

The multiplier effect: how the accumulation of cultural and social capital explains steep upward social mobility of children of low-educated immigrants

Maurice Crul^{a,b}, Jens Schneider^c, Elif Keskiner^a and Frans Lelie^a

^aDepartment of Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands;

^bDepartment of Sociology, Vrije University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; ^cIMIS, Universität Osnabrück, Osnabrück, Germany

ABSTRACT

We introduce what we have coined *the multiplier effect*. We explain the steep upward mobility of children of low-educated immigrants by studying how they overcome obstacles on their regular pathway, via alternative routes or through loopholes in the education and labour market system. The idea of the multiplier effect is that they virtually propel themselves forward in their careers. Essential is that each successful step forward offers new possibilities on which they build, thereby accumulating cultural and social capital and multiplying their chances of success. Initial small differences with their less successful co-ethnic peers generate an increasingly wider gap over time. Cultural and social capital theories primarily explain the reproduction of inequalities in society. The multiplier effect explains the breaking of the perpetual cycle of this reproduction, enabling steep upward mobility even when this group does not initially possess the right cultural and social capital to be successful.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 3 July 2015; Accepted 19 July 2016

KEYWORDS Elite formation; social mobility; integration context theory; diversity; cultural and social capital theory; multiplier effect

Introduction

This special issue explores a rising theme in ethnic and migration studies: steep upward mobility in the second generation. So far, a number of authors have addressed this topic within a single national context, but here we present the first international *comparative* research on the new upcoming elite among children of immigrants based on the ELITES study. The central idea of the ELITES study was to examine the differences between the conditions for steep upward mobility in four countries – France, Germany,

CONTACT Maurice Crul  crul@fsw.eur.nl

© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Sweden and the Netherlands – and between three labour market sectors: corporate law, corporate business and education. We interviewed professionals whose parents had come from Turkey as low-skilled labour migrants, who are working in managerial functions in corporate businesses or law firms or as school principals or leaders of support organizations or self-organizations in the field of education. In the educational sector we also spoke to respondents working as secondary school teachers to learn about what actions are required in order to advance from a teaching job to a more influential position.

In this article we present an overview of our main findings based on the comparison between countries and between sectors. We will refer to outcomes of the various articles in this special issue but we have also conducted further analyses of the material to further our general understanding of steep mobility trajectories. In the ELITES study we deliberately selected on the dependent variable of success. We basically wanted to answer two questions: who are the people who have “made it” against all odds and what were the conditions that enabled them to become so successful? This is a reversal of the usual questions that researchers ask about children of immigrants, such as “why do they fail in school?” or “why are they so often to be found in low-skilled jobs?” The large body of literature on school failure and exclusion on the labour market already extensively documents the many factors that work against children of immigrants (cf. Holdaway, Crul, and Roberts 2009). We therefore chose to look at the opposite end of the spectrum: the group that made it into high-ranking and well-remunerated positions. We know that they must have overcome many obstacles and made exceptional efforts to succeed, because it is extraordinary that they have made it so far. Their parents, most of whom were low educated, were generally unable to give practical help with homework or offer advice on the best type of school for them or the right study choices. Also, the national language was not spoken at home. Their “survival” and eventual success in the education system is already remarkable. Their successful entry into the labour market and climb up the career ladder seems even more improbable: but this is exactly what makes their stories so interesting.

As our findings confirm, we can safely say that the ELITES respondents are a select group of people. Many of the interviewees have a strong drive and ambition. This also seems to be the case for most of their parents: despite the fact that the majority had been unable to provide their children with instrumental support during their studies, many respondents mentioned that they had received unwavering support and faith in their abilities from their parents throughout their educational and professional careers. After school they enter professional positions that no one of their ethnic group have accessed before. When we look at their labour market careers, resilience and stamina appear as crucial characteristics. We see a group of people who

simply do not give up when things are not working out or when they encounter obstacles or problems. They try to overcome exclusion and discrimination on the labour market by proving people wrong and showing that they are capable and will succeed, even if others want to see them fail and they have to make twice as much effort to receive the same level of recognition (see also Waldring, Crul, and Ghorashi 2014). The particular added value of looking at this group of outliers is that the respondents often describe in detail how they overcame challenges and obstacles in their careers.

Main empirical findings of the ELITES project

The findings from the ELITES project alert us to a number of mechanisms that help to explain the success of this group of outliers. In the following, we will both summarize commonalities and define differences between countries and sectors. The fact that we found many commonalities, despite the significant differences between countries and sectors, indicates that some of the mechanisms described can be generalized to a larger extent.

