

Upward Mobility and Questions of Belonging in Migrant Families

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Social Mobility belongs to the “archetypical-terms” of Sociology because it links up with a series of key concepts and phenomena in the study of society: family, generation, social class and its reproduction over generations, the distribution of wealth and welfare, the formation of elites, and the openness and accessibility of social institutions to individual talent, merit, and effort – to name just the most obvious. The term ‘social mobility’ as such is open in many directions: it can look at mobile individuals, but also at entire groups; it is mostly associated with upward mobility in terms of social status and material conditions, but obviously downward mobility is also part of the possibilities. Moreover, social mobility may apply to the change of profession within the same social stratum (horizontal mobility) and to migrating persons or groups (territorial mobility). The term ‘mobility’ implies movement, and that is always *in relation to* – e.g. a place or class of origin, other ethnic or social groups in society or over time. These different kinds of social mobility do not only occur simultaneously, but they also interact with each other: the study of *individual* social climbers, for example, can unveil the general openness of certain social classes for individuals from different social strata; but these individuals may also be part of socially upwardly mobile *groups* that have a potential for structurally changing the social landscape as a whole. The study of social mobility represents an interesting starting point to examine how society works and which barriers and opportunities it provides.

The study of social mobility among the descendants of immigrants offers an interesting

additional dimension because it allows analysing the extent to which new groups can find their ways into the upper layers of society. A growing group of children of labour migrants in Europe are climbing up the social ladder, even though they grew up in working class neighbourhoods and their parents were poorly educated and worked in low-skilled jobs. The fact that their parents were mobile and ambitious enough to migrate already distinguishes them from their local and school peers from non-immigrant families. They are, moreover, perceived and discursively presented by mainstream appreciations as ‘outsiders’ or, at least, newcomers to the established social order. The social positions these newcomers are expected to occupy in the social structure can lie in two directions. While some expect them to form a new ‘sublayer’ underneath the lowest social stratum, others emphasise that they are socially mobile and invest more to ‘bypass’ certain barriers because the drive in immigrant families to succeed is stronger than in native born working class families.

Children of immigrants are frequently evaluated both in individual and group terms, over various generations, but they are also compared to their ethnic majority peers. Irrespective of their social and educational background, their parents often migrated to provide a better future for their children and can thus be characterised by upward mobility aspirations – an aspect that is frequently rather neglected by a public discourse which disproportionately focuses on deficits and problems. Again, this can be looked at in two ways: on one hand, the native-born children of especially labour migrants frequently far

exceed the educational level and occupational status of their parents. On the other hand, this remarkable intergenerational success may still mean little in comparison to the average levels of education in non-migrant families. Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants in Western Europe, for example, were mostly recruited among the poorest and lowest educated in both countries, with the fathers hardly more than a few years of primary and lower secondary education and not few of the mothers even illiterate. This type of educational deficit is practically unmatched among people of native origin of the same generation or age group than the migrant parents. Obtaining a middle educational diploma and completing a vocational training degree thus means a huge step forward in relation to the parents, but it is still not equivalent to more than a lower middle-class social status in most countries – a status that parents may have also gained in terms of ‘economic capital’ through hard work and long working hours.

However, in all countries there is a smaller group – varying in size depending on the country (cf. Crul, Schneider and Lelie 2012) – that achieves a much steeper social mobility by moving up into professional positions and social strata to which even the average person in the non-immigrant population does not accede. Because of the generally small size of that group, these success stories are often either not acknowledged at all or only seen as ‘the exception that proves the rule’. Yet, attention to this group is important for three main reasons: Firstly, the success of these individuals bypasses the generalised overemphasis on failure and demonstrates an immense potential; secondly, their success can be important for the emancipation of the whole group; and lastly, but maybe most important from a scholarly and policy perspective, the successful cases can tell us a lot about how structural conditions of inequality can be overcome by individual success.

Like social mobility, success is a relative concept which depends on the measurements and the comparison groups or benchmarks. For instance, in relation to education, not only the

achieved degrees, but also the trajectories followed (e.g. years repeated, tracks/courses followed, school/university attended) are used to critically assess the achievement results of immigrant children. The frequently more ‘unorthodox’ or ‘loopy’ pathways to educational success that children of immigrants follow can, for example, indicate the existence of structural barriers and discriminating practices, but they could also be interpreted as an indication that they still lag behind and/or lack the resources or conditions to take a more straightforward path into academia and professional life.

Moreover, the standard measures of upward social mobility, such as income or education, are also not always sufficient to also be *regarded* as successful in society. People with an immigrant background are often additionally evaluated in terms of their ‘cultural adaptation’ and their willingness and capacity to ‘immerse’ themselves into the dominant group (notwithstanding the question about the openness of that dominant group to accept full membership from such a person). Again, this is not only about individuals: also entire ‘ethnic or minority groups’ are located into the scheme by identifying some groups as supposedly ‘more difficult to integrate’ and juxtaposing them to so-called ‘model minorities’. Paradoxically, both forms of stereotyping particular ‘groups’ attribute success and failure to *individual* merit and cultural orientation; they neglect the central role of structural factors, such as the institutional logic of education and the relevance of ‘race’ and class and similar boundary-defining categories. One important effect of this is that ‘lower achieving immigrant groups’ can effectively be blamed themselves for their supposed failure.

