Attainment-aspiration gap in students with a migration background: The role of self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Academic aspirations are important for academic success. Students with migration backgrounds tend to report high academic aspirations despite low success in school, a phenomenon known as the attainment-aspiration gap. This paper investigates whether the self-perception of ability (here, academic self-efficacy) can explain aspirations better than actual attainment in students with migration backgrounds. Data from 380 seventh-grade students enrolled in German schools showed background-specific patterns in multigroup structural equation analyses: In students without migration backgrounds, attainment and self-efficacy both predicted academic aspirations. In students with migration backgrounds, attainment in reading and mathematics did not predict aspirations, whereas academic self-efficacy did. Furthermore, a differential pattern of results for family background variables emerged across students depending on their familial countries of origin. As aspirations can influence behavior and facilitate academic and employment-related success, understanding factors that lead to their formation in students from diverse backgrounds is important for research and practice.

1. Introduction

Academic aspirations are important for the persistent pursuit of long-term goals. Accordingly, they have been found to be associated with positive educational outcomes such as enrollment in higher school types or qualifications (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Schoon & Parsons, 2002) and also with success in adulthood (Mello, 2008). Despite these general findings, students with migration backgrounds and those from other minority groups (e.g., first-generation students or ethnic minorities) tend to report high academic aspirations despite their low success in school, a phenomenon known as the attainment-aspiration gap (Gutman et al., 2012; Hill & Torres, 2010). Several explanations for the attainment-aspiration gap have been discussed in the literature, one of which is high self-beliefs held by students with migration backgrounds in their abilities (Artelt et al., 2003) and chances (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

One self-belief that has consistently predicted effort and success is academic self-efficacy, the belief that one is able to successfully execute tasks in academic domains by one's own means (Bandura, 1977, 2002).

In Germany, the educational attainment of students with migration backgrounds is a vital topic. Although all students with migration backgrounds share a familial history of relocation, they do not

necessarily share the reasons and ambitions that go with it, making them a heterogeneous population with regard to their original culture and their migration experience. Students with Turkish backgrounds show low success in school compared with nonmigrant students and other large migrant groups such as those from the former Soviet Union or Poland (Stanat & Christensen, 2006). To date, it is unknown whether the attainment-aspiration gap is evident in all subgroups of students with migration backgrounds. Explaining the gap through self-efficacy—which can be changed through educational intervention—is theoretically compelling but has not yet been examined.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Academic aspirations

Academic aspirations are desires and intentions for educational attainment. A typical manifestation is the wish or intention to obtain a specific school-leaving certification. Idealistic aspirations can be distinguished from realistic aspirations. The latter are also referred to as expectations, and they take into account subjectively perceived structural and individual conditions that may influence the probability of

success on the chosen pathway. On the other hand, idealistic aspirations reflect what one hopes for and not what one thinks is likely (Gutman et al., 2012). The present paper is concerned with realistic aspirations. They can be viewed as aspects of *possible selves*, that is, imaginative future selves that inform behavior in a way that makes the realization more likely (Boxer et al., 2011; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

In school, possible selves exert their influence in the short run, for example, when students decide about learning behavior (Beal & Crockett, 2010). They are also important in the long run, enabling students to work for long-term goals such as when students pursue aspirations. Holding high aspirations can thus help students to actually achieve their goals (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007). In a large longitudinal study, Ou and Reynolds (2008) identified fourth-grade students' expectation to complete college as one important predictor of the number of years of education received at age 20. Besides, family-related variables such as mother's high school completion showed an effect (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). The influence of the family on students' aspirations and consequently on attainment is substantial, and it has been shown that parents from migrant backgrounds have high aspirations for their children (e.g., Raleigh & Kao, 2010).

2.2. Academic aspirations in minority and migration background groups

Although students or parents from minority or socially and economically disadvantaged groups report aspiring to high educational certifications and degrees, these students' school achievement is often low (e.g., ethnic minority groups in the UK: Strand, 2011; children of non-European immigrants in Sweden: Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011; ethnic minority groups in the US: Kao & Tienda, 1998; first-generation students in the US: McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; migration background students in Germany: Salikutluk, 2013). This pattern does not occur in all groups in the same way, and it is often only apparent if achievement and familial background variables are taken into account.

