

Book Review

A. F. Heath and Y. Brinbaum (eds.): *Unequal Attainments: Ethnic Educational Inequalities in Ten Western Countries*

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It is difficult to overstate the importance of education for achieving economic success and participating in society, especially for children of immigrants. On the level of nation states, education is the prerequisite for providing equal opportunities and ensuring the integration of ethnic minorities. Taking this as point of departure, the goal of the book *Unequal Attainments: Ethnic Educational Inequalities in Ten Western Countries*, edited by Anthony Heath and Yaël Brinbaum, is to quantify and explain differences in educational outcomes between the young second generation (i.e. children of immigrants who are born in the country of residence or arrived before the start of compulsory school age) and their peers without migration background. In this context, ‘ethnic penalty’ and ‘ethnic premia’ are defined—as in earlier studies by Heath and colleagues—as any (dis)advantage experienced by an ethnic minority when compared with their peers with similar socio-economic characteristics in the majority group (Heath and McMahan, 1996).

Empirical studies on ethnic penalties in educational systems are neither new nor rare in the social sciences literature. However, this 281-page volume will probably be highly appreciated among academics and policy makers for its cross-country comparison and its amplitude, as it brings together multiple dimensions of comparison simultaneously: in different stages along the educational career (‘Do minorities catch up or fall behind at different stages?’), across different groups of origin (‘Are some groups more (dis)advantaged than others?’), across different countries and regimes (‘Which countries provide more/less favourable conditions?’).

The chapters in this book rely mainly on a shared set of theories to explain the ethnic gap. On the micro level, the social mobility theory referred to is well established:

a student’s school performance does not only depend on one’s own ability and cognitive skills but also the parents’ social class, their ‘social origin’. The originality of the book roots in the ability to test different meso- and macro-level mechanisms. The main argument made throughout the book is that the characteristics of the immigrant groups, i.e. the degree of positive or negative selection of the parental first generation, plays a key role in understanding the educational attainments of their children, the second generation. The reasoning put forward is that more positively selected immigrant groups are more motivated and have higher aspirations. Regrettably, not many studies have integrated this point to date. A second recurring argument that the authors convincingly make is that the educational system affects the ethnic gap in educational outcomes: most notably early selection in the educational system hampers equal opportunities. Furthermore, the cultural and institutional distance between country of origin and destination is expected to matter: similar linguistic conditions in both countries should facilitate parity between the second generation and their native peers. In addition, the authors argue that countries with strong insider/outsider distinctions in their migration and integration policies provide less favourable conditions for parity. More targeted theoretical explanations are offered in each chapter.

To substantiate their arguments, the authors draw on mostly national, large-scale, and representative, ex-post harmonized data, which allow for a detailed breakdown of the second generation into different origin groups. This is rather exceptional in cross-national studies due to the mostly collapsed compilation of ethnic groups in existing harmonized data and thus represents one of the many assets of this book. The methodically

thoroughly set-up comparison does not come, surprising, knowing that the authors of the book are members of the EQUALSOC Network of Excellence, which aims at promoting high-quality cross-national research.

Moreover, covering different types of immigration, integration, and welfare regimes, the 10 countries studied in this volume are wisely selected—although, as stated, the selection has largely been influenced by the availability of expertise and data. They comprise traditional immigration countries with long histories of immigration (United States and Canada), ‘post-colonial’ regimes with large immigration from former colonies (England and Wales, France, the Netherlands), guest workers regimes that thought of immigration as a temporary labour supply in the post-war economic upsurge (Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland, and to some extent France and the Netherlands) as well as Finland and Sweden as two ‘exceptions’ from Northern Europe, which accepted more recently significant waves of asylum seekers—with the difference that Sweden has experienced large waves of labour migrants from other Nordic countries, while immigration to Finland has historically been low. Not all outcomes are analysed in all countries (Switzerland is for instance only integrated in the first outcome); for most of the outcomes, six to eight countries are included.

The book starts with an introductory chapter, in which Heath and Brinbaum set out the comparative framework for studying ethnic inequalities in educational careers embracing the different studies in the book and summarize the key findings. Lessard-Phillips and her colleagues then give a broad overview over educational systems, migration flows, and immigration/integration policies in the 10 selected countries. The innovative part here is the measure of positive or negative selectivity for each minority group in each country, which will be related to different educational outcomes throughout the book. The authors obtain this measure through comparing educational attainments of migrants from a particular country with attainments of those who stayed in the country of origin.

