

# Access to employment for children of immigrants : an exploratory review of several explanatory factors

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Claudio Bolzman

# **Access to Employment for Children of Immigrants: An Exploratory Review of Several Explanatory Factors**

## **Introduction**

This paper analyses the situation of the “second generation” of immigrants on the labour market and the main factors that influence their professional careers. We define the second generation as the children of immigrants who were born in their countries of residence or who have had most of their schooling in those countries (Bolzman, Fibbi, Vial, 2003). The question of integration into the labour market of the “second generation” has long been a concern in North America and in Europe. However, as indicated by an OECD report (Liebig & Widmaier, 2009), labour market integration of the children of immigrants is an area in which knowledge is gradually evolving internationally, but is still underdeveloped.

Scientific literature on migration – especially in North America – has traditionally perceived structural integration into the host society as a gradual and linear process whereby the difficulties faced by the first generation would give way to a progressive incorporation of their descendants into the economic mainstream. The latter would no longer suffer discrimination on the labour market, as had been the case for the first generation (Alba, 1985; Sowell, 1981).

Many scholars subscribing to what has been called the straight line assimilation theory suggest however that this process is not necessarily without conflicts between migrant populations and the “host society”. Thus, according to Gordon (1964), migrants and their children must overcome various stages before they are fully incorporated into the host society. The first stage is visible acculturation, a kind of behavioural adaptation to the new society. This is followed by structural assimilation, i.e. access to mainstream institutions at the economic and social level. This stage is much more difficult to reach for most immigrant groups because they usually face discrimination and prejudice from the majority. Thus, incorporation of immigrant groups also involves change and acceptance

by the mainstream population. Only then do the barriers to structural assimilation and intermarriage fall away and full identification with the host country become possible. According to Gordon (1964), this seldom happens before the third generation. In any case, convergence with the mainstream is, according to this theory, the main pattern of incorporation. In fact, the assimilation processes enable each new generation to do better in terms of education and occupation than the preceding generations. This process should go hand in hand with a lessening of ethnic distinctiveness in language use, residential concentration and intermarriage patterns (Warner and Srole, 1970).

In fact, classical theories based on the study of European migrations to the United States from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century perceived structural integration as a continuous process, accelerating through its own dynamic from one generation to the next. However, these theories did not pay enough attention to the general economic conditions that facilitated this process. In fact, due to the socio-economic transformations that have taken place during the last twenty years, such as the decrease in “intermediary” jobs (skilled blue and white collar jobs), an increasingly precarious labour market and the increase in long-term unemployment, some American scholars like Gans (1992) or Portes (1994) have asked themselves whether the mechanisms which allowed economic incorporation from one generation to another are still at work. It is especially important to know whether the factors which contributed to the social mobility of migrant children – such as the quality of schools or professional training, the substitution of early migratory waves by new ones and the possibility of building ethnic enclaves – are still valid. Portes and Zhou (1993) point out that in the late twentieth century United States, for what they call the “new second generation”, i.e. the children of migrants who arrived in the country after 1965, there is no longer a single model of socio-economic integration which would lead members of this generation to become part of the white middle class. They thus propose the concept of “segmented assimilation” to describe the different paths of incorporation into the country of residence. Basically, some groups could fail and remain marginalized while others could succeed, depending on the combination of the different sorts of human capital (economic, social, cultural) brought by the immigrants and the discrimination prevalent in the receiving society (Zhou, 1997). Or, in other words, members of some groups could join the mainstream, while members of others would join the “racialized,

permanently impoverished population at the bottom of society” (Portes et al., 2005, 1004).

