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To cite this article: Pinar Aslan, Stefan Sjöberg, Eva Wikström & Nader Ahmadi (2021) Door openers? Public officials as supportive actors in the labour market participation of descendants of immigrants in Sweden, *Nordic Social Work Research*, 11:3, 199-212, DOI: [10.1080/2156857X.2019.1680418](https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2019.1680418)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2019.1680418>



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Published online: 17 Oct 2019.



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Door openers? Public officials as supportive actors in the labour market participation of descendants of immigrants in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine how employed descendants of immigrants in Sweden perceive that interactions with public officials have benefitted their occupational aspirations and attainments. We conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with twelve female and nine male descendants of immigrants, followed by an abductive thematic analysis. Applying a theoretical framework of social capital, we found three main influences of public officials from respondents' perspectives: 1) connectedness, 2) supporting personal goals and focusing on possibilities, and 3) mediation of knowledge and information. We discuss and analyse the symbolic resources deriving from these influences, e.g. increased motivation and self-belief, and conceptualize these resources as social capital contributing to the occupational aspirations and attainments of immigrants' descendants.

KEYWORDS

Descendants of immigrants; public officials; social work; social capital; labour market

Introduction

Individuals with non-Western background risk marginalization when it comes to labour market entrance and mobility in Sweden, and in other Western countries (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2017; Schröder 2015; Bursell 2014; Statistics 2010; OECD 2017; Crul and Mollenkopf 2012). Several studies have aimed to investigate and explore the determinants behind these labour market outcomes (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010; Belzil and Poinas 2010; Heath 2010; Karsten 2010). Generally, earlier research has focused on the social exclusion of immigrants and their children in Western societies (e.g. Borjas 2011; Wacquant 2008; Sernhede 2007). These studies, focusing on the problems and challenges facing descendants of immigrants, have provided the migration research field with many valuable insights. Less is however known about the descendants of immigrants from disadvantaged backgrounds who enter and participate in the labour market (cf. Crul et al. 2017).

In this article, we intentionally sought for respondents who had already entered the labour market. By studying those who have entered the labour market and the influences they have had, we hoped to increase knowledge of conditions and influences leading to labour market participation for descendants of non-Western immigrants in Sweden. We focus on the role of public officials in the occupational aspirations and attainments of immigrants' descendants. People at risk of marginalization come into contact with various public officials in their lives who are capable of distributing resources and contributing to their labour market participation (Stanton-Salazar 2011; Stanton-Salazar and Spina 2003; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). Scholarly attention has been given

to influences of public officials on the incorporation of immigrants' descendants, but most of these studies are conducted in the field of educational studies and in an American context (Louie 2012; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Woolley and Bowen 2007; Conchas 2006). These scholars highlight how public officials may function as vital sources of social capital by providing descendants of immigrants with information, knowledge and support. A study conducted by Rezai (2017) suggests that the important role of public officials may also be relevant for the occupational pathways of immigrants' descendants in Western Europe.

This topic is important from a social work perspective. One of the main principles of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is social justice. This principle stems from the dedication to work with social groups at risk of marginalization and exclusion and forms the basis of the social work profession. Although the respondents in this study are all employed, they are part of a broader group that is generally more at risk of labour market exclusion in comparison to the majority population and to other immigrant groups. Studying ways to increase the labour market inclusion of immigrants' descendants with the help of public officials corresponds with the principle of social justice, including a recognition of diversity and fighting inequality.

Against this background, the *aim* of this article is to examine how employed descendants of immigrants in Sweden perceive that interactions with public officials have benefitted their occupational aspirations and attainments. More specifically, we examine influences from teachers, social workers and employment officers. We concentrate on how descendants of immigrants subjectively perceive influences of these public officials, because individuals' perceptions of people, situations, and events affect their actions within the social world (cf. Emirbayer & Williams, 2005; Keskiner and Crul 2017). Also, working with vulnerable and marginalized people requires considering the lived realities of these individuals (Adams 2008; DuBois and Miley 2011; Healy 2005; Popple 2015).

