

The Changing Family Background of the Low-Educated in the Netherlands: Socio-Economic, Cultural, and Socio-Demographic Resources

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This article addresses two questions: (a) to what extent have the effects of family background on leaving school without qualifications changed over time in the Netherlands, and (b) to what extent have the background family characteristics of the unqualified changed. We estimate discrete-time event-history models, using data from the Family Surveys Dutch Population 1992, 1998, and 2000. The results show that the effects of parental socio-economic resources and parental educational attainment on leaving school unqualified have decreased over birth cohorts, whereas the effects of parental cultural and socio-demographic resources have been stable. These developments have been accompanied by decreases in the proportions of younger cohorts who leave school without qualifications. The combination of these two developments has caused the family background characteristics of the low-educated to deteriorate: they increasingly originate from families with unfavorable socio-economic, cultural and demographic resources. We argue that due to statistical discrimination and labeling this compositional change may have negative consequences for the economic and social well-being of low-educated persons in the Netherlands.

Introduction

The massive educational expansion in Western countries during the last 50 years has drastically reduced the numbers of low-educated people. In the Netherlands, 40 per cent of men and 50 per cent of women born between 1930 and 1934 did not attain any qualifications after primary education. Among men and women born after 1970, less than 10 per cent left school unqualified (Statistics Netherlands, 1977–1999). Research indicates

that the decreasing number of low-educated has been accompanied by a deterioration of their socio-economic position and a worsening of their life chances. The low-educated experience more difficulties on the labor market than before. They need more time to find employment, they have less favorable jobs at labor market entry, and they have higher unemployment risks (Solga, 2002; Gesthuizen, 2004). In the Netherlands, the social participation of the low-educated has worsened as well, as indicated by decreasing political involvement and

decreasing participation in voluntary associations (Gesthuizen, 2004). Obviously, as these changes indicate, the low-educated are in a more precarious position than before.

In this article we set out to contribute to the explanation of the increasing vulnerability of the low-educated, focusing especially on two causal processes. The first process is structural: given the rapid educational expansion, the low-educated increasingly have to compete with individuals who are better qualified. This directs them further and further to the end of the labor-queue, which results in less advantageous socio-economic opportunities (Thurow, 1975; Wolbers *et al.*, 2001). However, while this process took place for young Dutch low-educated men and women (Gesthuizen, 2004) and helps explain their labour market outcomes, it cannot explain why the low-educated have lower levels of social participation than those who leave school with credentials.

The second process we distinguish is relevant for both the economic and social vulnerability of the low-educated. It relates to the compositional effects of the decline of the number of low-educated on their social, cultural and personal resources. This process has meant that those who leave school without qualifications have become a homogeneous group who lack the skills, the motivation, and the economic, social, and cultural resources that are necessary to compete on the modern labor market and to participate in contemporary society. Recent studies confirm that low-educated people have been subject to this process of unfavorable homogenization (Gesthuizen and Kraaykamp, 2002; Solga, 2002).

In this article, we focus on the resources related to family background as the primary source of the homogenization process. Since family background strongly affects educational attainment, it can be expected that those who leave school without diplomas increasingly originate from families with low levels of family resources. On the individual level, we argue that being brought up in a family with low levels of socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic resources will lead to deprivation, lack of motivation, and eventually to the decision to leave school early. Early school leaving in turn leads to underdeveloped labor market and social skills and to unfavourable life chances. At the collective level, homogenization of the life-chances of the low-educated gives rise to statistical discrimination and labeling. If people increasingly associate being low-educated with being, for instance, 'lower class', 'culturally incapable', or 'having grown up in an unstable family', they are more likely to treat low-educated individuals according

to these labels (Solga, 2002). Consequently, low-educated individuals might increasingly experience social and economic constraints through selection by employers and other members of society, but also through self-selection, for instance through withdrawing from social participation.