In fact segmented assimilation theory distinguishes three main outcomes for the second generation: upward social mobility, downward social mobility and upward mobility combined with persistent biculturalism. The first process represents the classical figure described by straight line assimilation theory, with convergence between structural incorporation and cultural assimilation trends. The second process is related to racial discrimination, bifurcated labour markets and often marginalized inner-city youth culture without strong parental or community support. The third process is a combination of upward mobility with some acculturation, associated with the preservation of ethnic culture (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). According to segmented assimilation theory, beside structural labour market features, the main variables that explain differential incorporation are the following: the existence or not of institutional discrimination (state immigration laws, welfare policy, etc.) and informal discrimination (employers’ attitudes) against specific ethnic groups; the levels of education and income (human capital) of different groups of migrants; the forms of social support (social capital) that different ethnic communities are able to provide to their members; the forms of acculturation in families (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

These conclusions of American scholars about the “new second generation” are not surprising to European researchers, who for many years investigated the chances of second generation youngsters of overcoming the difficulties of socio-economic insertion faced by their parents. In Europe, in fact, the issue of second generation integration was considered problematic and perceived mainly as contributing to a reproduction of the working class (Hutmacher, 1981; Muus, 1993; Wilpert, 1988) or to the formation of an underclass (Faist, 1993). European studies have thus been less optimistic than American ones with respect to the speed of the socioeconomic integration process. More recently, some studies indicate that serious social problems stem from the fact that incorporation into the labour market is quite difficult for a significant proportion of the second generation (see Meurs et al., 2005; Santelli, 2007 on the French case; Crul and Vermeulen, 2003 on European trends). Silberman and Fournier (2006) also use the concept of segmented assimilation to analyse the situation of the second generation in the French labour market.

A recent OECD work (Liebig and Widmaier 2009) comparing the situations of children of immigrants in 16 countries has shown the same

general trends: they tend to have lower employment outcomes than the children of natives in most countries. In Germany for instance, 90% of the young (aged 20 to 29) with a university degree whose parents are German have employment, which is the case of 81% of children of immigrants with the same kind of diplomas. According to the report, the rate of unemployment of second generation young adults in the OECD countries is 1.6 times higher than the unemployment of young adults of non-immigrant background. However the report indicates that in Switzerland this general trend is less marked: the professional prospects of the second generation are about the same as those of Swiss-born young people.

This paper explores the relevance of the two theoretical approaches for the Swiss case: to what extent do segmented assimilation or straight line assimilation theories apply to the situation of the second generation? The Swiss case has its own specificities compared to the situation in North America or Europe. We will limit ourselves here to mentioning some of those that are relevant for this analysis. One particularity of the Swiss case is that most second generation children are of European background: their parents came from south, central and eastern Europe. In comparison with North America, one important difference is that in Switzerland, until recent years, the great majority of second generation immigrants, with the exception of children of French and German immigrants, were children of low-skilled migrants (Piguet, 2004). Their similar social background should mitigate the differences in their social and professional trajectories. However, one factor which could play a major role in differentiating social trajectories is the existence of an “old second generation” and a “new second generation” with different national backgrounds. The “old second generation” are mainly the children of Italian and Spanish immigrants (and to some extent of French and German immigrants) who came to Switzerland between the 1950s and the 1970s as recruited workers during a period of important economic growth and very low unemployment. The “new second generation” are mainly the children of immigrants who came from Portugal, Turkey and former Yugoslavia, especially between the 1980s and 1990s. The main differences in comparison with the “first wave” are that, on the one hand the labour market situation has deteriorated in recent years, on the other hand many immigrants from Turkey and former Yugoslavia entered Switzerland as asylum seekers, refugees or spouses of migrants. They did not have an employment contract and entry into the labour market was more difficult for them. This more precarious situation probably has an impact on the integration of their own children into the



labour market even if, as we have seen, the rate of youth unemployment is lower in Switzerland than in other OECD countries.

We will mainly use data from a quantitative survey of a representative sample of 442 Italian and Spanish second generation and 203 Swiss-born young adults aged 18 to 34 living in Geneva and Basel (Bolzmann, Fibbi, Vial, 2003) since it is the only systematic study of the transition to the labour market. Unfortunately there are no such studies for the “new second generation”. As a consequence, systematic comparisons are not possible, with the exception of the level of education, for which data from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office is available (OFS, 2009). Thus, in order to analyse the situation of children of Portuguese, former Yugoslavians and Turks in the labour market, we will refer to the existing scientific literature in Switzerland which provides some information about various relevant factors having an impact on the second generation’s transition from school to labour market.

