

Cluster: Families in transition, youth and education

Project 11: Within-family inequality and sibling relationships

Aim

To examine the complex relationship between sibling relationships and educational inequality by focusing more closely on within-family processes.

Theoretical background

For decades, authors have analyzed how sibling configurations affect children's educational attainment. Studies point to the effects of sibsize, birth order, birth spacing, and gender composition. Some of these findings are well-established, others are challenged in econometric models. The literature also has a number of theories about the link between sibling configuration and inequality. The theory of *resource competition* argues that children compete for the financial and cultural resources of their parents, a process which leads to resource dilution and hence, to lower educational attainment in larger families. The theory of *parental favoritism* argues that parents have preferences for certain children, leading them to invest more in successful children than in others, thereby increasing inequality within the family. In contrast to this, the *theory of altruism* argues that parents support those children more who need the most support, thereby reducing inequality. Another theory emphasizes *equity norms* which implies that parents will try to equalize their resources among their children. The *sibling effects* theory (sometimes included in the confluence model) argues that siblings influence each other, either by setting (or lowering) academic standards and presenting positive (or negative) role models, or directly, by helping each other with homework and other school related tasks. Sibling effects would lead to a decline in within-family inequality in outcomes. The *theory of sibling rivalry*, finally, argues that inequalities in abilities and educational outcomes would negatively affect siblings' relationships, not only during youth but also during adulthood. Rivalry is also seen as an outcome of perceived parental favoritism. Studies in social stratification and educational inequality have addressed these issues but have rarely tested the alternative theories directly. In this project, we use existing national survey data, we assemble new register data, and we collect small-scale survey data to address the theoretical debates in this literature.

Research design

National survey data will be used from the OKiN (Ouders en Kinderen in Nederland) and the NKPS (Netherlands Kinship Panel Study). Register data will be assembled on siblings' educational careers (from the Netherlands and possibly from other countries). New small-scale data will be collected on parents with school-age children in the LISS survey.

Literature

Steelman, L. C., Powell, B., Werum, R., & Scott, C. (2002). Reconsidering the Effects of Sibling Configuration: Recent Advances and Challenges. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 243-269.

Suitor, J. J. et al. (2017). Role of Perceived Maternal Favoritism and Disfavoritism in Adult Children's Psychological Well-Being. *Journals of Gerontology Series B*, 72(6), 1054-1066.

Project initiators

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Location:

Amsterdam (UvA)