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Intergenerational Transfer in Russian-Israeli Immigrant Families: Parental Social Mobility and Children’s Integration

Larissa Remennick

Existing research on immigrant youth in North America and Europe points to the salient role of parental pre-migration socio-economic status for the second generation’s integration. Israel offers a unique opportunity to examine inter-generational transfer, drawing on the experiences of former Soviet immigrants. The study explored parent-child influences in terms of educational attainment and social mobility among 40 immigrant families, of whom half were status-stable or upwardly mobile and half downwardly mobile in the new country. The findings suggest that parental success or failure to maintain or improve their occupational and social status upon migration has a strong bearing upon the children, although not always in the predictable direction. In most cases, the upwardly mobile first generation boosted their children’s motivation for integration and success. However, children of downwardly mobile immigrants were driven to compensate for their parents’ status losses by overcoming barriers and improving their educational and labour-market outcomes. Thus, not only the first generation’s human capital but also the returns on their skills and social mobility in the host country are important in the successful integration of the second generation.

Keywords: Immigrant Generations; Human Capital; Occupational and Social Mobility; Israel

Introduction

Twenty years ago, sociologist Herbert Gans (1992) suggested that, despite a traditional expectation of upward social mobility from one immigrant generation to the next, the second generation is often prone to decline, as manifested by many...
immigrant groups in North America. He called for more social research into the mechanisms that shape the mobility tracks of the second generation. Since then, several major studies have pointed to the central role of parental socio-economic status (SES, usually measured by education and occupation) in the trajectories of immigrant children (Foner 2009; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). The segmentation of the assimilation process for immigrant children—whereby some of them join the local ethnic underclass or toil in blue-collar jobs like their parents did, while others step on the upward mobility track—is determined to a large extent by the educational and social opportunities they received from their families of origin (Portes et al. 2009). The available macro-level data on the second generation (American and European) also point to the central role of the residential neighbourhood and school-related characteristics for its educational and labour-market outcomes (Crul and Vermeulen 2003; Foner 2009; Mollenkopf and Champeny 2009). Children of highly skilled immigrants with well-paid jobs typically study in the better public or private schools and may even academically outperform their local peers, while children of migrant manual workers living in inner cities partake in all the deficiencies of their declining schools (Kasinitz et al. 2008).

Middle-class immigrant families are more often typified by a two-parent nuclear structure, fewer siblings and more personal resources than their working-class counterparts, resulting in higher parental investment in each child and closer supervision during various critical periods in the coming-of-age cycle (Foner 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Beside access to better education, parental human and cultural capital can be transferred to the second generation in multiple indirect and subtle ways, such as through after-school enrichment activities, a more secure and pleasant residential milieu, greater exposure to native peers, local and international travel and, maybe most importantly, more quality time for parents to spend with their children, thus contributing to their moral education and motivation for success (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Remennick 2007). The concept of segmented assimilation and models describing the key factors shaping the trajectories of immigrant children (usually drawing on macro-level studies in the North American context) remain the most accepted framework for second-generation theorising (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes et al. 2009). However, few micro-level studies so far have explored the intrinsic mechanisms of the intergenerational transfer of cultural capital among immigrants, and even fewer have considered non-American national contexts or focused on skilled migration flows—the subject of my research.

Although education and occupational credentials acquired in the country of origin promise better economic futures to the immigrants and their families, the gap between their qualifications and their ability to land skilled jobs on the host labour market has been growing. Due to multiple barriers—both objective (economic cycle, demand and supply of workers in specific occupations) and subjective (discounting of foreign credentials, language flaws, different professional standards, and the ethnic prejudice of employers)—many educated and skilled immigrants cannot regain their
careers and have to accept any jobs available (Remennick 2012). Occupational downgrading and the lingering earnings gap with local peers among both recent and older educated immigrants have been reported in Canada (Reitz 2001), Australia (Khoo et al. 2007), many European countries (Crul and Vermeulen 2003) and, recently, the US (Chiswick and Miller 2008). Although this trend seems to be universal, Israel comprises the most striking case of mass occupational downgrading among immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU). Among some 400,000 working-age immigrants with higher education who moved to Israel after 1990, less than 40 per cent have found jobs in line with their original training and experience, while the rest had to downgrade to semi-skilled or manual work (Stier and Levanon 2003; Weiss et al. 2003). As a result, the average family income of FSU immigrants has been 30–40 per cent lower than that of other Jewish Israeli families (CBS 2010; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2011). There is little doubt that this mass-scale loss of occupational and social status by former Soviet immigrants has had multiple ramifications for their offspring and their integration potential.

