Social Inequalities—Empirical Focus

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Abstract: Social inequalities constitute one of the largest research fields of sociology in the German-speaking countries. This field has been successfully institutionalized and internationalized in recent decades. Today, it rests on a rich data infrastructure and a large body of cumulative research. The article traces this advancement in terms of shifting theoretical paradigms, methodological innovations, and the establishment of the current data infrastructure. It particularly highlights recent developments in four core areas of inequality research: educational inequality and returns on education; employment and the labor market; income, wealth, and poverty; and social mobility.

Keywords: Social inequality, social stratification, social change, data infrastructure, Germany

1 Introduction

Ever since sociology emerged as a scientific endeavor in the era of industrialization (the "social question"), social inequalities have been at the heart of the discipline. In the German-speaking countries, as in many others, inequality research is one of the largest and most advanced fields of sociology. For this and other reasons, reviewing the publication output since the turn of the millennium is anything but an easy task. First, inequality research is constituted of, or is related to, several subfields of research, such as education, work/labor, social policy, health/aging, demography, the life course, family, migration/ethnicity, and gender. The demarcation of the field is therefore blurry and the relevant literature vast. Second, one of the most striking developments over the last two decades is the internationalization of inequality research. Many eminent scholars from the German-speaking countries are well known to an international audience through conferences and English-language journals. This raises the question of what represents inequality research among the German-speaking countries: Is it research done by scholars residing *in* these countries or by the scientific community working *on* these countries? For our review, we define Germany, Austria, and parts of Switzerland as the German-language area. The substantial exchange of scientific personnel and sociological discourse between these countries justifies an overall review. However, these countries' structures of inequality are, alongside several commonalities, shaped by national pathways in culture, politics, the welfare state, and the economy. For our survey of the literature, we have attempted to consider the sociological community that publishes on social inequalities in the German-language area, but we have placed special emphasis on empirical findings from Germany as the most populous country. A third observation, closely connected to

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the internationalization of this field, is the trend towards research being increasingly produced cumulatively within standardized paradigms by teams (instead of single authors) and in journals (instead of books). Altogether, when we took stock of the research on social inequalities in the German-speaking countries, we found ourselves mapping a broad field with vague boundaries that is heavily internationalized and shows a specifically national orientation only in parts.

Blurred boundaries notwithstanding, there is broad consensus in German-language textbooks on what constitutes the core of social-inequality research (e.g., Bacher et al., 2019; Huinink and Schröder, 2019; Klein, 2016; Rössel, 2009; Schwinn, SOCIAL INEQUALITIES—THEORETICAL FOCUS, this volume). Following this literature, we define social inequalities as the unequal distribution of valued resources, opportunities, and positions among the members of a population in a given space and time. Because educational qualifications, monetary resources, and labor-market positions are key for an individual's life chances in modern societies, most scholars agree that educational inequalities, labor-market structures, social-mobility processes, as well as income, wealth, and poverty distributions are at the heart of inequality research. Our main focus is therefore devoted to these topics (sections 4 to 7).

To map the field, we chose three strategies beyond our own personal knowledge.[1] We began by compiling the themes of the biannual meetings of the Social Inequality section of the German Sociological Association (DGS) from 2000 to 2018. This gave us an overview of the major discourses in German-language inequality research. We also used Google Scholar to determine the number of citations of all current members of the DGS Social Inequality section in order to identify influential scholars and publications. We broadened the coverage by searching for sociologists who reside in Austria or Switzerland or mainly publish in English. Third, we identified all articles on social inequalities that were published in the most influential German sociology journals, the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* (*KZfSS*) and the *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* (*ZfS*), from 2000 to 2018. On the basis of the abstracts, these papers were coded by their main topics.[2] Table 1 is a condensed representation that indicates the changing importance of research themes over time, with the shaded topics being the ones that appeared to gain in importance.

In the 1990s, inequality research in Germany was dominated by two major debates: the transformation of East German society after reunification in 1990 (Krause and Ostner, 2010) and the thesis of a dissolution of class society, which was inspired by Beck's individualization thesis (Beck, 1992), Bourdieu's notion of lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984), and models of socio-cultural milieus (Schulze, 1992). While German

1 We thank Viktoria Bading for her helpful research assistance. We also benefited from comments by Dave Balzer, Johannes Giesecke, Steffen Schindler, and the journal editors.

