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EDITORIAL

False promises and distinct minority mobility paths: trajectories and costs of the education-driven social mobility of racialised ethnic groups

This Special Issue (SI) enquires into the trajectories and consequences of education-driven social mobility among members of racialised and minoritised ethnic groups in a variety of geographical settings. It explores commonalities in the so-called distinctive minority mobility path that are typical for many racialised minorities in different social contexts – from Asia through post-socialist Eastern European countries to Western Europe and North America. Through analyses of the personal experiences of (potential) social advancement via education, the authors of this SI explore what schooling and educational mobility involves for those who belong to discriminated against and minoritised groups. What costs, both hidden and more apparent, does their education-driven mobility impose on them? Is education indeed a vehicle for social mobility for them? Finally, what are the social implications of their ‘individual success at the cost of collective failure’ (Reay 2018)?

This volume aims to offer answers to such questions from a comparative perspective. It does so through theory-driven but empirically based contributions using an intersectional lens. This lens sheds light on the interwoven and intersecting effect of racialised, class-based, and gender-biased inequalities in different educational contexts – inequalities that work together as co-constitutive phenomena of individual academic outcomes,

facilitating the use of a 'race'-conscious analytical model (Richards 2020). The race-conscious approach of the papers intentionally challenges the class-based master narrative of education studies. This intersectional approach recognises that the experiences of racialised minorities depend also on their social location in relation to other systems of oppression (Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1989). As Richards (2020, 4) argues, the class-based framework of educational mobility studies 'minimises the way that racism cheapens the value of cultural capital possessed' by parents from stigmatised minority groups.

This SI adopts a race-conscious approach to emphasise the role of non-dominant, non-White, 'Black' cultural capital (Carter 2003; also see; Boros, Bogdán, and Durst 2021 on 'Roma cultural capital') or 'community cultural wealth' (Yosso 2005) in the educational mobility trajectories of racialised ethnic minorities. These notions refer to a knowledge set acquired by minority students from their families and ethnic communities through primary socialisation. Racially minoritised students strategically deploy this non-dominant cultural capital to advance their education-driven social mobility, thereby successfully navigating a hostile environment.

(Higher) education for ethno-racial minority youth

The papers in this SI testify to the fact that education systems are continuously subject to influence from their surrounding social, political, and economic structures. An investigation into the interconnection between the education system and other sub-systems is necessary to grasp how the relative autonomy of the former is always coupled with a dependence disguised by the practices and ideology authorised by this autonomy (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Educational institutions can mean different things to their participants depending on the social context and relationship between the education system and other sub-systems in any given social setting. Marmath's comparative study (2024, in this SI) is explicit in this regard as it examines what higher education (HE) contributes to young urban and rural Meena (a scheduled tribe) women in India. She illustrates how in a context of traditional patrifocal family structures and ideologies, women's HE colleges play a merely instrumental role in women's education by facilitating their acquisition of degrees that add economic value within the institution of dowry. Such educational spaces do not serve as sites of transformation for these minority women. Rather, the complicity of women's HE colleges with the traditional family system reproduces existing inequalities, thereby trapping these women.

However, HE institutions in metropolitan settings can also empower minoritised

students by promoting personal development and a broader understanding of the surrounding world and society (Bathmaker et al. 2016). Throughout this empowering educational process, as demonstrated in the chapters by Mendes et al. (2023) and Mendoza et al. (2023) (both in this SI), oppressed minority youth can reconfigure their identities (Bereményi and Carrasco 2015). In the case of the Roma, for instance, traversing different social classes through educational mobility accompanies the formation of an in-between identity (Mendes et al. 2023, in this SI) that is continually transformed and reshaped. The restructuring of identity through the process of educational mobility bears special significance for racialised young women who are expected by their communities of origin to perform customary traditional gender roles (Pantea 2015). Still, these academically high-achieving women manage to re-negotiate and re-interpret the perception of their gender roles (i.e. what it means to be a 'proper' woman of their ethnic/ religious group) while also being educated (Bereményi and Durst 2021). HE can thus empower these women through the transmission of subject material that supports their resort to different kinds of feminism, such as 'Islamic feminism' (Mendoza et al. 2023, in this SI) or 'Black feminism' in the case of Romani women in Europe (Kóczé et al. 2018). These examples demonstrate how the evaluation of schooling by ethno-racial minority students can be ambivalent and context-dependent. Whether in an inclusive or an unfamiliar place governed by dominant White middle-class values and interests (Wallace 2023), schooling may be perceived as either empowering or as a mere instrument for acquiring qualifications (see Marmath 2024, in this SI). The protagonists of the case studies in this SI recognise schooling as necessary for increasing their prospects on the labour market. For them, it is a relevant instrument for accessing lucrative jobs, a means of developing human capital, and a privileged space for inter-ethnic socialisation (Mendes et al. 2023, in this SI). Others may regard school as a discriminatory context in which racialised minority students are exposed to racist attitudes from school administration, teachers, and classmates. Such experiences illustrate a racialisation process in the form of the 'racial domination' (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009) or 'distorted notion' (Kóczé 2017) of particular ethnic groups (Nyíró and Durst 2021).¹

