

Transnationality and social inequalities of migrants in Germany

Paper presented at the sfb882-conference, 20-21 September, Bielefeld

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the association of transnationality with social inequalities among migrants in Germany. The relationship between people's transnational ties and practices and their social position is subject to a controversial debate that suggests a dualistic picture. While there seems to exist a group of highly educated people who benefit from transnational mobility and networks, for migrants the maintenance of transnational ties to their 'old homes' appears to lead to a social mobility trap, and thus to further marginalization. Yet, the relationship between transnationality and social inequality has attracted little systematic exploration.

Available studies in the field often investigate very different kinds of transnational practices, seldom use a coherent concept of social inequalities, and generally focus only on the determinants of migrants' transnationality. In order to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship, in this paper a concept of transnationality as heterogeneity is proposed that distinguishes various dimensions of transnationality. The analysis concentrates on financial, personal, identity-based and cultural practices in this respect. As a marker of heterogeneity, transnationality produces social inequalities, understood as differential opportunities to participate in society based on economic, cultural and social capital.

Using these concepts the association between transnationality and social inequalities will be analyzed using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) which contains a relevant sub-sample of migrants as well as a number of transnational items. The analysis focuses on the question whether this association is marked by a dualistic pattern as suggested in the debate. To this end the analysis investigates how the different dimensions of transnationality are related to the various forms of capital relevant for social inequalities. As it turns out, the analysis identifies no uniform pattern. To the contrary, different dimensions of transnationality are differently associated with the various forms of capital. More often than not, those persons who engage in transnational practices in the various dimensions are those who have higher levels of capital at their disposal. Frequently, however, the relationship is by no means clear-cut.