Shades of Égalité: Educational Mobility and Ethnoracial Hierarchy Over Three Generations in France

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Abstract

The long-term incorporation of immigrant-origin populations is a crucial question in contemporary liberal democracies. While migration theories have emphasized the importance of the grandchildren of immigrants, most research has hitherto been limited to two generations. We assess assimilation through a mobility approach, comparing intergenerational educational trajectories between immigrant and native families over three generations to gauge the influence of ethnoracial origins on life chances in the long run. Our study is set in France, a major country of immigration in Europe, where a national narrative of immigrant integration and equality across ethnic origins has long prevailed. Based on the *Trajectories and Origins 2* survey (2019-2020), we show substantial catching up in educational attainment and higher social fluidity in immigrant families, for whom the grandparental educational starting point was very low. The grandchildren of Southern European immigrants converge with natives in their mobility patterns, suggesting equal opportunities. Despite a partial convergence with natives, the grandchildren of North African immigrants experience a distinct mobility regime and enduring educational disadvantage. Altogether, our results suggest the existence of an ethnoracial hierarchy, whereby Southern European families experience educational destinies broadly comparable to those of natives, while ethnoracial origins durably shape the educational trajectories of North African families.

Keywords

Immigration, Assimilation, Social mobility, Ethnoracial inequality, Third generation

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Data Note

R code used for the analyses is available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/NZAVQ.

TeO2 datasets can be accessed via the CASD Secure Data Access Center

(https://doi.org/10.34724/CASD.54.4671.V4) or downloaded in a less detailed version from the Quetelet Progedo data archive (https://doi.org/10.13144/lil-1575).

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Western liberal societies are built on the promise of equal opportunity, whereby ascribed characteristics such as ethnic and racial origins should not determine one's socioeconomic future. In practice however, social science research has long documented socioeconomic inequalities between immigrant and native populations, for instance regarding educational, residential and occupational outcomes (Kao and Thompson 2003; Zhou and Gonzales 2019; Heath, Rothon, and Kilpi 2008; Pichler 2011; Bucca and Drouhot 2024; Drouhot and Nee 2019; Zschirnt and Ruedin 2016; Polavieja et al. 2023). A crucial question is whether inequalities affecting immigrants and their children are temporary or durable – that is, whether they are bound to wane as immigrant families progressively reach parity with native families over generations, or solidify to form long-lasting ethnoracial[1] hierarchies. In that regard, the social destiny of the third generation – the grandchildren of immigrants who are two generations removed from migration – offers an adjudicative case to measure the extent of ascriptive ethnic inequality in contemporary immigration societies.

In this paper, we take up this question through the case of France, the oldest country of immigration in Europe and one where the color-blind ideology of Republicanism, rooted in a universalist tradition of expansive citizenship and public education, claims to provide equal opportunities to all French nationals regardless of ethnic origins (Noiriel 1996; Brubaker 1992). This state doctrine, combined with the country's tradition of immigrant incorporation, may lead us to expect a relatively weak ethnoracial hierarchy within the nation. To date however, the literature has shown that the second generation in France experiences disadvantage in multiple areas of life (Ichou 2013; McAvay 2018; Silberman, Alba and Fournier 2007). It remains unclear if these inequalities primarily reflect the working-class origins common to many immigrant families – and may thus be bound to wane over time and generations – or an emerging ethnic hierarchy endogenous to the French destination context. As expected among migration scholars, observing the second generation alone may not provide a sufficient basis to establish a clear diagnosis of immigrant incorporation in the long run (Tran 2018, Jiménez, Park and Pedroza 2018; Duncan and Trejo 2018; Zhao and Drouhot 2024; Gans 1979; Alba and Nee 2003:215).

To better understand the extent of an ethnoracial hierarchy in the formally color-blind French context, we study educational mobility within families across three generations. Sociologists of race and inequality (Duncan 1968; Wilson 1978; Hout 1984) and immigrant incorporation (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Li and Heath 2016; Bucca and Drouhot 2024; Ferry and Ichou 2024) have regarded intergenerational mobility trajectories as uniquely suited to understand equality of opportunity among different ethnoracial groups. Crucially, empirical trends in intergenerational social reproduction reflect the influence of social origins on life chances – e.g., how much one's educational attainment is shaped by one's parents' attainment (Blau and Duncan 1967; Haller and Portes 1973; Breen et al. 2009). Following this logic, we may consider that there is equal opportunity between minority and majority groups when ethnic minority origins do not alter the influence of social origins in shaping socioeconomic outcomes (Bucca and Drouhot 2024:491-2; Alba and Nee 2003) – in other words, when majority and minority individuals of similar parental social background end up in a similar socioeconomic position in adulthood. Conversely, enduring differences in

social destinations among majority and minority populations in spite of similar social origins signal ethnically stratified life chances and opportunities.

France, a country where a third of the population is either an immigrant, a child or grandchild of an immigrant (Lê, Simon, and Coulmont 2022), has experienced massive educational expansion (Ichou and Vallet 2013) in the 20th century, opening up new avenues for educational mobility for younger generations. The migration literature gives scholars reasons to expect that intergenerational mobility be different between immigrant and native families. On the one hand, immigrant families may exhibit higher rates of upward mobility due to immigrant optimism and the intergenerational transmission of high-status aspirations (Kao and Tienda 1995; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Abramitzky et al. 2021). On the other hand, they may face barriers to upward mobility, and even greater risks of downward mobility, due to widespread discrimination, as anticipated by theories of segmented assimilation and racialization (Portes and Zhou 1993; Telles and Ortiz 2008). Over time, mobility outcomes among immigrant families may also converge to mirror those of native-origin families, as anticipated by new assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003). Our analyses seek to evaluate the validity of these different scenarios by comparing mobility trajectories spanning three generations among native families and the two largest immigrant-origin groups in France: North African and Southern European families. In the French context, North African immigrants and their descendants face greater stigmatization due to their perceived racial and religious differences from natives, compared to those with Southern European origins (Lamont 2000; Alba and Silberman 2002; Beaman 2016). It remains to be seen, however, whether these differences translate into long-term disparities in life chances, which would suggest the existence of a rigid ethnoracial hierarchy in the French Republican context formally defined by egalitarianism.

We empirically answer this question by studying intergenerational mobility through a three-generational, within-family design allowing us to explore the long-term educational destinies of families from different regional origins. To our knowledge, this approach provides one of the most elaborate empirical tests of unequal opportunity and ethnic stratification in mobility trajectories among different origin groups to date. We rely on large-scale, nationally representative data from the Trajectories and Origins 2 survey (2019-2020) to implement a retrospective-prospective design in which focal respondents report on their parents and their children. We first study absolute mobility, assessing whether individuals from different ethnoracial origins experience downward mobility, upward mobility, or stability in educational attainment across generations. In a second step, we analyze relative mobility (social fluidity) by measuring the strength of the parents-children link in educational attainment, while accounting for the different educational composition of immigrant and native populations—particularly the fact that many first-generation immigrants came with no formal education. Finally, we investigate whether certain ethnoracial groups are more likely to follow specific intergenerational mobility patterns (upward or downward), while still accounting for their educational composition.

Our main results indicate that educational mobility patterns among immigrant families tend to converge with those of native families over three generations. However, we also document enduring penalties among the descendants of North African immigrants which are only partially explained by the lower educational level of the first generation. Substantively,

our results signal that while assimilation processes are at play, opportunities for intergenerational mobility over three generations are shaped by regional origins, suggesting the presence of a long-term ethnoracial hierarchy in life chances.

Normative and policy context: Immigration, equal opportunity and the promise of French Republicanism

An official state ideology and political doctrine, French Republicanism was borne out of the political ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and emphasizes a universalist idea of citizenship as a relationship between equal individuals and the state. As a set of values, beliefs, institutions, and political and cultural repertoires, Republicanism has profoundly shaped France's approach to migration and immigrant integration, theoretically promising equal opportunity and treatment for all citizens regardless of national origins (Brubaker 1992). Due to its refusal to acknowledge particularistic (e.g., regional, religious, ethnic) identities, France's approach to diversity and migration has long been identified as color-blind, often in comparison to the United States (Alba and Foner 2015; Bleich 2001). Up until the mid-2000s, there existed no comprehensive, publicly-funded source of data on France's ethnic minorities. This absence reflected an explicit intention to prevent public statistics from providing and legitimizing an "ethnicized" vision of the nation (Simon 2008). While the historical consistency of migration and citizenship policies in France should not be overstated (Weil 2008), it has long been commonplace in migration and citizenship studies to refer to a distinctive "French model of integration" predicated on a specific social contract, that of assimilation into a shared national ideal guaranteeing equal opportunity for all.

No other institution has been more closely associated to the universalist and egalitarian promises of Republicanism than public schools, which have historically been central to the emergence of the French nation-state (Weber 1976). During the 1880s—a period of intense industrialization and substantial immigration from neighboring European countries—the so-called Jules Ferry laws made primary schooling standardized, free and compulsory for all, and helped advance the linguistic and cultural unification of the country (Brubaker 1992). Mandatory public schooling was progressively extended to sixteen years of age in 1959. Although there exists no systematic assessment of educational attainment among the children and grandchildren of immigrants in French schools during the 20th century, historical studies suggest that earlier waves of migrants from Italy, Spain, Poland and Belgium experienced upward mobility through schooling, which was made compulsory for non-French children in 1936 (Noiriel 1996). In the 1980s, the growing attention to urban segregation, school dropout, and unemployment disproportionately affecting youth with an immigrant background led to the development of compensatory education policies targeted at specific urban areas identified as underprivileged, and thus eligible for additional funding (Van Zanten 1997). Compensatory schooling, and more broadly concerns for equal opportunity have persisted in various forms and been the objects of multiple laws in the 21st century.

During the 20th and the early 21st century, the absence of public statistics on the descendants of immigrants made it difficult to disentangle the grand narrative of a Republican

model of integration from social reality (Simon 2003). Assessing equality of opportunity between immigrants and natives—and the extent to which the national narrative of an egalitarian French melting pot holds—requires analyzing long-term trends. This, in turn, calls for studying mobility outcomes not only among immigrants' children, but also their grandchildren, a task that has hitherto not been possible due to data limitations. In broad terms, our study addresses a fundamental question: do descendants of immigrants experience similar educational opportunities as French natives, as implied by the national narrative and the Republican model of integration? Our overarching goal is to provide a rigorous empirical answer to this question, leveraging the toolkit of social stratification research to put the French Republican ideals to the test.

Analytical considerations: intergenerational mobility in immigrant families

The literature on social mobility classically distinguishes between absolute and relative mobility (Breen 2004). We build on this distinction to provide a comprehensive picture that taps into the various facets of intergenerational educational mobility. To do so, we introduce three approaches to analyzing social mobility in order to combine them in our empirical analysis: *absolute* mobility, *global relative* mobility and *local relative* mobility. We define each in turn, briefly review relevant evidence regarding immigrant families and identify the strengths and limitations inherent to each empirical approach.

Absolute mobility

In the context of educational mobility, absolute mobility measures the proportion of children whose educational attainment is *higher* than (absolute *upward* mobility), *lower* than (absolute *downward* mobility) or the *same* as (*immobility*) their parents'. Existing findings show that, as compared to children of natives, children of immigrants in Europe tend to experience moderately higher levels of upward intergenerational mobility compared to natives (Bauer and Riphahn 2007; Beauchemin, Ichou, and Simon 2022; Bucca and Drouhot 2024; Hermansen 2016; OECD 2018). This greater upward educational mobility among descendants of immigrants also appears almost universal in North America, with a steady trend of high second-generation mobility across various immigrant groups over the last 100 years (Abramitzky et al. 2021; Lowrey et al. 2021; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Park et al. 2014; Park and Myers 2010; Luthra and Waldinger 2013). Yet, studies on intergenerational mobility in immigrant families over three generations are very scarce. The few that exist mainly focus on the US, and show that third-generation patterns are more complex and group-specific than in the second generation. On the one hand, using aggregate comparisons of generations, some find that upward mobility slows down among grandchildren of Mexican immigrants (Bean, Brown, and Bachmeier 2015; Ortiz and Telles 2017). On the other hand, Lowrey et al. (2021) show that upward mobility experienced by second-generation European immigrants in the US continues in the third generation. Persistent intergenerational progress is also observed in Mexican American families when directly comparing immigrant grandparents to their US-

born second-generation children and third-generation grandchildren (Telles and Ortiz 2008:111–112).