Common mechanisms across countries and sectors

Considering their disadvantaged background, the group making it to higher education is already a very selective group. Following general statistics, one might think that once our respondents had obtained a higher education diploma, they would have overcome the most important hurdle on the path to a successful professional career. Such self-selection could even make them better equipped to succeed in the labour market than graduates of native descent who are, after all, a much less select group. The outcomes of the TIES survey, mentioned in more detail in the introduction to this special issue, show that in all four countries, respondents of Turkish descent with higher education degrees were much more likely to be unemployed or employed in a lower-level job than equally educated respondents of native descent. Despite their degrees, many graduates of Turkish descent do not make it into professional managerial positions. The qualitative ELITES project research has helped us to better understand the mechanisms involved. By looking into the details of the pathways we can reconstruct the challenges our respondents encountered and how they found ways to overcome them. Respondents in every sector reported that they had to overcome *more* difficulties to enter the labour market than peers of native descent. They emphasized that it is difficult to actually *prove* that they had been subjected to various forms of discrimination and exclusion, but almost all of them had had experiences that had lead them to think that, for example, their job applications had not been given equal consideration due to their family name or ethnic background. Similar experiences were reported with regard to

gaining promotion to managerial positions within their company. Many of our respondents expressed an awareness that they needed to invest extra efforts, both to enter the labour market and to advance in their careers. These extra efforts varied across the three sectors. In the corporate business sector, they involved starting at a lower level than warranted by their educational qualifications and only gradually climbing the ladder of success. Sometimes our respondents' qualifications were not fully appreciated because they had not, as a rule, attended the more prestigious secondary schools, colleges and universities. As a result, they had to prove their worth on the job, unlike "Ivy League" graduates, who, as our respondents report, had the advantage of being taken at face value. This advantage was confirmed by the small minority of respondents who graduated from such "Grandes Écoles" (see also the article of Keskiner and Crul, [in press](#)). In the corporate law sector, some respondents had to go to a lot of job interviews before finally being hired (also see Raad [2015](#)). Once employed, they still often felt that they were being tested constantly. The adaptation process to the typical corporate law culture, which is strongly based on the national upper-class culture, often involved distinct mechanisms of exclusion against them. Often, this put them under extra pressure at work, as they were aware that any small mistake would be seized upon and held against them. In the education sector, respondents reported other kinds of exclusionary mechanisms in addition to doubts about their abilities. One example is the way in which negative comments about students of immigrant origin made by staff of native descent create a difficult working climate for teachers and support staff from an immigrant background. There is also sometimes an element of rivalry when teachers and school directors of native descent perceive that teachers and principals from an immigrant background have better access to and communication with children and parents of immigrant descent (cf. Schneider and Lang [2014](#)).

How did our respondents overcome these obstacles? At this point, we wish to emphasize that we are not suggesting that the mechanisms mentioned below constitute an exhaustive explanation of our respondents' success compared to that of their less successful peers. In the ELITES project we did not make a comparison with less successful people. The relevance of the mechanisms we describe for this successful group is derived from the fact that these were the actions and attitudes by which they overcame the obstacles they described. Nevertheless, these obstacles resonate with the abundant literature on less successful students of the same origin and socio-economic background. Resilience, social skills, social support, ethnic capital and individual and parental agency all play a role in overcoming obstacles and difficulties. *Resilience* crops up as a key word when describing the behaviour of the respondents in all three sectors. We present resilience here as a "learned trait" rather than an innate characteristic. The respondents describe that

they learned to overcome problems at a very young age, often by themselves. They did this by learning to work harder, trying again whenever they failed, and by taking an alternative, albeit longer, route if the direct route was closed to them. This learned resilience often turned into a strong advantage: they are not easily thrown off balance if an obstacle suddenly appears.

In addition to resilience, most of our respondents also have extraordinarily strong *social skills*. They attribute this to their need to adapt to different social environments and diverse groups of people on their way up the educational ladder and the labour market. Climbing the social ladder has meant increasing exposure to socio-economic and cultural environments that are very different to the ones they came from. Again, many respondents emphasized that they *learned* the skills required to cope with different environments from a very early age. This adaptation often started at kindergarten or primary school where they learned that many things, such as language, food, celebrations and typical attitudes and customs, were very different here than in their home environment. In secondary school they were often the exception to the rule, perhaps the only student from an immigrant background in their class in an academic stream leading up to university. Here they learned the cultural codes of their middle-class peers of native parentage. Because they had grown up in a different environment, they were extremely aware of these differences and became capable of switching between different cultural codes quite easily. Rather than living *between* two worlds, the respondents became equipped with the necessary skills for navigating them *both* successfully (Schneider, Crul, and Van Praag 2014; Schneider and Lang 2014).

The respondents also mentioned that receiving crucial forms of *social support from parents and significant others* had contributed to their success. What many of the parents had in common was a positive attitude towards education, expressed as concrete support. Many of our respondents' parents had used their scarce resources to provide extra tutoring for their children. They let their children off household chores and later on, would not allow them to take part-time jobs that might distract them from their homework. This sets them apart from many other immigrant parents with different priorities, such as the contribution their children could make to the family income (see for an overview Crul 2000; Keskiner 2013). ELITES respondents also described how their parents tried to build good relationships with teachers or mentors so that they could ask for advice and obtain support at crucial junctures. Sometimes, the emphasis on "classical indicators" of parental support, such as help with homework and advice on school matters makes us overlook these important alternative forms of support (Rezai et al. 2015).