The birth countries of our respondents' parents are Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Pakistan and Lebanon. These countries are diverse, including different social and cultural contexts. Yet descendants of immigrants from these countries face many similar challenges in a Swedish context. They are at particular risk of encountering negative attitudes in Sweden (Ahmadi, Palm, and Ahmadi 2016), and like many other individuals with non-Western origin, they are at particular risk of labour market exclusion (Statistics 2010).

Labour market outcomes of descendants of immigrants

According to Liebig and Widmaier (2009), the unemployment rates of descendants of immigrants were on average 1.6 percentage points higher than people of native-born descent in OECD countries. Significant differences were also found regarding employment rates. In Sweden, France, Germany, Denmark, Austria and Norway, employment rates were about 10 percentage points lower for descendants of immigrants (ibid.). The Swedish labour market changed drastically during the 1990s, particularly for people with immigrant background, due to changes of social and labour market policies in combination with the international financial crisis of the time (Bergh 2013; Greve 2007; Larsson, Letell, and Thörn 2012; Sandberg 2013). After this, the employment rates of descendants of non-European immigrants, the majority of which have a non-Western background, were fifteen to twenty percentage points lower than for those with native-born parents (Statistics 2010).

The disadvantaged labour market situation of immigrants' descendants is due to several factors, e.g. parents' socioeconomic background and the lower educational levels of descendants of immigrants (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2017). However, large disadvantages remain even after controlling for such socio-economic and demographic characteristics. To explain the gaps between immigrants' and natives' descendants, scholars have discussed the role of structural and institutional factors, such as discrimination, political arrangements and social networks (cf. Guiraudon 2014; Carlsson 2010; Behtoui 2006). Many descendants of non-Western immigrants in Sweden grow up with socially and economically excluded parents and speak a different language at home, so

already in pre-school they are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis children of the native-born (Crul et al. 2012). They are also subjected to discrimination in recruitment processes (Bursell 2014; Carlsson 2010), and their social networks have fewer valuable resources with respect to labour market mobility (Behtoui 2006). In the section below, we discuss how public officials may function as important contacts for descendants of immigrants in terms of labour market participation.

Public officials as providers of institutional support and social capital

In this article, we examine how descendants of immigrants perceive that interactions with public officials have benefitted their occupational aspirations and attainments. To do this, we employ the concept of social capital. Our definition of social capital is in accordance with that of Bourdieu (1985, 248): ‘Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’. While Bourdieu (1985, 2005) analysed social capital as an individual asset derived from social relations, he also stressed the importance of social structures affecting the uneven distribution of social capital to groups.

The size and composition of social networks affect labour market participation of individuals in several ways (Okeke 2001). Behtoui (2008) reports that immigrants in Sweden have less extensive and less rewarding social networks, leading to a limited access to social capital. When immigrants find jobs through informal job search methods, it is often low-skilled and/or low-paid jobs. Because parents, siblings, relatives and co-ethnics are important members of individuals’ social networks, these disadvantages are generally transmitted to the descendant generation (cf. Dahlstedt 2015). For example, depending on the social and economic background of family members, relatives and friends, images of what educational and occupational goals are possible to set, and actions taken to achieve such goals may vary between individuals (Wicht 2016; Fernandez-Kelly 2008).

In this respect, public officials can play an important part, since they are institutional agents in positions of power (Stanton-Salazar 2011). The labour market disadvantages that derive from less extensive and less rewarding social networks may potentially be remedied by contacts with public officials. These public officials work in institutions that dispose valued forms of knowledge, provide key support and connection with resourceful individuals outside of clients’ personal networks (cf. Conchas 2006; Lareau 2003). The important role of public officials is supported by scholars identifying successful influences in the educational and occupational outcomes of individuals belonging to marginalized groups of society (Woolley and Bowen 2007; Louie 2012).

