The Swiss Survey on Children and Youth (COCON)

DR. MARLIS BUCHMANN*

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1. The Swiss Survey on Children and Youth (COCON)

The Swiss Survey on Children and Youth (COCON) is a nationwide survey carried out in Switzerland since 2006, with the goal of understanding the interplay between competence development and social opportunities among children and young people.

COCON has two main analytical interests. The first one is to identify the social and individual antecedents and consequences of young people in the context of early life course transitions. The second one is to find cumulative advantages and disadvantages in young people’s life course and competence development.

2. Design of the study

The COCON study is the first representative, longitudinal, multi-cohort, and multi-informant study of children and adolescents in Switzerland. It covers three prototypical stages of growing up: middle childhood, middle adolescence and young adulthood in a time frame of 15 years (2006-2021).
3. Sampling and attrition
A two-step procedure was used to select a population sample for each cohort. First, communities were selected by community type (Swiss territorial typology, socioeconomic criteria) and community size. Second, a random sample of children (6-year olds), adolescents (15-year olds), young adults (21-year olds) was selected from the communities’ resident register.

The criteria used to estimate the sample size of the considered a total of 600 respondents in each cohort in the final survey wave.

In the first survey, the participation rate was estimated at 65%, although there was substantial variation across cohorts. On average, considering all survey waves, the estimates of panel retention were 85% for the cohort of 6-year olds and 80% for the cohort of 15-year olds.

Specific measures were taken to ensure panel maintenance. In order to motivate respondents to participate, gifts such as birthday and seasonal greetings cards were sent to participants in each wave, as well as biannual newsletters summarizing findings from the survey.

4. Validation of the study

Along with the full-scale survey, a small validation study was carried out in the Canton of Zurich, involving 175 respondents. The design of the validation study was identical to the representative study (same measures). The major aims of the validation study were to collect behavioral data and to measure selected concepts more thoroughly.

The COCON validation study focused on cooperation behavior, moral judgments, moral emotions, perspective taking and development of sharing behavior among children.

5. Development of sharing behavior among children

Spontaneous sharing behavior among children of 6, 7, and 9 years of age was measured by conducting the so-called dictator game. The exercise consisted of sharing identical stickers between themselves and another anonymous child of the same age and sex.

A key finding of the study is that early sympathy and early social acceptance predict the development of sharing behavior in children. Growth curve modelling indicates a significant increase in sharing over time.

6. Lessons learned from the COCON study

A key lesson from this study is that without deliberate precaution and appropriate measures, prospective longitudinal data collection (e.g. panel study) may run the risk of morphing into a ‘normative sample,’ severely hampering the validity of results.

Another lesson learned is the relevance of pairing a large representative study relying on survey data with a small validation study that additionally collects behavioral data. The pairing is essential to assess the validity of both types of data.

Finally, the multi-informant approach proves to be crucial in assessing the perspective of actors acting not in isolation but always in social relationships – a core sociological assumption.