Entering the core of the book, no less than five individual outcomes are investigated building on prior research on educational transitions: students’ performance (scores) at the end of lower secondary education (Chapter 3), early school leaving vs. continuing education after reaching the end of compulsory schooling (Chapter 4), the choice between vocational and academic tracks in upper secondary education (Chapter 5), completion of upper secondary (Chapter 6) and university education (Chapter 7). These chapters are complemented by two transversal ones including all these outcomes—

one reflecting gender differences (Chapter 8) and one revealing systematic contextual explanations (Chapter 9).

In more detail, Heath and ROTHON in Chapter 3 study the academic performance of minorities at the end of compulsory school age (around 15–16) in terms of grades or test scores. The authors find that the second generation with Chinese, South-East, and South Asian background outperforms the majority group, while their peers from Turkish, North African, Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan African origins perform less well. For many groups, the authors can attribute (large parts of) these (dis)advantages to the parents’ socio-economic background. In other words, and this is an established finding, the ethnic gap is to a large part a class effect. The exceptions, which can only be identified in studies similar to this one with sufficiently detailed subgroups, are the Chinese, East and South Asians, and East European second generation. For these groups, controlling for parental class background does not explain the gap. Similar patterns of positively and negatively affected groups are found in the outcomes investigated in the next chapters.

Interestingly, the authors reveal that these group differences appear in all investigated countries and relate the unexplained gap to the degree of positive or negative selection of first-generation immigrants, which might—at this stage—not be entirely convincing to the reader, as they do not control for potential alternative explanations. But a more complex analysis follows in the final chapter.

The next chapter by Jonsson and his colleagues on early school leaving is, as announced by Heath and Brinbaum, truly a ‘watershed’ (p. 14). The authors find that parental socio-economic background and student performance explain the ethnic gap by and large. ‘This lends some credibility to choice theories suggesting that children in ethnic minority groups—just like majority-group students—leave school simply as a response to the lack of resources in their family or to poor school performance’ (p. 112). However, at the end of the chapter, the authors strike a more pessimistic tone: the high drop-out and early school leaving rates among minorities should not be forgotten—they are ‘real and have real consequences’: many of the young second generation ‘will follow their parents into joblessness and marginalized positions’ (p. 115).

In Chapter 5, Lessard-Phillips and colleagues ask whether second-generation students are disproportionately channelled into lower-status vocational tracks and excluded from high-status academic tracks that lead to higher education. They argue that, as with socio-economic background, it is important to distinguish between primary effects of ethnicity and secondary effects

(aspirations), as the latter, a potential result of immigrant group selectivity, may offset prior educational disadvantages. The results suggest that early tracking can have severe consequences for young people's later educational and occupational trajectories. The authors elaborate furthermore that because of positive selection, minority students are on average more ambitious than their peers and will aim high where possible, leading to positive secondary effects. This explanation also seems to hold for the next chapters.

Whether the high rates of continuation among ethnic minorities (esp. in England and Wales, Finland, France, and Sweden) in upper secondary education are followed by a successful completion is what Brinbaum and Heath examine in Chapter 6. The results are in line with the previous chapters; those groups with earlier penalties (Turkish and North African groups) are the ones more likely to face them at completion, too, while Asians with premia at earlier stages are also advantaged at the completion of secondary school. With respect to the country differences, the authors attribute the success of Canada and the United States in mitigating ethnic penalties to their comprehensive system of upper secondary education and absence of high stakes examinations. 'Where minorities can freely choose, ethnic penalties are minimised; where minorities are being chosen (for example by competitive examination) ethnic penalties reassert themselves' (p. 17).

The inequalities in the success rates in university completion that Lutz finds in Chapter 7 are largely in line with the results of earlier chapters. But what seems to be an important novel finding is that university education can give a second chance to disadvantaged ethnic minorities as the evidence on catching up suggests. Yet here, the expectation that market-oriented and highly stratified university systems (like in the United States and Canada) provide better second chances is not confirmed. The authors echo previous conclusions that ethnicity has positive secondary effects and that second-generation youths, when given opportunities, are even keener than their peers without migration background to seize them.