2 Papers were coded primarily by dimensions, not determinants of inequality. For example, female labor-market participation was assigned to the "employment and labor market" dimension. Only if a paper analyzed the multiplicity of inequalities from a gender perspective was it assigned to "gender and inequality," a category that we later subsumed under "other."

inequality research could be characterized as somewhat exceptional at the end of the millennium, as our predecessors noted in their review twenty years ago (Allmendinger and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2000), this diagnosis no longer holds true in light of the trends toward internationalization mentioned above. As Table 1 indicates, several shifts in research foci have taken place.[3] General debates on theories, models, and methods of inequality research as well as articles on cultural inequalities, still prominent in the early 2000s, have since lost ground. Educational inequalities (from preschool to tertiary education) have become by far the most important research focus: 66 out of 302 papers are devoted to this topic (Grundmann, EDUCATION AND SOCIALIZATION, this volume). Income inequality and poverty, health inequalities, as well as bodily and political aspects of inequality have also gained momentum, albeit not to the same degree in terms of absolute numbers.

Table 1: Number of papers on social-inequality topics in KZfSS and ZfS, 2000–2018

	2000–2005	2006–2011	2012–2018	Total
Methods and data of inequality research	9	1	3	13
Theories and explanations of inequality	6	5	1	12
Models of social stratification	4	1	1	6
Trend diagnoses of inequality	2	3	1	6
Educational inequalities	**8**	**25**	**33**	**66**
Transitions from school to work	4	1	3	8
Education (other)	0	1	0	1
Employment and labor market	8	10	8	26
Labor-market segregation	2	1	2	5
Specific occupational fields	3	1	1	5
Housework	0	2	1	3
Unemployment	6	2	0	8
Atypical employment	2	1	4	7
Income inequality	**5**	**3**	**13**	**21**
Poverty and precariousness	**1**	**4**	**6**	**11**
Material inequalities (other)	3	4	0	7
Social mobility (intergenerational)	2	1	3	6
Social mobility (career)	5	5	5	15
Spatial inequalities, residential segregation	2	1	3	6
Health inequalities, mortality	**3**	**3**	**7**	**13**
Bodily aspects of inequality	**0**	**4**	**4**	**8**
Cultural inequalities (values, lifestyles)	7	5	3	15
Attitudes towards inequality	4	2	5	11
Political aspects of inequality	**0**	**3**	**6**	**9**

3 These trends might be affected by a scholarly selectivity in the turn to publishing in English-language journals. We lack systematic data on this, but we have the impression that most scholars with a strong international publication record also made sizable contributions to the German flagship journals.

Table 1: Number of papers on social-inequality topics in KZfSS and ZfS, 2000–2018 *(Fortsetzung)*

	2000–2005	2006–2011	2012–2018	Total
Family issues/fertility and inequality	2	1	3	6
Other topics	3	1	4	8
Total	91	91	120	302

Before we move on to research on education, employment, income, and social mobility (sections 4–7), we discuss general developments in theoretical research paradigms (section 2), data sources, and methodologies (section 3).

2 Theoretical Research Paradigms

While sociological inequality discourses were dominated by macro approaches from neo-Marxism, structural-functionalism, or modernization theory far into the 1980s, they have been increasingly replaced by models that emphasize the micro foundations of macro-social phenomena. As a general framework, the explanatory macro–micro model coined by Coleman (1986) and popularized by Esser (1993) is employed by important parts of inequality research (Schneider, SOCIAL THEORY, this volume). In this model, collective phenomena are explained by reference to individual actors who are embedded in social contexts and make behavioral decisions. Varieties of rational-action theory are used to account for processes at the micro level. For example, educational choices are explained in terms of the costs, benefits, and probabilities of success, which are assumed to differ by social origin (Stocké, 2010). Apart from that, cultural processes, like socialization, social norms, stereotypes, and homophily, are frequent alternatives to explain individual action and interaction (Grunow et al., 2007; Kaiser and Diewald, 2014; Lorenz et al., 2016). At the meso level, social closure is regarded as one of the core mechanisms in the production of inequalities (Diewald and Faist, 2011), one that has experienced a theoretical revival (Groß, 2012; Haupt, 2012). Although collective phenomena, such as educational inequality, are devised as explananda, the micro-sociological turn has shifted attention to individual life chances. Without doubt, life chances are a valuable research focus, but inequality research has somewhat lost sight of genuine collective phenomena. For example, it has rarely addressed which social institutions promote an integrated or segregated society and which types and levels of inequality nurture social conflicts and political change (Nachtwey, 2016).