In senior secondary school and university, elder siblings and peers (and their parents) studying at the same level gradually became more important than parents. They helped them to navigate the school system and sometimes

like-minded peers would form study groups to work together on homework assignments. Elder siblings, especially those already in higher education, could also provide practical help with homework and sometimes they would also maintain contact with teachers and mentors, replacing the parents (cf. Crul 2000; Rezai et al. 2015).

The respondents relied on a variation of social support mechanisms throughout their educational and professional careers, which also varied across countries. Educational systems differ greatly in terms of what they demand from parents, elderly siblings or others. In Germany, for instance, parents or elderly siblings need to be much more involved with homework than in Sweden, where students generally do their homework at school. In the Netherlands, the complicated tracking system requires a lot of detailed knowledge from parents or others to navigate it.

Upon entering the labour market, our respondents' social network of family members more or less ceases to be of key importance for their success. They must actively start building network contacts, often from scratch. Entering the labour market and climbing the ladder poses considerable challenges. Once more, resilience is important: sometimes our respondents would fail, while at other times people would actively block their path. Discrimination and racism are not uncommon experiences for them. It is a characteristic of this group, however, that they always found another way and would not let others hold them back from achieving success. Conducting numerous internships throughout higher education was a common strategy for building professional experience and developing social networks (Keskiner 2016). Changing jobs and moving to other companies or institutions is one way of circumventing blockades within a company. Many choose to work for international companies which are considered to be more open to "diversity". The corporate culture of such companies is less ingrained with national traditions and values and the "national old boys" networks are less relevant (see also Konyali, *in press*).

Finally, some of our respondents turn their *ethnic capital* to their advantage. This comes in different forms. An important way to turn one's ethnic background into a "unique selling point" is by creating a personal niche through addressing "Turkish clientele" or setting up a "Turkish desk" for doing business with Turkey (see the articles of Keskiner and Crul, *in press*, of Konyali, *in press*, and of Rezai, *in press*). The growing importance of the Turkish market in the international business world has opened up opportunities for the Turkish-speaking second generation, especially in corporate business and law firms. To reach the higher steps on the corporate ladder you must specialize and prove that you can contribute something extra to the company. Having connections to Turkey and/or Turkish clients and speaking their language (also in the sense of "knowing the codes") represents such an asset. This even applies to the education sector to a certain extent. One can

specialize in working with immigrant pupils in support organizations or set up schools that cater especially for immigrant pupils. The problem posed by this type of niche is that it may turn into an “ethnic mobility trap”, whereby it is impossible to transfer acquired professional, cultural and social capital to any sort of mainstream organization. The respondents in our study are well aware of this. But, while some actively refuse to be relegated to an “ethnic niche”, others see it as an opportunity. It is sometimes conceived as an intermediate step towards a larger goal, depending on the opportunity structures within the sector. Some also use their exceptional position in their community to promote their skills and ambition to employers and supervisors. Here, the message is that they were only able to succeed because they had persistently overcome the host of obstacles that had strewn their path. This transforms migrant descent into a means of self-promotion (also see Konyali 2014).

The resilience, social support, social skills and use of ethnic capital described above are all crucial elements in explaining the respondents’ steep upward mobility at different stages of their careers. A key concept in Bourdieu’s (1984, 1990) work on the reproduction of class positions is *habitus* as behaviour, thinking and tastes acquired over a lifetime, based on background characteristics like class, ethnicity and gender. Cultural and social capital come with a certain *habitus* as part of the distinction between social classes. Our study, however, shows that cultural capital can be learned and social capital can be appropriated while becoming upwardly mobile, breaking the perpetual cycle of the *habitus* inherited through class position. The accumulation of social and cultural capital greatly increases the possibilities for further advancement, but we want to emphasize at the same time that it does not necessarily minimize the risks. Not only the “air gets thinner” in the higher strata of careers, meaning more direct competition with people who – by familial origin – might be better equipped especially with *social* capital. Also, our respondents often pay a high price while becoming estranged from old friends and having to stand a significant level of stress for continuously entering new social environments where they are required to prove themselves – even before having acquired the necessary social and cultural capital. But, passing through this step-by-step “self-energized” process of capital accumulation and risk management, these successful children of immigrants are equipped with many highly valuable skills and the capacity to deal also with adverse situations.

