Educational trajectories in a vertically differentiated but permeable system: Micro and macro mechanisms

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Abstract
A long-standing debate revolves around the relative importance of human agency and institutional structure for explaining life course outcomes. This study examines to what extent institutional differentiation and key agentic dimensions – persistence and effort – shape educational trajectories in Switzerland. The Swiss education system is strongly vertically differentiated but permeable, providing both standard and non-standard pathways to higher education. Using data from a 15-year panel survey (n = 4986, 43.8% male), the study analyzes whether lower-secondary school tracking predicts individuals’ probability of moving to an academic or vocational program at the upper-secondary level – and how this, in turn, predicts the probability of subsequently entering a university, when considering study effort and persistence. Results of a structural equation model suggest that tracking substantially influenced individuals’ probability of transitioning into academic upper-secondary education. In turn, pursuing an academic, rather than vocational, upper-secondary program, predicted a roughly 47% (or 16 times) higher probability of subsequently attending a university. Non-normative educational trajectories through non-standard (initially vocational) pathways to university were very rare. Overall, the hierarchically differentiated system powerfully channeled educational trajectories, with individual agency playing a comparatively minor, albeit not completely negligible, role in those trajectories.

Keywords
Life course; Tracking; Academic achievement; Social psychology; Motivation