Absolute mobility has the advantage of giving an intuitive, descriptive picture of intergenerational mobility flows, and is closest to what individuals actually experience when they compare their position to that of their parents. However, when it comes to comparing populations, absolute mobility may be misleading for two reasons. First, much of the observed absolute mobility tends to be driven by variations in the distribution of educational attainment over generations (with younger generations benefitting from educational expansion). Second, mobility differences between natives — educated in the destination country — and immigrants — often educated in their country of origin — may simply reflect lower average levels of attainment in the origin country.

Global relative mobility

By contrast, *relative mobility*, or fluidity, captures the statistical association between parents' and children's educational attainment independent of the marginal distributions of education. This approach, which adjusts for structural variations that may confound differences between cohorts or origins groups, is measured by odds ratios, log-linear models or related methods (Breen 2007). A lower degree of intergenerational persistence in socioeconomic attainment is usually considered a sign of higher equality of opportunity in a society (Torche 2015). Whether such persistence is lower in immigrant families or similar to that of natives remains debated. Some studies find lower intergenerational reproduction in immigrant-origin families (in educational and occupational outcomes in the US: Luthra and Waldinger 2013; in terms of occupations in the UK: Platt 2005), while others conclude to broadly similar levels of persistence between the two (for earnings in Norway: Hermansen 2016; for class in the UK: Li and Heath 2016). Yet others find lower intergenerational persistence only in some ethnic groups but not in others (Zuccotti 2015).

Global relative mobility does not provide insights into the direction of mobility trends. In other words, a higher level of global relative mobility can imply greater upward mobility, greater downward mobility, or both; it is therefore not necessarily a positive outcome and can also indicate obstacles in the intergenerational transmission of social position across generations among immigrant families. In particular, if immigrants' children of advantaged parents are not able to retain their advantaged socioeconomic position in the next generation, they experience a form of "perverse openness" (Blau and Duncan 1967; Hout 1984). In the UK, the lower socioeconomic achievement of Black African men denotes the enduring importance of their minority status whose effect "trumps" that of class background in the second generation's attainment (Heath and McMahon 2005; Li and Heath 2016).

Local relative mobility

To provide a more precise picture of the actual patterns of educational fluidity, and their potential differences between immigrant and native families, we propose an additional

empirical approach focused on *local relative mobility,* i.e., margins-free mobility patterns at specific points in the educational distribution. While retaining the main advantage of social fluidity (i.e., neutralizing the effect of marginal distributions of educational attainment across groups), an indicator of *local* relative mobility compares specific statistical associations between (grand)parental educational attainment and (grand)children's educational attainment, allowing us to distinguish the patterns of upward and downward mobility. Moreover, based on (log-)odds ratios from log-linear models, indicators of local relative mobility can be graphically plotted and easily compared across groups (Bucca 2020).

Because each of these three analytical approaches carries both advantages and limitations, we advocate for their combined use as the most effective means to provide a comprehensive depiction of intergenerational mobility. For each of these approaches (absolute mobility, global relative mobility and local relative mobility), we put forward theoretical expectations on how they may differ between immigrant and native families.

The mechanisms of educational mobility among immigrant families

Theoretically, we wish to avoid a priori assuming that all stratification processes involving ethnic minority groups are necessarily ethnic or racial in nature (Brubaker 2004, Wimmer 2009) and consider potential mobility mechanisms that prima facie apply to immigrant families in general. However, we note that certain mechanisms – such as ethnoracial segregation and discrimination – may inherently introduce heterogeneity between origin groups through differential exposure. Not all immigrant groups are subject to the same degree of historical stigma and discrimination. In our case, the postwar reception context in France was marked by tension and enmity towards immigrants from former colonial territories in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Meanwhile, the arrival of immigrants from Italy, Spain and Portugal was part of a longer history of Southern European immigration to France dating back to the 19th century. Throughout our discussion, we therefore compare and contrast the two regional origin groups we study – Southern Europeans and North Africans – when appropriate. We otherwise refrain from formulating systematically "ethnicized" hypotheses for intergenerational mobility in immigrant families.

Educational expansion and absolute mobility: lower educational starting point, greater upward mobility

The amount of absolute mobility mechanically depends on the average educational level in the first generation. Hence, upward mobility will be particularly high when previous generations have low levels of educational attainment while their offspring are educated in massified educational systems (Azomahou and Yitbarek 2021).

The French educational landscape has undergone two phases of expansion — in the 1960s and in the 1980s (Chauvel 1998; Vallot 2019), ultimately resulting in a massified educational system (Ichou and Vallet 2013). In any given period, the average level of

educational attainment in France has typically been substantially higher than that in immigrant-sending countries. Global data on educational attainment (Barro and Lee 2013; Goujon et al. 2016; Meschi and Scervini 2014) show that, even though there is a general trend towards higher educational attainment, advanced economies including France, have maintained a persistent advantage over developing economies, whose average educational attainment level in 2010 "is comparable only to that of advanced countries in the late 1960s" (Barro and Lee 2013:189). Central European countries, including France, also held a clear advantage in educational attainment and years of education compared to Mediterranean countries among older cohorts (born between the 1920s and up the 1950s) (Meschi and Scervini 2014).

Such long-standing regional patterns imply differences in average educational attainment in the first generation. Indeed, scholars observe immigrants' educational attainment disadvantages compared to French natives, despite their demonstrated positive educational selectivity relative to their origin countries (Ichou 2014). Beauchemin, Ichou and Simon (2022) show that whereas 20 percent of the native population has at least one parent holding a university degree, this is only the case of less than 5 percent of children with two immigrant parents, whether from Southern Europe or North Africa, both origin groups showing similarly low educational background. France thus appears as a country with relatively low educated immigrants, contrary to countries characterized by a highly selective, skilled migration such as Canada (Aydemir, Chen, and Corak 2013).

Despite such low starting points in the first generation, the children and grandchildren of immigrants are enrolled in the French educational system and benefit from educational expansion. They are therefore expected — almost mechanically — to reach much higher educational levels than their (grand-)parents. By contrast, such upward mobility is likely to be lower in native families in which the grandparental and parental generations had already been educated in the French educational system. With G1, G2, and G3 respectively standing for the grandparents', parents', and grandchildren's generations, we put forward the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1 (absolute mobility hypothesis): We expect higher absolute upward mobility between G1×G2 and G1×G3 among immigrant families than among native families.*

Immigrant aspirations: aiming high, reaching high?

Status attainment theory identifies educational aspirations as an important mediator between socioeconomic background and eventual attainment (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969; Haller and Portes 1973). Despite their lower socioeconomic positions, immigrants and their children tend to hold higher educational aspirations compared to natives (Bohon, Johnson, and Gorman 2006; Goyette and Xie 1999), including in France (Cebolla-Boado 2007; Ichou and Oberti 2014). This difference is concentrated among families with a low educational background: among highly educated families, aspirations are consistently high for both immigrants and natives—a pattern attributed to a ceiling effect (Ichou & Oberti 2014).

This "immigrant optimism" (Kao and Tienda 1995) likely stems, in part, from immigrants' pre-migration status and positive educational selectivity (Ichou 2024). This positive educational selectivity may not manifest itself fully through higher aspirations alone. Immigrant optimism frequently coexists with reinforcing mechanisms linked to positive selection—trust in educational institutions, frequent conversations about education, a moral duty to succeed, and community support—that make aspirations more effective (Fuligni 1997; Kao 2004; Smith 2005; Fernández-Kelly 2008; Schnell et al. 2015).

Despite lower academic performance, immigrants' children's educational aspirations conditional on performance are also higher than those of natives (Jackson, Jonsson, and Rudolphi 2012; Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011). Some studies cast doubt on the positive effects of these aspirations on actual educational attainment as they may act as an "optimism trap" and divert children of immigrants from beneficial vocational alternatives leading to smooth school-to-work transitions (Tjaden and Hunkler 2017). Yet, others insist that these higher educational aspirations do improve academic enrollment and completion among immigrants' descendants (Dollmann and Weißmann 2020; Ferrara 2023). For instance, Lee and Zhou (2014; 2015) show that the high achievement of the offspring of Asian immigrants with a low socioeconomic position in the US results from cultural "success frames" enhanced by socioeconomically successful peers in the community (see also Fishman 2020).

Few studies have investigated whether higher aspirations also maintain in subsequent generations, and in particular for immigrants' grandchildren. In the US, Ortiz and Telles (2017) suggest that the optimism about greater economic opportunities in the country of arrival relative to the country of origin is lost among the Mexican-origin third generation, leading to third-generation stagnation in educational attainment (see also Telles and Ortiz 2008). In France, Vallot (2016) documents that, adjusting for social and academic characteristics, third-generation students (mostly from European descent) are more hesitant than second-generation and native students to pursue higher education. Second-generation disappointment among those who pursued higher education but did not get desirable labor-market outcomes may trigger subsequent distrust in the educational system.

Overall, higher aspirations in immigrant families imply that we should expect more upward mobility from children coming from low-educated backgrounds, when compared to natives. This is true among both Southern European and North African families. In highly educated families, however, we do not anticipate differences in mobility patterns based on migration status, as the ceiling effect (Ichou and Oberti 2014) ensures consistently high aspirations across all groups. Unlike H1, which concerns absolute mobility, this expectation focuses on relative mobility—that is, mobility patterns net of differences in the educational structure across origin groups.

> *Hypothesis 2 (local relative upward mobility hypothesis): among children from a low educational background, we expect higher relative upward mobility in immigrant compared to native families.*

Structural barriers and perverse openness in immigrant families

While certain mechanisms promote upward mobility for immigrants' descendants, other mechanisms make it harder to maintain the positions achieved by themselves or their parents, leading to a phenomenon of "perverse openness" (Blau and Duncan 1967; Hout 1984). For example, research in the UK indicates that, in several groups, the sons of immigrants struggle to maintain their class positions over generations (Zuccotti 2015; Li and Heath 2016). More generally, recent comparative research in Europe shows that certain populations in some destination countries—such as those of North African and Middle Eastern origin in Germany and of European origins in Belgium and Sweden—experience worse mobility outcomes than natives of comparable social origins (Bucca and Drouhot 2024), and that the second generation as a whole is at a higher risk of unemployment (Kanitsar 2025).

Such a pattern of "perverse openness" can be the consequence of structural barriers in the educational system, the labor market and other institutions (Blau and Duncan 1967). A number of studies of hiring in labor markets identify widespread discrimination against non-White groups in France, and more generally in Europe and North America (for a systematic review, see Quillian and Midtbøen 2021). Based on a meta-analysis, Quillian et al. (2019) find discrimination in hiring against every non-White group in virtually all of the nine countries in Europe and North America under study—France showing the largest amount of discrimination.

Compared to labor markets, there exists less evidence of direct discriminatory practices within the French educational system. Nevertheless, there is some qualitative evidence pointing to the existence of structural barriers and differential treatment at the expense of immigrants' descendants, especially those from some ethnic minorities (Dhume et al. 2011; see Ichou and Van Zanten 2019, for a systematic review of the role of race and ethnicity in French schools).

More generally, there exists strong evidence of socioeconomic and ethnic segregation in the French educational system. These segregating dynamics between and within schools lead children of immigrants — especially those from racialized minorities — to be overrepresented in less favorable school contexts, ultimately hindering their educational attainment (Felouzis 2005; Felouzis, Liot, and Perroton 2005; Oberti 2007; Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, and Charmillot 2015). School segregation is compounded by residential segregation, whereby descendants of immigrants, especially from non-European origins, are concentrated in certain marginalized neighborhoods (McAvay 2018).

