

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Transnational social positioning through a family lens: How cross-border family relations shape subjective social positions in migration contexts

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[Correction added on 26 December 2023, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

Abstract

This article examines transnational social positioning through a family lens. Based on interviews with people who moved to Germany as young adults, we show that socialization and expectations in families coin individual understandings of success as an important baseline for social positioning, while migration challenges these understandings and social position evaluations in complex ways. With a specific focus on evolving processes of social comparison, we look at the role of the family in shaping three forms of transnational social position: (i) transnational status paradox, (ii) attached transnational social positions, and (iii) detached transnational social positions. By demonstrating the various ways in which family relationships affect social positioning in migration contexts, this study contributes to discussions on the links between migration and perceptions of social position, and to our understanding of transnational social structures.

KEYWORDS

positioning, subjective social position, transnational family, transnationality

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INTRODUCTION

In the face of the transnational turn, researchers have demonstrated that migratory movements and cross-border practices challenge traditional notions of social structures as inherently bound to nation-states (Faist, 1998; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Weiß, 2005). Therefore, various scholars have argued for the globalization of class relations and the formation of transnational classes (Gill, 2017; Sklair, 2001; Weiß, 2005). To add to this debate around the links between cross-border practices and the distribution of life chances in a globalized world, this article engages with social positioning as the process through which people subjectively evaluate their own social positions in migration contexts (Faist et al., 2021; Plüss, 2013). In contrast to conventional concepts such as 'class' or 'social status', we use social position to emphasize the meanings that individuals ascribe to their own position in social hierarchies. Migration, especially towards more affluent parts of the world, is often associated with opportunities for an improved social position through enhanced access to resources and better life chances (Jonsson, 2020). However, this claim occludes the processes that shape the subjective understanding of social position and simplifies the heterogeneous experiences of inequality and exclusion of people in migration contexts. Alternatively, examining subjective social positions allows consideration of the ways in which cross-border relationships complicate this process, especially by adding complexity to social comparison as a key mechanism involved in social positioning (Lindemann, 2007; Lindemann & Saar, 2014; Nieswand, 2011). This is because experiences of establishing new and maintaining old relationships confront people with a complex web of expectations, which contribute to perceptions of distinct and potentially contradictory positions in different contexts (cf. Erel, 2010; Kelly & Lusi, 2006; Nowicka, 2013). In this article, to advance our understanding of the ways in which migration shapes perceptions of social structures and one's own location therein, we explore the largely neglected role of cross-border family bonds in positioning processes in the context of migration.

The focus on family ties provides a unique starting point for examining perceptions of social positions and their changeability in the context of the simultaneous relationships across spaces that have become an everyday reality for many families affected by migration (Cienfuegos et al., 2023). We consider families to play a key role in shaping the norms and values that affect what people consider relevant determinants of their position (Bottero, 2012), which may be challenged and altered in migration contexts (Lindemann & Saar, 2014; Nowicka, 2013). To capture these dynamics, we explore the 'attitudes, values and worldviews' that shape subjective social positions in the specific context of family relationships and cross-border migration (Demakokos et al., 2018, p. 730). Looking at social positioning through a family lens allows us to examine the variety of ways in which individuals experience and interpret their social positions within and across the different contexts involved in migration. Therefore, it also provides relevant insights into perceptions of social mobility beyond the traditional nation-state frame.

Based on qualitative research with people who moved from various countries of origin to Germany, we concentrate on the role of family relations in shaping social positioning in migration contexts. To this end, we first provide an overview of the main ideas and concepts related to subjective social position and its relevance to migration. Second, we introduce the role of families in shaping social positioning. The third part of the article describes the methods and research design of the qualitative study that underlies the empirical findings we discuss. Based on interview analysis, the fourth part elaborates on subjective social positions among people who moved to Germany from less affluent countries in search of better prospects. In doing so, we highlight the complex ways in which migration affects individual experiences of social mobility within and beyond spaces, especially by altering subjective evaluations of 'success' (Chudacoff, 1982; López & Williams, 2023). The findings demonstrate how subjective social positions and underlying understandings of success are formed and negotiated within cross-border family relations, which produce various forms of transnational social positions. With its unique focus on family ties, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics inherent in social positioning in the context of cross-border migration.

MIGRATION AND SOCIAL POSITIONING

In the literature, social position is frequently used interchangeably with social status or class position. While the latter often connotes a particular reference to economic inequality and the formation of a collective sense of class membership (Wright, 2005), subjective social position reflects people's personal perceptions of social structures and their own position in relation to others (Lindemann & Saar, 2014; Kornhauser, 1950; Wright, 2005). This focus on subjective perceptions of inequality and stratification emphasizes that people experience societies in different ways. By focusing on cross-border family ties as a specific reference group dynamic, this article underscores the temporal dimension of perceptions of social positions. Specifically, we understand subjective social positions as the temporal outcomes of positioning processes, which are based on interpretations and negotiations of one's own location in social structures (Faist et al., 2021).

