The symbolic gift of education in migrant families and compromises in school choice

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ABSTRACT
This paper takes an interest in migrant families’ educational strategies in the upper-secondary school market in Stockholm. Based on interviews with parents and children in families living in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood, the analysis shows how conversion of symbolic and economic capital and assets between national-contexts and between generations shapes educational aspirations together with notions of pride, sacrifice, and guilt. What school choice alternatives that are considered viable options depends on the composition of assets and capital within the family, but also differs between family members depending on family dynamics and family members’ different social investments in the neighbourhood of residence. The paper argues that migrant biographies are embedded in a gift economy that influences families’ educational expectations. Moreover, parents and children identify sociospatial boundaries in the deregulated school market but develop divergent strategies to mitigate disadvantage.

Introduction
In the 1990s, Sweden went from having a highly centralised education system to having a deregulated and marketized one (Wiborg 2015). Municipalities are now responsible for providing education, and families can choose schools outside their former school districts. Private businesses are allowed to run schools that are financed through a tax-funded voucher system. The reforms had a particularly large impact on the educational landscape in Stockholm County, where 104 new privately owned secondary schools opened between 1992 and 2016 (Forsberg and Palme 2019). A majority of these are located in central Stockholm, while municipality-run schools continue to be more numerous in, for example, southern Stockholm. The educational reforms are similar to developments in other European countries, but Sweden’s far-reaching deregulation stands out, making it an interesting case for comparison (Rönnberg, Lindgren, and Lundahl 2019).

This study draws on in-depth qualitative analysis to examine migrant families’ educational strategies in a deregulated upper-secondary school market. The interviewees live in
an ‘urban diverse’ neighbourhood with a high share of non-European and European immigrants and high levels of economic deprivation (Kawalerowicz and Malmberg 2021). One of the core goals of the school reforms was to provide more pedagogically multifaceted and individualised education that would reduce social inequalities (Forsberg and Palme 2019). However, the problem that the socio-economic structure of housing segregation is reflected in the social composition of schools remains, and has rather increased (Andersson, Hennerdal, and Malmberg 2021). The logics of the school market are not working as intended, and there is continuing political and scientific discussion about how to adjust the ‘rules of the game’ (SOU 2020:28).

In Sweden, the choice of upper-secondary school is a first stepping-stone toward a particular pathway of higher education or work. Previous studies have shown that educational aspirations are higher in ethnic minority groups than the majority society (Rudolphi and Salikutluk 2021). Moreover, the high aspirations of minority youth are actually reflected in enrolment and attainment, as many second-generation minority students choose more academic educational paths than the majority population (Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi 2012; Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011). One reason for this is that foreign-background parents are often unable to convert educational credentials and work experience into a form that fits the Swedish context (Chiswick and Miller 2009; Carlsson and Rooth 2007) and instead invest in their children’s education (Urban 2012).

To shed new light on the important relation between family background and dispositions toward the school market the study engages with the symbolic economy of migrant families, which is both transnational and embedded in the neighbourhood of residence. The interviewed families’ migrant trajectories are diverse, but they all live in the same neighbourhood in southern Stockholm and have children who just selected an upper-secondary school. I argue that migrant biographies are embedded in a gift economy (Mauss 2002) that influences families’ educational expectations. Moreover, the study draws attention to differing priorities in school-choice, where parents and children identify sociospatial boundaries in the deregulated school market but develop divergent strategies to mitigate disadvantage.

**Geographies of education, migration, and school segregation**

The socio-geographical contexts of the country of origin and the destination country are both of great importance in understanding the influence of migrant trajectories (Sayad 2004). There is a wide literature within geographies of education on the internationalisation of higher education in relation to middle-class families’ aspirations and migration strategies (Waters 2006; Findlay et al. 2012; Holloway, O’Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson 2012). Like this study, the literature on students’ (im)mobility often draws on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work and examines the accumulation and conversion of cultural capital in relation to different national contexts.

When it comes to studying the choice of primary and secondary schools, the political agenda is not ‘internationalisation of education’ but rather ‘integration’. Research on school choice unambiguously emphasises the impact of families’ socio-economic background. Having conducted a survey in three Parisian suburbs, Poupeau et al. (2007) draw attention to families’ choice of schools within or outside their school district. Families report looking for different qualities in a school, such reputation, material conditions or educational credentials. ‘The right move’ is adjusted and rationalised differently in terms of each family’s
composition of social and cultural capital, as well as the socio-economic structure of the neighbourhood.

