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Moving beyond: narratives of higher educational aspirations among descendants of immigrants' in vocational training

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ABSTRACT

While the scholarly work on the second generation of immigrants has scrutinised both high educational achievers and marginalised groups, less attention has been paid to those in between and their aspirations. In this article, we draw on interviews with 35 adolescents pursuing vocational education in Norway. Our analysis takes as its point of departure a seemingly recurring paradox throughout the interviews. While all the interviewees are in their second year of vocational training, the majority express aspirations of moving beyond vocational occupations and attaining higher education. Building on the scholarship on class and moral worth, we argue that classificatory struggles about value represent an important but often overlooked context of integration. When the students position themselves as individuals who will move on to higher education, their aspirations can be understood as acts of self-constitution and moral boundary work.

Introduction

Having high aspirations is increasingly perceived as a dominating element of the rhetoric on adolescents' career paths, where the consideration of individual success seems to rely on whether or not they are pursuing higher education (HE) and earning diplomas (Baker 2017; Stahl 2016). While the normative claim of having high aspirations may be prominent for adolescents in general (Ball et al. 2002), it can be viewed as particularly pressing for children of immigrants, the so-called second generation. This issue pertains to them, not only as individuals, but also because their educational performance on a group level is used as a measure of success or failure – indeed often described as the 'litmus test' of integration. Descendants of immigrants may also face extra pressure from their ethnic communities (Portes and Rumbaut 2001) because their educational success may justify their parents' migration decision and hardships in the host society (Louie 2012).

While scholarly work on the second generation has scrutinised both high academic achievers and marginalised groups at both ends of the spectrum, less attention has been

paid to the aspirations and career goals of those 'in between'. We argue that to understand different pathways to integration, we need to deploy a *broader view* of the mainstream society. As Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters (2011) note, most children of immigrants, similar to most children of natives, neither attend elite universities nor live in poverty but occupy a social and economic space in between. Thus, our article contributes to the literature by exploring a group that has received little attention, namely second-generation adolescents on an educational path to skilled working-class occupations. Rather than reproducing the rhetoric where second-generation integration equals high educational achievement, we take the view that there may be different pathways to integration. Following this argument, this study asks: What kinds of aspirational narratives may be discerned among those who are neither on a direct path to higher education nor on their way to marginalised positions?

Our analysis builds on a seeming paradox that emerges from semi-structured interviews with 35 adolescents, of whom 30 have minority origins. All were attending three different schools on the less-privileged east side of Oslo, Norway and in their second year of special-ised education to become either auxiliary nurses or electricians. When the interviewees were asked about school-choice and future prospects, all but three stated that they aspired to 'move beyond' the occupations in which they were being trained and to attain HE. Taking this paradox as the point of departure in our analysis, we ask what kind of aspirational narratives these accounts of 'moving beyond' are embedded in. We discern three different but related prominent narratives on the apparent mismatch between the interviewees' choice of education and framing of their educational aspirations. After elaborating on these nar-ratives, we discuss how they all seem to draw on a wider moral context of higher educational aspirations.

Aspirations and achievement among the second generation

The integration of immigrant descendants' into mainstream society in Norway, as well as in many other western countries, is often described as following a strict two-track process. On one hand, children of immigrants take part in downward assimilation (Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011), reproducing their parents' positions as low-paid unskilled workers or dropping out of school and living on welfare benefits (Brekke 2014). On the other hand, they participate in upward assimilation (Heath, Rothon, and Kilpi 2008) and, despite vari-ation between different countries of origin, often outperform the majority of their majority peers in school and HE (Reisel, Hermansen, and Kindt 2019), against all odds. Thus, much research effort has been made to unpack this 'immigrant paradox'.