Despite ample social research on the economic, social and cultural integration of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel (Fialkova and Yelenevskaia 2007; Leshem 2009; Remennick 2007), little is known about the familial transfer of social and cultural capital and the influence of parental social adjustment on the lives of their children. Institutional data and surveys over the last 15 years have indicated that Russian immigrant youths have had higher school drop-out rates than their native peers, lower rates of full high-school matriculation (bagrut), and higher delinquency rates (Fishman and Mesch 2005). At the other end of the spectrum, one finds many children from Russian immigrant families who excel at school (Eisikovits 2008) and attend the best universities (Lerner et al. 2007). Parental adjustment in Israel should have a major effect on these outcomes in the children. My study tried to glean some initial insights on this complex matter by exploring intergenerational ties and their effects on the integration scripts and accomplishments of youths who were raised in Israel by Russian-Jewish immigrant parents.

Study Participants and Method

My current research (Study 2) draws on the respondent pool and data files of my earlier research (Study 1) on gender differences in the adjustment process among Russian immigrants in Israel (Remennick 2005). To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of parent–child influences in the context of resettlement, Study 2 included a re-analysis of the questionnaire data collected for Study 1, followed by in-depth interviews with eligible respondents. Altogether, 40 immigrant families (i.e. parents + children) took part in Study 2. Comparison of the parents’ pre-migration and current occupations served as the main indicator of social mobility in Israel, assuming that occupation largely determines personal income levels, living standards and social milieu. For Study 2 we only used the most recent job title as an indicator of achieved SES. Within this frame of comparison, half of the participants could be
characterised as social status retainers or improvers and half as declining on the SES ladder. The eligibility criteria for the interviews included being a two-parent family who arrived in Israel after 1990 from the FSU, both parents having completed academic degrees in the FSU, and having children under the age of 10 at the time of migration (who are now in their 20s). By the time of Study 2, these children had completed high school and military service, graduated from college and/or entered the labour market. The second generation born in Israel is typically still at school and hence too young for their achievements to be assessed. Thus, the children in this sample fall somewhere between the 1.5 (i.e. older children and adolescents at the time of migration) and the second generation.

At the outset, a secondary analysis of the Study 1 dataset was run in order to juxtapose the occupational status of the parents and their adult children. The original Study 1 of 150 couples included detailed assessment of occupational mobility. In Israel, a minority of respondents reported upward occupational mobility; in most cases, husbands and wives experienced similar changes, although a more drastic occupational downgrading was typically found among the women and older professionals (Remennick 2005: 851–2). For Study 2, correlations between parental occupational change and children’s educational and occupational status have been calculated.

From the 150 couples in Study 1, only 57 could be located and also met the eligibility criteria for Study 2; among these, 40 couples (and their children) signed consent forms for in-depth interviews. Most interviews were conducted by the author and her research assistant in the family homes and lasted about two hours. We had intended to interview the children separately from the parents, as some issues could potentially hurt parental sensibilities and would be better voiced discreetly. Indeed, this was done in 33 cases out of 40; however, seven families insisted on joint interviews. An attempt was made to interview all the children of participating couples but, where this was impossible, one of the children was interviewed and asked about his/her siblings. The interviews (mostly conducted in Russian, unless the interviewees opted for Hebrew) were semi-structured and explored the family narrative of economic and social integration in Israel. They were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis based on the code-book method (Crabtree and Miller 1999). In the next sections I present the main quantitative findings on parent–child status associations and highlights from the interviews.

Findings

Characteristics of Participants

The socio-demographic composition of the total sample of Study 1 (conducted in 2003–04) is described in Remennick (2005: 851–2 and Table 1).
By the time of Study 2, the children were in their 20s or early 30s. Less than a third (usually the younger ones) still lived with their parents; most had moved out and some had families of their own. The 40 parental couples had a total of 53 adult children, of whom 48 (22 men and 26 women) were interviewed, with the data on their siblings included in the figures reported here. The average age of the children was 26.2 (±3.7) and most had already entered the labour market, with or without a college degree (21 and 22, respectively, with 10 still being students). Bagrut had been achieved by 36 youths, while 15 had completed high school without qualifications and two had dropped out. Seven completed their bagrut during their military service (and hence gained college eligibility). Out of 31 graduates or current students, the most common majors were computing/engineering/technology (15), medicine and nursing (8), economics and finance (4) and teaching, social work and other (4). Of the 43 adult children who were not students, 36 had full-time jobs and seven worked part-time or were looking for work. About half were already married and, of these, 60 per cent had children of their own.

The SES of the parental couples had not changed much over the last 5–6 years: most continued to work in post-migration jobs which were unrelated to their original qualifications; several reported promotions, many others lay-offs and periods of unemployment, especially after the recent economic downturn.

