

Converging destinies? Educational mobility and reproduction among immigrant and native families over three generations in France

Background

Intergenerational social reproduction within immigrants families is a key dimension to assess the socioeconomic integration of immigrants' descendants in the destination society (Drouhot and Nee 2019). Yet, the few existing studies that compare social mobility in immigrant and native families are restricted to two generations (e.g. Li and Heath 2016).

Objective

In this study, we compare the intergenerational transmission of social positions in terms of education over three generations between immigrant-origin families (families with at least one migrant grandparent) and native families. Adopting a within-family approach, we examine educational mobility by comparing the educational attainment of grandparents, parents and children. The massive educational expansion in France in the last decades has opened broad avenues for social mobility among many French families (Ichou and Vallet 2013). Given the growing role of educational attainment in structuring inequality in postindustrial economies such as France, it is crucial to understand whether immigrant-origin families have also experienced educational mobility.

Hypotheses

Based on the existing literature, we formulate three broad sets of expectations when it comes to absolute and relative educational mobility in the French context over three generations (noted as G1 for grandparents, G2 for parents and G3 for children):

- *The initial conditions expectation*: Because most immigrant groups (G1) in France are on average less well educated than natives (OECD 2018), we expect more *upward absolute mobility* among migrant families over two and three generations (i.e. between G1 and G2 and between G1 and G3) than among native families.
- *The “immigrant optimism” expectation*: Because migrant communities tend to express higher educational aspirations than natives (Kao and Tienda 1995) which may have structural origins in their pre-migration status and positive educational selectivity (Ichou 2014), we expect *higher social fluidity* among migrants and their children (i.e. between G1 and G2) compared to natives, a pattern that may not necessarily apply to the succeeding generation (i.e. between G2 and G3).
- *The contexts of reception expectation*: Taking into account differences in the contexts of reception (largely relating to discrimination faced by non-European migrants, Quillian et al. 2019), we expect to observe more *upward intergenerational mobility* in European than in non-European migrant-background families across three generations. Conversely, we again expect higher social fluidity among non-European migrant-background families as discrimination hinders the ability of families with a relative educational advantage among their origin group to transmit this advantage to the next generation, inducing a form of “regression towards the mean”.

Data and methods

We use the *Trajectoires et Origines 2* survey collected in 2019-2020 in metropolitan France. 27,181 individuals were surveyed among which immigrants and their children were oversampled. The main respondents provided information on their own educational attainment, the educational attainment of their parents and of their children. We take advantage of this retrospective and prospective characteristic of the survey to assess intergenerational educational mobility over three generations.

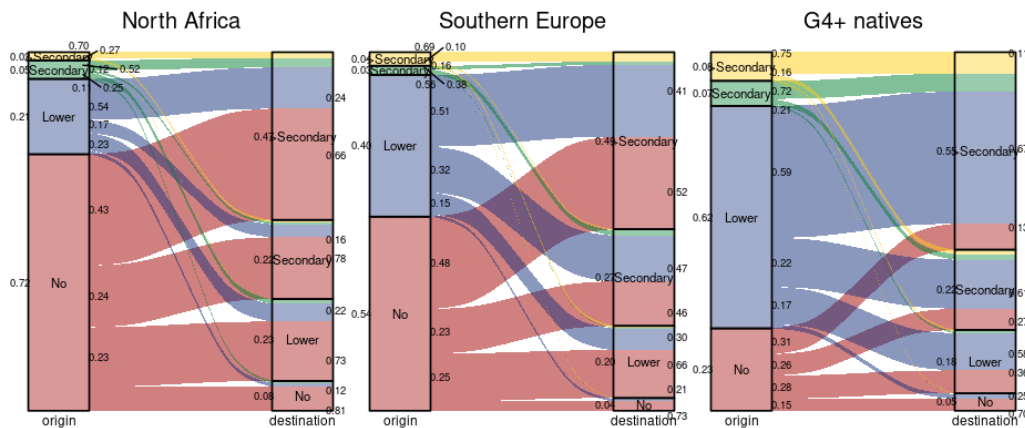
First, we describe the flows of absolute educational mobility, embedded in the structural distribution of educational attainment, as they are experienced by families. This descriptive viewpoint is assessed using Sankey plots. For each origin group, these plots represent the flows of upward, downward and stable mobility given children's educational background. Second, we also look at mobility “net of the margins,” i.e. we compute social fluidity for each origin group using log-linear and log-multiplicative models, assessing whether relative mobility between $G1 \times G2$, $G2 \times G3$ and $G1 \times G3$ are different from natives depending on geographic origins.

Results

We observe large initial gaps in the grandparents' educational origins (G1, left bar of each plot) between immigrants and natives that are greatly reduced two generations later in grandchildren's educational attainment (G3, right bar). Our visual representation highlights that among grandchildren with university degrees, two thirds of North African descendants and half of South European descendants had grandparents without any degree, while this is the case of only 13 percent of native grandchildren. Educational expansion is particularly striking among families of immigrant descent, since it leads to major upward mobility flows between the two extremes of the education hierarchy over three generations. Inequalities in educational attainment between immigrant origin groups are lower for grandchildren than for their grandparents, even if gaps persist (e.g., the grandchildren of immigrants are less likely to have a higher education degree compared to natives).

Are intergenerational reproduction mechanisms over three generations the same for descendants of immigrants as for natives? Do they differ depending on grandparents' region of origin? For each pair of generations (G1×G2, G2×G3 and G1×G3), our log-linear and log-multiplicative models control the educational structure of origins and of destinations among each group, and assess whether, controlling for these margins of the mobility table, the association between origins and destinations is stronger or weaker for a given immigrant group than for the native population. Educational reproduction between the first and the second generation is lower among North African and Southern European descendants than among natives. No difference is observed for descendants from Western Europe nor from other regions. This pattern changes for reproduction between the second and the third generation, where we still find less reproduction among North African descendants, but a similar reproduction among Southern European descendants, and more reproduction among Western European descendants, than among natives.

Figure 1 - Sankey plot of the flows of educational mobility between grandparents and grandchildren (G1xG3)



Conclusion

Our results confirm our expectation that the social position of immigrants from disadvantaged groups is less stable over generations than that of natives. The higher relative mobility (net of structural effects) experienced by immigrants' descendants results both from higher chances of upper mobility of those with less-educated parents (e.g. due to positive selection into migration and to discrimination of parents) and to a smaller extent from a lower persistence of high social positions (e.g. due to discrimination of children). Altogether, these results signal a pattern of “declining significance of origins” and educational reproduction among Southern Europeans on one hand, and enduring ethnic disadvantage among North Africans on the other hand.

In additional analyses, we undertake decomposition analyses to identify the main drivers of upward educational mobility between migrant and native families to get a more fine-grained perspective on educational expansion across origins.