One influential strand of literature on second-generation educational attainment high-lights the importance of cultural and social resources for minority students' aspirations and mobility (Lee and Zhou 2015). A central theme in this literature is the presence of ethnic communities (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). These provide norms, social pressure and organ-isations that promote educational attainment, especially gainful for members who lack cultural and human capital (Shah, Dwyer, and Modood 2010). Another theme in this lit-erature is the 'immigrant bargain', where second-generation youth feel the need to make up for their parents' sacrifices and hardships by achieving academic success (Louie 2012). Optimism and high educational aspirations are components of a family project on inter-generational mobility. The overarching story is that immigrants arrive in their destination countries, already having a disposition for achievement and passing it on to their children

by stressing educational attainment (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). This perspective on mobility is similar to contributions that emphasise how the high-achieving second generation may be the result of more traditional class reproduction, either by perceiving immigrant parents as constituting a selected group (Lee and Zhou 2015) or by reproducing the parents' class positions from their countries of origin (Feliciano and Lanuza 2017). In Norway, Kindt (2017) shows how immigrant descendants enrolled in prestigious educational tracks are subject to parental involvement and support, quite similar to the 'concerted cultivation' that is found in the middle class (Lareau 2003).

On an overall level, this cited body of research provides important explanations of how it is possible that second-generation youth with working-class backgrounds have such high aspirations and achievements, or expressed differently, how they are 'breaking the perpetual cycle of the habitus' inherited through their class positions (Crul et al. 2017, 336). Yet, by way of grappling with and explaining the immigrant paradox, this research could be viewed as unintentionally contributing to a discourse that narrows what is considered success, by subjecting it to an upper middle-class gaze. As Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters states, concerning the definition of 'mainstream' in the US: 'If graduation from a four-year university and admission into the professions or other "lofty" positions are needed to enter the mainstream, then most Americans, including most white Americans, are not part of it' (2011, 766).

Moral boundaries and broader discourses on recognition

While existing research on second-generation educational achievement has indeed generated a range of important insights into the intersecting structures of class, immigrant status and ethnicity, we argue that *classificatory struggles of value* may represent an important, yet overlooked context of integration for descendants of immigrants. A key argument in the literature on social class is that class is given value through culture. Access to the dominant symbolic worth or the ability to circulate ideas about someone's moral value is central to the history of classificatory value struggles (Skeggs 1997; Tyler 2015).

Research on social class has demonstrated how high educational aspirations provide a moral background where those who do not pursue high aspirations are positioned as lacking value and as failures (Frye 2012; Stahl 2016). From this perspective, aspirations can be understood as acts of self-constitution and moral boundary work. As Baker (2017) argues, focusing on moral meanings sheds light on an important question: *What do aspirations get used for?* In his study on working-class students in the UK, it is precisely their awareness of rank and status hierarchies that motivates them to present themselves as individuals with high educational aspirations despite lacking resources and having low levels of achievement: Having aspirations is part of what it means to be good and respectable persons.

Frye (2012) describes a similar process in a quite different context. The study shows how schoolgirls in Malawi have HE aspirations despite little realistic chance of achieving their goals; less than 1% of the population attends college. Frye (2012, 1598) argues that the selection of higher education as a future goal is shaped not only by factors related to the outcome but also by the *social meaning* of the goal and what it states about the actor's place in the world. While the emphasis on the high-aspiration rhetoric may be an international phenomenon, educational aspirations and choices are also embedded in different social contexts (Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015), from the labour market (Reegård and Hegna 2019), the educational system (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012) and the 'institutional

habitus' of the school, to the local area and the city (Reay et al. 2001; Smyth and Banks 2012). Thus, to properly situate the narratives in this study, we describe some important contextual aspects in the following section.

Context

Norway represents a context characterized by a generous and redistributive welfare state, providing a free, centrally regulated secondary and tertiary education system. To gain entrance into higher education, a student needs a higher education admission certificate (HEAC). This is generally obtained by completing the academic track in secondary education, the standard being to finish this within three years. The other main option in secondary school is the vocational track, which normally leads to a craft certificate. This usually means the completion of two years of school attendance, followed by two years of apprenticeship. In line with the relatively late tracking (aged 15/16) of academic versus vocational studies, the vocational track also offers built-in second and third chances to earn the HEAC and thus advance to higher education. The second chance entails finishing an intensive third year in school with only academic courses, while the third chance consists of completing a less intensive year of academic courses *after* obtaining a craft certificate.