Parent–Child Social Status Associations

Parental occupational status in Study 2 was coded separately for mothers and fathers using the composite index based on the extent of their status improvement/retention/loss in Israel, plus overall satisfaction with the current job. The latter subjective dimension was added to account for situations where higher job satisfaction offsets losses in formal occupational status. Another measure of parental status was their income in relation to the national average (5-point scale, from ‘much below’ to ‘much above’). Key indicators of children’s achievement at the time of Study 1 were retrieved from the dataset and used alone or as composite indices: the timeline for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children (combined)</th>
<th>SES change + job satisfaction</th>
<th>Relative income</th>
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<td>Mothers</td>
<td>Fathers</td>
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<tr>
<td>School students</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>High-school graduates</td>
<td>0.54</td>
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<td>College students/graduates</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.59</td>
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<td>Military (soldiers &amp; officers)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working individuals</td>
<td>0.57</td>
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Notes: All correlations significant at p < 0.005; *R = multiple correlations (explained variance).
these indicators was extended, drawing on the Study 2 interview data. For current students, they reflected school quality and average annual grades (both in per cent); for high-school graduates, matriculation average and the Israeli equivalent of the SAT score (using the formula for college admissions); for college graduates they reflected the average grade for the current or last college year. For those in the military, the type of unit and personal rank (private vs. officer) served as measures of social achievement. For those working, the composite index included their highest degree earned and job title, coded 1–3 by the level of prestige and compensation. Children’s indicators were combined; those of mothers and fathers calculated separately.

High overall concordance between the direction and extent of parental occupational mobility and children’s trajectories was found. Pearson’s correlations between the indices of parental occupational/social status and their children’s achievements as students, soldiers and workers were all significant, positive and ranging from average to high (see Table 1). Multiple correlation coefficients R between each of the children’s achievement measures and both parental status measures were also significant and high, especially for education-related measures. Similar correlations for mothers’ and fathers’ indicators point to the salient role of both parents for the children’s outcomes. Together, these findings attest to the significant role that parental social mobility and their ensuing financial resources play in the mobility tracks and achievements manifested by the immigrant youth. The psycho-social mechanisms of these influences were further explored in the qualitative phase of this research.

Interview Insights

Altogether we conducted over 70 semi-structured interviews that produced a rich tapestry of family and personal narratives reflecting both issues raised by the interviewers and insights added by the informants; due to space limitations, only some of the findings can be described here. The interviewees are identified by their first initial, gender (M/F), age, and city of residence in Israel.

Education and Social Mobility as Key Jewish Values

Former Soviet Jews place education very high on their value scale, and invest great efforts to ensure high educational standards and future career potential for their offspring (Lerner et al. 2007). During the final 30 years of state socialism, this was increasingly difficult due to institutional antisemitism at schools and universities; yet about 60 per cent (over 80 per cent in the younger cohorts) managed to get post-secondary degrees. Most left the USSR/FSU as professionals or white-collar employees (Remennick 2012; Stier and Levanon 2003).

Parents were determined to ensure quality schooling and college degrees for their children on arrival in Israel, but this goal often proved hard to achieve. Educational resources there, as in most capitalist societies, are not equally accessible to all, but are
a function of family residence and parental income. While most Israeli schools are public, the better ones are located in the more prestigious towns and neighbourhoods, where recent immigrants cannot afford to settle (Eisikovits 2008; Swirski 1999: 170). Access to university education is contingent on bagrut and success in college/university entrance exams, as well as on tuition fees that are often covered by the parents\(^2\) (most undergraduates cannot combine work and full-time study; Swirski 1999: 57).

Thus, opportunities for the children in this study have been clearly shaped by parental mobility and status: those who landed professional or white-collar jobs could afford to rent or buy homes in high-status areas with good schools, and could later afford to pay tuition fees. Youths who studied in the better schools reported not only higher academic achievements, but also a more positive social experience less marked by inter-group hostility and immigrants’ isolation so typical in many Israeli schools. Immigrant parents who struggled to make ends meet and lived in low-cost urban areas were unable to help their children to attain quality schooling and proceed to college. As V (M, 52) from Natania (a former economist, now office janitor) mused:

> When we embarked on Aliyah [immigration of Jews to the homeland of Israel], who could imagine that Jewish kids in the Jewish country would be unable to attend good schools? That they would struggle with Hebrew and fall behind their classmates, getting little help? That many of them will never get full high-school diplomas? This is such a loss of their potential!

Yet, despite their precarious status, many parents made great efforts to send their children to the more reputable schools, at least from junior-high onwards, by renting tiny flats in the nearby area and cutting back on every other expense or by pestering the educational authorities in order to get permits to study out of the area. Others chose the Mofet schools run by Russian immigrant teachers (known for their higher standards in maths and science) or the private religious schools of the Shuvu network, where immigrant students received free tuition. Parental school decisions were a litmus test for the importance of children’s educational opportunities vis-à-vis other family needs and goals, such as buying a more comfortable home (in a cheaper area), a car or a family vacation. Out of 20 parental couples who experienced downward mobility, 11 ranked children’s education at the top of their personal agenda; they made sacrifices to place their children in better schools and subsequently helped them to finance their college degrees. All 17 of the youths in Study 2 who finished high school without bagrut, or who dropped out, were raised by downwardly mobile parents.