We expect that the existence of structural barriers against immigrants' descendants, may create a situation of "perverse openness" in which the intergenerational reproduction of educational advantage is hindered in these families. Perverse openness may occur especially among North African families due to intensive racialization and assorted processes of discrimination and segregation. Meanwhile, Southern European-origin families may be racialized as "honorary Whites" and face constrained mobility pathways, as in the case of the Portuguese consistently experiencing educational segregation in low prestige tracks leading to semiskilled jobs in specific sectors like construction (Delon 2019, Brinbaum and Kieffer 2009). Across origin groups, such structural barriers may have less impact on descendants of

immigrants from low-educated families, since they are already at the bottom of the educational distribution (floor effect): they have less to lose than more educated families.

Hypothesis 3 (local relative downward mobility hypothesis): among children from a high educational background, we expect higher relative downward mobility in immigrant families than in native families.

Compounded mechanisms leading to lower educational reproduction in immigrant families

The two mechanisms discussed above — higher aspirations and structural barriers — are not mutually exclusive. We expect them to work together, resulting in a reduced overall impact of parental background on children's educational fate in immigrant families. This is because, due to floor and ceiling effects, the gap in educational attainment based on parental education is expected to be narrower in immigrant families compared to native families. Overall, if those coming from the bottom of the educational distribution are more likely to move up, and those coming from the top to move down, we should observe higher global fluidity within immigrant families.

Hypothesis 4 (global relative mobility hypothesis): we expect higher levels of social fluidity in immigrant families than in native families.

The effect of ancestry mixedness on convergence

The ancestry of immigrants' descendants is often shaped by intermarriage, which can influence their social mobility. In particular, unions between immigrants and natives may play a role in shaping the mobility prospects of their offspring. Prior research examining the relationship between intermarriage and socioeconomic outcomes has predominantly focused on two generations. These studies consistently show that the socioeconomic outcomes of children from mixed couples tend to fall between those of natives and immigrants (Duncan & Trejo 2011a; Kalmijn 2015; Azzolini et al. 2017; Alba et al. 2018; Zorlu & Van Gent 2024). Research investigating intergenerational transmission across three generations has primarily addressed the transmission of ethnic minority identity (Duncan & Trejo 2011a; Saarela et al. 2025). These studies find a positive association between the number of ethnic minority grandparents and the likelihood of grandchildren identifying with a minority identity. Collectively, these findings suggest that immigrant-specific factors influence outcomes in mixed-origin families, though less strongly than in mono-ethnic immigrant families. We propose our ancestry mixedness hypothesis building on this rationale.

Hypothesis 5 (the ancestry mixedness hypothesis): we expect educational mobility to be more similar to natives among descendants with a single immigrant grandparent compared to those with two or more immigrant grandparents.

The intergenerational convergence of social reproduction processes

Classical and neo-classical assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964) predicts a convergence in outcomes with natives across generations. While migration status initially affects one's educational attainment and socioeconomic position, we can expect migration and migration-specific mechanisms to fade in subsequent generations so that the socioeconomic position of native- and immigrant-origin populations become increasingly similar (Tran and Valdez 2017). Despite the dearth of data on the third generation, a few studies shed light on such socioeconomic assimilation at the third generation. In a seminal paper in the US, Neidert & Farley (1985) find that ethnic background fades away over generations and is not a strong determinant in predicting occupational positions for most groups (see also Borjas 1994; Smith 2003). More recently, Lowrey et al. (2021) have shown that the grandchildren of European immigrants outperform descendants of native-born Whites in terms of educational attainment. Based on register data in the Netherlands, Zorlu and Van Gent (2024) note that for most origin groups, persisting gaps by the third generation are entirely explained by unfavorable socioeconomic backgrounds. More specifically on educational attainment, Lessard-Phillips and Li (2017) document a "convergence toward the mean" for third and fourth generation immigrants in the UK. To a certain degree, Vallot's (2016) observation that immigrants' grandchildren have lower educational aspirations than immigrants' children in France may well reflect a form of generational convergence towards the native population in social mobility processes.

Indeed, beyond a similarity in outcomes, assimilation theory also predicts a convergence in *transmissions* across generations. As the "significance of ethnic origins" declines (Alba and Nee 2003), the strength of social (class) reproduction increases, ultimately leading class mobility patterns among immigrant and native families to become similar. For instance, Li and Heath (2016) show that social fluidity among ethnic minorities in the UK is largely similar to that of White British natives. Bucca and Drouhot (2024) also show that class reproduction among descendants of immigrants is highly comparable to that of natives, and constitutes the master trend across seven Western European countries. In conjunction with findings of a third-generation convergence in attainment discussed above, the increasing similarity of the status transmission processes between immigrants and native families suggests that educational attainment among the third generation should be similar to that of natives of comparable educational origins.

We thus propose:

Hypothesis 6a (the intergenerational convergence hypothesis): we expect educational mobility between grandparents (G1) and parents (G2) in immigrant families to be different from those of native families. However, this difference should fade away between parents (G2) and grandchildren (G3). This should apply both to absolute and relative mobility.

However, it is likely that the significance of ethnic origins does not decline for all ethnoracial groups in the same way. Following basic tenets of segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993), different origin groups may face different "modes of incorporation" primarily defined by a combination of class position, ethnoracial visibility, and societal

reception (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). While both Southern European and North African migration to France have primarily consisted of unskilled workers in the postwar era, socioeconomic opportunities among Southern European immigrants and their descendants may have been positively shaped by their relative ethnocultural similarity to native French. Conversely, North African populations' integration may have been hindered by their phenotypical visibility and perceived religious difference from the French population (Alba and Silberman 2002; Beaman 2016; Drouhot 2021).

The historical reception of North Africans in France has been marked by the tense postcolonial context of the 1950s and 1960s. In that regard, the Algerian case is illustrative, both because Algerians have long been the largest group of North African migrants in France and because of the Algerian war. In 1962, Algeria gained its independence following an eight-year war with France which unfolded along with continuous migration of Algerians to French cities. Following recent research on the long-term consequences of geopolitical events on immigration attitudes (Hiers, Soehl and Wimmer 2017, Wimmer et al. 2024), we can expect the Algerian war to have created a durably hostile context of reception towards Algerians in France (Bourdieu and Sayad 2018). More broadly, the postcolonial context may have a lasting negative impact on the descendants of North African immigrants.

More recently, while immigration from both Southern Europe and North Africa has persisted, continued migration – immigrant "replenishment" (Jiménez 2008) – from North Africa has been more substantial (INSEE 2023: 77). While Southern Europe's living standards and education converged with those of France through EU integration, the continued presence of relatively disadvantaged North African migrants – and their overrepresentation in certain marginalized neighborhoods (McAvay 2018) – could reinforce the salience of ethnoracial boundaries around later-generation descendants in this group.

Altogether, we may thus expect distinct modes of incorporation for Southern Europeans and North Africans respectively, with the former experiencing assimilation with natives across generations and the other a form of durable disadvantage due to a hostile societal reception crystallizing into "bright boundaries" in the long run (Alba 2005). This segmentation is already evident in existing studies on discrimination in higher education and the labor market among the first and second generations in France. In universities, recent research finds that candidates bearing a North African name face discrimination in Master's degrees admissions (Chareyron, Erb, and L'Horty 2023). In the labor market, Silberman, Alba and Fournier (2007) document a pattern of segmented assimilation in which individuals of Muslim-majority origin groups and from former French colonies encounter systemic disadvantages (see also Meurs 2018). Such ethnic penalties appear to be partly rooted in religious discrimination against Muslim groups (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010; 2016; Drouhot and Nee 2019). In light of existing theories and evidence, we propose:

> *Hypothesis 6b (segmented assimilation): we expect the educational mobility patterns in immigrant families to converge with those in native families more strongly over generations for Southern European than for North African families. This should apply both to absolute and relative mobility.*

Table 1 summarizes our hypotheses.

Table 1 – Summary of hypotheses

Absolute mobility	**Local relative mobility**	**Global relative mobility**
H1: higher absolute upward mobility among immigrant families	H2: low parental education → higher upward mobility in immigrant families H3: high parental education → higher downward mobility in immigrant families	H4: higher social fluidity in immigrant families
H5: families with two or more immigrants at G1 will be more different from natives		
H6a: mobility differences between immigrant and native families will decrease from G1×G2 to G2×G3		
H6b: mobility differences will decrease more for Southern European than for North African families		

Data & methods

The TeO2 survey to examine educational attainment across three generations

We use the *Trajectories and Origins 2* (TeO2) survey collected in 2019-2020 in mainland France (Beauchemin, Ichou, and Simon 2023). The survey design for TeO2 broadly follows that of the first *Trajectories and Origins* survey gathered in 2008-2009 by the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE, the French census bureau) (Beauchemin, Hamel and Simon 2018). In an evolving data infrastructure characterized by increasing plenitude in Western Europe (Drouhot 2024:1996-8), the TeO surveys have arguably constituted some of the best instruments to study assimilation in the adult population to date thanks to their sample size, breadth and face-to-face implementation. In TeO2, 27,181 individuals aged 18-59 were selected through a stratified probability (random) sample drawn from the 2018 Annual Population Census Survey (*Enquête annuelle de recensement)*, with sampling ratios adjusted to over-represent specific origin groups (Beauchemin et al. 2023:15–20). The overall response rate for TeO2 was 67%, which is comparably high for contemporary research (Couper 2017).

We use information provided by the main respondents on their own educational attainment. Crucially, and unique to TeO2, respondents also report on the educational attainment of their parents and that of each of their children, which allows us to study educational mobility within families. While historical studies have been able to track social mobility across generations by linking individuals within the same family using de-anonymized Census data (Lowrey, Van Hook, Bachmeier, Foster 2021; Abramitzky et al. 2021, Ward 2020), studies of immigrant social mobility in the contemporary period have had to rely on "synthetic generation" comparisons, where unrelated first-, second- and occasionally third-generation individuals are compared (e.g., Farley and Alba 2002; Smith 2003; Park and Myers 2010; Park, Myers, and Jiménez 2014; Duncan and Trejo 2015; Park, Nawyn, and Benetsky 2015; Jiménez, Park, and Pedroza 2018; Tran 2018). Due to data

constraints, these studies have routinely used differences between unrelated populations as proxies for the within-family generational changes that are of core interests to theories of immigrant incorporation. In practice however, differences in attainment across synthetic generations may be confounded with either age, period, cohort, and life course differences depending on the exact method used (Myers and Park 2010:373-4), and result in biased estimates of intergenerational mobility across variants of the synthetic generation approach (Myers and Park 2010:377). Our combined *retrospective* and *prospective* design avoids these issues by allowing for a comparison of immigrants, and their "true" second- and third-generation descendants in terms of educational attainment (Figure 1).

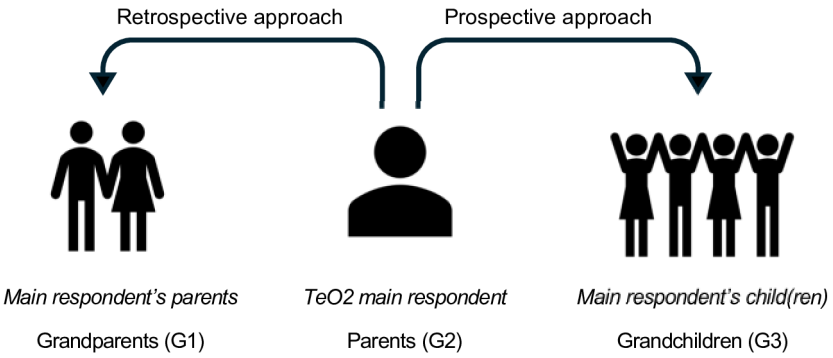
Our units of analysis are thus the *children of the main respondents*, who represent the grandchildren's generation. We identify them as G3. The main respondents of the survey are labeled G2: the parental generation. The respondents' parents are designated as G1: they are the grandparents' generation. Relying on the analytical sample of the children of the main respondents allows us to increase the number of third-generation individuals and capture a more diverse range of ethnic origins. Indeed, we cannot rely on the main respondents' sample here as it contains far fewer third-generation individuals, who are predominantly of European descent. This limitation would prevent us from testing hypotheses by regional origins as outlined above. Our analyses are thus representative of the adult children of adults aged 18-59 living in mainland France in 2019-2020.

