

Despite some improvement in the educational situation of migrants in the last decades, empirical data points to substantially lower attainments of persons with a migration background in many western countries. In Germany, students with a migration background attend more prestigious tracks of secondary education and obtain qualifications that provide access to higher education less often than their native peers, they drop out of the general educational system more often without any formal qualification and experience less successful transitions into the vocational education and training (VET) system (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2014; Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung 2011). While ethnic differentials in education are not a fundamentally new phenomenon, they have been more seriously considered in the face of a shrinking population, the struggle with skilled labor shortage and an increasing share of young persons with a migration background (Söhn and Özcan 2007; Stanat and Christensen 2006a). According to the National Report on Education 20% of the total population in Germany have a migration background. The share among children aged younger than five is as high as 36% (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2014, p. 14).

In view of the overrepresentation of migrants in lower socioeconomic positions, micro-level approaches have modeled ethnic differentials in educational attainment¹ as a function of the systematically unequal distribution of resources that leads to less favorable preconditions for educational success in migrant families. Indeed, differences in parental level of education and occupation are consistently found to explain a significant proportion of the attainment gap. Yet, available evidence also points to variations in the background-adjusted transition

1 The present study uses the term educational attainment as defined by the United States Census Bureau, i.e., the highest level of education an individual has completed (United States Census Bureau 2013).

and attainment patterns across different groups of immigrants (e.g., Heath and Brinbaum 2007). While some immigrant groups even outperform their native peers when the family's socioeconomic position is taken into account, significant gaps remain in the case of others. Following these observations, more recent approaches explicitly take into account the existence of conditions that specifically affect the educational outcomes of migrant students *net* of social origin (Heath and Brinbaum 2007; Lehmann et al. 2002; van der Werfhorst and van Tubergen 2007). Based on Boudon's (1974) approach to explain social disparities in educational attainment, the current literature discusses ethnic differentials in educational attainment as a two-component process that involves different preconditions for educational success in native and migrant families on the one hand, and their educational decisions net of their probabilities of success on the other hand (Heath and Brinbaum 2007; Kristen and Dollmann 2010).

The increased interest in educational belief-formation and decision-making processes as a potential explanation for the emergence and persistence of ethnic disparities in educational attainment is not least reflected in the rapidly growing body of transitions studies (R. Becker and Schubert 2011; Brinbaum and Cebolla-Boado 2007; Diefenbach 2010; Kristen and Dollmann 2010; van der Werfhorst and van Tubergen 2007). Yet, so far empirical applications of models to explain the attainment gap in Germany have almost exclusively been confined to the investigation of subjective data in the form of respondent-reported educational aspirations and expectations. This body of studies not only points to a clear pattern of significantly higher background-adjusted aspirations and expectations in migrant families, but also shows the educational aspirations, and sometimes expectations, of migrants to exceed those of their native counterparts when background characteristics are not taken into account (Heath and Brinbaum 2007; Stanat and Christensen 2006a). In view of the significantly lower attainment levels of migrants, several researchers have taken these patterns to indicate that it is not lower levels of ambition but primarily features of the opportunity structure that hinder migrants to translate their high aspirations into attainment and matter most to the persistence of the attainment gap (e.g., Gresch et al. 2012, p. 65; Klieme et al. 2010, p. 202).

While longitudinal studies indeed point to significant correlations between expressed aspirations, expectations and attainment levels (e.g., Beal and Crockett 2010; Buriel and Cardoza 1988; Jacob and Wilder 2010; Domina et al. 2011; Mau and Bikos 2000; Ou and Reynolds 2008; Rojewski and Kim 2003; Zhang et al. 2011), both the assumption of a causal effect from aspirations on attainment levels and the value of subjective data to predict later attainment outcomes are discussed controversially. Considerations that have been brought forward in this vein in-

clude the concern that respondent-reported aspirations may be vague preferences that have no salience to students' everyday behavior (Alexander and Cook 1979; Coleman et al. 1966), that expressed aspirations do not represent value orientations as much as students' perceptions of the opportunity structure (Alexander and Cook 1979; Bourdieu 1973; Jencks et al. 1983; Kerckhoff 1976), and that subjective beliefs may result from inaccurate or lacking information about the educational system and/or unrealistic self-appraisals (Coleman et al. 1966; Kerckhoff 1977; Kerckhoff and Campbell 1977; Rosenbaum 1976, 1978, 1980).

Empirical findings such as an increasing gap between respondent-reported aspirations and expectations and eventual attainment outcomes in many western countries certainly call for the relevance of these considerations in the interpretation of subjective data (e.g., Domina et al. 2011; Goyette 2008; J. Reynolds et al. 2006; J. R. Reynolds and Johnson 2011; Rosenbaum 1976, 1978, 1980, 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). In view of the concern that migration-specific conditions may be associated with a lack of knowledge about the educational system that leads to more unrealistic appraisals of students' educational potential in the migrant population (Diefenbach 2010; Gresch 2012; Relikowski et al. 2010), the observation of comparatively large gaps between expressed aspirations, expectations and attainment levels in the migrant population further suggests that the considerations above may be particularly relevant to better understand the emergence of ethnic disparities in education. Yet, they have received little attention in empirical studies that attempt to identify the micro-mechanisms that generate ethnic differentials in educational attainment.