Parents’ occupational downgrading has also negatively affected some immigrant children because of the latter’s incipient doubts about the principal value of education as a vehicle for social mobility and higher living standards. One mother (L, 49, Natania) recounted a comment made by her son in response to her ‘nagging’ him about his poor school performance:
Education may be not as important as you think. Your college diplomas did not help you or Dad in securing good positions in Israel, you are still toiling in unskilled jobs—despite all your knowledge and ambition. Why push me in the same direction? I may find my own way to succeed.

Other children retorted that their parents’ Soviet experience was irrelevant in the new country and referred to the example of their Israeli classmates’ parents, who ‘lived in nice houses and made a lot of money by selling vegetables, installing AC or repairing cars—hardly having a high-school diploma. Truth is, in Israel there is no direct link between university degree and income’ (D, M, 55, Bat-Yam). Parents’ attempts to assert the intrinsic value of education regardless of the earning capacity it entails, only caused the youngsters to smile skeptically. Since parents were often demoralised by their own failure to regain former careers, they lost ground in this argument. Parents whose children manifested low educational motivation were often distressed, seeing this as a sign of failure of the whole migration venture. Many parents spoke of themselves as the ‘desert generation’ who could live with their own failure as long as their children succeeded.

Another typical point of contention was the children’s choice of educational major and future vocation. Most parents believed in pragmatic occupational choices that ensured future employment and a decent income and pushed their children towards familiar occupations such as engineering/technology, finance or medicine. When children showed an interest in ‘soft’ disciplines such as comparative literature or anthropology, many parents tried to discourage them, saying that they ‘may be a lot of fun to study but at the end of the day a waste of time and money’ (to cite one father’s words). These parents believed that, as recent immigrants with slim resources, they could not afford for their children to ‘chase their dreams’, needing them instead to obtain a firm economic foothold. When children disobeyed and pursued the ‘dead end’ educational tracks in social and human disciplines, parents stored up their resentment and sometimes denied financial aid to the ‘rebels’.

Living Standards: Neighbourhood, Housing, Leisure

Russian immigrants of the 1990s were exposed to the strong forces of social stratification and settled in a wide variety of geographic and social locations within Israeli society (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007). They are to be found in all walks of life—from Knesset members, doctors and scientists, to security guards, geriatric nurses and office cleaners. They live in kibbutzim, development towns, West-Bank settlements and upscale Tel-Aviv suburbs. Their residential choices mostly reflect their financial status (more rarely their ideological or group affiliation) and strongly affect migrants’ range of opportunities and quality of life. Besides better schools, immigrant residents of high-income areas enjoy clean, leafy streets, sports, culture and enrichment outlets, and high personal security. Most importantly, they are exposed to daily contact with their native social peers, enabling progress in their Hebrew skills and social networking. By contrast, many run-down urban quarters
have turned into immigrant enclaves where ‘Russians’ share the turf with Ethiopian immigrants and working-class Israelis, mostly Mizrahim (Jews from Arab countries)—with poorer municipal services, a lack of youth activities, and greater street violence. Between these extremes lies the range of ethnically mixed towns and neighbourhoods where middle-income Israelis, including ‘Russians’, reside (Lipshitz 1997; Mesch and Manor 2001).

In my small sample, the local environment in which immigrant children were raised has made a lasting imprint on their social integration, educational outcomes, and general feeling about Israel as home or as foreign terrain. Immigrant youths, who came of age in the mixed or largely Hebrew-speaking neighbourhoods, reported having more Israeli friends and dates and considered themselves to be regular Israelis. Some were married to native-born spouses. Conversely, those raised in Russian enclaves typically construed their identity as Russian or Russian-Jewish and perceived their Israeli peers as alien and potentially hostile. This stance is exemplified by a comment made by V (M, 26), raised in Ashdod:

I grew up in a jungle where every one belonged to a tribe that guarded its territory. There was a Russian tribe, a Georgian tribe and a Moroccan tribe, and you tried to avoid contact with other tribes as best you could... The girls belonged to different tribes too and were carefully guarded.

In addition to a more pleasant and safer residential milieu, immigrants who joined the Israeli middle class could typically afford larger homes that offered more space and privacy to all family members. Low-income immigrants usually had to suffice with smaller apartments where siblings and/or other relatives often had to share rooms. The quality of housing (primarily having one’s own room) strongly affected the youths’ ability to study, make their own choices of TV viewing and Net surfing, and socialise with their friends, especially their native peers. Finally, higher parental incomes enabled a broader choice of after-school activities for the children, as well as joint family outings, vacations and cultural events conducive to parent–child interaction and family consolidation.