In search of the drivers of subjective social positions, research has shown that socio-economic determinants, such as income, gender, age, and education, predict subjective assessments to some extent (cf. Lindemann & Saar, 2014, p. 4). However, scholars have also demonstrated that the individual selection and evaluation of these determinants are strongly driven by social and cultural norms and values (Evans et al., 1992; Goldman et al., 2006; Lindemann, 2007). Therefore, the ways in which people evaluate their social positions, which aspects they employ to make sense of their position, and how they construct reference groups vary across contexts and over time. In their study of the subjective social status of people in Taiwan, for example, Goldman et al. (2006) argued that the high level of importance ascribed to having sons and levels of education among their respondents was rooted in social and cultural norms associated with Chinese societies (p. 83). Furthermore, they explained the tendency of their participants to estimate their positions as being relatively low with another 'key feature of traditional Chinese culture, namely the high value placed on modesty and humility' (p. 86). Consequently, whether objective improvements of social position by means of acquiring a higher income, for example, are also subjectively associated with upward social mobility largely depends on the shared understandings of what determines social positions.

Hence, subjective social positions are strongly contingent upon the reference groups that serve as a basis for social comparison (Major, 1994; see also Lindemann & Saar, 2014). In the specific case of migration, research has shown how various reference groups, composed of friends, relatives, and colleagues with deviating norms and values, promote experiences of multiple and sometimes conflicting social positions in different contexts (Faist et al., 2021; Stock, 2023; Wang & Shen, 2023). Therefore, the study of subjective social positions challenges the overly optimistic portrayal of migration as a means for upward social mobility (Jonsson, 2020, p. 205). Specifically, migration has been shown to affect both access to and evaluations of resources and opportunities (see e.g. Carlson et al., 2017; Erel, 2010; Nowicka, 2013). For example, in her study on domestic workers from the Philippines, Parreñas (2001) found that downward mobility from middle-class to working-class employment correlated with upward mobility in terms of their incomes and abilities to provide for their families. Rye (2019) described similar findings in the study of class positions among people who migrated to Norway. According to the author, the participants in this research experienced 'a downward social trajectory, from the homeland middle class to the Norwegian working class [...] and an upward social trajectory in the interpretative framework of the homeland class structure' (p. 38). This way of simultaneously losing and gaining status in the countries involved in migration is what Nieswand (2011) termed the 'status paradox of migration' (p. 2).

These findings resonate with previous publications on the role of transnational engagement in changing identifications and perceptions (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Nonini & Ong, 1997; Vertovec, 2009). During migration and settlement, people often encounter differences and deviating cultural and social understandings, which can lead to the transformation of social position evaluations (Erel & Reynolds, 2018; Kelly & Lusi, 2006; Nowicka, 2013). While these tensions have often been described with particular reference to countries of origin and destination, in this article, we emphasize the interconnectedness between different views and expectations imposed by the transnational ties that connect individuals to both contexts simultaneously (Barglowski, 2019a; Faist, 2021). Based on the findings of the

study underlying this article, we argue that subjective social positions in migration contexts are subject to challenged, contradictory, and evolving understandings of success—a concept that is socially and culturally loaded and has been shown to play a key role for interpretations of social mobility (Chudacoff, 1982; Schnittker, 2008). Considering that migration significantly affects evaluations of success (López & Williams, 2023), we will show how this impacts subjective social positions. To add to the literature on the transnationalization of social positions, we specifically explore the role of family relationships in shaping and challenging subjective understandings and assessments of social position within migration experiences.

FAMILY RELATIONS AND SOCIAL POSITIONING IN MIGRATION CONTEXTS

Starting from the assumption that social positioning is largely driven by social comparison with selected reference groups (Sauer & May, 2017), the family provides an important lens to examine the role of migration experiences for perceptions of social position. While migration can rupture old relationships and contribute to the formation of new social bonds, specific loyalties, values, and attitudes shaped in family relationships provide a special basis for a person's view of the world (Bottero, 2012; Soehl & Waldinger, 2012). Previous research has highlighted the influence of cross-border life worlds on family dynamics (Barglowski, 2019a; Slany & Pustułka, 2016; Zontini & Reynolds, 2018), and especially on the experiences of children (Moskal & Sime, 2016; Pollock et al., 2010; Slany & Strzemecka, 2018; Sun, 2014). In this article, we turn our gaze towards the ways in which migration and cross-border family ties shape perceptions of social position, especially by examining shifting and sometimes conflicting understandings and evaluations of success (López & Williams, 2023). Therefore, we specifically look at individual experiences related to family relationships and migration.

