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## Future Paths in the Study of Migrant Descendants' Citizenship: Engaging with Critical Literature

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses how research related to migrant descendants' citizenship could potentially benefit from recent critical literature towards migration and citizenship. On the one hand, we discuss how such research focusing on the so-called "second generation" and citizenship could draw from conceptualisations that approach citizenship as everyday practices and as lived experience. On the other hand, we reflect on how such research could benefit from calls to de-migrantize migration scholarship. In this paper, we also discuss how such critical approaches allow problematising the research categories, such as "second generation" or "migration background", and what implications this has in terms of understanding the citizenship among migrant descendants. In the end, we suggest possible paths for future research and theorisation concerning citizenship and migrant descendants.*

**Keywords:** *Migrant descendants; citizenship; methodological nationalism; de-migrantizing approaches; transcultural capital*

### **Introduction**

Scholarship on the so-called "second generation" has become an established field of study in migration research. On the one hand, the "second generation" is understood to have specific lived experiences, practices, attachments, identifications, or engagements embedded in the transnational social space that sets them apart from their parents' generation (Levitt 2009). On the other hand, their experiences have been shown to differ from those of their "national" peers, for instance in terms of disadvantages, racism, and discrimination they face in their everyday life (among others, Ahmad, 2020; FRA, 2017; Verwiebe et al., 2016). Such empirical findings speak of the continuing and unquestioned need to produce knowledge on migrants' descendants, both on the challenges they continue to face in many European countries and on their successful paths toward socio-economic inclusion (Crul et al. 2017; Schneider et al., 2022). Nonetheless less attention is devoted to the theoretical, analytical, and methodological challenges that the study of migrants' descendants imply – with few exceptions (Bolzman et al., 2017; Dahinden et al., 2021; Elrick and Schwartzman, 2015).

In this article, we focus on migrants' descendants, narrowing the focus specifically on the issue of citizenship. Citizenship is approached as a lived experience and an everyday practice, as in the experiences of migrants' descendants, that needs to be understood also from a multiscale perspective (Isis, 2008; Kallio and Mitchell, 2016; Kallio et al., 2020). We ask: What insights can be learnt from the calls to de-migrantize migration research in the study of migrant

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descendants' citizenship, empirically, theoretically and methodologically? How to move beyond any residual meanings of migrancy in understandings of citizenship, specifically concerning migrants' descendants? To what extent is the term "second generation" a signifier of non-belonging to the national community and citizenship? What possible paths for future research, drawing from critical literature towards migration and citizenship, are there?

In the first section we discuss the critical research tendencies in both migration and citizenship studies, and lay ground for analytical reflection on the centrality of migrancy in understandings of citizenship. In the second section, we further problematise commonly used terms - such as "second generation" - addressing not only a terminological challenge, but also an epistemological, theoretical, ethical and empirical issue. Finally, we discuss what nationalised forms of exclusion widely used terms potentially carry and how to avoid them. We find this crucial to avoid reproducing nation-state-based power relations and ethnicity-centred epistemologies in research that relates to migrants' descendants. For this discussion, we draw from the scholarship that calls to critically approach nation-state-coloured epistemologies concerning the migrants' descendants. Then in the third section we will move forward to present our observations for potential future paths of research, in terms of lens and approaches to be adopted in the study of citizenship regarding migrants' descendants.

### **Problematizing migrancy in citizenship**

During past decades, critical research traditions have drastically shaped how migration and citizenship are analytically and conceptually approached in academic research. Within both, the citizenship studies as well as migration studies (where also citizenship is discussed in the context of migration), the criticism seems to have been towards de-nationalising and de-territorialising tendencies. We note that such criticism has been considered essential when examining migration-related topics, including migrants' collective action and political mobilisation, questions of identity, community life, social relations, and citizenship. In contrast, the *combined* insights from these two bodies of critical literature (on migration and citizenship) have less commonly been applied to similar research topics concerning migrants' descendants. Therefore, we ask: What lessons can be learnt from discussing observations from both strands of critical literature when it comes to questions of citizenship, specifically concerning migrants' descendants? How can their citizenship be approached without the analytical or methodological residues of migrancy that have become under the critical scrutiny in migration studies?

