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Article

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Schmollers Jahrbuch – Zeitschrift für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften. Journal of Applied Social Science Studies

Provided in Cooperation with:

Duncker & Humblot, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Berthoud, Richard; Spiess, C. Katharina (2002) : Analysing the Dynamics of Social Change in Europe, Schmollers Jahrbuch – Zeitschrift für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften. Journal of Applied Social Science Studies, ISSN 1865-5742, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, Vol. 122, Iss. 1, pp. 1-4,
<https://doi.org/10.3790/schm.122.1.1>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/292003>

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Analysing the Dynamics of Social Change in Europe

By Richard Berthoud and C. Katharina Spiess

This special edition of Schmollers Jahrbuch has been compiled to illustrate the potential value of comparative European studies. As Melvin Kohn says, “cross-national research is valuable, even indispensable, for establishing the generality of findings and the validity of interpretations derived from single-nation studies. It is equally valuable, perhaps even more valuable, for forcing us to revise our interpretations to take account of cross-national differences and inconsistencies that could never be uncovered in single-nation studies” (1989: 77).

Cross-country comparisons are of immense potential value for different actors. Within Europe they are of likely significance:

- To the institutions of the EU itself, offering a detailed map of variations in social and economic experiences between countries and groups of countries.
- To policy makers at the national level, showing how far the social and economic problems observed locally are experienced in common with other European countries.
- To social scientists seeking to understand the processes and results of change. If the influences identified in one country are not generalisable to other countries, it is necessary to develop hypotheses about the reasons for the differences.
- To analysts of social policy looking for general conclusions about the influence of government actions on individuals’ lives in Europe.

There are many different approaches to cross-country research. Summary macro-data may be compared across many countries. At the other extreme, highly detailed studies can be undertaken of the effects of policy in just two or three countries. The papers in this compilation are focused on micro-level data about individuals and households in most of the countries in the EU. They are mostly based on one cross-national survey, the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). Most of them have been contributed by members of the European Panel Analysis Group (EPAG).

The European Community Household Panel

The overwhelming majority of empirical data available to social scientists is based on 'cross-sectional' surveys. This produces a 'snapshot' of the situation at that certain point in time. However, valuable though these data sources have been, they lack the picture of changes in individuals' experiences that can contribute to an understanding of the processes at work. Longitudinal data offer a 'movie' rather than a 'snapshot'.

The longitudinal method with the widest general applications is the household panel survey. A sample representative of all households is identified at the start. Every (adult) member of these households is then interviewed every year, using largely the same set of questions on each occasion.

A major Panel Survey of Income Dynamics was set up in the United States in 1968; now that it has traversed a generation it is of unparalleled value to American social scientists seeking to understand the processes of social change and the impact of policies over the past decades. In Europe, substantial panels have been launched in several countries, starting with the German Socio-Economic Panel in 1984. Some early comparative analyses have been based on harmonised data from surveys undertaken separately in different countries. But a major development was the introduction in 1994 of the European Community Household Panel survey (ECHP, also known as the Europanel). This covered initially the 12 nations of the pre-expansion EU, and has being extended to other member states as they join.

The Data Watch section of this issue provides a brief introduction to the ECHP. Comparative studies have been severely hampered in the past by the absence of data collected on a consistent basis across a range of countries. The Europanel appears to transform that situation, since the same questionnaire, and equivalent sampling methods, have been used in every country in the EU.

One of the objectives of this compilation is to encourage other analysts to make use of such an important source. The European Panel Analysis Group (see below) is also hoping to establish an ECHP User Network, through which researchers from all over Europe (and elsewhere) can exchange information about their experiences; and to assist new analysts to become familiar with the data.

Potential users need to be warned that the ECHP data are not, and could not expect to be, as internally consistent as a single survey conducted in one country. Some key sections of the common questionnaire are not available in all countries' data sets. Every now and then the analyst bumps into an inconsistency between countries which can only be explained by variations in the questionnaires and / or data preparation routines. These inconsistencies

are only to be expected, and on the whole Eurostat and the contributing national statistical agencies are to be congratulated on the quality of the data they have assembled.

At the time of writing, four waves of ECHP data have been released. The value of a panel survey expands, though, as the sequence of waves is extended. The number of transitions available for analysis increases; it becomes possible to measure the duration of spells, and to assess variations in people's experiences over a period of time. The ECHP will 'come of age' over the coming period, as the data builds to its eventual total of eight consecutive years.

The European Panel Analysis Group

The European Panel Analysis Group (EPAG) is a consortium of quantitative economists and sociologists specialising in the dynamic analysis of social change in Europe. The group is currently drawn from researchers at six institutions.

Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex

DIW Berlin (German Institute for Economic Research)

Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin

Tilburg Institute for Social and Socio-Economic Research, University of Tilburg

Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Aarhus

Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca

All of the research reported in this edition of the journal has been supported by the European Commission under its Fourth and Fifth Framework programmes, though the Group's activities have also been supported by other European institutions such as EuroStat and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC).

EPAG's research programme has four primary objectives:

- to undertake detailed studies of the processes of change across Europe in the domains of family structure, employment, household income and living standards;
- to establish the mutual influences of each of these domains on the others;
- to draw conclusions about the role of social policy, and the prospects for reform;
- to exploit the research opportunities provided by panel data, in particular the ECHP as it comes of age, applying various analytical techniques.

Much of the Group's analysis, including all of the empirical papers published here, has been based on the ECHP, though we have also made use of other longitudinal data sources from Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and Italy.

EPAG undertakes a broad programme of inter-connected studies, rather than a single enquiry designed to examine particular links in the hypothesised chain between family structure, employment, household incomes and living standards. The papers presented here – all of which have been subjected to Schmollers Jahrbuch's normal refereeing procedure – illustrate the range of our interests. The first paper provides a review of European comparative research from the point of view of a Canadian sociologist. The empirical papers include some with a mainly descriptive approach and others which use multivariate methods. All of them focus on issues of relevance to policy and have one common purpose – to contribute to and promote cross-European comparisons of the dynamics of social change.

Visit EPAG's website for more information about its research programme, and about the proposed ECHP User Network.

<http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/epag>

References

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