In this article, we investigate whether the homogenization of family background has occurred among the low educated in the Netherlands. We have reason to be skeptical about this since in the Netherlands the effect of family background on educational attainment has decreased considerably (de Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993; de Graaf *et al.*, 2000). A decrease in the relationship between family background and educational attainment could offset the homogenization process. If socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic family background resources are more evenly distributed over those who leave school unqualified and those who leave school with diplomas than in the past, the process of homogenization will not take place to the same degree as in a situation with stable family background effects. There is a trade-off between the consequences of increasing selection, and the consequences of the decline of the number of low-educated. If the effects of family background are increasing or stable, a decline of the low-educated will lead to homogenization. But, if the effects of family background are decreasing, it is an empirical matter whether homogenization will take place.

We will contribute to this discussion in two ways. First, we will investigate whether the effects of socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic family background resources on leaving school without qualifications have changed over time. We will estimate event history models to analyze the risk of leaving full-time education without qualifications. Second, we will investigate to what extent changes in the relationship between family background and leaving school without qualifications have led to changes in the composition of the group of the low-educated in the Netherlands. There may be a subtle balance between these two processes, with one process dimming the other. To find out what the empirical reality is, we have to address two main research questions.

The first research question is: *To what extent do parents' socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic resources affect the risk of leaving school unqualified, and to what extent did the effects change over time?* The second question is directly related to the homogenization process: *To what extent did the composition of the group that leaves school unqualified change regarding parental socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic resources?*

Theory and Expectations

Family Background and Leaving School without Qualifications

In research on the determinants of educational attainment, a variety of family background factors have proven to affect the risk of leaving school without qualifications (Rumberger *et al.*, 1990; Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Teachman *et al.*, 1996; Rumberger and Thomas, 2000; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2003). A general theoretical notion is that the impact of parents on children's educational careers depends on three types of resources available in the family of origin: socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic (Schneider and Coleman, 1993).

Socio-economic resources are expected to negatively affect the risk of leaving school without qualifications. Although in the Netherlands the government pays most of the costs of schooling, parents still have to contribute themselves. In addition, socio-economic resources may affect children's educational attainment because of the perceived opportunity costs in extending their educational career. Parents with low levels of socio-economic resources fear that their children will miss out on income if they prolong their educational career. (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997), and therefore will have relatively low-educational aspirations (Boudon, 1974; Sewell and Hauser, 1980). The relation between parental wealth and educational success is well established (Teachman *et al.*, 1996; McNeal, 1999; de Graaf *et al.*, 2000).

A family's *cultural resources* will also affect children's educational achievement (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; DiMaggio, 1982; de Graaf, 1986; de Graaf *et al.*, 2000). Children from families with low levels of cultural resources are socialized in a cultural environment in which school-related values are less prominent (de Graaf *et al.*, 2000; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2003). This leads to an experienced friction between the home and school environment, resulting in weak performance at school. Research using cultural participation and reading behavior as indicators of parental cultural capital, shows substantive positive effects of cultural consumption on educational success (Farkas, 1996; de Graaf *et al.*, 2000). In addition, parents with lower levels of cultural resources may be less successful in helping their children with homework.

Further, a family's *socio-demographic resources* affect educational attainment. Intensive contact between parents and children is necessary to transmit resources (Coleman, 1988), to monitor children, and to intervene

in their school career (Schneider and Coleman, 1993). In single-parent families, this often is problematic (Amato, 1993; Schneider and Coleman, 1993; Fischer, 2004). Being a very young mother might also indicate a family situation in which the provision of stability is problematic, which negatively affects school success (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2005). Furthermore, the 'resource dilution' hypothesis argues that the more children parents have, the less time and resources they can provide to each child (Blake, 1981; Steelman and Powell, 1989; Downey, 1995; Van Eijck and de Graaf, 1995).

