

RESEARCH

Re-made in Sweden: Success Stories in a Swedish Migration Context

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This article discusses how migrants from the Middle East are accounting for their successful career pathways as businessperson and academics in the Swedish society. It demonstrates how the stories of these individuals reveal strategies for mobilising the forms of capital that assumes to promote career advancement. It argues that the migrants accentuate a 'middle-class standpoint' with a priority on education; the capital mobilised in their country of origin is 'reinvested' in studies and the making of new contacts in the Swedish society. The article concludes that these stories are significantly shaped by the individuals' professional position and class background but indirectly also by their foreign background. The article also reveals that the conditions set for successful career achievement require individual strategies that pragmatically downplay differences in societies as well as ethnicity and disregard the influence of discrimination.

Keywords: Migration; Career pathways; Success stories; Capital

I. Introduction

Samad is one of the entrepreneurs in Sweden who made it 'against all the odds'. Born in a middle-sized town in Eastern Iran in the mid-1960s, he grew up in a family with a good financial situation – his father was a bank manager in the 1970s. However, because of the Iranian revolution, the family lost most of its wealth. Samad's older brother and cousins were involved in the political protests against the new regime, for which they were arrested and jailed. After finishing upper-secondary school, Samad decided to leave the country. After a journey to several countries in Asia and Europe, he finally arrived and settled in Sweden, but his family had stayed behind in Iran. Samad was, by then, 19 years old. He certainly knows now what it takes to be a migrant from the Middle East to the Northern Europe. Samad was safe in Sweden but without any regular income – he had to endure a period in which he was penniless:

When I flew from Iran I knew I had nothing, so anything was better than that. And when I arrived in Sweden, I had only a 20-dollar note in savings and that note I changed

to Swedish money in order to be able to buy what I needed. But later when I earned enough to save 20 dollars again I changed it for a new twenty-dollar note, which I always carry in my wallet. Because as long as I don't have to change this again, I'm not losing.

After several years of studies and hard work, Samad made an exceptional progress in his career. He runs one of the top-performing electronics companies in Sweden and belongs to the growing number of migrants in the Swedish society that have advanced into the society's 'upper segments'. The stories of these 'successful' individuals represent something like counter-narratives to the negative publicity about the difficulties of migrants in the Swedish society. More than 19 per cent of the Swedish population are foreign born (SCB 2019), but the proportion of migrants who are reaching so-called top positions in the Swedish society has in general been low (Behtoui & Leivestad 2018; Sandelind & Ådahl 2010). The pathways to advanced positions in the Swedish society even for so-called highly skilled migrants are in many respects challenging. It is well covered in research that migrants are subjects for extensive 'de-skilling' (e.g. McNeil-Walsh 2008; Nowicka 2012) in their encounters with the Swedish society and that they have less return of their education compared with native Swedes (Behtoui 2006; Behtoui & Olsson 2014).

In this article,¹ I highlight the stories of individuals who have migrated from the Middle East and become successful in the Swedish society. 'Success' is, however, a contested and normative term, and I am not suggesting any exact criteria for measuring these achievements – not least because success could mean different things depending on the context. Instead, the focus of this article is on the pathways of individuals who, in one way or another, made exceptional progress in their career, defined by a visibility within their respective professions in terms of, for instance, positions or income. As will be evident from the theoretical section, the point of departure for my analysis is Pierre Bourdieu's (e.g. 1977, 1986, 1990) 'capital theory' and more specifically individual's mobilisation of resources and conversion of capital in career achievements. The intention is to provide a picture of the cultural and social capital that the informants, in their own eyes, have carried with them in their migration to Sweden. By analysing these accounts, my aim is to *reveal otherwise non-visible strategies that feature career pathways in migration contexts and in relation to different social fields*.

First, I give a brief account of the general background of the individuals in the study, setting out how they presented their migration project. I then examine how the individuals see their upbringing and their family in the origin country and some of the cornerstones in their life as young individuals in the Middle East. Next, I delve deeper into the informants' accounts of their ability to mobilise a capital with significance on their career in Sweden depending on whether they work in business or in academia. In the conclusion, I return to the practice of capital conversion in relation to migration contexts. I hope that this discussion could provide a broader insight into the situation for highly educated migrants in the Western societies.