While attending vocational education is associated with problems of marginalisation and downward mobility in some European countries (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012), Norway is characterized by a highly regulated labour market, strong worker protection, a relatively compressed wage structure, and a shortage of skilled labour that may provide good job opportunities for both electricians and auxiliary workers (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2016). There are, however, also concern over the replacement of practical training with theoretical subjects as well as the working conditions of skilled workers, especially regarding part time and zero-hour contracts (Vogt 2017). There further exists evidence that second generation youth both have less access to apprenticeships and have higher unemployment rates as skilled workers than do natives (Støren 2011; Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017).

Finally, there are significant regional differences both in the demand for skilled workers and adolescent's educational preferences, where Oslo represents a context of 'de-industrialization' with only about 2 out of 10 adolescents entering a vocational secondary education (Reegård and Hegna 2019). Oslo further stands out in Norway by having significant residential segregation by both class and ethnicity. While certain areas in the western part of the city are marked by affluence and few minorities, several areas in the east are characterized by the opposite situation (Ljunggren and Andersen 2015). Though admission to schools and programmes are based on grade averages, the levels of class and ethnic segregation among schools are quite similar to those of Oslo's neighbourhoods. All three schools where we (strategically) conducted interviews were situated in the eastern part of Oslo and had significantly higher shares of individuals with immigrant and working-class origins than the city average.

Reflecting Norway's relatively short history of migration – not becoming a net immigrant country before 1967 – the second generation is still young, about 80 per cent being under the age of 20. The migration levels have varied across the years, consisting mainly of labour, refugee and family migration from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, while larger numbers of free-moving labour migrants arrived from Central and Eastern Europe after 2004 (Brochmann et al. 2012). In 2018, immigrants and their descendants accounted for

approximately 17 percent of the Norwegian population as a whole, while their share in Oslo was 33 percent (Statistics Norway 2019).

Data and analytical strategy

Sample and recruitment

Being part of a larger project on different 'Pathways to integration', this particular study aimed to analyse second-generation youth undergoing vocational training. We sought to recruit students in training to become auxiliary nurses and electricians, both having high shares of immigrant descendants. When approaching schools and students for recruitment, we emphasised our special interest in talking to students who were descendants of immigrants, but did not exclude the participants with ethnic majority origins. After strategically identifying schools and vocational programmes, we contacted the school management and presented our project as a study on adolescents' educational choices, school experiences and work aspirations. In one school, we handed out a list where students could sign up, and made individual appointments. In the other two schools, the teachers assisted by scheduling interviews within school hours. In both cases, the interviewees were informed orally and in writing that participation was voluntary.

In total, we interviewed 35 students in their second year of school training, 29 were 17 years old, while six were aged 18–21. Five of them had majority origins and only act as a complementary group in this study. The other 30 had parents who had immigrated from 18 different countries representing all continents. However, all of them had grown up on the east side of Oslo, with parents in unskilled working-class occupations. Reflecting the gender differences between auxiliary nursing and electrical work, our sample consisted of 16 students (10 girls) in the auxiliary nurse programme and 19 students (18 boys) in the electrician programme.

Data analysis

In 2016, we conducted the semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. All were recorded and later transcribed in full. We used an open-ended interview technique to encourage the adolescents to share how they had experienced the curriculum in their area of study, the school environment, as well as how they considered their future career prospects as skilled workers. We coded all transcribed interviews in HyperResearch; 10 were coded doubly to ensure reliability. Besides being informed by the literature on ethnic capital and moral boundaries, the coding process was empirically driven. The initial thematic codes, for instance, 'educational choice', 'school choice' and 'family expectations', were expanded with more descriptive subcodes, such as 'advisement', 'aspirations' and 'language'. These later formed the basis for the analysis, where three prominent narratives of moving on to higher education were discerned.

In the analysis, we treated the transcribed interviews as 'speech acts' (Gubrium and Holstein 2003), meaning that the interviews were filled with performances where the interviewees (and the interviewers) constructed themselves as agents with moral capacities and engaged in meaning-making processes (Sandberg 2009). Thus, when we asked them in what ways they identified with their educational choices, how they experienced support

from significant others and how they viewed their career prospects as skilled workers, the underlying notion of how they made sense of these questions and formulated their answers was related to their social contexts and the cultural discourses available to them.

