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Inequality in old age cognition across the world

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Highlights

- A linkage between past educational inequality and today's late life cognition is documented
- Past educational inequality increases inequality of late life cognition functioning
- The relatively larger survival rate of females increases inequality of cognition
- It is verified that inequality of late life cognition is decreasing over time for some countries
- Inequality of opportunity (parental background) plays a role on cognitive inequality

Abstract. Although cohort and country differences in average cognitive levels are well established, identifying the degree and determinants of inequalities in old age cognitive functioning could guide public health and policymaking efforts. We use all publicly available and representative old age surveys with comparable information to assess inequalities of cognitive functioning in six distinctive age groups of 29 countries. We document that cognitive inequalities in old age are largely determined by earlier educational inequalities as well as gender differential survival rates. For example, a one percentage point increase in the Gini index of past education is associated with an increase of 0.45 percentage points in the Gini index of delayed memory and 0.23 percentage points in the Gini of immediate memory. Results are robust to a variety of alternative explanations and persist even after controlling for gender-related biases in survival rates. Furthermore, we find evidence that unequal opportunities for education -captured by differences in parental background and gender- also have significant effects on inequality of old age cognition.

Keywords: Cognition functioning, inequality, old age, education, inequality of opportunity

JEL codes: I14, I24, J14

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