II. Successful migrants in Sweden

Research on so-called successful migrants in Sweden is limited to a few exclusive examples (Bennich-Björkman & Likic-Brboric 2018; Ekberg 1992, 2016; Graham & Khosravi 1997; Hosseini-Kaladjahi 1997; Kelly 2013). There is, however, a growing literature on particular professional categories and highly skilled migrants (c.f. Frykman & Öhlander 2018; Irastorza

¹ The article is part of the project *Pathways to Success: the upcoming elite among descendants of migrants in Sweden*, based at Stockholm University. The project is funded by a grant from the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation.

& Bevelander 2017) such as academics (Behtoui 2017; Behtoui & Leivestad 2018; Mählck 2013; Olsson, Behtoui, & Leivestad 2018; Wolanik Boström 2005) and physicians (Frykman & Mozetič 2019; Wolanik Boström & Öhlander 2011, 2012, 2015) that may offer important insights into the topic. This diverse research shows that the pathways to advanced positions in the Swedish society are, in many respects, challenging (Sandelind & Ådahl 2010). Compared with the Swedish natives, it shows that highly skilled migrants, in general, experience higher unemployment and have, on average, much lower income (e.g. Behtoui 2006; Behtoui & Olsson 2014; see also Tibajev 2016).

With these challenges as a backdrop, it is obvious that individuals that seek to compete need particular strategies in monitoring their encounters with the Swedish society (Wolanik Boström & Öhlander 2015). According to a qualitative study of well-educated refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, permanent settlement and engagement with(in) the new society would seem to be their strategy for receiving recognition of their skills and the credentials they brought to Sweden (Bennich-Björkman & Likic-Brboric 2018). However, taking into account that recognition is often part of the problem, this acceptance is not a straightforward affair; for example, the Iranians in Sweden. Although this 'group' has a reputation for being well 'integrated' and educated, many of the group had the disappointing experience of finding themselves isolated in the wider Swedish society. With these experiences, some of the highly educated Iranian migrants engage in business as a fallback, rather than completing the career pathway they started (Khosravi 1999; c.f. Najib 1999a), and others decided to leave Sweden to try their luck in another country (Kelly 2013). However, it is also clear that a large share of the highly educated Iranians dealt with their initial difficulties and moved further in their career by 'emphasising their similarities to Swedes, and their ability to fit into Swedish society with ease' (Kelly 2013: 173). Similarly, according to the research of Polish doctors who moved to Sweden, migrants negotiate symbolic capital by 'learning the culture' and by fine-tuning their professional role to gain an appropriate status in their specific field (Wolanik Boström & Öhlander 2015). In this article, I build further on these studies by looking into how these kinds of strategies are reflected in the informants' stories about their career.

III. Understanding successful careers in migration

Pierre Bourdieu's theories about capital are a starting point for understanding the way agency shapes the individual narratives both as a form of 'impression management' (Goffman 1959) and rewarding strategy. In the centre of Bourdieu's (e.g. 1977, 1986, 1990) 'capital theory' are the practices of mobilising resources and converting capital. Individuals mobilise social resources, such as educational credentials or valuable social contacts, and use them as capital to accelerate the effect of social origin and other background attributes in, for instance, competition for power and wealth. Access to educational and social capital will be decisive for individuals' chances of upward mobility through the process of conversion (c.f. Lin 2000). Possessing capital implies being able to trade it for other forms of capital. This research offers an important contribution to our understanding of the distribution of social positions in a given society but with Bourdieu's qualification of symbolic capital as always recognised and valorised in social fields.

Migration complicates the conversion of symbolic capital, and critiques of the 'rucksack' version of capital theory clearly disapprove the representation of this theory as a matter of packing resources in the country of origin and unpacking them at the country of migration for validation (Erel 2010). Instead of postulating a straightforward transplantation of forms of capital, there is an obvious need for a closer look at differences in social fields and in the contexts of practices that are making resources convertible (Erel 2010). For instance, gender and class are primary constituents of power relations but are differently distributed and configured in various social contexts (Anthias 2007). Clearly, the resources which individuals

mobilise as cultural and social capital in their country of origin will be re-assessed in the new society but there is no guarantee that this re-assessment will appraise these as a capital with a currency in the new context. Validation of education is a prime example, as there is no universal standard for converting education between countries. Likewise, as Bourdieu (1986) has pointed out, the possession of social capital builds on trust and trustworthiness (Young 2014). When migrating to new societies, these networks are seldom giving the same value – for example when job hunting. Hence, individuals who embody different forms of capital from, for instance, Iran and have them assessed in Sweden will probably see their capital significantly devalued.

