



Educational mismatch and health status among foreign-born workers in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

Foreign-born workers have been shown to experience poorer working conditions than native-born workers. Yet relationships between health and educational mismatch have been largely overlooked among foreign-born workers. This study uses objective and self-reported measures of educational mismatch to compare the prevalence of educational mismatch among native ($n = 2359$) and foreign-born ($n = 1789$) workers in Sweden and to examine associations between educational mismatch and poor self-rated health. Findings from weighted multivariate logistic regression which controlled for social position and individual-level demographic characteristics suggested that over-educated foreign-born workers had greater odds ratios for poor-self rated health compared to native-born matched workers. This association was particularly evident among men (OR = 2.14, 95% CI: 1.04–4.39) and women (OR = 2.13, 95% CI: 1.12–4.03) from countries outside of Western Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand. Associations between under-education and poor-self rated health were also found among women from countries outside of Western Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand (OR = 2.02, 95% CI: 1.27–3.18). These findings suggest that educational mismatch may be an important work-related social determinant of health among foreign-born workers. Future studies are needed to examine the effects of long-term versus short-term states of educational mismatch on health and to study relationships over time.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 15% of the Swedish population is foreign-born (Statistics Sweden, 2013) and estimates suggest that foreign-born persons will comprise increasingly larger proportions of the Swedish population and the active labor force in the near future (Statistics Sweden, 2009, 2011). Yet immigrants in Sweden and elsewhere often face labor market integration difficulties in the destination country. This can influence their ability to secure employment and affects the quality of work. Work-related factors such as these are established determinants of health and well-being (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). In recent years several studies of native-born and general population samples have reported associations between educational mismatch and negative health outcomes (Garcy, 2015a; Bracke et al., 2013; Lundberg et al., 2009; Smith and Frank, 2005), suggesting that

educational mismatch could be an important public health concern. Yet educational mismatch, which is commonly defined as a type of status inconsistency that occurs when there is a discrepancy between an individual's educational attainment and the educational requirements of their occupation, remains a largely overlooked aspect of work life as it relates to potential health effects among foreign-born workers. Educational mismatch is a key indicator of work quality, which plays a central role in determining if work is health-promoting or debilitating (Kahn, 1981). This study adds to existing research on the work-related social determinants of health by exploring associations between educational mismatch and health status among foreign-born workers in Sweden.

1.1. Educational mismatch among foreign-born workers

Most studies of educational mismatch have focused on over-education and related status inconsistency such as over-qualification, under-employment, and occupational downgrading. A higher prevalence of over-education has been found among foreign-born workers in several countries (Battu and Sloane, 2002;

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Neilsen, 2011) including Sweden (Dahlstedt, 2011; Joonas et al., 2014). These higher rates may partly be the result of structural changes in the labor market and the recent economic downturn, which has increased competition for jobs. But they may also reflect the labor market integration difficulties experienced by immigrants which can limit opportunities for jobs that are commensurate with educational attainment (Crollard et al., 2012). Previous Swedish research by Rooth and Ekberg (2006) has demonstrated that many immigrants experienced occupational downgrading in their first job after migration. Higher rates of over-education among immigrants compared with natives have also been reported (Joonas et al., 2014). Other studies have suggested that immigrants suffer greater financial penalties via a lower return to over-education than natives (Joonas et al., 2014; Neilsen, 2011; Wald and Fang, 2008). These findings have important implications for the formation and persistence of social inequalities between native and foreign-born groups, as existing stratification processes often segregate immigrants into lower status, lower paid positions. This may be reinforced if immigrants are less likely to gain the financial or occupational status rewards associated with educational attainment.

In terms of under-education, prior research from North America (Chiswick and Miller, 2008, 2010) and Europe (Aleksynska and Tritah, 2013) has shown higher rates of under-education among immigrants compared to natives. Under-educated immigrants may possess additional abilities or resources which enable upward mobility into higher level occupational positions in excess of their formal education or qualifications (Aleksynska and Tritah, 2013; Chiswick and Miller, 2008). Therefore, under-education may be considered an advantageous status position. Conversely, under-educated individuals could experience feelings of overload (House and Harkins, 1975) if they are ill-equipped to carry out the duties of their position or face downward occupational mobility if they are unable to meet the demands of the job.