Differences across countries and sectors

Although we observed commonalities across countries and – to some extent – across sectors, we also observed important differences. The differences between countries are most prominent in *the education sector*. This should not surprise us too much, since the education sector is historically shaped

in the building of the nation state through the struggle of national interest groups. As a result, the opportunity structure for people working in this sector varies greatly across countries. Waldring's article (Waldring, [in press](#)) demonstrates this clearly: in the Netherlands, the opportunity structure made it possible for some of the Turkish-Dutch respondents in our study to start their own primary and secondary schools with public funding. This brought them into a position of power as school principals or even as leaders of their own schooling group, making them relevant stakeholders in the field. As this type of school is increasing in number in cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, these people have become relevant players at the table of education policies at both the local and national level. The Netherlands' decentralized school system makes it possible for school directors to take far-reaching decisions with regard to their students. For instance, the principals of the secondary schools in question decided to place students who had been advised to follow vocational education in intermediary classes that allow them more opportunities to move up to an academic track. The Dutch system enables these principals to intervene on important issues that block access to higher education for many children of immigrants. In contrast to this, we see France, with its highly centralized school system. The French respondents employed in the education sector all work within already established schools. Here, school principals have very little room to manoeuvre or influence the way in which education is organized, even in their own schools. Correspondingly, our French respondents had very limited possibilities to influence educational policies. Some of them chose to work in *banlieue* schools in order to work directly with children of immigrants. In Germany, the stratified school system creates a lot of barriers and frustrations for children of immigrants and their parents. As a result of this stratification, there is a high concentration of children of immigrants in the lower levels of secondary school (*Hauptschule* and *Realschule*). A great many education and social support services for children of immigrants and their parents have been set up, partly to deal with the problems encountered by these children within the stratified school system. The fact that many of these organizations are run by professionals of Turkish origin has created a niche for upward mobility in the education sector. Somewhat similar to the Dutch situation, we see that the people holding management positions in these organizations in Germany also have a seat at the table beside other stakeholders in the education sector. In Sweden there has been extensive funding for self-organizations, partly as a result of multicultural policies. Leadership of those organizations is increasingly in the hands of second-generation young professionals of Turkish descent. These leadership positions do not usually come in the form of a paid job, but rather as voluntary work done outside working hours. This, of course, limits the amount of time that people can dedicate to the organization, reducing the influence they can

assert in the field of education. This illustrates how both the structure of the school system and national policies can either limit or enhance opportunities to become an influential stakeholder.

The differences between countries in *the corporate law sector* are the least pronounced of all the sectors. The highly regulated and internationalized corporate law sector displays very similar career paths and opportunities across all four countries (see Rezai, [in press](#)). You can only enter the profession with a law degree and by passing the bar exam. The pathway to become a senior and then a partner is very similar in all four countries. The only difference seems to concern the options available to those who are *not* promoted to a senior or partner position. In the French and German cases many chose to become independent lawyers, often taking with them part of the clientele they had recruited while working for the corporate law firm (see also the article of Keskiner and Crul, [in press](#)). In Germany, this is also an option that people explore if their final grades are not good enough for corporate law firms or the in-house law departments of large companies. The main challenge here is building a solid enough clientele, which in most cases will almost exclusively consist of persons of Turkish origin or other immigrant background.

The differences between countries in *the corporate business sector* are more pronounced than in the corporate law sector, but less pronounced than in the education sector. Once more, entry into the labour market is marked by specific national institutional arrangements in each country. In the Netherlands, an important route to becoming a business professional is known as the “long route” which involves moving through the education system from lower vocational education to middle and higher vocational education. This takes three years longer than the direct academic track. But – and this is crucial – at the middle and the higher level, students must conduct an extensive internship in a company. Many respondents either got their first full-time job at the company where they had done their internship, or they had got it because of positive references gained from a successful internship. This smoothed their transition into the labour market, as well as preparing them for what is expected on the job and for working in a competitive environment where exclusion and discrimination are not uncommon (Keskiner [2016](#)). The respondents in the French corporate business sector entered the labour market after graduating from university. This is the point at which many of them discovered that their university college diploma was worth a lot less than a diploma from one of the more prestigious universities (the so-called *Grandes Écoles*). This was less of an issue in the other three countries where there is not such a difference in prestige between universities. Students who had not attended such universities – and many of them had not, simply because they had never been informed of the distinction and what this could mean for them – only became aware of the differences when they met *Grandes Écoles* alumni in the work place. The article by Keskiner

and Crul (*in press*) illustrates that the cultural and social capital acquired by respondents who graduated from one of these elite institutions is a huge advantage for anyone wanting to climb the corporate ladder. Those without access to such elite circles invested in building their own social networks with other descendants of migrants. The article by Vermeulen and Keskiner illustrates how social network organizations established by highly educated descendants of migrants in France and the Netherlands serve as hubs of information and interaction.

In Germany, most members of the group making it into higher managerial positions had already been singled out during secondary education. Nearly all of the respondents in our sample had a high school diploma at academic level (*Abitur*) and a university degree. This shows, as we also emphasize in the introductory article of this special issue, that people without a higher education degree who have reached managerial positions through the labour market (for example, by starting off in an apprenticeship position) are usually not able to progress beyond a certain point in middle management. Nevertheless, another crucial mechanism in Germany seems to be learning on the job. Many of our respondents made maximum use of the possibilities for promotion by learning on the job, acquiring additional specialized qualifications and by taking advantage of every opportunity that presented itself.