However, social capital does not necessarily reduce social inequalities, but must be mobilized into a relational resource in order to do so (Farell 2007). Whether the meeting between a public official and a client leads to a transmission of resources is dependent on various conditions, e.g. institutional frameworks influencing public officials’ capacity for action, and clients’ social conditions (Fauske 1997). According to Stanton-Salazar (2011, 1076), institutional agents may act strategically to provide their clients with institutional support and contribute to the upward mobility of individuals who risk marginalization. These strategic actions may involve empowering low-status individuals and providing them with means to navigate important aspects of vital societal institutions, such as providing information about university application (Stanton-Salazar and Spina 2003). Portes and Fernandez-Kelly (2008), suggest that an important aspect of such support is also that institutional agents notice minority youth and act as mentors. Similarly, Rezai (2017) demonstrate the impact of public officials on descendants of immigrants by giving recognition and encouragement.

As mentioned, studies that have examined beneficial aspects of relations between public officials and descendants of immigrants (e.g. Louie 2012; Woolley and Bowen 2007; Conchas 2006; Lareau 2003) are predominantly carried out in an American or non-Nordic context. There are institutional and contextual differences, not only between North America and Western Europe, but also in-between Western European countries (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990). As highlighted by Broady (1998)

the production of social capital must be studied in relation to the specific context in which it operates, is accumulated and transmitted. Studying experiences of how relations with Swedish public officials have generated symbolic resources may provide insights specifically relevant for the Swedish context.

Against this background, two main areas of relations with public officials are considered in this article: 1) characteristics of the relationship, and 2) the resources that accrue from it. The first of these areas relates to aspects of the relationship between public officials and descendants of immigrants. As shown by Rantakeisu (2011, 115), a transmission of resources is affected by how well public officials understand and respond to clients' perceptions and values. It is therefore relevant to examine respondents' perceptions of the public official and of the relational approach that public officials use in their meetings.

The second area of examination is the resources derived from this relational approach in terms of positively affecting the occupational aspirations and attainments of the respondents. These resources may for example be received knowledge, advice or coordination that becomes valuable in a context of labour market participation. Symbolic resources pertain to resources which gain their meaning in relation to the specific rules, values and regulations of a field and to the positioning of individuals in that field (Carlhed 2011). Social capital is therefore associated with the social forces that make certain assets more valuable than others. In this article, we are occupied with the labour market and are therefore interested in resources that gain their symbolic value in relation to the prospects they create for labour market participation.

Methodological approach

Procedure

This article is based on data gathered from qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Qualitative studies can often reveal nuances that are hard to capture with quantitative large-scale studies (Berg & Lune, 2012; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008). Rich, qualitative data can say something important about processes involved in social relations and how they can be adapted to the lived realities of descendants of immigrants. The present study has employed an abductive thematic approach, meaning that the results have generated from an on-going interaction between a pre-understanding of the research problem and empirical findings (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2010; Feilzer 2010; Rambaree and Faxelid 2013). An abductive strategy signifies an alternation between theory and data, and of letting the research focus and analytical tools be formed by how they are '[...] confronted with the empirical world' (Dubois & Gadde, p. 554). In this study, the abductive approach led us towards focusing on the role of public officials. Influences from public officials were not part of the interview themes or directly in focus at the beginning of the research process. Based on the concept of social capital, we were interested in how social agents outside of the family had influenced the occupational aspirations and attainments of immigrants' descendants. However, when we started to do interviews, we found that the respondents spoke a lot about public officials in relation to their aspirations and attainments, and so reoriented the research focus accordingly.

The public officials that our respondents talked about in the interviews were teachers, social workers and employment officers working in public schools, social service departments and the public employment services. Some of their perceptions were based on relations with teachers in upper elementary school, whilst others were with social workers assigned to the family during childhood, with teachers from Municipality adult education after graduating from upper secondary school, or with employment officers they had met while searching for a job.

The interviews were performed in Swedish by telephone and Skype video ($n = 14$), and in person ($n = 7$). Although some scholars have expressed doubt over digital interviewing and warned that it might inhibit an in-depth interviewer-interviewee relationship (cf. Fontana and Frey 2008), we view this practice as beneficial for several reasons. For example, it facilitates interviews with individuals

who live at a distance from the researcher, thus offering variation in the sample. It is also an environmentally friendly alternative, and it saves both time and expense as it speeds up the data collection process. Technological developments in recent decades have created interview settings which are similar to that of a face-to-face interview, which helps maintain a trustful interviewer-interviewee relationship (Iacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016).