Narratives of higher education

All but three of the interviewees in our study do not envision themselves as working in the occupations for which their current education would qualify them but aspire to attain HE. In accordance with the existing literature, it could have been expected that the most prominent narrative that these adolescents would draw on when speaking about education should in some way involve their families (Modood 2004). Being crucial agents of their immigrant families' upward mobility strategies, second generation youth often face high expectations and feel responsible for realising the family dream of social ascent (Louie 2012). Nonetheless, narratives of parental educational pressure or support are rare in our data. Instead, the prominent description of parental involvement is that it does not matter what type of education the children choose, but they must 'work hard and finish what they started'. The interviewees often further describe their parents as expecting them to 'behave and show up in school' but not being so concerned about their grades or following up on their homework. Thus, the interviewees' description of their parents' support is less about family pressure and more similar to working-class parents' school involvement (Lareau 2003).

In the following analysis, we show how the seeming mismatch between being enrolled in a vocational programme and simultaneously aspiring to 'move beyond' and attain HE can be observed as embedded in three related, yet different and sometimes opposing narratives: 'smart, easy and safe', 'discrimination and stigma' and 'becoming respectable'.

'Smart, easy and safe'

> I took this subject because it is easier to get access to health studies, because the grade requirements are not as high as in general studies. It is also easier to accomplish this study than accomplishing general studies and then getting into higher education (female student, auxiliary nurse programme).

Within the first and multifaceted narrative, the decision to undertake vocational training while still aspiring for HE is portrayed as individualistic and strategic. As previously described, the pathway to HE in Norway is not closed to students attending vocational programmes but may be taken through an extra year of academic training. As visible in the citation above, it is not difficult to see that the choice of pursuing HE through the vocational route may be a perfectly rational one. However, this does not provide much information about why the students do *not* want to work in the occupations for which they are training. The interviewees largely deploy two different logics of 'smartness' when accounting for their educational choice, which we refer to as 'the easy way' and 'Plan B', respectively.

The easy way

Almost all the students in our sample talk about vocational education as something *easy* or at least easier than the academic programme. As we will show later, 'easiness' may also

run counter to merit and thereby influence conceptions of status, but here, we focus on how it is presented as an easier path to HE and thus a 'smart' choice, especially for those who are not so 'theoretically oriented':

> I chose [the] electrician [programme] because I'm not so fond of school. I can't bear it. The electrician programme is easy or kind of easy. There's [a] lot of practical work and not so much writing and stuff like that. I like to work with my hands, being active. My student counsellor told me to choose the electrician programme because I was crazy in lower secondary [school]. I smashed everything, computers, tables, stuff. But I managed to fix a lot of what I damaged. The other boys are here because they want to become football players. We do not have tests or a lot of homework, so there's much time to play football (male student, electrician programme).

The strong narrative of vocational education as 'easy' is also underlined by how the interviewees compare it with lower secondary school. They describe their current school days as far less intense concerning theoretical subjects, homework and tests and thus far less academic. In many aspects, this emphasis on vocational school as easy is more in line with a classic image of a 'vocational programme student' than an 'academic programme student'. For instance, they frequently describe themselves as being 'practically oriented' and not a 'school type'. Several express their dislike of theoretical subjects or classroom teaching in general and state that they are tired of school altogether. Some have low grades, while others will not receive grades at all due to low attendance.

Despite these frequent descriptions of themselves as fitting well within the idea of a vocational student, most state their aspirations of moving 'up the educational ladder'. However, the general academic route is also presented as a somewhat risky venture.

Plan B – creating a safety net

The interviewees' frequent description of HE as 'risky business' resonates well with how working-class students have been shown to talk about their aspirations (Archer and Hutchings 2000). The possibility of failure is a common theme when the students discuss why they have not chosen general academic studies. In their perception, vocational education and earning a craft certificate constitute not only the easiest but also the safest path to HE. In this way, aspiring towards higher education becomes a less risky process because the craft certificate or the possibility of apprenticeship is treated as 'Plan B' if they fail higher education.

> This is my Plan B. Because if I don't succeed with Plan A… if I take the last year and get my HEAC and after that, start higher education… what if I fail? So, that's why I choose a vocational subject. If I have the craft certificate, I can move on, studying to become a police officer. And if I don't succeed, at least I have the diploma that proves that I'm an electrician (male student, electrician programme).