Inspired by this critique, I am here suggesting that the success stories of migrants' have a capacity to mediate or 'transport' different capital forms. This is in line with Bourdieu who suggested that conversions take place as an interaction between economic, cultural, social and other symbolic forms of capital and that individual agency is the mediator of capital. The individuals' stories of their social background and experiences of carving out a career in the new society are here seen as reflecting their career strategies. They speak of the resources they believe were important in their progress. Hence, the narrative is in some way reflecting the 'position taking' (Bourdieu & Waquant 1992) and strategies employed to form a 'winning' capital. Analysing these narratives will reveal the practices of capital conversion in which these individuals engage. What resources and obstacles is a foreign social background believed to generate? what new forms of capital are required to carve out a career in the Swedish society? What variations, if any, are revealed when comparing professional categories that are, at least, partly performing in different social fields?

III.1. Success Stories and Narratives of Careers

The empirical basis to this study is in-depth interviews with 25 individuals with professional careers as entrepreneurs or managers within the business sector (11 individuals) or/and as researchers within higher education (14).² All individuals are born in the Middle East and made prominent careers within their respective business and academic-related professions. The interviews are here regarded as 'success stories' that contain statements of their biographies and experiences that reflect the pathway to their professional positions. In other words, the individuals are likely to tell the story about their lived experience they believe will represent them in a meaningful way but also their own reflections about conditions, events, and actions that promoted progress in their achievements.

The analysis focuses on the content in these stories and treating them as 'narratives' (Riessman 2008) that tries to make sense of the complexity in their situation as migrants with career pathways in a 'new' society. Hence, in line with the Bourdieu-inspired perspective accounted for in the previous section, the analysis is mainly concerned with the positioning of individuals in relation to their 'society of migration', their society of origin and the social networks (at least potentially) they are embedded in as migrants with this origin (c.f. Anthias 2001).

In terms of method, several of the individuals that were interviewed as part of this project were identified through media features of 'famous' people, such as the lists of 'successful' entrepreneurs produced by economic magazines, or through our own networks as researchers within academia. Through a classical snowball effect, the individuals approached by the researchers would refer to other examples of successful individuals with a similar background. Although these individuals diverge in their life situations, they all carved out exceptional professional careers in Sweden (although three of the informants decided to

² The interviews are conducted by Alireza Behtoui, Hege H. Leivestad and Erik Olsson (author) as the researchers participating in the project. All the names of individual informants mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.

move to another country) that resulted in different top positions in the business sector or within the academic world. Clearly, our data is not gender neutral as we interviewed 17 men and 8 women, but my impression is that the interviews contained similar ways of accounting for the career pathways irrespective of the gender of the informant. Note that the stories certainly reflect a winner's perspective and as such reveal strategies employed by those who succeeded. However, a 'migrant group' is not a social unit with homogeneous cultural capital (Erel 2010), and the analysis in this article is not representing those who are the main victims of discrimination and injustices.

III.2. From the Middle East, Making a Career in Sweden

This article is discussing stories of mixed migrants who all became Swedish citizens and in principal can return to their country of origin if they so wish. According to their statements, most informants in this study moved to Sweden as refugees in spite of political tension in Iran, Iraq and Turkey during the 1980s. Several moved from their home country as students and a few of the informants declared affinities with former migrants, such as a sibling or a cousin, already living in Sweden (these reasons do not, however, exclude being refugees). Although most parents had stayed behind, it was common to have family living in other countries such as the United States or Germany with whom they remained in contact. All but one informant stayed for more than 20 years in Sweden, although several had previously lived in another country before settling in Sweden. It is noteworthy that, although progressing well in their careers, several participants remained mobile, moving on after living in Sweden for some years; at the time of the interviews, three individuals were resident in a new country (Spain).

