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## Transnational Biographies

### **Abstract:**

In this paper we discuss the concept of transnational biographies in migration studies. We use a biographical case study from the relatively new research field of advancement through education to explore that a transnational biography is not just a product of subjectivity but also a way of gaining access to invisible but nonetheless objective structures of transnational migration spaces. Our thesis is that the discovery and use of a transnational European educational space made it possible for second generation migrants in Germany to circumvent the exclusionary mechanisms of the German education system much more effectively than through unconditional assimilation into that system.

**Keywords:** Transnational Biographies, Migration, Transnationalism, Education

## 1 From labour migration to transnational migration

Workers from EU countries enjoy a privileged legal status that sets them apart from immigrants from non-European Community states. The most important aspect of this status is their right to freedom of movement. These workers appear to be “first-class” immigrants when compared to those who migrated from countries that had signed bilateral agreements on the recruitment of workers with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the 1960s, but that are not members or candidates for membership of the EU – such as Turkey, Morocco, or Tunisia. However, this status not only provided advantages but it also led to a number of problems that differ from those encountered by minorities originating from other countries where workers were recruited. From the outset, workers from EU countries enjoyed a legal status in the FRG that allowed them to have a wider scope for political and cultural action than other groups of foreign workers. At the same time, however, their economic status as an industrial reserve army in their countries of origin meant that they were exposed to constant rotation, and the social disadvantages associated with this, even after the recruitment policy came to an end in 1973. The German employment agencies in countries outside

the European Community (EC) that recruited workers were most interested in signing up qualified workers from the (relatively) developed regions of countries such as for example, Yugoslavia. The majority of the Italian, Greek, Spanish, and Portuguese citizens who emigrated to the FRG however came from the least economically developed areas of these countries. A significant proportion of them had only a few years of basic education and had not finished secondary school.

Even so, looking back from the vantage point of today, one can say that, paradoxically, these workers found employment in what were in many respects “good jobs”. Wages were not only significantly higher in the FRG than in their countries of origin, but were also higher than in other Western European countries, such as France and Belgium that also recruited labour (see Pugliese 2006). The foreign workers, organised in trade unions, benefited from wage increases and other advantages that they achieved through struggles over wage settlements, as well as from generous health and pension systems. It is true, however, that they worked at the bottom of the social ladder in terms of working conditions and job prestige. This impacted their health and was reflected both in an often-necessary early retirement and in the disproportionately high unemployment rate following a period of full employment. Many of the foreign workers who retired early returned to their homelands. Some of them managed, by living extremely thriftily in Germany, to save enough to buy a plot of land in their home region where they could build a house and have a fruit and vegetable garden or even a vineyard (see Apitzsch 2004; 2005a).

Admittedly, very few people from this first generation of *Gastarbeiter*<sup>1</sup> who returned to their homelands severed all ties with Germany. Based on surveys carried out in a number of large German cities on the need to provide retirement homes for immigrants, we know that migrant families keep their cheap state-subsidised flats in Germany as long as possible so that the older generation can return for periods of several months each year, in order to visit their grandchildren or to go to doctors’ appointments. Thereby, the normality of a transnational space of life gradually became a resource for this first generation of labour migrants (Martini 2001, p. 158). Increasingly, it is no longer just the house in the country of origin that serves as a “safe haven” in times of economic crisis. Depending on the area of life involved, either country may serve as a refuge when a wide range of problems affecting the families needs to be solved.

But what impact did this development have on the so-called second generation, the generation born in the 1970s? What, in general terms, is the social situation of this second generation? The original *Gastarbeiter*, the workers who arrived in Germany from the mid-1950s onwards, were mostly men over 18 years old. However, as soon as the members of this group had settled in Germany and had found jobs for their wives, the children joined their parents. Because both parents often had exhausting jobs, the children frequently travelled to and fro between their country of origin and Germany (see Apitzsch 2006a). A transnational space of life was thus established, and while it certainly increased access to specific resources, it also became a trap for some members of this second generation. The receiving society exhibited tendencies to close itself off by blocking access to higher education as social insecurity increased. As a consequence, the second generation experienced much worse discrimination than their parents. This generation was labelled “disadvantaged”, and state programmes designed to benefit the “disadvantaged” and “disillusioned” with regard to their life chances branded it even more. The first generation immigrants, especially those who ar-