In short, the students often talk about HE as something difficult and risky for all adolescents. Contrary to those who are on the direct academic track, they have thought over matters and made a more rational and 'smart decision', which give them the benefits of having both an easier path to HE and a safety net.

Discrimination and stigma

While the adolescents emphasise this voluntaristic narrative, they also draw heavily on what may be viewed as the opposite – a narrative of external and structural constraints. In particular, they tell stories about how ethnic stereotyping, discrimination and place stigmatisation make it very difficult or even impossible to be hired as an apprentice and then as a regular employee.

Discrimination and ethnic stereotypes

The majority of the students in our study explicitly speak about how they received student counselling in lower secondary school, when having to choose between the vocational and the academic tracks. In their experiences, it frequently happened that the student counsellors discussed how a vocational programme would be the best for them because it was easy. While this could indeed be regarded as in line with some students' self-presentation as the 'practical type', not fond of theoretical subjects, it is also interpreted as a language of stereotyping:

> The student counsellors and teachers told me to…. You see, in the last year in lower second-ary school, we had this course where we could visit schools and attend different subjects, and I wanted to see the general academic programme. But then, they told me like, 'No, do not take the academic programme. Take something else. Take a vocational programme.' Anyway, I hadn't decided yet. I wasn't certain that the academic track was right for me, but I just wanted to check it out, you know. But sometimes, I was like, 'Why do you tell me that I should not go to the aca-demic track when I'm telling you that's what I want?' (male student, auxiliary nurse programme).

The interviewee's reflection illustrates the discomfort or the ambivalence of being cate-gorised as someone who does not fit into general studies. This is a situation that we also know from previous research. Several studies have described how ethnic stereotypes influ-ence teachers' and advisors' perception of ethnic minority students' performance (Francis and Archer 2005) and in their guidance of students towards choosing vocational schools (Smyth and Banks 2012). It is important to note that the ambivalence and the discomfort of being constrained by stereotypes add a significant nuance to the first narrative. While the students' choice of first taking the vocational programme and then an extra academic year fits well into the story about 'smart choices', to be categorised by others as not fitting into HE and in need of choosing an easy career path is a totally different matter and perhaps the opposite of being regarded as 'smart'.

It was not only in their own stories from the past that they speak of stereotyping and discrimination. Perhaps most prominent, particularly among the electrician students, is their mention of ethnic discrimination in the labour market. Although the interviewees have themselves not yet entered the labour market, several describe severe discrimination in the manual occupation for which they are training. Often, their narratives combine prominent accounts that they have heard (which recur in a range of the interviews) and their own experiences in trying to arrange for a shorter work placement in a company or an institution.

> I'm Norwegian, but…. I don't know if I'm Norwegian or not. What's stressing me is that I will not manage to get an apprenticeship in any firm because I have a different background. I've heard things like that. And it's true. The Norwegian students have networks and a lot of contacts. They will get the apprenticeship. There were two students [who] had good grades, no school absence, but still, they [were] not getting an apprenticeship. This story was in the

newspaper. The best students in school… but still. A lot of us have just lost our motivation. So…what to do? You're stuck. When I was in [a] work placement the first year, the firm I worked for was like… it was only [hiring] Norwegians. You know, ethnic Viking Norwegian. It was like two or three foreigners working there. […] In the police, they need people like me, people with [an] immigrant background. A lot of foreigners are criminal, and we can understand them. So I think my ethnicity will be a bonus in the police. It is the same in the army, when they are in Afghanistan; they need people [who] can speak the language. […] And then they think, seeing a foreigner that's in the army, defending his country. The Norwegians think… wow, I don't know how to explain this. If someone calls me a foreigner, then I can answer that 'do you know what? I protect my country and your country.' I will attack them with those words. Then they can't say anything. You know, you have to have higher education in the army. It's not easy to get access. You have to fight for it (male student, electrician programme).

The meaning-packed preceding quote shows how the interviewee describes occupations in the police force and the military as open for 'people like him', people with an immigrant background, brown skin and a foreign name. Most of the students express clear expectations of having to face discrimination in manual labour, which function as important explanations of why they aspire to move beyond these occupations. What the informants have in common is that they present and label themselves as 'foreigners', but as the preceding quote illustrates, their status is highly ambivalent. In this narrative, HE as a requirement to obtaining a position in the army, is not only viewed as a factor that can help them avoid discrimination in the labour market, but it may also be about being recognised as Norwegians. In the next section, we elaborate on their positioning as foreigners and explore this identity construction in relation to growing up on the east side of Oslo.