For this purpose, we consider two main aspects. First, we look at the ways in which families shape understandings of the 'norm' that informs perceptions of an average position and related perspectives towards the necessary conditions for social mobility (Hyman & Singer, 1968; Kelley & Evans, 1995). The value attached to different types of resources can be linked to both their overall accessibility within the family (Bertaux & Thompson, 2017; Bourdieu, 1983; Lareau, 2011), and established values and related expectations explicitly and implicitly communicated within families (Goulbourne et al., 2010). Therefore, we look specifically at the role of upbringing and socialization in a person's view of the world and related understandings of what determines 'success' with regard to social mobility (Chudacoff, 1982; Fivush et al., 2008; Friedman, O'Brien & McDonald, 2021).

Second, we explore the role of families as reference groups for social positioning in the context of new frames of comparison and the changes in expectations and identities induced by migration experiences (Harding et al., 2010; Bertaux & Thompson, 2017). On the one hand, family values and shared interpretations of success may promote a desire to conform to expectations associated with these values (Davis-Kean, 2005; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). In this way, we argue that families can represent an important point of orientation and reference, especially in the context of uprooting experiences related to migration (Barglowski, 2019a; Barglowski & Bonfert, 2023a). On the other hand, migration can also challenge the norms that govern interpretations of success and its determinants (Goulbourne et al., 2010; López & Williams, 2023; Usta, 2023). Consequently, it can alter the dynamics of social comparison and specifically the role of the family as a point of reference. Previous research has especially emphasized the important role of the immediate social environment in evaluating one's own social situation (Kelley & Evans, 1995; Lindemann & Saar, 2014). In this context, the family has been shown to provide a relevant point of departure to examine perceptions of social position (Bottero, 2012) and success, in particular (cf. Schnittker, 2008). By contrast, cross-border family ties allow exploration of the ways in which social positions and underlying understandings of success are shaped in the context of various interpretations of proximity and distance (Amelina, 2022; Barglowski, 2019b; Lindemann & Saar, 2014).

In this article, to develop a more nuanced understanding of perceptions of social position at the crossroads of migration and cross-border family relations, we look at the ways in which norms, values, and expectations affect evaluations

of social position among people who moved to Germany. The family serves as a crucial research field for incorporating the simultaneity inherent to transnationality (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

METHODS

The narratives discussed in this article were collected during a doctoral research project on subjective social positions in the context of cross-border migration to Germany. In total, interviews with 16 people between the ages of 20 and 35, who had spent at least 1 year in Germany, served to explore subjective understandings and perceptions of social positions from a cross-border perspective. The initial goal of the study was to challenge persistent images of migration to more affluent parts of the world as always leading to upward social mobility. Therefore, the sample comprises people from various countries of origin often associated with a deprived 'Global South'. The people who participated in this study originate from Cameroon, Kenya, Ghana, Syria, Ukraine, Gambia, and Nigeria and were raised in heteronormative families (opposite-sex parents and their biological children). Most of them had left their countries of origin directly after school or with a first degree in higher education and pursued further education in Germany. At the time of the interviews, they were enrolled in apprenticeships or study programs or had entered the labor market within the last four years. According to research participants' narratives, their families could objectively be described as part of the upper middle classes, with medium to high levels of education and sustainable incomes. The age range linked to an early career phase and time spent in Germany served as sampling criteria, while the places of origin were used by the participants as a major aspect for self-positioning. Additionally, in the context of global inequalities and colonial histories and associated differences in life chances in their countries of origin and destination, research participants' social positions could be argued to have improved since moving to Germany.

The first participants were recruited through personal contacts. Following theoretical sampling techniques, these first interviews served to narrow down the sampling criteria with a focus on people in their early career stages. Consequently, additional participants were recruited both through contacts provided by research participants and through a scholarship network for students from abroad. To protect the privacy of all research participants who took part in the study underlying this article, all names are pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021 following the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Semi-structured interviews were used to initiate narratives about individual understandings of what determines social position and the reference points used to situate and evaluate these positions. In the circular process of collecting and analyzing data using the software f4analyse, coding the interview material allowed us to gradually derive various thematic categories. In addition to the meanings, determinants, and reference points used for social positioning, these include aspects related to experiences and expectations at different stages of migration in a temporal (before, during, and after) and spatial perspective (local, national, and transnational). The analysis shows that subjective social positions are subject to different images of success, which are a key indicator of social mobility experiences. We identified three types of transnational social positions that were characterized by different perceptions of success. In this article, we focus on the role of family relationships in shaping these perceptions.