The interviews were retrospective; the encounters and relations with public officials described by the respondents had taken place in different periods of their lives, either in school (elementary, secondary, upper secondary or municipal adult education) or in the job-search process. The time frame for their interactions with public officials is specified in the presentation of the results. Each interview lasted 30–90 minutes and was voice-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were in Swedish, although quotes extracted from the transcripts to exemplify results in the article were translated into English with help from a professional English-editing company.

Ethical considerations

All respondents gave their informed consent before data collection began. They were informed of the aim and conditions of the study, including the possibility to withdraw their participation during any stage of the research process. Approval from the Swedish Regional Ethical Review Board (ref: 2015/025) was granted before any data were collected.

Sampling procedure

Our sampling procedure started by advertising for respondents via social media. However, this produced only a small sample, and one that was somewhat homogeneous with respect to social background, family background, and gender. To obtain a more varied sample, we advertised for respondents in a daily, cost-free newspaper that reaches approximately 1.2 million readers in mid- and southern Sweden. This significantly increased the sample size and variety.

Between September 2015 and January 2016, we interviewed twelve female and nine male descendants of immigrants in Sweden, all aged 25–35. The respondents were from northern, mid- and southern Sweden with a variety from small, medium-sized and larger cities. The sample was purposively selected (Palinkas et al. 2015), as we aimed to interview employed descendants of immigrants in order to study conditions and circumstances that influenced labour market aspirations and attainments. All respondents were in employment at the time of the interviews and had been for at least six months (most of them for at least three years). Their work positions ranged from self-employment to managerial or professional positions.

Altogether, 23 individuals reported their interest to participate in the study after seeing our advertisements. Of these, 21 were chosen for interviewing. One of the individuals who reported their interest was unemployed at the time and another came to Sweden as a young migrant. Since we purposively selected respondents that were employed and native-born descendants of immigrants, these two individuals did not fulfil the selection criteria of the study.

We aimed for a varied sample with respect to social and family background, and so the sample included respondents whose parents were long-term unemployed and uneducated or had lower educational backgrounds, as well as those whose parents had obtained university diplomas and had work experience in the host country. Most respondents had themselves obtained university diplomas ($n = 17$), with a few exceptions who had secondary or vocational degrees ($n = 4$). The respondents in our study were all employed in job positions that matched their educational degrees. Many jobs in Sweden today require higher education (Olofsson 2018), and studies show that descendants of immigrants in particular use higher education to compensate for anticipated discrimination on the labour market (Urban 2012). This may be a possible reason why so many individuals with university diplomas reported their interest to participate in our study.

Analytical procedure

The analysis took an abductive thematic approach, moving back and forth between theory and empirics (cf. Rambaree and Faxelid 2013; Dubois and Gadde 2002). Themes in the interview guide emanated from earlier research and the theoretical framework and were used to focus the interviews on topics relevant to labour market participation. These themes involved questions about respondents' upbringing, family and educational background, social networks, occupational aspirations and attainments, and meanings attached to having a job. We asked open-ended questions in the interviews to allow unexpected areas of interest to emerge (Bryman 2012; Repstad 1999).

The analysis of the data led to three specific themes: 1) connectedness, 2) supporting personal goals and focusing on possibilities, and 3) mediation of knowledge and information. These themes emanating from the data were identified on the basis of what kind of influences were frequently brought up by the respondents and how they affected respondents' occupational aspirations and attainments. Since the respondents mainly focused on the contributions that public officials had made to their occupational aspirations and attainments, the empirical findings essentially revolve around positive influences of public officials.

As mentioned, these three themes were empirically generated, meaning that they emerged during the coding process. The data were coded using a qualitative data software package (ATLAS.ti version 7.5.4; Rambaree and Faxelid 2013), beginning by searching for text segments that answered our research aim (Silverman 2015). The respondents expressed varied perceptions and experiences of how public officials had contributed to their occupational aspirations and attainments. In the initial coding process, text segments from the interviews that dealt with these perceptions and experiences, e.g. of being acknowledged, supervised or receiving valuable information, were highlighted. We created codes from these text segments and analysed the codes in relation to other relevant aspects, such as family background. A codebook including the frequency of, meanings of, and links between codes was used to create a network view, which is a graphical view of relations between codes. This helped us understand how the codes co-occurred with and related to each other and facilitated the forming of codes into themes (Frieze, 2014).