Ghetto kids and ghetto schools

In Oslo, with one exception, all the vocational schools are located on the less affluent east side of the city, where all of the interviewees in this study grew up. Two of the schools in this study are also frequently publicly portrayed as problem schools, with very low or no grade requirements and with frequent visits by the police. When asked about their reason for choosing the school that they are currently attending, they commonly answer, 'It's close to where I live', echoing the 'localism' found among working-class students elsewhere (Reay et al. 2001). However, this does not mean that their choice of school is an unconscious one. They easily speak of and distinguish among different sorts of schools, as well as various types of people in their schools. A very prominent type of story is one where they experience others viewing and labelling their school as 'ghetto':

Female student, auxiliary nurse programme: When people hear of [another school's name], it's like this: 'That's a good school!' But when they hear the name of my school, they just respond like, 'Ahh, ghetto school! Bad teachers!' All of that, but it's not really like that. It's just our Norwegian teacher [who] sucks.

Interviewer: Why do they say ghetto school?

Female student, auxiliary nurse programme: Because they think there are many foreigners here. That's… you can say that it is 90% foreigners here. The rest is Norwegian, the 10%. It is true. Perhaps the environment is a little bit like a ghetto. There are people who smoke, just

hanging outside the school. Going to parties and everything like that. That's probably why it's ghetto.

Interviewer: isn't that what young people do? Go to parties and stuff?

Female student, auxiliary nurse programme: Yeah, exactly. It's just that it [involves] foreigners.

As shown in the case with the label 'foreigner', 'ghetto' is also frequently used by the students themselves. Some explicitly identify with this bad reputation, positioning themselves as 'ghetto girls' and 'ghetto boys', as people who use drugs, are not afraid to pick up a fight and do not care about school.

When it comes to the people I'm hanging [out] with, [school name] has a very high status. This is the school where the cool people go. It is not where the rich go, but it's more like the ones that… it's a ghetto school. And I'm a very ghetto girl, so the people I hang out with, they appreciate [school name]. But if I meet people from other schools, and they ask about which school I attend, and I say [school name]. They're like, 'What? Why do you go to [school name]? You should start here.' And I'm just like, 'No, I will not.' Then they say, 'No, I've heard you get bad grades and that it's dangerous and that the police are there every day' and so on. And I'm just, 'It's like this. No, I'm going there; I know how it is. [They're] just rumours.' The police are here sometimes, but they're also in other schools (female student, auxiliary nurse programme).

As visible throughout our data, the most prominent stories told here are not about subcultural resistance but take the shape of far more conformist ones, emphasising the students' aspirations for HE. Thus, for most of them, the stigma attached to their school, neighbourhood, immigrant origin and, as we will show shortly, their position as vocational students, marks a highly ambivalent identity. This becomes evident when they talk about their prospects in the labour market.

Male student, electrician programme: Because you know, I called like 62 companies, in front of my teacher, I said I went to this school and they're like, 'No, we do not need people.' 'No, not this time.' 'No.' 'No, no!' All 62, I called 62 companies! My friend called 50 companies. 'No!' '[School name]?! Oh no!' '[School name]? No!'

Interviewer: Why do you think this happened?

Male student, electrician programme: I don't know. It's like this: 'Hi, my name is Mohammed. I'm calling for [a] work placement in weeks 43 and 44. And when I say that I'm calling from this school, they just [say], 'We do not hire at the moment; goodbye' the second they hear the name of this school.

In contrast to the first narrative, which focuses on individual choices and smart decisions, here, we show the existence of a competing narrative that highlights structural constraints, particularly those of stigmatisation and discrimination. When stories regarding experiences and expectations about discrimination are so prominent, a narrative that includes a reorientation towards the extra academic year and higher education also makes much sense.