Following the segmented assimilation theory, we will explore three main factors. The first one is the influence of the parents’ level of education on the transition of the second generation from school to labour market. The second is the role played by formal and informal discrimination in this transition and the third is the role of social support or social capital in accessing the labour market. The fourth dimension, the levels of acculturation of the first and second generations and their impact on school and labour market performances, is also quite relevant but no clear data concerning this point is available.

Our hypothesis is that even though the Italian and Spanish second generation are incorporated into the economic mainstream, segmented assimilation of new second generation national groups is also observed in Switzerland.

### **The relevance of the parents’ level of education**

In Switzerland, as in other “knowledge societies” with a high degree of tertiarisation of the economy and qualified labour (Meyer, 2009), the level of education is highly correlated with professional positions in the labour market (Levy, 2002). In other words, the level of formal education plays a decisive role in career opportunities.

If during the 1960s and 1970s it was normal for the young to enter the labour market as unskilled blue collar workers, nowadays the unskilled are a marginalized category (Eckmann et al., 1994). At present, about nine 20-year-olds out of ten are studying and will complete post-compulsory

training (OFS, 2002). However, the unskilled are overrepresented among the unemployed and among those receiving social welfare. In the canton of Vaud for instance, 40% of those receiving social welfare are unskilled, while they represent 20% of those in employment (Jaques, 2010).

The situation of the second generation in Switzerland with respect to education is contrasted. While the children of French and German immigrants are doing even better than Swiss children, the children of Italian and Spanish origin are doing slightly less well, and those whose parents are from Turkey, former Yugoslavia and Portugal clearly less well (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Courses at secondary level II, 2007/2008 (in %)

	Proportion of pupils at secondary level II according to type of course and nationality										
	Total	Swiss	Foreign	German	French	Italian	Spanish	Ex-Yu	Turkish	Portuguese	Others
Schools preparing for the <i>maturité</i> examination	21.8	22.6	17.8	39.3	37.2	14.1	19.1	6.9	7.9	13.3	27.6
Schools preparing for the <i>culture générale</i> diploma	4.6	4.4	5.4	5.7	7.7	3.9	7.9	3.0	4.1	10.0	6.1
Other general education schools	3.0	2.3	6.8	2.3	3.1	3.1	4.8	5.7	7.7	8.4	11.0
Initial professional training	66.9	67.3	64.9	51.1	49.4	75.1	63.6	77.5	72.8	63.6	50.7
Professional <i>Maturité</i>	1.9	2.0	1.1	0.8	1.6	1.4	2.5	0.7	0.7	1.5	1.1
Elementary training (professional)	1.1	0.9	2.1	0.2	0.5	1.4	1.3	3.9	2.7	1.6	1.8
Pre-vocational training	0.8	0.6	1.8	0.6	0.5	1.0	0.8	2.5	4.1	1.5	1.7

Source: OFS 2009.

These figures cannot be understood without taking into account the social origins of the second generation. Clearly French and German immigrants have the highest level of education and are in higher socioeconomic positions in the stratification system (Wanner, 2004). This has an impact on their children's school situation. In contrast, immigrants from the other national groups have a high proportion of unskilled workers and this also has an impact on their children's school careers.

However, our study on the Italian and Spanish second generation shows that they are doing as well in school as Swiss children from a similar social background. Only a few of them do not complete at least a vocational training course. In other words, if we compare what is comparable,

school careers are quite similar, and the same occurs with the transition to the working world: second generation Italian and Spanish on the one hand, and Swiss-born on the other hand wait the same length of time until they find their first job; they obtain the same types of contracts, they occupy the same white collar positions as skilled employees or middle managers, their rate of unemployment is similar (see Table 2). The only difference is the access to employment in the public sector <sup>1</sup> (Bolzman, Fibbi et Vial, 2005).

**Table 2** Time lapse between leaving school and starting the first job, according to type of diploma and national origin (in %)

	Professional secondary		General secondary		Tertiary	
	Spanish/Italian origin	Swiss origin	Spanish/Italian origin	Swiss origin	Spanish/Italian origin	Swiss origin
Less than 6 months	92	87	73	68	75	90
6 months to 1 year	6	8	3	13	14	6
More than a year	2	5	24	19	10	3
N	139	72	34	31	57	31

Source: Bolzman, Fibbi, Vial, 2003.

