

Article history: Received 25 June 2016; Accepted 21 November 2016

Searching for ‘success’: generation, gender and onward migration in the Iranian diaspora

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Abstract

This article uses the concepts of ‘transnational social fields’ and ‘habitus’ to explore the multifaceted role families play in shaping the aspirations of onward migrating youth. The article draws on biographical life history interviews conducted with the children of Iranian migrants who were raised in Sweden but moved to London, UK as adults. The findings of the study suggest that from a young age, all the participants were pressured by their parents to perform well academically, and to achieve high level careers. These goals were easier to achieve in London than in Sweden for several reasons. Interestingly, however, participants’ understandings of what constituted success and their motivations for onward migration were nuanced and varied considerably by gender. The study contributes to an understanding of the role of multi-sited transnational social fields in shaping the aspirations of migrant youths, as well as the strategies taken up by these migrants to achieve their goals.

Keywords: intergenerational; transnational social fields; transnational habitus; Iranian diaspora; onward migration.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that for many migrants, life is carried out within transnational social fields. This conceptualization has challenged traditional understandings of migrant integration (Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). What has been given less attention, however, is the influence of destinations that extend beyond the sending and receiving countries, and how they impact on the lives of migrants, particularly those who identify as members of globally dispersed diasporic communities. The multi-sited transnational social fields where the children of migrants are coming of age are particularly understudied. This is a major oversight, considering the role that transnational communities play in the lives of young migrants (Haikkola, 2011; Levitt, 2009; Sperling, 2014).

In this article, the transnational social fields in which the children of Iranian migrants negotiate their aspirations are explored, with particular emphasis on the

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Acknowledgement: This study was supported by Department of Geography, Uppsala University; Anna Maria Lundins Stipendiefond.



role of transnational family life and transnational habitus in shaping their perceptions of success and opportunity across diasporic space. The focus is on the children of Iranian migrants who arrived in Sweden in the 1980s, following the Iranian Revolution.

This article is based on a larger study which utilized statistical data, ethnographic fieldwork and in depth interviews with individual onward migrants of various ages and life stages (Kelly, 2013). This paper, however, draws specifically on biographical life history interviews conducted with 10 individual onward migrants (six women and four men). The participants were in their early 20s to early 30s at the time of the field research (between 2010 and 2012). Some of the participants were born in Iran and moved to Sweden before the age of 11, while others were born in refugee camps or in Sweden shortly after their parents' arrival.

The participants were recruited primarily through Swedish-focused organizations in London and Iranian-focused organizations in London and Sweden, as well as through the researcher's personal and professional networks in Sweden. Interestingly, while educational attainment was not a requirement for participation in this study, all participants either had or were in the process of receiving a bachelor degree, while several even had advanced (doctoral) degrees. Eight participants were interviewed in London and two in Sweden.

Interviews were conducted, using the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001). In the first interview, participants were simply asked to relay their life stories, with limited guidance from the interviewer. In the second meeting, pointed follow-up questions were asked. By using this in-depth method, it was possible to generate detailed information about each participant. This method also helped the researcher to distinguish between the events of the participant's life story, and his/her interpretation of these events. The specific focus of this study was to understand how migrants' socialization and connections to the wider Iranian diaspora influenced their aspirations and understanding of success over time, and consequently how they perceived and acted on opportunities for achieving their goals across space.

The article begins with an overview of the theoretical background of the study, outlining how the aspirations of migrant youth can be understood by using two concepts: habitus and transnational social fields. Then the article outlines the socio-cultural context of the global Iranian diaspora. This is followed by an analysis of the findings, and a brief conclusion.

Theoretical Background: Transnational Families, Habitus and Social Fields

Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) concept of habitus concerns how class and culture are reproduced from generation to generation. As Friedmann (2002: 300) remarks, "the habitus serves as a kind of template which generates strong, normative *propensities* of actual social practices that are considered normal, acceptable conduct within a given field". A field may be considered a space wherein social



groups draw on resources (or capital, to use Bourdieu's term) to maintain or advance their position. The fields in question are context specific, and the groups stratified along class lines. Each class grouping has different combinations of capital at their disposal. The lifestyle of the class grouping is influenced by the resources they have. Importantly, these resources are not only economic, but also cultural and social (Bourdieu, 1984). Parents pass on certain resources to their children, thereby reproducing not only their cultural practices, but also the class hierarchy from generation to generation.

