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Popular peers and firstborn siblings are better off

Abstract
'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree' is an idiom that ultimately is reflected in the reproduction of inequality patterns across generations. Representatives of the child's own generation, such as siblings and peers, may however play a key role by either reinforcing or counteracting this reproduction. Based on a Stockholm cohort now approaching retirement, we explore whether the inheritance of parents' misfortunes, here reflected through poverty, varies in strength depending on the cohort members' position in the sibship or peer group.

Keywords: inequality, life-course, relationships

CHILDREN BORN TO less fortunate parents are more likely to find themselves in adverse situations while growing up. This tends to translate into higher risks of disadvantageous living conditions at subsequent points across the life course, including periods during which they raise their own children. A vicious cycle is hereby created, through which disadvantage is inherited from one generation to the next, reproducing patterns of inequality in society. When it comes to poverty, this is evident also in contemporary Sweden, despite being a well-developed welfare state with comprehensive social insurance systems (Stenberg, 2000).

Early life experiences are however not only shaped by the parents. Representatives from the child's own generation, such as siblings and peers, also constitute important agents of socialization. Although these types of intra-generational relationships are more egalitarian in comparison to parent-child relationships, they still reflect relational issues of power and dominance. For example, siblings may share both genes and their home environment, but they tend to adopt different roles during upbringing that accentuates their dissimilarity. These differences can to some extent be seen as a function of each sibling's position in the sibship structure. There is a massive literature devoted to differences between being the oldest, youngest and intermediate child in the sibship. Earlier-borns are generally found to be in a more advantageous situation with respect to both cognitive and health-related outcomes compared to their laterborn siblings (Modin, 2002; Barclay, 2016).

While sibship is something that the child cannot choose for him- or herself, peer

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relations tend to be established on a more voluntary basis. Peers, who spend a lot of time together in school or during leisure time, come from different families but are often remarkably alike. This is partly a result of the propensity to form relationships with similar others, partly due to mutual influences over time. In peer groups, processes of power and dominance give rise to a social ranking with a certain amount of status attached to each position. Being at the top of the hierarchy reflects a more central location in the overall network of peers, better access to information, and higher levels of respect and support. Research has revealed consistent short- and long-term advantages among these children (Almquist, 2011).

This study derives from the notion that the intergenerational reproduction of inequality may be modified by intragenerational relationships. Individuals holding advantageous positions in the sibship or in the peer group are expected to have access to resources that add to those stemming from the parents, thereby promoting upward social mobility. The opposite reasoning would then apply for individuals in disadvantageous sibling or peer positions. Focusing on one specific type of disadvantage – poverty – we explore these issues in one of few large-scale longitudinal data materials containing information about parents, siblings, *and* peers.

Data and methods

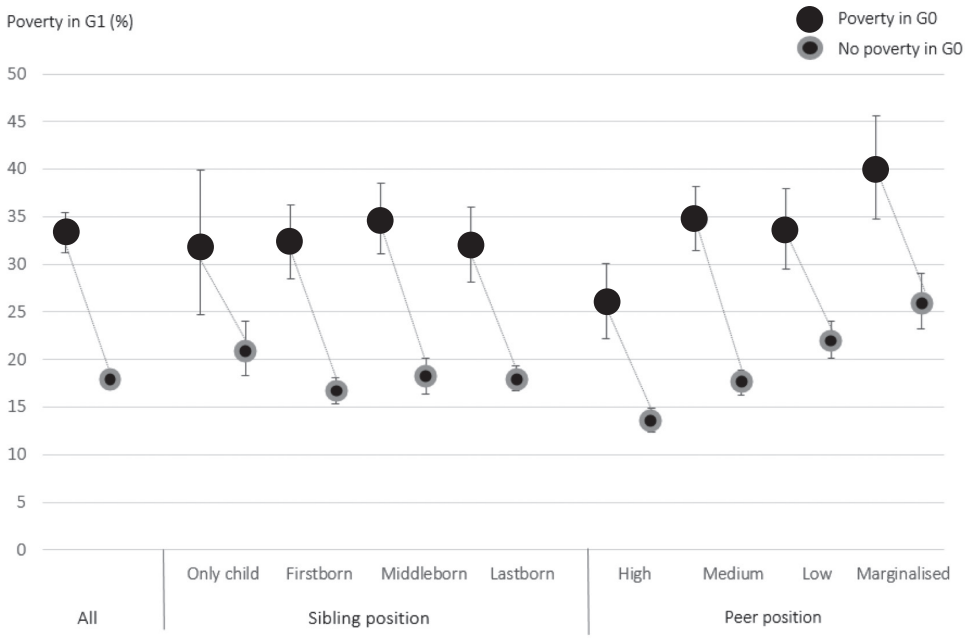
Data were drawn from the Stockholm Birth Cohort study (Stenberg *et al*, 2007), defined as individuals born in 1953 who resided in the greater Stockholm metropolitan area in 1963, and were alive and living in Sweden in 1980 and/or 1990 (n=14,294). Only individuals with complete information for all study variables were included here (n=10,618).