A major conceptual shift that has underlain a growing body of research since the 1990s is the analysis of inequalities from a life-course perspective (Mayer, 2009; Huinink/Hollstein, LIFE COURSE, this volume). While typical research papers were previously occupied with describing and explaining inequalities between social categories, a life-course approach investigates how transitions between stages or epi-

sodes in an individual's life (e.g., from school to work, out of unemployment, or into poverty) come about and how preceding events shape later life chances. This approach renders causal claims on the influence of social contexts, events, opportunities, and resources much more convincing.

The lively discussion of the 1990s on models of social structure has markedly faded. Among social-class models, the Goldthorpe (EGP) scheme, or variants like the European Socioeconomic Classification (ESeC), are the most popular. The class scheme developed by Oesch (2006) is also gaining importance. Bourdieu's social-space approach and his notion of cultural capital is still influential even though a consensus on the adequate operationalization has not been reached. Apart from this, social stratification is often measured in gradational terms, for example, by income, educational qualifications, or socioeconomic status. Models of social milieus or lifestyles have not become widely accepted as many of their promises (e.g., superior explanatory power) have not been kept. One of the few measurement approaches, Otte's (2005) "conduct of life" typology, has been adopted in applied research but less so in foundational research. The general trend is to abandon single "master concepts" of inequality and to use multivariate explanatory models instead. This trend is also reflected in the intersectionality paradigm, which is widely discussed in qualitative research (Meyer, 2017; Karstein/Wohlrab-Sahr, CULTURE, this volume; Villa/Hark, GENDER, this volume).

3 Data Infrastructure and Methodological Innovations

The continued growth of the data infrastructure is a success story for inequality research in the German-speaking countries.[4] In Germany, the biennial general social survey (ALLBUS) with its repeated cross-sectional design can be used to monitor long-term trends of social inequalities since 1980. Data from the German micro-census is available for similar purposes (Hundenborn and Enderer, 2019). In general, the collaboration between those producing official statistics and those conducting academic research is improving continuously. Several research datacenters have been set up over the last two decades and provide such unique data as the "Linked Employer–Employee Data of the Institute of Employment Research" (LIAB), which merges administrative individual-level data with surveys of organizations.[5]

4 Many of these data can be accessed via the GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences and its data archive (https://www.gesis.org/en/home). For Switzerland, see https://forscenter.ch; for Austria, see https://aussda.at/en.

5 Founded in 2004, the German Data Forum (RatSWD), an advisory council to the German federal government, gives an overview of all research datacenters at https://www.ratswd.de/en/data-infrastructure/rdc.

While the macro–micro paradigm outlined above ideally requires multilevel data, such as those from the European Social Survey (ESS), the life-course perspective calls for panel data. The proliferation of panel studies is indeed impressive. The German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), established in 1984 and currently comprising about 15,000 households with 30,000 persons, can be considered the flagship in this field (Goebel et al., 2019). Since 1999, the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) has fulfilled a similar function in Switzerland. With its multicohort sequence design, the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) is even more complex (Blossfeld et al., 2019). It has run since 2009 and has followed more than 60,000 target persons from six starting cohorts over time, ranging from newborns and kindergarteners through fifth-grade, ninth-grade, and college students up to adults. Another study relevant to inequality and poverty research is the Panel Study Labour Market and Social Security (PASS). It focuses on the dynamics of receiving welfare benefits and comprises household samples of welfare recipients as well as members of the general population with an overrepresentation of low-income households (Trappmann et al., 2013). Other panel studies, such as the Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam; Huinink et al., 2011) or the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE; Börsch-Supan et al., 2013), provide valuable data for inequality research as well. The German Twin Family Panel (TwinLife) deserves special mention as it follows more than 4,000 families with monozygotic or dizygotic twin children to investigate genetic and environmental influences on behaviors (Mönkediek et al., 2019).

