

Migration – How social policies shape life chances of migrants

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Abstract

Migration is a core issue of the social sciences, including sociology, social policy and social work, and yet, the impact of social policies on the life chances of migrants has to date not received much attention. In this editorial contribution, we introduce this theme by first outlining migration as an axis of inequality and how welfare states, as systems of stratification, approach inequality. We then discuss the stratification of migrants' social rights in the context of intersecting immigration and welfare regimes. Doing this, we introduce the different contributions to this themed issue of socialpolicy.ch. Finally, we introduce the Migrant Integration Policy Index as a starting point to study how migration and social policies shape migrants' life chances regarding different spheres and in different national contexts.

Keywords: Migration; social policy; life chances; inequalities

Introduction

Migration, understood as a process of spatial mobility of people within and between societies, is a core issue in academic debate across the social sciences, including sociology, social policy and social work. From a historical perspective, migration has always been a persistent feature of social, economic or political developments worldwide, be it because of changing natural conditions, wars, other crises or social demands for change. In recent decades however, migration has gained increased attention in the public and political sphere due to perceived increases in migration and the perceptions of related problems, such as growing numbers of workers migrating between countries due to labour shortages in the second half of the 20th century, increased European mobility connected to the EU free movement of persons principle and particularly, the EU Eastern European Expansion, or regarding the war-related refugee movements from Southeastern Europe in the 1990s, from MENA countries around 2010, and

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currently from Ukraine. Central to public and political debate has been the question of controlling migration flows. A second issue that has sparked debate is the question of migrants' access to welfare services and benefits, with concerns being voiced that migrants could be attracted to affluent welfare states due to their generous welfare provision. While this form of "welfare chauvinism" has gained traction in recent years, what is often overlooked in these increasingly populist public debates is how changing welfare and labour market regimes themselves create migration dynamics, e.g. with respect to labour shortages in the health and care sectors of mature welfare states.

A growing body of research exists that examines these interactions between migration policy and welfare and labour market regimes, pointing to the differentiated access of migrants to welfare services and benefits due to differences in legal status, but also variations in practices on local and regional levels within national welfare states (see e.g. Bendixen/Näre 2024; Ataç/Rosenberger 2019; Kramer/Heindlmaier 2021; Carmel/Cerami/Papadopoulos 2012). There has been less focus on the outcomes of welfare regimes, or specific social policies and related implementation practices for migrants themselves (but see Sainsbury 2012). This themed issue presents a collection of international empirical research that examines how social policies shape the life chances of migrants. Bringing together research on a diverse set of policies, such as social assistance, education policy or specific integration measures and their effects on different groups of migrants, the contributions identify examples of both restrictive and exclusionary, as well as enabling and supportive policy measures, thereby highlighting the ambivalence of social policy and social work practices with respect to the wellbeing and life chances of migrants in mature welfare states.

Migration as an axis of inequality

The study of migration is closely linked to the study of inequalities: migration, and related aspects such as ethnicity, culture and language differences, constitute an axis of inequality as it is systematically linked to the stratification of advantages and disadvantages in life chances. Understood as sociological structural category, migration is linked to restrictions to the availability of resources in terms of "desirable social goods and/or to social positions equipped with unequal power or interaction possibilities" (Kreckel 2004, p. 17), or – from another perspective – to "capabilities to function fully as a human being" (Sen 2009; Therborn 2013).

A general resource-centred approach for the analysis of immigration-related inequalities is the classification of integration dimensions as developed by Esser (2000, 2004). Notably, the term "integration" is not understood as a synonym for assimilation but refers to forms of successful functioning within a society. Esser (2000, 2004) differentiates four dimensions of a successful social integration of immigrants: a) the acquisition of knowledge, cultural norms, competencies and practices needed to interact successfully in a society (acculturation/socialisation), b) the attainment of a position within the economic system of the society that allows a person to gain cultural, social and economic capital (placement), c) the ability to form relationships and becoming part of or setting up new networks (interaction) and d) the identification with a social system and a sense of belonging to this system (identification).

Migration research, however, also points to the ways, various discrimination mechanisms create obstacles for the successful integration of migrants.