Interviews that include different family members deepen the understanding of the family's composition of capital by addressing family dynamics. Beaud (2014, 2020) follows an Algerian family with eight children and their different routes into French society. The ethnographic work was collected over several years and draws attention to gender relations within families and differences between siblings' pathways to education and work. The sisters' investments in higher education become a collective resource also for the younger brothers, who experience a bumpier road to employment. Beaud (2020) further stresses the importance of time and space in understanding social positions and dispositions. There is an age difference of sixteen years between the oldest and youngest siblings, and the family's changes in neighbourhood of residence and increasing poverty also influence the siblings' different future prospects.

Studies of education and mobility as well as of education and school choice explore to what extent neighbourhood affects educational trajectories (Malmberg, Andersson, and Bergsten 2014; Andersson and Subramanian 2006). Studies of school choice in Sweden show that people living in the same neighbourhood make similar school choices (Malmberg, Andersson, and Bergsten 2014). Another important dimension for understanding Stockholm's school market is the ethnic composition of schools. Migrant-background families living in the southern suburbs of Stockholm are oriented towards schools in areas dominated by Swedish majority society (Bunar 2009; Kallstenius 2010; Trumberg 2011; Andersson, Malmberg, and Östh 2012; Forsberg 2018). Moreover, when the proportion of pupils with foreign background increases, Swedish middle-class families begin leaving the schools and looking for new ones (Bunar 2009; Trumberg 2011; Forsberg 2015). Studies of everyday urban mobility patterns find that travel-to-school distances are highest amongst Swedish-born middle-class families living in ethnically heterogeneous and low-income areas (Andersson, Malmberg, and Östh 2012).

Qualitative work supports findings that the ethnic and social structure of a school matters a great deal to parents when choosing schools (Bunar and Ambrose 2016). For some families, school choice entails the possibility to ‘break-out’ of the socio-economic context of their home neighbourhood (Kallstenius 2010). For most migrant youth living in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, however, ‘school choice’ rather reinforces social distances (Bunar 2009).

Qualitative studies in the Nordic context that have studied the lives of young refugees highlight the experience of being ‘in-between’ different national identities, as well as how racial structures play a substantial role in young people’s lives (Sharif 2017; Mathisen 2020). By focussing on school choice, this study builds on and contributes to this research by linking histories of migration to the practices and translation processes leading from aspiration to action. The following section goes more deeply into the study's focus on the home and engages further with understanding the concepts of gift economy, conversion of capital, and habitus.

The symbolic economy of the family

This paper starts from the home, treating it as a decisive space of social and cultural reproduction. The qualitative approach makes it possible to deepen the understanding of how
educational strategies are discussed, challenged and reproduced in the home. What kinds of expectations surround children in the home, and how are they reflected in the reasoning and practices of school choice? To make an analysis of the home, it is necessary to reflect upon what a home is, and how it differs from other kinds of institutions. Following the work of Mauss (2002), in this paper the home is viewed as a gift economy.

Understanding the home in this way provides important insights into solidarity between family members and generations. Parents’ expectations about their children’s future pathways are explored in terms of long-term investment and aspirations. This might be considered an unconditional act, but giving and receiving gifts is obligatory. A gift need not be reciprocated right away; a time delay rather underlines the spontaneity of a gift and the unselfish duty of giving it. It is also necessary to show that one is worthy of the gift.

Douglas (1991) argues that the home has been mystified in relation to ‘loyal support’ and ‘inner sources of strength’ (p. 288) and needs to be examined more pragmatically. A home can be both nurturing and disruptive. It is also a link to the outside society, since it potentially contains the sum of its inhabitants’ social networks, historical biographies, and memories. A home can also be a bridge between the countries of birth and residence, through visitors, memorabilia, practices and spoken languages. A home can also be socially isolated.

Furthermore, Ryan et al. (2009) claim that ‘family’ should not be defined narrowly; instead the inter-generational and transnational character of migrant families should be emphasised. In this paper, the symbolic economy within the family is defined by the cultural, economic, and social recognition of different work and educational pathways. The study also engages with the conversion of assets and capital (cultural, economic, social) between different spaces and geographical contexts (Erel 2010). The analysis differentiates between assets, which can be converted or transmitted within a limited social group, and capital, which is recognised more generally in the majority society.

The concept of ‘strategies’ is closely entwined with an understanding of families and individuals struggle for recognition of capital (Bourdieu 1984). This may for some be reflected in an explicit tactical approach when choosing a particular school while others seem to ‘end up’ in a school more randomly. Following the work of Bourdieu (1984, p. 125), strategies include both conscious and unconscious practices. In this paper, strategies are examined in relation to embodied forms of capital, habitus, that influence what alternatives become visible and accessible, how bodies claim space in society, and spontaneous feelings of belonging or not belonging (Bourdieu 1984, 1990).

Habitus is made visible in certain situations in relation to how we speak, body gestures as well as in instinct reactions. One could say that each individual has a particular habitus and therefore there as many forms of habitus as people. However, Bourdieu underlines the importance of understanding groups of people who share a certain habitus and how these are different or similar to other groups (Broady 1997, 226).