The trend towards panel data comes along with a heightened awareness of the presuppositions of causal claims that are widespread in inequality research (Barth/Blasius, QUANTITATIVE METHODS, this volume). For a long time, cross-sectional data were used unduly to draw such conclusions. The problem is that relevant variables are frequently missing to control for individuals' selection into social contexts and biographical states that are assumed to exert causal influences. Guided by the counterfactual approach to causality, some scholars have suggested analytical designs to attenuate this problem of unobserved heterogeneity and to approximate the ideal of randomized experiments (Gangl, 2010; Legewie, 2012). The fixed-effects paradigm of panel regression is seen as particularly well suited for causal inference because it controls for time-constant unit-level influences (for an overview of applications, see Giesselmann and Windzio, 2014). In addition, experimental designs are increasingly used in causal analysis (Keuschnigg and Wolbring, 2015). Field experiments have become popular to detect discrimination in labor and housing markets. By way of example, ethnic discrimination can be found in the rental housing market, but its extent is reduced when more information is disclosed about ethnic minority applicants, which suggests that statistical discrimination is at work here (Auspurg et al., 2017b, 2019). Factorial survey designs integrate experimental elements into surveys. For instance, when asked to rate a set of fictitious employee vignettes, respondents in one study considered lower earnings for female employees to be fair—an answer that would hardly be expected to a direct question about attitudes toward equal pay

(Auspurg et al., 2017a). Finally, natural experiments are used to evaluate the impact of institutional reforms. The temporary introduction of (rather low) tuition fees in some German federal states, for example, has been shown to have no detrimental effect on access to higher education (Helbig et al., 2012).

Inequality research is dominated by quantitative approaches. Qualitative studies, by contrast, are often published in books rather than journals, thus making them less visible (Burzan and Schad, 2018). These studies mostly use interview methods and typically focus on perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of personal living conditions, especially among precarious groups (e.g., Bahl and Staab, 2015; Gefken et al., 2015). They also explore processes of identity formation and symbolic boundary construction (e.g., Sachweh, 2013; Bosancic, 2014; Hollstein/Kumkar, QUALITATIVE METHODS, this volume) and show how inequalities are reproduced in everyday practices (for an overview, see Behrmann et al., 2018). Some examples of qualitative panel data collection do exist. For instance, Grimm et al. (2013) investigated how personal identity formation was shaped by labor-market insecurities over a five-year span.

4 Educational Inequality and Returns on Education

The most striking development in German-language inequality research is the upsurge in research on educational inequality (Grundmann, EDUCATION AND SOCIALIZATION, this volume). Although this field is marked by a strong prior research tradition with important contributions from Germany and Switzerland (e.g., Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Shavit and Müller, 1998; Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011), the recent upswing can be traced back to the first PISA study in 2000 and the ensuing "*PISA-Schock*." Not only did German students perform below the OECD average, their test scores were determined more strongly by social origin than in any other of the 32 participating countries (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium, 2001). Since then, each new PISA wave has been received critically by the general public. The transdisciplinary field of empirical educational research and panel surveys such as NEPS have profited from calls for more evidence-based research and extensive funding.

The German-speaking countries have witnessed a pronounced educational expansion since World War II, with particular boosts for upper-secondary education in the 1970s and 2000s and for tertiary education in the 1980s and 2000s (Becker and Hadjar, 2013). Compared to most other Western countries, enrollment in higher education is still low because of the well-developed dual system of vocational education, which provides an attractive alternative to an academic education. While inequalities in the completion of advanced-track upper-secondary education (*Abitur*) associated with social class have been moderately reduced over the last four decades, access to the university system has become more socially selective among those who have acquired such an entrance certificate (Breen et al., 2009; Lörz and Schindler, 2011; Neugebauer et al., 2016).

The profound effects of social origin on educational success are attributed to the strong stratification of the school systems in the German-speaking countries (Müller and Kogan, 2010). Decisions to enter one of the hierarchical secondary-school tracks must be made very early—in Germany, this is usually at the end of the fourth grade. Because educational decision-making is so important, much research focuses on "secondary effects" (Boudon, 1974), which are comparatively large in Germany (Neugebauer et al., 2013). Worth mentioning is Stocké's (2007) attempt to measure the parameters of the well-known Breen–Goldthorpe model of educational decision-making (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). Drawing on rational-action theories, some scholars argue that inequalities of educational opportunity are reduced when parental freedom of choice of a secondary-school track is restricted by teachers' recommendations. Because German federalism grants considerable leeway for educational institution-building, there is variation in the binding nature of teachers' recommendations between the federal states. Evidence on this hypothesis is mixed. Whereas Dollmann (2011) used a pre- and post-reform survey of pupils in Cologne to show that mandatory recommendations attenuate the effects of social origins on the probability of a student attending a higher-secondary track, other studies based on a large set of federal states and their transition regulations did not confirm that hypothesis (Büchler, 2016; Roth and Siegert, 2015).