As a result, children raised by upwardly mobile immigrant parents often reported better family cohesion, a lack of conflict between home, school and peer group, and greater general well-being while growing up in Israel. For example, N (F, 27), who grew up in wealthy Herzelia, said:

I was quite happy as a child and adolescent... Streets were safe, people friendly, and most of my wishes were granted by my parents. My only problem was being too busy after school—the ballet class, the English tutor, etc. I never had enough time for my friends... I remember having native Israeli friends starting from my first year at school—my being Russian was never a problem.

Thus, for the children of successful parents, their middle-class status and the ensuing family resources strongly attenuated their inherent disadvantage as recent immigrants.
Role Reversal: Children Acting as Social Guides

Role reversal between adults and children is a common phenomenon in immigrant families, particularly those with lower human capital and a broad cultural distance between home and host countries (Foner 1997; Kasinitz et al. 2008). By virtue of their local schooling and exposure to their native peers, immigrant children learn host language and local customs much sooner than their parents (let alone grandparents) and are often called for help in adults’ daily social transactions with the outside world. In this study, the role of social guides to Israeli society was typically ascribed to the children of poorly adapted parents who did not learn much Hebrew and whose social network was mainly co-ethnic. These families typically resided in areas with a dense Russian presence—often together with grandparents or other relatives—and were employed either in the co-ethnic economy (e.g. Russian groceries or other small businesses) or in mainstream hourly paid jobs—in cleaning, maintenance, security, etc.—that do not require much Hebrew. For example, F (M, 23) from Lod (a mixed Jewish–Arab town near Tel-Aviv), recounted episodes from his childhood:

As soon as I learned how to read in Hebrew, I became the only ‘literate’ person in the family and had to translate all the official letters from banks, clinics, social services, etc... As a teenager, I remember taking my grandmother to a doctor and having to translate her most intimate symptoms, causing me a lot of shame... But I couldn’t say no, as there was no one else around to help her—my mother’s Hebrew is very basic to this day and then she was always at work during doctors’ reception hours... So I had to act like an adult.

This role reversal was far less common among immigrants who landed skilled, well-paid jobs, probably due to their faster acquisition of the Hebrew needed in the workplace and their direct contact with native peers, both conducive to social learning and more-efficient navigation of the host society. Therefore, these parents were able to retain their socially normative role as guides, caregivers and chief authority for their children. These latter did not have to engage in adult tasks normally performed by the parents, although they still served at times as interpreters for their grandparents (e.g. in interactions with neighbours).

When asked about how this situation affected the parent–child relationship, many older respondents said that they were embarrassed by their own helplessness in the face of the Hebrew-speaking society and their new dependency on their youngsters. Many parents also felt that they lost a great deal of authority in their children’s eyes and found it difficult to discipline them. The greater their dependency on children’s help and mediation on the outside, the weaker their parental authority and control over their life on the inside, in the family. To quote one frustrated mother from Haifa (S, 48):

I guess my daughter stopped taking me seriously after she realised that I relied on her help in most basic activities, such as calling for a doctor’s appointment or filling
in an important application. In a while, she adopted the adult role and relegated me
to the status of a child, if not a half-wit... So my remarks about her lifestyle and
late-night returns fell on deaf ears...

Thus, role reversal proved quite destructive: the children often felt overwhelmed by
the adult duties imposed on them, while the parents felt degraded by their
dysfunctional status and loss of parental authority, which was more common in
downwardly mobile families.

Parental Supervision and ‘Quality Time’

Perhaps the most important difference between the lifestyles of white- and blue-/pink-collar immigrant parents was the amount of leisure and joint family time they
could afford. Immigrants working in hourly paid positions often had to take several
part-time jobs or work as many hours as they could get in order to earn a basic living
wage. As a result, they spent most of their waking hours at work, returning home
only to eat and sleep. Many worked six days a week, with only the Sabbath for rest,
and also signed up for extra work during the holidays. In contrast, professionals and
white-collar workers typically worked five days a week from nine to five and had a
fixed salary, leaving them much more time for leisure, family and children. Thus, the
role and influence of the parents in shaping their children’s lives in the new country
was typically much greater in middle-class families than in working-class ones. To
quote one father’s bitter account (J, M, 50):

My two sons basically grew up all by themselves, without my being there for them
most of the time. I hardly knew what they were learning at school or who their
friends were... And this is not because I was negligent or indifferent—I am
basically a family man! I simply was never at home, taking shift after shift in my
two jobs [one at a factory, another in security] and having no energy for anything
but sleep. Almost ten years passed like this, and now I realise that I have two
strangers for sons. They can’t even speak to me in Russian anymore...