rived in their countries of destination after being signed up by state recruitment commissions, were usually able both to find work and to get involved in the social structures of the receiving country because of their involvement in functioning trade union organisations. At the same time, the social and political traditions of their country of origin remained valid because the emigration phase was always thought of as temporary. The immigrants were still rooted in the history of their society of origin. By the beginning of the 1980s, this no longer applied to the members of the second generation. Only a small proportion of young people from the second generation could hope for success through professional advancement in the receiving society. The rest of them experienced identification with the modernisation goal of professional advancement as an illusion, but they no longer had the option of retreating to the “ethnic colony”<sup>2</sup> that had been available to their parents in times of crisis.

Despite this potentially negative trajectory that affected an entire generation, one can also identify a counter-dynamic that took the form of well-thought-out strategies against exclusion. Many members of the first generation had undertaken the migration project principally because they wanted their children to have access to professional opportunities that were unavailable to them. These parents understood very well that they needed to give their children the chance of getting a better education in the receiving country. Only by doing this could they bring the family migration project, which had also been a protest against the living conditions in their society of origin, to a successful conclusion. In this way, many biographies embodying an upward educational and professional trend came to fruition even though they were statistically unlikely (see Apitzsch 1990). How could this happen, given the immigrants’ unfavourable initial social situation, as described above, and the tendency of the receiving society to close itself off? One factor that was certainly important was the setting up of networks within the immigrant communities (see ISS 1981). A new wave of immigration, in the framework of freedom of movement as guaranteed by the European Community as it established itself supported this trend. Soon, the second generation also produced university graduates, and the staff of consulates, schools, cultural organisations, and educational institutions outside the school system were recruited from the ranks of these graduates. Political associations among the organisations set up by immigrants, which in the 1970s and 1980s were mostly of a left-wing orientation, gave rise to communication networks between intellectuals, the new self-employed, and a trade union and political working-class elite (see Apitzsch 2006a). Because the German labour market was now offering fewer opportunities, some of the new arrivals set themselves up in self-employment, in many cases without any intermediate phase of employment with existing companies. They became “ethnic entrepreneurs” by occupying economic niches that had been abandoned by German society (see Apitzsch 2004; 2005a; 2005b; Apitzsch/Kontos 2008).

Additionally, a number of self-organised measures to counteract exclusionary mechanisms in the German school system were successfully implemented (Liguori-Pace 1987). For example, the Italian community developed measures that were predominantly designed to counter selection processes in the German system. Using a different mechanism, Greek communities successfully set up their own schools as early as the 1960s, as a result of intensive efforts by Greek parents and after heated debates about teaching methods, Greek national schools were set up. They are structured on the same lines as the Greek school system, are financed by the Greek state, and are coordinated by the Greek diplomatic mis-

sions in Germany (see Paraschou 2001). For pupils who are unable to obtain a higher-level qualification in the German system, the national schools offer a way of making the transition to either the German or the Greek university system.

One can say that the discovery and use of a transnational European educational space made it possible to circumvent the exclusionary mechanisms of the German education system much more effectively than through unconditional assimilation into that system.

In the following section we use a case study in order to explain this hypothesis in more detail and show how the process worked. We begin with some general remarks about the state of the discussion on advancement through education in a transnational space.

## 2 Advancement through education in a transnational space

It is only in the last few years that the phenomenon of advancement through education in migration has begun to receive explicit attention in qualitative empirical migration research (see for example Hummrich 2002; Ofner 2003; Pott 2002; Raiser 2007; Tepecik 2011). Scholars investigating this question define advancement through education in migration as a distinctive form of upward mobility within the generation succeeding labour migration, which involves reaching the highest possible rung on the educational career ladder (i.e. obtaining the highest possible secondary school qualification and entering the German university system) (for Turkish immigrants, see Pott 2002).