All of the informants migrated to Sweden as children or young adults, and they arrived in Sweden deprived of the social capital they potentially could have mobilised in their respective country of origin before migration. The career trajectories of these individuals have taken divergent forms in terms of education and profession. They all claimed that they belong to the Iranian middle class – a sub-category with an extremely high educational level³ – or to the Kurdish intelligentsia in neighbouring countries. As most of the informants moved at a young age without having completed their university studies in their country of origin, their main education had been in the Swedish system. In some cases, they also re-educated themselves in Sweden as their Iranian credentials were not fully recognised; alternatively, some decided to change their educational path in a new direction.

IV. Stories of origin and background

The informants' accounts of their background are interesting in relation to the resources they expect to mobilise. According to these accounts, an upbringing in a caring and supportive family is important. Several participants said that their parents were merchants or entrepreneurs, whereas others mentioned typical middle-class professions such as teacher, civil servant or engineer. A few of the informants said that their parents were highly educated – one was a professor and another a judge – and only 1 out of the 25 said that her family had no education at all. However, most of the informants referred to the father's work or position, but the mother's occupation was mentioned in only a few single cases. When asked about the latter, it seemed that the mothers were often the homemakers or that they 'stayed home with their kids'. In a few of the interviews, it was clear that the father had a position within

³ According to Swedish Statistics (SCB 2017), migrants from countries in the Middle East living in Sweden are in general less educated than Swedish natives are. However, the adult Iranian-born part of the population (25–64 years) is well educated. About 50 per cent of the Iranian sub-category has a degree in higher education, compared to the Swedish native population in which about 44 per cent has the same education.

the Iranian Shah administration before the revolution. One of the interviews stands out as the informant referred to his upbringing in a landowning family of high rank with a feudal background.

The main avenue towards career achievements in the accounts of our informants goes with higher education. Aida's story is a good example of a caring and supporting family, ready to sacrifice for their children's education:

I grew up in a family with a father who worked as an officer within the health service. My mother was a housewife but my dad always had this ideal that girls had to educate themselves, become independent, economically independent – and he was extreme on this point! So, one was not allowed to do anything else at home but study! ... We were studying intensively. I was doing natural sciences in a very good school, although we could not really afford it, but it was an investment on behalf of my father!

With this privilege, there also came expectations of intensive and high performance. At least for the males, the families often expected them to become physicians, dentists or lawyers. The competition to qualify for the best programmes and the most prestigious schools and diplomas was, however, demanding; it seems several of the informants confessed they were not able to make it. One example is the case of Mina. After finishing school in Teheran, Mina insisted on studying technology at university (this was during the Shah regime in Iran). However, because of the massive competition she failed to gain a place so; on advice from her brother, who already lived in Sweden, she decided to study abroad. The implementation of this plan implied that she needed to persuade her parents:

The kindest father in the world! Always very supportive! However, it took some time to persuade my father. ... He understood, though, that I had made my decision. He had raised me so that I always had to make my own decisions. So he agreed but, at the same time, he said 'Okay, but then you have to take your little brother with you'.

The situation for my informants of Kurdish origin was more complicated. Their schooling was not in their native language and they presumably suffered from some of the disadvantages of belonging to a minority group. However, their accounts also confirmed the image of a society that privileged education and of supportive parents willing to sacrifice for their children.

These accounts of the informants' background environment are clearly from a 'middle-class' standpoint (although some also saw themselves as 'upper class') in which education is crucial for many reasons. All recounted family expectations that they would join this route for an ambitious professional career for which their families were ready to provide. This confirms Kelly's (2013) findings about Iranian migrants who see themselves through a middle-class lens and who try to fit into the Swedish society. However, it is noteworthy that no one in this study mentioned expectations to conform to traditional norms of their society of origin. Although these norms *per se* did not come up in the interviews, these appear at least indirectly in the biographies of some informants. A clear example of this is Kenan, who declared he was born in a society with traditional cultural norms and feudal relations for landowning and power. However, despite this, his story is accentuating the expectations of educating himself and how he, at the time of his migration to Sweden (as a teenager), was already familiar with the typical consumption patterns of the Western society.