Poverty in the parental generation (19%) was indicated through information from municipal archives concerning the parents' receipt of social assistance in 1953–1972 (ages 0–19). Poverty in the child generation (19%) was based on information about social assistance receipt in 1990–2009 (ages 27–56), kept by Statistics Sweden. While it should be noted that social assistance receipt is a commonly used indicator of poverty, the current study's operationalisation is crude and may reflect rather heterogeneous groups in terms of living conditions.

Cohort member's sibling position was divided into: 'Firstborn sibling' (30%), "Middleborn sibling" (25%), 'Lastborn sibling' (33%), and 'Only-child' (12%). Information about peer position was based a sociometric test in 1966 (age 13) where cohort members were asked to nominate their three most preferred work partners in class. Those who received four or more nominations were seen as having 'High popularity' (31%), two-three nominations 'Medium popularity' (38%), one nomination 'Low popularity' (20%), and zero nominations 'Marginalised' (11%).

The statistical analyses were based on logistic regression, with poverty in the parental generation (G0) as the independent variable and poverty in the child generation (G1) as the dependent variable, using Stata 14. From the derived estimates, we first calculated Yule's Q according to the formula (OR-1)/(OR+1). Second, we calculated

Figure 1. Adjusted proportions (expressed as percentages with 95 % confidence intervals) of poverty in adulthood among the cohort members, stratified by the presence or absence of poverty in the parental generation, as well as sibling position and peer position (n=10,618).



proportions (expressed as percentages) with 95 percent confidence intervals. The analyses were performed for the full sample as well as across the different sibling positions and peer positions, respectively. Adjustments were made for gender, sibship size, and school-class size.

Results

The intergenerational correlation in poverty is estimated at Q=.38 in this cohort. However, it varies across sibling and peer positions. The correlation is strongest among middleborn (Q=.40), firstborn (Q=.40), and those with medium popularity among peers (Q=.43), but not too much weaker among lastborn (Q=.35) or those with high popularity (Q=.37). Less pronounced correlations are found for only children (Q=.29) as well as marginalised children (Q=.29) and children with low popularity (Q=.27).

In the figure, the first pair of markers to the left show that 33 percent of cohort members whose parents were poor during their childhood are themselves experiencing poverty as adults. The corresponding figure for individuals who did not have poor

parents is 18 percent. The following four pairs of markers show these proportions across the different sibling positions, indicating no clear pattern. What can be noted is that firstborn siblings seem to be best off, especially in relation to only children where firstborns without poor parents display a significantly lower prevalence of own poverty.

The next four pairs of markers indicate the corresponding results for childhood peer position. Here, clear differences in the proportion of cohort members with experience of poverty in adulthood are shown, ranging from more than 40 percent among marginalised individuals whose parents were poor to 14 percent among those in the highest peer positions whose parents were not poor. The most striking finding is that the proportion who experience poverty in adulthood among marginalised children *without* poor parents, is the same as among highly popular children *with* poor parents (16%).

Discussion

In line with previous results (Stenberg, 2000), this study indicates a sizeable intergenerational transmission of poverty from the parents of our 1953 Stockholm cohort to the next generation of children. Interestingly, this transmission is more differentiated across childhood peer positions than across sibling positions. The downward social mobility among those who held marginalised positions in childhood, together with the upward mobility among those with high popularity, indicate a weakened intergenerational correlation in poverty but at the same time, adds new components to the pattern of inequality. Future studies should further address the underpinnings of these findings as well as explore other types of disadvantage.

For policy-oriented sociologists looking to identify meso-level factors that could potentially reinforce or counteract the intergenerational reproduction of inequality, it may now be time to extend the hitherto more or less exclusive focus on sibships to also encompass peer groups. However, at least in the context of quantitative sociology in Sweden, that would require us to rely less on administrative registers and put more effort into developing large-scale cohort studies that highlights potentially decisive features of childhood for later life chances.

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