Potential impacts of researchers on the data collection and analysis should always be considered when conducting research that involves human beings. Like our respondents, two of the researchers have an immigrant background; one of these conducted the interviews and is in the same age group as the respondents. The advantage of these aspects is that they increased the researchers' understanding of respondents' descriptions (Fontana and Frey 2008). Subtle layers of meaning related to social and cultural background are easier to discover when researchers are embedded in the social and cultural contexts of the respondents. At the same time, sharing a common background with the respondents required reflexivity on the researchers' part. Here, we benefitted from the varied backgrounds of the four researchers in the study; two native-born, the third migrated to Sweden as an adult, and the fourth migrated at the age of four. We reflected on and analysed the data in joint discussions, which minimized the impact of subjective experiences while opening possibilities for more nuanced interpretations of the data.

Results

Here we present empirical results from our interview study, illustrating influences from public officials as perceived by our respondents. Three main themes of the influences are presented; 1) connectedness, 2) supporting personal goals and focusing on possibilities and 3) mediation of knowledge and information. We present and analyse these influences as forms of social capital produced in the interaction between public officials and descendants of immigrants, contributing to respondents' occupational aspirations and attainments.

Connectedness

A recurring theme across the interviews in this study is that respondents articulate a sense of connectedness with public officials who approached them in a caring, and not authoritarian, way. A relationship between public officials and their clients inevitably involves a power imbalance, due to the official position of the former (Järvinen 2002), which can make a transmission of social capital difficult. The respondents here considered public officials who demonstrated a caring approach towards them as mentors, or even friends, which clearly enabled a transmission of symbolic resources. These findings indicate that social capital is built when the authoritarian stance of the public official is toned down, and when public officials demonstrate connectedness with the experiences of their clients. This is illustrated by one of our respondents [IP5], who described a background infused with criminal activity, drug abuse, and school absence. Below, he explains how the connection he had with a public official was important for overcoming this:

IP5: [...] I got in trouble with the police [...] I'd started doing drugs and stuff like that. [...] So, they assigned me a contact [at the social office] and he got me thinking and changing my life course. He got me studying, which eventually led me to obtaining an upper secondary school certificate, which then let me apply to university and eventually become a teacher. He made me realize that I have a future ahead of me, that I'm not just living in the present, and that I had to think about what my life would look like in ten years. I'm grateful to him for that [...].

I: This person, how would you describe his approach to your problems?

IP5: He came across as a friend, or as someone who cared. He met me at the level I was at during that time, not as an adult who sort of slaps you on the wrist. He didn't look down on me [...].

The transmission of social capital can occur between individuals even when they are in rather asymmetrical relations of recognition and trust (Broady 2002, pp. 58–59), as public officials and their clients may be. A mediation of practical knowledge and information, for example, may emerge in a meeting between public officials and their clients without establishing a deeper connection. However, our results indicate that the transmission of *certain* types of symbolic resources require a more elaborated sense of connectedness between individuals. The quotation above implies that a sense of mutual recognition (cf. Bourdieu 1985) propelled the transmission of symbolic resources (coordination and advice) that encouraged the young person into changing his/her destructive behaviour. As argued by Stanton-Salazar (2011), an important aspect of how public officials may create social capital relates to coordinating and advising potentially marginalized clients. Modes of thought, behaviour and actions may be conceptualized as social capital if directed in ways that correspond with institutional conditions of success, e.g. demands for labour market incorporation (Nordby 2011). In the interview extract from above, it is clear how changes in thought and behaviour positively influenced the respondent's occupational aspirations and attainments.