There are no similar studies on more recent second generations of Turkish, former Yugoslavian or Portuguese origin. Official data shows however that the young descendants of Turks or former Yugoslavians are experiencing more difficulties than other “ethnic” groups in entering the labour market. However, there is a Portuguese exception. Unemployment among young Portuguese is low (Fibbi et al., 2010) in spite of the fact that they are not doing well at school (high proportion of unskilled).

As we can see, the level of education plays an important role in labour market participation, but it does not explain the difference between the incorporation of the Portuguese second generation and other similar “ethnic” groups into the labour market. Nor does the level of education explain why the children of Spanish and Italian immigrants are doing globally better in school and in the labour market than the children of Turks, former Yugoslavians and Portuguese even if their parents also have a low level of qualification. New factors must be introduced to explain these differences.

### The role of discrimination

Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (2001) have shown, in the case of the United States, that economic incorporation is highly dependent on the attitudes of employers and of the State towards specific immigrant popula-



tions. In other words, obstacles to entering the labour market can be informal (attitudes and behaviour of employers) or formal (immigration policies and laws established by the State).

These obstacles can be defined as discrimination when populations in a similar situation are treated unequally, when equality of chances is not respected. Certain types of discrimination are forbidden by law (those based on gender, race or religion for instance), while others are established by the law. This is the case for persons without Swiss nationality (Pauchard, 1999). In Switzerland discrimination towards Spanish and Italian immigrants has now almost completely disappeared, while it was still very high during the 1970s, according to surveys carried out by Hoffmann-Nowotny and his colleagues (1997) during the two periods. Moreover, according to the same researchers, since the 1990s people of Spanish or Italian background are very positively perceived by the Swiss population. This is clearly observed among their second generation: older (over 30) indicate more often than younger ones (18 to 25) that they have been victims of injustice or hostility during their lives (Bolzmann, Fibbi, Vial, 2003).

This impressive decrease in discrimination can be observed through different types of indicators, as we have stated in the preceding section: even if 40% of Italian and Spanish second generation young adults have known periods of unemployment, a similar proportion of Swiss-born young adults have also experienced this situation. However, at the moment of the Bolzman, Fibbi, Vial survey (2003) only 3% of respondents of both groups were unemployed. Only 4% of Spanish and Italian second generation young adults were working in unskilled jobs, while it was the case of 10% of the Swiss-born.

Access to public sector jobs is still however somewhat problematic for this second generation. Only a quarter of the children of Spanish and Italian immigrants are working for the State<sup>2</sup>, against 40% of Swiss-born. It is an improvement over the first generation (with 11% working in the public sector) but still a low proportion. This is probably due to formal requirements (some positions are only available to Swiss citizens) and to informal selection.

But the situation is much more dramatic for other second generation populations. A study using testing methods by Fibbi, Piguet and Kaya (2003), which consisted in sending fictive applications with similar CVs in response to real job offers and simply introducing variations in the nationality and names of candidates, showed that the same type of diplomas and similar work experiences do not offer young people with a foreign

background the same chances as those of Swiss-born in the labour market. The study shows that there is a high level of discrimination by employers against second generation immigrants from Turkey and former Yugoslavia, which is not the case for the Portuguese. This could partly explain why young Portuguese are less affected by unemployment than the young of the other two origins.

In the case of young people from Turkey and former Yugoslavia the negative image they have among potential employers is reinforced by legal discrimination against those that are asylum seekers (Permit N) or have temporary admission (permit F). Access to vocational training or to qualified employment is restricted for asylum seekers. They can apply for such openings only if there are no candidates among Swiss or foreigners with a resident permit (Bolzman and Perregaux, 2008). The situation was the same for temporary admissions until the revision of the Foreigners Act in 2008, which put them in the same situation as resident foreigners with respect to the labour market. However, employers hesitate to hire somebody with a “temporary” permit for long-term employment because it can be a problematic investment: why hire somebody who might leave Switzerland at any moment?