Without denying the similarities between the Swedish and the Iranian or the Iraqi societies in this respect, there are certainly also differences between them. My interpretation is that these biographies are tailored to fit the Swedish society, rather than pronouncing the

experiences related to the differences. The middle-class background and 'modern' cultural experiences are important in the biographies of the informants but not the experiences when growing up in a society with other forms of cultural expectations (as in the example of Kenan). The informants probably saw the interview as a way of presenting important events, resources and experiences in relation to their achievements in Sweden. The cultural capital or dispositions (i.e. 'habitus') that had 'best' prepared them for a career, such as education and perhaps culture, are brought to the fore but other, less career-relevant, issues were 'forgotten' or disregarded (c.f. Kelly 2013). Although the migrant engages in bargaining activities about the value of these resources, it here seems that they prefer to 'remember' the sides of their lives that they experienced as validated in the encounters with the Swedish society and employers.

V. Career pathways in a new country

What we can see in the accounts of the informants in this study is a long and winding path towards the current position of the informants. This is a consequence of the fact that most of the informants were young students on arrival in Sweden. As they needed an education to advance on a career and with the low transferability of grades and credentials, they either started or completed their higher education in Sweden. Careers are thus not linear but often re-routed; the mobilisation of a strong capital in the new society will often mean migrants starting from scratch. Although the social environment in their society of origin – above all their caring parents – was frequently celebrated as a positive trait in their biography, this was not an integral part of their accounts of their actual professional careers in Sweden.

A common denominator in informants' stories of their career pathways is the memory of a particular individual, often a teacher or a boss, who had become a friendly mentor or advisor when he or she first entered the Swedish society. Here the differences between professional conditions become clear. For professionals in the business sector, progress in career is normally measured by 'results' in economic and financial terms. It could also be a question of attaining power and control as evidenced by the setting up of a company or becoming a board member of a corporation. In academia, career progress is somewhat different. A highly esteemed teacher or lecturer with a PhD is, of course, 'successful'. The exceptional achievements in this respect are more often a matter of visibility in terms of publishing and citations, grants obtained from research councils and, above all, the gaining of respect and attractive positions in academia. In the following subsections, I demonstrate how these differences frame the individual narratives.

VI. Business through luck – the Stenmark way!

When asked about the reasons for his large success in Sweden, Samad, the entrepreneur presented in the introduction, explained that he was fortunate to be part of the IT boom. After a few years in Sweden, Samad decided to study at the university and made very good progress in his studies; he received his Sc.D. after only six years of studies. However, Samad was not satisfied with his conditions at the university and soon he abandoned a promising academic career without having a secure situation on the labour market. Instead, he decided to start a small company by building computers in his kitchen and selling them. In the wake of the expanding IT market, his company quickly developed; Samad later managed to establish a corporation of four companies in computer consultancy. Referring to a world-famous Swedish alpine skier of the 1970s and 1980s, Samad elegantly worded his formula for success:

As Ingemar Stenmark once said, the more he exercised luckier he become. So, I think it is the same for us. The more we work, the harder we work, the harder we fight, the

more luck we have. And I think that is true, because the more you work, the more you're out fighting, the more you expose yourself to luck, and the more you can win something! Even if it is really hard to win the lottery, the more rows you play, the more you increase the probability!

Many of the other stories by the businesspersons in the study are very similar to Samad's. Their exceptional achievements were often explained by their 'luck'. They became winners either because the fortune has been on their side or because of some coincidences. However, this is not a very exceptional explanation; it is crucial to understand what the individuals are communicating about themselves and their agency when referring to this kind of luck.

Considering some of the informants have been extremely successful, their stories are seemingly quite modest. Instead of boasting about one's own achievement, the successful marketing of a particular product or the timing of a market upsurge, was a matter of 'luck' in these stories. However, insinuations about what it takes to get by are abundant. For example, often when luck was mentioned, they added a self-description such as 'I'm stubborn like that by nature' or implied that they at least have some talents ('I'm good at maths'). Seemingly, the lucky career break presented itself as a set of coincidences that highlighted these skills: a 'breakthrough' when skills paid off. For instance, Shahron said she was 'lucky' to be in Sweden at the right moment when the privatisation of welfare services in the society took off. Similarly, Khai said that she had taken advantage of the 'IT boom' by pure chance as she just had decided to start studying and just basic knowledge was enough to secure a job. However, there were also more implicit hints about additional experiences and individual actions. For instance, Shahron also mentioned that she already had experience of the private welfare market in Iran, and Khai confessed that she was quite strategically choosing computer programming for job reasons.