Most studies of educational success in migration use a definition and categorisation of advancement through education that relies exclusively on the classical nation-state model of immigration. It is almost impossible to bring successful educational careers between different nation states into focus when using this perspective. Unsurprisingly, therefore, migration research has treated the “commuting phenomenon” in the second generation as something that triggers problems, leading to the failure of educational careers and low levels of achievement at school (see Damanakis 1982; Diehl 2002; Auernheimer 2006). This is especially the case for second-generation Italian immigrants where the commuting mentality of the parents has been put forward as an explanation for the lack of educational success of their children (the second generation) (Auernheimer 2006, p. 3). Diehl (2002) has treated the commuting phenomenon (i.e. travelling to and fro between different national contexts and education systems) as a “strategy which swallows up resources”. She carried out a quantitative investigation of the effects of commuting on success at school for pupils from Turkish and Italian families and found that, although commuting “does not independently have a negative effect on success at school”, it affects pupils’ secondary education “indirectly” because of its consequences for their language skills (Diehl 2002, p. 181).

Only in more recent empirical investigations have transnational research perspectives been introduced in such a way that “commuting” can be treated as a resource rather than a deficit (Fürstenau 2004; Ruokonen-Engler/Siouti 2006; Sievers et. al 2010; Siouti 2013).

Fürstenau (2004) investigated the educational careers and future orientations of young people from Portuguese families in Hamburg who have been educationally successful. The empirical basis of her study were children of Portuguese labour immigrants who became successful young people who, “according to Esser’s concept of assimilation, can be considered structurally assimilated to a great extent because of their inclusion in the education system of the receiving country” (Fürstenau 2004, p. 51). Esser (2001) assumes that social integration in the receiving society is only possible by means of assimilation processes which rule out any simultaneous integration into the ethnic community or the society of origin. Fürstenau found that, contrary to this assumption, “social integration into the receiving society need not contradict a high level of self-organisation within an ethnic community” (Fürstenau 2004, p. 51). These young people situate themselves transnationally when they make the transition from school to the labour market. Transnational secondary education divided between Portugal and Germany functions within the Portuguese community as a model that can orient planning for the future (Fürstenau 2004, p. 49).

In the following section, we would like to use a biographical case study to show that in the second generation of immigrants, processes of advancement through education in transnational space are occurring that have a transnational character and that present a challenge to conceptions of educational success that rely on a nation-state framework (see Siouti 2013).

### 3 The case of Athina: from a “suitcase child” to an educationally successful transmigrant

Athina<sup>3</sup> was born in Germany in 1970 to Greek labour immigrants. Her parents had come to Germany as guest workers. Initially, they both worked in a factory. After Athina was born, her father set himself up as a self-employed taxi driver, and in the 1990s he founded a small taxi business together with his wife. From an economic point of view, the labour migration project of Athina’s parents was very successful and the family’s status improved in Germany.

Throughout her childhood Athina experienced her parents’ migration project passively, as a process over which she had no control. For the first four years of her life she was separated from her parents. Shortly after she was born her parents placed her in the care of her paternal grandmother, who lived in a village in central Greece where her father originally came from. When Athina was two years old, her aunt in Athens took over responsibility for her so that her grandmother could look after her younger brother. After a while her parents decided to take Athina back to Germany with them, and she remained there until the age of six. She did not attend kindergarten. When the time came for Athina to start school, the authorities suggested that this should be postponed because she did not understand German well enough. Athina’s parents did not want to do this, so they sent her to a Greek primary school in Athens; during her first year of school, Athina lived with her aunt again. After this first year, Athina continued her schooling successfully in Germany.

The initial situation in Athina’s biography contains a great deal of potential for a negative biographical trajectory (Riemann/Schütze 1991). This can be seen

in her experience of separation as a child, which is caused by the migration history of her family and by commuting between two countries and two education systems. However, a negative trajectory does not develop. Athina makes extremely good progress at school. Although her knowledge of German is poor at the time when she enters the German school system in the second-year class, she succeeds in overcoming the initial language difficulties and problems of adjustment with the help of the committed support provided by her primary school teacher and her family. In her biographical narrative, Athina stresses that her primary school teacher did a great deal to help her and to provide her family with emotional support. He was understanding with regard to her difficulties with German and very supportive of her efforts to learn the language. In the first few months after she started school, her teacher assisted her with language exercises outside normal school hours and put her parents in touch with a student who helped Athina with her German homework. In the following years Athina developed into a very good pupil, and she did so well that in the fourth year of school she moved on to a *Gymnasium*<sup>4</sup>. The reconstruction of Athina's case using the biographical analytical method shows that both the support she received from her teachers (both in Germany and in Greece) as well as the communication within her family were decisive factors that enabled her to overcome the potential for a negative biographical trajectory (Riemann/Schütze 1991) in her biography. Communication within the family is shaped in particular by the narrative form of interaction and by shared reflection on the years of separation by Athina, her mother, and her aunt. The role of Athina's aunt as a biographical helper is decisive during her childhood. She is the person to whom Athina relates to most closely as a child, and Athina describes her as her social mother.