Essentialised ethnic expectations (Wallace 2023), myths, or distorted notions (Kóczé 2017) about academically low-achieving minorities reinforce teachers' low expectations and function as an 'ethnic penalty' in educational settings. They act as a driving mechanism of an 'ethnic ceiling' (Ogbu and Simons 1998) or 'racial glass ceiling' (Durst et al. 2022) – the hidden labour-market barriers that explain why working-class graduates from racialised minority groups often occupy lower status jobs than their 'White' counterparts with the same educational qualifications (see also Árendás and Messing 2022). In fact, Wallace notes that although 'culture functions as a seemingly race-neutral code (. . .), it has re-emerged as an

acceptable way of defining differences between groups and drawing distinctions within them. It serves as a way of obfuscating race while reproducing racial and ethnic hierarchies' (Wallace 2023, 14).

Cultural explanations of the school achievement of racialised students obscure the historical, structural, and institutional factors that shape their school experiences. Therefore, argues Wallace, schools can be regarded as racialised sites of power that influence the mobility trajectories of ethno-racial minority youth.

The articles in this SI also illustrate how ethnic differentiation in educational settings perpetuate the reproduction of inequalities (Bourdieu 1990), racial hierarchies, and exclusion despite broad consensus about the desirability of providing equal opportunities. They demonstrate how school dynamics in different geographical settings interact with historical, socioeconomic, and institutional forces to together limit the educational opportunity structures for ethno-racial minority youth.

The SI papers here explore adaptation to these (unequal) opportunity structures by shedding light on the various strategies for meaning-making and navigation, as well as the resilience of minority students (Bereményi et al. 2023; Dvorakova 2022; Mendoza et al. 2023, in this SI). In so doing, they demonstrate the importance for practitioners, policymakers, and scholars to address the intersectional effect of 'race'/racialisation and class (alongside gender and religion) if we are to remedy educational inequality and injustice.

The cost of social uplifting and the education–social mobility nexus for racialised minorities

In mainstream mobility studies, educational systems are often regarded as the primary vehicle by which to facilitate social mobility (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2019). At the same time, they are criticised for their failure to eliminate initial socioeconomic inequality among students and contribution to the reproduction of these inequalities instead (Bourdieu 1990). But scholars of social inequality argue that such expectations of education systems are exaggerated; the greater the social inequality that should be eliminated, the more illusionary the expectations are (Atkinson 2015; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2019; Durst and Huszár 2022). Grounded on this theoretical stance, this SI contributes to educational studies that regard and explore social mobility as subject to the wider context of social inequality rather than as an individual project (see, e.g. Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2019; Friedman and Laurison 2020; Huszár and Durst 2022; Nyíró and Durst 2021).

For racialised minorities, the relationship between education and social mobility is more complex. Nevertheless, it remains under-researched compared with

mobility studies of ‘White’ working-class youth that use a ‘master narrative of class’ (Richards 2020) to explain the struggles associated with social ascension. Scholars researching the experiences of racialised minorities agree that although HE can be an important vehicle for achieving social mobility, minoritised and racialised ethnic groups face additional hidden structural obstacles. These obstacles hinder their attainment of same occupational and income status as members of majority groups with the same level of educational qualifications. In many countries, affirmative action in HE aims to address this unequal attainment by providing opportunities to underrepresented groups. However, these policies and other universal outreach programmes have downsides and limitations too, as shown by papers from Nivedita and Danvers and Hinton-Smith in this SI.