While the ‘model minority’-discussion describes processes that distinguish *between* ‘ethnic groups’, similar tensions between structure and agency can be found *within* these ‘groups’. This special issue is also interested in the question of when and where at all ‘ethnicity comes in’, or in other words: how much of the social interaction and the possibilities of career

development are actually influenced by attributions of cultural and religious backgrounds. We know that in our late modern societies – with their strong social stratifications the change of material conditions and the access to educational levels and professional fields not typically associated with a given social status in a family also have socio-cultural implications as regards social networks and the cultural preferences of individuals, families or even entire groups. The social and material position of an individual affects the concept and the definition of the Self – be it in Marxian terms as ‘class consciousness’ or, following Bourdieu, as ‘habitus’.

Especially the interpersonal relations with members of the new social class one enters may be crucial for the ways in which social mobility is experienced and, by extension, how it may constitute a part of one’s identity. Scholarly work in that area has generally presupposed that the change of social class (and milieu) goes hand in hand with particular identity challenges for the upwardly mobile individual. This is nothing particular for offspring from immigrant families: Already in the late 1950s, Peter Blau argued that since social climbers fall between two groups, they have problems of acculturation and feelings of insecurity. Only when the new social class accepts the socially mobile individual as a full member and allows the individual to merge into his or her new class, the upward mobility process loses its importance (1956). The case of children of immigrants, however, demonstrates that social mobility as a movement between different categories of belonging should be conceived in less simplistic or static terms. The empirical evidence provided by the articles in this special issue represents a comparative framework that allows broadening the scope and questioning some of these almost taken-for-granted presumptions in much of the social mobility literature. One aspect is that in most of the high-status professions and milieus into which social climbers from immigrant families move, there are very few other (children of) immigrants and/or ethnic minority members. They are thus most frequently con-

fronted with a lack of specific role models, on one hand, and an increased likelihood of experiences of discrimination and stereotyping on the other. But, these challenges can also trigger creative processes of ‘social negotiation’ in which *new* individual and collective identities are being constructed. In more general terms, this is about the intersectionality of alleged ethnic, religious, (trans-)national or local identities with categories, such as class, gender and/or ‘social milieu’ – a combination that has received relatively little attention so far in the research on social mobility and children of immigrants.

In their article, Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou discuss the so-called “Asian American exceptionalism”-construct. It shows how volatile the public perception of specific immigrant groups can be: within less than a century, Asian Americans moved from being described as illiterate, undesirable, and unassimilable to becoming *the* ‘model immigrants’, profiting from ‘*stereotype promise*’ (i.e. the reverse to what has been described in the literature as ‘*stereotype threat*’). In this way, the notion of ‘Asian American exceptionalism’ becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; teachers perpetuate these stereotypes which, in turn, give Asian Americans a much higher chance to be tracked into academically oriented classes, regardless of actual performance.

Kris Noam also looks at the Chinese second generation and how they reproduce certain educational values that are labelled as ‘typically Asian’ or ‘typically Chinese’. Her comparison between ‘tiger parents’ in the U.S. and the Netherlands, however, shows that the support strategies for their children differ fundamentally across the two countries and seem to be much more a reflection of rational responses to the necessities posed by the respective educational system than of any kind of essentialised ‘ethnoculture’.

The structural conditions are also a central topic in the article by Dirk Eisema, Tara Fiorito and Martha Montero-Sieburth on activists in the student movement for the legalisation of undocumented 1.5 generation in California. They examine how the student movement func-

tions as a vehicle for upward social mobility for undocumented 1.5 generation migrants. Many of them only find out about their precarious status as they are finishing their secondary education and wanting to access university and/or the labour market. On the basis of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with nine activists in the greater Los Angeles area, the article shows how the political activism of these youths can help them to better manage the odds of being undocumented and providing the emotional and material means for becoming upwardly mobile.

Also in the article by Marieke Slotman is the issue of how to transform a kind of 'stigma' – in this case being the child of low-educated Turkish or Moroccan labour migrants in the Netherlands – into a source of self-assertion in the process of upward social mobility. Following the notion of a 'Minority Culture of Mobility' (see Neckerman, Carter and Lee, 1999), Slotman describes this as a dynamic process and identifies three recurrent elements in relation of social climbers to their ethnic origins: a moment of distancing in their youth, the effects of being able to share the moments of 'unsettledness' in the mobility process with other social climbers of similar ethnic backgrounds, and the re-discovery of one's 'ethnic origins' at a later stage in the career path – mostly when they have already climbed relatively high on the social ladder, but are still experiencing discrimination and being 'othered'.