While the fields Bourdieu referred to were generally national in scope, and were specific to the context of early 20th century France, the ways in which habitus may play out in transnational social fields is also explored in recent migration studies (Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Kelly and Lusia, 2006). Such studies consider how the habitus of migrants may be shaped according to multiple spatial contexts, and how resources may be mobilized in transnational fields to achieve certain objectives in the place of destination, origin or in other places to which the migrant may have connections.

The habitus should not be taken as a fixed concept, as it is always in flux, and nowhere is this clearer than in the context of migration. As Friedmann (2002) notes, migration may disrupt the habitus as migrants experience new things and become exposed to different practices. This does not mean that the concept is redundant, however. On the contrary, as Vertovec (2009: 69) puts it, 'By conceptualizing transnational experience through the idea of habitus, social scientists might better appreciate how dual orientations arise and are acted upon.' This is perhaps particularly valuable when considering the intergenerational experiences of migrant youths, who are raised in transnational fields linking parents' place of origin, destination and increasingly other places (Levitt, 2009).

The children of migrants may be greatly influenced by their parents' migration experience and transnational practices. They may, for example, maintain strong ties to their parents' country of origin through social networks, language, religion or culture. They may also, however, have their own interpretations of this transnational experience, and cultivate their own transnational practices, independently of their parents (Laoire et al., 2010). It is for this reason that Pimlott-Wilson (2011: 115) argues that researchers should consider 'how children perceive and make sense of the habitus, acknowledging their active role in the creation of their own life paths and the simultaneous influence of social conditions.' Central to this endeavor is to understand how youths view 'ethnically specific resources' and their utility in certain contexts (Erel, 2009).

Class is not detached from other structuring power relations. A common critique of Bourdieu's work is that it does not provide a sound analysis of gender. Adding an intersectional analysis whereby the ways in which race, class and gender intersect is therefore highly valuable (Adkins, 2004). Within diasporic communities and transnational families, power relations between members are played out,

leading to a reconsideration of gender relations (Ehrkamp, 2013; McDowell, 1999). As family members integrate ideas from different contexts, the meaning of being a woman or a man from a certain class and ethnic background is typically evaluated and in some cases challenged.

A starting point for this article is that historically constituted diasporic communities (Brah, 1996) produced certain notions of success, and these conceptions may be reproduced, renegotiated, or challenged by subsequent generations. It is important to situate these changes within the context of structural opportunities and constraints (McNay, 2000: 23). For this reason, understanding the socio-cultural context under study is of central importance.

Aspirations and Success in the Iranian Diaspora

Large communities of Iranians can be found in Western countries such as the United States, Canada, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia and France respectively (Hakimzadeh 2006). Countries like the United States, France and the U.K. were known to Iranians and hosted Iranian students, business people and Iranians of many political and religious persuasions even prior to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Sweden, however, became a popular destination for Iranians following the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. It was a relatively open country in the 1980s and 1990s, compared to other destinations that had already received large numbers of Iranian migrants and were reluctant to accept more. Consequently, Sweden became an attractive place for Iranian refugees during this period (Kelly, 2013).

It is difficult to associate a single definition of success to an entire diasporic community. 'Success' is a socially constructed concept (Torres, 2001) with variable meanings. Nonetheless, for historical reasons certain dominant conceptions of success are identifiable in Iran and in Iranian communities around the world. The Shah, who was in power prior to the Iranian Revolution, encouraged middle class Iranians to pursue western education, and as a result many Iranians went to western countries to acquire tertiary level degrees (Kelley, 1993). Such education was typically seen as a precursor to becoming wealthy and respected, with fields like medicine, dentistry and engineering being held in high regard. The value placed on education has been carried over to modern Iran and the Iranian diaspora, where young people are still pressured to pursue high level careers in certain fields (Shavarini, 2004).

Cultural practices, and in particular patterns of consumption, are also important markers of success within Iranian diasporic communities. Two studies on the consumption practices of Iranians in Sydney, Vancouver and London (McAuliffe, 2008) and Los Angeles (Kelley, 1993) highlighted how driving certain cars, wearing specific fashion labels, and living in select neighbourhoods have been markers of high class and success in the diaspora. Despite the transnational dimensions of class and habitus, the ability of Iranians to maintain certain lifestyles has varied



between different places. As McAuliffe (2008) finds, even among the cities of Sydney, Vancouver and London there are important differences, and when one considers non-English speaking countries where Iranians have settled there are even more differences. Therefore, the opportunities diasporic Iranians have had to reproduce their middle class position and related practices have varied considerably from context to context.