Boudon's (1974) model also points to the "primary effects" of cognitive ability varying between children of different origin. In Germany, a Turkish migration background is associated with serious disadvantages in an individual's life chances. In a series of papers, Becker demonstrated that children in general benefit from high-quality preschool learning environments and that those with a Turkish migration background improve their German vocabulary particularly well when they attend preschool for a longer period (e.g., Becker, 2010).

The German-speaking countries are known for a strong link between the educational system and the labor market: General and vocational educational credentials are highly valued by employers (Shavit and Müller, 1998). Against this backdrop, the ongoing educational expansion has sparked a lively debate on the inflation of educational credentials and an overeducation of graduates. Although there is, in fact, a growing shortage of skilled personnel in various trades and care occupations, recent studies have shown that, by and large, the returns on education have remained stable with regard to income and class positions (Klein, 2011; Piopiunik et al., 2017). Still, because many families feel that the value of upper-secondary and university degrees has diminished, new distinctions have arisen. We can witness a trend towards private schooling (Jungbauer-Gans et al., 2012) and a renewed interest in ancient languages (Sawert, 2016) along with investments in transnational human capital in the form of school or academic years abroad (Gerhards et al., 2017), the enduring appeal of prestigious fields of study, such as medicine and law (Reimer and Pollak, 2010), and a trend toward the doctoral degree as a new status marker (Jaksztat and Lörz, 2018). Moreover, students from privileged social classes benefit more from alternative paths

to higher education, which are meant to correct initial failure in pursuing the standard pathway (Buchholz and Pratter, 2017).

5 Employment and the Labor Market

While educational credentials are equally important in the German, Austrian, and Swiss labor markets, some peculiarities must be considered in each of these countries. In Germany, the process of establishing homogenous living conditions has posed a prolonged challenge since reunification. Whereas the former GDR observed a full-employment policy with comprehensive state-run childcare, the West German employment system was built on the male-breadwinner model. In the face of demographic change, economic strains, and egalitarian cultural ideologies, this model increasingly clashed with reality. New policies put a stronger emphasis on activating the unemployed and removing obstacles for women (Dingeldey, 2007; Hipp et al., 2015). Several reforms in the 2000s, especially the Hartz reforms, emphasized individual responsibility for safeguarding against life risks and incentivized labor-market participation (Eichhorst and Marx, 2019).[6]

It is challenging to disentangle the effects of these macro-level processes. For instance, the flexibilization of labor, indicated by an increase in atypical employment, such as part-time work and temporary contracts, can be traced to the Hartz reforms but also to the long-term growth of female labor-market participation (Giesecke and Groß, 2003; Pfau-Effinger/Grages, SOCIAL POLICY, this volume). These trends have reinforced a dual labor market: standard employees with privileged and relatively safe positions are pitted against those in atypical and precarious employment (Eichhorst and Marx, 2011; Ochsenfeld, 2018; Aulenbacher/Grubner, WORK AND LABOR, this volume). Flexible labor comes with new risks, such as in-work poverty. Precarious employment has grown over the last decades, and the insecurities associated with it are more pronounced in East Germany and among migrants and women (Brady and Biegert, 2018).

The group affected most by severe risks such as poverty is the economically inactive part of the population. Compared to other European countries, unemployment in Germany has decreased considerably since the early 2000s, and the 2007–08 financial crisis had only a marginal impact on the labor market. Although unemployment is quite low in general, it is higher in East Germany and hits hardest individuals with low levels of educational attainment and without vocational qualifications (Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2018). From a life-course perspective, Gangl (2006) showed the enduring "scarring effects" of unemployment on earnings trajectories.

6 From 2003 to 2006, a bundle of reforms, which had been developed by an expert committee chaired by Peter Hartz, were put into effect in Germany. The reforms alleviated temporary work and minor employment ("mini jobs") and lumped together the former unemployment assistance and social welfare.

