

Sibling influences: a conceptual model

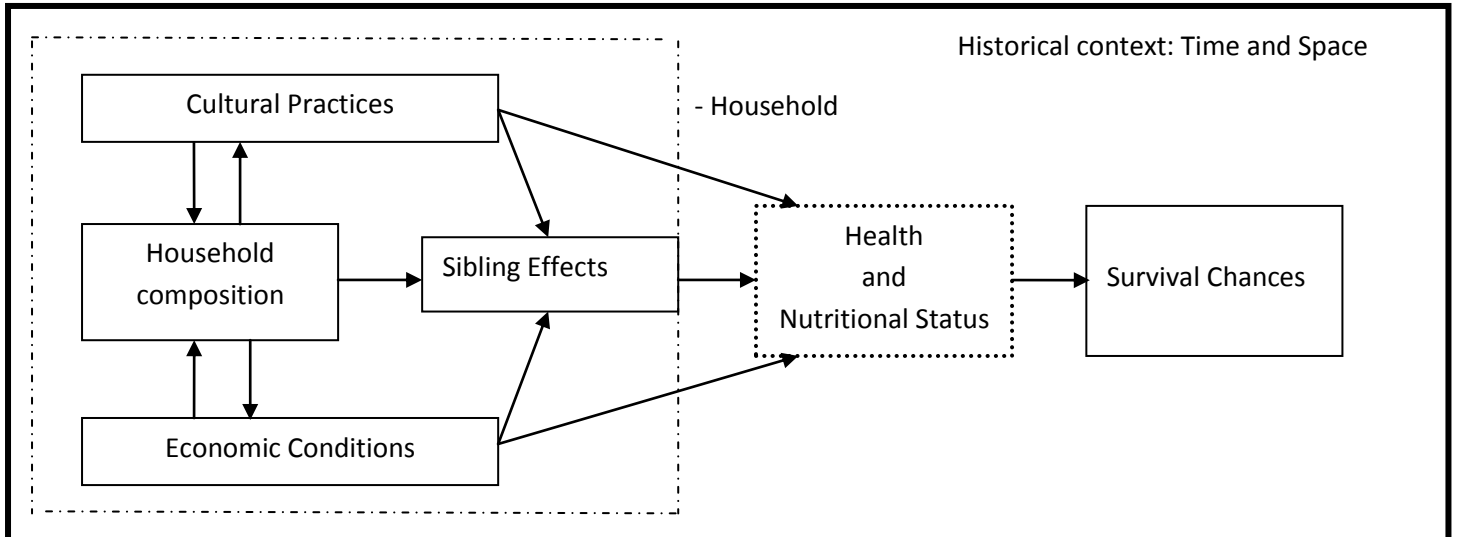
The conceptual model of this PhD project is based on the mechanism of sibling effects on infant and child mortality outcomes. Earlier research already demonstrated that mortality chances are shaped by the presence of certain family members, cultural practices and economic conditions. Especially social class, religion, ethnicity, age and gender are all important in determining who dies and who survives (Mosley and Chen 1984; Schofield and Reher 1991; Mosley and Chen 2003). However, this study is innovative because it investigates the role of siblings within household composition and organisation.

In general, it is suggested that household composition is important in determining mortality through the ways in which it influences the availability and division of material and immaterial resources (Folbre 1986; Niehof 2011; Sear and Coall 2011; Bras 2015). Household organisation may in turn determine the ways in which family members cooperate in raising children because of power structures. It determines who is available, who is culturally or socially held responsible to help, and how members of the household interact with each other (Das Gupta 1997; Skinner 1997). Especially siblings may be important in this regard. When siblings become older, they become less dependent on parents and are able to give attention, care, time, food, or other resources to others (Hrdy 2009; Batson 2011). The question, however, is whether older siblings in a household are actually willing, or forced, to step in and help their younger siblings, or whether their resources are used for other matters. Depending on the answer to this question it can be argued that birth order, the number of siblings or the composition of the sibship set will have a positive, neutral or even a negative effect.