Our results further indicate that a close connection with public officials may increase clients' willingness to form and take actions to accomplish occupational goals. The respondents in this study described their connectedness with public officials as a motivating force that compelled them to put in extra work. Motivation, according to Bourdieu (1984), may be seen as a component of the embodied dispositions constituting an individual's acting space. Such dispositions are continuously formed in social environments, including in interaction with significant others (cf. Rezai 2017). It is imperative, not only that one knows which resources are important and how to acquire them, but also to have the motivation it takes to accumulate such resources (Zimmerman 1995). Increasing clients' motivation must thus be considered a key component of public officials' transmission of social capital. This was exemplified in an interview with a respondent currently working as a consultant at a biopharmaceutical company [IP13]. His father had worked in the restaurant business for the greater part of his childhood, and his mother had been on long-term sick leave since he was a child. Among representatives of public organizations, he considered school personnel

during his years at elementary and upper secondary school to be significant in shaping his occupational aspirations:

IP13: In school and at the community youth centre, I always had some sort of mentor who I looked up to and who supported me. When you find someone like that, [someone] you feel comfortable with, it helps a lot. [...] When you have that person you look up to, you want to do your best.

These findings are in line with studies that have reported increased motivation among students who perceived teachers as considerate and supportive, and the correlation between positive relations with teachers, and students' achievement (cf. Woolley and Bowen 2007). According to Adams (2008), public officials' ability to go beyond their own definitions and connect with clients' experiences is essential for the empowerment of clients. Our results support this idea and suggest that clients who feel acknowledged and understood also become motivated. As explained in the description of our theoretical framework, other than the material and symbolic resources that derive from a social connection, social capital is also concerned with the *nature* of a relationship. The results in this section highlight connectedness as an important characteristic of social capital, allowing resource transactions to come across between public officials and their clients. In the next section, we analyse another characteristic of the relationship conceptualized as social capital, namely perceptions of having one's personal goals supported by public officials.

Supporting personal goals and focusing on possibilities

Another important aspect of influences from public officials involved a focus on respondents' personal goals and on possibilities instead of hindrances to occupational attainment. Again, these results are related to the exercise of power in relation to public officials, who may or may not understand clients' life experiences and interpretations of meaningful work. Occupational aspirations entail that individuals imagine their future selves in term of labour market participation (cf. Kaya 2018), and in doing so, they assess the possibilities to become that future self. Such assessments are key determinants of occupational attainment, since they affect the kind of actions taken by individuals to achieve their goals (Portes et al. 2013). As Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) state, social relationships are important for subjective images of which goals are 'impossible', 'possible', or 'natural' with regard to opportunities. Our findings show that directing clients' focus to possibilities of attaining their goals, rather than hindrances, may lead to increased self-belief, and enhance clients' efforts to obtain these goals. This was seen in an interview with a respondent [IP16] whose mother was illiterate and long-term unemployed and whose father worked in the restaurant business, a job position that the respondent himself aimed to avoid. While studying at Municipality Adult Education to complete his upper secondary degree, he came across a teacher that demonstrated belief in his possibilities to accomplish success:

IP16: My gut feeling was like 'Okay, I'm going to be stuck working at this restaurant.' I had that fear. [...] We [IP16 and his twin brother] weren't the students that were prioritized by the teachers, or the ones they put energy into or engaged with. But in Komvux [Municipality Adult Education] [...] there was a teacher who acknowledged us [...] and was like 'You have potential and all the opportunities in the world [...] so don't blow this.' That sort of stuck with us [...].

The quotation above illustrates firstly respondents' earlier disillusionment as regards occupational aspirations, which is linked to a feeling of being overlooked by teachers. Thereafter, the respondent describes a teacher who demonstrates belief that he and his twin brother had 'potential' and 'opportunities', which made an important impression on the respondent. As highlighted earlier in this article, and demonstrated in the quotation above, the act of acknowledgement and encouragement is central to the process of forming a connection with clients. However, here we also see the importance of actively changing the mental images of what is possible to achieve. Self-belief is an important resource in fulfilling occupational goals, since it can play a major role in taking certain courses of action or in how challenges are approached by individuals. Social relations with public

officials were described by our respondents as important for a reinforcement of the self. This is an essential aspect of how social capital works, since public officials who demonstrate belief in their clients' goals also assure them that they do indeed have a claim to resources (Lin 2001, 20).