The findings represent the experiences of people who were well educated, and where education and career ambitions play an important role in the migration decision. This is largely rooted in family contexts in which these aspects are particularly valued as a means for upward social mobility. Additionally, it is linked to the fact that, in the context of restrictive, though liberalizing migration policies for professionals and skilled workers in Germany, education has become a major pathway for migration from non-EU countries. Based on an in-depth analysis of the interview material, this article reconstructs representations of family histories and associated social positions from the perspectives of people who migrated from less to more affluent countries. Therefore, the findings provide insights into the largely neglected role of transnational family ties for subjective social positions of people whose migration is often narrowly considered 'successful' based on educational attainments (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017).

Reflections on positionality (Amelina & Faist, 2012) were a constant feature throughout all stages of the research. As in migration scholarship in general, global power hierarchies and access to funds and knowledge shape the research process and require scholars to be particularly sensitive. This includes reflections of the ways in which the narratives that participants share, and how they present their experiences related to marginalization and racialization, are shaped by the researcher/research participant relationship. This relationship might also be shaped by other boundaries as well as ethnicity/race, which thus should not be taken for granted. In the research project on which this article is based, research participants and researchers shared several commonalities in terms of age, life stage, level of education, and experiences in (German) academia. The research also aimed to include participants in the process of knowledge production through follow-up discussions with some of the interview partners in which we also discussed preliminary findings and methodological reflections.

SOCIAL POSITIONING IN THE CONTEXT OF CROSS-BORDER FAMILY RELATIONS

The findings indicate that evolving and sometimes conflicting understandings of success and associated expectations formed and negotiated within family relations play a key role in social positionings in the context of migration. The immediate environment, and families in particular, shape the norms and values that coin interpretations of success, which are expressed and communicated through specific expectations—for instance, from parents to children (Barglowski, 2019b; Schnittker, 2008). As the immediate environment changes in the face of migration, however, experienced differences in the norms and values that govern these understandings pose various challenges to social positioning within and across different settings (Chudacoff, 1982; Soehl & Waldinger, 2012). Through the lens of family relationships, we will show below how migration thus contributes to the formation of three types of transnational social positions: (1) the transnational status paradox, (2) detached transnational social positions, and (3) attached transnational social positions.

The transnational ‘status paradox’

The first type of transnational social position is characterized by the simultaneous, yet conflicting interpretations of success that people face in the context of cross-border engagement. It evolves when the values and interpretations inherited through family socialization diverge from the evaluations of success experienced in the destination context. These experiences of ambivalence in the norms and values of what constitutes ‘success’ promote perceptions of multiple and divergent social positions. The notion of a ‘status paradox’ indicates the simultaneous experience of a loss and gain in status compared to different reference groups (Nieswand, 2011). The perceived loss is often related to racialized experiences in the destination country that create barriers to belonging, socio-emotional well-being, and status (Barglowski & Bonfert, 2023a; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Ambivalence occurs when, simultaneously, the new living circumstances in a more affluent and ‘developed’ country promote an experienced improvement in relation to the country of origin (Rye, 2019). The *transnational status paradox* thus emerges from a form of social positioning in which individuals contrast different expectations and opportunities for success that they experience simultaneously because of their transnationality.

One of the participants who described his position in this way is Raymond, a mechanical engineer, who moved to Germany after graduating from high school.

That I was able to study in Germany is such a great opportunity for the future of someone from Africa. And when you get this opportunity, you know, I will fly to another country where I can get up. And when I really try my best, I will receive recognition for that. So, for us, no matter where you study – in France,

England, Germany, or America – then you know: 'Now it is my responsibility. Now I am responsible for whether I will achieve something in my life'. (Raymond)

Like many other participants in our study, Raymond associates his move to Germany with an improvement in his life chances. Specifically, he underscores the increased opportunities that he considers Germany to provide for actively building his own achievements. As the following statement shows, this emphasis on performance was formed during his childhood, especially by his father.

My father is a role model for me. When I was a kid... he was very strict. He was very strict in his parenting. He was a dictator, I could say (laughing). But he knew what he was doing, he knew: If he did not do it this way, we would not achieve anything in life. (Raymond)

This particular concern with helping his children to succeed shaped Raymond's own perception of success as a personal responsibility. In the context of family socialization, he thus learned to evaluate his success primarily based on the value of self-efficacy. Therefore, Raymond's depiction of his migration and the opportunities it provided for him to pursue his desired degree and career indicate forms of success that contribute to an improved social position. However, in the specific context of living in Germany, Raymond finds that the lack of recognition for his achievements inhibits their potential to improve his social position. Instead, he associates the ways in which he is perceived and treated in Germany with a loss of social position.

