

# Inequality in demographic behaviour

## How important are parents?

AART C. LIEFBROER

**Inequality is on the rise across Western societies. A key aspect of inequality is that the life choices and life chances of individuals depend on their social background. This certainly is true for socio-economic outcomes, like how much you earn and the status of your job. But to what extent is this true for demographic behaviour, like leaving home, marriage, parenthood and divorce?**

Does the influence of parents weaken if societies become more individualized, and children are expected to rely more on their own judgment than on that of their parents? Or do parents matter more in societies where the state does not provide a strong safety net? These are some of the questions that are being addressed in the Contexts of Opportunity project (CONOPP), a large comparative study funded by the European Research Council.

### Parental education and union formation

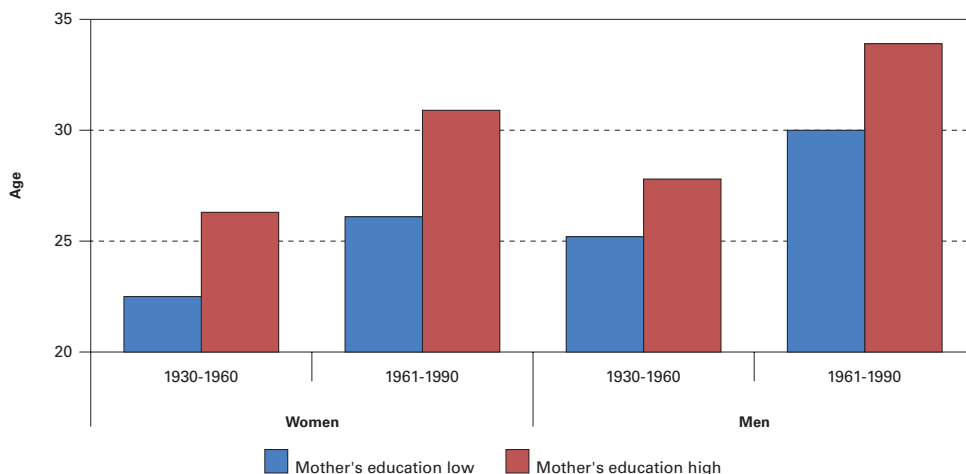
In one CONOPP study, the influence of parents' education on the union formation of Dutch children is studied. It was shown that young adults delay entry into a union or marriage if their mother and/or father is highly educated (see Figure). This is true for both men and women. In addition, when they enter a first union, children of higher educated parents are more likely than children of lower educated parents to choose for unmarried cohabitation rather than for marriage.

Why do Dutch children of higher educated parents enter later into a union? And why are they more likely to opt for unmarried cohabitation than children of lower educated parents? This is partially explained by the fact that children of higher educated parents are more likely to be higher educated themselves. However, even if we take this into account, a strong influence of parental education remains

visible. This suggests that the values and attitudes that are transmitted from parents to their children matter as well. Higher educated parents may put more emphasis on autonomy than lower educated parents, making children of higher educated parents more reluctant to commit themselves to a partner at a young age than children of lower educated parents. It may also lead children of higher educated parents to be less willing to commit themselves to marriage and prefer (a spell of) unmarried cohabitation instead.

Additional evidence for this explanation is provided by another study in which we asked adolescents and their parents about their plans for the future. It turned out that the expectations of parents about their children's future career and family pathways strongly influences the plans of children themselves. These expectations partly explain socio-economic differences in these pathways. For instance, adolescents whose parents are highly educated plan to experience events like leaving home, marriage and parenthood much later than children whose parents have a low level of education. This is partially due to differences in expectations which low and high educated parents have about their children. Thus, parental background influences the family life of children both through intergenerational transmission of educational opportunities and through the transmission of values.

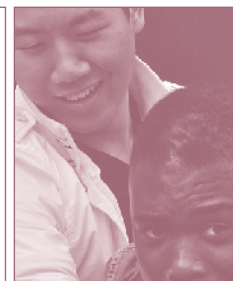
Median age at first marriage of Dutch men and women, by birth cohort and mother's level of education\*



\* Low education = at most lower vocational education; high education = at least some finished tertiary education.

Source: Mooyaart & Liefbroer (2016).

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Currently, many of the studies in CONOPP examine cross-national differences in the influence of parental background. In general, these studies show that differences between children of high and low educated parents are visible in almost all European countries, however the strength of this influence varies between countries, depending on cultural climate and economic circumstances.

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