In Sweden, the role of certain gatekeepers in the labour market seems to be more pronounced than in the other three countries. This coincides with the quantitative data presented in the introductory article of this special issue, which demonstrates how obtaining a professional position is hindered by exclusionary mechanisms to the greatest extent on the Swedish labour market. Here, gatekeepers, such as superiors, can block both entrance to a job and promotion to a leadership position. Many respondents complain about the “thickness” (i.e. the inaccessibility) of Swedish business culture, which makes it hard for persons of non-Swedish background to be accepted as equals. Some respondents circumvent this by consciously building contacts with gatekeepers to gain access to jobs for which educational and professional merit is not enough. Other respondents found work in international firms that often prove to be more open to people from different backgrounds.

This brief overview triggers the question as to which sector or which country context provides the best chances for upward mobility into higher managerial positions and positions of influence. It takes a two-step explanation to answer this. First we have to look at which integration context allows most people to move into higher education. In this first step, as we saw in the introductory article, Germany stands out in the negative sense, while Sweden is the most positive example. As we explained, there is much more opportunity to attain a university diploma in Sweden than in Germany thanks to the more open comprehensive school system. Alternatively, in Germany one can move up through the labour market, but this

usually only leads to lower or middle managerial positions. When we examine the second step towards gaining a high-ranking or influential position in the labour market, the picture becomes more complex. In the education sector, the Netherlands' specific opportunity structure offers unique opportunities to gain an influential position. Opportunities in the law sector are slightly better in France and Germany because there seems to be more room to start an independent law firm. In Germany, the stratified school system forms a huge stumbling block for many, but labour market opportunities for those who overcome this hurdle seem to be more positive because of the emphasis on proving one's capabilities on the job. The huge pool of Turkish-German clientele (approx. three million people) and the investments of large German firms in the Turkish market are also instrumental in the German case. The Swedish case looks less favourable once the focus shifts from education. The school system in Sweden, including higher education, may be very open, but the labour market seems to be extremely closed, presenting a serious challenge to even the most highly educated.

We also looked at the different roles played by formal educational requirements in the various sectors. Educational credentials are much more important in the corporate law sector than in the other two sectors, where we can find people without a university degree in leadership positions. Even more important, these sectors are also accessible for graduates who did not achieve top marks in their final exams. In all four countries, marks are the most important selection criterion in the corporate law sector. This higher dependency on grades makes this sector highly selective, but also apparently more meritocratic. Achieving top grades in law, however, also depends on factors beyond merit. One of the most important factors is family support, which may consist of cultural capital in the form of parents who are lawyers themselves or, in the case of France and Germany, who are able to finance good private prep courses. The corporate law sector also has the most developed, distinctive and characteristic jargon and upper-class culture. The cultural and social gap between this environment and an immigrant working-class background could not be larger and more difficult to bridge (something that also affects upwardly mobile people of non-immigrant parentage). At the same time, the distinctness of this specific culture is anything but subtle, making it rather easy to read. Our respondents relate that the jargon, dress code, and typical expressions of elite culture can be observed, imitated, and adapted to, to a large extent (also see Rezai, [in press](#)). The pathway to a senior position is plainly spelled out and it is clear what one needs to accomplish to get there. So, paradoxically, the distinctiveness of the corporate law sector actually makes it easier for newcomers to adapt to it. The specific work ethic, which includes very long working hours and a strong emphasis on making a lot of money (clients are charged

almost by the minute) also functions as an equalizer. Furthermore, speaking Turkish can be an important asset, especially in international law firms.

By contrast, the education sector has long been a mobility channel for working-class and lower middle-class children. As a result, the gap in terms of social and cultural capital with people from a working-class immigrant background is less pronounced here than in the other two sectors. But at the same time, there is a large emphasis on middle-class (bourgeois) culture with its many implicit norms and values that are not always easy to read. Some of our respondents work in a school or city district where the majority of the pupils are of immigrant descent. This can provide special opportunities for gaining an influential position. There is generally an urgent need to find good staff and create policies that tackle educational inequalities in such neighbourhoods. Respondents who can present themselves as part of the solution can rise to high positions within this niche in the educational sector. Alternatives to this are limited, as it is more difficult for teachers from immigrant backgrounds to find jobs in schools with an elite reputation or, at least, to be fully and easily accepted by the staff and parents at these schools.