The Iranian refugees who came to Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s were generally less wealthy than those who moved to Los Angeles and London, as the latter could use their economic influence to secure migration before and after the Revolution (Kelly, 2013). Most Iranians in Sweden were, nevertheless, part of the middle class, secular and highly educated (Graham and Khosravi, 1997). They shared many of the same aspirations as other Iranian emigrants, which they were able to achieve to varying degrees in Sweden.

In Sweden, it has been possible for Iranians to achieve high levels of education due to the generosity of the welfare state, and the country's ability to provide free tertiary level degrees. Given the value attached to education in Iran and the Iranian diaspora, it is not surprising that people born in Iran have an above average level of education compared to all Swedish residents (Hosseini-Kaladjahi and Kelly, 2012). At the same time, however, it has been more difficult for Iranians to achieve high level careers and to demonstrate their social status through consumption practices. One reason for this is Sweden's comparatively flat social structure, which discourages wealth and conspicuous consumption. As a strong social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1985) Sweden is a country that encourages equality and sameness (Holvino and Kamp 2009). Hence, compared to Iran, and countries in the West like the UK and the USA, Sweden has less of a social hierarchy.

Like other immigrants in Sweden, many Iranians have struggled to achieve labour market equality with Swedes, and show surprisingly high levels of unemployment (Hosseini-Kaladjahi and Kelly, 2012). According to Swedish statistics (GeoSweden, 2008) the employment rate of Iranian migrants was below 50 per cent between 2000 and 2008, years after most Iranians moved to Sweden. There are a number of possible explanations for this, ranging from systemic difficulties such as the inability to transfer education and skills from the Iranian to the Swedish context, to more overt types of labour market discrimination. Many migration scholars have argued that Sweden is a country that is relatively closed to cultural differences and does not readily value the contributions of immigrants (Knocke, 2000). This appears to have had a profound impact on the experience of Iranians in Sweden who suffer from feelings of marginalization and othering (Khosravi, 2009). While the children of migrants have done considerably better, they still face challenges as a result of their parents' experience of marginalization and the discrimination they continue to encounter as people with Middle Eastern backgrounds (Eliassi, 2010; Knocke, 2000).

Migration, cultural differences, and the experience of downward class mobility have had a significant impact on Iranian families in Sweden. As Torres (2001) has noted, Iranian and Swedish family norms differ considerably, with Swedish youth generally feeling less pressure to be deferent to their parents. Moreover, the emphasis on gender segregation in Iran, and the numerous laws that limit the freedom of women contrasts sharply with Sweden's commitment to gender equality. The pressures placed on families as they adapt to Swedish norms has in many cases led to divorce and conflict (Darvishpour, 1999). On the whole, it has been shown that Iranian women have been much more positive about the new opportunities in Sweden, while men have suffered more from marginalization (Kelly, 2013). This has affected the experiences of Iranian youth in Sweden insofar as they have witnessed their parents' struggles and have often directly experienced the effects of family breakdown. Consequently, many young Iranians have had to negotiate between the different cultures they have been exposed to, and make their own decisions concerning what constitutes ideal gender roles and family life.

According to Swedish statistics (GeoSweden, 2008), about 500 to 1000 Iranian-born people leave Sweden every year. While some of these migrants have returned to Iran, the majority have instead chosen to migrate onward. The most popular destinations are the United States and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is particularly accessible to young people with Swedish citizenship due to the policies that allow freedom of movement within the EU. While statistical data is not available on the localized destination choices of migrants, one could contend that the wide variety of employment and cultural opportunities available in London have made it a popular choice (Butler and Robson, 2003; Clark and Drinkwater, 2007). This article will shed light on the specific reasons why young Swedish-Iranians perceive moving to the UK as desirable, and how they define their aspirations and view success in relation to their position in transnational fields linking Iran, Sweden and the wider global Iranian diaspora.

Reproducing Success in the Iranian Diaspora

The participants in the study emphasized how their parents encouraged them to undertake tertiary level education, and preferably in professional fields such as engineering, medicine and dentistry. Participants typically attributed their high level of educational attainment to the influence of their parents and extended families. Even participants who took up work in fields different from what their parents encouraged them to enter, still maintained high ambitions for their careers.