A closer look at these modest accounts of success will reveal stories about struggles, sacrifices and dedicated work. Perhaps their 'luck' would have been worthless if they had not also worked hard? The successful corporate manager needs to work hard and be open-minded to new possibilities on the market, as illustrated by Simon. His office is located in the outskirts of Stockholm where he has 40 employees from 18 different countries. In a busy restaurant near the office, Simon told the story about his career when, as a highly educated young man in Iran who had worked as head of retail in different companies, he arrived in Sweden in his late 20s. At the time of the interview, Simon remembered how he started over, studying and working at the same time. Stepwise he developed working for a family-owned retailing firm and ended up on the management of a company with a 700 million Swedish *kronor* (67 million Euro) annual turnover:

It's the same attitude I still have (...) To earn my own money, and not be dependent upon the state (...) I started working in sales when I was seven – in middle school I worked in the afternoon, in secondary school I worked in the afternoon. In high school I worked. Even when I studied at the university, I worked almost full-time and studied almost full-time.

When reflecting upon his own role as head of a large company, Simon implied that he is certainly different from many other business managers in Sweden, not least when it comes to how their networks are created and sustained:

We are doers, pragmatics... (...) we are flexible. We have bosses who run around in warehouses and work on the ground. That is the difference, not because I'm Iranian (...). I

work after five, I work when it is needed. I mean that culturally, you work differently but that's got nothing to do with our ethnicity. It is how we think...

The 'cultural differences' to which Simon is referring are in his version not concerned with ethnic differences. He refers to a way of running his business that corresponds well to the almost universal image of the entrepreneur (Appadurai 2016; Barth 1967): work hard, be smart and pragmatic! In addition, good business requires a strong personal reputation. Simon makes a direct link between his successful career and the exceptional work efforts made. However, in Simon's story, the hard work is not only a matter of hours and individual's fighting spirit but also of 'seeing', learning and understanding. Similarly, the financial consultant Hasse implied that 'seriousness' is the basis for the reputation one needs to attract customers. For some years in the 1990s, Hasse was the owner of a small snack bar in Stockholm, during which he needed to learn about nutrition and production:

Well, if you encounter people [customers] who are asking you [about the product]... and you answer 'Well, er ...', they will not be convinced. However, if you immediately spell out 'This contains ... and this does not have nuts' or something [referring to allergies], then they will say 'Good' and they will come back ...

The guiding principle, which these business actors seem to follow, is (they prone) a matter of being open to taking risks, smart and ready for individual and strategic hard work. However, the narratives also account for the 'underdog' position that comes with the combination of having migrant origin and performing as an entrepreneur on the Swedish market (Leivestad & Olsson 2020). The 'politics of hard work' (Ho 2009) is a clear component of the strategy they employ, but their stories also reveal an individualism that overlooks collaboration and the building of networks. As Simon suggests, this is partly an effect of their lack of a network of rewarding contacts. This observation seems to support earlier research about 'immigrant entrepreneurship' (Najib 1999b) that the main difference between 'immigrant' and 'native' entrepreneurs is that the former are embedded in networks that seem to be virtually irrelevant when accounting for the social capital required in the country of migration.

VII. Academic frustration

The success stories of the academic informants are, in several aspects, different to those of the business professionals in the study.⁴ Instead of 'luck' and 'hard work', the narratives of the academics are more concerned with unclear standards for promotion and recognition. Typically, they find it difficult to understand how promotion works and what effort it merits. However, at some points also the academics admitted that they were 'lucky' as they by coincidence became acquainted with a person who later became important for their own career.

A first example is Ana. She recounted how, after some years in Sweden, she pursued her university education. Coincidentally, she was introduced to some of the requirements of an academic career:

Well, I was studying on and was [as a coincidence] connected with the head of department for the xxx programme, and I booked a time for a meeting, showed all my grades and talked about what I would like to do. Well, she gave me a bunch of books and said: 'Now go and read those and come up with some ideas and we will see'. She is

⁴ A critical and reflective note on the interviews with academics is that these could contain somewhat biased responses. As researchers, we share many of the experiences of the academic world with our informants.

retired now, but she was marvellous. So, I went and read and I drew up a research plan – although I didn't know what a plan was like, but at least something about my ideas. Then she just decided to take me on as a doctoral student!