Education-driven social mobility is presented in public discourses as an unquestionably desirable process – a ‘panacea for all our social ills’ (Lawler and Payne 2018) – that improves the well-being and overall social position of communities. However, the process of transcending social class and moving ahead in the social space involves serious dilemmas and difficulties for individuals, as described in Sorokin’s (1959) dissociative thesis, status inconsistency theory (Hope 1975), and Bourdieu’s (2004) concept of *habitus clivé*. Most recently, this was problematised through Reay’s (2018) notions of *emotional cost* and *the cruelty of (upward) mobility* and Friedman’s (2016) sociological theorisation of the *emotional imprint of class* (of origin). All of these concepts speak to the psychological strain and emotional stress that accompany movement from one social class to another through education.

At the root of the struggle for (education-driven) upwards social mobility is the cruel optimism it entails, according to Berlant, who explains that ‘a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant 2011, 1). Many of the papers in this SI investigate how some of the hidden costs of upwards social mobility through education result partly from ‘gendered’ mobility discourses. For young adult girls from a ‘traditional’ Roma community (e.g. Fehérvári and Varga 2020; Pantea 2015) or religious Muslim family (e.g. Shahrokni 2015), conflicts between community expectations regarding their gender roles (marriage, child-rearing) and educational aspirations contribute to emotional distress and psychological burdens. Beyond cost – benefit debates (Hajdu, Huszár, and Kristóf 2019), research also highlights the differentiated emergence of mobility-related dilemmas – particularly those of ethnic minorities (migrants and other racialised individuals, among others) and disadvantaged social groups (Cole and Omari 2003; Durst and Bereményi 2021; Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999; Shahrokni 2015). This SI demonstrates the existence of a distinct mobility path for racialised minority youth in diverse

geographical settings that emerged as a way of dealing with the costs of social ascension in the context of ethnic stereotyping and discrimination. However, we go a step further by interrogating the validity of this theory within the superdiverse social and geographical contexts in which minoritised ethno-racial groups become the numerical majority – as is the case in Vallejo and Ramirez’s study of the Latino elite in Los Angeles.

Outline of the Special Issue

Most papers in this SI are based on ethnographic fieldwork among ethno-racial minority youth in various geographical settings. All intend to contribute to the sociological or anthropological literature on the relationship between education and social mobility, and all use an intersectional lens to explore the interwoven and interlocking effect of classed, gendered, and racial(ised) inequalities in education. They do so through analyses of the personal experiences of academic high achievers who, against the odds, acquired educational mobility compared with their parents or other members of their communities of origin.

The first three papers overlap in their engagement with the paradox of educational mobility for adolescent women in the Global South. Global educational initiatives often present formal schooling as a central vehicle for achieving upwards mobility. But, in practice, students in this part of the world cannot rely on schools to equip them with the educational capital necessary for success. All three papers emphasise the limits of formal education and the ‘unequal footing’ of youth attempting to achieve social mobility in developing countries. The authors reference the ‘false promise’ of education (Batatota) or ‘camouflage[d] social mobility’ (Marmath 2024) associated with the education of academically high-achieving women who are trapped within the nexus of marriage and dowry that determines the extent of the education their families are willing to help finance.

In the opening paper, Laura Batatota (2023) discusses the impact of education-driven mobility discourses and policies produced in the Global North on adolescents in the South. With an insider’s positionality, she shows how girls in a reputable all-girls national secondary school in Sri Lanka negotiate their educational and labour aspirations. International development agencies have long promoted human capital theory alongside the knowledge economy, implying a link between wider access to education for all and development. However, the voices and experiences of the adolescents attempting to pursue a good life by ‘becoming somebody’ are notably absent from such developmental discourses. Batatota listens as they narrate the great effort of their investment in academic excellence with a view to ultimately accessing the government jobs associated with secure employment and stable pensions that would facilitate their hope of giving back to the community. Better-off students compete in (formal) school and take daily (informal) tuition classes to realise high aspirations formed partly by their

capital-rich families. Formal schooling alone does not equip them with the knowledge to enter elite national universities.

