



Neighbourhood effects on educational attainment of adolescents, buffered by personality and educational commitment



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ABSTRACT

Research has repeatedly shown that neighbourhood disadvantage negatively influences individual educational outcomes. However, the great variation in outcomes indicates substantial unobserved heterogeneity. Looking at the rates of obtaining a basic educational qualification, the hypothesis is that individual traits of adolescents can buffer neighbourhood effects. First, adolescents with a more resilient personality may be better able to cope with neighbourhood adversity. And second, educational commitments might buffer adolescents from negative neighbourhood influences. These hypotheses are tested employing survival analysis, using six wave panel data, containing information on ten years of adolescents' lives. The results show that resilient experience no negative influence of neighbourhood disadvantage, while both undercontrollers and overcontrollers do. And, the stronger adolescents' educational commitments, the less they experience the negative effect of neighbourhood adversity. In sum, neighbourhood effects are found, but not for everybody.

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1. Introduction

Research on how the neighbourhood in which people live influences their social outcomes increased drastically over the past 25 years, and has led to a wide variety of mechanisms that may explain how neighbourhood effects work (Galster, 2011; Van Ham et al., 2011). However, despite this longstanding interest, the literature is still far from conclusive about the workings of the neighbourhood. Neighbourhood disadvantage has often been linked to individual educational outcomes, with mixed evidence, some finding large or small effects, while others are not able to establish any evidence for the influence of neighbourhoods on educational outcomes (for reviews, see: Dietz, 2002; Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Johnson, 2010; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This variation in findings points at unmeasured individual characteristics. Heterogeneity of neighbourhood effects has for example been shown for individual characteristics such as being a parent or not, and being in part-time vs. full-time employment (Galster et al., 2010). Another example of characteristics that are commonly used to address diverging neighbourhood effects for different individuals pertains to the family context and the parents. Parenting

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strategies or parental stress have in some instances been indicated as a pathway between neighbourhood disadvantage and child outcomes (for a review, see: Galster, 2011), although this relation is not found consistently (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2013).

We, however, suggest two commonly unmeasured attributes that pertain more to the individual adolescent, which may lead to different findings in neighbourhood effects research: a resilient personality type and educational commitments. First, people with more resilient personalities might differ substantially in their ability to cope with adverse neighbourhood effects, and second, adolescents might be buffered from negative neighbourhood effects by higher levels of educational commitment. Resilience and educational commitment may explain why some research finds a neighbourhood effect, while others are not able to find significant links.

A second reason for the variation in the findings of neighbourhood effects is the definition of the neighbourhood. Some studies use the district level to measure effects, others take the analyses down to the level of streets or blocks. Smaller delineations are likely to better represent the individually perceived neighbourhood, and might better when a local socialisation mechanism is in effect. However, a larger delineation may be more suitable when the neighbourhood effect is caused by outside stigmatisation and reputation (Kwan, 2012; Oberwittler and Wikström, 2009). We will test which of the two is more apt in identifying neighbourhood effects on educational outcomes.

2. Theories and hypotheses

We consider two individual attributes that we hypothesise to interact with the neighbourhood effect: personality types and educational commitment. Our specific educational outcome is ‘the timing of obtaining a basic qualification’. This outcome enables us to develop hypotheses about study delay and school dropout. In the following we will first briefly discuss the neighbourhood effects literature on education, and subsequently we will hypothesise why personality type and educational commitment are likely to interact with this effect.

2.1. Neighbourhood effects

One of the important contexts for youth’s development is the neighbourhood in which they grow up, since a significant part of their developing years are spent in there. There is a continuing discussion in neighbourhood effects literature about the mechanisms through which neighbourhoods might influence its residents’ behaviour or attitudes (for extensive reviews, see e.g., Galster, 2011; Jencks and Mayer, 1990). Whether neighbourhood characteristics influence individual educational outcomes is also subject to debate, however, review articles seem to suggest that there is an effect of the neighbourhood (see e.g., Dietz, 2002; Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Johnson, 2010; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Disadvantaged neighbourhoods are often marked by high levels of social disorder and low levels of residents’ ability to enforce norms (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). Besides, disadvantaged neighbourhoods with higher rates of unemployment have less positive adult role models showing the merits of education. Adolescents in such neighbourhoods are less likely to learn the importance of education (Ainsworth, 2002; Wilson, 1996). Furthermore, when negative attitudes towards education are normal amongst neighbourhood residents, residents are less likely to interfere when they see, for example, adolescents skipping school, since they maintain the same attitudes. While on the other hand, skipping school would not go unnoticed in neighbourhoods where people value education (Akers et al., 1979). This would mean that adolescents growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more likely to have negative attitudes towards education and behave accordingly, because they perceive less positive role models who could teach them the importance of education, and because they are less likely to be sanctioned in case of deviant behaviour. The hypothesis is that: *the higher the degree of disadvantage of the neighbourhood in which adolescents reside, the more delay they experience in obtaining a basic qualification (H1).*

2.2. Personality types

Within the neighbourhood context, studies have already looked into the relationship between neighbourhood effects and personality traits, mainly within the field of criminology. Examples are that the effects of impulsivity on delinquency are found to differ between high and low disadvantage neighbourhoods (Lynam et al., 2000; Meier et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2010); and furthermore that neighbourhood characteristics moderate the effect of low self-control on violent victimisation (Gibson, 2012), of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention difficulties on conduct problems (Zalot et al., 2009), and of thrill and adventure seeking and lack of premeditation on offending (Jones and Lynam, 2009). These studies suggest the importance of including personality measures in neighbourhood research. However, research on neighbourhoods and educational outcomes has thus far neglected this. Besides, aforementioned studies rely on personality traits, while we employ person-centred approach, using personality types. Personality types enable us to look at the differences between within-person configurations of a set of personality traits.

Studies on personality often distinguish three personality types: resilient, undercontrollers, and overcontrollers, which relate closely to the five broad personality dimensions of the Big Five (Caspi et al., 2005): extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience (McCrae and Costa, 1987). Earlier research has consistently shown that the personality types have specific Big Five personality profiles, and can therefore be constructed directly from the Big Five personality dimensions (Klimstra et al., 2010; Mervielde and Asendorpf, 2000; Robins et al., 1996). Resilients

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