For me, [social position] would be to receive respect from society. That you are no longer perceived as a refugee but that you are acknowledged as an educated, smart person, who is finished and lives a good life. (Raymond)

Raymond here clarifies that his social position is not based on his achievements as such, but rather on the amount of respect he receives for his performance. Although recognition of his family in the context of their shared understanding of success thus links with an improvement in his social position, misrecognition in Germany facilitates a different experience. Especially in the conception of migration as a pathway to improvement, the challenges of misrecognition experienced by those who migrate can clash with the persistent family view of the destination country as meritocratic. This can exacerbate the perceived lack of recognition and yield different representational strategies. In Raymond's case, this means that he feels the need to 'invest twice' to increase the chances of receiving recognition.

You notice that you are being treated differently. Now, at work, this difference is not as large as it was at university or when I went to a party. When the professor said that you have to partner up and you realize that you don't have a partner, or when they don't let you enter the disco: I still encounter things like that, but I experience them differently. I already expect it. When I work, I make sure that my performance is twice that of my colleagues, so that I receive recognition. (Raymond)

Raymond's evaluation of success in terms of the recognition received for his achievements results in paradoxical social positions in different contexts. In relation to Cameroon, Raymond associates his migration and its potential to pursue his own goals with success and a subsequent improvement to his social position. At the same time, he experiences a downgrade in Germany, where he feels the need to convince others of his performance. Similar narratives have been discussed in migration scholarship, showing that perceptions of success are closely related to notions of belonging (Arhin-Sam, 2019). While experiences of exclusion and discrimination facilitate perceptions of failure, belongingness to the family provides a key basis for shared understandings of success that promote more positive evaluations. Consequently, the 'status paradox' (Nieswand, 2011) as a form of subjective social position is strongly shaped by varying levels of attachment to the different reference groups used to evaluate success.

I will always be a foreigner. I mean, I still feel Cameroonian in my heart. I am still very strongly attached to Cameroon. My blood is still there. That's why... I mean, my heart is still there. (Raymond)

Raymond here emphasizes the high level of attachment he feels to Cameroon, while experiencing exclusion and challenged belonging in Germany—an experience shared among many people with migration biographies in Germany (Barglowski & Bonfert, 2023b; Nowicka & Wojnicka, 2023). This demonstrates that the different ways in which Raymond evaluates his social position with reference to Cameroon and Germany are inherently shaped by experiences of (un-)belonging to these groups. While understandings of success coined by and shared with the family thus promote an experienced gain of social position, feelings of exclusion and un-belonging in Germany simultaneously require higher investments to demonstrate success and yield recognition. Consequently, Raymond's strong family bond, especially with his father, which is characterized by mutual understanding and appreciation, stands in contrast to his exclusionary experiences in Germany and thus highlights the different assessments of the social position that contribute to perceptions of a 'status paradox'.

Another example of the *transnational status paradox* is evident in John's narrative. John came to Germany from Gambia in search of refuge one year before the interview and was currently pursuing an apprenticeship as a carpenter. For John, moving to Germany was similarly associated with opportunities, but also with rejection and discrimination against people of color, and especially refugees. Considering that his social position is largely driven by the respect of other people, the different levels of attachment with Gambia and Germany as two points of reference here also promote different evaluations of his social position. Thus, the prospect of living and working in Germany constitutes forms of success in relation to Gambia, while prejudice and lack of recognition in Germany promote an experienced drop in his social position.

There is no other place like home. If the security situation, if the education and health situations were different, I would still be there [in Gambia]. Nobody would come here [to Germany], man. (John)

This statement emphasizes John's strong attachment to Gambia as well as the difficulties associated with living in Germany. Throughout the interview, he repeatedly stressed how much he missed being in Gambia and the regrets connected with leaving his family behind. In this context of longing to be reunited with his family at home, he underscored the opportunities that moving to Germany had promoted, therefore improving his chances for success and his social position. However, in the context of Germany as a place he associates with neglect and misrecognition, he found his social position to have diminished.

In view of the positioning strategies pursued by participants like Raymond and John, the *transnational status paradox* represents an approach to social positioning that results from the simultaneous confrontation with varying frames of reference that differently foster recognition. In the context of migration, the country of destination constitutes a new frame of reference associated with difficulties in receiving recognition, which is different from the country of origin. The family here provides a major reference group associated with the latter, which is emphasized for high levels of belonging and appreciation in the context of shared understandings of what constitutes success (Chudacoff, 1982; Schnittker, 2008). In this way, the family particularly demonstrates the importance of attachment and inclusion as key aspects of social positioning in migration contexts.