In practice, habitus is closely related to bodily experiences of ‘fitting in’ and ‘feeling out of place’ (McRobbie 2004). The maintenance of a social order is described by Douglas (2005) as relying on categorisations of pollution and taboo, and by Skeggs (1997) in terms of respectability. These are among the mechanisms of ‘othering’ employed by those in the position of not having to prove themselves to gain legitimacy and validation. The study engages with the shaping of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Jenkins 2008) and the boundaries this creates,
by exploring when habitus becomes relevant in school choice and how it distinguishes between different social groups.

**Method**

This paper is based on interviews I conducted with children, parents, and siblings in ten migrant families in the southern parts of the Stockholm region. The families have different migration backgrounds in terms of reasons for migrating, country of birth and migration histories. What unites the interviewed families is their neighbourhood of residence and that they all have children who have just chosen an upper-secondary school and study programme.

The interviews with the students were conducted without the rest of the family present, and covered topics related to everyday family life, how they travel within and between neighbourhoods and city districts, family relationships, educational aspirations and choice of school and occupation. The upper-secondary schools that the interviewees discussed are not named, but are described in terms of their approximate location and whether they are privately or publicly owned. The interviewees consisted of four boys and six girls, eight were born in Sweden and two had migrated to Sweden within the last six years, and at the time of the interview all were enrolled at the same secondary school. Similar topics was covered in the interviews with parents and older siblings (three family interviews included siblings) as in the interviews with the students, along with more developed questions about the family history, migration trajectories and social background. Most often it is the parents who migrated to Sweden, and the interviews include questions about experiences from different places in relation to education and work. A main theme in the interviews was the parents’ hopes and plans for their children. These interviews lasted longer than those with the children, between two and three hours. During that time the conversation shifted between interview questions and small talk about various topics.

The socio-economic situation of the families before and after migration varies. Two of the interviewed families had socially and economically high positions before migrating to Sweden and experience downward social mobility. In three families there is a big difference between the mother’s and the father’s education and work trajectory. The mothers of these families migrated to Sweden when they were children or teenagers and later attained a higher education degree. Today they have advanced within their professions. The fathers in the same families arrived later in life and had a difficult time to convert education and work experiences. In other families, both parents have a variegated road to education and work both before and after migrating. At present, these families have a similar economic living standard compared to before they migrated, but experience – as all the interviewees – that they had to ‘start from scratch’ in Sweden. The children’s education and work prospects are considered much better compared to current situations in the countries of origin.

The interviewed parents represent a group of ‘committed parents’ who attend the parent–teacher meetings. In nine of the ten families, it was the mothers who accepted the invitation to take part in the study, and it was they who mostly participated in the interviews. Fathers were present in three of the interviews. It would have been interesting to have a more equal gender balance between the parents. However, the strong voices of the mothers are to some extent representative of the interviewed families, because they
are described by themselves and by other members of the family as taking an active role in their children’s education. In one of the interviews with the parents a translator was present.

The interviews were first analysed separately and summarised in relation to themes that unpacked the symbolic economy of the family, such as interdependencies between generations (Mauss 2002). The concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1984, 1990) was examined in relation to families’ everyday life, how different family members moved between socio-geographical contexts, and what school alternatives were visible, desirable and available. The shared family narratives as well as differences within families were contextualised within family histories and the conversion of assets and capital in different national and local contexts (Bourdieu 1986; Erel 2010). Finally, the material was carefully read through to ensure that the collective analysis captured and synthesised the interviews in a way that preserved the essence of each narrative.

School choice and the mitigation of disadvantage

The analysis of the family interviews is presented in three related themes. The first examines migration biographies and the conversion of capital (Bourdieu 1984) between generations and national contexts and highlights how families’ social and migrant trajectories are intertwined in a gift economy (Mauss 2002) which influences educational aspirations. The second theme gives attention to family dynamics and differences in aspirations and practices between children, siblings, and parents. This sub-section underlines that the home is not an enclosed space but is embedded in intersecting symbolic economies of the neighbourhood, majority society and different national contexts. The third theme focuses on boundaries within the deregulated school market that are made visible in relation to embodied practices. Parents and children may identify similar challenges in their social mobility, but they develop different rationales for choosing or opting out of schools or school locations.

Migration biographies and the conversion of Capital

Exploring how educational expectations are interpreted, negotiated or left unfulfilled is a way to highlight the conditions of a symbolic economy within a family. The rich qualitative material is here represented by two families and the narratives of the mothers, Aya and Fai. Their migration biographies illustrate how solidarity within a home can be both nurturing and disruptive at the same time, as well as how the symbolic economy is maintained and sometimes challenged or defied. Representations of sacrifice, pride and guilt are associated with the migration process and influence the family’s symbolic economy and individual family members’ perceived ability and need to ‘be worthy’.

