

The declining influence of family background on educational attainment in Australia

Siblings have much more similar educational outcomes than non-related individuals do of the same age. The similarity between siblings' outcomes compared to individuals from different families provides a measure of the total impact of family background. Family background includes not only parents' socioeconomic characteristics but also a host of both environmental and biological factors that siblings have in common. It includes. So 'family background' includes readily measurable characteristics such as father's occupation, father's and mother's education, income, race, ethnicity, religion but also factors typically unmeasured such as, cognitive ability, non-cognitive attributes (e.g. personality) and family norms, interests and goals. It represents the upper limit of the influence of family of origin since it includes aspects of the family that are independent of parents, such as the influence siblings have on one another's attitudes and aspirations.

This paper reveals clear declines in the impact of family background on educational attainment in Australia. The intra-sibling correlations in the youngest cohorts were about one-third lower than that for the oldest cohorts. The study also found declines in the extent that measured aspects of socioeconomic background matters for educational attainment for father's socioeconomic status, parental education, 'books in the home' and wealth. The decline was strong and unambiguous for the strongest indicator of socioeconomic background: parental education. Therefore, there have been declines in the influence of both the family's economic and cultural resources on educational attainment.

This study is consistent with studies conducted in other countries with declines in the sibling correlation for the United States, Germany and the Netherlands. This and these studies supports a central hypothesis of the modernization theory that in Western societies, individuals' educational outcomes are increasingly less tied to their social background or origins.

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