The attached transnational social position

In contrast to the *transnational status paradox*, the *attached transnational social position* characterizes a form of social positioning that involves reflections and reconsiderations of the socialized values that shape social position assessments in the context of new reference groups. Building new relationships and frames of comparison is thereby accompanied by a gradual detachment from the family in the country of origin. This means that individuals develop

new understandings of success during migration, which can oppose their family's norms with which they were socialized. One of the research participants who positioned himself in this way is Gilbert, who moved to Germany from Cameroon to pursue a degree in the social sciences and now works as a social worker while simultaneously pursuing a master's degree in social work. In response to the question of how he interprets his social position, Gilbert also finds that his family's values have played a key role in shaping his own view of what it means to be successful.

We have grown up as people, or have been raised in a way that school, right, university, degree, marriage before having kids, then a child. And this is also how I... my parents are Catholic and I went to a Catholic school. It was just like that, too. Marriage, children, work, buying a house, buying a car. Then you have made it. Right? Yes. And I think, when you do it exactly like this, then you will have the best position there is. In terms of social position, then you have the best position (laughing) ever. (Gilbert)

Gilbert describes how he was raised to pursue what is often portrayed as a typical middle-class biography, with education, settling a family and owning property as major life achievements and ways of organizing the life course. He relates to these values as shaped by Catholic belief, which implies a shared 'family habitus' (Zontini & Reynolds, 2018, p. 418) composed of universal understandings of success, which, in Gilbert's view, has shaped his initial understanding of success beyond the local context of socialization. Gilbert acknowledges that the socialization goals and subsequent expectations of his family greatly contributed to his initial understanding of success and the concomitant perception of a 'good' social position. However, this understanding was fundamentally challenged when he moved to Germany:

And I think I have always been ambitious. I want to achieve so many things; things that might not have been so clear to me back then. Today, I think differently. Since living in Germany, I also gained a new way of thinking. If I had stayed in Cameroon, I would probably have fulfilled more than 80% or 70% of these expectations I had as a child. That means that if I had stayed in Cameroon, I would probably have a child, at least, or maybe a wife. And I would be older in my head than I am now. In Germany I need to achieve so many things. Life in Germany is geared so much towards achievements. In Cameroon, I would have thought, you know, life is what it is, and I have a child. The main thing is that I take the kids to school and make lunch and that is enough, you know. Having a big belly and being in a good mood, not playing soccer anymore, just like my father, for example. Then I would have my father's life. But now I absolutely do not want my father's life. I want more, somehow. (Gilbert)

His experience of life as 'geared so much towards achievements' in Germany led him to question his initial determinants of success in terms of a settled middle-class biography. Later during the interview, he emphasized specifically the importance of career-related milestones, including university degrees and work experience, as reflections of success in Germany. Therefore, Gilbert describes a re-evaluation of his father's life and expectations as an initial benchmark to evaluate his social position. While he thus used to consider starting and taking care of his own family as a major goal and a key aspect determining his social position, his focus shifted towards career-related goals. As he began to turn towards new points of reference in Germany, the values of family, a house, and a car also lost significance for his understanding of a successful social position. As a result, Gilbert decided to enrol in a master's degree part-time in addition to his full-time employment as a social worker, knowing that this was not a life plan that would receive recognition from his family. Therefore, Gilbert repeatedly emphasized his opposition and detachment, especially from his father's norms and values.

Until today, my father cannot understand that. For him it is like – you already have a Bachelor's, you have a job. You have a car. You can afford a flat. What do you need a Master's degree for? You know. He just doesn't understand that. (Gilbert)

Thus, Gilbert's family in Cameroon becomes a point of departure and to some extent also a benchmark for interpreting success, by forming his own life course in opposition to family norms (Schnittker, 2008). Gradually departing from his family's persistent notion of success, he stresses the advantages of being able to learn from various perspectives and expectations that allow him to question and reconsider his own. Instead of contrasting his social position in relation to diverging expectations, Gilbert therefore evaluates his position based on his personal understanding of success in relation to that of others, while the former evolves in the context of the various perspectives with which he is confronted. Thus, he describes his social position as the result of his personal development in the context of both his family's upbringing and his ability to question his values consciously in a new context. This shows that migration can be seen as a double transition: both as a change of residence and as disembedding oneself from family expectations. This way of social positioning indicates the role of the family not only as a distinct point of reference but also as an integral part of the ways in which norms and values take shape and evolve.

In contrast to the *transnational status paradox*, where the family provides a contrasting point of reference and belonging, Gilbert's way of positioning himself is closely related to the new points of reference he identified in Germany. Having established new friendships and feeling confident in his position as a social worker, he has developed new anchoring points in Germany that promote new notions of belonging (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016). In the context of these experiences of attachment in Germany, he also ascribes less relevance to his family 'left behind' as a point of reference for his social position.