In terms of possibilities to accumulate wealth, successful people in the business sector outperform respondents in the two other sectors, especially compared to those in the education sector who mostly work in secure, but considerably lower remunerated public sector jobs. What is more, they are usually more recognizably part of a "ruling elite" than the people in the two other sectors, as they bear responsibility for supervising large groups of people and overseeing departments or branches of their firm. The corporate business sector also provides special "ethnic niche" type opportunities for our respondents because of the emerging Turkish market and the increased business relationships with Turkey (partly as a result of EU accession negotiations). Respondents who took advantage of this opportunity have risen very high in the company's hierarchy in a short space of time. Some of them have become the CEO of the Turkish branch or have set up their own company to do business with Turkey. Simultaneously, it is in this sector that "glass ceilings" seem to be most relevant, because meritocracy or standardized mechanisms for promotion apply to a lesser extent. It is also quite common for employees to receive different salaries for doing the same job, and all this permits differential treatment, including discrimination. One strategy used by our respondents is moving to another company if they notice that pathways are blocked.

Looking at different countries and different sectors reveals the complexity of the interplay of factors in processes of upward mobility and acceding elite positions of power and influence. The contributors to this special issue have all highlighted the ways in which obstacles and opportunities depend upon

opportunity structures that are inherent to the national or local institutional arrangements in specific fields and areas.

New theoretical insights

American scholars have put forward the idea of “immigrant optimism” or “the immigrant bargain as a family project of intergenerational mobility” as important explanations for the success of (some) children of immigrants (Kao and Tienda 1995; Louie 2012). Several authors in the academic debate have emphasized that families of successful people usually demonstrate a strong commitment to education (Fibbi and Truong 2015; Keskiner 2015; Lee and Zhou 2014; Rezai et al. 2015; Schnell 2015). Both elements, in particular drive and the emphasis on education, also showed up in our research. In the families of the ELITES respondents, the narrative on the value of education is very consistent over time. Yet, despite its unquestioned importance, parental support only explains part of the variation in outcomes within ethnic minority groups. The practical role played by parents usually decreases as children progress in their school careers. By the time they reach upper secondary school or university most parents will be no longer able to give substantial practical help or study advice. This raises the question as to which factors exert a direct positive influence later on in the school career and when gaining access to the labour market. The empirical findings in the ELITES study show the role of what we call the *multiplier effect*, a “self-triggering” element produced during the pathways of the climbers. In earlier research we described this effect in education (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012). The multiplier effect becomes visible in two ways: (1) successful children of immigrants take more advantage of opportunities in education and on the labour market than their peers of native descent, and (2) there is an exponential effect on successful children of immigrants because moving into new socio-economic circles offers them opportunities that were previously unavailable. To set the multiplier effect in motion and keep its propeller going, resilience, social skills, social support and the use of ethnic capital are crucial. Chances must be actively pursued and social contacts sought out. Cultural and social capital theories primarily explain how people with a certain amount and type of cultural and social capital are likely to be successful. And, consequently, how the lack of cultural and social capital reproduces the inequalities in our society. Where does this leave us when we seek to explain steep upward social mobility among disadvantaged groups? The Cumulative Risk Theory (Atkinson et al. 2015) explains the likelihood that pupils leave school early increases when there is an accumulation of risk factors in their environment. In the ELITES study, there is a mirror-like opposite mechanism at work: we see an *accumulation of chances* which the respondents readily took up. Initially small chances and opportunities became doors to other possibilities

and the starting point for further gains. Some of these favourable factors seem rather coincidental and individual – for example, a supportive teacher or neighbour – but others are more structural.

Examples of structural features, for instance, relate to national institutional arrangements in education and the labour market. Some school systems offer alternative and often longer pathways to higher education. Children of immigrants take more advantage of these loopholes than working-class children of native descent. This can be explained, at least partially, by the “immigrant bargain” that we mentioned earlier: migrant children seemed, for instance, to be more willing to invest extra years in schooling in order to reach higher education. In the Netherlands we found that twice as many second-generation Turkish and Moroccan pupils used the longer route (three years longer) through vocational education to higher education than pupils of Dutch descent. Similar outcomes were found for alternative routes in France and Austria (Schnell 2014; Schnell, Keskiner, and Crul 2013). Our findings on the labour market fit into this picture and underscore the importance of the multiplier effect for the second generation. Respondents often reported doing an extra internship or following extra on-the-job training. They felt that they needed to make these extra efforts in order to outperform people of native descent and climb the corporate ladder at the same pace.

A second important element of the multiplier effect seems to be a sort of “snowball effect”: initial success is utilized to gain access to a new and – especially in terms of social and cultural capital – a more enriched social world, which then again allows pushing forward their career. The starting point is a success-driven habitus, which usually is a family project, transmitted to the children from young age on. Their parents often planted the initial seed that gave them the drive to become upwardly mobile, but the children developed and learned most of the necessary skills for upward mobility themselves on their pathway to the top. A very common example from our research illustrates the multiplier effect. When, at the end of primary education, pupils of immigrant descent receive a recommendation for an academic track in secondary school, a mostly unconsidered side-effect is that they “escape” the more segregated vocational school tracks in the Netherlands and Germany or the vocationally oriented programmes in lyceum in France or gymnasium in Sweden. Following an academic track allows them to become familiar with middle-class culture and to learn codes and a habitus that will prove useful when entering the top ranks in many professions. The fact that in many cases they are rather an exception to the rule is likely to generate more positive feedback both from their families and – with a little bit of luck – from teachers also. Access to and success in the academic track raises their parent’s prestige in the community and makes them proud, which motivates them to encourage their children to aim even higher. Academic success often provides girls with a justification