Ismintha Waldring, Maurice Crul, and Halleh Ghorashi focus particularly on the necessary and developing capacity among successful members of the Turkish and Moroccan second generation in the Netherlands to deal with boundaries in Dutch society and in the labour market that, despite their high-end professional careers, continue to be relevant and cut across professional relations. Social climbers from immigrant families mostly emphasise 'sameness' in professional and work relations, while trying to relegate their 'difference' to where it actually matters, e.g. in social relations outside of the professional context. This 'sensitivity' for boundaries in place allows them to develop of a professional identity

without abandoning – from a seemingly contradicting mainstream point of view – their 'ethnic' identifications.

Jens Schneider and Christine Lang are interested in the transformations of individual social relations and lifestyles caused by social mobility processes, as well. Their point of departure is the Bourdieuan concept of 'habitus' that also fuels large parts of the theory building in social mobility literature. However, in its mainstream usage, different habitus appear as static separated spheres with clear-cut boundaries that social climbers have to cross – leaving one habitus behind in order to enter another. By contrast, and on the basis of interviews with social climbers of Turkish background in different parts of Germany, the authors identify *habitus diversification* as the predominant pattern: respondents employ different kinds of 'bridging strategies' in order to stay connected to the 'world' of their families, while – at the same time – becoming part of a very different and to them previously unknown 'world'.

Finally, Ali Konyali also analyses the narratives employed by business professionals of Turkish background in Frankfurt, Paris and Stockholm to 'make sense' of their rather exceptional achievements. In these narratives, personal achievement and turning the 'disadvantage of origin' (ethnic and social) into an asset in the competitive context of the corporate business sector are strongly emphasised. This feature, common to the narratives of respondents in all three cities, is different than their colleagues from non-immigrant family origin, as well as to other descendants of Turkish migrants in lower level jobs.

All articles in this special issue contribute one way or another to our understanding of how successful children of immigrants negotiate and make sense of their position in a new social class. They themselves develop a narrative of their success and their position as social climbers, but also the narratives of the people in the world around them matter for the ways success should be read and interpreted. The articles tackle this issue from very different perspectives. Lee and

Zhou show how the combination of a middle and higher social class background, together with the adaptation to the U.S. educational system, creates a positive narrative around an entire 'racial category' that becomes self-perpetuating. Noam's article shows how, in a different national and institutional context, the adaptation to the functioning mechanisms of the Dutch school system leads to a different educational narrative (even though the label 'tiger parents' may remain). It also shows that the (historical) context in which social climbers negotiate and develop their narrative of success is very important, because the success narrative comes with (mental) costs in the second generation – and this experience again will have an influence on what they transmit to their children, the third generation. Konyali's article demonstrates the importance of the context in another way by looking at success in a particular sector, namely the corporate business sector. The narratives of social climbers in this sector blend in a creative way with the individual success narratives that characterize the business sector as such. Social climbers of Turkish background position themselves positively against the backdrop of the dominant negative narratives about their group: they made it, they thus stand out and are special – and become the above-mentioned 'exceptions that prove the rule'. Here no alteration to the dominant perception and discursive connection between 'Turkishness' and low SES can be expected.

Another major question around social climbers is who they become when they enter another social class and world. Three articles in this special issue show that there is no 'zero sum'-result. Social climbers do not exchange one life for another, as the social mobility literature has long presumed. As both Schneider & Lang and Slootman analyse, social climbers often had to work hard mentally (and often still continue to do so) to find a position that feels comfortable for them

and helps them to achieve their full intellectual potential, but also to stay true to themselves, as the article by Waldring, Crul and Ghorashi shows. Being part of the second generation, one could say that they have practiced for this for their entire lives. Nevertheless, as described in all three articles, social climbers use specific mechanisms to negotiate and reach their position. Slootman demonstrates the importance or recognition by co-ethnics and co-educational peers as an important resource to reinvent their own identity and social position. Schneider and Lang show the importance of keeping the links between their lives as social climbers and their roles as daughters or sons in their families. Waldring et al. examine the strategies employed to deal with situations of discrimination and prejudice in their professional life. They use their awareness of the rules of engagement in different social worlds to control the situation, find allies and – most of all – not accept to be victimized. The three articles describe different life phases and contexts, but together they portray the fascinating ambiguities in the pathways of social climbers.

To conclude, this special issue analyses the question of the effects of processes of inter-generational upward social mobility in a thematic context which, at the same time, adds and highlights certain dimensions in both aspects of social mobility: (a) the specific structural barriers and conditions for immigrants and their children to insert themselves into the given social structure of the 'receiving' society; and (b) the implications of moving up the educational and/or professional ladder in relation to their parents – and mostly also the majority of their peers from school and neighbourhood – for subjective feelings of belonging and being 'admitted' to social spheres whose codes do not correspond to those learned in childhood and youth, but that have also frequently not been particularly characterised so far by cultural and/or ethnic diversity.

References

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