Considering discrimination-centred approaches, at least three aspects can be identified: *Statistical discrimination* relates to what people (stereotypically) expect from previous experiences or general knowledge regarding certain (immigrant) groups. For example, employers may be less likely to invite applicants with a migrant background for a job interview due to generalised stereotypical assumptions about migrants, such as alleged language problems or lack of general knowledge. *Taste-based discrimination* relates to ethnocentrism in terms of in-group glorification and out-group defamation: put simply, people with a migrant background are discriminated against because they are different (Koopmans/Veit/Yemane 2019). A less often used argument relates to *self-stigmatisation* that may have its roots in general defamation and discrimination experiences: anticipated discrimination may lead to withdrawal and avoidance among the discriminated social groups such as immigrants in vocational education and at the labour market (e.g. Solga 2002).

The combination of resource deficits of migrants and discrimination mechanisms lead to migration-related inequalities and vulnerabilities within existing societal systems of stratification. For example, lack of qualifications and exclusionary mechanisms on the grounds of (discriminatory) ascriptive characteristics create labour market barriers for migrants (and ethnic minorities) leading to a concentration of migrants in low skilled/low paid employment and often with unstable employment conditions (e.g. Kingston/McGinnity/O'Connell 2015). In addition, migrant labour tends to be concentrated in industrial sectors, which are particularly affected by structural economic change (e.g. Aldin/James/Wadsworth 2010; Rijken/de Lange 2018). As a consequence, unemployment figures of immigrants are generally higher than amongst the general population. Resource deficits of immigrants are often also expressed in lower educational opportunities for immigrant children (such as language barriers and lack of knowledge of the respective education systems) which perpetuates migration-related labour market inequalities and economic vulnerabilities (e.g. Gabrielli/Impicciatore 2021). This research on immigration-related inequalities tends to centre on the effects of disadvantage at the individual micro level. From a multilevel perspective, it is however equally important to study the (macro-)structural factors shaping disadvantages. Societal and political discourses on migration, and the way immigrants are included (or not) in social protection frameworks and national or local social policy measures, all impact on the situation of immigrants.

Welfare states as systems of stratification

Modern welfare states were designed to protect individuals from social risks, address social needs and facilitate social inclusion and wellbeing. In addition, all mature welfare states – to greater or lesser extent – include redistributive mechanisms that address social inequalities and support social mobility, such as state pensions, free education or universal health care. Considering these core functions of the welfare state, it could be argued that social policies provide important leverage to address immigration-related inequalities. As we shall discuss below, migrants' access to welfare provision is not straight forward as welfare states tends to

differentiate between nationals and different categories of non-nationals with respect to eligibility to welfare services and transfers. Nevertheless, due to the social challenges and systemic resource deficits immigrants face, immigrants tend to be at greater risk of experiencing financial insecurity and poverty, and needing welfare state support in various life situations, such as social assistance or unemployment benefits (Breidahl/Hedegaard/Seibel 2022). Thus, an important aspect of studying migration as an axis of inequality is to explore to what extent welfare systems in general, and specific social policies in particular, support the social inclusion and wellbeing of migrants.

It is important to note however, that welfare states themselves are systems of stratification (Esping-Andersen 1990; Mohr 2005). For example, social insurance-based pension systems tend to reward continuous life-time employment and higher earners with relatively generous pensions. On the other hand, earning gaps and lower contributions, e.g. due to unemployment or care responsibilities and low-paid employment can lead to financial insecurity and poverty in old age. The stratification effects of welfare states can affect various groups in society that experience barriers to labour market participation: the low-skilled, people with ill health, women (due to care responsibilities). For migrants, welfare state stratification is exponentiated due to their resource deficits and vulnerabilities in relation to their legal statuses. It has been pointed out however, that certain social policy programmes can also create more equality and support social integration, particularly where they offer universal access (such as universal health care or universal childcare services). This is seen to be particularly the case with the Nordic welfare states: even though also these welfare states are strongly work-centred, large public service sectors and extensive reconciliation of work/family policies provide equalising opportunities (Esping-Andersen 2014). In contrast, reliance on the market with respect to social services provision – as is the case in Liberal welfare regimes, but has also become more widespread in other welfare regimes in recent decades – reinforces existing inequalities: for example, it was found that in marketised childcare systems such as in the UK, there were gaps in provision in socially disadvantaged areas and the quality of provision was lower than in more affluent areas. In addition, high fees create strong barriers for socio-economically weaker groups to access these services (Gambaro/Stuart/Waldfoegel 2014; Naumann 2014). Again, migrants are particularly affected by this form of welfare state stratification with migrant populations being concentrated in socially disadvantaged areas of cities and towns and overrepresented in the socio-economically weaker strata of society.