Reflecting the lack of parental supervision, quite a few children in the sample got
into trouble with the law and/or had poor school performance, with two dropping
out of high school altogether. Having no structured after-school activities, most of
them spent hours watching TV, surfing the Net or hanging out in the malls and
public parks with their peers, smoking and drinking beer. One young man from
Ashkelon (P, 22) mused about his teenage years:

I felt so alone... Thrown into this hostile jungle called school where the Russian
gang waged a war against the Sabra gang, with a few Ethiopians sitting on the fence
and joining the winners. So much energy went into these inter-group wars that we
had hardly any time to learn anything... Basically, I didn’t even try to master all
these Hebrew disciplines—the Bible, Jewish history and all that... I knew I won’t
make it to bagrut in any case... And my parents—I hardly ever saw them; my mum
would leave me a plate of food in the microwave and that was all... But actually
what could they do for me? None of them knew Hebrew well enough to help me with the homework…

This story reflects the low level of Hebrew proficiency among many Russian immigrant children who grew up in Israel (P arrived at the age of eight). This greatly impedes their school performance and precludes them from further college education and social mobility. Their low mastery of Hebrew reflects their coming of age in the Russian-speaking milieu and the lack of Sabra (native) peers in their social networks. Sadly, their command of Russian is also very limited (‘kitchen Russian’), and most of them cannot read or write in their ‘heritage language’, making them virtually semi-literate (Niznik 2003). Many of the younger interviewees from low-income families struggled with self-expression in Russian—switching into Hebrew and back—and were visibly embarrassed by their impaired language skills. Sadly, many fell between the Russian and the Israeli cultures, not developing firm ties with either.

Upwardly mobile parents invested much more ‘quality time’ in their children’s education and moral upbringing (expressed by the Russian word vospitanie, or preparation for adulthood), trying to instill in them the values of hard work, the cultivation of intellectual hobbies and cultural interests (e.g. in music, reading or chess), and the advantages to be gained from whole-family activities such as nature hikes. These parents often invested time and effort teaching their children literary Russian and instilling in them a love of Russian literature, theatre, cinema, etc. As a result, these young adults often had a fluent command of Russian and were able to articulate complex ideas in the interviews. At the same time, their Hebrew was also fluent, reflecting good school performance and deeper contact with their native peers. Thus, these middle-class immigrant families have raised bilingual, bicultural youngsters who have no difficulty in navigating mainstream Hebrew society while simultaneously maintaining familiarity with their heritage Russian culture.

Children’s Perceptions of the Parental Role

Young interviewees often touched upon the topic of the parents’ role in shaping their lives in Israel, referring to it as either an incentive or a disincentive in their personal development. One major negative influence was their qualms about the imperative of higher education, taken for granted by the parents but no longer self-evident for the young. The apparent failure of so many educated immigrants to find an adequate application for their knowledge and skills sent a negative message to the second generation. This only reinforced the bad news from the Israeli skilled-labour market, where large numbers of recent graduates had been unable to find meaningful, well-paid jobs. Many believed that, if the market was rejecting Israeli-born youths endowed with better personal and family resources (including social capital, i.e. personal ties with the ‘right people’), then their own chances of success, as immigrants, were twice as slim.
This dilemma was particularly current for those who had completed high school without achieving bagrut (or had low grades) and had to invest much effort and money into courses and exams—first for bagrut, then SAT—in order to qualify for higher education. Many youths decided against it, usually to their parents’ great disappointment. Some entered the labour market after high school and military service, but their jobs were usually unstable and incomes low, not allowing the youngsters full independence. Some were quite pessimistic about their future in Israel and considered looking for better fortunes elsewhere. Thus, T (F, 25, Ashkelon) who, after high school (without bagrut), finished a course for beauticians, said:

“I’ve been in and out of jobs in different beauty parlours for three years now and I am quite fed up. Most owners don’t even pay a minimum wage; you have to survive on tips only. I don’t see how one can make a decent living in this country, let alone own your own business some day. A friend is telling me there is high demand for beauticians in Ukraine these days, so maybe I’ll try my luck back in my parents’ home city.

