How do migrants judge inequality?

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Why migrants?

Migrants and their descendants make up a sizeable proportion of Germany’s population: 18.4% of the population has moved from abroad. The second generation, those born in Germany with migrant parents, make up an additional 5.9% (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). Germany is a country of immigration. To understand how the population judges inequality, we need to consider migrants. But does a migration background make a difference for the way people judge inequality?

Methods

This study explores whether migrants and their descendants judge economic inequality differently than non-migrants. Integrating insights from migration scholarship that age at migration and generation matter (Rumbaut 2004), it distinguishes three migrant generations:

First generation (moved after age 12)
1.5 generation (moved before age 12)
Second generation (born in Germany to migrant parents)

This study is based on the German Socio-Economic Panel Innovation Sample (SOEP-IS). It explores whether there are differences along four dimensions: a judgement on the fairness of life circumstances, as well as perceptions of equality of opportunity, meritocracy, and the fulfillment of basic needs. These dimensions were captured through the following questions:

“How do you assess the fairness of life circumstances in Germany?”

(1 = very unfair, 5 = very fair)

Migration background (ref.: non-migrant)
First generation
1.5 generation
Second generation
Male
Age
Net equivalent household income (in 1000€)
Education (in years)
EGP class scheme (ref. higher managerial and professional workers)
Lower managerial and professional workers
Routine clerical, service, and sales work
Self-employed
Skilled manual workers
Semi- and unskilled manual workers, agricultural labor
N.a. / not employed

A comparison framework is arguably more salient for individuals who move as adolescents or adults because they generally have more agency over their migration.

Generation and age at migration matter

First-generation migrants (i.e., those who moved after age 12) are the only generation that significantly differs from non-migrants across all four dimensions. Namely, they tend to judge life circumstances as fairer, compared with non-migrants, and perceive more equality of opportunity, meritocracy, and fulfillment of basic needs.

51% of first-generation migrants believe people have the same chances to thrive, compared with 34% of non-migrants. 58% of first-generation migrants believe one is rewarded for one’s performance, compared with 46% of non-migrants. 68% of first-generation migrants believe everyone gets what they need to live, compared with 52% of non-migrants.

Theoretical explanations

MIGRANT OPTIMISM

People who move to another country tend to be inherently optimistic, or would not have left their country of origin in the first place (Arce, Bahales, and Kupperminc 2022). People with migration aspirations have a more positive view of the prospective country of immigration than people who do not want to emigrate (Lapshina and Duvel 2018). This self-selection effect is arguably more relevant for individuals who move as adolescents or adults because they generally have more agency over their migration.

TRANSLATIONAL COMPARISONS

People who move to another country tend to compare it favourably with their country of origin, thus generally having a positive impression of the country of immigration. This is known as “dual frame of reference” in migration scholarship (Suárez-Orozco 1991). This comparison framework is arguably more salient for people who left their country of origin after childhood.

BEHAVING LIKE A GOOD MIGRANT

The population of the country of immigration expects newcomers to adopt a meritocratic worldview (Testé et al. 2012). Thus, migrants might feel compelled to express a belief in meritocracy to position themselves as hard-working, good migrants, and to express acceptance of the immigration country.

References


Net equivalent household income (in 1000€)

Male
First generation
1.5 generation
Second generation
Age
Semi- and unskilled manual workers, agricultural labor
Lower managerial and professional workers
Semi- and unskilled manual workers, agricultural labor
EGP class scheme (ref. higher managerial and professional workers)
N.a. / not employed
Skilled manual workers
Self-employed
Routine clerical, service, and sales work
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Unstandardized regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals from an OLS regression model. Data from the German Socio-Economic Innovation Sample, weighted, with robust standard errors.