Educational information reported by the main respondents about their parents may not be perfectly accurate, as proxy-reporting of education attainment can introduce inaccuracies (Engzell and Jonsson, 2015). However, most studies reporting discrepancies in a retrospective approach—where children report their parents' socioeconomic status—focus on children under the age of 16. In contrast, our TeO2 respondents are all adults (18–59), as is standard in social mobility studies, which should reduce any existing bias in proxy-reports. In general, reporting educational origins appears to be relatively unproblematic and reliable: for instance, Hout and Hastings (2016) show that, across General Social Survey waves, respondents report their educational background with the highest reliability among all surveyed socioeconomic background indicators. In the TeO2 survey, respondents' reports of parental education have been shown to be largely reliable (Lavest et al. 2024). Information reported by the main respondents about their children's education (*prospective* approach) can be considered as even more reliable as parents are generally directly involved in their children's schooling.

Nevertheless, this *prospective* approach involves one potential source of bias shared by all studies relying on such a prospective design (Song and Mare 2015)[2]. The TeO2 survey is restricted to respondents aged 18-59 and our analysis focuses on their adult children. Children of respondents born when their parents were in their late 30s or older are less likely to be included in our analytical sample because they either would be too young for inclusion in our analysis or their parents would be too old to be surveyed. Supplementary analyses in Appendix A show that respondents who have adult children and are less than 59 years old tend to have lower education than the full TeO2 sample. This suggests that our analytical sample is negatively selected in terms of parental social origins. However, we show in Appendix A that such a pattern of negative selection is not dependent on geographical origins, and that the mobility patterns we observe for G1×G2 hold regardless of whether G2 is

conditioned on having adult children. Therefore, it does not threaten our conclusions which are focused on differences across geographical origins.

Figure 1 – Construction of the analytical sample based on TeO2 data



In our main results, G3 individuals are either grandchildren of at least one immigrant grandparent (i.e., at generation G1) based on the main respondents' G2 lineage (*group of interest*) or grandchildren of four native grandparents based on the main respondents' and their partners' lineage (*comparison group*). Our identification strategy for the third generation, which constitutes our *group of interest*, relies on the birth country of survey respondents' parents (i.e., the grandparents of G3 individuals)[3]. This approach helps us avoid the issue of ethnic attrition, which affects many studies tracking intergenerational progress among populations of immigrant descent in the US (Duncan and Trejo 2011; Smith and Brown 2019; Tran 2018). Indeed, ethnic identification is endogenous to the process of assimilation: descendants of immigrants who experience upward social mobility or are children of mixed marriages may cease to identify with their ethnic origins (Alba and Islam 2009). Ethnic attrition can therefore bias inferences about assimilation when analyses rely solely on individuals who "opt in" through ethnic self-identification. While systematic comparisons of ethnic self-identification and parental birth country data in the UK found this concern to be negligible (Parameshwaran and Engzell 2015), the French case presents a different challenge. When asked about their self-identification in an open-ended survey question, descendants of immigrants in France tend to identify primarily as "French," reflecting a strong societal expectation of assimilation (Simon and Tiberj 2018). For this reason, using information on grandparents' country of birth—which is factual and less susceptible to distortion by assimilation processes—is a more reliable approach.

In our *group of interest*, we include immigrants' grandchildren based on only one parental lineage (the one of the TeO2 survey respondent), in order to be consistent with educational attainment being known over three generations only for this lineage. However, in order to make sure our *comparison group* does not include immigrants' children or grandchildren, we exclude those with an immigrant grandparent in either of the two lineages (the main respondent's and their partner's). In Appendix A, we detail the construction of our analytical sample. In the last section of our main results, we use both lineages among our *group of interest* to account for the number of immigrant grandparents to test whether the ancestry mixedness affects our results.

Given that immigrants arriving at a young age share similar characteristics to immigrants' children (Rumbaut 2004) (e.g., they are educated in the French system), we expand our sample of interest by including the children of immigrant main respondents who arrived before three years old in mainland France (see Appendix D for alternative operationalizations which do not affect our results).

Since we are interested in the transmission of educational attainment over three generations, we restrict our sample to G3 individuals aged 20 or older. In total, our sample is composed of 4,307 children of the main respondents, of which 1,577 are grandchildren of natives (G4+) and 2,730 grandchildren of immigrants (i.e., children of main respondents who are themselves the child of at least one immigrant parent). The latter group consists of 412 children of immigrants who arrived before 3 years old, 1,087 children of main respondents who have two immigrant parents and 1,231 children of main respondents who have one immigrant parent.

Among G3 individuals with an immigrant descent, we distinguish according to geographic origin those with a grandparent hailing from North Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco), Southern Europe (Portugal, Italy, Spain) or other regions. In Table 2, we see that the vast majority of the G3 sample originates either from Southern Europe or North Africa. In more detail, among North African descendants, the majority come from Algeria (N=594). Southern European descendants are more evenly spread between Italy (N=423), Portugal (N=383) and Spain (N=343). Among descendants from other origins, Germany (N=135), Poland (N=100) and Turkey (N=92) are the three most represented countries.

Table 2 – Description of the studied sample (G3 grandchildren)

Characteristic	**North Africa N = 813**	**Southern Europe N = 1149**	**Other N = 768**	**G4+ native N = 1577**
Age	25.6 (4.5)	26.8 (5.1)	26.6 (5.1)	27.2 (5.0)
Sex				
Male	46% (377)	52% (603)	50% (381)	49% (791)
Female	54% (436)	48% (546)	50% (387)	51% (784)
Ancestry				
1 immigrant grandparent	24% (171)	34% (369)	68% (459)	-
>1 immigrant grandparents	76% (642)	66% (780)	32% (309)	-

Note: Continuous variables are summarized with the means and the standard deviations. Categorical variables are summarized with weighted percentages and the unweighted number of observations. Table A2 in Appendix A details the number of immigrant grandparents by origin.

Because they are all children of main respondents who cannot be older than 59 by design of the survey, the G3 individuals that we observe are typically young. Their average age in our sample is 27.1. It is slightly lower among North African descendants, at 25.6. The sex composition of the sample is evenly distributed between males and females. North African and Southern European descendants more frequently have more than one immigrant grandparent than descendants from other origins.

We study the transmission of social position by focusing on educational attainment categorized as "No degree", "Lower degree" (only primary school, junior high school, or a short vocational degree), "Upper secondary degree" (high school degree) and "Tertiary

education". The latter category concerns individuals who either have obtained a tertiary degree (88% of the G3) or have obtained an upper secondary degree and are still enrolled in tertiary education (12%) – most of whom will eventually obtain a tertiary degree. This categorization captures a relevant threshold of stratification in the French context. Numerous studies show that access to tertiary education—whether or not a long degree is ultimately completed—strongly predicts long-term labor-market advantages and social positioning, both in the general population and among immigrants' descendants (INSEE 2025; Dabbaghian and Péron 2021; OECD 2024). Degrees are grouped following the same categorization among G3 individuals, their parents (G2) and their grandparents (G1).[4] For G2, we take the highest educational level among the two parents (main respondent and the second parent), and for G1 the highest level between two grandparents (the focal respondents' parents). This follows the standard approach in social mobility literature ("dominance approach"), which implies that in mixed couples, the educational level of the native parent or grandparent can be used rather than that of the immigrant. This appears as the most appropriate choice since both parents play a role in determining their children's outcomes (Ballarino, Meraviglia, and Panichella, 2021). In Appendix G, we discuss alternative strategies for measuring educational origins and how they affect our empirical results, showing that the results remain broadly similar. It is also important to note that our comparison of educational attainment across three generations relies exclusively on the main respondents' family branch for G1, i.e., on two out of four grandparents.[5] Indeed, we have no information on the educational attainment of the second parent's parents (the two grandparents who are not the main respondents' parents).

Empirical strategy

We start our empirical analyses by displaying Sankey plots representing the flows between educational origins and destinations between grandparents (G1) and parents (G2), and between parents (G2) and grandchildren (G3) (Laurison, Dow, and Chernoff 2020). We then calculate absolute mobility rates to describe the flows of upward and downward mobility, as well as immobility between G1, G2 and G3 in each group (North African families, Southern European families and G4+). We use two-sample z-tests to assess the statistical significance of differences in mobility rates across groups. This step allows us to test H1 about absolute mobility.

Second, we use a series of log-linear and log-multiplicative models to analyze intergenerational educational mobility independent from marginal distributions reflecting educational distributions and opportunities across cohorts (i.e., to analyze fluidity or relative mobility). We assess whether relative mobility between G1×G2 and G2×G3 in immigrant families is different from relative mobility flows in native families. In particular, we use uniform difference models (Unidiff, Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Xie, 1992) to assess differences in the intensity of the association between intergenerational pairs across native and immigrant families from North Africa and Southern Europe. Since we look at overall differences in relative mobility, we term this analysis "global" relative mobility. Its results provide a test for hypothesis H4.

Each model is nested in the next. We use as the baseline the conditional independence model which assumes the absence of any association between educational levels of G1, G2 and G3 – it merely reproduces the educational structure at each generation. Let us note m_{ijkl} the expected count of observations for which G1 has level i, G2 level j and G3 level k among families of immigrant or native origin l. The conditional independence model is then:

M0: $\log m_{ijkl} = \lambda + \lambda_i^{G1} + \lambda_j^{G2} + \lambda_k^{G3} + \lambda_l^{O} + \lambda_{il}^{G1O} + \lambda_{jl}^{G2O} + \lambda_{kl}^{G3O}$

We then introduce terms that allow for an association between educational levels of intergenerational pairs G1×G2 and G2×G3, assuming the association is the same independent of the migration status:

M1: $\log m_{ijkl} = \lambda + \lambda_i^{G1} + \lambda_j^{G2} + \lambda_k^{G3} + \lambda_l^{O} + \lambda_{il}^{G1O} + \lambda_{jl}^{G2O} + \lambda_{kl}^{G3O} + \lambda_{ij}^{G1G2} + \lambda_{jk}^{G2G3}$

We then allow the strength of these associations to vary according to the migrant origin, following a double Unidiff specification:

M2: $\log m_{ijkl} = \lambda + \lambda_i^{G1} + \lambda_j^{G2} + \lambda_k^{G3} + \lambda_l^{O} + \lambda_{il}^{G1O} + \lambda_{jl}^{G2O} + \lambda_{kl}^{G3O} + \phi_l^{O} \psi_{ij}^{G1G2} + \phi'^{O}_{l} \psi_{jk}^{G2G3}$

In Appendix I, we extend these models to explore whether there is an association between grandparents' and grandchildren's education (G1×G3), once adjusting for the associations between proximate intergenerational pairs, and we test whether this G1×G3 association varies between immigrant and native families.

In order to analyze whether some groups are more likely to experience downward or upward mobility than others, net of marginal distributions (local relative mobility), we fit log-linear models saturating the G1×G2 and G2×G3 associations:

M3: $\log m_{ijkl} = \lambda + \lambda_i^{G1} + \lambda_j^{G2} + \lambda_k^{G3} + \lambda_l^{O} + \lambda_{il}^{G1O} + \lambda_{jl}^{G2O} + \lambda_{kl}^{G3O} + \lambda_{ijl}^{G1G2O} + \lambda_{jkl}^{G2G3O}$

This model estimates log-odds measuring, for each pair of subsequent generations and each geographic origin, the chances of children of parents with a given educational level versus other levels to attain a given level versus other levels. We take the G4+ group as the reference by setting $\lambda_{jkl}^{G2G3O} = \lambda_{jkl}^{G2G3O} = 0$ for this origin (dummy coding), so that λ_{ijl}^{G1G2O} and λ_{jkl}^{G2G3O} coefficients reflect the differences between the log-odds among the G4+ and those among each immigrant group. To ease the interpretation of the differences in local associations, we express their magnitude as ratios of generalized odds ratios (Kaufman and Schervish 1987), defined as $\exp\left(\lambda_{ijl}^{G1G2O}\right)^{\frac{IJ}{(I-1)(J-1)}}$ and $\exp\left(\lambda_{jkl}^{G2G3O}\right)^{\frac{JK}{(J-1)(K-1)}}$, with I, J and K the number of educational levels at generations G1, G2 and G3 respectively. A ratio above (respectively, below) 1 indicates that, net of margins, the corresponding parent-child combination is more (less) likely among a given immigrant group than among G4+. We use heatmaps as suggested by Bucca (2020) to plot these differences in patterns of association, and provide the generalized odds ratios for all groups in Appendix C. We use permutation tests swapping ethnic origins at random to assess the statistical significance of these differences. Together, these results speak to patterns of local relative mobility, and provide tests for H2 and H3.