Expectations of Changes in the Effects of Family Background

Social mobility studies have shown that in the Netherlands the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic status has decreased strongly (de Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993; Ganzeboom and Luijkx, 2004). This finding is in line with modernization theory, which argues that on the modern labor market family background has become obsolete as a determinant of socio-economic status and that there has been a transformation from ascription to achievement. Economic modernization has gone hand in hand with cultural modernization: values with regard to how society should allocate persons to positions have shifted from particularistic values to universalistic values. Institutional reforms that aimed to make the education system more meritocratic – offering financial assistance to parents and students, and raising the age of compulsory schooling – support this process. Most of the Dutch findings which support modernization theory with regard to educational attainment are based on studies concentrating on the effects of family background on the highest educational level ever attained. Although tempting, we think it is premature to conclude that the effects of family background will have decreased with respect to the specific event of leaving school without qualifications. The decision to leave school without a qualification usually occurs in the first view years of secondary education, a phase in which parents still substantially influence children in their educational choices (Mare, 1981). Since education plays such a decisive role on the modern labor market, parents and children nowadays might be more sensitive to the risk of leaving school without qualifications, but parents and children from disadvantageous backgrounds less so than those from the higher strata.

Also, the ways in which children leave school without qualifications have changed over time. For older cohorts, leaving school without qualifications meant

that, after finishing primary education, children did not attend secondary education at all. At the age of 14 or 15, after some years of extended primary school, children entered the labor market. For younger cohorts, leaving school without qualifications means that they have dropped out of secondary education. This changing nature of the decision to leave school without qualifications might lead to decreasing effects of family background. We think that in older cohorts, children from families with low levels of resources were relatively likely to leave school without qualifications, whereas in younger cohorts, children with various levels of parental resources become dropouts.

It is obvious that we do not have clear expectations about changes in the effects of family background on the risk of leaving school without qualifications. However, we think that the role of parental socio-economic resources will have decreased over the period we study. The decreasing relevance of financial resources in the Netherlands has been well documented (de Graaf *et al.*, 2000). Education has been made free of charge during the period of compulsory education, that is until the age of 16, and since it is possible to attain diplomas in the lower levels of secondary education at that age, financial resources should hardly matter nowadays. With respect to changes in the effects of cultural and socio-demographic resources we do not have such clear predictions, and thus we must make this issue an empirical one.

Expectations of Changes in the Composition of the Low-Educated

Changes in the effects of family background and changes in the proportion of a cohort that leaves school without qualifications have to be considered simultaneously to come to predictions regarding compositional changes within the group of the low-educated. We start with the general notion that if a family background characteristic significantly influences the risk of leaving school without qualifications, the decline of the proportion results in an unfavorable compositional change: the children from more advantaged families are most likely to attain a diploma in time, while children from less advantaged families are most likely to remain unqualified (Solga, 2002).

If the association between family background and leaving school without qualifications changes, two scenarios are possible. First, if the association becomes *stronger*, children from disadvantaged social backgrounds become more likely to be selected into the group of unqualified individuals. When combined with a decline in the proportion of low-educated in a cohort, the unfavorable

compositional change would be even more pronounced than under a stable relationship, since social selection increasingly works in favor of children with resourceful parents. Second, if the association becomes *weaker*, it becomes less likely that children from less advantaged social backgrounds are selected into the group of the unqualified. Now, the compositional change depends on the strength of the counteracting effects of declining group size and relationships losing strength.

Since we do not have clear ideas about the direction of the changes in the association between parental resources and the risk of leaving school unqualified, it is impossible to derive hypotheses on the homogenization of the low-educated in the Netherlands. If the general Dutch pattern of decreasing levels of intergenerational transmission is also observed for the relationship between family background and leaving school without qualifications, the direction and size of the compositional changes is indeterminate.

Data and Measurement

Family Surveys Dutch Population 1992, 1998, and 2000

We use data from the Family Surveys Dutch Population 1992, 1998, and 2000 (Ultee and Ganzeboom, 1993; de Graaf *et al.*, 1998, 2000). These repeated cross-sectional surveys combine computer-assisted face-to-face interviews and self-completion questionnaires, including detailed retrospective information on the educational career and the family of origin. The three independent samples of the Dutch population are of people aged between 18 and 70 years, and were drawn randomly from the registers of a random sample of Dutch municipalities. The spouses of the primary respondents were interviewed using exactly the same questionnaires. Since we can assume that the spouses have not affected each other's (early) educational careers, primary respondents and their spouses are treated as independent observations. The response rates of 42, 47, and 41 per cent are relatively low, because both partners (if the primary respondent was living with a partner) had to be interviewed for a successful response. We exclude data of respondents who did not live in the Netherlands before the age of 12 (196 cases). Altogether, we have information on the complete educational career of 3790 respondents.