I also identify a bit with Germany. This means that if I am travelling in France, for example, if I hear someone speak German or read something in German, I will feel some kind of happiness or I don't know (laughing). I also somehow feel an attachment, I would say. And this attachment means that I am no longer 100% Cameroonian. I mean I think if a Cameroonian just arrived as a student, we think completely different, you know. And because I have lived here for a long time. And I have my life here, I have developed endlessly! And in Cameroon I also have to integrate, re-integrate. And that is why I can no longer be 100% Cameroonian (laughing). I am just Cameroonian because of my genes, my blood. (Gilbert)

In this way, Gilbert's example shows how new modes of belonging established in the context of migration promote new approaches to handling sometimes conflicting expectations. Due to the ways in which he links his social position to the anchoring points established in Germany, it is 'attached' to this particular context. This is evident in the ways in which he refers to his roommates, friends, and colleagues as the people who have challenged his values and caused him to reflect his own view of success. At the same time, it emphasizes the interplay between various cross-border perspectives towards success and the ways in which they jointly shape subjective evaluations transnationally. Thus, the *attached transnational social position* is the result of combined reference groups across different contexts, which, together, challenge and shape the individual perception and evaluation of success.

Another example of this way of social positioning can be found in Vincent's story. Vincent came to Germany from Cameroon in 2009 after graduating from high school. His decision to move to Germany was closely linked to his search for a German university degree and opportunities for a sustainable income. However, over the years he spent in Germany, he also found that his understanding of success as a baseline for evaluating his social position had changed.

In Cameroon, I was more focused on money. I didn't care whether I knew the world or not, whether I had friends or not. Whether I had a family or not. I didn't care. For me, the only thing that mattered was: I need to have money, everything else will follow. That's why I said, since I came here, I have started to perceive of life differently. (Vincent)

Having moved to Germany and started a family of his own, Vincent reconsidered his initial focus on money and found that less tangible achievements in terms of '[knowing] the world' and social relationships had gained importance in his

life. With colleagues, new friendships, and a family of his own as important points of reference in Germany, Vincent had also gradually shifted his attachment to his new place of living, where he began to question and re-consider the values that serve as a basis for evaluating his social position.

As Gilbert's and Vincent's examples show, the *attached transnational social position* is driven by a combination of the new attachments that develop during migration and the family in the country of origin, which gradually loses its initial importance as a point of reference for notions of belonging and social positioning. In this way, social positioning 'attached' to the country of destination also indicates a gradual 'detachment' from family ties in the country of origin, with lower degrees of transnational engagement compared to the *transnational status paradox*. This shows how social positioning is affected by both migration-related transitions towards various degrees of transnationality and family-related transitions towards adulthood.

The detached transnational social position

Another form of transnational social positioning is evident in the context of 'global families' often associated with the upper middle classes, which do not necessarily identify with any one country or culture (Pollock et al., 2010; Sun, 2014). Based on a sense of identity and belonging rooted in personal relationships, experiences, and values, the *detached transnational social position* is situated in the context of cross-border social relations. Consequently, it is largely 'detached' from the countries involved in migration. Adola's story illustrates the experience of growing up as part of a global family, where people are the most important anchors (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016), promoting spatially detached social positions.

We moved around a lot, and my family was always like the center in that sense. Not that we didn't interact with other people; just, you know, the people who had shared similar experiences were always my family, mainly my siblings. We are quite close. My upbringing... and being my parents a little bit more, I think they were always motivated by dreams and purpose, and things they enjoyed. Not in a reckless way, I don't think. I think there was a sense of something that mattered for yourself, potentially, and for others. But actually, that may not be the case, because all my other siblings are pretty corporate (laughing). So, I don't know where that came from, but maybe I was also allowed the space to do that? As you know, I am the youngest sibling, too, so maybe I was just allowed the space to be whatever it was that I wanted to be. (Adola)

Adola's family has a long history of moving around the world and is now spread out across different countries. As she grew up, Adola lived in various places around the world and, in the absence of a permanent physical base, she considers her family a distinct point of reference. As the above quote shows, for Adola, the family thus serves as a continuous baseline for viewing and evaluating her success. Instead of associating the family with the country of origin, Adola's family constitutes a relational space across borders in which she can evaluate her success in ways that resonate with her own understanding of the term. She particularly stresses the role of her parents' education in allowing her to define and pursue her own goals. Consequently, Adola employs a *detached transnational social position*, which she measures in the context of her own abilities to pursue the goals she personally considers relevant.

Social positioning... I understand it as how I would see myself, in relation to my community and the society around me. How do I view my success or the level of contentment, or prospects? (Adola)

Adola perceives her social position as shaped by the ways in which she sees herself in the context of the people 'around [her]', who may or may not be physically close to her. Including both her 'community' as the people close to her heart and 'the society' as those physically close as one reference group, she views her social position in relation to people.