Despite being highly educated, the participants believed that their employment prospects were limited in Sweden. Many attributed this challenge to perceived discrimination in the hiring practices of Swedish employers. Furthermore, according to the participants, in order to succeed in Sweden's labour market and receive promotions, one must conform socially to one's work environment and demonstrate loyalty to a single employer for an extended period of time. The



participants noted how their parents had raised them to be ambitious and competitive, attributes that were highly regarded in Iran. They believed that while this ethnic capital was undervalued in Sweden, their enthusiasm, ambition, and hard work were given a much higher value in the British labour market. Thus, the participants believed they could professionally advance much faster in the UK. As Bijan, one of the participants, put it:

You don't excel in Sweden. You don't find yourself far above the average. Perhaps that's why a lot of my Iranian friends decided to move out. Not saying they saw themselves as geniuses compared to the rest of the people in Sweden but perhaps they had a drive that was bigger than mediocre. I know that's the case with me.

With the move to London, participants sought out opportunities that offered the professional success and economic status that they and their parents viewed as desirable. The decision to move was sometimes planned well in advance, while other times it was made spontaneously, when job opportunities in Sweden did not work out as expected, or when a specific opportunity arose in London.

Furthermore, the transnational fields within which the participants were embedded facilitated their move. The presence of relatives and/or friends in London meant that they could access information about employment prospects and accommodation upon their arrival. When Hamid, for example, could not find a desirable position in Sweden, his cousins encouraged him to move to London. They even offered to host him, so all he had to do was fly to London. For him, moving to the city was therefore an easy decision because as he put it, 'You can do it... overnight. You just get on the plane, start to work, bum bum buah bum bum buah.' As with other participants, the pace at which Hamid could settle and find work in the city was also quickened by the presence of a well-established Iranian diaspora in London, as well as a number of professional organizations catering to the promotion of Iranian professionals such as the British Iranian Business Association and the Iranian Medical Association.

In this sense, the participants were actively mobilizing their cultural and social resources to achieve their goals in transnational space. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the values and aspirations of these youths were not simply transplanted from one context to another, but rather were constantly being renegotiated in relation to their evolving experiences in the diaspora.

Challenging Traditional Understandings of Success

Despite reproducing many aspects of their parents' understandings of success, the participants did so – to varying degrees – with a critical perspective. The dual cultural orientation they acquired during their formative years enabled them to explore different lifestyles and consider various opportunities before choosing to mobilize certain types of capital in the pursuit of specific goals. Many participants, for example, noted that they have come to value the more relaxed and well-

rounded approach to life embraced by many of their Swedish friends and colleagues. While they generally earned more and engaged in more conspicuous consumption in London, they perceived life in the city as comparatively stressful; this led some participants to second guess their decision to onward migrate. Hassan, one of the participants, even returned to Sweden after he could not take the pressure of living up to his family's expectations. As he explained the situation:

I think one of the problems in my life has been that you always have to prove that you're good. And since you were, you have to continue with that. I never revolted. When people come into puberty they start to revolt against their parents. I missed that period. So finally it got to me.

There were also important gender differences in participants' reflections on their aspirations. For example, the young men in the study (with the exception of Hassan), were more inclined to view their socialization and upbringing favourably, and had a strong desire to reproduce their parents' class ambitions. They generally wanted to earn high incomes to ensure that they could provide a 'good life' for their future families. The female participants, on the other hand, despite being equally well-educated, put a higher value on acquiring independence and freedom and thus were more likely to pursue alternative pathways to achieving their goals. For example, they pursued educational programs in accordance with their interests, regardless of the income or prestige these careers would bring. They were also more inclined than the male participants to prioritize relationships over their careers, and aspired to cultivate a favourable work-life balance.

The female participants also tended to value Sweden more, noting for example, the country's strong safety net, and above all, its commitment to gender equality; in this regard, they generally considered the UK to be less progressive than Sweden. Moving to London, nevertheless, enabled these women to distance themselves from the Iranian diaspora in Sweden as well as their families, both of which they sometimes experienced as restrictive. They viewed the Iranian community in Sweden as more tightly knit; people were more likely to know one another, which diminished one's privacy and freedom. If one transgressed against too many Iranian cultural norms, they could become the subject of gossip. Sometimes tensions were experienced within the family unit as parents tried to maintain control over their children, especially the girls.

