



Poverty in the family: Race, siblings, and socioeconomic heterogeneity[☆]

Colleen M. Heflin^{a,*}, Mary Pattillo^b

^a *Martin School of Public Policy, University of Kentucky, 429 Patterson Office Tower,
Lexington, KY 40503, United States*

^b *Northwestern University, United States*

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Abstract

We use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to characterize siblings of middle class and poor blacks and whites, testing for racial differences in the probability of having a sibling on the other side of the socioeconomic divide. In support of theories in the urban poverty literature about the social isolation of poor blacks, we find that poor African-Americans are less likely to have a middle class sibling than poor whites, controlling for individual and family background factors. For the middle class, being black is positively correlated with the probability of having a poor sibling, challenging the notion that the black middle class is separated from the black poor, but supporting recent research on black middle class fragility. Overall, we find that African-Americans are less likely than whites to have siblings that cross important social class lines in ways that are beneficial. Racial differences in the composition of kin networks may indicate another dimension of racial stratification.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: cmh@uky.edu (C.M. Heflin).

1. Introduction

Stratification studies focus on the attainment and mobility of individuals, taking into consideration their achieved and ascribed characteristics as well as the influence of their family of origin. Socioeconomic status is conceptualized as a trait of the individual, or perhaps of a husband and wife dyad, and the result of investments in various forms of capital made by the individual. In this article, we propose a broader understanding of socioeconomic well-being that recognizes that individuals are embedded within not only the nuclear family of their own creation, but also within the families to which they were born. Siblings and parents remain an important reference group and a common source of support and/or stress. While outsiders may gauge success or failure on individualized criteria, a particular social status position is experienced by an individual as a combination of: (1) the fruits of his/her own labor and investments, and (2) the successes or failures of significant others surrounding the individual. Thus, this article focuses on “kin attainment,” locates individual attainment within a discussion of the extended family, and then theorizes about the importance of kin attainment for our understanding of racial stratification.

Even by standard stratification measures that focus on the individual, it is clear that racial equality remains illusive in the US. African-Americans have lower incomes, receive less education, achieve lower occupational status, and possess less wealth than whites. Do these racial disadvantages extend to the arena of kin attainment? Are the racial disadvantages documented at the individual level just one part of the stratification story? Are they compounded by racial differences in connections to disadvantaged kin? We use data on siblings to empirically address these questions, focusing on low-income and middle-income blacks and whites and the relative extent of sibling ties across these socioeconomic categories. We bring together the literatures on intergenerational processes, sibling outcomes, and racial stratification to build a theory of family attainment that suggests the existence of an unrecognized layer of inequality by race.

2. Intergenerational processes and sibling studies

Previous research on sibling outcomes has focused on the correlation in sibling earnings and educational attainment and is motivated by an interest in intergenerational mobility, and especially the transmission of poverty, across generations (Corcoran et al., 1992; Duncan, 1969; Jencks et al., 1972; Kuo and Hauser, 1995). Research using siblings is ideal for this question because measured and unmeasured characteristics related to family and community environments, and even shared genetic traits such as in studies using monozygotic twins, can be assumed to be shared across siblings. If family and community background characteristics are significant determinants of socioeconomic status, siblings will share a strong resemblance in their status; if family and community background characteristics are unimportant, siblings' outcomes will be no more correlated than with unrelated others (Solon, 1999).

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