These biographical resources contribute to Athina's ability to deal constructively with the biographical burdens of her childhood and youth that were conditioned by migration. Athina copes with the separation emotionally and intellectually. She succeeds in transforming what she suffered passively in her biography in such a way that she can draw on it creatively for her own actions. She can then develop her own biographical projects oriented towards education.

In the biographical reconstruction, both Athina's childhood separation from her parents and her "commuting migration" during her schooldays are interpreted positively. Athina presents her life story by projecting it as the story of a transnational education. The schools she attended, what she learned, and her successes at school are the biographically relevant topics that provide the basis of reflection for the positive evaluation of her educational career.

However, there is a break in Athina's successful school career in the German system after the sixth school year. Her parents are educationally oriented towards Greece and intend to return there eventually. They decide to split the family up so that Athina and her brothers – accompanied by their mother – can return to Greece and continue their education in the Greek school system. Athina, while attending a normal Greek school in Athens, also attends classes at a language school where she continues to learn German. After three years in Athens, during which Athina attended the Greek school, her parents decide to reunite the family in Germany. When Athina is 15 years old, her mother returns to Germany with her and her two younger brothers to rejoin their father. Her parents now revise their plans to return to Greece, and their plan to remain in Germany for a longer period is symbolised by their investment in property there. Meanwhile, Athina still has the biographical plan of returning to Greece. Initially, this is

constructed as a biographical counter project to her parents' intentions. It then emerges that it is not Athina's own counter project alone that develops the power to generate a plan of action. Her parents' plan to keep their options open is also a strong motivating force behind Athina's plan to return to Greece and study at a Greek university. After her return to Germany, Athina has two alternatives in order to continue her secondary education: she can follow either the Greek or the German path. She feels that attending a German school would threaten her future plan of studying at a Greek university. Athina thus decides to follow the Greek path and enrolls in the Greek Lyceum. She explains her decision by saying that she was afraid of failing in the German school system. During this period of attendance at a Greek school in a large German city, Athina develops the professional biographical project of becoming a teacher. During her third year at this school, she combines this project with the explicit idea of continuing her education by returning to Greece and studying Greek literature. After passing her final year school exams with distinction, Athina takes the Greek university entrance examination and obtains a university place in Athens. At the age of 18, she then begins to study literature at Athens University and puts into practice her biographical project in the form of "educational migration". When Athina draws up the balance sheet of her biography, she evaluates her time at university positively because she experienced this period as the phase of her life when she had the highest degree of subjective freedom. During her time at university, Athina meets her future husband, who like her is a child of Greek parents who emigrated to Germany. After her boyfriend obtains his degree in economics, he accepts a job offer in Germany. During the second half of her degree course, Athina shifts her main place of residence to Germany, and for two years she commutes between Germany and Greece. In the practical experience of her life, Athina's biographical idea of "being in two places at once" does not fail. She has no great difficulty in dealing successfully with the end of degree examinations because fellow students support her by sending her the lecture notes she needs. After graduating successfully, she marries her boyfriend in the same year. After her marriage, Athina decides to continue her education in Germany. While her husband is working for an international bank she starts a second university degree, this time a social science degree in the faculty of education at a German university. At the same time she also works in the administrative department of a communications company. Athina does not complete this second degree, though, leaving the university when she becomes pregnant for the first time. When Athina is expecting her second child, she and her husband decide to move their main place of residence back to Athens. After the commuting migration she experienced as a child, which in the course of her biographical development initially led her to plan to return to Greece, Athina, as a wife and mother, together with her husband, now puts into practice a plan of transnational mobility in which the societies of reception and origin are connected with each other. This transnational structure becomes more firmly established after Athina has given birth to her third child. Her life is now shaped by systematic commuting between her two places of residence in Greece and Germany. For Athina, this geographical mobility is a form of life in which multiple ways of belonging, embracing two cultural and national contexts, constitute her biography. Moving between two places in different national societies is not a temporary phenomenon that only occurs in extra-ordinary circumstances, but rather, from her biographical perspective, a "normal state of affairs".