to postpone marriage in order to continue studying. Once they have a university degree, these young women are keen to pursue a professional career. By then they are also older and more capable of making decisions on their own. Once on the labour market, their contact with former fellow students of native origin helps them to navigate middle-class working environments. This kind of working environment also increases their likelihood of finding a partner with a similarly high level of education, either of native descent or a co-ethnic. Such women will generally form a household with two good incomes, which allows them a middle-class lifestyle with high-quality housing and good educational opportunities for their children. In other words, by the time they form their own household, a seemingly small initial difference early on in their educational career has grown into an undeniably huge gap between them and most of their co-ethnic peers who followed a non-academic track in secondary school. We argue that this steep mobility can be explained as much by what could be labelled as “self-propelled mobility along the way” on the part of children of immigrants as by the support they received from their parents and, most likely, from some other key persons, such as a teacher early on in their educational career.

The other building block that we introduced to explain steep upward mobility is the integration context theory. We developed this theory on the basis of our comparative research of, among other topics, the educational trajectories of children of immigrants across different countries. The emphasis in the integration context theory lies on the central role of national or local institutional arrangements such as pre-school facilities, the amount of school contact hours, selection and tracking mechanisms, and alternative pathways to higher education (see Crul 2013; Crul and Schneider 2010; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012, 2013; Crul et al. 2012a, 2012b; Schnell 2014; Schnell, Keskiner, and Crul 2013). The key idea is that different school systems demand different strategies and forms of engagement from children and their parents. On the basis of the ELITES project we can expand our understanding of the effects of institutional arrangements in education, but, more importantly, having compared different sectors we can now extrapolate it to explain the effects of institutional arrangements in the labour market (see also Schneider and Lang 2016).

Opportunities to acquire an influential position in the education sector differ radically across the four countries because of the different structures of their education systems. In the other two sectors, institutional arrangements such as internship phases in higher vocational education in the Netherlands or the on-the-job-training in Germany are important influential factors that explain different pathways to success. Each of the three sectors has its own institutional logic, rendering the possibilities and conditions required to climb the ladder substantially different.

The selection on the dependent variable has brought us a number of new insights into how people are able to succeed against all odds. In the

introduction to this special issue, we introduced the concept of “new social mobility”. New social mobility is characterized by three aspects. First of all, new social mobility refers to the fact that children of labour migrants belong to ethnic groups that are not yet present in the elites of these countries. Secondly, their pathways to professional positions are different from those commonly used by traditional elite groups. Thirdly, the new social mobility is explained by an accumulation of cultural and social capital through what we have called the “multiplier effect”. Steep social mobility for this group is on the one hand the result of the alternative, often longer routes and extra investments they need to make. These extra efforts often lead to a self-propelled dynamic that creates new opportunities and access to resources that were previously unavailable to members of their group, enabling them to rush forward exponentially in relation to other age peers of immigrant descent. Whereas Bourdieu (1990) mainly uses the concepts of habitus and social and cultural capital to explain the reproduction of social classes, we show how it is possible to appropriate social capital and learn cultural capital over time while moving up the social ladder, thus breaking the perpetual cycle of the habitus inherited through class position. This is crucial in order to explain the steep upward mobility of this group. Pierre Bourdieu, himself the son of a small farmer from the French countryside, is the embodiment of a person who acquired both social and cultural capital while moving up the social ladder and becoming an esteemed academic.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Research Council [grant number 284223].

References

- Atkinson, L., J. Beitchman, A. Gonzalez, A. Young, B. Wilson, M. Escobar, V. Chisholm, et al. 2015. Cumulative Risk, Cumulative Outcome: A 20-Year Longitudinal Study. *PLoS ONE* 10 (6): e0127650.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Crul, M. 2000. *De sleutel tot succes. Over hulp, keuzes en kansen in de schoolloopbanen van Turkse en Marokkaanse tweede generatie jongeren*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Crul, M. 2013. “Snakes and Ladders in Educational Systems: Access to Higher Education for Second Generation Turks in Europe.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39 (9): 1383–1401.

