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Les inégalités sociales face à la santé:
constats, explications et politiques

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EDUCATIONAL HEALTH INEQUALITIES: AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

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Educational health inequalities: an institutional approach

Educational health inequalities are among the most consistent findings in social epidemiology and health sociology: the higher educated generally fare better in terms of health and health-related outcomes. Most social epidemiologists consider inequalities in educational attainment as a proxy indicator of social inequality and/or take education into account as a control variable. These strategies add little to our understanding of the relevance of education for health and illness. Some take the nexus between educational attainment and health more seriously, and explore the various paths through which educational attainment can contribute to better health. On average, the better educated seem to be blessed by social competence or learned effectiveness, resilience and healthier life styles. In addition, they are capable to turn credentials into better jobs, into more financial security, and into a lower risk of unemployment. More over these capacities, opportunities, and resources often accumulate across the life span. By viewing education from a human capital perspective, these studies tend to portray education as a social characteristic of individuals.

An institutional perspective on education and health tries to go one step further by superseding the aforementioned social psychological approach. It considers education not only as an individual accomplishment, but also as a core institution of contemporary, meritocratic societies. This perspective opens up a plethora of potentially interesting research questions, such as on the potential health impact of the expansion of tertiary education; on education and social class reproduction; on gendered educational health inequalities and the reversed gender gap in education; and on education, healthy life styles, preventive care in the fourth stage of the epidemiological transition. With these examples of research topics, we hope to illustrate how an institutional approach contributes to the development of a macrosociology of health & illness.

Piet Bracke est professeur ordinaire au département de sociologie de l'université de Ghent (Belgique) et professeur invité du pôle de recherche national LIVES (Université de Genève) au semestre de printemps 2017. Ses thématiques de recherche sont ancrées dans la sociologie de la famille et dans l'épidémiologie sociale. Il a notamment mené des travaux dans le domaine de la santé mentale et de l'éducation à la santé.