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Does Culture Explain?
Understanding Differences in School Attainment between Iberian and Turkish Youth in the Netherlands

Flip Lindo

Any assessment of the socioeconomic position of a migrant group will inevitably be based on a comparison, either implicit or explicit. Usually the social performance of immigrants is measured against the standards of mainstream society. Inherent in such a comparison is an expectation that generations born and reared in the host society should ‘ideally’ conform to mainstream standards. If they do not, something is wrong.

Society, however, is many-layered, and one might ask whether it is realistic to expect all migrant groups, coming as they do from different strata in their societies of origin, to all adapt at an equal pace (see Steinberg 1989). In real life there is considerable variation in the speed at which migrant groups become incorporated into the host society, in the routes they choose in their efforts to achieve social mobility and in the positions they occupy, at least initially, in the stratified system. Theories that try to account for these divergent paths and outcomes have highlighted contextual factors, as well as individual- and group-level factors, as possible determinants. Such theoretical arguments are often tied to central pairs of concepts – ‘culture and society’, for instance, or ‘agency and structure’. The mutually exclusive use of such concepts lies at the root of the normative discussions that are likely to accompany any observation made about the differential success of migrant groups in daily life. Many of the claims made in such discussions can be traced to two opposing normative positions. These might be described, by way of caricature, as blaming the victim and blaming the system.

In many analyses of the success of some migrant groups compared to others, a distinction between culture and structure still plays a major role (for an extended discussion, see Lindo 1996). The culture of a given group is frequently presented as an explanation for success, with emphasis on certain properties deemed typical for the group in question: a family orientation, a sober life style, perseverance, a self-denying attitude, ability to
formulate and live up to long-term goals and high ambitions for the children's educational careers.\(^1\) Such qualities – often emphasized selectively because they resemble the ideals of the mainstream (Zhou 1997: 994) – symbolize an immigrant group's capacity to surmount problems and obstacles on its own, thus underlining its moral worth. Often without explicitly saying so, such a moral narrative passes judgement on less successful groups. In the process of incorporation into the receiving society, their culture has evidently failed to support them.

A recent theoretical framework, developed especially to make sense of the differing paths and outcomes in the incorporation processes of second-generation migrants, is the *segmented assimilation theory* (Portes 1995, Portes and Zhou 1993). This approach calls attention both to societal factors such as discrimination and the hourglass economy and to more group-specific factors such as a proliferation of transnational activities and the mechanisms of social control within migrant communities. The way in which societal and group-specific factors interact may influence, among other things, the potential for the emergence of an *adversial frame of mind* among migrant children raised in the host society (Portes 1997). Some proponents of the segmented assimilation theory claim that their approach diverges from other models by assuming that the specific determinants by themselves are of minimal importance. They emphasize instead the *interaction* between contextual determinants and the determinants ‘intrinsic’ to the migrant group (Zhou 1997). If we try to analyse this interaction more concretely within specific cases, however, we run into problems on how to conceptualize such determinants. The question arises, for instance, as to whether contextual determinants should always be understood as ‘structure’ and group determinants as ‘culture’ (that is, as frames of mind, orientations and other ideational constructs).

This study focuses on the interaction between individual-level, group-level and societal factors, and on some of the conceptual problems that come with this type of analysis. It contains an explicit comparison, an analysis of the differences in school success between (and to a lesser degree within) two specific groups of ‘Mediterranean’ migrants in the Netherlands. The analysis is based on largely qualitative research involving the children of Turkish migrants and the children of Iberian (Portuguese and Spanish) migrants. The research, conducted from 1989 to 1993, uncovered marked differences between these two groups in terms of the overall school performance of their offspring (Lindo and Pennings 1992). Portuguese and Spanish youth turned out to be quite successful in education, while most of their Turkish peers performed rather poorly.\(^2\) In this type of comparative analyses, any divergence in school performance is usually brought into connection with one or more conspicuous differences in the social and cultural resources the children’s families have at their disposal, their migration histories, or the social positions they occupy in the receiving country.