

Universität Bielefeld

SFB 882

From Heterogeneities to Inequalities



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Bielefeld University institutions participating

- ◆ Faculty of Sociology
- ◆ Faculty of Educational Science
- ◆ Faculty of Health Sciences
- ◆ Faculty of Law
- ◆ Faculty of Business Administration and Economics
- ◆ University Library

Institutions outside Bielefeld University

- ◆ German Institute for Economic Research

German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP)
- ◆ University of Erlangen-Nuremberg
Institute for Psychology

SFB 882

From Heterogeneities to Inequalities

People differ from one another not only in their physical features, but also in their nationality and ethnicity; in their cultural preferences, lifestyles, attitudes, orientations, and philosophies; in their competencies, qualifications, and traits; and in their professions.

But how do such heterogeneities lead to social inequalities? What are the social mechanisms underlying that process? These are the questions pursued by the Collaborative Research Center (Sonderforschungsbereich, SFB) 882, "From Heterogeneities to Inequalities".

More than fifty researchers from Bielefeld University, the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) in Berlin, and the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg are involved in the SFB. The SFB conducts research on inequality in various fields, such as the labor market, migration, justice, health, or gender. One goal of SFB 882 is to integrate these fields, searching for common mechanisms in the emergence of inequality that can be consolidated into a typology.

Summary of the Research Program

Heterogeneities indicate difference, while inequality may refer to the outcome of socially legitimized mechanisms for the distribution of opportunities and the societal division of labor. The concept of inequality must be thought of in the plural – it is a multidimensional phenomenon.

This applies not only to the different components of inequality and their sociostructural distribution, but also to the perception, interpretation, and evaluation of different inequalities and states of inequality. We consider both classic resource inequality and inequalities in social recognition and in access to participation in various spheres of life.

Based on the distinction between difference and inequality, the projects that make up the SFB all share a focus on the social mechanisms through which individual heterogeneities – in the sense of mere differences between members of a society – lead to social inequalities.

The ways that particular characteristics of heterogeneity result in particular inequalities are analyzed both from the synchronic perspective of different spheres of life and from the diachronic perspective of the life course, in order to do justice to the range of different interdependencies, levels, and contexts of inequality production. Comparisons between the concrete, substantive mechanisms that are constitutive of the various features of heterogeneity and those that are constitutive of the various inequalities form the long-term research orientation of the SFB as a whole, transcending the individual projects.

The overarching issue is the homology of mechanisms of inequality production with the various features of heterogeneity, dimensions of inequality, and locations and phases of inequality production. The SFB's research is directed at developing a higher-level, abstract and theoretical typology of social mechanisms, not only building on the concrete and substantive mechanisms but also incorporating issues crucial to the wider theoretical debate. Put more broadly, to what extent can concrete mechanisms in specific fields of action be derived from more general, abstract and theoretical social mechanisms; and to what extent can generalized, abstract-theoretical social mechanisms be found to recur in manifestations that vary according to their context?

For further details, see:

Diewald, Martin & Faist, Thomas (2011):
From Heterogeneities to Inequalities: Looking at Social Mechanisms as an Explanatory Approach to the Generation of Social Inequalities,
SFB 882 Working Paper Series, No. 1, DFG Research Center (SFB) 882 From Heterogeneities To Inequalities, Bielefeld.

Project Area A

From Heterogeneities to Inequalities in the Life Course of Individuals

The six projects of Project Area A in the Collaborative Research Center are dedicated to the genesis and effects of inequality-relevant features of heterogeneity in the individual life course under different contextual conditions.

Four classes of heterogeneity features (ascriptive features, cultural differentiations, skills, and activities) are discussed and analyzed in terms of their interaction. First, these features are essential because they determine individual life course decisions, being personal resources influencing the development of preferences. Second, they are features perceived and judged by collective actors, thus becoming criteria for selection and unequal treatment in the context of networks and organizations. And third, they play a role in the development of preferences and in judgments on perceived inequalities, most of all in the form of attitudes to justice.

Researching the emergence and effects of these individual features, as a contextualizing enlargement of purely individual life course research, is considered an important theoretical and methodological task for explanation-oriented work in the social sciences. Independently measured contextual development conditions are identified in families of origin, social networks, daycare, schools, and housing environments, right up to the variance of institutions of the nation state in international comparison.

Integrating life course and individual development will make it possible to distinguish psychological mechanisms from the path dependence of institutionalized life courses in the genesis of social inequalities and to analyze their interaction. The Project Area will also seek to make this research internationally comparable by drawing on the researchers' own longitudinal data surveys, along with the SOEP's secondary analyses and other data sources.

Projects in Project Area A

Project A1

Social Closure and Hierarchization: Contextual Conditions of Unequal Developmental Opportunities in Early Phases of Life

Directors and contacts:

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Prof. Dr. Jürgen Schupp

German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) –
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Project A2

The Emergence and Development of Deviant and Delinquent Behavior over the Life Course and its Significance for Processes of Social Inequality

Directors and contacts:

Prof. Dr. Jost Reinecke

Bielefeld University

Prof. Mark Stemmler Ph.D

University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

Project A3

Gender-Specific Patterns of Opportunity in Employment

Director and contact:

Dr. Katrin Golsch

Bielefeld University

Project A4

The Heterogeneity of Skills, Technological Change, and Changing Perspectives on the Labor Market

Director and contact:
Prof. Dr. Herbert Dawid
Bielefeld University

Project A5

The Welfare State and Education: An International Comparison of Educational Poverty