In this case, the economic misfortune of T’s parents (who had been engineers in Ukraine and were factory workers in Israel) seemed to transfer to their child. In her narrative, T made it clear that she partly blamed her failure to get a proper education and establish a career path on her parents’ lack of attention and help. She said, for example:

Some of my Russian friends had tutors to coach them for bagrut, went to dance and drama classes, and enjoyed family vacations abroad…I had nothing of that as a kid or teenager. My parents always said they couldn’t afford it, yet they did buy a car and then a flat…I’m parents pretty much left me to my own devices and I didn’t amount to much, as you can see…

Yet other young immigrants (seven out of 29) were able to avoid this scenario and set themselves on the path to success against all odds. For example, L (M, 27), who grew up in the immigrant enclave of Hadar, in Haifa, and whose parents (a former accountant and manager) now worked in a nursing home, managed to complete high school with bagrut and then graduated from Haifa University as an IT designer/programmer. Later he served in the Israeli Defense Forces as a professional. He made enough money to help his parents move to a better apartment and enable his mother to reduce her working hours. L said:

My parents could not pour much money in my education because they hardly earned enough to pay their rent and bills. But they have done a crucial thing for me: pushed me to work hard, to learn Hebrew by all means possible, and to switch to a better high school when the opportunity came up. This latter step pretty much shaped my future chances to make it in Israel…

Like L, other young interviewees, who managed to overcome their initial disadvantage as children of low-status parents, underscored their appreciation of
their parents’ efforts and sacrifices for their sake. They often asserted that the parents’ role is not just about financing better schooling and various extra activities, but also about setting a personal example and providing intellectual stimulation, guiding the children towards the right hobbies, books and activities—many of which are available free of charge. Some also noted that their parents helped them to master Hebrew and facilitated their social insertion by such simple means as watching Israeli TV channels together instead of Russian ones, buying Hebrew newspapers, and encouraging friendships with their Sabra peers (inviting them for birthday parties, etc.).

Indeed, these parental initiatives could play a salient role in children’s social integration without encroaching on family resources. They were actually common for all parents seeking social inclusion in the mainstream—regardless of their occupational status and income—and reflected their positive attitude towards the host country and its people. Children of parents who construed their immigration as a new beginning, were grateful to Israel for accommodating them, and wished to integrate, were usually very successful in instilling positive motivation for success in their offspring. Throughout the interviews, we could trace clear continuity between parental and children’s feelings and ideas about Israel, as well as generally better outcomes (in career, living standards and general outlook) among those families who expressed ‘unconditional acceptance’ of their new country and who had stopped ‘looking back’.

Conclusion

Within immigration research, there have been few studies bridging the experiences and outcomes of first- and second-generation immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes et al. 2009). This study explored the pathways by which the gains and losses of the parental generation endowed with high human capital in the course of migration may shape opportunities and outcomes for their children. An existing dataset (Study 1) was used for the analysis of statistical associations between the social mobility indicators of parents and of their children, and to recruit the parents and their adult children for further interviews. My analysis reaffirmed my assumption that high positive correlations between parental social mobility and children’s trajectories (see Table 1) are causal rather than random. Parental SES achieved by the time of Study 2 (after 15+ years spent in Israel) reflects both their pre-migration human capital and their mobility track in Israel. The socio-economic decline of the first immigrant generation is conducive to poorer integration outcomes among the second generation; the opposite is true for families demonstrating upward mobility. This carry-over effect is manifested in both the material living standards and the mobility aspirations of the children of immigrant parents. This conclusion sheds more light on the intrinsic mechanisms of generational transfer in migration and resonates with American and European literature on second-generation trajectories (Crul and Vermeulen 2003; Gans 1992; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997) and the segmented assimilation of immigrant children (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes et al. 2009).
The contexts of immigrant reception differ between countries and cultures, and my findings admittedly reflect many specifics of the Israeli situation. Immigrants’ race/ethnicity, negative stereotyping and broad cultural distance between origin and host cultures may significantly thwart migrants’ upward mobility and integration, for both parents and children, as exemplified by another immigrant group in Israel—Ethiopian Jews (Offer 2004). I believe, however, that my study of former Soviets in Israel captures some generic features of the immigrant experience that entails universal aspirations for inclusion and upward mobility. Skilled immigrants of any ethnic background in Western societies face discounting of their credentials and tough competition with other immigrants and native professionals; the pressures of daily survival often make them abandon professional ambitions and settle for unskilled jobs (Chiswick and Miller 2008; Reitz 2001). The effects of parental status and mobility on the children may be similar in different societies: the offspring of economically successful immigrants enter adulthood equipped with a good education and bilingual/bicultural skills that ensure their position in the local middle class. The children of downwardly mobile immigrants often lack positive role models, fall behind in their studies, and get stuck between the home and the host cultures, remaining at the social margins. Role reversal and its detrimental effects on parental authority reflect another universal feature of immigrant families: the differential pace of acculturation between parents and children (Foner 2009). These are the ways in which parental experiences—at least as much as ethnicity, religion and other features of ‘visible minorities’—may affect opportunity structures for the second generation. Similar conclusions were reached in a long-term comparative study of several immigrant groups (including Russian Jews) in the Second Generation Project in New York City (Kasinitz et al. 2008).