Measurement

We distinguish between respondents who *never attained a secondary school qualification* and respondents who did

attain a diploma. There are two groups of respondents without qualifications: respondents who never attended secondary education after primary school and respondents who did enroll in secondary education but never attained a diploma (dropouts).

All information about parental socio-economic, cultural and socio-demographic resources is collected in a retrospective research design, referring to the situation in the family of origin when the respondent was 15 years old. Descriptive information on all variables can be found in Table 1. To facilitate the interpretation of the results of the regression analysis, we transformed all indicators of parental resources to have a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1.

The first indicator of parental socio-economic resources is *parental occupational status*. We use the maximum of the father's and mother's occupational status, as measured by the ISEI scale developed by Ganzeboom *et al.* (1992). The second indicator of parental socio-economic resources is an additive scale of the *parental financial capital*, for which we used 16 items: possession of a car, a garage, a camera, a freezer, a VCR, central heating, a dishwasher, antique furniture, telephone, a washing machine, a laundry dryer, a garden, and a television set, and whether the family had holidays abroad, a cleaning lady and a nanny. Since some of these assets were not available to older birth cohorts (central heating, VCR) or were not very relevant for the economic well-being of younger cohorts (car, television), we standardize the measurement within four birth cohorts (1940 and older, 1940–1949, 1950–1959, 1960 and younger). We use proportional rank scores (for each of the three surveys separately). The reliability coefficients of the resulting scales are satisfying ($\alpha = 0.80$ in the 1992 data, $\alpha = 0.68$ in the 1998 data, and $\alpha = 0.80$ in the 2000 data).

Parental cultural resources are also measured by two indicators. The first indicator is *parental level of schooling*, which is measured by the maximum level of the father's and mother's educational attainment. Educational attainment is measured by the number of years needed to complete the highest diploma attained, which varies between six (primary school only) and 21 years (post-academic training). The second indicator is *cultural capital*, which is an additive scale for which we used 13 items: visits to modern and old buildings, classical concerts, opera and ballet, historical and art museums, theatre plays, frequency of father's and mother's reading of Dutch literature, translated literature, and literature in a foreign language. Again, we compute proportional rank scores within birth cohorts. The internal reliabilities of the resulting scale are relatively high ($\alpha = 0.85$ in

the 1992 data, $\alpha = 0.82$ in the 1998 data, and $\alpha = 0.85$ in the 2000 data).

Parental socio-demographic resources are measured by four indicators. The *number of siblings* has three categories: the respondent is an only child, has one or two siblings, or has three or more siblings. Since there is no information on *parental divorce* available in the 1992 survey, we include an indicator of missing information on parental divorce. Information on *parental decease* is available in all three surveys and indicates that one or both parents died. Finally, *young mother* indicates that the respondent's mother was younger than 24 years old when the respondent was born.

In the event-history analyses, most variables are time constant since they refer to the situation in the family of origin at a fixed year, i.e. when the respondent was 15 years old. *Parental divorce* and *parental decease*, however, are time-varying variables, since we have exact information on the month in which these events occurred. We will use age (time-varying) and sex as control variables. For reasons of parsimony we will not analyze the interaction effects between sex and parental resources.

Analysis

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents descriptive information on all the variables we use in the analysis for all respondents, separately for those who left school with and without qualifications. The table shows that 12 per cent of respondents left school without a qualification in secondary education. It further shows that the unqualified have significant disadvantages with respect to all types of resources. They more often come from families with lower levels of socio-economic and cultural resources; they relatively often come from large families, are more likely to have a young mother, and relatively often are raised in incomplete families. Note, however, that these figures are not controlled for the possible confounding effects of birth cohort: since leaving school without qualifications occurred more often in older birth cohorts, and since the levels of parental resources are lower in the older cohorts, part of the association is spurious. Further, it is evident that leaving school without qualifications occurred more often among women than among men.

