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## Religiosity as a bridge or barrier to immigrant children's educational achievement?

Sarah Carol<sup>a,\*</sup>, Benjamin Schulz<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Cologne, Institute of Sociology and Social Psychology (ISS), Albertus-Magnus Platz, 50923, Köln, Germany<sup>b</sup> Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), Reichpietschufer 50, 10585, Berlin, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Immigrant children in Europe remain in a position of educational disadvantage. Most studies underscore the role of the parents' education level and their socio-economic status in the educational achievement of their children. This paper adds to the literature by exploring other factors that reduce or contribute to educational inequality among immigrant children. Using research from the United States as a reference point, we specifically examine religiosity as a device for social mobility. Religiosity may be conducive to educational attainment in two ways: (1) religious organizations may provide guidance, support and beneficial social norms that foster the formation of social capital and sanction deviant behaviour; (2) religious participation may induce an internal locus of control that encourages students to focus on learning and resist counterproductive peer influence. Other scholars argue that ethno-religious in-group ties can be a mobility trap when human capital and socio-economic status in an immigrant community is low. Using the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), we take a cross-sectional perspective to test these arguments for Christian and Muslim students of immigrant origin living in Germany. Our analyses reveal that religiosity is primarily relevant for Muslims' mathematical test performance. We find that students and parents' religiosity are not necessarily a barrier to good mathematical test performance. Yet our multidimensional measure of religiosity consisting of religious engagement, praying and subjective religiosity allows us to uncover distinct relationships depending on the form of religiosity. Christians' and Muslims' frequency of praying is positively linked to academic performance. Self-rated religiosity, however, is correlated with worse performance. Finally, we find that religious community engagement is related to better academic performance only when the share of co-ethnics in a residential area is low.

### 1. Introduction

In the United States, many researchers have moved beyond powerful but orthodox explanations for educational disadvantage – mainly, parental socio-economic status – and have begun to examine religiosity as another device for social mobility, especially for the educational achievement of immigrant students (e.g., Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Brown & Taylor, 2007). Despite the presence of large Muslim minorities in many European countries, the role of religiosity in educational achievement in Europe has been studied primarily in relation to the majority group (i.e., without immigrant background), and to a much lesser extent in relation to immigrants (e.g., Helbig & Schneider, 2014). When studies do focus on minorities, they usually examine the reverse relationship, wherein religiosity is the dependent variable and educational achievement the independent variable (e.g., Fleischmann, 2011; Güveli & Platt, 2011).

Recent figures show that the descendants of guest workers (i.e., the

second generation, if born in the country of residence), particularly those with parents from Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Turkey), lag behind the native majority group in educational achievement (Alba, Sloan, & Sperling, 2011). In Germany, Turkish minorities belong to one of the largest ethnic groups. In the highly stratified German education system, these children are generally found in lower-track schools, which obstructs their chances of upward mobility. Slightly less than 20 per cent of the Turkish second generation has obtained the *Abitur* (maturity certificate), compared to approximately 40 per cent of native children (Kristen & Granato, 2007). Moreover, children of Turkish origin in Germany are more likely to be discriminated against during the decisive transition from primary to secondary school (Sprietsma, 2013). As most Turkish, North African and some Yugoslav minorities have Islamic roots, they frequently face social exclusion and are perceived as having distinctly different values (e.g., Carol, 2016).

With the disadvantaged situation of Muslim students in mind, we seek to answer the following question: Is ethno-religious attachment a

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [carol@wiso.uni-koeln.de](mailto:carol@wiso.uni-koeln.de) (S. Carol), [benjamin.schulz@wzb.eu](mailto:benjamin.schulz@wzb.eu) (B. Schulz).

bridge or barrier to the educational achievement of Muslim and Christian students with an immigrant background living in Germany?

Much of the research on the integration of minorities in Europe has deemed attachment to an ethnic group or a religious denomination as counter-productive to social equality and underlined the importance of intergroup ties for social mobility. But North American migration studies have shed a different light on the matter. Scholarly work in the US has been engaged in a lively debate about these contrasting perspectives and the advantages and disadvantages of ethnic attachment when it comes to integration. Indeed, this topic has been at the forefront of North American migration studies since the emergence of early assimilation theories and continues to be important in segmented assimilation theory (SAT), which was more recently introduced by Portes and Rumbaut (2001; see also Bankston & Zhou, 2002). SAT casts the role of ethnic and religious communities in a different, rather optimistic light by emphasizing that they do not necessarily hinder the achievement of immigrants and their descendants. For example, according to SAT (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; see also Bankston & Zhou, 2002), it is precisely the ethnic and religious embeddedness of Asian Americans that is central to their success, as these communities offer strong social support, beneficial institutions, norms and forms of social control that reinforce students' devotion to education. Ethnic embeddedness helps students stay motivated in the face of discrimination or exclusion (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