Situations like those that the one Ana is telling represent a key moment in the stories of our academics. In most cases, the story refers to a respected person who turned out to be generous in helping them find the way forward. Mehmed presents one such case.

Mehmed describes his research interest as quite exceptional. His university studies in Sweden were for many years disappointing as he felt a disinterest from his colleagues and teachers. In fact, he had no expectation that his studies would result in a professional career. Instead, he started thinking about returning to Iran. However, when a quite famous intellectual in Sweden became Mehmet's supervisor, everything changed. According to Mehmed, the generous attitude and support of his supervisor encouraged him not to give up but to continue his studies without changing subject. With this newfound backup, Mehmed got the necessary courage for applying to a doctoral position at the same department. This represents a turning-point in Mehmed's story of his life in Sweden, as it opened the door to a career as a researcher. Although Mehmed had to continue struggling with a lack of recognition within his discipline, he kept the relationship with his former supervisor. Mehmed had met a mentor but also a person who became his friend for a long time. In fact, several of our informants had similar stories about mentors facilitating breakthroughs in their careers.

In contrast to the businesspersons, the academics rarely referred to individual hard work in their stories of their advancement in the academic hierarchy and seldom they made indirect reference to attributes like talent or skills. Instead, they often spoke of frustrations and misrecognition, disappointing moments and perceived injustices. All informants, in one way or another, referred to the social game that had taken over their institutions. It was indeed important to be familiar with the informal knowledge and culture of the department. To win this game, one not only had to accept living with frustration but also had to search for the keys that unlocked the doors upwards. A successful strategy, it seems, is to become allied with a more experienced and influential individual who was generous and could support in writing a successful research proposal, preparing a research paper or in other ways guiding to a position at the department. However, these key persons were not mentioned in terms of ethnicity or compatriots. Only a few of the academics mentioned experiences of ethnic discrimination at their university. Instead, it was common to explain their frustration with references to the challenges of having to compete with their colleagues in situations where the standards for rewards are unclear.

The narratives of the academics often reveal their confusion and the struggle to become familiar with and control the standards that guide employment or promotion (Olsson, Behtoui, & Leivestad 2018). They are concerned with issues on where and how to publish, where the funding opportunities are and how to write proposals for them – knowledge and information, which belong to the 'hidden curriculum' (Broady 1981; Margolis 2001) of the profession. Individuals gain access to this through practice and experience as well as collegial social networks. These accounts seem to reflect experiences that our informants share with most other researchers in Sweden (and elsewhere).

Ana spoke of a career track filled with attempts to accentuate her specific expertise. Nevertheless, at one occasion the quality of her research was questioned in the review process for promotion – one of the reviewers was critical of her 'expertise' as she had only a few single-authored publications *independent* from her supervisor and research team. Here, Ana's initial luck in collaborating with someone who supported her career was suddenly reversed

and was obstructing her progress. After such frustrating experiences, success may have different connotations than just being because of the particular expertise of the researcher.

The academics' accounts of their successful careers are in one sense related to the struggle of receiving the recognition deserved or having a proposal accepted for funding. The reason why the narratives did not refer much to the validation-procedures of their previous studies is they, in most cases, had to re-educate themselves in Sweden or start anew (in some cases because they were young when arriving). Although I agree with Erel's (2010) critical analysis of migrants' mobilisation of capital and the encounters with a new society, the case of the academics in this study also involves turnings when the individuals reflect over the next steps on their carer pathways; when he or she identified a breakthrough after having already achieved much. In retrospect, the individual comes to the insight that having access to social relations and knowledge about the rule of the game are important components in a successful strategy.

VIII. Conclusion

This article discusses how migrants from the Middle East account for their successful pathways as businesspersons and academics in the Swedish society. Analysis of their narratives focuses on their strategies for mobilising forms of capital when, as migrants, they attempt to progress in relation to the social context they encounter in the new society. The central argument here implies a relationship between agency and symbolic capital, which, by extension, provides an insight into the situation for highly skilled migrants in the Western societies. I suggest a discussion of this in relation to four empirical observations.