One important difference between Switzerland and some neighbouring countries, such as France, is that discrimination related to place of residence is lower in the Confederation. This is probably due to the fact that in Switzerland housing segregation is less significant than in France. Emmanuelle Santelli (2007) and others have shown that part of the difficulties experienced by second generation immigrants in accessing the labour market are related to the strong stigmatization of the urban districts where they live.

The acquisition of Swiss nationality by the second generation of Turkish or former Yugoslavian origin does not eliminate the effects of discrimination in the labour market but improves their situation in comparison to those who are still foreigners (Fibbi and Lersch, 2005). In fact, naturalisation is a form of social selection, open to the “best performers” among foreign families and their children (Bolzman, Fibbi, Vial, 2002; Frauenfelder, 2007).

### **What about social capital?**

Many studies on the second generation also highlight the importance of social capital for entry into the labour market, especially when there is discrimination. Social capital can be defined as “the qualities, characteristics

and properties of social networks which are formed, evolved and dissolved within wider institutional and socio-economic environments, having different implications for individual, social groups and communities” (Iosifides et al., 2007, 1344–1345). Three forms of social capital can be distinguished: bounding social capital, applied to a relatively homogenous social group; bridging social capital, referring to relations between different and heterogeneous social groups; linking social capital, which refers to social relations between individuals and groups who hold different positions in a system of hierarchy (Putnam, 1993; Portes, 1998).

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) showed that in situations of legal and informal discrimination the existence of a well-organized and economically active ethnic community can provide employment to those marginalized by the mainstream. Here the ethnic community can be seen both as a source of bounding and bridging social capital. Bounding social capital probably has the same enabling social function here for the second generation for entry into the working world. We can also refer to what Granovetter (1973) has described as “strong ties” in his theory of social networks. In both cases, it is mainly the circle of those who are closely related to the individual by kinship or ethnic proximity which supports them in finding a job. This is the case in particular for the Portuguese in France. By contrast, second generation Algerians who enjoy a higher level of education than the Portuguese experience greater difficulty in entering the labour market because of their lack of social capital (Gaymu and Parant, 1996; Tribalat, 1995).

Our study on the Italian and Spanish second generation indicates that most of them do not need a particular form of social capital in order to enter the labour market. They use formal channels that guarantee them equality of treatment, such as answering a job advertisement, making a spontaneous offer, using the services of an employment agency. However, about 30% were helped by personal relations in getting their first job (see Table 3). The kind of social capital they use is mainly bridging or linking social capital, i.e. they receive help mainly from their former classmates and schoolmates. Family (bounding capital) is not of much help because their parents are in subordinate social positions in the labour market and they are seeking middle or high professional positions. They are moving from one socio-professional status to another.

But at the same time, data seems to indicate that the higher the level of studies among the members of this second generation, the longer the delay in entering the labour market, which is not the case for the Swiss-born. On the other hand, vocational training diplomas allow a faster entry

**Table 3** Current means of access to jobs by national origin (in %)

	Spanish/Italian origin	Swiss origin
Responding to an advertisement	25	28
Employment agency	14	12
Making a spontaneous offer, placing an advertisement	16	15
Personal relations	26	21
Parents or their relations	4	5
Internal promotion	7	8
Cantonal Employment Office	2	–
Other <sup>(1)</sup>	6	12
N	239	154

(1) Was solicited, created own enterprise, job offer following an internship.  $P = .39$ ,  $V = .14$ .  
Source: Bolzman, Fibbi, Vial, 2003.

into the working world (see Table 4). Probably, the lack of social capital is a real barrier to accessing the working world for the members of the second generation with a university degree.

**Table 4** Time lapse between completing training and first job, according to level and type of diploma (in %)

	Professional secondary		General secondary		Tertiary training	
	Spanish/Italian origin	Swiss origin	Spanish/Italian origin	Swiss origin	Spanish/Italian origin	Swiss origin
Less than 6 months	92	87	73	68	75	90
6 months to 1 year	6	8	3	13	14	6
More than a year to 2 years	2	2	15	3	10	3
More than 2 years	–	3	9	16	–	–
N	139	72	34	31	57	31

Source: Bolzman, Fibbi, Vial, 2003.