Director and contact:
Prof. Dr. Henning Lohmann
Osnabrück University

Project A6

The Legitimation of Inequalities: The Structural Conditions of Justice Attitudes over the Life-span

Director and contact:
Prof. Dr. Stefan Liebig
Bielefeld University

Project Area B

From Heterogeneities to Inequalities in the Context of Organizations

The five projects of SFB 882's Project Area B deal with organizations in the fields of education and work as actors and contexts of the production of inequalities. The common basic idea is that organizations contribute crucially to the production of social inequalities because they perceive and interpret individual heterogeneities very differently and selectively, making them criteria for membership and the distribution of resources. In this context, three problems are particularly striking:

(1) As organizations channel interactions by means of formal position structures and systems of rules, they contribute to establishing boundaries and differentiate the distribution of rewards and burdens. They thus not only transform individual heterogeneities into classified differences, but also open up selective realization opportunities based on differentiation criteria that are evaluated intra-organizationally. Identifying such processes and mechanisms permits more detailed claims to be made regarding exactly how organizations are important in the generation of inequalities.

(2) To the degree that organizations themselves are subject to horizontal differentiation and grant different advantages to their members, it becomes increasingly important to an individual's opportunities for access and realization which organization he/she is included in at which stage of his/her life course, and where the organization currently stands in its own development.

Inequalities – in the sense of, for example, cumulative advantage and disadvantage – are also a result of the sequence of individual memberships of the same or different organizations, memberships that must be taken into account by inequality research.

(3) Educational and work organizations are institutionalized action contexts within which attributions are communicated and perpetuated. Through the examples of ethnically coded attributions, gender stereotypes, and normative attitudes to distributional justice, the Project Area analyzes in detail how this reproduction of attribution and interpretation patterns takes place within organizations.

The identification of mechanisms producing inequality, their organizational conditions, and their effects is carried out in the five projects from a perspective of methodological plurality: the empirical data are accessed using qualitative and quantitative approaches and a combination of both.

Projects in Project Area B

Project B1

Ethnic Heterogeneity and the Production of Inequality in Educational Organizations from Early Childhood Onward

Director and contact:
Prof. Dr. Isabell Diehm
Bielefeld University

Project B2

Ethnicity at University: Processes of Ethnic Demarcation and Relations of Inequality Over the Course of Studies

Director and contact:
Prof. Dr. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka
Bielefeld University

Project B3

Interactions Between Capabilities in Work and Private Life: A Study of Employees in Different Work Organizations

Directors and contacts:
Prof. Dr. Martin Diewald
Dr. Reinhard Schunck
Bielefeld University

Project B4

Companies and Inequality: The Synchronic and Diachronic Inequality Effects of Temporary Layoffs (Recalls)

Director and contact:

Prof. Dr. Stefan Liebig

Bielefeld University

Project B5

Organizations and Life Conduct of Fathers

Directors and contacts:

Prof. Dr. Ursula Müller

Prof. Dr. Mechtild Oechsle

Dr. Sandra Beaufaÿs

Bielefeld University

Project Area C

From Heterogeneities to Inequalities beyond the Nation State

The four projects of SFB 882's Project Area C address heterogeneity features, their combinations, and the resulting inequalities above the level of the nation state. The projects go beyond the scope of previous research, which has primarily considered income disparities in the international or global context, and discuss participation in a variety of fields: the labor market, education, health, politics, development cooperation, social security, and the social integration of migrants. The analysis of the interaction and intersection of transnationality as a heterogeneity feature plays an important role in this context, as do other features such as gender, religion, legal status, nationality, and ethnicity.

Transnationality refers to transactions within networks, groups, and organizations that result in continuous and dense cross-border processes. It points to processes that may potentially occur on a variety of levels or scales. A process-oriented, mechanistic analysis of inequalities beyond the nation state can be applied both to migrants and non-migrants.

A crucial question is that of comparison criteria. How are perceptions of, judgments on, and ways of dealing with social inequalities shifting, given that social comparison groups are no longer restricted to the closed spaced of nationality?

These questions, and others arising from them, will be addressed through research projects tackling a number of typical cases: the informal social security of mobile and immobile individuals, cross-border landscapes, the social construction of heterogeneity criteria in the fields of justice and politics, and finally the semantics of global inequality in the context of international organizations.

Projects in Project Area C

Project C1

Transnationality and Inequality: Pilot Project for the Panel Study

Directors and contacts:

Prof. Thomas Faist, PhD

Prof. Dr. med. Oliver Razum

Bielefeld University

Project C3

Transnationality, the Distribution of Informal Social Security, and Inequalities

Director and contact:

Prof. Thomas Faist, PhD

Bielefeld University

Project C4

The Social Construction of Heterogeneity Criteria

Director and contact:

Prof. Dr. Christoph Gusy

Bielefeld University

Project C5

Conceptions of Global Inequality in World Society

Directors and contacts:

Prof. Dr. Mathias Albert

Dr. Martin Koch

Bielefeld University

Central projects of SFB 882

Project SFB-GK

Integrated Research Training Group

(Integriertes Graduiertenkolleg (SFB-GK))

Directors and contacts:

Prof. Dr. Herbert Dawid

Prof. Dr. Jost Reinecke

Bielefeld University

Project INF

Information and Data Infrastructure

Directors and contacts:

Prof. Dr. Stefan Liebig

Dr. Christian Meyer

Dr. Johanna Vompras

Bielefeld University

Administrative contacts

Dr. Christian Schmidt
Dr. Carl Peter Kleidat

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