Confirming the Appadurai (2004) thesis about the 'capacity to aspire', Batatota concludes that aspiration is shaped by the social world surrounding the students. Controversially, development discourses from the Global North indeed strengthen the capacity of youths to aspire. But growing up in capital-poor families who cannot invest in their children's private tutoring hinders the prospects of high academic achievement within the public system, thereby contributing to the feeling of failure among low-income youths and demonstrating the false promise of schooling as a means of social mobility.

In a similar vein, Seema Marmath (2024) offers insider insight into the gendered educational experiences of young women who are first-generation students from the Meena community. This scheduled tribe has acquired minority group status in Rajasthan, India, which entitles them to affirmative government policies. Marmath's analysis centres on the tensions between macrostructural pressures that increase the desirability of education for women and microstructurally generated constraints that shape the social mobility trajectories of young Meena women living within a patrifocal family structure and ideology. Marmath's paper eloquently illuminates how the education-driven social mobility trajectories of her protagonists are shaped by family, community, school, and the institution of marriage. Highlighting the cross-sectional factor of an urban – rural setting, she further explores the complexities of social mobility to demonstrate how it is affected by locality, uneven community support, and the fractured engagement of women as they transit to and attend a regional women's college – revealing how the scope of their aspirations is shaped both before and during their HE. A particularly illuminating aspect of Marmath's study is the complicity of women's colleges with the institutions of patrifocal family, marriage, and dowry. In rural contexts, only the wealthiest families can afford to send their daughters to study at the government-supported women's college. As HE degrees increase young rural women's dowry value, college education contributes to the reproduction of inequality within the community. The article demonstrates how the women's college informally hinders women's deeper socialisation in an urban college environment among peers of distinct social origin, depriving them of the experience of being a bona fide HE student. This and other dilemmas lead Marmath to conclude that growing access to HE extended by the Indian government's affirmative action policy for minority groups merely camouflages the lack of effective social mobility for first-generation college-graduate Meena women. Indeed, Meena women pay a high price for their education.

Similarly set in the Global South, the next study, by Narender Nivedita (2023),

unpacks what 'distinct upward social mobility trajectories' mean in the case of the few academically successful Dalit women to acquire prestigious government jobs in India. Nivedita claims that these achievements are the result of the interrelation of interrelated forces, such as the social location of the family, affirmative action policies, and personal agency. This study lucidly illustrates the complexity of the nexus of education and social mobility for marginalised and socially discriminated groups in contexts in which a multiplicity of social hierarchies coexist – where 'Dalit' is a category mediated by class, gender, and inter-caste variation.

Merging a systemic interpretation with the micro-sociological analysis of an insider researcher, Nivedita's paper offers insight into the choices and strategies of the highachieving Dalit women who are going beyond their individual gains to aim at the transformation of their community. Engaging with Appadurai's (2004) concept of aspiration, Nivedita demonstrates how familial support helps to generate the capacity to aspire and provide the women with a 'navigational map'. Nevertheless, individual aspirations and community-wide goals imply a series of hidden costs owing to structural discrimination and other mobility-related hurdles, along with an added commitment to 'pay back' the community of origin.

While the first three papers are set in the Global South, the study by Jody Vallejo and Blanca Ramirez (2023) brings us back to the Global North, where global educational initiatives and mobility discourses are produced. The authors take a step further in interrogating the concept of 'minority mobility culture' in the case of a Latino economic elite in the United States that engages in 'ethno-racial philanthropy' as a way of 'giving back' and facilitating the mobility of their co-ethnic Latino youth. The analysis finds that 'ethno-racial philanthropy' involves three supporting structures for young Latino students: scholarship funds, a network of charter schools for those from low-income families, and youth leadership programmes for those from top 100 universities.

Taking Los Angeles as the study site means investigating a context in which Whites are no longer a numerical majority into which minoritised Latino groups desire to integrate. Prior theories of selective assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993) and the 'minority culture of mobility' (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999) are thus insufficient for explaining the mobility paths of ethnic elites; such theories disregard contexts wherein ethno-racial minority groups represent the numerical majority and are highly internally diverse in terms of socioeconomic status.