Education systems play an important role in creating qualitatively different stratification scenarios of mature welfare states. Research has suggested that unified and comprehensive school systems create more opportunities for the equalisation of educational attainment and support of social mobility than tracked education systems (van de Werfhorst/Mijs 2010; Hadjar/Gross 2016). This is of particular importance for the life chances of migrants. Considering policies and institutional settings, it appears to be meaningful to study how education systems compensate for primary and secondary effects of ethnic origin (van de Werfhorst/van Tubergen 2007; Kristen/Dollmann 2010) as well as tertiary effects of ethnic origin (Blossfeld/Blossfeld/Blossfeld 2015; Esser 2016). Primary effects of ethnic or migrant origin relate to on average lower performance levels of students with migration background, an effect that is seen to be rooted in migrants' lack of resources such as language skills or knowledge

on the institutional setting (Kristen/Granato 2007; Kristen/Dollmann 2010). Secondary effects of migrant origin relate to educational decisions and evaluations of costs, benefits and probabilities of success of different educational tracks. The state-of-research indicates on average higher educational aspirations among migrants than among non-migrants, although this does not apply to all immigrant groups to the same extent and changes during educational trajectories (Hadjar/Scharf 2011; Becker/Gresch/Zimmermann 2023). Tertiary effects (e.g. Blossfeld et al. 2015; Esser 2016) refer to ethnic origin or migration background: here attention is drawn to stereotypical teacher expectations and differential evaluations of teachers which impact on students' attainment and account for some disadvantage ethnic groups experience in education (e.g. Glock/Kovacs/Cate 2019).

As *Lüring, Zerle-Elsässer and Steiner* highlight in this themed issue: tracked education systems, such as in the state of Bavaria in Germany, that “sort” children at an early age (when they are around ten years old) into different tracks of education with long-term effects on further educational opportunities and types of careers, pose obstacles for immigrant children to progress. Lack of socio-cultural resources, particularly language barriers and insufficient knowledge of the specificities of the Bavarian education system, compounded by the economic precarity which many migrant families experience, mean that immigrant families are often not able to provide the kind of parental support needed to direct children through the tiered education system. As a result, there is often a stark mismatch of the high educational aspirations of immigrant families for their children and the educational realities within which these children find themselves. The study by *Lüring et al.* also found that the educational aspirations of immigrant families were often not supported by the teaching staff who act as gatekeepers in the tracked school system.

With other words: institutional characteristics of welfare states, or particular social policies – while originally not designed with migrant populations of a country in mind – can have significant effects on deepening immigration-related inequalities or, conversely, facilitate social integration and social mobility of migrants. The same holds true for specific integration policies aimed at migrants. *Otmani* in this themed issue examines integration measures in Switzerland aimed at integrating refugees into the labour market and tensions that arise from these integration policies. Drawing on the experiences of street-level bureaucrats and refugees in the Swiss canton of Vaud, the research highlights challenges related to the expectation of “fast” integration. While street-level bureaucrats prioritise fast and sustainable integration by promoting vocational training and employment, this “fast” integration approach can trap migrants in low-skill/low-pay sectors and stands in tension to the aspirations many migrants hold.