But other studies, including some by SAT proponents, argue that ethnic embeddedness is generally not beneficial for educational achievement. This position is, for instance, adopted by Portes and Hao (2004), and it is also present in more recent contributions. Such studies adopt a conditional view, wherein effects depend on the resources and opportunities as well as the norms and values provided by a particular group (Kroneberg, 2008; Schulz, 2013). This argument is particularly relevant in the European context, given that Western Europe's largest and most disadvantaged religious minority – Muslims (mainly of Turkish and North African origin) – are in less favourable starting positions than Asian immigrants in the US (Alba et al., 2011) and Muslims in the US (Sander, 2010). In stark contrast to the US, religious minorities in Europe encounter a relatively secularized majority group (Foner & Alba, 2008), which might lead to discrimination that strengthens religious boundaries in education. As a result, immigrant religiosity has been identified as a barrier to integration in secularized Western Europe (Foner & Alba, 2008) but also as an anchor of stability in the aftermath of immigration (Diehl & Koenig, 2013). Yet, religiosity does not become less important in subsequent generations (Jacob & Kalter, 2013), which suggests that it will continue to affect different dimensions of integration, including educational integration.

Given that existing studies often neglect the role of immigrant religious denominations in educational achievement (cf. Schulz, 2013 for a review), we see a promising opportunity to analyse the link between educational achievement and religiosity for Muslim and Christian immigrant children in Europe, and to test whether the mechanisms discussed in the American literature hold for other denominations and countries. This paper seeks to unravel the potential of using religiosity to explain immigrant children's educational achievement, which is key to other domains of integration. We expect religiosity to influence educational achievements by means of social capital, norms and beliefs (Bankston & Zhou, 2002).

Our contribution is fourfold. First, we bring together theoretical arguments from different debates in the sociology of religion, migration studies and social stratification research. Second, in contrast to existing research, which focuses mostly on the US, we provide novel findings on the link between educational achievement and religiosity in Germany (used as a European example) from a cross-sectional perspective. Third, we draw on cross-sections in two cohorts of students in the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), which include refined measurements of test performance and three different forms of religiosity. The refined measurements help us to show that religiosity is not

necessarily a barrier or bridge to achievement, and that the relationship is more complex. Fourth, we include data on parental religiosity and show that this is also not a barrier to educational achievement. Our findings are relevant for countries that are home to both very religious and upwardly mobile minorities.

## 2. Theoretical framework: the role of religiosity in educational achievement

Consistent with previous research, we differentiate between intrinsic (e.g., identification and beliefs) and extrinsic religiosity (e.g., bonding through praying and visiting places of worship) (Saroglou, 2011) to explicate the distinct effects of religiosity on educational achievement.

In the US, there is a long tradition of research on religiosity and its effects on educational achievement. Most of these studies find a positive relationship: church attendees (Brown & Taylor, 2007; Regnerus, 2000) and students who are actively involved in religious communities (Stokes, 2008; Bankston & Zhou, 2002) outperform less religious students (Jeynes, 1999).

In Europe, the role of religiosity in educational achievement has been rarely studied. Instead, valuable research has been conducted on the reverse relationship, i.e., the effect of educational achievement on religiosity. Such research indicates ambiguous results, depending on the national context and the minority groups in question (e.g., Fleischmann, 2011; Güveli & Platt, 2011).

In the following sections, we specify the mechanisms that may explain the relationship between educational achievement and religiosity.

### 2.1. The role of religious communities in educational achievement

A review of the literature reveals that social capital contributes to educational achievement in two main ways. First, religious social capital in the forms of norms and social control may bolster educational achievement. Coleman (1988) is one of the pioneers in exploring the importance of social capital when it comes to children's educational achievement. He argues that religious embeddedness can counteract educational disadvantages and thus reduce the risk of school-dropout by transmitting achievement norms, fostering social control in neighbourhoods and establishing mutual obligations (see also Muller & Ellison, 2001). Social control ensures adherence to moral codes and prevents behaviour that would undermine these rules (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). In qualitative interviews, Muslim students said they perceive religious activities as generating social capital, enforcing norms and values related to educational achievement, and reducing the risk of deviant behaviour and of wasting spare time, thereby rendering Islam a driver of educational achievement (Shah, Dwyer, & Modood, 2010; Van Praag, Agirdag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2016).

Segmented assimilation theory often takes a similar perspective (e.g., Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). If an individual is obstructed from assimilating into the American white middle class, greater involvement in an ethno-religious community may be viewed as a more promising path than downward assimilation into the lower classes. As a result, participation in American society is accompanied by 'selective acculturation', which involves retaining one's ethnic – and possibly also religious – identity and ties (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Previous studies support segmented assimilation theory by showing that parents' community engagement (Werum, Davis & Cheng, 2011), social control and ethnic community resources can promote educational achievement among descendants of immigrants (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; see also Fleischmann, Deboosere, Neels, & Phalet, 2013; Levels, Dronkers, & Kraaykamp, 2008).

Second, religious community centres might directly mitigate lags in educational achievement by providing language classes or offering counselling and additional skills training (Bankston & Zhou, 2002),

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