Whether gender roles and gender inequalities are transmitted from the country of origin to the second generation or whether there are trends of convergence towards the Western patterns are the leading questions of Fleischmann and Kristen in Chapter 8. The highlights of this chapter are the graphs mapping the ethnic premia/penalty versus gender differences for each outcome that summarize the vast amount of information at a glance. The findings are unambiguous: there is neither *systematic* evidence for an enduring heritage of traditional values nor for a consistent double disadvantage

by gender and ethnicity. But Fleischmann and Kristen are right to remind the reader of the exceptions, such as some groups of second-generation boys who are disadvantaged with respect to upper secondary school completion, and they conclude accordingly that 'the second generation does not yet perform on par with their peers from the majority population' (p. 217).

In the final Chapter 9, Van de Werfhorst and co-authors pull together the results of the previous chapters and conduct a meta-analysis of the net ethnic penalties and premia at the five investigated educational outcomes. Indeed, as advocated already 10 years earlier by Van Tubergen and colleagues (2004), research on ethnic inequalities must attempt to change the research strategy towards investigating also indicators of origin and community effects in addition to destination country effects. The authors do so and include a large number of potential origin (education index), community (selectivity index, language distance) and destination effects (multiculturalism, migrant integration policy index, employment protection legislation, three indicators of the educational system: tracking, central examinations, and standardized input), reaching the limits of the data by regressing these nine variables on 51–80 records of group inequalities on five educational outcomes. Nevertheless, with a cautious interpretation of the causal inferences regarding the institutional features and taking into account the insights from the previous chapters, the results consistently point towards three main conclusions of the book.

With respect to the educational system, first, the authors of the book persuasively show that early tracking is 'harmful' to equal opportunities for the second generation: 'inequality, not only by social class but on top of that also by ethnic origin, is exacerbated by early selecting institutions' (p. 264). On the political level, second, the conclusions are more modest: 'multicultural policies seem to make a difference' (p. 264). Here, future research needs to disentangle the mechanisms in more detail than the overall policy indicators used here allow for. The book makes thirdly convincingly the case that the degree of positive and negative selectivity of the first-generation immigrants is decisive for the outcomes of the second generation. Positive selection of parental generation is associated with high levels of motivation and aspiration and can therefore explain much of the success of Chinese and South Asian students as well as negative selection can explain parts of the disadvantages of some of the North African and Turkish minorities. Interestingly, rather than multicultural policies, it also seems to explain why Canada is so effective in integrating minorities. The authors warn that the importance of policies will be exaggerated if the selectivity of

immigrants to different countries is not considered. But what does this imply for policy making? Is it not too tempting—if one does not read the chapter carefully enough—to jump to the conclusion that (positive) selection is a more effective tool to promote equal opportunities than tampering with integration policies? Such a conclusion would be too trivial, especially as there are limits to actively recruit and select migrants based solely on their socio-economic profile (e.g. humanitarian migrants).

However, in a nutshell, the overall story of the book ‘is quite an optimistic one’ (p. 20). While many second-generation groups are disadvantaged, and these real disadvantages should not be neglected, they face similar difficulties as the working class majority youth. Only some minorities suffer major additional ethnic penalties on top of these class disadvantages but there is no systematic pattern behind this. Important is the finding that when opportunities open up, minorities are particularly likely to seize them.

If at all, there are not many aspects that this volume misses out. Some academic readers might wish to know more regarding the methodological background and choices made (operationalization of concepts, effect sizes, model evaluation, etc.) —although the methods are generally transparently described. Such information could have been a valuable annex inviting other researchers to supplement these exemplary analyses with additional country studies. Vis-à-vis the detailed and consistent presentation of the empirical results, second, the overarching theoretical embedding seems somewhat more humble. To what extent do these results confirm, refute, or complement existing theories (e.g. theory of segmented assimilation by [Portes and Zhou, 1993](#), or integration context theory by [Crul and Schneider, 2010](#))? Precisely the rich empirical results obtained here seem to offer the start of a stimulating theoretical debate. However, these minor points do not make the book less

valuable. The present volume edited by Anthony Heath and Yaël Brinbaum is preeminent in its comprehensiveness and quality in providing a thorough overview of ‘ethnic penalties’ or ‘ethnic premia’ among minority groups in different educational outcomes and various Western countries and origin, community, and destination factors behind. The book is therefore without doubt destined to become a major standard reference in this field, just as earlier seminal books by [Shavit and Blossfeld \(1993\)](#) and [Heath and Cheung \(2007\)](#).

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