Care work is another reason for individuals not being part of the active labor force (Villa/Hark, GENDER, this volume). Such responsibilities traditionally fell to women in the German-speaking countries. In recent decades, the housewife model has been replaced by female part-time (and full-time) work. This new model reduces women's dependency on their husbands' income. However, women are now vulnerable to the risks associated with atypical employment (Böhnke et al., 2015). Many mothers work part-time after childbirth, and this often comes with wage penalties on top of a persistently high gender wage gap (Gangl and Ziefle, 2015). The majority of women lack enough disposable income to secure their livelihood on their own (Trappe et al., 2015). As a stronger inclusion of women into the labor market is not without controversy still today, contradictory policies coexist. German family policies both encourage women to assume care responsibilities by offering financial benefits and promote female labor-market participation at the same time (Lohmann and Zagel, 2016). These issues are further complicated by the heritage of two formerly distinct welfare systems. After reunification, the GDR childcare infrastructure as well as cultural foundations supporting a greater inclusion of women in the workforce have persisted in East Germany, resulting in higher female employment rates and lower wage inequalities in the East than in the West (Rosenfeld et al., 2004; Matysiak and Steinmetz, 2008).

Two related issues that have attracted much attention during the last two decades are the gender pay gap and the underrepresentation of women in high occupational positions (Gartner and Hinz, 2009). Two mechanisms are particularly important to explain these phenomena (Ochsenfeld, 2012). First, there is a considerable and enduring amount of occupational gender segregation (Busch, 2013; Hausmann et al., 2015). As occupational choices have their roots in gender-specific preferences toward school subjects, fields of study, and vocational education, and as men tend to pursue better-remunerated occupations, the process of preference formation is an important research topic. Second, female careers are hampered primarily at the point of family formation: The household division of labor starts to traditionalize, which means that women shoulder the larger part of care commitments and have to content themselves with part-time work (Grunow et al., 2007).

6 Income, Wealth, and Poverty

Although Germany has a below-average level of income inequality by international standards, income inequality and poverty have increased considerably in recent decades. The proportion of people affected by income poverty is currently around 16 percent (BMAS, 2017). Since 2000, an almost continuous increase in income inequality and poverty has been reported, both for West and East Germany. Not only has the number of poorer households grown steadily—they have also become even poorer. At the other end of the income distribution, the trend is for wealthy households to become even wealthier (Haupt and Nollmann, 2017). This polarization can be attributed to inequalities in labor incomes and the rise of a low-wage sector, reforms of

the tax and social-transfer system, the heightened educational expansion, changes in the household structure (in particular the rising share of single-parent households), and increased low-skill immigration (Biewen and Juhász, 2012; Grabka and Goebel, 2018).

The Hartz reforms were intended to increase employment and to reduce poverty. However, despite positive labor-market performance, poverty did not fall (Pfau-Effinger/Grages, SOCIAL POLICY, this volume). On the contrary, the expansion of the low-wage sector led to an increasing share of in-work poverty (Brülle et al., 2019; Lohmann, 2009). Panel studies identify life-course events such as divorce, birth of a third child, unemployment, death of the household's breadwinner, disability, and ill health as gateways to poverty (Andreß et al., 2003; Kohler et al., 2012). There are strong correlations between poverty and social class (Groh-Samberg, 2004). Poverty does not seem to be confined to temporary episodes in individual life courses but rather ossifies at the bottom of society (Groh-Samberg, 2009).

The main groups at risk of poverty in Germany are single parents and individuals with a migration background. Single parents have only recently begun to receive more research attention (Boehle, 2019; Hübgen, 2018). Together with increasing employment in the low-wage sector, the pronounced poverty of single parents is a major reason why poverty is currently further rising. As single parents are almost exclusively mothers (around 90 percent), their poverty results from employment patterns, such as part-time work, that are typical of a traditional division of labor. Individuals with a migration background have a heightened risk of poverty due to deficits in general and vocational education, unemployment or low-wage employment, and having a family with many children (Giesecke et al., 2017).

Poverty research in Germany has devoted a great deal of thought to conceptual issues (Hauser, 2012). Intensive efforts were made to establish a multidimensional concept of poverty, which comprises various elements of a person's "standard of living" (Andreß, 2008) or a multitude of "conditions of life" (Voges et al., 2003). Because of their complexity of measurement, however, these approaches have not been able to replace the resource-based concept of relative income poverty, which dominates in research and social reporting. Nevertheless, a consensus has been reached that poverty is a multi-layered phenomenon and that the relative-income indicator is a suitable proxy for deficiencies in various areas of life.