Becoming respectable

While several aspects entail a devaluation of vocational training in both of the former narratives, the last narrative stands out by emphasising this in a more direct manner –

referring more explicitly to notions of *personal* worth. Although the students are cautious when talking about status and differences in rank ('I am not a person who judge others'), they discuss at length how they (and vocational subjects more generally) are constantly judged and delegitimised by others. Very frequent descriptions of HE involve wording such as 'moving on' and seeking 'better opportunities'. In this manner, they more or less directly state that their HE aspirations are associated with becoming respectable (Skeggs 1997).

> There are very many who think that if you take vocational education, it's a poor occupation. That craftsmen or those taking vocational education… I don't know… maybe they think a little like, that is low… you understand what I mean? A person who is a lawyer is seen as much smarter and a better person than someone who is a mechanic, for example. I don't know (male student, electrician programme).

A prominent way of the students' self-presentation throughout the interviews is to position themselves as individuals who are not 'fixed' on a vocational track. Pursuing HE or obtaining a degree is talked about as offering 'more of a chance' and securing 'better jobs' than what waits for them at the end of their vocational training. Although the majority of the students in our study position themselves as people who will pursue HE or obtain better jobs, few have specific plans on how these aspirations will be accomplished. Rather, they describe their plans in generic terms. This lack of information and vagueness about the future are typically expressed in general statements such as 'I just have to work hard and believe in myself.'

> When it comes to wiping ass and stuff like that, when I tell my friends what I do, they're like, 'Oh, my God! Are you going to do that for the rest of your life?' And I always answer something like this: 'Yes, you have to start somewhere and then see how it goes' (female student, auxiliary nurse programme).

When the students position themselves as individuals who aspire for HE, this is also related to who they want to be. Earning a degree is talked about as 'bettering yourself', similar to Archer and Hutchings (2000) findings, where their working-class interviewees construct the attainment of a degree as a mythical ticket to both social mobility and a good life. As they further emphasise, a HE degree offers huge benefits by being an objective measure of social significance that can be easily communicated to others – 'it talks'. As the interviewees present it, this is contrary to a craft certificate.

> People tend to think that it is high status to have higher education. One thinks that a person has worked hard and been dedicated to accomplish higher education. While when a person only takes two years of secondary education and apprenticeship and then enter the occupation, then they think, 'He has been very lazy.' That's how people think (male student, electrician programme).

In the students' elaborations about moving on to HE, a recurring phenomenon concerns the symbolic markers of body work from which they distance themselves. The students differ in the ways that this is done, however. For the electrician programme students, this is important not only in terms of their own body, first and foremost by talking of electrical work as 'hard', 'dirty' and 'exhausting' (cf. Archer and Hutchings 2000), but also in terms of clothing, making a frequent distinction between wearing suits and overalls:

> **Male student, electrician programme:** My parents won't get depressed if I become an electrician, but I think [there's] no point being an electrician for the rest of your life.

Interviewer: OK, you said you wanted to become an engineer. What kind of job do you want when you graduate as an engineer, then? What is your dream job?

Male student, electrician programme: Engineer. Just to work in an office.

Interviewer: So there are no special companies or fields that you think about?

Male student, electrician programme: No, it's just that I think that I will make big money. Go to work [in] a suit, not [in] an electrician's overalls.

In this way, the electrician students can be perceived as drawing a symbolic boundary based on bodies (and clothes) to differentiate among status groups. In contrast, the auxiliary nursing students establish boundaries by distinguishing between those who have to take care of others' bodies and those who do other types of work. They frequently refer to themselves as individuals who will 'not wipe ass for the rest of their lives'. The students' positioning of themselves as committed to remaining in the educational system to achieve their academic goals leading to their career advancement, thus seems important in their boundary making and ranking of different occupations and the categories of people whom they associate with these jobs. As such, their aspirations can be regarded as acts of self-constitution (Baker 2017), where moral boundaries are central parts of their identity work and negotiation of value.