Some relatives and family members have proved to be especially influential when it comes to representing a shared family narrative. Aya’s father was born in a small village in Turkey in the 1950s. He dreamt of becoming a surgeon but had to drop out of school and follow his father to Germany to find work. Aya’s father was the oldest son and was described as the head of the family, not just for Aya and her siblings but also for her uncles, aunts, and cousins. The family carries a feeling of injustice about the fact that Aya’s father, who was bright and ambitious, did not get a chance to study.
Mother Aya: I wanted to study and get a profession, and that’s similar to my father. He didn’t get to study. He grew up in a farming society, but he wanted to become a surgeon or doctor. He talked a lot about how he wanted to advance and wanted to study, but his life changed completely when his dad decided to go abroad and brought him along.

The family later settled in southern Stockholm in the 1970s, and Aya’s father gained social recognition in the neighbourhood as an important link between Turkey and Sweden for other migrants. He quickly learned how Swedish society worked and helped others, for example with contacts with authorities. He was respected both as a good worker at a manufacturing industry and for his social work within the community. People often came to him for advice, and Aya remembers the apartment where she grew up as social hub for relatives and acquaintances. The high social status of the family raised the expectations placed on his children, especially for Aya who was oldest.

Like Aya, Fai discusses her educational trajectory in relation to her father’s struggles and sacrifices. Perhaps this is not a coincidence, since the two mothers are in a similar life stage, which amplifies certain parts of their narratives (Ryan et al. 2009). Fai grew up in a rural town in Southeast Asia. She feels guilty for coming to Sweden where she could not make use of the education that her father had worked so hard to provide.

Mother Fai: You know education is expensive in my country. I remember that my father owned a lot of land. He sold and sold. He wanted money. He said: “You don’t have to be sad if one day I have nothing left for you. But education, the schooling that I paid for, it will stay with you children.” I’m really sad. I have a good education that my father gave me. My father invested in me, but I left and came to Sweden because of love.

In this case, the father converted land ownership into education, economic capital into cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990). Fai used that investment to go to university and get a well-paid office job working with tourism. In the process, she moved from the countryside to the city and adapted to an urban lifestyle. She saved money to travel internationally, something that her parents had never done. It was on a vacation in Stockholm together with friends that she met her husband-to-be. Her education and social mobility in her country of origin are thus important parts of her migration biography.

The interviews with Aya and Fai describe a complex symbolic economy in the families where close ties have both enabled and restricted their educational trajectories (Ryan 2004). Aya related her longing for education to her father’s life history, but he did not think that she – as a woman – should study at the university. When Aya was 17 years old, her father arranged a marriage between her and a relative which she did not approve of. To show good will, the father decided to allow Aya to study if she went along with the marriage.

Mother Aya: During that time I got engaged. If I had to do that, I also got to do the other thing, so to speak. So I got engaged with a relative, and there were plans for the wedding, and for us to get to know each other, and that he should come to Sweden, and all that. But I also had my own plans, to study.

Aya describes an unhappy marriage. She is deeply invested in the family’s symbolic economy and although she has considered divorce, it would never be acceptable in the eyes of her parents. Her parents do feel obliged to compensate for Aya’s marriage and support her supplementary training and long working hours by picking up her children at preschool and watching after them. Aya’s husband does not like that she works outside the home.
Mother Aya: I told him, it's because your mum didn't have the opportunity to work. She lived in a farming society. But I live in Sweden; I have a career. Since my parents felt like they were part of this process, I think they've tried to compensate by being there for me as much as they could.

Aya's and her husband's migration histories diverge as the husband has been unable to convert economic and social capital in the migration process from Turkey to Sweden. Another difference is that Aya has most of her family and relatives in Sweden. The need for social support from the family and relatives is crucial to the mother's conversion of capital (Bourdieu 1990). In Aya's case, this means being given the time to earn a degree, or having the possibility to take the economic risk of continuing with higher education. In contrast, Fai has received little support from her parents after moving abroad. When she arrived in Sweden in her late 20s, she planned to continue working and take the necessary courses to validate her education from Southeast Asia. This proved to be difficult when she had her first child and had to combine motherhood with education or a more demanding. Fai got a job as a cleaner and does not want to risk her employment for a less stable income.

Mother Fai: My husband works night shifts. No parents to take care of the children. So I forgot about wanting to study.