1.2. Psychosocial stress processes of educational mismatch

Exposure to educational mismatch has been theorized to cause psychosocial stress (House and Harkins, 1975; Jackson, 1962; Lenski, 1954), and several interrelated processes have been proposed to explain why mismatch may be stressful and harmful to health. One process relates to stress from role conflict, which can occur when an individual simultaneously inhabits two conflicting social statuses but is viewed by others solely in terms of their lower status position (Lenski, 1954; Vernon and Buffler, 1988). An over-educated individual working in a low status job may feel stress when interacting with persons who identify them solely in terms of their occupational position. Such mismatch distress may be further compounded if investments in education do not match the occupational position or financial rewards anticipated as a result of those investments (Homans, 1961; Lenski, 1954). A second process concerns feelings of relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966), which can occur when individuals compare themselves to similar others with whom they share common attributes or characteristics. Educationally mismatched individuals who compare themselves to others with similar levels of attained education but who are more successful on other dimensions of social position, such as income or occupational status, may be more likely to experience relative deprivation and associated stress or poor health effects, as relative deprivation has previously been associated with negative health outcomes (Kondo et al., 2008; Åberg Yngwe et al., 2012). A third process relates to job strain as it is conceptualized by the Demand Control Model (Karasek, 1979). This model maintains that discordance between job demands and job decision control can cause stress-mediated negative health effects. The tenets of this model

can be adapted to suggest that educational mismatch may also play a role in the production of work-related stress (Garcy, 2015a). Under-educated persons might feel overloaded by the demands of their work (House and Harkins, 1975; Kahn and French, 1970) or stress due to uncertainty over how to exercise the decision control their position may offer. Conversely, over-educated persons may experience stress or worry that their skills may atrophy over time due to lack of use (De Grip and Van Loo, 2002) or under-stimulation (House and Harkins, 1975; Kahn and French, 1970), frustration or boredom due to underutilization of their skills.

1.3. Health effects of educational mismatch

Compared with the large literature on the health effects of other aspects of job quality, such as substandard working conditions, only a limited number of studies have examined relationships between educational mismatch and health outcomes. Yet prior associations between over-education and ischemic heart disease (Peter et al., 2007), physical health complaints (Dean and Wilson, 2009), poor subjective health (Friedland and Price, 2003; Smith and Frank, 2005), poor mental health (Bracke et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2010; Dean and Wilson, 2009; Lundberg et al., 2009), and mortality (Garcy, 2015a; Faresjö et al., 1997) have been found. A recent German cohort study of persons aged 45–65 (Braig et al., 2011) also found an association between under-education and cardiovascular disease among men. Few studies to date have examined relationships between educational mismatch and health specifically among foreign-born workers. Those that have been conducted have focused on recently arrived immigrants, up to four years post-migration (Chen et al., 2010; Dean and Wilson, 2009). These studies found associations between over-education and mental health declines (Chen et al., 2010; Dean and Wilson, 2009) and physical health declines (Dean and Wilson, 2009). We are unaware of any published studies of foreign-born workers that have examined associations between under-education and health.

Foreign-born workers may be more vulnerable to the stress or negative health effects of educational mismatch than native-born workers for several reasons. Immigrants may experience labor market integration stressors that native-born workers do not, such as ethnic discrimination (De los Reyes, 2008; Rydgren, 2004) or the undervaluing of human capital acquired in the country of origin (Crollard et al., 2012). These factors may also act as sources of mismatch by segregating immigrants into low status or low skill positions for which they are over-qualified. In addition, immigrants may find it more difficult than natives to leave mismatched jobs in favor of more suitable positions due to a marginalized labor market position or the imperfect transferability of human capital (Chiswick and Miller, 2008). The persistence of educational mismatch among immigrants has been demonstrated over time (Joonas et al., 2014). Chronic stress and the associated negative health effects may be more likely to occur among individuals who occupy a long-term mismatched status (Garcy, 2015a). Yet immigrants are a highly diverse group. Exposure to educational mismatch and related associations with health may vary considerably among foreign-born workers. Immigrants may be differentially segregated into the labor market by multiple factors, such as gender (Johansson and Vingård, 2012) and region of origin background (De los Reyes, 2008), which may entail differential exposure to stressful working conditions (Akhavan et al., 2007) and educational mismatch.

1.4. Educational mismatch measurement

Methodological debate continues about the most valid and reliable method of measuring educational mismatch (Sloane, 2003;

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