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Generation in transition: Youth transitions among native-born descendants of immigrants from Turkey

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1:Introduction

In 1980 Gündüz Vassaf, a prominent Turkish scholar in psychology, spent a sabbatical year in the Netherlands and later Germany. He conducted one of the first studies of the children of immigrants, collecting his research findings in his book *Daba Sesimizi Duyuramadık: Avrupa'daki Türk İşçi Çocukları*.¹ The title was inspired by one descendant of a Turkish immigrant who told him, “we are not a lost generation or stuck in-between; we haven’t just been able to get our voices heard”. In his study, Vassaf called attention to the problems faced by the children of immigrants at the time and warned that the negligence of both the host and home countries would have serious consequences for the futures of these young individuals. Vassaf’s study was unique in its concern to give voice to the perspectives of immigrants and their children rather than to the concerns of the host or home societies.

Today, the descendants of immigrants are at the forefront of public debate. Issues affecting their lives receive attention not only in social science research but in government policies and the media. However, in many western European countries public discourse remains mostly deaf and blind to the concerns and difficulties of these young people, but still seeks to apportion blame and responsibility for their perceived lack of integration. The media discourse on integration underscores the lower educational attainment and higher unemployment rates among the descendants of immigrants, and even associates some groups with criminal activities. Negative usages of “immigrant”, “ethnic”, “*allochtoon*” or “foreign” youth present them as outsiders though they are natives of the countries and leave no space for young people to develop their own personal identifications (Zwart and Duyvendak, 2012). The descendants of immigrants from majority Muslim countries like Turkey also suffer their share of suspicion related to growing Islamophobia dominating the public and political discourse (Uitermark, 2010) and especially amplified in the populist discourse of right-wing parties which have been regaining confidence in European countries over the last few decades.

¹ We still Couldn’t Make Our Voices Heard: The Children of Turkish Workers in Europe (Vassaf,1983)

Sitting here at a table in the library of the HBO in Zwolle, I am surrounded by descendants of immigrants from Turkey. They of course have no idea that I am writing about them, or that I understand what they are talking about in their admirably creative half-Turkish half-Dutch argot. As I listen, I hear them discussing everything from the exams next week, to the annoying boss in a *bijbaan*², to their concerns about finding an apprenticeship, to the way Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ³ acted in last night's Turkish TV series, to the features of the latest iPhone, to their vacation plans for next summer in Istanbul, and a whole lot of gossip about friends in between. Listening in on these conversations, one cannot help but wonder why it is that questions of integration dominate the public debate rather than their daily realities such as the obstacles they encounter in school and the labour market, and the pathways they take to try to navigate these barriers or the multiple frames of references that enrich their lives. In fact, from this perspective, the public debate over integration appears to mask a systemic unwillingness or inability to meet the needs of immigrants and their descendants and embrace their realities, instead framing the easily observable inequalities in terms of these groups' own attitudes or deficiencies.

However despite these media discourses, as Crul and Schneider highlight (Crul and Schneider, 2010), the descendants of immigrants are the new natives of the cities where they are born and raised. And as their numbers are growing, they are transforming the mainstream constitution of the super-diverse metropolitan world (p. 1257). In fact during the last two decades, there has been considerable research into the different social and institutional realities faced by the children of (post-war) immigrants born and raised in various European countries and the US (Crul and Vermeulen, 2003, Crul et al., 2012, Kasinitz et al., 2008, Thomson and Crul, 2007). Thanks to the prominent and widespread presence of native-born descendants of guest-worker immigrants from Turkey in various European countries, there is also a growing body of literature on the Turkish "second generation". This research focuses on this group's educational attainment (Crul, 1999, Pasztor, 2010a, Schnell, 2012, Van De Werfhorst and Van Tubergen, 2007) labour market position and social mobility (Heath and Brinbaum, 2007, Lessard-Phillips and Ross, 2012b, Silberman et al., 2007, Simon, 2003), marital patterns (Huschek, 2011, Milewski and Hamel, 2010), identity (Ersanilli, 2011), and political identification (Kaya and Kentel, 2005). Especially with the impact of the recent economic crisis, educational achievement and occupational progression have become particularly popular topics with researchers seeking to underline issues of social inequality and social mobility (Bol and Van De Werfhorst, 2012).

Most of the studies listed above are quantitative in nature and successfully reveal the general trends of educational and labour market attainment among descendants

² A part-time job.

³ Tatlıtuğ is a Turkish television actor.

of immigrants from Turkey. This shifts the focus of debate to the actual conditions this group confront. My own approach to the debate on the descendants of immigrants will be to focus on their youth transitions, inspired by the debates on new forms of transitions in youth sociology. Youth transition studies place the young people themselves centre stage and extend their analyses outwards from the perspectives of young people, exploring their reality, their relations with wider society and the structures that surround them. In that sense, youth studies provide critical research tools and theoretical concepts for understanding the complex lives of young people today.