- Crul, M., and J. Schneider. 2010. "Comparative Context Integration Theory: Participation and Belonging in Europe's Large Cities." *Journal Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34 (4): 1249–1268.
- Crul, M., J. Schneider, and F. Lelie, eds. 2012. *The European Second Generation Compared: Does the Integration Context Matter?* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Crul, M., J. Schneider, and F. Lelie. 2013. *Super-diversity: A New Vision on Integration*. Amsterdam: Free University Press.
- Crul, M., P. Schnell, B. Herzog-Punzensberger, M. Wilmes, M. Sloomman, and R. Aparicio-Gomez. 2012a. "School Careers of Second-Generation Youth in Europe: Which Education Systems Provide the Best Chance for Success?" In *The European Second Generation Compared: Does the Integration Context Matter?* edited by M. Crul, J. Schneider, and F. Lelie, 101–165. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Crul, M., M. Zhou, J. Lee, P. Schnell, and E. Keskiner. 2012b. "Success Against All Odds: Second Generation Mexicans in Los Angeles and Second Generation Turks in Western European Cities." In *The Changing Face of World Cities: Young Adult Children of Immigrants in Europe and the United States*, edited by M. Crul, and J. Mollenkopf, 36–54. New York: Russell Sage.
- Fibbi, R., and J. Truong. 2015. "Parental Involvement and Educational Success in Kosovar Families in Switzerland." *Journal of Comparative Migration Studies* 3 (2): 13.
- Holdaway, J., M. Crul, and C. Roberts. 2009. "Cross-National Comparison of Provision and Outcomes for the Education of the Second Generation." *Teachers College Record* 111 (6): 1–2.
- Kao, G., and M. Tienda. 1995. "Optimism and Achievement: The Educational Performance of Immigrant Youth." *Social Science Quarterly* 76: 1–19.
- Keskiner, E. 2013. *Generation in Transition: Youth Transitions Among Native-Born Descendants of Immigrants From Turkey*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University.
- Keskiner, E. 2015. "Is it Merit or Cultural Capital? The Role of Parents During Early Tracking in Amsterdam and Strasbourg Among Descendants of Immigrants from Turkey." *Journal of Comparative Migration Studies* 3 (2): 1–19.
- Keskiner, E., and M. Crul. *In press*. "How to reach the top? Fields, forms of capital, and strategies in accessing leadership positions in France among descendants of migrants from Turkey". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
- Keskiner, E. 2016. "Student Employment Among Descendants of Turkish Migrants in Amsterdam and Strasbourg." *Journal of Education and Work*. doi:10.1080/13639080.2016.1167844.
- Konyali, A. *In press*. "International opportunities on the way up: Alternative career paths of descendants of migrants from Turkey in the field of professional business services". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
- Konyali, A. 2014. "Turning Disadvantage into Advantage: Achievement Narratives of Descendants of Migrants from Turkey in the Corporate Business Sector." *New Diversities* 16 (1): 107–121.
- Lee, J., and M. Zhou. 2014. "From Unassimilable to Exceptional: The Rise of Asian Americans and 'Stereotype Promise'." *New Diversities* 16 (1): 7–22.
- Louie, V. 2012. *Keeping the Immigrant Bargain: The Costs and Rewards of Success in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press.
- Raad, S. 2015. *Othering and Inclusion of Ethnic Minority Professionals*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.
- Rezai, S., M. Crul, S. Severiens, and E. Keskiner. 2015. "Passing the Torch to a New Generation: A Qualitative Study of the Highly Educated Second Generation's

- Receiving of Parental Support and Giving of Support to the Younger Generation." *Journal of Comparative Migration Studies* 3 (12). doi:10.1186/s40878-015-0011-x.
- Rezai, S. *In press*. "Self-made lawyers? Pathways of socially mobile descendants of migrants from Turkey in Europe". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
- Schneider, J., M. Crul, and L. Van Praag. 2014. "Upward Mobility and Questions of Belonging in Migrant Families." *New Diversities* 16 (1): 1–6.
- Schneider, J., and C. Lang. 2014. "Social Mobility, Habitus and Identity Formation in the Turkish German Second Generation." *New Diversities* 16 (1): 89–105.
- Schneider, J., and C. Lang. 2016. "Barriers and Opportunities: Trajectories of Teachers with Turkish Background and the Institutional Context in Germany." In *Diversifying the Teaching Force in Transnational Contexts: Critical Perspectives*, edited by C. Schmidt, and J. Schneider, 165–179. Toronto: Sense Publishers.
- Schnell, P. 2014. *Educational Mobility of Second-Generation Turks*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Schnell, P. 2015. "Behind the Scenes: Family Involvement and Educational Achievement of Second Generation Turks in Austria, France and Sweden." *Journal of Comparative Migration Studies* 2 (3): 10.
- Schnell, P., E. Keskiner, and M. Crul. 2013. "Success Against All Odds: Educational Pathways of Disadvantaged Second Generation Turks in France and The Netherlands." *Educational Inquiry* 1 (4): 125–147.
- Vermeulen, F., and E. Keskiner. *In press*. "Bonding or bridging? Professional network organizations of second-generation Turks in the Netherlands and France". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
- Waldring, I., M. Crul, and H. Ghorashi. 2014. "The Fine Art of Boundary Sensitivity. Successful Second Generation Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands." *New Diversities* 16 (1): 71–87.
- Waldring, I. *In press*. "Practices of Change in the Education Sector: Professionals dealing with ethnic school segregation". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.