In addition, several contributions in this themed issue point to tensions between different policy objectives and implementation issues. *Hartmann, Eser Davolio, Mey and Keller* present findings on Swiss refugee policies towards unaccompanied minors with a focus on the living conditions and perspectives of these minors. Drawing from studies on accommodation, disappearance, and the treatment of unaccompanied minors, they assess risks and challenges faced by these vulnerable children and youth. Regarding the policy-migration-specific link, they show that legal regulations, economic prioritisation and the design of specific care situations shape the opportunities of this vulnerable group. A key problem relates to tensions between the

logic of asylum and child protection as well as the resulting risks and dangers for young people. Recommendations for social policy and social work are proposed based on children's rights principles.

The stratification of migrants' social rights

A key feature of national welfare states is that all citizens have equal rights with respect to welfare services and benefits (feminist literature has highlighted extensively that the existence of formal rights does not mean all groups in society have equal access to these rights. For example, women tend to be less able to take advantage of employment-related social rights due to their weaker link to the labour market. That is why social rights are stratified along the category of "gender" (Orloff 1993)). A key feature of migration is that immigrants (mostly) don't hold the citizenship of the country they are migrating to, which creates a fundamental barrier to immigrants' access to welfare services and benefits. Originally developed as national projects to support the wellbeing of national communities, welfare states historically excluded non-nationals from welfare provision. Migration policy was seen as an extension of economic policy, where migrants were plugging labour shortage gaps, but were not meant to draw out resources from the country. In the 1970s and 1980s, social rights were gradually extended to "denizens", that is non-nationals settled in a country, with EU integration and extending human rights agendas providing drivers for the extension of social entitlements to migrants, and it was suggested that the link between citizenship and social protection was weakening (Layton-Henry 1990). Towards the end of the 20th century, however, trends of closure of national welfare systems and increased restrictions of migrants' social rights could be found again across mature welfare states (Breidahl et al. 2022). Research began to point out that migrant's social rights are highly stratified, with differentiated inclusion into the welfare state depending on a country's integration regime and more specifically, the legal statuses of different "categories" of migrants, as well as the nationality of the migrants (e.g. with higher restrictions on social rights for "third country" nationals from outside the EU) (Wenzel/Bös 1997; Mohr 2005; Sainsbury 2012; Söhn 2012; Boucher 2014).

Most recent research points to the ways social policies are increasingly used as a form of migration control or even deterrent, by creating internal borders through setting barriers and conditions on migrants' access to welfare services and benefits, which has been coined "welfare state bordering" (Bendixsen/Nära 2024; Ratzmann/Sahraoui (2021); Ataç/Rosenberg 2019). Drawing on this new scholarship, *Gago* in this themed issue examines the intersections of social and migration policy in Switzerland, highlighting how recent changes to legislation gives the Swiss government the possibility to "downgrade" migrants' residence statuses in case they claim social benefits. *Gago* points out however, that since social assistance is administered at the cantonal level, there seems to exist considerable variation between Swiss cantons in interpretations and reporting practice with regards to the new legislation. *Gago* develops this strand of research on "social policy as migration control" further by exploring the impact the linking of migrants' residence and social rights has on the wellbeing and life chances of migrants in Switzerland, highlighting particularly issues of anxiety and mental health amongst migrants,

as well as examples of migrants choosing not to seek social assistance out of fear of being expelled from the country if claiming benefits.

