WORKSHOP 3

Cumulative (Dis)Advantage: A Mechanism of Inequality Across the Life Course
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SUMMARY

Cumulative advantage/disadvantage (CAD) theory describes the process through which initial advantages or disadvantages amplify over time. Originally introduced by Robert K. Merton in the context of scientific careers (the "Matthew effect"), CAD-processes have since been studied across various disciplines, including sociology, economics, public health, and education. The CAD-type processes may be conceptualized in different ways (e.g. they may focus on differences across groups or individuals) and are driven by a range of mechanisms (e.g., financial mechanisms, reputational effects, homophily in social networks, differential risk exposure, buffering effects). Therefore, defining, measuring, and analyzing CAD processes remains complex.

This workshop, open to both junior and experienced social science researchers, provides a space for idea exchange and potential collaborations. Combining a brief lecture with group work and open discussion, it aims to deepen understanding of CAD processes. Specifically, it covers the following topics:

1. Conceptual foundations: How are CAD-type processes defined, and which mechanisms are analyzed in this context?
2. Research practices: How do different disciplines define and analyze CAD processes?
3. Methodological challenges: What are the main difficulties in measuring and analyzing CAD (e.g., data limitations, measurement issues, causal inference)? What are the best practices, and which approaches yield the most useful insights?
4. Policy relevance: Should policies specifically target CAD mechanisms? Are some CAD processes fair while others reinforce unjust inequalities? How do CAD processes affect the success of different policies?

By the end of the workshop, participants will gain a clearer understanding of CAD, its methodological complexities, and its broader societal relevance, equipping them to contribute more effectively to research and policy debates on long-term inequalities.