



# Defining success in education: Exploring the frames of reference used by different voluntary migrant groups in Belgium



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## ABSTRACT

There has been little research, particularly in Europe, into who ethnic minority students compare themselves to in developing attitudes towards education and in making educational decisions, and into how their use of particular frames of reference can be explained. The analyses are derived from qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations involving students from Eastern European ( $N = 15$ ), Turkish ( $N = 33$ ), and Northern African descent ( $N = 18$ ) from three secondary schools in Flanders (Belgium) providing academic, technical, and vocational tracks. This study finds that the generational status of immigrants, their experienced collective problems, the structural characteristics of the immigrant networks, and related access to resources shape students' use of particular reference groups. This, in turn, seems to explain particular educational outcomes. The conclusion discusses the implications of this study for future research and social policy.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the first waves of labour migration to Belgium after the Second World War, immigrant children have underachieved in school compared to their Belgian peers. Scholars have studied a variety of factors to explain this underachievement, such as socioeconomic background, the experience of ethnic and cultural barriers, perceived discrimination, and the unequal treatment in school due to one's linguistic or ethnic background (see overview Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2014). However, to fully capture the range of possible factors that influence students' final educational achievement, scholars should not only look at the effort they put into school or into achieving a good grade for a particular test, but should also look at the factors that influence the development of the students' aspirations and educational decision-making and actions (e.g. track or school choice and doing homework). These decisions and actions are developed within particular frames of reference (Azjen & Fishbein, 1980; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002) and depend on the groups with whom students compare themselves (Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Köller, 2008; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, & Nagy, 2009). This idea is central to Ogbu's (1987, 2008) cultural ecological theory, in which frames of reference are seen as thriving forces

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affecting ethnic minority students' motivations. More specifically, students' frames of reference refer to the group in the specific country that students use as a yardstick to compare their educational opportunities and benefits.

In his cultural ecological theory, Ogbu tries to understand ethnic minority students' achievement results by relating those results to their context. Ogbu predicts that minorities' school orientation and educational outcomes are the result of interactions between 'the system' and 'community forces' that influence minority educational strategies. The system consists of educational policies at different levels, the treatment of minority children in school, and the societal rewards that minority students receive when they achieve. Community forces refer to minority community factors, and springs from the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours regarding education within immigrant communities. These forces include 'frames of reference for comparison', 'instrumental beliefs about schooling', 'a relational domain' (e.g. the degree of trust and mistrust towards school and school personnel), and 'expressive factors' (e.g. collective identity). Ogbu argues that, based on the shared collective history of different racial/ethnic minority groups, immigrant and involuntary or caste-like minorities can be distinguished. Immigrant minorities migrated more or less voluntarily to the receiving country to obtain better opportunities. Involuntary minorities entered the immigrant country through slavery, colonization, or conquest, and, by contrast, perceive their presence as forced by the immigrant country. Due to their initial migration motivation, 'voluntary immigrants' are expected to have better educational outcomes than 'involuntary immigrants' ones as they compare their educational opportunities and benefits to those in their country of origin and involuntary minority students with those in the country of residence.

Building on Ogbu's framework may add to the existing knowledge, as there is little research investigating how structural factors inform the frames of reference and reference groups ethnic minority students use (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). However, it remains unclear to what extent students actually use these frames of reference, how they relate to structural factors, and whether they really affect their school results in the way predicted by Ogbu. There is to date, particularly in Europe, little research on this topic in relationship to ethnic minorities, for whom the choice of particular reference groups is often even more complicated (e.g. Gibson, 1997; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008). For instance, reference groups may consist of the social networks that students are a part of – usually considered students' social capital – but the reference groups and social networks are not necessarily the same. This could be because students do not necessarily identify themselves with all members of their social networks (Terry & Hogg, 1996), or find themselves in particular situations in which they are more likely to opt for reference groups outside their social networks. Merton (1968) argued that this could be the case when students have aspirations of social upward mobility, when they are looking for prestige, or when they are isolated within their own networks. Furthermore, Ogbu's theory has been widely criticized because it fails to incorporate in-group variations within the voluntary/involuntary typology, does not consider specific historical relations sufficiently, and cannot be replicated or applied to 'non-settler' European countries (e.g. Foster, 2004; Gibson, 1997).

To obtain a more in-depth understanding of the frames of reference students use to evaluate their own situations, we incorporated previously formulated criticism of Ogbu's work by studying variations in the frames of reference of three distinct ethnic minority groups – all categorized in Ogbu's voluntary immigrant group – in a relatively new immigrant country, namely, Belgium. Focusing on these voluntary immigrant groups is theoretically relevant, as variations exist between them in terms of their migration histories, settlement patterns, and relationships with the dominant society. Immigrant groups vary in their specific historical relations with the dominant society (being stigmatized or confronted with ethnic stereotypes, or by being relatively unknown for the ethnic majority, see De Witte, 1999; Hermans, 2004; D'hondt, Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2015; Siongers, 2011, 2013), length of stay (migrated during their school career or born in the immigrant country, see Paspalanova, 2006; Verhaeghe, Van der Bracht, & Van de Putte, 2012) and immigrant community characteristics (dense community network vs. lack of immigrant networks or unifying features, see Van Kerckem, Van de Putte, & Stevens, 2013; Verhaeghe et al., 2012). More specifically, starting from a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we will distinguish distinct voluntary minority groups based on the immigrant group characteristics and the frames of reference they use. By doing so, attention will be given to the structural and cultural factors that relate to such frames of reference.

The central research question of this study is threefold. First, we want to understand the factors and processes that help to shape students' choices of particular frames of reference and the comparison groups that students use with respect to their educational careers. Second, we want to study how these frames of reference relate to students' educational trajectories. Third, we intend to incorporate previously formulated criticism of Ogbu's work by studying variations in the frames of reference of three distinct ethnic minority groups categorized in Ogbu's voluntary immigrant group, in a non-settler and relatively new immigrant country, namely, Belgium.

## 2. Method

The initial objective of the data collection for this study was to explore success determinants of students of immigrant descent in secondary school through ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with students. Ethnographic research was conducted in three schools in a large Flemish city between 2009 and 2012. Schools were selected based on a theoretical sampling procedure, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Theoretical sampling of schools was based on three criteria: track composition of the schools, ethnic composition of the school, and geographical region of the school. This resulted in the selection of the following three schools (pseudonyms): St. Bernardus, Mountain High, and Catherina Atheneum.

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