The often contentious public and political debates concerning migration and immigrants' access to and use of welfare services and benefits have developed alongside other debates regarding the pressures on mature welfare states, austerity and welfare state restructuring. Neoliberal influences in mature welfare states that have placed stronger focus on welfare conditionality and "workfare" for all parts of the population and have brought back to the fore narratives on "deservingness/undeservingness" with respect to welfare benefits are mirrored in discourses on migration with perceptions of "good" migrants (those who contribute to the economy without being a "social burden") and "bad" migrants (those who depend on social welfare and "don't integrate", e.g. because they are unemployed) (Bendixsen/Näre 2024; Breidahl et al. 2022). What often remains under the radar in public and political debates is that transformations of mature welfare states themselves create specific migration dynamics: falling fertility rates, increased longevity, and rising labour market participation rates amongst women (who used to be the main informal carers), have intensified care needs at the same time as the availability of informal care is declining in mature welfare states. The considerable labour shortage that has arisen in the care and health sectors is increasingly being met by migrant care and health workers, who are partly recruited via agencies and government initiatives, but also attracted into the expanding informal private care sector in mature welfare states (Williams/Brennan 2012; Yeates 2010; Beneira 2008). Pay and employment conditions in the female-dominated care and health sectors of mature welfare states tend to be poor and so care labour in the welfare state contributes to the vulnerable and disadvantaged position of migrants. This pull of migrant care workers to meet the growing care needs of mature welfare states creates global care chains, where for example migrants from rural areas in developing countries provide the care for the left behind urban families of women migrating to "Global North" countries to provide care for the families of employed women there. Care migration to mature welfare states thus also has significant impacts on the wellbeing and welfare provision of families in "Global South" countries, thereby highlighting the global interconnectedness of migration and welfare regimes as well as the transnational dimension of migration-related inequalities (Lutz 2018). In this themed issue *Hipp, Leumann and Kohler* examine the economic and subjective wellbeing of Polish "live-in" care workers in Berlin, Germany, comparing the situation of live-ins contracted by care agencies with those in other types of employment, including informal care workers. Their study employs novel empirical techniques of respondent-driven sampling to collect data on this difficult to reach group and to enable them to present generalizable findings. Their research identifies clear differences in working conditions and wellbeing of this group of care migrants depending on type of employment and highlights the multi-faceted contexts that shape the wellbeing and life chances of migrant care workers in mature welfare states today.

As this short overview and the articles in this themed issue demonstrate: migration and social policy have become strongly intertwined in mature welfare states. With the stratification systems of both immigration regimes and welfare regimes overlapping, it becomes difficult to trace the complex patterns of differentiated social rights of migrants and to examine the impact of these policy regimes on the welfare and life chances of migrants. The remainder of this

introduction is thus dedicated to presenting a conceptual framework that brings together sociological theories of social inequality and migration and social policy approaches that allows for systematic cross-country comparisons.

The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX): how migration and social policies shape immigration-related inequalities

A systematic framework to study how national-specific patterns of migration and social policy shape the opportunities of immigrants and immigration-specific inequalities is provided by the British Council and the Migration Policy Group with the Migrant Integration Policy Index (Solano/Huddelston 2020). This score ranging from “restrictive” at one end to “integrative” and in favor of immigrants at the other, systematises immigrant integration policies defined as the institutional practices adopted by state agencies to deal with immigrants in destination countries (Bourhis et al., 1997; Tatarko/Jurcik/Hadjar 2021). The migrant integration policy index allows for a comparison of integration policies in different country settings. Notably, the MIPEX defines integration policies broadly by including not only border control and migration policies, but also a series of social policies. The MIPEX score is based on sub-ratings regarding 167 indicators (questions) that relate to eight policy areas, which we will describe in more detail below: labour market mobility, family reunion, long-term residence, political participation, access to nationality, access to education, anti-discrimination, and attention to migrants’ health needs.

Table 1. Description of MIPEX policy fields (Tatarko et al. 2021, p. 321)

(1) Labour market access	This component relates to the general question of whether immigrants have labour rights and opportunities comparable to nationals in gaining access to work and improving their skills. This includes sub-issues such as equity in immigrants’ and nationals’ access to work and job change opportunities, access to general support and workers’ rights.
(2) Family reunion	This component relates to the general question: do immigrants have the right to reunite with their families? This includes sub-issues such as eligibility (can all immigrants apply for the sponsorship of their entire family?), conditions for acquisition of status (do immigrants applying for family reunion have to comply with the same basic conditions as nationals?), security of status, and rights associated with status.
(3) Access to education	This component relates to the general question: are immigrant children encouraged to study and develop along with the children of nationals? This includes sub-issues such as access (do all children, regardless of their legal status, have equal access to all levels of education?), targeting needs (do immigrant students, their