By moving to Sweden against her parents' will, she to some extent broke the chain of solidarity within the symbolic economy of the home where she grew up. She knew she was taking a risk by coming to Sweden but could not fully grasp the consequences. To the question of why she thinks her father is still disappointed, she answers: 'he tells me so every time we speak,' and Fai is now in her late forties. Fai's parents compare her life choices to those of her brother, who has a government job in a larger city not far from where the parents now live with an insurance plan that will cover their healthcare as they get older. This underlines the time frame of the parents' gift of education, which is expected to be reciprocated in the long-term (Mauss 2002). The parents sacrificed land, money, time and well-being so that their children could have 'a better life.' Similar descriptions are found in several of the interviews, both with the children and with parents. Fay's inability to make her parents proud means that she has failed to live up to her own and her parents' expectations. This is one way to understand the strong sense of guilt she expresses in relation to both her parents and her children, who in turn were supposed to benefit from her university degree. Not feeling able to pass forward an advantage to her children – as her parents did for her – makes her sad and causes feelings of anxiety.

The social position-taking of Aya and Fay are different. Like her father, Aya perceives herself as a social link between the neighbourhood where she lives and a Swedish majority society. Her life history and habitus (Bourdieu 1990) represents feelings of sacrifice and making it against all odds. She expresses that her two sons will 'stand on their own two feet' and with confidence she tells them that they 'will go to school and have amazing careers'.
accumulate and convert capital (Bourdieu 1984) are integrated – to differing extents – into national contexts as well as the neighbourhood of residence. In this subsection, important findings from the family interviews are exemplified, mainly in relation to two daughters, Marta and Linda.

Together with her parents, two sisters and a brother, Marta came to Sweden as a refugee from Syria six years ago. The family sacrificed a lot, career-wise, by fleeing to Sweden. In Syria, Marta’s mother had worked for 25 years within healthcare and reached an advanced position but is now working at a preschool, while her father, who had owned his own business, is now unemployed. Carine, her oldest sister, was top of her class in Arabic and about to enter a prestigious law programme. In Sweden, she switched to becoming a pharmacist, since she no longer had the rhetorical advantage. Marta’s older brother is living in another city in Sweden and is studying to become an engineer.

The family has not been able to accumulate capital (Bourdieu 1986) in the move to Sweden. However, the family members’ language skills, study habits, social curiosity and experiences of different social environments have made them adaptable enough to convert their abilities into different career and educational paths.

The whole family is now involved in Marta’s choice of upper-secondary school, which is a main conversation topic at the dinner table and during evening chats in the sofa. Marta has chosen another school in southern Stockholm with higher admission requirements than her nearest school and a study programme that focuses on media. Her plan is to become a film director.

Interviewer: Is there anyone in your family or do you have relatives who work as film directors?

Daughter Marta: That’s actually one of the reasons I want to become a film director, since no one else is doing that. I like to be unique. They always tell me to become a lawyer, a doctor… things like that. I don’t know why, but I have dreams. I want to be different. Not just socially, but even in the family. I don’t feel similar at all to the rest of my family anymore. In a way I feel like they don’t understand me. I’m trapped between four walls and would like to be free.

Marta’s decision becomes a way to emancipate herself from her family, and she is actively pursuing her chosen career path. In the interview she displays a broad knowledge of film directors, and compares the styles of directors of different nationalities. Before her two-week internship in 8th grade, she worked hard to get an internship at a public service institution located in the inner-city where she learned about editing radio programmes. Marta describes differences in how various professions are valued and associated with social status in Syria and Sweden. In Syria, she would most likely not have proceeded with an education in media or directing.

Daughter Marta: In Syria school is much more important. You always have to have good grades. You have to become something great, like a doctor or lawyer. Study, study, study. Like you always need to be best. If you’re not great, then you’re not good. But here, whatever you do, it’s equally good. That’s one thing I love. In Sweden no one would say your job is worse than mine.

This image of the Swedish education system as non-judgemental is shared by several of the interviewed parents and children with experiences of the education systems in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon. Similar views about differences between Sweden’s and other
nations’ education systems have been found in previous studies of migrant youth (Sharif 2017), however, different educational trajectories are essential to the social distinction of Swedish elites (Börjesson 2004; Lidegran 2009; Forsberg 2018). In a few of the interviews, like with Marta, the children emphasise a difference within the family, describing their parents as ‘stuck in how things work over there’ but themselves as seeing other pathways made possible by the move to Sweden. This might be enabling in the way Marta describes it, but other interviews also highlight that it is difficult to assess the value of the many educational alternatives in the Stockholm school market.

A bit contradictorily, almost all families – children and parents – discuss the need to be educated or to have a job to be accepted in Sweden. Previous studies also show that migrant families are overrepresented in preparatory programmes for higher education (Erikson and Rudolphi 2010). Soso, the mother of two teenage sons, is working as a teacher assistant and studying to become a qualified teacher, which was her profession in Iraq before coming to Sweden. Her husband has worked within transport all his life and is now a bus driver. They both emphasised the importance of education for their children.