Furthermore, as highlighted by other studies (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Louie 2012), meeting public officials who demonstrate belief in immigrants' descendants does not have to occur continuously in order for them to have a lasting impact on descendants' lives. Our findings suggest that negative encounters with public officials had little influence on respondents so long as there were other public officials who supported their goals. This was illustrated by a respondent [IP7] who worked as a lawyer, which had been a childhood dream of his:

IP7: I think [support from teachers] was necessary. It would have been tough if all the teachers were like 'You won't make it.' I had a study counsellor at elementary school. I wanted to apply to a school [upper secondary] with law-oriented programs [...]. I asked about it. First, he was like 'there's no such thing'. Then he said 'It's too difficult; you won't get in.' [...] So, he wasn't very encouraging, but I didn't care [...] it didn't hold me back. [...] I had a teacher who really believed in me [...] She was encouraging and was like 'You can do anything.' [...] So, it didn't feel impossible to become a lawyer.

This respondent [IP7] describes how his self-belief was strengthened by the empowering support of a teacher, despite demotivational influences from other school personnel. In an earlier stage of the interview, the respondent [IP7] explained that, while his parents had actively pushed him to form his occupational dream, they were unable to offer substantial support in fulfilling it. Individuals with parents of limited resources who also encounter unsupportive public officials in school and other vital, societal institutions may start to view their dreams as unrealistic and act accordingly. As demonstrated by our findings, however, support from one single public official may suffice for maintaining a belief in one's ability to accomplish occupational goals. These findings are supported by other studies demonstrating that gestures from non-family agents may be small and isolated events, and yet have a changing and longstanding impact in the lives of individuals (Briggs, 1998; Louie 2012; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008).

Mediation of knowledge and information

The findings in this section demonstrate social capital as institutional knowledge shared by the public officials. Some of the respondents had parents who lacked knowledge of the educational system and labour market; these respondents had limited possibilities to receive practical support, information, and knowledge from their parents on how to realize or be informed of their various options and strategies to set occupational goals.

In some cases, siblings who had traversed the educational system and gained access to the labour market could contribute practical support with these matters, such as navigating the higher educational system, writing CVs, undergoing the job-search process, and providing advice/support before job interviews. For other respondents, support from public officials became a source of valuable knowledge which compensated for the lack of symbolic resources in the family.

The respondents described how public officials who shared ideas and know-how related to educational and occupational attainments were important for their occupational attainments. This was illustrated by a respondent [IP3] who grew up with uneducated and long-term unemployed parents but was herself a graduate in social studies and had obtained a job as an 'integration coach' for newly-arrived immigrants at a private organization that collaborated with the Swedish employment offices. Her aspiration to this occupational path developed in encounters with an employment officer she met after graduating from upper secondary school:

IP3: The thing is that I had no intention of ... I didn't even know what social studies were! [...] It was when I enrolled at the employment office that my case worker said: social studies would suit you. I hadn't even heard of it. And then he helped me; told me what social studies were, and informed me about the steps involved, the programs, and so on.

As illustrated by the quotation above, public officials can help their clients form occupational aspirations by presenting options and offering practical support with fulfilling such aspirations. Creating awareness is a fundamental aspect of how social capital is produced through social relations. According to Bourdieu, knowledge that can lead to occupational attainment is a symbolic resource. Symbolic resources are transformed to social capital when they are communicated between individuals, as was the case with IP3 above. For many of our respondents, public officials' transmission of social capital through shared information was an important compensation for the lack of familial symbolic resources.

Conclusion, discussion and suggestions for further research

Earlier studies have highlighted that institutional actors are important for the intergenerational mobility of disadvantaged groups of individuals (Rezai 2017; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Stanton-Salazar and Spina 2003; Stanton-Salazar 2011). This article builds and elaborates on trends shown in these studies. We focused on a specific group which earlier studies identified as disadvantaged in terms of their labour market situation; that is, descendants of non-Western immigrants in Sweden. We interviewed individuals within this disadvantaged group who were gainfully employed. The aim was to examine how these descendants of immigrants perceived that interactions with public officials had benefitted their occupational aspirations and attainments.