For example, Azadeh, one of the participants, grew up in a household where she felt considerable pressure to do well academically, but she was also expected to do a lot of domestic chores and look after her younger siblings. Her father was uncomfortable with Swedish dating culture and did not allow her to wear the clothing she found fashionable because he found it immodest. These factors, in addition to her looking different from most of her classmates on account of her black hair and dark eyes, contributed to Azadeh's sense of being an outsider in school. Moving to London not only improved her career prospects, but gave her a



stronger sense of independence, freedom and confidence. She describes a conversation she had with her father about her move as follows:

He was really upset that I was in London. He was like a girl should be near her family. He's like 'Come back, come back!' I'm like 'I'm not gonna come back.' But he's like, 'I'm not going to send you the credit card. If you want it, then you have to come back. I was like 'No, I'm not coming back then.' Cause I was so upset that he was trying to control me, so I'm like 'I'm not coming back.' She later continues, 'Because I didn't have money and I didn't want to go home, I was just like I'm gonna win this, I'm gonna do this, I want to be independent. I don't want to go home anymore; I want to have my life.'

Azadeh initially struggled financially in London and was forced to move home to Sweden temporarily at some point. However, she eventually pursued the career field of her choice and was able to secure a position that she believed—due to widespread discrimination against migrants—would not have been available to her in Sweden. More importantly, Azadeh believed that in London she could live her life as she wanted to, independently and with fewer social restrictions. Her narrative therefore broadens the conventional definition of success often deployed in the Iranian diaspora.

As the participants contemplated their futures, London was not necessarily perceived as a final destination. Both men and women had heard about opportunities in places such as the United States and Canada and were inclined to think about what they could gain from transferring the social, economic and cultural capital they acquired in London (e.g. English-language skills, a broader network of Iranian contacts, and professional work experience) to these contexts. Interestingly, for both genders, central to these contemplations were family concerns. As they weighed their prospects in different places, they also thought about what they would like for their own children in the future. For this reason, settling in a place that offered good educational and work opportunities, that was simultaneously open to cultural diversity, was one of their foremost priorities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Several studies have addressed how the lives of migrant youths may be shaped by their position in transnational fields that link their parents' country of origin and their country of destination with the general assumption being that over time, the children of migrants will adapt to the country where their parents have settled. The aim of this study was to go beyond this origin-destination perspective to consider how migrant youths relate to additional countries where their diasporic counterparts have settled. More specifically, the study considers the opportunities Iranian youths have across diasporic space and the ways in which they act on them to achieve their aspirations.

The study findings illustrate the importance of socialization in shaping the participants' ideas about success. Participants' parents and families certainly had a considerable impact in this regard; the participants were very aware of what their parents, their relatives in Iran (and even the wider Iranian diaspora) considered successful and felt pressure to achieve it. What was interesting, however, was how the participants reflexively responded to these dominant conceptions of 'success' by either reproducing them, actively challenging them, or in other ways renegotiating them. The findings have highlighted how the participants' exposure to different places over time has given them options concerning how they identify and act on their aspirations. Hence, the findings of this study contribute to the conceptualization of habitus as something that is malleable; as migrants encounter new circumstances, their habitus changes and they devise creative solutions to meet their goals.

In the UK, where class structure plays an important role in ordering society, it has been relatively easy for male and female participants to reproduce the class privilege they (or their parents) experienced in Iran. By mobilizing ethnic-specific social capital by way of Iranian diasporic networks, and using the education they acquired in Sweden, the participants have been able (or at least believe it will be possible) to achieve high level career positions and economic success. This was more difficult in Sweden given the numerous challenges foreigners face when trying to enter the labour market, as well as a social structure that is relatively flat and does not allow for large disparities in wealth or status.

As the study findings have emphasized, however, simply reproducing their parents' class position was not a goal maintained by all the participants. Gender differences in particular affected both how the study participants came to define success, as well as how they perceived opportunities for achieving it in different places. While the UK, and specifically London, was a better place for the participants, given its higher regard for skilled migrants and relative openness to foreigners, Sweden was more advanced in terms of gender equality. However, their relative anonymity in London made it possible for female participants in particular to free themselves of many of the gender-related pressures that they felt in the context of the Iranian diaspora in Sweden and within their families. They therefore had more opportunities in the UK to use their agency to achieve alternative conceptions of success.

The findings of this study are not specific to the children of Iranian migrants. Children of migrants in different contexts may not only be influenced by multiple places, but also have the necessary resources to move between them. Understanding both how their aspirations are shaped by different contexts and how they view opportunities in different places – taking into account race, class and gender hierarchies – will be important for ensuring their successful integration as well as predicting future migratory patterns.



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