In the Russian-Israeli case, the most devastating effect of parental failure to maintain their former occupational status in Israel was observed in the children’s attitude towards and achievement in education. This was expressed on two levels: difficulty in accessing high-quality schooling for recent immigrants due to the parents’ lack of resources, and the complete lack of motivation for academic achievement in the children. The first predicament reflects the class stratification of educational resources in Israel: although secondary education is mandatory and schools are mostly public, their quality differs considerably between high- and low-status residential areas, and between Central Israel and the remote development towns where many immigrants settle (Swirski 1999). Although many ‘Russians’ have managed to place their children in better schools through personal sacrifice and the bypassing of local educational bureaucracy, many others could not. They ended up faced with their children’s school failure—the lack of the bagrut that opens the door to college and a white-collar career. Since many youngsters have severed ties with their parental culture, coming of age under constant pressure to conform with Israel’s Hebrew mainstream and peer norms, the potential benefits of bilingualism and the cultural capital of their families (including their long-established traditions of educational excellence) has often been lost on second-generation Russian Israelis.
This *dissonant acculturation*, where children’s adoption of the values and language of the host society is accompanied by rejection of those associated with their parents, has been described by Portes *et al.* (2009) concerning working-class immigrant families in the US; it is also very evident in my own study.

Other ways of transferring disadvantage to the second generation include residence in low-status areas with a dense immigrant presence and a lot of inter-group youth violence; living in crowded apartments where children have little privacy; a lack of affordable and meaningful after-school activities; and a chronic deficit of ‘quality family time’ due to parental absence from home while working. In the better cases, parental absences were compensated for by the grandparents, who served as primary caregivers and educators (mainly in all things Russian). When even this family resource was unavailable, immigrant children were left to their own devices, often with detrimental results. The opportunity structure was very different for the children of financially secure immigrant parents who could settle in wealthier neighbourhoods, work regular hours and spend more time with their children.

The silver lining in this overall gloomy picture was the demonstrated ability of quite a number of young immigrants to swim against the stream and set themselves on the path to eventual success. This finding resonates with the personal narratives of the children of underclass Mexican immigrants in California (Portes *et al.* 2009), tapping into the personal and social factors that explained their positive educational and labour-market outcomes, in stark contrast to the co-ethnic majority. Among those factors were their selective acculturation (i.e. bilingualism and strong ties with the parental culture), parental authority, committed educators who helped them to succeed, and mobility programmes catering for disadvantaged groups. Although the children of downwardly mobile Russian parents were clearly disadvantaged in most respects, about a third still left school with qualifications and used every extra opportunity for self-development that came their way (e.g. improved their *bagrut* score in the IDF, won a scholarship for immigrants, reduced college tuition by volunteering, etc.). In other words, these young immigrants displayed strong agency in the face of an unfavourable opportunity structure. When asked to explain their achievements, many spoke of their ambition to compensate for their parents' losses and sacrifices and to persuade the family that moving to Israel was the right decision. Others were driven by the cultural legacies of Jewish upward mobility, despite a hostile milieu. As one young man put it:

> Our parents had succeeded against all the odds in antisemitic Ukraine, and I felt a strong drive to succeed in competitive and often anti-immigrant Israel. It is in the Jewish genes to overcome barriers and be on top of every situation.

Thus, for some second-generation immigrants, the parental decline apparently served to boost their ambition; yet external help and social policies targeting minority groups played an important role in their eventual success.
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Notes

[1] In brief, most couples had emigrated from large Soviet cities before 1999 (45 per cent in 1990–92); the average duration of their life in Israel was 10 years. About 60 per cent had Soviet college degrees, had worked in white-collar occupations and belonged to the Soviet middle class. The rest had technical training. Regardless of their past education, about 15 per cent had been small-business owners in the FSU, and just a few were factory workers or taxi drivers or worked in other blue-collar occupations. Most ranked their pre-migration SES as average or somewhat higher than average for Soviet urban intelligentsia. In Israel, 25 per cent of the men and 17 per cent of the women were able to retain their original professions, while 75 and 83 per cent, respectively, reported occupational downgrading. The average income in the sample was 35 per cent lower than the national average for the Jewish population. About 83 per cent had children, of whom 75 per cent lived with their parents at the time of Study 1.

[2] Eligible recent immigrants have 2–3 years of university tuition covered by the state if they are admitted soon after arrival. Demobilised soldiers get state funding sufficient for 1–1.5 years of college study out of the 3–4 needed for a BA. Any remaining fees have to be covered by the students or their families. In 2009, the average university tuition fee was NIS 10,000 a year, plus additional expenses (books, materials, etc.). For comparison, 40 per cent of Russian immigrants earn less than NIS 5,000 a month (CBS 2010).

References


