

Call for papers

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Experiments in the Sociology of Education

Guest editors:

Rolf Becker (rolf.becker@edu.unibe.ch), Ben Jann (ben.jann@soz.unibe.ch), David Glauser (david.glauser@edu.unibe.ch), and Joël Berger (joel.berger@soz.unibe.ch)

As part of analytical-empirical sociology, one of the central tasks of sociology of education is to gain scientific knowledge about social phenomena. In this context, the focus lies on uncovering cause-and-effect relationships and thus on explaining these phenomena causally. In comparison to non-experimental or quasi-experimental research designs, a randomized controlled experiment – provided an appropriate theory of a causal relationship – is the most efficient way to investigate causal relationships and therefore to explain sociologically interesting and socially relevant phenomena. Using a theory-based experimental design and appropriate statistical methods, average causal effects can be estimated in their direction and strength. Thus, by replacing the unknown counterfactual result with the observed value of the control group, causal conclusions can be drawn. Such possibilities do not exist, or only with serious limitations, in most non-experimental or quasi-experimental research designs that dominate today's empirical social research.

In the sociology of education, randomized controlled experiments are still relatively rarely used. Although experiments are not uncommon in the sociology of education, the number of publications based on experiments has increased and experiments have long been considered standard when it comes to model-building, thinking in terms of experimental designs is not widespread. However, as replicable empirical studies, the experiments at hand demonstrate their potential for systematic knowledge gain.

For example, randomized controlled field experiments have been used to demonstrate the effect of different class sizes on the school performance of children. Other experiments have dealt with the effect of educational vouchers on the efficiency of both public and private schools, on the use of institutional childcare, or on participation in higher education for socially disadvantaged groups. Field experiments have also proven successful for teaching evaluations.

Natural experiments as a special case of experimental designs are another example. On the one hand, they are suitable for assessing the consequences of educational policy measures such as the introduction of tuition fees or of binding versus non-binding educational recommendations, on the structure, direction and extent of social inequalities. On the other hand, they can be used for investigating the effects of natural disasters – such as the two hurricanes "Katrina" and "Rita" in 2005 that forced social heterogeneity in schools – on school

performance.

Laboratory experiments are even rarer in sociological educational research than the mentioned field and natural experiments. However, despite low external validity, existing studies based on laboratory experiments have found evidence of ethnic discrimination in schools or have been able to reveal social mechanisms behind educational decisions.

Survey experiments such as vignette studies or choice experiments are increasingly being used to test theories or hypotheses – for example in regard to the selection of an apprenticeship. However, although they offer the advantage of an efficient, valid and reliable examination of causal relationships, choice or vignette experiments have as yet still received but little attention in sociological educational research. Above all, they are particularly suitable for the detection, verification and assessment of different causal mechanisms.

Last but not least, randomised controlled experiments are extremely valuable for evaluating interventions in the education sector and thus provide a solid, evidence-based foundation for decision-making in education policy.

This *focus issue* aims to bring together contributions that deal with experiments in sociology of education. In addition to substantive contributions, we welcome in particular problem-oriented discussions on (quasi-)experimental designs and discussions related to theoretical, methodological, political and ethical challenges of experiments in sociology of education.

*Please submit your proposal for a contribution to the guest editors by **20 September 2020**:*

rolf.becker@edu.unibe.ch

Your submission for the focus issue should include the following:

- *Name, email address, and affiliations of all the authors*
- *Title of the paper*
- *Abstract of around 500 words, structured as follows: topic, aim, methods, results, discussion, conclusion.*

*The guest editors will decide on the acceptance or rejection of the abstract until **20 October 2020**.*

*Selected authors will be invited to submit their manuscript (max. 8,000 words, 50,000 characters including tables, figures and references) by **15 March 2021**. The manuscripts will go through the usual peer-review process of the Swiss Journal of Sociology. Accepted languages are German or French, and preferably English. More information about the Swiss Journal of Sociology and the submission process are available in www.sgs-sss.ch/sociojournal.*

Publication is planned for July 2022.

For any queries, please contact the guest editors at the e-mail addresses mentioned above.