The study itself reflects a context and historical moment in which the Latino sense of reactive ethnicity and ethno-racial solidarity creates a basis for cross-class social capital networks. These networks enhance mobility and facilitate incorporation not into the White mainstream, but into an expanding Latino middle class. The authors conclude that although ethno-racial solidarity driven

by economic interests helps thousands of Latino young people in their mobility trajectory, it also benefits the rich, maintains structural inequalities and individualism, and legitimises neoliberal capitalism. It focuses on education rather than broader structural issues such as white supremacy or the criminalisation of Latino migrants, thereby continuing to benefit those who reproduce the image of the elites.

In the following paper, Blanca Mendoza, Jordi Pàmies, and Marta Bertran (2023) argue that within a context in which binary division continues to exist between the numerical majority (native-born Catalonians) and minorities (immigrants to Spain, among others), second-generation immigrant HE students of Moroccan descent still resort to use of the 'minority culture of mobility' to mitigate the cost of their HE-driven social mobility and navigate a social milieu of discrimination and othering. Their paper employs an intersectional perspective to examine how gender, religion, ethno-racial, and class-based inequalities shape the upwards educational and social mobility trajectories of their research participants. Benefiting from life-story and ethnographic approaches, Mendoza and colleagues draw on feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of the 'borderland' to understand how the 'marginalised locationality' of the students does not exclusively imply deprivation and oppression. Instead, it can be transformed into opportunities for social change and resistance.

A central element of their argument is that social mobility does not necessarily occur 'outside' one's ethnic group, but 'within'. Using concepts of 'foreign' and 'local' cultural capital, Mendoza and colleagues emphasise that social mobility is not simply about gaining access to new and higher social strata within the dominant society. It also includes mobility within groups of origin. Thanks to their successful negotiations and strategies, many of these academically high-achieving young people earn recognition from their background community, participate more in decision-making and counselling in their families, and often become role models within their ethnic community. These young people further use a 'minority culture of mobility' to establish various strategies that facilitate their academic continuity and social mobility. As part of this cultural repertoire, the practice of 'giving back' to their community places them in favourable positions within pre-existing or newly created support networks – and 'within' mobility processes themselves.

Following this thread, Ábel Bereményi, Judit Durst, and Zsanna Nyíró (2023) show us how the locality of the 'margins' occupied by Hungarian first-in-family (FIF) Roma graduates in the social space can be used as a resource to fight for social justice and facilitate social transformation. The focus of their comparative study is a discussion of how habitus reconciliation occurs in practice within the education-driven social mobility trajectories of minority Roma and majority non-

Roma FIF graduate Hungarians.

The article places a particular emphasis on understanding how their presence in marginal 'third spaces' contributes to mitigating the price of social mobility by supporting the formation of 'reconciled habitus' among class-changers. Here, 'third space' means a physical, social, and cognitive space situated at the margins of a social class – one that permits inclusive, safe, creative, and productive reflection on changing individual social position to facilitate resistance, solidarity, and social transformation. Operating within a Bourdieusian framework, the authors argue that social mobility can cause a '*habitus clivé*': a mismatch between the primary habitus and the habitus of the attained social field. In many cases, however, the habitus of the upwardly mobile can be reconciled; the study focuses on these cases.

One relevant conclusion drawn by the authors is that the Roma (racialised) ethnicity is a distinctive factor with regard to habitus reconciliation through occupying or creating third spaces. This is because such ethnicity implies specific dilemmas and social roles. It involves a communal selfhood, coping with a racialised identity, and consideration of the need for betterment of the whole 'Roma community' (expressed, for instance, in the perceived obligation of 'giving back'). For Roma class-changers, the third space is also perceived as a site for the collective fight against social injustice. In contrast, upwardly mobile non-Roma experience it as a space for symbolic homemaking in the majority middle class where an individual trajectory with a reconciled habitus may be created. The paper thus takes another step towards understanding the distinctive factors involved in racialised minority social mobility paths.

The final four papers explore the complex relationship between education, social mobility, and the concomitant mobility dilemmas within different Roma communities in both Western and Eastern Europe. Using an intersectional approach, Maria Manuela Mendes et al. (2023) examine the interwoven effect of gender, ethnicity, and family socioeconomic status on the academic and upwards educational mobility trajectories of Roma/Cigano secondary students in Portugal. The study's 32 Cigano participants perceive education as a key relevant factor for achieving upwards social mobility. They believe that schooling will 1) help them acquire higher-status jobs different from the traditional activities of their parents, 2) help them develop important transversal skills, and 3) provide a privileged space for inter-ethnic socialisation that will affect their professional futures.