The critical tendencies in migration scholarship are often discussed through the criticism of *methodological nationalism*. This refers to the nation-state-centred approaches that have been suggested to characterise a large share of migration research until the 1990s, when they increasingly came under critical scrutiny (Bommes and Thranhardt, 2010; Dahinden, 2016; Pries, 2005; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). The main premise in such literature has been to question and to problematise the nation-state and ethnicity-centred epistemology in understanding migration-related phenomena. Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) convincingly argue that nation-state building processes have fundamentally shaped how migration has been perceived, reacted upon as well as analysed in academic scholarship. Building on the criticism presented within methodological nationalism, scholars have aimed to tackle the problematic nature of ethnicity-centred epistemologies in how research is conducted on migration-related topics. They have argued that this can be done by steering away for "groupism" (Brubaker,



2005) and from the ethnic lens (Glick Schiller and Caglar, 2016) when examining such topics. Also more recently, calls to “de-migrantize” migration research (Dahinden, 2016), to “migrantize the citizen” (Anderson, 2019), to adopt “doing migration approach” (Amelina, 2020) or yet the entangled mobilities approach (Wyss and Dahinden, 2022) have been suggested as remedies to move beyond the essentialised notions of ethnicity and group belonging. We find these observations of great relevance in conceptual approaches concerning citizenship, particularly in the context of (post)migration.

Citizenship has traditionally been approached as a question of rights and duties, as a relationship between an individual and a political entity (Turner, 1990). However, citizenship studies have diversified during past decades, with scholars paying more attention to efforts to “deterritorialise” citizenship (Collyer, 2017; Kallio et al., 2020; Kallio and Mitchell, 2016). The lived citizenship has become a key concept in citizenship studies during past decades (Kallio et al., 2020). The lived citizenship approach posits focusing on less formal and everyday modes of political participation that do not necessarily inscribe into the institutionalised practices within the state. Kallio et al. (2020: 714) mention that “lived citizenship is about people’s daily, mundane lives and how the ‘political’ is worked within informal and domestic spaces...as much as in relation to changes such as those associated with globalisation, migration and the diaspora”.

The migration scholarship has also approached citizenship through the conceptualisation of transborder citizenship (Glick Schiller, 2005; Khayati and Dahlstedt, 2008). This has meant that migrants are approached as transborder citizens “who live their lives across the borders of two or more nation-states, participating in normative regime, legal and institutional system and political practices of these various states” (Glick Schiller, 2005: 48). Building on the idea of social and cultural citizenship, transborder citizenship moves beyond the legal and juridical definition of citizenship, showing also how diverse local and global spatialities shape citizenship.

Collyer (2017: 576-577) has suggested that the reason why transnational theorisation has had relatively little impact on studies on citizenship is due to the territorial bias, which “associate citizenship primarily, if not exclusively, with belonging to a particular territory”. However, more recent conceptualisations of lived citizenship situate it in the transnational frame and push towards conceptualisations of transnational lived citizenship (Kallio and Mitchell, 2016; Martin and Paasi, 2016; Müller, 2022; Müller and Belloni, 2021). Instead of approaching citizenship merely as right-based status linked to a nation-state, the transnational lived citizenship approach “enables us to look at the intersections between formal and aspirational aspects of citizenship combined, and its emotional and practical aspects – those aspects defined by feelings of belonging, transnational attitudes, and circulation of material cultures.” (Müller and Belloni, 2021: 13). Still, the main emphasis in research literature on both lived and transborder citizenship has been on migrants themselves, instead of their descendants. Towards the end of this paper, we sketch possibilities to push the conceptual discussion on citizenship and migrants’ descendants forward, but before that we discuss the attempts to de-migrantize the terms that are commonly used to refer to the children of immigrants.

### **De-migrantization of the “second generation”**

When dealing with particular groups – especially those at risk of marginalisation or discrimination – the consequences of the process of attributing a label should be addressed

with great attention. Labelling indeed entails the risk of reinforcing social categories or of stigmatisation of an entire social group (Bolzman et al., 2017). As Dahinden and colleagues write “migration categories do not simply represent or reflect the world, but simultaneously create and limit it” (Dahinden et al., 2021: 539). That is the challenge in the definition of a population is not only methodological – to define the object/subject of a research especially in comparative studies – but also substantive (Bolzman et al., 2017) and ethical due to the effect of a definition for the ‘labelled’. The choice of terms – and the use of categories by children of immigrants themselves – is influenced by different factors, such as citizenship policies, migration histories, and the perception of immigration and ethnic minorities in the country of residence (Bolzman et al., 2017; Dahinden et al., 2021). The nation-state and ethnicity-centred epistemology discussed above have often informed the analytical categories used in social sciences, in particular in migration research. The different definitions attributed to the children of immigrants are a case in point. In migration research, the children of immigrants have been called in different ways: *second generation immigrants*, *second generation*, and *migrant descendants*, together with the category *migration background*, are the most used.