Mother Soso: I’ve taught my children that they should have good grades. Good results. And that will be like a weapon for you. It will show everyone that you’re capable and have capacity. You can do whatever you want. You should make money, you should fight, and you’ll become a good person in Sweden.

Soso’s choice of words recurs throughout the interviews, with education being compared to arming yourself for battle. In the end it is not only about going to school and getting good grades, but also proving yourself in a way that says something about you as a person (Sharif 2017; Mathisen 2020). This relates to what is described in the previous subsection about migration biographies and family images of favourable personal characteristics, but ‘being worthy’ also relates to expectations in the majority society and being recognised as a respectable person (Skeggs 1997).

Marta’s mother Maryam is worried that her daughter is leaning towards a career as a film director and that this will not provide economic or social security. She compares Marta’s educational choice with that of her older sister Carine, highlighting how the sisters’ different choices reflect their personalities.

Mother Maryam: There’s a big difference in character between Carine and Marta. Carine is calm and thinks a lot. Marta is more “I want to do things!” “I want an exciting job, not a usual one”. She wants to learn new and unusual things. So she says she doesn’t want to take the science programme; she wants to study media or photography.

The longing to ‘be different’ has been detected in previous studies of young people’s trajectories (Forsberg 2017). However, the roles ascribed within the family also legitimise Marta’s choice. Marta is described, both by herself and the rest of the family, as a ‘free spirit’ and someone who ‘finds her own way’. Furthermore, the burden of educational expectations has to some extent already been taken up by the older siblings who have played a different role in the family, giving the younger sisters space to follow less traditional paths (Beaud 2020).

Just a few blocks away from Marta, Linda lives with her older sister, mother and father. Her school choice is also at the centre of family conversations, with her mother disapproving of Linda’s choice of the nearest public upper-secondary school where the daughter has applied for the Social Science Programme. Linda’s mother came to Sweden from Iraq at the
age of four, and lived in a small town in another part of Sweden before moving to Stockholm as an adult. She is a university graduate and her salary as a pharmacist is the family’s main source of income. Linda’s father arrived from Syria in his twenties and started his own business selling fruit in open-air markets as well as opening a small restaurant. Due to illnesses, he has not been able to work for several years. There is a divide in the family, with the two daughters finding inspiration and support for their different educational pathways in their parents’ different trajectories.

Daughter Linda: My mum grew up in a small town in Sweden where things are very ‘Swedish’. That’s why she and my sister think in a certain way. My mum hasn’t let go of what was there. She still thinks that way, while my dad hasn’t lived in Sweden as long, and is still stuck in that culture. It hasn’t change much. I haven’t seen much more than this neighbourhood, and my dad hasn’t either. I think that’s a big part of why we think like this.

The family’s different migration biographies do not only include the move from one national context to another, but also experiences from living in various parts of Sweden. It is possible to say that habitus ‘diverge’ within the family, where the oldest sister and mother acquire educational capital and the younger sister and father rather emphasise the need of economic capital. The older sister in the family is enrolled in the Social Science Programme at a public upper-secondary school a few subway stops away from the family’s apartment. Linda’s mother makes mention of those ‘Swedish girls’ that the oldest sister hangs out with. She is proud to say that the oldest daughter does not care about brands, is careful with money, and plans to move out when she start studying at university, because ‘that’s how those girls think’, unlike the girls in the nearest public upper-secondary school. This family is experiencing a social organisation structured around an ‘us-and-them’ divide between people with foreign background in the suburbs and the majority society. The process of self-identification with one or the other side becomes decisive, since the two worlds are perceived as separate.

Mother Malika: The oldest daughter wants to move out. But she’s growing up with those kids in another part of Stockholm. But the youngest, she’ll get married, live here and go to church [laughter]. Isn’t it so? (the husband is nodding). Linda, she’s going to run her own business or be unemployed. I mean that’s what you do here.

This quote offers insight into how different pathways are discussed within the home. However, the different pathways are not ascribed the same value. The daughters’ habitus also converge, and they share their parents’ different histories of migrations as well as ideas of ‘what counts’—regardless of their different trajectories. The youngest daughter, Linda, describes her mother and sister as ‘thinking outside the box’, ‘modern’, and having ‘an open heart’. Linda is taking an opposite role in the family. She emphasises her close relationships with her friends in the neighbourhood, and a sense of belonging. Linda reflects on her aspirations in life and concludes ‘I will become a standard Syrian with my own company and an expensive car’. The social barriers that mean choosing sides (Beaud 2020) are visible to everyone in the family, but were not visible to Linda’s mother to the same extent when she was growing up. In the family interview they stress how the social and migrant trajectories within and between countries, as well as changes in Swedish society, explain differences and tensions between various family members’ future prospects. Amongst the interviewed families it is not a question of conflict but rather of compromises.
Bodily practices and boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’

The de-regulated school market makes it possible for the interviewed students to choose from a wide range of schools and programmes in the wider Stockholm region. The family interviews highlight how ethnic social groupings and neighbourhoods are made relevant in relation to school choice.