Hypothesis 5 (ancestry mixedness) is evaluated in the last subsection based on a comparison of results for families with a single immigrant G1 and for those with two or more immigrant G1. Hypotheses 6a (intergenerational convergence) and 6b (segmented assimilation) are evaluated throughout the presentation of results. All analyses are weighted to take into account survey design and nonresponse. Log-linear and log-multiplicative models are fitted

using the R package gnm (Turner and Firth 2023), scaling weighted counts so that their sum equals the actual sample size for each immigrant group (pseudo maximum likelihood; Skinner & Vallet, 2010). To adjust our statistical tests for the clustering of children within families, we report confidence intervals around the layer effect coefficients of the Unidiff models based on percentile bootstrap, and p-values based on permutation tests (see Appendix B). In the following, we report our findings for male and female G3 individuals together. Analyses stratified by gender can be found in Appendix F, and are briefly discussed at the end of our results section.

R code used for the analyses is available at https://osf.io/nzavq/?view_only=9486fb0ad3224672a7cc4a2853b72f6c. TeO2 datasets can be accessed via the CASD Secure Data Access Center (https://doi.org/10.34724/CASD.54.4671.V4) or downloaded in a less detailed version from the Quetelet Progedo data archive (https://doi.org/10.13144/lil-1575).

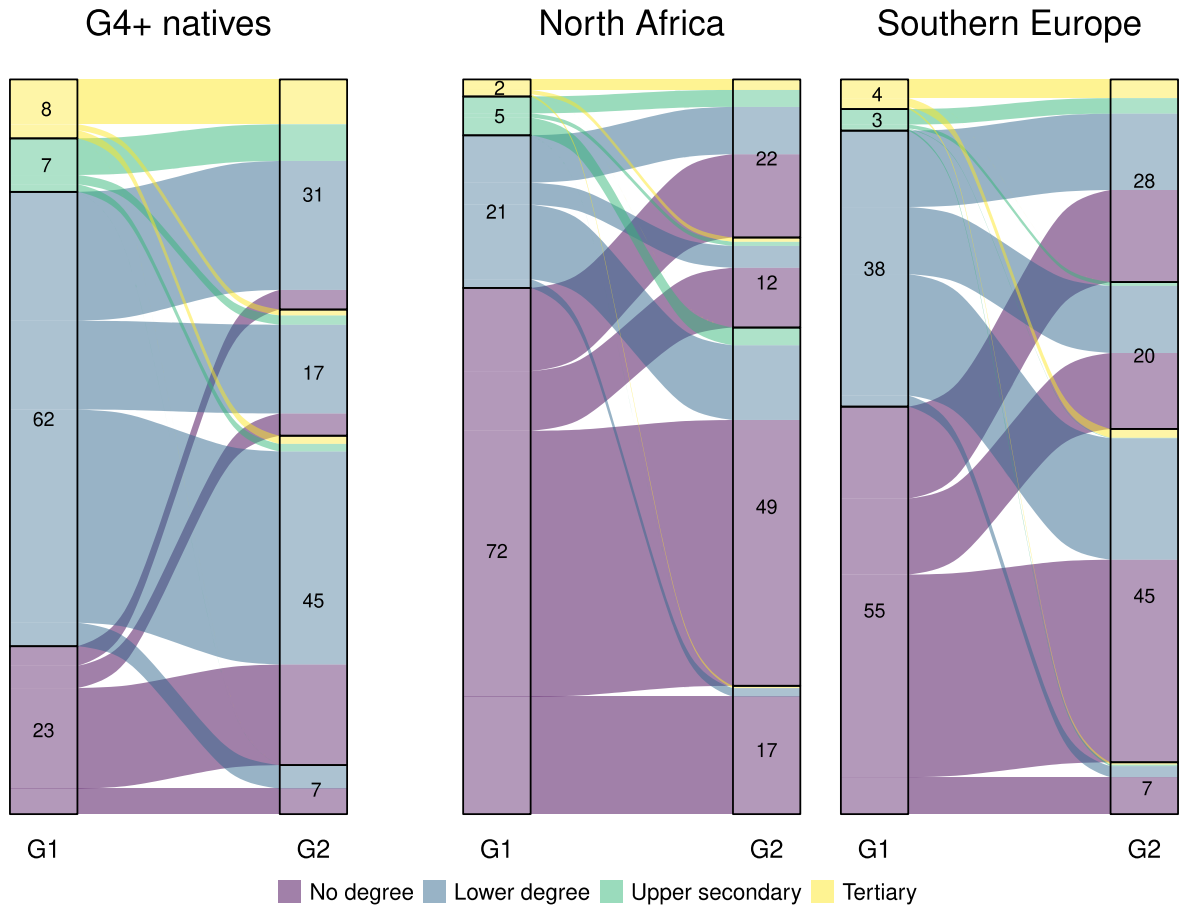
Results

Visualizing intergenerational mobility flows

Figures 2 and 3 provide a descriptive picture of educational origins and destinations across groups and generations (from G1 to G2 in Figure 2, and from G2 to G3 in Figure 3). First, as expected, the educational distribution among grandparents (G1) is very different across groups (Figure 2). North African and Southern European grandparents are much more likely to have little education: 72 percent of North African grandparents and 55 percent of Southern European grandparents have no degree, which is the case of only 23 percent of native grandparents. Having attended tertiary education was rare in the grandparents' generation in all groups, but much rarer in immigrant families (2 and 4 percent among North African and Southern European families, respectively) than in native families (8 percent). Overall, North African grandparents have on average lower educational attainment than Southern European grandparents, both groups lagging far behind their native counterparts.

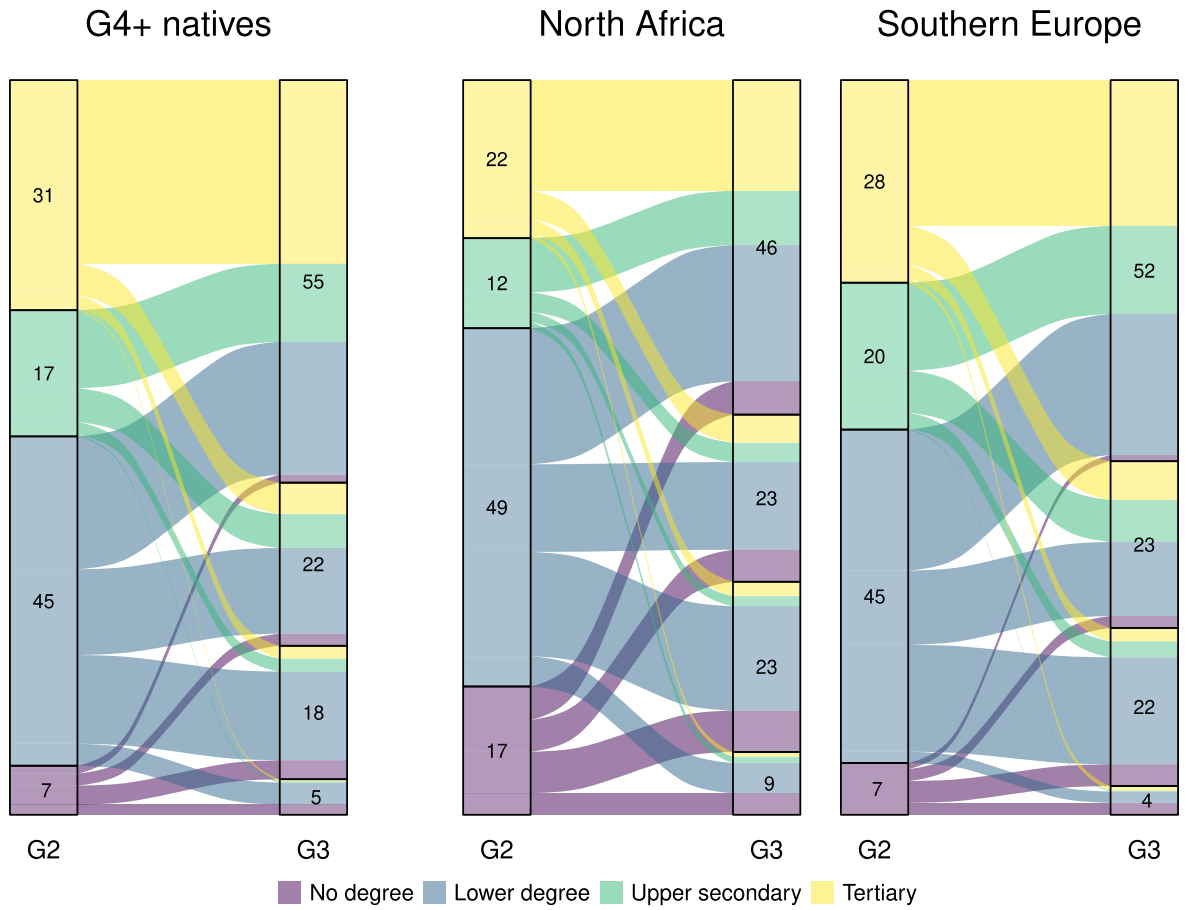
While large flows of upward mobility between grandparents (G1) and parents (G2) are observed for all groups, they are even more marked for immigrants' children due to their lower starting point (Figure 2). As a result, over the course of just one generation, Southern European G2 are almost as well educated as native G2. By contrast, North African G2 are still at a disadvantage, both at the top of the distribution (22 percent attended tertiary education vs. 31 percent of natives) and at the bottom (17 percent have no degree vs. 7 percent in both native and Southern European families).

Figure 2 – Sankey plots of the flows of educational mobility between grandparents and parents (G1×G2) (percent)



The Sankey plots depicting mobility flows between parents and grandchildren (from G2 to G3, Figure 3) also show slightly higher upward mobility flows among immigrants' descendants compared to natives. Therefore, the educational attainment differences vis-à-vis natives are further reduced among G3, especially for Southern Europeans whose educational attainment distribution is very similar to that of natives' grandchildren. Despite their continued upward mobility, North African G3 still experience some educational disadvantage at both ends of the distribution: 46 percent of them have attended tertiary education (vs. 55 percent among native G3) and 9 percent have no degree (vs. 5 percent among native G3).