In traditional German-language research on migration and labour migration, Athina's biography would have been understood from the theoretical perspective of approaches to integration and assimilation as amounting to a failure, since her lifeworld contradicts the conventional notions of integration in Germany as an immigration society. If one follows the logic of the nation state, a life with two or even more homelands is still considered a problem (on this point, see Römhild 2002). This perspective would see Athina as a child of labour migrants who dropped out of the German education system. She would not have appeared under the category of "advancement through education" in the German statistics, even though it is quite clear that her transnational path is a case of advancement through education in migration. Athina combines two different education systems in order to advance along this path. In the migration process, she attains the highest possible secondary qualifications in two European school systems, despite pronounced commuting movements in her biography. The possibility of commuting to and fro is a resource for her educational career and for her efforts to establish a secure social situation. Her transnational educational path is not only beneficial for the process of advancement through education, but also leads to the development of a transnational biography (see Siouti 2013).

#### 4 Conclusion: The phenomenon of transnational advancement through education requires us to rethink methodological nationalism in migration research

Migration researchers whose work is based on the perspective of the nation of arrival harshly criticise the transnationalism approach (see Bommers 2002). Up until now this national perspective has largely dominated the research on the lifeworlds of immigrants, and this has had important consequences for state legal systems, practices of exclusion, and the management of immigration in society as a whole. The discussion of the phenomenon of inclusion and exclusion continues to be organised around the metaphor of "national integration". Since the end of the recruitment policy in 1973 and the period of family reunification following it, questions relating to the second generation of labour immigrants have been posed in Germany in terms of "assimilation and integration". "Integration" is considered to be something each individual has to achieve, and exclusion is a consequence of insufficient "assimilation". Much of the research in the field is based on this assumption, and thus concentrates on only one side – the perspective of the arrival country and its national interests – of the migration process.

The concept of transnationalisation, on the other hand, is a way of trying to grasp the changes taking place as a result of migration processes at the level of the acting subject and the social spaces that subjects bring into existence (see Homfeldt et al. 2006). The pioneers, Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc (1992), in the development of this approach used the prefix "trans" in order to place the everyday worlds and ways of life of the immigrants in a new conceptual framework. This concept has now been under discussion for a number of years in

migration research. It is considered, in broad terms, to be a critique of the one-sided structure-oriented approaches. "Transnationalism" is also seen as an instrument that can analyse patterns and causes of migration in the age of the "information society" (Castells 2001–2003), in which transnational and trans-state spaces are increasingly expanding as a result of growth in the cross-border movements of people, goods and information (see Apitzsch 2006b). This concept is also a critique of the dominant idea that sees migration as a one-way process that is limited in time and space, a move from the country of origin to the country of reception. In addition, it criticises concepts of space in which the nation state is treated as the natural and secure "container" (Pries 1996; 1997) in which all social experience takes place. This questions thus the concepts of emigration and immigration as well. The new space creates transnational identities which develop in ways that undermine rigid divisions between forms of national belonging. Transnational relations, conditioned by the rapid expansion of technologies of communication and mobility, also give rise to political, social and cultural changes. Glick Schiller et al. (1992) define transnationalism as a process in which immigrants create social fields in order to connect their country of origin with the country in which they have settled. The goal of these authors is to go beyond the binary model of "emigrants" and "immigrants" and of "push" and "pull" factors, in order to focus attention on the transborder practices of the transmigrants.

Empirical studies have investigated the way in which transmigrants make use of their social relations and biographical identities in order to cope with contexts in which they constantly have to cross borders (see Apitzsch 2003). Portes (1999) argues that transmigrants lead double lives. They often speak two languages, feel that they belong to more than one homeland and culture, and usually have complex social or political interests which condition their presence in two or more countries.