The nearest public upper-secondary school is described by the mother Madena, as ‘an extension of the neighbourhood itself’. Madena and her husband migrated to Sweden when their children were small. Before coming to Sweden, they both had various short-term jobs. Madena has been active in the local community in various women’s groups but has also struggled with long-term illnesses. Her husband has worked for several years as a bus driver. Madena emphasise that her children have benefitted from the education at the nearest upper-secondary school, and she is proud to say that the oldest son has a steady job and the other two are studying at the university. Amongst other parents the school is perceived to have extensive social problems that reduce the quality of education and lower the teachers’ expectations of students. These parents usually have had little or no direct contact with the school. A few of the interviewees describe their choice of another school in southern Stockholm as way to opt out of the nearest public school.

Daughter Maria: My parents didn’t want it either. They thought that the nearest school would change me, if I went there with those pupils. My mum was glad that I chose a more popular school in southern Stockholm. She said, pick whatever you want, as long as it isn’t the nearest school.

A majority of the interviewed children and their parents prefer schools located in other parts of southern Stockholm within convenient commuting distance. The interviewees emphasise that these schools have high admission requirements and engaged teachers. Three of the interviewed mothers stress the importance of their children going to schools in the city centre.

Interviewer: Why does she like schools in Central Stockholm?

Daughter Linda: She wants there to be some Swedes there, so I can develop my language. Because here there are only foreigners, you could say.

The socio-economic and ethnic composition of schools is a determining factor for school choice (Bunar and Ambrose 2016). The daughters Linda and Jasmine want to make their mothers proud by choosing a school their parents approve of. School choice is not only about choosing a career path; it is also about choosing a school and a school location that the family agrees with.

Daughter Jasmine: It’s difficult because you want them [her parents] to be happy with the choice. That they will say ‘okay good, you’ve chosen a good school’. Especially since we’re from the ‘hood’, they want you to ‘go into town and meet new people’. It’s hard to tell them I want to stay.

Unlike Linda, Jasmine plans to go to a school in central Stockholm which her mother and brother thought was the best alternative. She expressed that she would have preferred to attend the nearest public school.
The family interviews also uncovered differences within families and between parents regarding the best school choice for their children.

Mother Dalila: For our children, I don't want them to stay in these preschools and schools. They need a better foundation, I think.

Father Nabil: When you get used to an area, an environment, it's not easy to move. When you move, you have no friends. Here, all their friends are nearby. But it depends. If they have relatives from another part of town, maybe it would work, but it's tough when you don't know anyone. That's how I feel.

Like a few other interviewed mothers, Dalila emphasised the importance that her children change environment. These mothers have lived in Sweden for a long time and have jobs and social networks outside their neighbourhood of residence. In contrast, the father, Nabil, is afraid that his son will end up in bad company in the city centre, where the parents lack social connections. Nabil works as a mechanic in the same neighbourhood where the family lives, and hopes to start his own business, both for himself and his two sons. Several parents, including Nabil, also expressed that it is more likely that their children would be recognised for their educational achievement in the nearest public school, since they are being compared with other pupils with the manners and language that are expected in that particular school. In families where the children are experiencing difficulties in secondary school, the parents are wary of a social order where their children may be at a disadvantage if they are 'loud' and 'need more discipline' than 'Swedes'. It is possible to relate this discussion to processes of 'othering' and to Douglas' (2005) work on purity and pollution which highlights the mechanisms of maintaining a certain social order that is forced upon others by those in a dominant social position. In this case, Nabil raises a concern that his son might disturb the social order of a school in the city centre. This shows how a 'problem' is constructed in relation to an individual or group, diverting attention from the racial structures that underlie these distinctions between order and disorder.

In an interview with Dalila and Nabil's son Samir, Samir discusses his parents' different opinions of schools. He has decided to attend the nearest upper-secondary school, though he agrees with his mother that a school in central Stockholm would have a better social environment.

Son Samir: It's mostly my mum really. Dad is more like 'sure, pick another school in southern Stockholm if you like', you know, like, 'do what you want'. But my mum, she's more like 'go into the city!' A new environment, that kind of thing. And I think it's true, all that about meeting new people, but I don't know. The school I want to go to feels safe [laughter]. I know the people there.