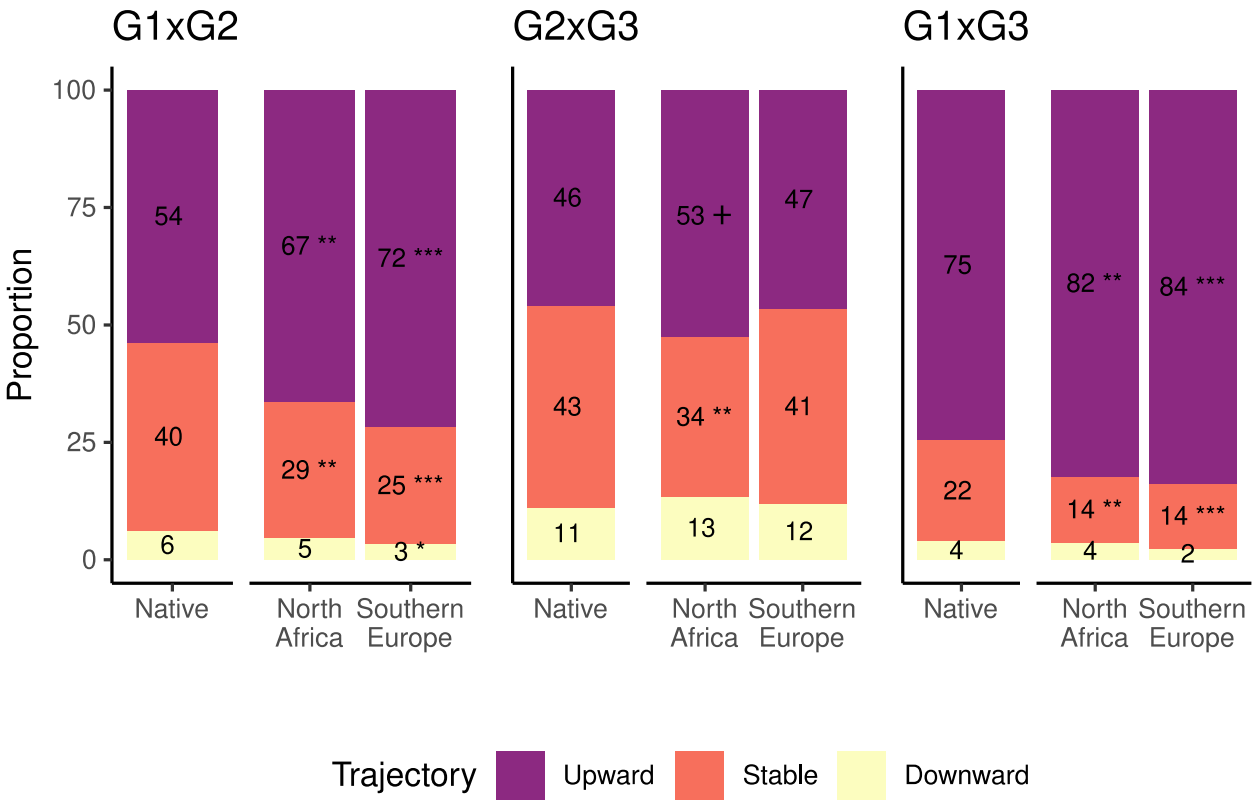
Figure 3 - Sankey plots of the flows of educational mobility between parents and grandchildren (G2×G3) (percent)



Upward, downward and stable intergenerational trajectories

Figure 4 synthesizes these detailed intergenerational flows into upward mobility, downward mobility and immobility. Between the grandparents and parents (G1×G2), we observe more frequent upward mobility for North African and Southern European families (G1×G2, Figure 5): 54 percent of intergenerational trajectories go upward among native families whereas, among North African and Southern European families, this proportion is significantly higher at 67 and 72 percent, respectively. The proportion of intergenerational stability is also significantly smaller in these two groups than among native families. Transitions between parents and grandchildren (G2×G3) are more similar across groups. However, upward mobility flows are still significantly higher and stability lower in North African families than in native families. Overall, upward mobility flows between grandparents and grandchildren (G1×G3) are more frequent — and intergenerational stability less so — for North African and Southern European immigrants' descendants compared to natives.

Figure 4 – Types of intergenerational educational trajectories by origin and generations



Note: Chi-squared tests are used to compute the significance of the difference of absolute mobility flows between native and immigrant families.
****: p<0.001, **: p<0.01, *: p<0.05, ϯ: p<0.1.*

All in all, these descriptive empirical analyses clearly support H1: we observe higher absolute upward mobility from G1 to G2 and from G1 to G3 among immigrant families compared to native families. This relates to the lower "starting point" of the immigrant first generation due to the lesser development of educational systems in the country of origin. The hypothesis about convergence over generations (H6a) is also supported by these descriptive findings. Compared to native families, patterns of educational mobility are indeed much more distinctive between G1 and G2, than between G2 and G3. Following the segmented assimilation hypothesis (H6b), convergence is clearer for Southern European families, while North African families maintain some of their specific mobility patterns even between G2 and G3.

Adjusting for educational distributions: global relative mobility

The results above may in part be due to educational expansion across cohorts, and its differential effect between origin groups. We therefore turn to a different way of looking at educational mobility, namely, relative mobility. A relative mobility approach is substantively

useful insofar as it allows us to observe whether some groups attain advantaged positions or avoid disadvantaged ones given their educational background, independent of differences in educational distributions across groups and generations.

Following standard statistical techniques in social mobility studies, we fit five log-linear and log-multiplicative models. First, the baseline model is the conditional independence model (M0), which assumes that there is no association in educational attainment across generations — neither between grandparents' and parents' educational attainment (G1×G2), nor between parents' and grandchildren's educational attainment (G2×G3), nor between grandparents' and grandchildren's educational attainment (G1×G3). Second, we fit the common social fluidity model (M1). This model allows for G1×G2 and G2×G3 associations, but the level of these associations is constrained to be the same across groups, i.e., between North African, Southern European, and native families. Third, we fit the log-multiplicative layer effects model (also known as the uniform difference model, or Unidiff) to assess the extent to which the strength of G1×G2 and G2×G3 associations varies across groups (M2).

The fit statistics of these five models are shown in Table 3. Overall, the comparison of M2 over M1 shows that the grandparents-parents and parents-grandchildren associations vary across groups, based on the markedly lower AIC and the p-value from the likelihood ratio test.

Table 3 – Fit statistics for log-linear and log-multiplicative models

	D.F.	Deviance	Δ (%)	AIC	p
M0 : Conditional independence	156	1705	23.62	1393	
M1 : M0 + G1×G2 + G2×G3	141	374	9.54	92	< 0.001
M2 : M0 + Unidiff(O, G1×G2) + Unidiff(O, G2×G3)	135	328	8.85	58	< 0.001
M3: M0 + O×G1×G2 + O×G2×G3	96	238	7.20	46	< 0.001

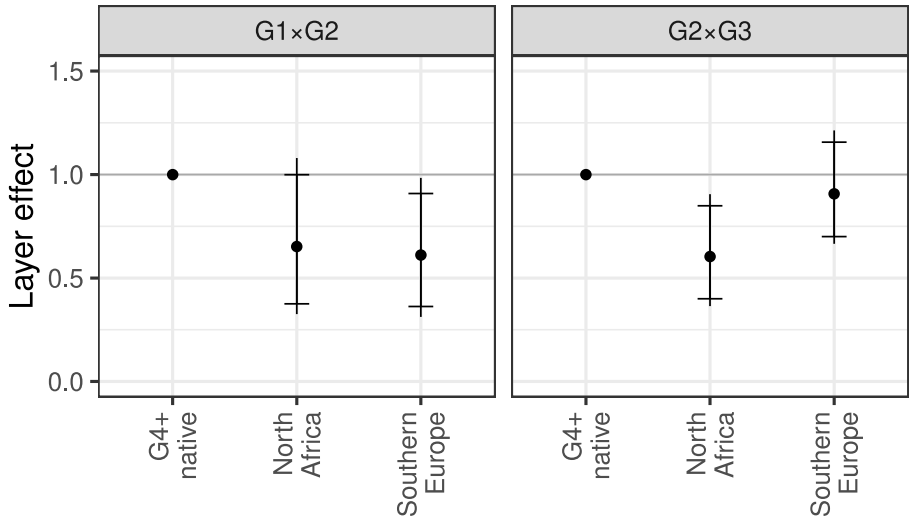
Note: D.F.: degrees of freedom; Δ: dissimilarity index; AIC: Akaike Information Criterion; p: p-value from a likelihood ratio test comparing fit with previous model. Note that these are anti-conservative as they do not take into account the clustering of observations, contrary to permutation tests and bootstrap used below.

Figure 5 shows the layer effects from M2. The strength of the intergenerational association between educational attainment is set to 1 in the reference group (native families). Values above 1 indicate a stronger overall association (lower fluidity) between educational origins and destinations for a given group compared to natives, and values below 1 indicate a lower overall association (higher fluidity). We assess the statistical significance of these differences both visually (through 95 and 90 percent confidence intervals) and through permutation tests, whose associated p-values are given in the text and in Appendix B.

The level of association between grandparents (G1) and parents (G2) is about one-third lower among North African and Southern European families than among native families (p=0.07 and 0.02). In other words, there is significantly more educational fluidity among immigrant families for this generational pair. An effect of similar direction and magnitude is found in the next generation – between parents (G2) and grandchildren (G3) – among North African families (p<0.01). Among Southern European families, the strength of the association between G2 and G3 is no longer different from that of native families (p=0.49); however, it is significantly stronger than that of North African descendants (p=0.03).

From this model, we conclude that overall relative mobility is higher between grandparents and parents in immigrant than in native families (supporting H4)[6]. We also note a convergence toward natives for Southern European families. On the contrary, we do not observe this pattern of convergence in social reproduction across generations among North African families, but rather persistently higher fluidity across generations. These two findings support H6a (intergenerational convergence) and H6b (segmented assimilation).

Figure 5 – Layer effects of G1×G2 and G2×G3 associations from M2



Note: 95 and 90 % bootstrap confidence intervals are shown around layer effect coefficients (they may slightly differ from p-values from permutation tests).

Patterns of local relative mobility

To better understand how a higher overall fluidity manifests in specific mobility patterns in immigrant families, we fit saturated models — that perfectly reproduce observed mobility tables — and compute local relative mobility indicators in immigrant families compared to native ones, for each cell in the G1×G2 and G2×G3 tables (Figure 6). In line with the previous analysis on global relative mobility using Unidiff models, we find that the magnitude of the differences between native and immigrant families tends to be higher for G1×G2 than for G2×G3. Between G2 and G3, almost all of the significant differences are between North African and native families.

Between G1 and G2, the positive differences (in red) with the highest magnitude stem from the cells depicting steep downward mobility patterns. Among immigrant families where grandparents hold upper secondary or tertiary degrees, parents are significantly more likely not to hold any degree than to hold one in comparison to natives. The ratio of the generalized odds ratios for North African immigrants with upper secondary or tertiary education and their children without any degree is 9.8 when compared with native families, meaning that a steep downward mobility pattern is 9.8 times more likely in North African families compared to native families. The corresponding ratio for Southern European families is even higher, at 54 (though, due to the uncertainty around this estimate, the difference with North African

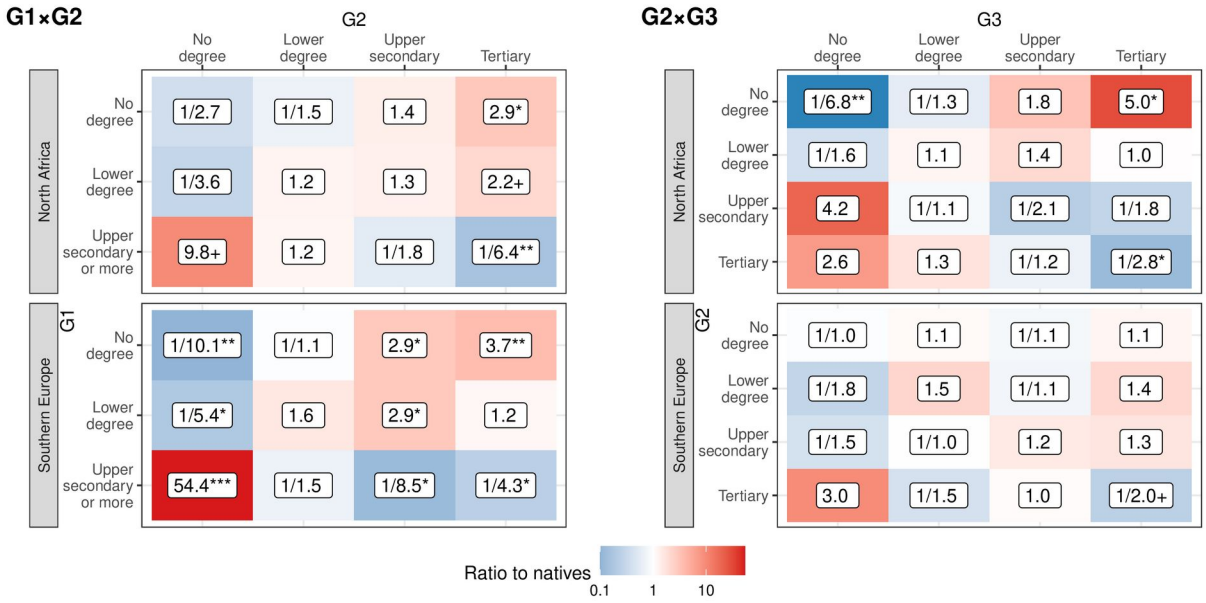
families is not statistically significant, p=0.22). Differences depending on origin are clearly visible from the generalized odds ratios presented in Figure C1 in the appendix: G2 from native families with upper secondary or tertiary educational origins versus all other educational origins are 31.3 times more likely to hold a degree than not whereas G2 from North African families are only 3.2 times more likely to hold a degree than not compared with other North African families with a different educational background (31.3 divided by 3.2 gives a ratio of 9.8). Parents from Southern European families with upper secondary or tertiary educational origins versus all other origins are even 1.71 times *less* likely to hold a degree than not (31.3 divided by 1/1.71 gives the very large ratio of 54). Overall, our results here clearly show higher chances of extreme downward mobility between G1 and G2 for those with high educational starting points in immigrant families compared to native ones.