The term ‘second generation immigrants’ reaffirms the alterity of the children of immigrants, reproducing their exclusion in their country of residence. The choice to include the term *immigrant* even when the experience of migration is not in the biographical paths of those described appears as a limitation. This term – second generation immigrants – strongly reiterates the unfamiliarity of those who, even if born or grow up in their parents’ country, are still considered immigrants – in opposition to citizens – in the country in which they live, replicating the nation-state logic of inclusion and exclusion (Dahinden, 2016).

‘Second generation’ is the most commonly used term in migration scholarship when referring to the children of immigrants (among others, Crul and Vermeulen, 2003; Heath et al., 2008; Portes, 1996; Schneider et al., 2022). Nonetheless, this term implies non-belonging (Dahinden et al., 2021) and underlines the alterity of the so-called second generation, implicitly assigning a priority to one of the characteristics of the individuals that it describes: their being linked to the experience of migration of their parents to whom they are closely linked. That is, the parents national origin becomes a central, or even unique, marker of their identity. This category – second generation – implicitly highlights the long-lasting effect of migration also on those who have never crossed a border, emphasising at the same time the role of the national origin. Moreover, as Dahinden and colleagues state (2021: 542), “it suggests that only multigenerational sedentariness in a specific national territory turns a person into a true citizen”.

Both the terms – second generation immigrant and second generation – are ‘categories of difference’ (Dahinden, 2006: 2210), which entail the risk of stigmatization and of reinforcing the idea of exclusion from a national, homogeneous, and imagined community. These two terms risk to be a signifier of non-belonging to the national community and citizenship. This relates directly to the binary construction of citizen/migrant and how it is maintained through the naturalised notions of ethnic belonging (Anderson, 2019). Migrants’ descendants, in many cases citizens in their parents’ countries of settlement, are therefore “migrantized” by the terminology that is being used.

The category *migration background* – as interestingly discussed by Elrick and Schwartzman with reference to the German experience (2015) – was transformed by state representatives from a statistical category to a homogenised social category which tends to exclude from the



imagined national community all those who have a migrant background, also those who are legal citizens. While further distinctions can be made in statistics (asking for example citizenship, country of birth, age of arrival, etc), the migration background used as a general term to identify a segment of the population is too broad. Indeed, in this term are comprised both first generation migrants and their descendants, creating a unique social category of exclusion. Dahinden and colleagues (Dahinden et al., 2021) – on the basis of a process of reflexivity which involves both researchers and research participants – opt for using of the term *migrant descendants*. This term – despite being again a signifier of non-belonging as recognized by the authors themselves (ibidem) – has the advantage of being inclusive when accessing the field recognizing migrant descendants as an integral part of the entire population, avoiding to frame them in ethnic terms<sup>3</sup>.

This brief critical overview of the most commonly used terms to refer to the children of immigrants makes clear the influence of the nation-state logic in each of these categories which focus on the past (their parents' experience of migration) of the children of immigrants as a primary category of difference. Our initial question – how we can de-migrantize the term “second generation”, or any other term – is therefore still unaddressed.

A wide amount of research shows that children of immigrants do share a series of common experiences (such as the perception of discrimination), intercultural competences (Sarli and Phillimore, 2022), and legacies from their immigrant parents. That is, their being children of immigrants still matters and has a social relevance, in particular for empirical research. This calls for an analytical category capable of defining the research population/subject of inquiry. A possible proposal to overcome the nation-state logic and the limitations of previous terms is to refer to their *transcultural capital* (i.e., youth with transcultural capital) (Arias Cubas et al. 2022). This term – that need to be further explored in a process of reflexivity also with those who are the target of this label – has several potential advantages. First, it is a descriptive term that refers to people who navigate between different cultures, different belongings and who have multiple identities and cross-cultural competencies. It does not refer exclusively to migrant descendants, but to all those with more than one culture, overcoming the citizen/migrant contraposition. It also captures a characteristic of migrant descendants that have emerged in previous empirical research (among the most recent ones, see Arias Cubas et al. 2022; Sarli and Phillimore 2022).

In addition to the centrality of the analytical definition, it is worth focussing on the approach to be adopted in the study of the children of immigrants. As clearly stated by Dahinden (2016: 2211) “migration and ethnicity are not always the most important criteria for explaining social processes or people’s social practices and affiliations”. Children of immigrants may not exclusively or primarily self-identify as such. Indeed, their being children of immigrants strongly interacts with other individual characteristics, such as gender, social class, level of education, and socio-economic characteristics. A comprehensive approach – more precisely an intersectional approach – would offer a chance to “de-naturalize” (Amelina and Faist, 2012) differences and to focus on the categories relevant in a given empirical research, avoiding – especially when dealing with migrants’ descendants – to make ethnicity as the central (and sometimes only) criterion toward a de-migrantization of research. Several empirical findings show how the adoption of an intersectional approach may offer a more

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<sup>3</sup> In this present article, in line with the approach of these authors, we have decided to use the term “migrant descendants”.

comprehensive understanding of the realities of migrants and their descendants (Bourabain and Verhaeghe, 2019; Shinozaki, 2017; Toivanen 2021), making sense of their multiple identities. Previous research for example shows the central role of social class (Grasso and Giugni, 2022) and of social and educational factors (Henn and Foard, 2014) on youth political engagement rather than other categories of difference.