Young people's lives accommodate a lot of complexities today. As the economic crisis continues to hold even western European countries hostage, young people have become among the most vulnerable groups under the new labour market conditions as youth unemployment rates have skyrocketed and insecurities intensified. The effect of these changing conditions is greatest on those young people who are about to leave school and make a transition into the labour market (Furlong, 2009). Transition from school marks a critical point in the lives of young people. Traditionally, transition has been referred to as the period "from the completion of full time education to entering into the labour market with a full-time job" (Mueller and Shavit, 1998). In the last two decades, youth studies have shown that understanding the new transition experiences requires moving away from the idea of school-to-work transition as a single point in a biography, and towards an analysis of the dynamic interplay between multiple transitions taking place simultaneously (du Bois-Reymond, 2009a). Today young people might leave the parental home or have kids before getting married, might start working while they are at school or might go back to school after having worked and started a family. Hence there is no longer any clear-cut boundary or linearity between work and study (du Bois-Reymond, 1998, Wyn and Dwyer, 1999). Within these complex transitions, the differential experience of the children of immigrants and other minorities is also well documented (Evans, 2002, Lehmann, 2007, Plug and Bois-Reymond, 2006, Webster, 2009) but since none of the studies focused closely on this descendants of immigrants per se researchers have not yet been able to explore the transition experience among these young people in its entirety and complexity.

The current study aims to explore the experience of native-born descendants of immigrants from Turkey focusing on their youth transitions. It takes the opportunity to study the mechanisms of transition as an on-going process, trying to reveal modern youth transitions in their full complexity, and the variety of experience among the native-born descendants of immigrants. The study will focus on a sample of young people with two immigrant parents who migrated to Amsterdam or Strasbourg from similar regions in Turkey around the same time for reasons of work or family reunification. The analysis will work on the theoretical assumption that having immigrant parents provide differential resources during

their transitions of their children. Immigrant parents initially arrive with distinct forms of capital, which they may develop or transform to various degrees through their exposure to the new national context. These different forms and volumes of capital and resources may then be differently instrumental in the various fields of their children's transitions.

To answer these puzzles the study compares the transition experience of the native-born descendants of immigrants from Turkey in Amsterdam and Strasbourg, two cities which host considerable populations of Turkish immigrants who arrived around the same time, through similar guest-worker migration schemes and from similar regions of Turkey. The institutional structures of the Netherlands and France provide a suggestive contrast with regards to how educational tracking is organized or how credentials are recognized in the labour market (Van De Werfhorst, 2011). Both countries have also been besieged by economic crisis during the course of this research, and both have experienced youth unemployment and precarious labour market measures. In the Netherlands, in October 2012 Social and Cultural Planning bureau reported that the unemployment rates are becoming alarming for the young people with migrant parents between 15-24 years old, including the descendants of Turkish immigrants (SCP, 2012). In France, concerns over high unemployment have led to job-creation policies targeting youth between 15-24 (Figaro, 2012).

Finally, together with quantitative analysis, the study will use qualitative methods to explore the individual trajectories of a group of young descendants of immigrants from Turkey. It will use in-depth interviews try to understand how these young people negotiate the conditions of their transitions in each phase of their lives, from early educational tracking to their entry into (or exit from) the labour market. This study hopes to reflect the fact that the transitions of its young participants are an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome. Therefore, it should be remembered that only snapshots of their lives have been captured here, and that their biographies remain pregnant with possible future transformations.

Chapter Outline

The book is structured around 9 chapters. Each empirical chapter of this thesis incorporates both quantitative and qualitative findings as the different methodologies inform and reinforce each other to provide a better understanding of the transition process. The comparative approach also runs through each chapter, underlining the different ways in which the distinct institutional structures of the city settings shape the transition experience of the respondents. Chapter 2 delineates the theoretical framework of the study. It discusses the state of the field of youth transition studies, reviews the literature on descendants of Turkish immigrants and then outlines the conceptual tools it employs to understand youth transitions. Chapter 3 presents the aims of the study and research questions and

describes how the methodological design combines qualitative and quantitative techniques in a comparative framework. Chapter 4 focuses on the parental background of respondents, exploring the similar conditions of migration and origin among parents in both settings as a basis of comparison. In Chapter 5, the analysis of the transition process begins retrospectively with the initial stratification in the education system when young people are tracked into distinct trajectories. Chapter 6 analyzes how many young people enter the labour market while still studying, which not only blurs their point of transition but also influences their future conditions of labour market entry. In Chapter 7, the experience of transition from school is studied in detail, highlighting young people's negotiation between school, work and marriage. Finally, in Chapter 8, an innovative methodology called latent class analysis is employed to generate a new typology of transitions, which is then reflexively applied to data from the qualitative interviews.