For the G2×G3 pair, this extreme downward mobility ratio does not show any significant difference between immigrants' and natives' descendants. Still, the magnitude of the ratio is rather large in North African families and is present for both individuals with tertiary and upper secondary degree origins. If we were to group these two educational origins together, we would observe a significant difference (ratio of 5.0, p=0.02) compared to natives, further hinting that trajectories of steep downward mobility still occur in North African families between the second and the third generations. These observations give credit to our hypothesis H3 predicting higher chances of downward mobility among highly educated immigrant families, especially those from non-European descent.

Conversely, immigrants' descendants whose parents had no degree are more likely to experience steep upward mobility and attain university degrees than not when compared to natives, both among North African and Southern European families (Figure 6). This pattern is significant for the G1×G2 pair and for the G2×G3 pair in North African families, and is even stronger among the latter. For Southern European families only, the G2 are more likely to achieve an upper secondary degree and less likely to obtain no degree at all compared to natives when the G1 had a lower degree. This suggests higher chances of upward mobility in immigrant families compared to native ones for those with low starting points, supporting H2. In accordance with results above, diagonals of the mobility tables — indicating educational reproduction — depict lower associations in immigrant families compared to native ones — especially at the top and at the bottom of the educational ladder — consistent with a finding of higher educational fluidity.

Overall, these results support our two hypotheses related to local relative mobility (H2 and H3), respectively on higher chances of upward mobility for immigrants' descendants coming from the bottom of the educational distribution (possibly due to higher aspirations)[7] and higher chances of downward mobility for immigrants' descendants coming from the top (possibly due to discrimination and segregation). These two processes are present for immigrants and their children in both North African and Southern European families. They clearly wane between immigrants' children and grandchildren in Southern European families, but persist for those of North African families. This persistence is consistent with the existence of durable discrimination specifically directed at North African descendants (for instance due to phenotype and religion).

Figure 6 – Heatmap of the ratios of generalized odds ratios of contingency mobility tables between immigrant and native families



Note: Results are based on model 3 and are equivalent to those from saturated log-linear models where coefficients are computed using effect coding on each two-way contingency table, and the difference in log-odds coefficients between immigrant and native families is calculated. Differences with natives are presented as ratios of generalized odds ratios $\exp(\lambda)^{\frac{IJ}{(I-1)(J-1)}}$. *Permutation tests are used to compute the significance of the difference. ***: p<0.001, **: p<0.01, *: p<0.05, +: p<0.1.*

Variations in mobility depending on ancestry mixedness

We finally examine whether differences in intergenerational mobility can be observed between immigrant and native families depending on the degree of ancestry mixedness. We fitted models separately on two sub-samples: one contrasting natives with immigrants' descendants with a single immigrant grandparent; and one contrasting natives with immigrants' descendants with at least two immigrant grandparents. Results confirm our hypothesis 5. Fit statistics (Table 4) indicate that variations in global relative mobility are borderline significant when considering descendants with a single immigrant grandparent (p=0.101 when testing M2 over M1), while they are strongly significant when considering descendants with at least two immigrant grandparents.

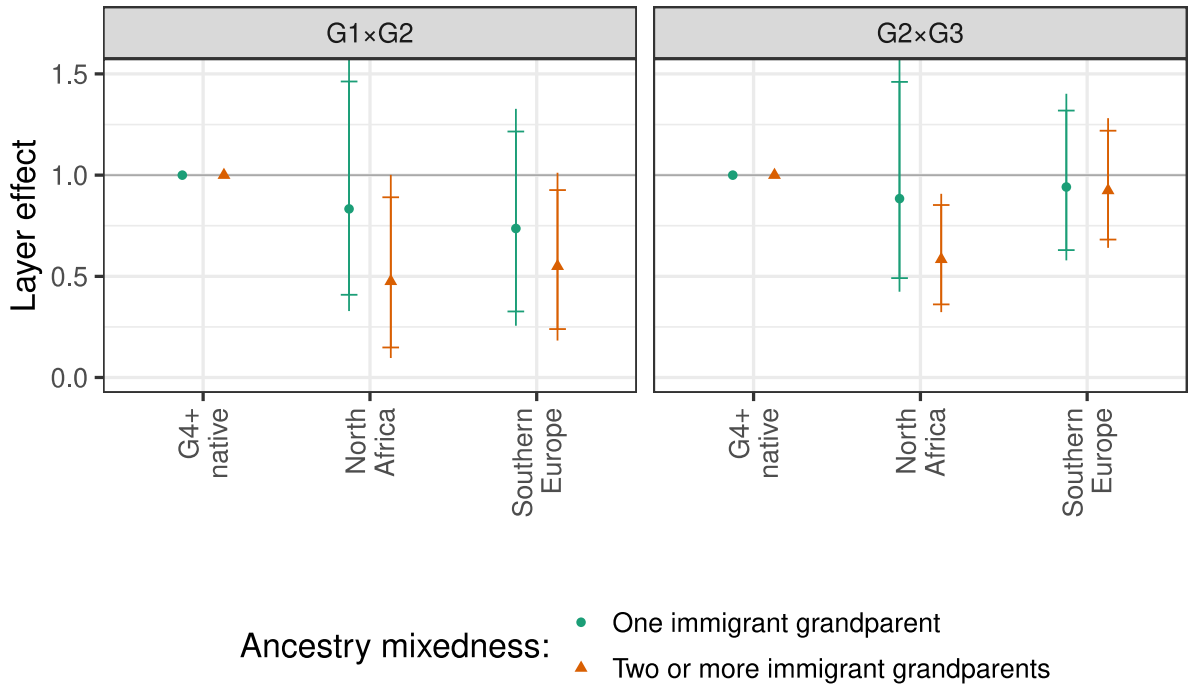
Table 4– Fit statistics for log-linear and log-multiplicative models, estimated separately depending on ancestry mixedness

	D.F.	Deviance	Δ (%)	AIC	p
One immigrant grandparent (n=2229):					
M0: Conditional independence	156	1302	27.76	990	
M1: M0 + G1×G2 + G2×G3	141	325	11.61	43	<0.001
M2: M0 + Unidiff(O, G1×G2) + Unidiff(O, G2×G3)	135	314	11.27	44	0.101
M3: M0 + O×G1×G2 + O×G2×G3	96	227	8.77	35	<0.001
Two immigrant grandparents or more (n=2913):					
M0: Conditional independence	156	1273	23.30	961	
M1: M0 + G1×G2 + G2×G3	141	371	10.25	89	<0.001
M2: M0 + Unidiff(O, G1×G2) + Unidiff(O, G2×G3)	135	334	9.49	64	<0.001
M3: M0 + O×G1×G2 + O×G2×G3	96	253	8.39	61	<0.001

Note: D.F.: degrees of freedom; Δ: dissimilarity index; AIC: Akaike Information Criterion; p: p-value from a likelihood ratio test comparing fit with previous model. Note that these are anti-conservative as they do not take into account the clustering of observations, contrary to permutation tests and bootstrap used below.

Layer effect coefficients from the Unidiff specification (M2) confirm this conclusion (Figure 7). For descendants with several immigrant grandparents, effect sizes are somewhat larger than those obtained for the full sample (Figure 5), though due to the reduced sample size statistical significance is similar. On the contrary, for descendants with a single immigrant grandparent, effect sizes are much reduced and non-significant. We do not report local mobility results as the low sample size does not allow for a reliable analysis of detailed odds ratios.

Figure 7 – Layer effects of G1×G2 and G2×G3 associations from M2 depending on ancestry mixedness



Note: 95 and 90 % bootstrap confidence intervals are shown around layer effect coefficients (they may slightly differ from p-values from permutation tests).

These results shed light on our observation that the mobility patterns of North African descendants converge toward those of natives more slowly and less completely than those of Southern European descendants. This difference is partly related to the fact that the former are more likely to have several immigrant grandparents (76% versus 66%, see Table A2 in Appendix A) and even more to have all four grandparents immigrants (40% versus 16%).

Sensitivity analyses

To assess the robustness of our results, we re-ran our analyses using more detailed educational categories at the top of the distribution, distinguishing short from long tertiary education (see Appendix E). Our conclusions hold but we note that North African descendants less frequently have degrees beyond the bachelor level.

We also stratified our analyses by gender (see Appendix F). Our main conclusions remain valid concerning all measures of mobility. However, we observe that male grandchildren of immigrants are more likely than natives to experience downward mobility in families with a high educational background, while no difference is observed for females. This result, in conjunction with their lower overall educational attainment levels, suggests that grandsons of immigrants are primarily affected by the phenomenon of "perverse openness", a result that resonates with findings for the second generation (Li and Heath 2016).

Unfortunately, our limited sample size and the resulting lack of statistical power prevent us from further investigating gender differences.

Finally, we assessed whether G3 having an immigrant grandparent alive during childhood experience different mobility patterns compared to natives (Appendix H). Results are similar to those presented above for all G3 individuals.

Discussion: Intergenerational mobility, equal opportunity and ethnoracial hierarchy in a color-blind society

Do long-term disparities in life chances exist between immigrant- and native-origin populations in France, a formally color-blind society where the official state ideology of Republicanism claims to guarantee equal opportunity for all citizens?

To answer this question, we studied within-family trajectories of educational mobility across three generations of immigrants and natives – from grandparents, to their children and grandchildren. We relied on recent, nationally representative data from the French *Trajectories and Origins 2* (TeO2) survey (2019-2020). In line with a few existing studies (Bucca and Drouhot 2024; Li and Heath 2016; Alba and Nee 2003) we studied differences in intergenerational mobility trajectories as a signal of the degree of influence of ethnic origins on life chances, and sought to systematically compare the mobility patterns of North African and Southern European families with those of native families. We approached intergenerational mobility in three distinct ways, namely absolute mobility, global relative mobility and local relative mobility, which we then analyzed with both visualized descriptive statistics of mobility flows across generations and coefficients taken from a range of log-linear and log-multiplicative models. Our analyses yield two major empirical findings.

The first finding is that of substantial immigrant-native differences in multigenerational patterns of absolute mobility, i.e., the flows of upward and downward educational mobility, as well as immobility across generations.

On the one hand, we found substantially higher levels of absolute upward mobility between first generation immigrants and their children than between natives and their children. This finding can be related to France's migration history and educational system. In the aftermath of WWII and until the mid-1970s, France welcomed immigrant workers (and later on their families) as part of its process of economic recovery. In this "French melting pot", immigrant populations predominantly hailed from countries of Southern Europe and North Africa with little compulsory schooling. They therefore had generally low levels of educational attainment and worked in unskilled manual jobs (Noiriel 1996). By contrast, French natives in the same birth cohorts already benefited from the first educational expansion in the postwar era (Ichou and Vallet 2013). Thus, natives' average educational attainment was much higher than immigrants' in the first — grandparental — generation. Educational expansion in the destination country — and the absence or delay of such expansion in the country of origin — mechanically created a gap in average educational attainment between native and immigrant populations, and in turn, the conditions for greater absolute upward mobility for the second generation, which attended education in France.