The negative effect of siblings is often labelled as sibling rivalry and is mainly defined as the situation in which there is more than one young child in the household. This results in competition for resources among these children (Boerma and Bicego 1992). Yet, it does not imply a conscious struggle between siblings to get more resources. Indeed, in most cases parents, or other kin, are the ones who are actually distributing resources which will impact nutritional status, the incidence of morbidity and the fatality from illness and accidents. Moreover, even in the absence of any strategic behaviour of parents and kin, or when parents distribute resources strictly equally in all children, inequalities may arise because there is simply less to divide when there are more children in a household (Hertwig, Davis, Sulloway 2002; Hampshire et al. 2009; Bras 2015). The term sibling rivalry therefore only indicates the situation when available resources are divided between children within a

household, which in turn can have important negative effects for life chances (Garg and Morduch 1998; Makepeace and Pal 2008).

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Influences of siblings on infant and child mortality



Historical context is essential because economic condition and cultural practices, which are both connected to household composition and organisation, may change over time and between locations. Norms and practices surrounding family and kinship of a certain region, which are often labelled as household systems, are on the one hand important because of the ways in which they shape siblings relationships. It gives content to norms to which people relate and position themselves and shapes the type and kind of social control (Todd 1990; Thornborn 2004). For example, it has been argued that there are major differences between strong and weak family ties in Europe which affects the influence of kin in demographic outcomes (Reher 1998). By knowing the norm of a certain household system, it becomes possible to hypothesise if siblings are willing, or forced, to step in and help their younger siblings or if they are mainly seen as competitors. Economic conditions, on the other hand, influence sibling relations because they determine if there are actually possibilities for providing support. In addition, because economic conditions determine income and the total amount of household resources which are actually available, it also affects to what extent rivalry exists regarding economic resources (Blake 1981; Downey 2001).

Previous research argues that most Asian societies, in which extended household structures were the norm, the individual was not very different from the role that he or she occupies, because of the collective nature of the family (Nuckolls 1993; Chu and Yu 2009). Furthermore, parental authority was absolute during the whole life of individuals as a result

of virilocal marriage, which means living together with a husband's father's family (Wolf 2005). Parental background, family composition, gender of the child and his or her position among same-sex and different-sex siblings may therefore have had a decisive influence on what parents decided regarding the life course of a particular child. The willingness of siblings to support each other could therefore be subordinate to being forced to help. Three phenomena in Asian families through which siblings were linked from birth can further explain this. Firstly, sibling care-taking was already an integral part of early childhood. Secondly, marriage strategies, especially kin marriage, were practiced by parents who saw marriage like a kind of 'business deal' and a way to carry on the family line. Thirdly, many Asians lived in extended families based on the co-residence of adult brothers. Brothers not only lived together, they also shared meals and other social activities, or in other words, they pooled resources and offered mutual support according ethnographic studies (Wolf 1972; Wolf and Huang 1980; Thornton and Fricke 1987; Chen 2009).

In North-Western European societies siblings supposedly played a far less significant role in shaping the life course because individualism was propagated, and most households were small and nuclear (Richard, Robin, & Laslett, 1983). Moreover, neolocality was the norm, which meant that children left the parental home when they married. Parental authority was therefore limited to unmarried children, but parents influenced their children's decisions well into their twenties because the age of marriage was much higher (Klep, 2005). Life course decisions regarding work, marriage and residence were taken against the backdrop of the stakes and preferences of either their parental or own household. In contrast with the Asian household, the couple was central to the European household (Engelen and Wolf 2005; Sabean, Teuscher, and Mathieu 2007). Scholars argued that Western norms, cultural ideals and life course characteristics, for example a period of domestic service, stressed the development of individuals into free and autonomous beings (Hajnal 1965; Hajnal 1982; Bras 2003). Sibling relations were consequently characterized by rivalry, not by solidarity. However, research has also observed cooperation between siblings (Bras and Van Tilburg 2007). Moreover, recent kinship analysis shows how much the ideology of individualism was just that – ideology. In reality the individual was still embedded in the web of family and kinship (Johnson & Sabean, 2011). The question therefore remains if these siblings would also support each other or be more individualistic as a result.