Multivariate Models

We use discrete-time event-history models to estimate the effects of parental resources on the conditional risk

Table 1 Descriptives of all variables

	No qualifications (n = 464)		Qualifications (n = 3326)		All (n = 3790)		Significance of difference between means
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Leaving school without qualifications (0/1)	-	-	-	-	0.12	0.33	
Female (0/1)	0.59	0.49	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.50	**
Birth cohort = (birth year-1923)/10 (0-5.5)	2.61	1.10	3.46	1.13	3.56	1.16	**
<i>Parental socio-economic resources</i>							
Parental occupational status (0-1)	0.43	0.16	0.52	0.19	0.51	0.19	**
Parental financial resources (0-1)	0.39	0.27	0.52	0.28	0.50	0.28	**
<i>Parental cultural resources</i>							
Parental education (0-1)	0.12	0.17	0.29	0.24	0.27	0.24	**
Parental cultural capital (0-1)	0.35	0.24	0.52	0.29	0.50	0.29	**
<i>Parental socio-demographic resources</i>							
Respondent is only child (0/1)	0.03	0.18	0.04	0.20	0.04	0.20	
Respondent has one or two siblings (0/1)	0.33	0.47	0.45	0.50	0.44	0.50	**
Respondent has three or more siblings (0/1)	0.63	0.48	0.50	0.50	0.52	0.50	**
Parents divorced (0/1) ^a	0.08	0.28	0.04	0.18	0.04	0.20	**
Young mother (0/1)	0.17	0.37	0.11	0.31	0.12	0.32	**
One or both parents deceased (0/1)	0.09	0.29	0.06	0.24	0.07	0.25	*
Number of respondents	464		3326		3790		

Source: Family Surveys Dutch Population 1992, 1998, and 2000.

*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01.

^aBased on 2986 cases only (347 without qualifications and 2639 with qualifications), since the 1992 survey does not include information about parents' divorce.

of leaving school without qualifications, that is, leaving school unqualified in year $t+1$, given that the respondent is still at school in year t . This survival analysis starts at the age of 12 – the age at which children finish primary education in the Netherlands – and finishes when the respondent gains a qualification in secondary education or becomes 22. At this age only a few respondents without a qualification are still enrolled in school. The units of analysis are person-years; each respondent has records for all years of being at risk of leaving school unqualified. The situation in January is the retrospective time of observation, which is convenient since school years typically start in September and end in June, and most decisions to continue or not to continue the educational career are made in this summer period. The models are estimated using logistic regression models. The total number of person-years is 20,554 records, and 459 out of 3790 respondents have experienced leaving school unqualified.

We estimate one baseline model to estimate the effects of age, sex, year of birth, and all types of parental resources on leaving school without qualifications. This is the first model presented in Table 2. The two final columns of Table 2 show the between-cohort changes in the effects of parental resources. To maintain maximal statistical power, we estimate an interaction model for each indicator of parental resources separately. The main effect presents the effects of the indicators of parental resources for the oldest cohort, and the linear interaction effects show how these effects have changed gradually over birth cohorts. Note that birth cohort is measured in units of 10 years, which means that the interaction effects represent how the effects of parental resources have changed over periods of 10 years.

The Effects of Parental Resources over all Birth Cohorts

The estimates of the additive baseline model show that parental socio-economic resources strongly affect the risk of leaving school with qualifications. Whereas the effect of parental occupational status is insignificant, the effect of financial resources is highly significant. For children from the most affluent families the odds of leaving school without qualifications is 49 per cent ($1-e^{-0.67}$) lower than for children who grew up in the families with the lowest levels of financial resources.

Both indicators of parental cultural resources have strong effects on the risk of leaving school without qualifications. The odds are almost 88 per cent lower ($1-e^{-2.12}$) for children who have parents with university training,

when compared with children who have parents with primary education only. For children from families with the highest levels of cultural capital the odds ratio is 78 per cent lower ($1-e^{-1.51}$) than for children from families with the lowest levels of cultural capital.

Socio-demographic resources also play an important role in predicting who leaves school without qualifications. For children of divorced parents the odds are 2.64 as large ($e^{0.97}$) as for children who grew up with both parents. Respondents with young mothers have 82 per cent higher odds ($e^{0.60}$) of leaving school unqualified than respondents with older mothers. Family size and the death of one or both parents do not significantly influence the risk of leaving school without qualifications.