Moving beyond – moral significance of aspirations

Although in their second year of vocational training, most of the adolescents in this study state that they aspire to move beyond such occupations and attain HE credentials. Departing from this recurring paradox, we asked what kind of aspirational narratives these accounts of HE are embedded in. At first glance, high aspirations are well in line with the general literature on second-generation achievement in western countries. However, under closer scrutiny of how these adolescents frame their educational choices, a central finding is that their educational accounts are embedded in a moral context of higher educational aspirations. Of course, this does not mean that factors such as 'ethnic capital' and 'family pressure' are unimportant, but they are not prominent in the adolescents' own accounts. Our analytical goal here has not been to conclude on whether or not these adolescents will actually complete their vocational training or advance to HE. Neither have we been preoccupied about assessing if they will meet discrimination in the labour market or if those that state a dislike for theory would succeed in HE. What we have attempted is to undertake a closer examination of what paths and narratives that are available for them to draw on (cf. Sandberg 2009) when they present themselves as individuals on their way to higher education.

The obtainment of a certificate of apprenticeship may very well be seen as a rational minimisation of the risk associated with HE, as the interviewees also describe it. It is, however, also a highly contextually embedded aspirational utterance and by analysing the interviewees' aspirations as part of narratives, we can also see how they make sense as moral responses attached to wider structural phenomena and cultural discourses. As emphasised by several others (e.g. Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012; Reegård and Hegna 2019; Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015), both the institutional features of the educational context as well as other local contexts are highly relevant when trying to understand aspirations and educational choices.

As we have shown, many of the interviewees both see themselves as 'practical' and as disliking theoretical subjects, so in this way the vocational route into the Norwegian labour market, which until now has been characterised by having a significant number of relatively well paid skilled working-class jobs, would seem to be a good fit, which it definitely also is for many across the country (Reegård and Hegna 2019). However, when these 'practical' interviewees describe aspirations for HE instead of a craft certificate, it could be that the school system in Oslo, and in particular the schools with a reputation as 'trouble schools', is not able to provide a narrative where this is pictured as a success. Further research is needed here, but in addition to how the school system is rigged towards providing both second and third chances for vocational students to move over to the academic track, others have pointed to how the latter decades' growing focus on HE also have entailed a general move towards 'theoretical knowledge' at the expense of practice based learning, even within the vocational educations (Vogt 2017).

While the discourse on the importance of HE achievement likely is important for all adolescents, it may also be the case that the moral meaning of educational aspirations is even more pressing for immigrants' descendants. As we have shown in the second narrative, obtaining HE credentials is indeed connected to processes of othering and of becoming, and being recognised as, 'Norwegians'. Adding to this, are the important stories of how the second generation face discrimination in the labour market (cf. Midtbøen 2016; Støren 2011), which could also lead to an adjustment of where they perceive to 'fit in' and not. There are thus many factors pointing towards that the general definition of 'mainstream' may be somewhat narrow (Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters 2011), and that a narrative of vocational education as success may be even harder to find for these adolescents.

As we have shown, these narratives of ambition underscore how they are respectable individuals (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Skeggs 1997). This respectability is further often defined negatively, being apparent in that their stories are not so much about the type of HE they will apply for, but rather is centred around the types of persons they *do not* want to be – those on a pathway to working class occupation. The findings therefore call for a broader perspective on what types of aspirations and educational choices that are treated as indicators of success and integration, and for whom. Future studies should therefore not only address the role of employer discrimination in minorities' access to apprenticeship and skilled working class occupations, but also explore in more detail processes of self-selection – whether and to what extent ethnic minorities adjust their aspirations and career choices in respond to both anticipated discrimination and considerations of status.

This article contributes empirically to the existing literature on immigrant descendants, by exploring second-generation adolescents on an educational pathway to skilled working-class occupations – a group that have largely been overlooked by scholars. Theoretically, we contribute to this literature by bringing together two distinct research traditions that seldom engage with one another: research on social class and moral boundaries and research on educational aspirations among second generation immigrants. A central insight gained from this analytical position is that focusing on the broader moral meaning of aspirations and processes of othering may provide an understanding of why aspirations can remain high even in the absence of capital or opportunities among disadvantaged groups (Baker 2017; Lee and Zhou 2015). When the interviewees' high aspirations are not discussed within a narrative of ethnic capital or 'immigrant drive', we believe that this illustrates how perspectives on class and valuation may contribute to advancing the sociological understanding

of immigrant descendants' horizons of action. Even though someone is on a path towards earning a craft certificate, it seems difficult to access narratives emphasising the positive aspects of skilled working-class occupations. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of immigrant descendants' aspirations and educational choices should also include classificatory struggles of value as providing a context of integration.

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