On the other hand, while the immigrant-native difference appeared more salient than differences by regional origins when looking at the first and second generations, our results suggest that absolute mobility patterns are more differentiated by regional origins between the second and third generations. Children of Southern European immigrants were already almost as educated as native, and so are their grandchildren, with mobility rates similar to natives. On the contrary, children of North African immigrants were still significantly less educated than natives, and this difference persists among their grandchildren, despite a somewhat higher upward mobility than among native families. This disadvantage is reflected both in a lower share of grandchildren reaching the top and a higher share remaining at the bottom of the educational ladder. Results therefore suggest a convergence with natives in terms of absolute educational mobility across generations for Southern European families, but not for North African ones. Immigrant origins shape educational attainment in the first generation, largely due to structural differences in educational opportunities and educational expansion across national contexts. As a result, the first generation often has particularly low educational backgrounds, leading to both persistent disadvantage *and* greater absolute upward mobility over several generations—especially among groups starting from the lowest educational levels, such as North African families.

While this structural effect accounts for a large part of the observed patterns, it is not the full story.[8] Our second major result concerns relative mobility (or fluidity) — that is, mobility net of group and generational differences in the educational distributions that generate some of the absolute mobility patterns just discussed.

Educational fluidity between the first and second generations is markedly shaped by nativity – that is, we observe clear differences between immigrants and native families, but no strong difference by regional origins among immigrants. Compared to socially similar natives, Southern European and North African second generations have higher probabilities of experiencing both extreme *downward* mobility — not attaining any degree while having relatively highly educated parents — and extreme *upward* mobility — attaining higher education despite having parents without degrees. Meanwhile, both groups also have lower probabilities of experiencing social reproduction at both the top and bottom of the educational distribution. These patterns result in heightened global social fluidity between the first and second generation in immigrant families.

From the second to the third generation however, we document ethnically segmented patterns of relative mobility. On the one hand, the weight of immigrant origins tends to decrease across generations among Southern Europeans, so that the third generation experiences similar levels of fluidity and attainment patterns conditional on educational origins compared to natives — a convergence in intergenerational social reproduction from the second to the third generation signaling the decreasing significance of ethnoracial origins on life chances. However, we do not observe a similar dynamic of convergence with natives in life chances across generations among North African families, who still have lower chances than natives to reproduce both advantaged and disadvantaged positions at the third generation: grandchildren are less likely to be without a degree if their parents (the second generation) were also without a degree, and less likely to attend higher education if their parents did the same. Furthermore, they are still more likely to experience extreme upward mobility and, to a certain extent, steep downward mobility as well. Such lower returns to educational origins

suggest that family educational background plays a smaller role in the educational destiny of the North African third generation. Immigrant optimism may continue to matter well into the third generation in shaping trajectories of extreme upward mobility, while trajectories of extreme downward mobility may reflect a "perverse openness" (Blau and Duncan 1967) whereby the intergenerational transmission of educational status is hampered by discrimination processes.

In this respect, our findings echo other mobility studies on the descendants of immigrants documenting comparatively high rates of downward mobility and blocked upward mobility among certain non-European second-generation groups in the UK (Li and Heath 2016, Zuccotti 2015) and in certain Western European countries such as Belgium and Germany (Bucca and Drouhot 2024). However, the bulk of results from Li and Heath (2016) and Drouhot and Bucca (2024) point to a trend of assimilation by the second generation, whereby social reproduction dynamics generally work in similar ways and magnitude among immigrants and natives alike – like those of historical studies based on American Census data (Lowrey et al. 2021, Abramitzky et al. 2021). By comparison, only among Southern European at the third generation do we see a similar pattern of complete convergence (see also Zorlu and van Gent 2024 for analogous findings in terms of income mobility in the Netherlands). On the one hand, we can tentatively attribute the distinctiveness of our findings to historical patterns of migrant selectivity in the United States and the UK, which have older traditions of skilled and positively selected migration compared to France (Ichou 2014, 2015, Borjas 1993, Feliciano 2005). On the other hand, we note that optimistic findings of assimilation in mobility studies among the second and third generation (e.g., Lowrey et al. 2021, Bucca and Drouhot 2024; see also Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters and Holdaway 2008) tend to be based on measurements of absolute mobility, not relative mobility. The extent to which such intergenerational dynamics of assimilation may be confounded by changes in the marginal distributions of the outcomes of interest (position in the class structure, educational attainment, income) between cohorts and countries of origin and destination remains unclear. Approaches in terms of social fluidity that fully account for differences in marginal distributions among different cohorts and origins may be less likely to provide optimistic accounts of progress across immigrant generations, particularly in contexts characterized by a "low starting point" among immigrant families who can only go up in later generations.

Taken together, our results reflect a mixture of blending and segregating dynamics in terms of mobility outcomes among immigrants and their descendants in France (Drouhot and Nee 2019) and speak to a "moderate" version of segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993, Drouhot 2024: 1981). Among Southern European families, the French Republican promise of equal opportunity has largely become reality by the third generation. Southern Europeans experienced a declining significance of ethnic origins across generations, with educational mobility trajectories becoming increasingly similar to those of natives by the third generation. North African families, on the other hand, experience a lasting influence of ethnic origins, with comparatively high rates of both upward *and* downward mobility among the grandchildren of immigrants in this group. Thus, we find that educational destinies over three generations are segmented by ethnoracial origins, likely reflecting different societal receptions unfolding in the long run – one associated with a migration from culturally and phenotypically adjacent contexts (Southern European descendants), the other with a

postcolonial context in large part defined by substantial religious and phenotypical differences from French natives (North African descendants). Our results, however, do not speak to a "strong" version of segmented assimilation, where the extent of racialization would nullify the effect of social origins on social destination due to the pervasiveness of racism (Drouhot 2024: 1981). Our analyses of relative social mobility show that significant social reproduction occurs within North African families at both intergenerational transitions.

Theoretically, these results underscore the analytical importance of the third generation in adjudicating between different incorporation trajectories, as ethnic segmentation in mobility trajectories became clear in our results only by the third generation. Thus, while among European immigrant populations in the US, it was historically "only with the third [...] generation that the powerful undercurrent of assimilation came unmistakably to the surface" (Alba and Nee 2003:215), one might say that it is only with the third generation that a clear pattern of ethnic inequality in mobility between European and non-European descendants emerges in the French case. The grandchildren of immigrants offer a valuable analytical lens to clarify empirical trends that may remain uncertain at the second generation — either because such trends unfold over the long run or because observed progress between the first and the second generation may primarily reflect migration between different socioeconomic systems rather than true assimilation. This was particularly relevant in the case of absolute mobility, which we largely attributed to differences in compulsory education and educational expansion between countries of origin and destination.

On the contrary, differences in social fluidity are by definition not due to the lower educational starting point of North African immigrants in the first generation. In that regard, our results show stubborn differences in relative mobility by the third generation, suggesting distinct mobility regimes unfolding in the long run. It is only among those with a single immigrant grandparent (one quarter of the North African sample) that we did not observe any difference in fluidity compared with natives. These results underline the importance of mixed ancestry in bringing about assimilation in later generations (Alba et al. 2018).

Our work is not devoid of limitations. First, we lacked the statistical power to produce more refined analysis by national origins and gender. Sensitivity analyses on the latter suggests that grandsons of immigrants are more likely to experience a form of "perverse openness," but our limited sample size does not allow us to investigate this pattern in depth. In addition, we exclusively focused on the transmission of educational attainment, and did not study occupational or income mobility. As discussed by Sakamoto and colleagues (2023:1255), educational mobility cannot be considered a proxy for mobility in these dimensions. Ethnoracial inequality in occupational mobility is likely to be more pronounced than in educational mobility, given the well-documented ethnic and racial discrimination in labor markets, particularly in France (Quillian et al. 2019). We may therefore expect a higher degree of ethnic segmentation in the patterns of occupational mobility. Understanding whether immigrant-native differences subside or persist over three generations within other institutional domains beyond education remains an important question for future research.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our work, along with other recent studies of third-generation assimilation (Zorlu and Gent 2024, Zhao and Drouhot 2024), provides a useful starting point to evaluate the incorporation of postwar migrant populations in the long run. Here, we have employed a retrospective-prospective design to study educational mobility

over three generations within immigrant and native families. Our analyses speak to the existence of an ethnoracial hierarchy in educational destinies in France, a country where public schools have historically been regarded as an engine of equal opportunity, and an integral aspect of the so-called Republican model of integration. Altogether, our results suggest that the French Republican model works only partially in practice insofar as it fosters equal opportunity with native French among Southern European families but not among North African families.

Our approach provides a blueprint for future survey-based research on assimilation in contexts where data sources offering possibilities for within-family linkage — such as population registers and de-identified Census data — may be hard to access or non-existent. A within-family approach relying on simple information on the country of birth of adult respondents, their parents and children overcomes long-standing issues of synthetic generations confounding estimates of generational change with cohort or period effects (Park and Myers 2010) as well as ethnic attrition (Duncan and Trejo 2011b). Future implementation of a retrospective-prospective design for the study of the third generation could focus on other assimilation dimensions known to be influenced by dynamics of intergenerational transmission and surveyable via proxy reporting – for instance, name-giving (Gerhard and Hans 2009), transnational ties (Soehl and Waldinger 2012), religion (Drouhot 2021) and bilingualism (Alba, Logan, Lutz and Stults 2002). We hope our approach and results will prove fruitful for the new waves of studies on the grandchildren of immigrants that will undoubtedly emerge as the third generation continues to come of age in Western Europe and beyond.

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Notes

[1] Throughout this paper, we use the terms 'ethnic' and 'ethnoracial' interchangeably. In our study, these terms refer to differences and inequalities based on immigrants' geographic origins, which may be linked to ethnicity, religion, race, or other factors related to migration and discrimination. However, we do not directly analyze these factors and their associated mechanisms. Instead, we treat race and ethnicity as part of the same broad category of social distinctions (Brubaker 2009) and do not take a firm stance on the exact causes of the disparities between the regional origin groups we examine. Our focus is on measuring these disparities rather than explaining their sources.

[2] While we rely on prospective data collection on the third generation, our analyses adopt a retrospective perspective in which the third generation is the reference, consistent with the classical approach in intergenerational mobility studies (Song and Mare 2015). Therefore, first- and second-generation individuals who had more children are given more weight.

[3] Consistent with official French definitions, individuals who were born French outside of mainland France are not considered as immigrants. They, as well as their descendants, are excluded from our analytical sample. This concerns in particular individuals of European descent born in Algeria before the country became independent in 1962 ("pieds-noirs"), who were French citizens contrary to the majority Muslim population.

[4] As an exception, when fitting log-linear and log-multiplicative models, we collapse the "Upper secondary degree" and "Tertiary education" categories for grandparents since the small number of highly educated individuals in this generation makes estimates of odds ratios unreliable.

[5] Similarly, and for the sake of consistency, our selection of G3 grandchildren of immigrants also relies on the TeO2 main respondent's ancestry and not the one of their partners as presented above.

[6] When including the direct effect of grandparents on grandchildren's educational destinies (Appendix I), we also identify a higher fluidity between G1 and G3 among immigrant families from both North Africa and Southern Europe. However, the precision of the estimates is quite low, and social position of G2 is controlled very imperfectly using only education.

[7] While these higher educational aspirations may partly stem from positive educational immigrant selectivity, this positive educational selection is empirically found in our sample for North African immigrants but not for Southern European immigrants (see Appendix J). Therefore, positive educational immigrant selectivity should not be considered the main explanatory mechanism.

[8] In Figure 3, we have shown the persisting educational disadvantage between grandchildren of North African immigrants and native grandchildren of natives: while 55% of the latter have education above a high school degree, only 46% of the former do. To assess the role of educational origins, we reweighted the data to align the educational attainment of G1 North Africans with that of G1 natives. With this reweighting, the educational disadvantage of North African G3 grandchildren is reduced by nearly three-quarters, from a 9-percentage-point gap to less than 3 points.