Further, the estimates of the baseline model show that the risk of leaving school unqualified increases with age. At 18 years and older the odds are 97 per cent higher than at 16 or 17 ($e^{0.68}$), and, as expected, the risk is lowest at 12–15, when, given compulsory education, only children from the oldest cohorts run the risk of leaving full-time education. Over all cohorts, the odds of leaving school unqualified are 75 per cent higher ($e^{0.68}$) for women than for men. Note that all the effects of family background are net of cohort, which is rather important. The effect of birth cohorts is quite substantial: net of the increase in parental resources, the risk of leaving school unqualified decreases by about 57 per cent for every successive 10-year period.

Changes in the Effects of Parental Resources

The interaction models of Table 2 show that the effects of socio-economic resources – parental occupational status and parental financial resources – have lost much of their impact over time. For individuals born in the 1930s who had economically resourceful parents, the odds of leaving school without qualifications are 84 per cent lower ($1-e^{-1.86}$ and $1-e^{-1.81}$) than for individuals with economically disadvantaged parents. For individuals born in the 1970s, the effect of socio-economic resources on the odds has become insignificant.

With respect to changes in the effects of parental cultural resources, we find a downward trend in the effect of parents' educational attainment. The effect decreases from -3.52 for cohorts born in the 1930s to $-3.52 + 4 \times 0.48 = -1.60$ for cohorts born in the 1970s, whereas the effect of cultural capital is stable over time. For the youngest cohorts in our sample (born in the 1970s) the effects of parents' education and cultural capital are still

Table 2 The effects of parental resources on leaving school without qualifications; discrete-time event-history regression models

	Baseline model	Interaction models ^a	
		Main effects	Interaction effects
Age 12–13	-1.55**	0.64	-0.87**
Age 14–15	-0.19	1.15**	-0.46**
Age 16–17 (reference)			
Age 18 and older	0.68**	-0.06	0.23
Female (0/1)	0.56**	1.41	-0.31**
Birth cohort (0–5.5)	-0.56**	^b	
<i>Parental socio-economic resources</i>			
Parental occupational status (0–1)	-0.45	-1.86*	0.52*
Parental financial resources (0–1)	-0.67**	-1.81**	0.42**
<i>Parental cultural resources</i>			
Parental educational attainment (0–1)	-2.12**	-3.52**	0.48*
Parental cultural capital (0–1)	-1.51**	-2.01**	0.18
<i>Parental socio-demographic resources</i>			
Respondent is only child (reference)			
Respondent has one or two siblings	0.02	0.08	0.00
Respondent has three or more siblings	0.16	0.29	-0.05
Parents divorced ^c	0.97**	0.80	0.05
Young mother	0.60**	1.10**	-0.17
One or both parents deceased	0.17	0.18	-0.01
Constant	-0.58		
Model chi-square	735.86**		
Degrees of freedom	15		
Nagelkerke R ² (per cent)	18.3		
Number of person-years	20,554		
Number of events	459		
Number of respondents	3790		

Source: Family Surveys Dutch Population 1992, 1998, and 2000.

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$.

^aThe interaction terms are added to the baseline model one by one. ^bThe effect of birth cohort varies between models. ^cAll models include a dummy for missing values on parental divorce (effect not presented). The effect of this dummy is insignificant in all models estimated.

quite substantial. The interactions models further show that none of the effects of socio-demographic background have changed significantly over the last 40 years.

The historical developments in the effects of age on the risk of leaving school without qualifications reveal the consequences of the changes with respect to the age of compulsory education. The minimum age at which children are allowed to leave education has increased from 13 in the 1920s to 16 since the mid 1970s. Accordingly, the likelihood of leaving school unqualified before 16 has decreased drastically. In the earlier cohorts, children aged 14 and 15 had the same risk of leaving school unqualified as the 16-year-olds, whereas for children in the younger cohorts the odds are significantly lower for the younger children.