The ambivalence in this interview is present in several families and amongst both parents and children. The schools in central Stockholm are described as better from an educational point of view and as door-openers to future careers. However, the familiarity of the nearest school makes it a more attractive choice in the end. Moreover, choosing a school dominated by 'Swedes' in a different neighbourhood entails a risk of being discriminated against for having a foreign background or living in a certain neighbourhood. This is highlighted in the interview with Jasmine.

Daughter Jasmine: You want out, to the city and the people. But you feel you won't be received so well, because you're from the suburbs. I won't make any friends and they'll look at me
funny. Maybe they’ll say something, like a joke. Or maybe they’ll talk about the suburbs in a bad way. Here everyone ends up in the schools close to here, so we all know each other. And that’s not good. Well you enjoy yourself, but it’s not good for your career because you get a better education in the city.

There is a perception that a certain school choice would be objectively better than the choice that actually has been made. This may be expressed by the children as wanting to attend the same school as their close friends, but the interviews also uncover something else, described in terms of the different environments and mentalities of schools. In a study of former young refugees in rural Norway, Mathisen (2020) highlights experiences of 'being different', even among interviewees who spent almost their entire childhood in Norway. The boundaries of ‘Norwegianness’ are drawn in relation to skin colour, language and religion, as well as norms and values. In this study, the neighbourhood of residence is also of importance. In the interviews, whether or not one is comfortable in a school environment is a question of personality and practices connected to language, social interactions with friends, and life experiences. However, young people and their parents’ different and sometimes vaguely described experiences of comfort and discomfort are not perceived as valid arguments regarding school choice.

It is important to note that the kinds of schools where the interviewed students imagine they would feel uncomfortable are mainly discussed in relation to locations, rather than by pointing to specific schools. The interviewed families do not compare the broad range of schools in central Stockholm with each other, nor are their assumptions about school environments based on first-hand experiences of these schools. This supports previous findings that families primarily compare schools within a certain social segment (Forsberg 2018). One could then argue that the interviewed families are reasonably apprehensive about the unknown, and adapt their school-choice strategies accordingly. These kinds of explanations are certainly likely to be part of the explanation. However, returning to Douglas (2005), it is also important to note that fear regarding this matter, along with the embodied sentiments of comfort and discomfort, is reflected in a social order of school and housing segregation. Gaining an understanding of how and where different bodies can claim space yields insight into how sociospatial structures – in this case in the Stockholm school market – are reproduced and sometimes resisted.

**Conclusion**

Previous studies show that educational aspirations are higher amongst ethnic majority groups than the majority population (Rudolph and Salikutluk 2021). This study gives a deepened understanding of why this is the case and how these aspirations are translated into practices of school choice. Migration biographies and feelings of pride, sacrifice and guilt are closely entwined in family’s symbolic gift economy (Douglas 1991; Mauss 2002). More than a will to ‘give something back’, the symbolic gift economy creates multiple practices of solidarity, compensation, a need to be ‘different’ as well as feelings of anxiety and disappointment. The paper also draws attention to social capital, relatives and kinship as assets that differentiate between migrant families in terms of who has the practical or economic support to invest time and money in education.
The analysis emphasise how habitus (Bourdieu 1984) is made relevant in school choice and in the interviewees differing priorities which sometimes is about finding ‘the best education’ and often also a school ‘for people like me’. The interviewed families bring up subtle feelings of comfort and discomfort that are not considered proper arguments for choosing or opting out of a school, but nonetheless reflect societal structures of housing segregation and racism. How to navigate in the Stockholm school market becomes a question of diminishing the sociospatial disadvantage of ethnicity and neighbourhoods, with parents and children identifying similar obstacles in Swedish society, but sometimes drawing different conclusions about how to increase their chances of social mobility. This sometimes leaves children and parents with the feeling of making choices based on subtle sentiments rather than rational considerations. Believing that one’s school choice is less strategically sound may negatively affect one’s prospects. Moreover, mechanisms of ‘othering’ increase the need for children in migrant families to attain a higher education degree.

Furthermore, the study shows how family habitus diverge in relation to parents’ migration biographies, such as year and age of arrival as well as different possibilities to accumulate or convert education capital or work experiences. Interviewing both the children and the parents also visualises how family habitus converge and is shaped by discussions, differences, and shared family histories. Young people also have an independent voice within families and the analysis highlight how compromises in school choice occurs both ways between generations.

The school reforms implemented in the 1990s created a much-debated educational market in Stockholm. Families are perceived to navigate between different schools and programmes, and the need to make the system more accessible in terms of equal information and fair application systems is often highlighted (SOU 2020:28). This study points to how migrant families’ school practices are embedded in an ongoing struggle for recognition, where deregulation of school districts reinforces the importance of family habitus. The study stresses the importance of widening the geography of school choice to include migrant and social trajectories, the multi-scaled symbolic economy of the home and embodied experiences and practices.

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