Our results showed three main beneficial influences of public officials on our respondents' occupational aspirations and attainments, 1) connectedness, 2) supporting personal goals and focusing on possibilities, and 3) mediation of knowledge and information. We interpreted these influences as important for the respondents' opportunities to accrue symbolic resources and thereby as sources of social capital. The main resources accumulated by descendants of immigrants through these influences were coordination and advice, motivation, increased self-belief, an awareness of opportunities and practical support in taking up available options.

The results of this study should be considered highly relevant for public officials and the ways in which they carry out their work with individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and limited opportunities. It has previously been shown by Belabas and Gerrits (2017) that the support provided by public officials is largely based on whether clients are perceived as 'motivated' and 'worthy' of assistance. We have now demonstrated through this study that clients' motivation and exertions in fulfilling their occupational aspirations may in fact be influenced by how public officials approach them.

Against this background, and considering our results, forming ways for public officials to support and empower marginalized groups of individuals needs to be considered both at the national and local level of policy. This has important implications for social work. It has been shown that Swedish social workers have experienced changed work conditions resulting in that they have less time to engage directly with clients and are less inclined to give clients advice and support (Tham 2018).

As Lin (2001) discusses, social capital provided by public officials to clients may come in a personal form, given from a personal supply of resources, but the possibilities to provide resources are also dependent on rules and regulations of institutions. This means that institutional conditions and how these conditions change are important for public officials' possibilities to support socio-economically disadvantaged clients to accumulate social capital. An example of a social policy reform that may affect public officials' possibilities to have a supportive and empowering role is the implementation of 'the new work strategy' by the Swedish former liberal-conservative government. The strategy included an institutional framework of a 'work-first' approach, including efforts to strengthen 'activation' principles for immigrants, the unemployed and those on long-term sick leave (see e.g. Wikström & Ahnlund, 2018). Scholars have discussed the implementation of the 'activation' concept in social policy and how it lessens the public support for marginalized groups of individuals, leading to increased individualization, e.g. making the unemployed responsible for

becoming ‘employable’ on their own (see e.g. Thunman 2016). Other scholars highlight that such policy changes leave ample room for the acting space of public officials, who may develop diverse strategies in trying to balance between clients’ needs and policy requirements (e.g. Hansen and Natland 2017). Our results indicate that in order for it to be an *empowering* approach, activation must be interpreted in a holistic sense, taking into account clients’ life situation and own definitions of meaningful work, including active efforts to increase clients’ personal supply of symbolic resources and social capital.

Up until the 1990’s, a holistic view of individuals’ life situation and their activation and empowerment pervaded national social and labour market policies and the strategies to strengthen the resources of the unemployed in Sweden (Bengtsson and Berglund 2012; Esping-Andersen 1990). These strategies were realized in relation to the social democratic welfare regime’s aim to guarantee all its citizens social rights, including the right to work. This meant that the responsibility of creating job opportunities according to individual’s life situation and aspirations was mainly on public institutions. This focus has changed and activation in national labour market policy in Sweden today generally entails ‘fast employment’ and emphasis on what clients can do for themselves to get a job, e.g. improving their work ethic and more frequently applying for jobs (Larsson 2015; Bengtsson 2014). A recent development that underlines this change in focus is the decision to cut funding to the Swedish Public Employment Services, resulting in the closing of more than half of its job centres in Sweden. The decision was made after the conservative parties’ budget was adopted by parliament in late 2018.

Putting the responsibility of labour market incorporation on descendants of immigrants themselves, may pave the way for increased marginalization of these individuals. Due to the many disadvantages they face on the Swedish labour market today, a holistic approach needs to be adopted among public officials working with young and adult descendants of immigrants. In light of our results, we argue that it is important that future studies consider the relational characteristics employed by public officials and the possibilities of adopting various approaches. In order to investigate this further, future research may also focus on how public officials perceive and experience the possibilities to support and empower descendants of immigrants in a context of shrinking resources and transformation of the welfare state.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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