: TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD AND MERITOCRACY

Session 6: Transition to adulthood

Billari, F. C., Hiekel, N. & Liefbroer, A. C. (2019). "The Social Stratification of Choice in the Transition to Adulthood". *European Sociological Review*, 35(5), 599–615.

Writing Clinic I

Session 7: The British meritocracy debate

Saunders, P. (1997). "Social mobility in Britain: an empirical evaluation of two competing explanations." *Sociology*, *31*(2), 261-288.

Breen, R., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (1999). "Class inequality and meritocracy: a critique of Saunders and an alternative analysis." *British Journal of Sociology*, *50*(1), 1-27.

Saunders, P. (2002). "Reflections on the meritocracy debate in Britain: A response to Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe." *British Journal of Sociology*, 53(4), 559-574.

Breen, R., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (2002). "Merit, mobility and method: another reply to Saunders." *British Journal of Sociology*, 53(4), 575-582.

Session 8: Cognitive ability and achievement

Gil-Hernández, C. J. (2021). "The (unequal) interplay between cognitive and noncognitive skills in early educational attainment." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(11), 1577-1598.

Betthäuser, B. A., Bourne, M., & Bukodi, E. (2020). "Understanding the mobility chances of children from working-class backgrounds in Britain: How important are cognitive ability and locus of control?". *British Journal of Sociology*, 71(2), 349-365.

Controversial takes:

Marks, G. N. (2020). "Occupational mobility and cognitive ability: A commentary on Betthäuser, Bourne and Bukodi." *British Journal of Sociology*, 2020, 1–4.

Betthäuser, B. A., Bukodi, E., & Bourne, M. (2021). "The case for studying the intergenerational transmission of social (dis) advantage: A reply to Gary Marks." *British Journal of Sociology*, *72*(2), 233.

PART IV: LATER-LIFE OUTCOMES AND FAMILY ISSUES

Session 9: Later life outcomes

Mini-lecture: Ideal types

Sieber, S., Cheval, B., Orsholits, D., Van der Linden, B. W., Guessous, I., Gabriel, R., ... & Cullati, S. (2020). "Do welfare regimes moderate cumulative dis/advantages over the life course? Cross-national evidence from longitudinal SHARE data." *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 75(6), 1312-1325.

Writing Clinic II

Session 10: Family and labor market transitions

Gonalons-Pons, P., & Gangl, M. (2021). "Marriage and masculinity: Male-breadwinner culture, unemployment, and separation risk in 29 countries." *American Sociological Review*, 86(3), 465-502.

Weisshaar, K. (2018). "From opt out to blocked out: The challenges for labor market re-entry after family-related employment lapses." *American Sociological Review*, *83*(1), 34-60.

PART V: META SCIENCE AND TERM PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Session 11: The hidden universe of uncertainty

Breznau, N., Rinke, E. M., Wuttke, A., Nguyen, H. H., Adem, M., Adriaans, J., ... & Zołtak, T. (2022). "Observing many researchers using the same data and hypothesis reveals a hidden universe of uncertainty." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *119*(44), e2203150119 [including Correction].

Engzell, P. (2023). "A universe of uncertainty hiding in plain sight." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *120*(2), e2218530120.

Mathur, M. B., Covington, C., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2023). "Variation across analysts in statistical significance, yet consistently small effect sizes." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *120*(3), e2218957120.

Auspurg, K., & Brüderl, J. (2024). “Toward a more credible assessment of the credibility of science by many-analyst studies.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 121*(38), e2404035121.

Writing Clinic III: Seminar Paper Presentations, part 1

Session 12: The hidden universe of uncertainty, part two

Writing Clinic III: Seminar Paper Presentations, part 2

Wrap up: Reviewing the Semester