Transnational approaches to migration research show that people usually make and act on the decision to move across a border in the framework of a network of interpersonal relations. These approaches also examine the cumulative causal dynamic that is set in motion once such movements have been initiated. Transmigrants develop fluid and multiple identities which can arise both from their country of origin and from the country where they have settled (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). This makes it possible for them to resist global political and economic changes. Ong (1999) broadens the transnational spaces approach by introducing the term "cultural interconnection". She argues that the concept of transnationalism provides a more precise definition of recent developments than globalisation, since the latter term suggests a primarily economic perspective in which subjects do not act intentionally. Transnationalism comes into being as a result of cultural interconnections and the mobility of subjects who cross spatial borders.

In our view, the concept of transnational social spaces is a way of grasping the phenomenon of the biographical knowledge (Alheit/Hoerning 1989) of subjects interacting with one another.

This knowledge is accumulated and symbolised in the course of individual lives and of the lives of groups. On the basis of past, continuing and future separations and border crossings, this knowledge constitutes different and partly overlapping social spaces understood as coordinates of orientation for individual and group action. This biographical knowledge introduces the time axis into the constitution of social spaces: accumulated experience represents the dimension of

the past and biographical planning represents the anticipated future. It is linked to and interacts with the ways in which people cope with these border crossing in psycho-social terms. Family members involved in a migration process experience this process in different ways depending on their age, gender, position in the family (whether they have older or younger siblings), etc. Although each individual has his or her own biography, there are typical sequences of events which are specific to migrants and which tell us a great deal about the invisible, but very real, structures of the society of immigration.

Biography can be understood as a point of intersection between collective constitution and individual construction. The biographical shape of the sequence of separations and border crossings in migration can be reconstructed on the basis of individual life stories representing certain types of objectively possible (and more or less threatened) paths of the international border-crossing option. For example, because citizens of non-EC countries cannot cross borders at will, they move in a different transnational space than citizens of EC member states.

The discovery of typical sequences of events that are specific to migrants in the biographical reconstruction of migration processes has also led to the characterisation of biographies as *the sites* of transnational spaces (Apitzsch 2003). The point of this repositioning is to treat biography not just as a “product of subjectivity” (Lutz 2004), but also as a way of gaining access to invisible but nonetheless objective structures of transnational migration spaces. Since drawing attention to these objective structures is necessarily tied up with their re-production and re-construction by subjects and those who interpret them, site (in German: Ort) is to be understood not in the sense of *topos* but in the sense of *topography* (Apitzsch 2006b). This concept is certainly close to the units of investigation described by Appadurai (1991) as discursive “landscapes”. However, these structures differ from Appadurai’s “landscapes” in that they do not always presuppose a reference to modern urban environments with mobile individuals who are not confined within family networks. Both for Appadurai (1991) and for Hannerz (1993), the most important attributes of Global Cities include the fact that “here, one can describe the forces of attraction of mobile transnational migration processes. For these authors, immigrants in the global cities can no longer be compared with classical immigrants who have simply moved from one place to another and then decided to stay there for good” (Járosi 2003, p. 21).

In our own investigations, we have expressly incorporated the movements of “classical” labour migrants into an open-ended analysis of typical topographies of transnational spaces. The question that arises is whether or not the classical family networks of labour migration remain in existence in new phenomena such as transnational motherhood. Our hypothesis, explored through our case study (Athina) of transnational advancement through education on the part of a second-generation Greek immigrants in Germany, is that transnationalism emerges logically from trans-generational subject practices that can be empirically reconstructed. Subjects develop biographical resources that allow them to overcome impending or actual exclusion, and these resources cannot be satisfactorily explained within the national horizon of immigration societies. Only a transnational framework enables us to give an account of these resources.

## Notes

- 1 This is the German term for work migrants after the mid 1950s, meaning literally „guest workers“.
- 2 This expression has been coined by members of the Chicago School of Sociology. It describes social institutions created by the immigrant community in the country of arrival: „The immigrant colony in America is a bridge of transition from the old world into the new; a half-way house on the road of assimilation.“ (Stonequist 1937, p.85).
- 3 Irini Siouti conducted and analysed the biographical-narrative interview with Athina in the framework of her research project on the emergence of forms of transmigration in the educationally successful second generation of labour migrants (see Siouti 2013).
- 4 The Gymnasium is the highest form of the German tripartite school system.

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