Also, the literature discusses a variety of mechanisms to theoretically explain systematically different investments in education in native and migrant families but provides little direct evidence on individual belief-formation and decision-making processes (Diefenbach 2010; Kristen and Dollmann 2010). Available data sets typically allow for the investigation of the distribution of aspirations, expectations and/or transitions but contain little or no information on the mechanisms by which they are shaped (Kristen and Dollmann 2010). The great majority of empirical studies in Germany further investigate parental aspirations, and sometimes decisions, at the transition from primary into secondary education (Beck et al. 2010; Maaz et al. 2010). These studies not only attest higher aspirations in migrant families, but also point to more favorable background-adjusted transitions of migrant students into secondary education (e.g., R. Becker and Schubert 2011; Relikowski et al. 2010). Yet, it is also well-documented that the type of secondary education attended is a rough indicator for students' eventual attainment outcomes only, and that track changes mostly occur in the direction of lower tracks (Stubbe et al. 2012). Besides, while parents are conceived of as

the primary decision makers when children are still fairly young, it is widely acknowledged that students' own motivation becomes increasingly important with increasing age and that educational decisions are taken more and more personally by students themselves in the course of their educational careers (B. Becker 2013a, p. 435; Erikson and Jonsson 1996, p. 54; Henz and Maas 1995, p. 610).

Following these considerations, it appears that both the role of students' educational aspirations in the explanation of the attainment gap and the mechanisms that shape systematically different educational aspirations and decisions in native and migrant families remain to be empirically investigated.

The present study attempts to add a further dimension to the understanding of how native and migrant students orient themselves toward the future by investigating the educational and future career aspirations and expectations of several hundred 9th- and 10th-graders in Hamburg. At this point of the educational career, students reach the end of compulsory full-time education and face the decision to continue in general education to obtain higher qualifications or to leave the general educational system and pursue a career in the VET system. In view of the significance of the highest level of general education in determining students' future career opportunities not only by means of providing access to an academic career but also by means of determining their chances of a successful transition into the VET system (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2014; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2013), a particular concern at this stage of the educational career is that students unnecessarily or overly restrict their future opportunities due to a lack of motivation to obtain higher general educational qualifications, insufficient or incorrect information about the full spectrum of career opportunities, the misperception of the opportunity structure or their failure to deal effectively with anticipated or experienced barriers (Gottfredson 1981, 1996, 2005; Morgan 2005).

In consideration of the mechanisms that are discussed in the literature to explain social and ethnic disparities in educational attainment, a first research objective is to provide insight into the dimensions along which students construct their educational and future career aspirations as well as into the barriers they perceive in implementing their aspirations. A first focus is the identification of systematic differences in these patterns between native and migrant students. A second focus is to shed light on the nature of the association between students' future career aspirations and their aspirations and expectations in general education. While the impact of educational qualifications on later labor market opportunities is without controversy, several researchers have brought forward arguments and empirical evidence to support the notion that students' future career aspirations may be conceived of as a cause rather than the consequence

of their aspirations and expectations in general education (Goyette 2008; Looker and McNutt 1989; Shapira 2009). Following the consideration that it may not be objective possibilities of achieving significant labor market returns but the extent to which students' life plans will allow them to take full advantage of high educational qualifications that matter most to their educational choices (G. Becker 1993; Gambetta 1987), and that the likelihood that aspirations are translated into attainment depend on dimensions such as the strength of preference for a given career alternative and the extent to which aspirations are clear and specific (Gambetta 1987; Gottfredson 1981, 2005; Haller and Miller 1963; Lent et al. 1994), the study investigates whether there is evidence to support the notion that students construct their aspirations and expectations in general education in consideration of the entry requirements for their future career aspirations. A second research objective is to provide insight into the theoretical meaning of respondent-reported educational aspirations, and into their role in the explanation of ethnic disparities in educational attainment.

The remainder of the study is organized as follows: Chapter 2 provides an overview over available data sources that allow to empirically investigate the micro-mechanisms that shape ethnic differentials in educational attainment in Germany as well as an empirical description of the educational situation of natives and migrants based on data from the German Microcensus. Chapter 3 outlines the controversy surrounding the meaning of respondent-reported aspirations and discusses the value of subjective data to investigate disparities in educational attainment. The fourth chapter provides the theoretical framework of the empirical study and discusses two research traditions that are commonly used as a point of departure for models of educational aspirations, expectations and choice. Both the Wisconsin model of status attainment and rational choice theories of educational attainment were originally developed to explain social disparities in education but have in more recent years been increasingly drawn on to explain the attainment gap between natives and migrants. The suitability of traditional approaches to explain social disparities in education to investigate the emergence of ethnic differentials in educational attainment, and extensions that explicitly consider the existence of conditions that specifically affect the educational outcomes of migrants, are discussed in chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 outline the research objective and the study design. Chapter 8 provides a descriptive analysis of the data. Chapters 9 and 10 develop models to explain the variation in students' probability to plan to attain the highest level of general education and in their expected probability to accomplish their high aspirations. Chapter 11 starts off with a brief summary and discussion of the key findings of the study in relation to previous research and the questions posed in chapter 6. It further provides a

discussion of the theoretical, methodological and interpretative implications the present findings give rise to at a more general level and concludes the study by pointing out its limitations and prospects for future research.

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