The first observation relates to the *middle-class standpoint* in these success stories. When informants speak of their background in the origin country, they often refer to their upbringing in a supportive family in which education is a priority. As such, the informants were prepared to embark on an ambitious professional career for which they had good support – thus reflecting a middle-class standpoint with modern preferences that is common among the wealthy elements of the population in these Middle Eastern countries. This is here interpreted as a combination of 'impression management' – in the Goffman (1959) sense – and the need of mobilising the relevant resources for capital in the Bourdieusian model. However, Erel's (2010) critique of the 'rucksack' version of capital conversion is to the point. These biographies seem to be tailored to fit the performance required for a career in the Swedish society rather than the society of origin.

My second observation relates to the *possession of capital* and the mobilising of resources this will require. When informants spoke of their social background, their family and their social involvement in networks, they became resources that could potentially be mobilised as different forms of symbolic capital. However, when the narratives explicitly turned to career issues in Sweden, these potential resources were virtually invisible. The accounts speak not only of re-investing capital but also of most of their previously embodied capital becoming devalued in the new country. The support of the family is culturally, socially and economically important for the individuals, but, in their accounts of the new context, it was not regarded as a resource to be mobilised in their career trajectory. In that sense, a successful career is a matter of 're-investing' in the new country any symbolic capital generated in the country of origin – through (for instance) re-education and finding of new social contacts (c.f. Wolanik Boström & Öhländer 2015). It is also about learning how this should be accomplished. This observation echoes Bourdieu, as it maintains that symbolic capital is correlated with social fields and should be analysed in relation to the power configurations within them.

Thirdly, the success stories analysed here are shaped by their *links to different professional fields*. It is noteworthy that the individuals performing within the business sector represent

their success as luck combined with an individualistic hard-working logic but also with pragmatism strategically using their underdog position (Leivestad & Olsson 2020). The accounts of the academics were more concerned with the complexity of which concerned the standards of rewards and the social 'game' typical of their profession and institution. Success becomes a matter of mastering this game by learning the 'hidden curriculum' of their profession. For this reason, supportive colleagues and invitations into influential networks are crucial resources. The academics and the businesspersons have in common that they need to mobilise new resources and re-invest new capital for a career in the new society.

Clearly, these observations show that migration results in 'new ways of producing and re-producing (mobilizing, enacting, validating) cultural capital' (Erel 2010: 642). This concern with re-investments should *not* be interpreted as the dismissal of their entire life in the country of origin (and elsewhere). Their families' support, their upbringing and their earlier studies may very well be resources when mobilising capital in the new country. However, in this analysis I view the stories of successful individuals as part of larger narratives about success and career in the new society. What is accentuated in these narratives are the strategies employed when individuals try to mobilise a capital when, for instance, engaging in negotiations with powerful actors in the Swedish context. These are situations when experiences and attributes from their country of origin are *not* recognised as negotiable capital.

My final observation relates to *ethnicity* and *migrancy*, and how these attributes do not seem to be integrated in the narratives of successful career pathways. In contrast to many other studies, there are fewer concerns with ethnic discrimination, as well as with ethnic or cultural differences, in the current study. The empirical observations rather give the impression of a somewhat undramatic transition into the new society as individuals rather accentuate 'their similarities with the Swedes' (Kelly 2013: 173) or 'making themselves "pass" culturally' (Wolanik Boström & Öhlander 2015: 43). In other words, the narrative about successful career does *not* accentuate strategies when cultural background and ethnic belonging are mobilised as capital (c.f. Erel 2010; Konyali 2017) but is, again, pragmatic in their negotiations with the new society.

Finally, the fourth observation calls attention to the *complexity* in these narratives about success. Clearly, they are significantly shaped by professional position and class background (van Hear 2014). The observation mentioned suggested that ethnicity and discrimination are not significant components in the narratives. However, both ethnicity and discrimination may indirectly enter the strategies that these stories are narrating. These latter reveal that the conditions set for successful career achievement in both these professions seem to require individual strategies that pragmatically downplay the differences in societies and disregard ethnicity and the influence of discrimination. The capacity to mobilise resources for re-investment in careers is, under these conditions, largely a matter of performing according to the standards set by the more general and class-related social fields of each profession.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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