This way of choosing her frame of reference, detached from the countries involved in migration, is accompanied by a similarly detached feeling of success. This is evident in the ways in which Adola ascribes no relevance to the generalized perceptions and expectations of the destination context, and instead evaluates her success specifically based on her own definition and pursuit of achievements in relation to the people who serve as her point of reference. In this context, the family provides not only a particular frame of comparison but also key 'socio-emotional resources' to feeling a sense of belonging (Sauer & May, 2017, p. 48). The prefix *detached* in this type of transnational social position thus refers to the detachment from places both as a source of belonging and as a frame of reference for evaluating success (Lamoureux-St-Hilaire & Macrae, 2020). Consequently, in the face of high levels of spatial mobility, the family as a 'center' plays a key role in comparisons, while place attachments and local groups are less important. Using her self-defined social environment as a continuous benchmark in this way, Adola expresses high levels of confidence and comfort in pursuing and evaluating her success. Hence, *detached transnational social positions* are driven by cross-border family settings that serve as an indisputable anchor regardless of place, thus promoting distinct feelings of belonging, security, and consistency in transnational spaces (Barglowski & Bonfert, 2023a; Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we explored the intricate interplay between family ties and social positioning in the context of migration. Drawing from interviews with people who relocated to Germany from regions associated with limited prospects, we showed how family relationships affect subjective social positions in the face of migration and transnational engagement. Based on the finding that subjective social positions develop along with evolving and sometimes conflicting evaluations of success (Chudacoff, 1982; López & Williams, 2023; Schnittker, 2008), we demonstrated how family relations contribute to the formation of three types of transnational social positions.

First, a *transnational status paradox* arises when strong family bonds persist amidst ambiguous feelings of belonging following migration. In the face of racialized discourses and exclusionary politics of belonging in the destination context (Yuval-Davis, 2006), the family remains a cornerstone for defining success, serving as a continuously relevant reference point for social positioning. While the transformative effects of migration, including increased educational and employment opportunities, align with this ingrained notion of success, the simultaneous sense of exclusion contributes to a perceived loss of position with reference to the country of settlement (Nieswand, 2011). This paradoxical duality, in which social positions are evaluated in relation to both the family and the settlement context simultaneously, compels individuals to anchor their social positions within the norms and expectations of their families (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Second, *attached transnational social positions* emerge when individuals develop new forms of belonging in their country of settlement, with gradually loosening ties to the family. In this scenario, new points of reference induce a re-examination of the meanings and determinants of success once shared with the family, thereby promoting subjective social positions *attached* to the settlement context. Finally, *detached transnational social positions* indicate strong ties with the family across borders, which provide belongingness in ways that foster positionings *detached* from the places involved in migration. In this case, the anchoring role of the family aligns with overall positive experiences of success, whose meaning is defined here in the context of transnational relations (López & Williams, 2023).

Importantly, these types are analytical constructs akin to Weberian 'ideal types', which represent a particular snapshot of social position perceptions shaped by the respective contexts in which they were constructed (cf. Weber, 2002). Nonetheless, they indicate the varying and complex ways in which migration shapes social positions, especially by challenging the simplified notion of migration as a pathway towards 'success' (Nowicka, 2014). With our focus on social positioning, we were not only able to show how racialized discourses and ambiguous processes of skill validation in the countries involved in migration can cause challenged and contradictory social positions (Sime, 2017; Rye, 2019; Nowicka & Wojnicka, 2023), but also, by applying a family lens, how social positioning is shaped by varying degrees

of transnationality (Anthias, 2016; Barglowski, 2019a; Faist, 2014; Moskal, 2015). In doing so, we have not only challenged accounts of social mobility that bind social positions to countries, but also shown the diverse ways in which families affect social positionings within and across spaces.

To advance our understanding of the intricacies inherent in migration experiences and perceptions of social positions and well-being, further exploration of family ties in the context of migration and transnationality offers a promising avenue for research. Enhanced insights could be gained by encompassing a spectrum of family dynamics and diverse migration contexts and life stages. Furthermore, investigations into different forms of transnational engagement, with or without direct migration involvement, could significantly enhance our understanding of the genuine impact of transnational connections on social positioning. Longitudinal data could provide insights into the changeability of subjective social positions in transnational contexts.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data cannot be shared to protect respondents' confidentiality; however, research materials of the PhD work on which this article is based are available at <https://osf.io/8epfy/>.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study on which this article is based involves human research participants who took part in qualitative interviews. The study was approved as a doctoral research project by the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology, Bielefeld University in 2019. Before each interview, participants received information regarding the scope and aim of the project as well as their data protection rights. Ethical approval was not mandatory for this study.

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