Discussion of:

“Healthy(?), Wealthy and Wise: Birth Order, Wellbeing and Adult Health”

Stephen Machin

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Summary

Study of health outcomes and birth order using rich matched Norwegian register and survey data.

Nicely implemented empirical study, with (from my reading) two main conclusions:

i) Looking at a range of health and health related behaviours generates differential impacts from birth order.

ii) Exploring mechanisms uncovers a role for maternal investments to impact on health through birth order.
Four Comments

1). Difficult question from methodological standpoint.

2). Multiple outcomes.

3). More than mechanisms.

4). Specific issues with health and birth order, compared to other outcomes and birth order.
1) Difficult question from methodological standpoint

The authors are very transparent about the difficulties in separating out birth order effects from family size and sequence.

Adopt within-family estimator with the rich data they have.

Might have expected some more on within-family age gaps as a lot of the discussion is around first born versus fifth born.

Health cycles, fads and trends might mean these are quite far apart in time.
2) Multiple outcomes

The focus on multiple outcomes is good and bad.

It is good because a diverse range of outcomes can be explored (as per advocates of multiple outputs in health/education production functions).

It is less good (bad?) because it becomes very complicated thinking about what effects might be expected.

Example: would same model apply to mental health, or weight issues or smoking? Think some theory might help here, in the broad sense of which outcomes one might expect birth order to impact upon.
3) More than mechanisms

Related to 2), the findings of different impacts for different outcomes makes the notion of looking for mechanisms somewhat cloudy.

Need to think more about heterogeneous impact and how mechanisms might underpin the range of estimated health effects.
4) Specific issues with health and birth order

Health effects to do with birth order are not the same as, for example, earnings or employment.

Two examples (amongst others):

Trends in health technologies make people born more recently (i.e. later born within the family) have longer life expectancies.

Similarly trends in health behavior (smoking down, obesity up) differentially vary through time.