Changes in the Family Background Composition of the Low-Educated

Since none of the effects of parental resources has become stronger over time, it can be concluded safely that social selectivity has not increased over the last 40 years. Indeed, we find support for earlier findings that in the Netherlands the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic status has declined in many dimensions. However, as we argued above, since most background factors did and still do influence the odds of leaving school unqualified, and since the proportion of low-educated individuals has declined dramatically over

Table 3 Lack of parental resources of school leavers without and with qualifications; within-group percentages

		Before 1940	1940–1949	1950–1959	After 1960
<i>Parental socio-economic resources</i>					
Lowest quartile occupational status (0/1)	No qualifications	31.8	41.4	30.2	38.5
	Qualifications	23.0	21.5	24.4	24.4
Lowest quartile financial resources (0/1)	No qualifications	38.5	38.6	50.0	27.7
	Qualifications	20.5	22.5	22.3	25.0
<i>Parental cultural resources</i>					
Both parents primary school only	No qualifications	77.0	73.1	53.8	36.9
	Qualifications	50.5	38.2	32.0	15.4
Lowest quartile cultural capital (0/1)	No qualifications	39.9	40.7	50.9	47.8
	Qualifications	19.0	22.5	22.1	24.0
<i>Parental socio-demographic resources</i>					
Large family (three or more siblings)	No qualifications	68.2	63.5	63.2	52.3
	Qualifications	61.3	62.9	58.8	34.8
Parents divorced (0/1)	No qualifications	5.5	7.2	10.7	13.5
	Qualifications	1.4	2.0	2.2	5.6
Young mother (0/1)	No qualifications	13.5	20.0	14.2	21.5
	Qualifications	7.0	7.5	8.9	15.5
One or both parents deceased (0/1)	No qualifications	10.8	11.7	4.7	6.2
	Qualifications	9.3	6.5	6.8	4.6
Number of respondents		548	802	1060	1380

Source: Family Surveys Dutch Population 1992, 1998, and 2000.

cohorts, we may still find increasing homogeneity within the group of unqualified persons in the Netherlands.

Table 3 presents information on changes in the distribution of parental resources within the unqualified and the qualified across four successive birth cohorts. Here we focus on *lack* of parental resources, using dichotomies of all resource variables. For some variables there are obvious dichotomies: for parental education and socio-demographic resources, we define lack of resources as having parents who both have primary education only, have divorced or deceased parents before the age of 16, and come from large families or have a young mother. There are no such obvious dichotomies for the indicators of parental socio-economic resources and parental cultural capital. For these indicators of parental resources, we define a lack of resources as being in the lowest quartile of the distribution. We standardized these quartile scores for each birth cohort separately, to make sure that possible changes in the composition of the indicators of parental resources within the qualified and unqualified groups were not a result of changes in the distributions of the indicators.

First, Table 3 shows that increasing proportions of people within the group of unqualified respondents have parents with a low occupational status (31.8 per cent for the cohort born before 1940, and 38.5 per cent for the

cohort born after 1960). Thus, even though the effect of parental occupational status has decreased over time (Table 2), the declining group size of the unqualified has meant that the composition of the unqualified has become less favorable. Among the unqualified, the proportion who have parents with low occupational status has increased, whereas among the qualified the proportion who have parents with low occupational status has not changed. In contrast, the decrease in the effects of financial resources on leaving school without qualifications, has accompanied a more even distribution of children from less advantaged financial background across those with and without qualifications. In the youngest cohort, the group without qualifications contains fewer children from families with low levels of financial resources than in the oldest cohort, while the proportion of children from families with low levels of financial resources has increased in the group with qualifications. Given that the financial situation of the family of origin has been an important indicator for educational attainment, this outcome is remarkable. Apparently, the impact of the decrease in association has been stronger than the counteracting impact of the decline in size of the group of school leavers without qualifications.

Both within the group of unqualified persons and within the group of qualified persons the proportion of

those with low-educated parents has decreased across birth cohorts. The size of the decreasing proportion with low-educated parents is about equal in both groups, suggesting that no unfavorable homogenization has taken place. With regard to the level of cultural resources in the family of origin, we observe that having parents with low levels of cultural resources is nowadays more common among the unqualified. It is clear that in this cultural domain unfavorable homogenization has taken place.