Transition from training to employment seems to be easier when the young stay in the same professional sector as their family. In Switzerland, like in France, many unskilled second generation Portuguese – but also those with a vocational training degree – are working in the same enterprises as their parents or other relatives. Family and kinship networks allow them to work in professional areas (such as construction, for instance) where the members of their ethnic community are well represented (Fibbi et al., 2010).

In the case of unskilled second generation Turks and former Yugoslavians, their family and kinship networks seem to be less efficient in providing them access to the labour market. The rate of unemployment is

higher in these communities than among the Portuguese. However, Turks are using social capital to set up their own independent small businesses in sectors such as fast-food or tourism. Many of these are family enterprises (Haab et al., 2010).

A high level of education and the absence of discrimination do not guarantee relatively easy access to the labour market. A significant proportion of minority members need some kind of social capital, especially when moving from a lower to a higher socio-professional status. Social capital can also provide access to work and compensate for a lack of qualifications and/or for barriers related to discrimination. But although this bounding social capital protects from underclass formation, it facilitates mainly intergenerational social reproduction.

### **Conclusive remarks**

Our main hypothesis is that segmented assimilation is also a reality in Switzerland regarding the forms of economic incorporation of different second generation national groups.

Available data shows that the children of Italian and Spanish migrants are moving massively into the mainstream economy, integrating into the middle and upper classes. Their situation fits in with the straight line assimilation theory. However this is not the case for the children of Turks, former Yugoslavians and Portuguese, who are overrepresented among the blue collar and lower classes, the children of Turks and former Yugoslavians also being overrepresented among the unemployed.

Among the three factors analysed here, access to education, but especially the decrease in discrimination, seem to play a major role in the more successful professional careers of the Italian and Spanish second generation as compared to those of second generation Turks and former Yugoslavians. The Portuguese are not achieving higher levels of education, but social capital allows them to enter the labour market as blue collar workers.

One question remains: we don't know if segmented assimilation of these different "ethnic" groups is a temporary or permanent reality. In other words, are children of Italian and Spanish immigrants doing better because they belong to an older, more settled migration? Will things change for the children of former Yugoslavians and Turks with time? Or, are they more vulnerable because important contextual and social variables have changed and opportunities for upward mobility will not be the same in the future? To answer these questions, more systematic studies on



changes in the socio-historical context are needed. It is important to analyse changes in the general structure of the labour market in the last fifteen years: is the class structure that allowed upward social mobility for the children of Italian and Spanish immigrants the same nowadays or has it radically changed? For instance are intermediary jobs decreasing, as has been the case in the United States?

It is also necessary to clarify whether prejudices and discrimination are a necessary and temporary stage in the relations between newcomers and settled immigrants, as established by the straight line assimilation theory, or if new factors such as the rise of islamophobia (Gianni, 2003; Schneuwly Purdie et al., 2009) in recent years (most of the Turks and a significant proportion of former Yugoslavians are Moslems) can lead to the persistence of discrimination towards specific categories of the population and then keep them durably excluded from the economic mainstream.

A longitudinal study on the incorporation of second generation immigrants into Swiss society (Bolzman, Bernardi, Le Goff, 2010) in the framework of NCCR "Overcoming Vulnerability: Life Course Perspectives" will allow us to explore some of these questions in greater depth. In fact, we will follow up on the social trajectories of new second generations in Switzerland.

Our theoretical focus is the relationship between life courses and vulnerability during the transition to adulthood. More precisely, our aim is to identify young people's main resources, to understand how they mobilize these resources to face the trials they encounter during this transition and the main outcomes in terms of social status and well-being in early adulthood. All these aspects will be examined taking into account the multidimensional aspects of life course trajectories: training and professional careers, family life, social life, health development, values, social perceptions, attitudes towards risk, as well as citizenship and social participation. We will use an innovative mixed method research design combining qualitative and quantitative instruments in a longitudinal perspective.

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## Notes

- 1 We will come back to this point in the next section.
- 2 We refer here to the public sector in a broad sense, including public companies like the CFF, the cantonal public transports or cantonal hospitals.