The reflection on the analytical categories should be therefore developed together with those who are the object/subject of the definition and strictly linked to the potential approaches to the study of migrants' descendants which will be developed in the following section, also showing how we should practically engage in “de-migrantizing” (Dahinden, 2016) research on migrants' descendants and citizenship.

### **Future paths for research on migrants' descendants and citizenship**

Based on our previous reflection on the analytical categories and critical approaches, we propose future paths in the study of citizenship concerning migrant descendants. The first strategy is to move beyond treating citizenship as merely a formal category and to approach it through the lived experience framework (Kallio et al., 2020) as well as through the lens of everyday practices (Isin, 2008). The second strategy is to adopt “de-migrantizing” approach, specifically in regard to the association between citizenship and ethnicity (Dahinden, 2016; Anderson, 2019) or yet to “second generation” as an unquestioned conceptual category. The third is to pay attention to the contextual dynamics and how the diverse social spaces in which migrants' descendants are embedded shape their citizenship practices and the lived experience thereof (Levitt 2009). More importantly, we argue that these three strategies allow a more comprehensive picture of migrant descendants' citizenship, including the meanings attached to it as well as of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that subtly shape the lived experience of citizenship.

#### *Citizenship as everyday practices and lived experience*

As discussed earlier, we feel that there is great analytical value in moving beyond the treatment of citizenship as formal status and approaching it through the lenses of everyday practices and lived experiences. Why is this? The lived experience approach allows inquiring the meanings attached to one's citizenship category, and to examine how it related to other neighbouring research themes such as political activism and questions of identity. Furthermore, instead of narrowing the empirical focus on either to a formal citizenship status or to formal practices, we approach citizenship as being constituted by individuals' everyday acts (Isin and Nielsen 2008). This puts emphasis on the sporadic, mundane and everyday practices that relate to “enacting” one's citizenship, and that can be either routinized or occasional, social, political, cultural and symbolic acts through which migrants' descendants situationally and relationally choose “where they belong”. Focusing on the citizenship practices and the lived experience of citizenship in the case of migrants' descendants, we feel, allows a better understanding of the informal exclusions embedded within a formal citizenship status, particularly such exclusions that remain invisible if focusing solely on citizenship as formal status.

#### *De-migrantizing citizenship*

We see value in the calls to “de-migrantize” migration scholarship and consider such critical reflections to be useful in the conceptual (and empirical) approaches to citizenship. Firstly, this means ridding the notion of citizenship from the underlying conceptual residues of



migrancy, or yet of assumptions of ethnic or national belonging. For instance, Anderson (2019: 1) has criticized the dichotomy migrant/citizen and aimed to “migrantize” the citizen. According to her, this allows to grasp the “connections between the formal exclusions of noncitizenship and the multiple, and sometimes informal exclusions within “citizenship”. Secondly, we adhere to Dahinden’s (2016) call to link migration to broader analytical categories of social sciences. We link this to our earlier discussion on the conceptual premises of the term “second generation”. For instance, this means not merely treating the category of “generation” in reference to migration (background), but also empirically questioning the generational experience from an age cohort perspective. To move beyond the “ethnic lens” also identified by Brubaker (2005) and by fully adhering to the call to “demigrantize” research on migration and integration (Dahinden, 2016), we suggest to study migrants’ descendants as *also* belonging to a generation, in the sense of a particular age cohort. For example, in the study of young migrants’ descendants and their citizenship practices, it could also be beneficial to consider them as *youths* in the first place/*qua talis*, and to consider how broader and global political transformations are also shaping younger generations’ citizenship practices (and meanings attached to them).

Hence, examining migrant descendants’ everyday experiences of citizenship also informs the study of participation and citizenship among the generation they belong to, thus enhancing our understanding of the broader transformations concerning configurations of citizenship among youths *in general*. Along these lines, we consider the intersectional approach useful and we see the value in adopting an intersectional approach in the analysis of migrant descendants’ experiences (role of gender, social class, ethnic origin) and how those are affected by different intersecting social locations they belong to. We feel inspired by Floya Anthias’s theorisation of positionality and power in the context of transnational mobilities (Anthias 2012), with references to migrants’ descendants. Drawing from the intersectional frame, her theorisation on translocational positionality allows to capture the informal exclusions in citizenship at the experiential level, including those related to gender, ethnicity, national belonging, class and racialisation, thus linking this strategy to the previous one, that is approaching citizenship as everyday practices and lived experience.