Some scholars have proposed new concepts such as exclusion and precarity. The social-exclusion concept no longer delimits the poor and the non-poor in a vertical logic but treats individuals as included in—or excluded from—various realms of society (Kronauer, 2002). Those affected by exclusion have been referred to as the "superfluous" (Bude, 1998). While the notion of exclusion has not proven very fruitful for empirical research, the concept of precarity has exerted greater influence. It accounts for employment insecurities and suggests that they reach well into the middle classes (Castel and Dörre, 2009).

Affluence and wealth have long been neglected in inequality research, partially owing to data limitations. More recently, several studies have suggested "Matthew

effects" of cumulated social inequality. That is to say, those who are privileged in terms of education, income, and class tend to inherit and accumulate larger amounts of wealth, with real estate being the most important component (Frick and Grabka, 2009; Skopek et al., 2012; Szydlik, 2016).

7 Social Mobility

Studying social mobility means bringing together educational inequalities, educational returns, access to class positions, and labor-market careers in the "OED triangle" (i.e., origin–education–destination). Although Germany is among the least "open" European societies, the association between the classes of origin and destination has weakened in West Germany, particularly for the cohorts born after World War II. The main drivers of this process are the reduction in educational inequalities and the expansion of education as such, whereas the returns on education have remained rather stable and processes of direct inheritance are of minor importance (Pollak and Müller, 2020). Social immobility is notably strong at the top and the bottom of the class hierarchy, even across three generations (Hertel and Groh-Samberg, 2014). As a result of the radical political and economic restructuring after reunification, East Germany experienced much higher mobility rates in the 1990s and has adapted to the West German pattern ever since.

Career mobility is widespread—but within rather narrow confines, which are determined by one's educational qualifications and first occupational position (Hillmert, 2011; Stawarz, 2013). Over the life course, inequalities in occupational prestige do not increase much among men, but they do increase among women, mainly because some careers stagnate due to longer periods of parental leave and part-time work while others continue without interruption. Contrary to what the individualization thesis would suggest, occupational biographies have become more stable rather than fluid in the succession of birth cohorts (Mayer et al., 2010).

By extending the OED framework to the offspring of labor migrants from Southern Europe and Turkey to Germany, Kalter et al. (2007) showed that structural assimilation takes place in generational succession. Migrant children, often originating from lower-class families, have benefitted from the weakening link between social origin and educational success. Qualitative studies portray the steadfast beliefs in success along with the cumbersome habitus transformations that go along with the upward mobility of these children (Raiser, 2007; El-Mafaalani, 2012). Deficits in human capital and language skills are the main determinants for persistent ethnic disadvantages in the labor market (Granato and Kalter, 2001; Kalter, 2006), but evidence of discrimination can also be found (Weichselbaumer, 2016).

8 Conclusion and Prospects

Social-inequality research has been successfully institutionalized in the German-language area. This process has several cornerstones: a large scholarly community with many professorships, important research centers, and valuable access to official statistics; a high-quality data infrastructure; the establishment of social-reporting systems;[7] assessments of the robustness of results in cumulative research; as well as middle-range theories and social mechanisms as explanatory tools. These cornerstones, in principle, suffice to derive evidence-based policy recommendations (e.g., Gebel and Giesecke, 2016). However, many researchers are cautious about engaging in political consultancy, and sociologists are less successful in this profession than economists.

Current inequality research seems a bit unbalanced in favor of educational inequalities, and sociologists should pay attention to other enduring but somewhat neglected themes, such as unemployment and residential segregation (Teltemann et al., 2015). Interestingly, our survey of major German journals revealed a few topics that seem to be gaining in importance. Demographic change and societal aging have begun to draw attention to health inequalities as a field of study (Lampert et al., 2016; Hoffmann et al., 2018). Disability is an important determinant of inequality that will attract more research interest with the data of the first survey on inclusion of people with special needs that is currently underway in Germany. Studies on bodily attributes and their discriminatory effects have to date mostly dealt with physical attractiveness (Dunkake et al., 2012; Schunck, 2016) and weight issues (Bozoyan, 2014). The implications of income polarization for social discontent and political attitudes have attracted more scholarly interest with the rise of right-wing populist parties (Burzan and Berger, 2010; Mau, 2012; Lengfeld and Dilger, 2018). Furthermore, the debate about the shrinking middle class and fears of social decline has brought to light some shortfalls of research: For example, there is no clear-cut answer as to how to demarcate the "middle class." Nevertheless, this debate points the way toward the fruitful study on the interlinkages between social inequalities and macro-level outcomes.

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