For three out of four indicators of parental socio-demographic resources, we observe an unfavorable compositional change for the unqualified. Due to the general decrease in family size, both the group of the unqualified and the group of the qualified nowadays are less composed of children from large families. However, this development has been much weaker for the unqualified than for the qualified. In the youngest cohort, still more than half of the unqualified come from families with three or more children, whereas for the qualified the proportion decreases to a third. Among the unqualified, the proportion of respondents with divorced parents has increased from 5.5 per cent in the cohort born before 1940 to 13.5 per cent for the cohort born after 1960. For having a young mother these proportions are 13.5 and 21.5 per cent, respectively. For the qualified the developments with regard to the proportion who experienced a parental divorce and had a young mother is in the same direction, but for them the trend is weaker. The experience of the decease of a parent has become less common across birth cohorts for the qualified and the unqualified to the same extent.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate whether the decreasing proportion of the Dutch population that leaves education without any qualifications, has become a more selective group with respect to family background. A first answer to this question is found by looking at changes in the association between family background and the risk of leaving school without qualifications. If this association becomes stronger, the unqualified might suffer from increasing stigmatization through labels such as 'lower class', 'culturally incapable', or 'socialized in unstable families'. Since our data show that none of the relationships between a set of indicators of parental socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic resources and the risk of leaving school without qualifications has become stronger over

time, it is safe to conclude that this scenario did not occur. However, if we look at the compositional changes within the group of unqualified compared to the non-qualified, we believe that there are good reasons to assume that there is stigmatization and subsequent statistical discrimination of the low-educated. Nowadays the low-educated are more likely to have parents who have a low occupational status, who have low levels of cultural resources, who are divorced, and whose mother was young when she gave birth to the respondent. This deteriorating composition might have negative effects for those who left school without qualifications. Third parties such as employers, but also potential friends or spouses, might increasingly associate unqualified people with high social and economic risks, and therefore have a higher intention to exclude them. Our analysis shows that, in general, it has become easier to predict unfavorable social origins based on the lack of educational qualifications, which is the crucial factor for labeling and statistical discrimination.

It is necessary to make some critical comments on this conclusion. More children nowadays have divorced parents or a young mother, but this group is still relatively small. Both factors might have become more important for stigmatization, but they do not apply to a majority of the group. Furthermore, although we think that the educational histories and the detailed measures of family background that are available in the Family Surveys of the Dutch Population offer the best data to answering the research questions posed in this article, the group without qualifications nevertheless is rather small. In the youngest cohort, we do not observe many dropouts, which makes it impossible to differentiate within the youngest cohorts, and we cannot see whether there were changes for the cohorts born after 1960. This is unfortunate because in the youngest cohorts ethnicity becomes an important predictor of dropping out from secondary education (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2003; Dagevos *et al.*, 2003), and thus the idea of statistical discrimination becomes increasingly important. Although lack of education might be a different phenomenon for the migrant population, we think that, particularly nowadays, including the ethnic factor is highly important. Indeed, we would have preferred to be able to investigate whether unfavorable homogenization occurs as much among migrants as it has among the Dutch population.

In conclusion, we would like to stress that there have been offsetting historical developments in the Netherlands with respect to the composition of the group of persons who leave school unqualified. Even though parental socio-economic, cultural, and socio-demographic resources

remain strongly associated to the risk of leaving school without qualifications, the decline of the size of the group of the unqualified has not always resulted in an increasingly unfavorable composition of this group with regard to family background. This means that the expected increasing double handicap, that is, marginalization and deteriorating levels of resources, does not occur in full strength. The main reason is that in the Netherlands the effects of various socio-economic and cultural indicators of family background have decreased. Assuming that comparing in and out groups facilitates the labeling process, labeling theories are most appropriate when decreasing numbers of low-educated people correspond with more stable effects of family background on the risk of leaving school without qualifications. This scenario is supported by empirical evidence for Germany (Solga, 2002), but for the Netherlands, the decreasing effects of family background make developments in the social and economic composition of the low-educated more complex. If labeling is not so much a matter of comparison, then some compositional changes do suggest increasing social and economic risks of low-educated people in the Netherlands.

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