	parents, and teachers have the right to the consideration of their special needs in the education system?), and intercultural education for all.
(4) Political participation	This component relates to the general question: do immigrants have opportunities to participate in political life comparable to those available to nationals? This includes sub-issues such as electoral rights and political liberties.
(5) Permanent residence	This component relates to the general question: do immigrants have access to a permanent residence permit? This includes sub-issues such as eligibility, conditions for acquisition of status, security of status (does the state protect applicants from discretionary procedures?), and rights associated with status.
(6) Access to nationality	This component includes sub-issues such as eligibility (how long should immigrants wait for naturalisation?), conditions for acquisition, security of status (does the state protect applicants from discretionary procedures?), dual nationality (can immigrants and their children who have obtained citizenship of that state also be nationals of other states?).
(7) Anti-discrimination	This component relates to the general question: are all residents of the state effectively protected from racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination? This includes sub-issues such as definitions and concepts (presence in regulations – is everyone living in the country protected from racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination?), fields of application, enforcement mechanisms, equality policies (does the state provide protection against discrimination for all residents of the state?).
(8) Attention to immigrants' health needs	This component relates to the general question: does the healthcare system meet the needs of immigrants? This includes sub-issues such as entitlement to health services (do immigrants have the same healthcare-related rights as nationals?), policies to facilitate access, responsiveness of health services.

Empirical research that applied the MIPeX index by introducing the country-specific MIPeX scores into multilevel models of European Social Survey data found that combinations of migration and social policies matter: Hadjar and Backes (2013) suggest that immigrants are better off in countries with more favourable integration policies. According to their findings, the difference in subjective well-being between migrants and non-migrants was smaller in countries with a high MIPeX score. Tatarko et al. (2021) show that even non-migrants benefit from migration and social policies in favour of migrants and their integration, as their results reveal a positive link between the MIPeX and subjective well-being of non-immigrants. This positive linkage could also be empirically established for most of the eight sub-MIPeX scores. The MIPeX offers a useful tool to examine the ways national policies that are particularly

directed towards migrants impact on the wellbeing of migrants (although indirectly also identifying outcomes of wider social policies). As this outline and the contributions in this themed issue demonstrate: to more fully understand migration-related inequalities also social policy areas and programmes that do not seem directly related to migration issues, should be studied with a focus on their effects on the life chances of migrants due to the intersection of welfare state stratification and migration-related inequalities and disadvantages. In addition, while much research on immigration-related inequalities has focused on government responses on the national level, the contributions in this themed issue highlight the importance to also include local levels and non-government actors in the analysis as there often exist contradictions and tensions in national and local approaches regarding migrants' access to welfare provision.

Conclusion

In this editorial we have highlighted a series of key dimensions and future directions for the study of the impact of social policies on life chances of migrants. Firstly, the study of migration-specific inequalities should consider both lack of resources and different types of discrimination. Institutional welfare state settings are systems of stratification and may reduce, but also produce inequalities and disadvantages for migrants. Furthermore, immigration regimes and social policies interact to create complex patterns of stratified social rights for migrants – with exclusionary mechanism sometimes being intentional, at other times unforeseen. Thus, unintended consequences of general social policies as well as specific integration policies that may be based on good intentions or administrative logics also need to be considered. What also needs to be taken into account is the heterogeneity among the group of immigrants structured by countries of origin, countries of destination, gender, reason for migration, ethnicity/cultural background, language, socio-economic status among other characteristics.

The contributions in this themed issue feature empirical state of the art investigations that expand on these themes and provide a rich array of examples regarding the challenges and opportunities of current migration and social policy frameworks with respect to migrant's life chances, with a particular focus on the inequality-prone welfare regimes of Germany and Switzerland. The study of migration and social policy is an emerging field and the contributions in this themed issue point to new directions in which research on the nexus between migration and social policy in mature welfare states could be advanced:

- regarding the ways welfare states as systems of stratification can create equalising opportunities and address disadvantages and marginalisation of migrants, but also deepen immigration-related inequalities
- regarding the ways welfare state restructuring, increasing care needs and interrelations of formal and informal care create migration dynamics and affect life chances of migrants and their families in transnational/global perspective.
- on the intersections of immigration regimes and welfare regimes and how these conjoined policy regimes affect immigrants' wellbeing and life chances.

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