For the present paper, results for groups with different ethnic origins are especially relevant. In France, Brinbaum and Cebolla-Boado (2007) used a nationally representative sample to compare native French with Maghreb and Portuguese migration background students while controlling for social background. They found higher aspirations for the highest school-leaving certificate in the Maghreb but not in the Portuguese subgroup. In Germany, Salikutluk (2013) initially found no differences in aspirations between the two largest groups of migration background students (Turkish, and former Soviet Union [FSU] backgrounds). When academic ability as well as several family features were introduced into the model, Turkish background predicted higher aspirations than in nonmigrant students, but FSU background did not.

In a nationally representative US sample, only Asian Americans showed higher aspirations than Black, White, and Hispanic Americans, a finding that is in accordance with the high achievements of Asian Americans. When academic proficiency, school type, and family and personal background variables were taken into account, all non-White groups scored higher than White Americans (Mau & Bikos, 2000). Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998) used data from the same study to compare students' expectations of how many years of education they would be likely to complete in groups of migrant eighth-grade students in the US (Chinese, Filipino, Korean) and ethnically different native groups (Mexican, Black, and White). Controlling for language proficiency, parents' characteristics, and parent-child interactions, Chinese and Korean students had higher expectations than nonmigrants. Regarding ethnicity, Black students had higher expectations than Whites, but Mexicans' expectations did not differ from Whites' expectations. Taken together, the relatively high aspirations of some groups of migration and ethnic minority background students are quite obvious, whereas the reasons are less so.

In the literature, several possible explanations have been discussed, the most prominent of which is the *immigrant optimism hypothesis*. Immigrant optimism refers to the fact that having a (family) migration

background often goes along with high expectations for social and economic upward mobility (Kao & Tienda, 1998). In this context, it should be considered whether migration took place due to push or pull factors (OECD, 2009): High aspirations most likely exist in families who migrated to ensure a better future for their children. The children's educational advancement in the receiving country would settle this claim (Andriessen et al., 2006). Some research has looked into explanations other than immigrant optimism, one of which includes the specific ethnic or cultural qualities of particular groups. For example, a reason for high aspirations in Asian Americans could be that they consider the pursuit of higher education a question of family honor (Mau & Bikos, 2000). The influence of high estimations of individual ability that are prevalent in at least some groups of students with a migration background even after accounting for actual proficiency (Artelt et al., 2003; Stanat & Christensen, 2006) is another possible explanation for high aspirations. High self-beliefs may deliver immigrant optimism or be a response to specific ethnic or cultural qualities and have not yet been subjected to systematic research in this context.

2.3. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the individual belief that one is capable of successfully completing a given task that is connected with a desirable outcome (Bandura, 1977) and is a strong correlate of achievement (Britner & Pajares, 2006). According to Bandura, self-efficacy has a strong impact on "thought, affect, motivation, and action" (Bandura, 1991, p. 248). Because the anticipated results of human actions are represented cognitively in the present, they can serve as motivators and regulate behavior (Bandura, 1991). This regulation encompasses all kinds of large and small decisions, thus constantly shaping behavior and results (Parker et al., 2014). In the learning domain, high self-efficacy increases persistence and effort during learning and testing episodes, thus resulting in better performance (Dickhäuser et al., 2011). Accordingly, high-achieving students tend to have higher self-efficacy scores as well (Shell et al., 1995). Nevertheless, self-efficacy does not necessarily reflect actual attainment in all students similarly. Despite the strong relations with success and achievement, self-assessments of self-efficacy are typically flawed. Dunning et al. (2004) discussed this phenomenon extensively and categorized the psychological reasons for misjudgment as either due to information deficits that are not realized or due to the neglect of existing and relevant information. Owing to the particular situation of students from families with a migration background, both kinds of group-specific distortions of self-appraisal may be in evidence.

Bandura et al. (2001) showed that domain-specific academic self-efficacy is more predictive of occupation-related aspirations than actual attainment is. This pattern could be due to the fact that it is not objectively measured attainment that dictates what a student aims for in terms of educational success but rather individual perceptions of achievement potential (Schnabel et al., 2002). The latter can be distorted differentially in subgroups with diverse migration backgrounds (cf. Bandura, 2002), thus possibly providing an explanation for the attainment-aspiration gap in these students. Most educational systems, including the German, comprise students with different migration or minority backgrounds.

2.4. Students with migration backgrounds in the German school system

Students with migration backgrounds form a large group of about a quarter of all students in German schools (Prenzel et al., 2013). Across all migration backgrounds, these students show lower competencies in reading, mathematics, and science compared with students without a migration background (Prenzel et al., 2013). Because many families with migration backgrounds do not speak only German at home, the language domain is often a particular challenge for these students (Stanat & Christensen, 2006). As a result, students with migration