#### *A situational approach to citizenship*

Thirdly, we call for a situational analysis that moves beyond one contextual framing. Most often in the case of citizenship studies the focus has – unsurprisingly so – been on the national context. Different sites and scales shape citizenship processes, through which individuals enact different political subjectivities (Isin, 2009). For instance, past research has shown how migrants can develop a stronger attachment and sense of belonging to the local community, or the city they live in, rather than to the receiving state (Vancluysen et al., 2009; Toruńczyk-Ruiz and Brunarska, 2018): this seems to apply to their descendants too, to some extent (Barwick and Beaman, 2019), but more insights are needed as to how this occurs and how this related to migrant descendants’ citizenship practices. At the same time, young adults with a migrant background may display forms of “cosmopolitan citizenship” (Jaffee et al., 2014), claiming to be “citizens of the world”, also by leveraging on their intercultural competences. Furthermore, the lived experience of citizenship connects also to perceived racism and discrimination, which may spur different outcomes: frustration can be manifested straightforwardly, or be redirected through offbeat channels (e.g. cultural expressions), or else turn into passive resignation (Oskooii, 2016) and acceptance of the ambient negative

discourse. In the latter, the individual cannot necessarily appropriate citizenship and attach his/her own meaning to it, which calls for properly explaining the underlying mechanisms of exclusion that may operate in different levels.

Therefore, we need to acknowledge that migrant descendants' citizenship practices reflect the diverse social spaces they are embedded in and extend beyond the national context (Levitt 2009). This means paying attention to factors that shape such acts and lived experiences of citizenship, including local, supranational and transnational forces. These can concern, for instance, major changes affecting national citizenship policies in a more general manner, global/local changes in political subjectivities that affect young people's political activism, changes in supranational citizenships (such as the EU's) that shape rights and duties, and so forth. There exist conceptual reflections that marry the citizenship as lived experience framework with the transnational theorisation (Kallio and Woods, 2016). Moving away from any territorial bias, we posit that the transnational social realities in which migrants' descendants are embedded needs to be included in studies of citizenship. We suggest approaching migrant descendants as also belonging... practices and lived experiences of citizenship in the transnational space deserve more attention beyond the formal and territorially-based approaches to citizenship as status. This allows further analyses on how exclusions related to (the lived experience of) citizenship are shaped by mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion that are locally, nationally and transnationally structured.

## Conclusion

This paper is a reflection on how the research on migrant descendants' citizenship could potentially benefit from critical literature in citizenship studies and in migration scholarship. To this effect, we have discussed citizenship as everyday practices (Isin, 2008; Isin and Nielsen, 2008) and as lived experience (Kallio and Mitchell, 2016; Kallio et al., 2020). On the other hand, we discussed how such research could also benefit from calls to “de-migrantize” (Dahinden, 2016) and “de-nationalize” (Anderson, 2019) migration scholarship, taking the need to critically approach widely used terms, such as “second generation”, as one example. We have then sketched three possible paths in the study of citizenship concerning migrants' descendants. The first is to move beyond treating citizenship as a formal category and approach it through the lived experience framework and through the lens of everyday practices. The second is to adopt “de-migrantizing” approach, to problematize the conflation of citizenship and ethnicity/national belonging, or the underlying residues to migrancy in conceptualisations such as “second generation”. The third one is to pay attention to situational dynamics in understanding the practices and lived experiences of citizenship and what meanings are endowed in them.

This means that the future research would need to consider the complex realities of migrants' descendants' everyday experiences of living in a diasporic, transnational and multicultural environments, yet without adopting an analytical gaze that approaches their lived experiences of citizenship solely through their “ethnic”, “diasporic” or “multicultural” backgrounds. Other categories of difference should be analysed with a comprehensive and intersectional approach able to address the multiple and intersecting identities of migrants' descendants. This is a possible path toward the de-migrantization of research on the children of immigrants, avoiding to emphasise only one characteristic – their ethnic background – overlooking other crucial variables. Such a focus can also showcase the complexity of migrant descendants'





practices and lived experiences of citizenship that evidence them being embedded in social and political spaces that are simultaneously transnational, diasporic as well as local. These strategies would also allow a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusions that are attached to citizenship beyond its formal entitlements.

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