The paper sheds light, moreover, on the formation of a so-called 'in-between identity' among racialised and minoritised Cigano students as a consequence of traversing different social milieus via education. But despite the growing presence of Cigano youth in secondary schools in Portugal over time, the education gap and inequalities between majority Portuguese and racialised Cigano youth persist.

The authors call for policymaking efforts aiming at reducing this education gap to listen to the voices of Cigano parents and students during the design and development of educational programmes. Policies themselves should lead to opportunities for obtaining qualifications equivalent to those of the majority population.

Antonie Dvorakova (2022) addresses two different geographical and social settings to argue against the so-called 'deficit view' of FIF graduates – a view that pathologises socially disadvantaged, stigmatised, and minoritised populations. Using a cultural psychology approach and an intersectional lens, her comparative phenomenological study among FIF Roma college graduates in the Czech Republic and Native American professionals in the United States identifies specific contexts, strategies, and meaningmaking systems that facilitate the resilience of her research participants despite the costs of their education-driven upwards social mobility. The paper demonstrates how Roma and Native American FIF professionals were able to use some of the resources of their socioeconomically disadvantaged family and community backgrounds as sources of resilience and empowerment. Dvorakova argues that FIF graduates socialised in socioeconomically disadvantaged and racially oppressed contexts derive cultural capital (including unconditional family support and community cultural wealth) and various coping skills (e.g. adaptation capacity) from their communities of background. Together, the capital and skillset enrich their well-being while facilitating their upwards social mobility.

In the UK context, Emily Danvers and Tamsin Hinton-Smith (2023) challenge a deficit-centred view of the patchwork of HE policy intervention programmes targeting Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) students. They demonstrate how university outreach can essentialise GRT people without consideration for the heterogeneity of this category or the different (local) cultural capitals they possess. The article also reveals possibilities for the inclusion of GRT students into or towards HE. In line with the central topic of this SI, however, the authors emphasise the cost of social mobility. These costs manifest in the mixed feelings of students who tread an unfamiliar path (as the first in their family to obtain a degree) and dream about a future that education might create for them.

The authors further show the cruel promises of HE for the marginalised and socially unaccepted groups made to feel 'not at home' at universities dominated by White middle-class students and teachers. This research challenges the supposed inclusivity of GRT students in HE. It shows how one strategy employed to accommodate the positioning of marginalised and racialised students in the HE environment – that of 'ethnic invisibility' – is perceived as deficient in relevant qualities, but may actually help GRT students avoid prejudice (Bereményi 2018; Pantea 2015).

Finally, Maria-Carmen Pantea (2022) explores a different field of education, namely vocational training and its relation to social mobility in the context of prolonged precarity in the labour market. Pantea investigates Roma youth in Romania as a test case for broader claims about the role of initial vocational education and training (iVET) in social mobility. The paper sheds light on whether the Roma perceive iVET as a means of social mobility and, if so, how. What are the personal (subjective) meanings of (objectively) precarious employment opportunities for those from families with parents who exist on the margins of the labour market? Based on extensive fieldwork, interviews, and focus groups with Roma iVET students, the paper analyses the role of location (the family residence of students), habitus, school ethos, and the perceived costs of undertaking iVET.

Much like Mendoza et al. (2023), Pantea concludes that the benefits of upwards educational mobility achieved through iVET for Roma students – compared with the educational attainments of their Roma peers and parents – are not necessarily reflected ‘outside’ (in their occupational positions on the labour market) their ethnic group. Rather, they emerge ‘within’. The paper calls for a recalibration of the broader narrative on social mobility in economic contexts in which work is becoming increasingly precarious. It also draws attention to other values of iVET beyond ‘employability’, such as the heightened moral and symbolic position of Roma with vocational training credentials compared with their peers and parents. Overall, the contributions to this SI highlight the need for an intersectional lens in educational and social mobility studies to explore the intertwined effects of class, racialised ethnicity, gender, and (when relevant) religion. Rather than providing individual explanations of education-driven social mobility, the papers draw attention to the complexity, ambivalence, and costs of the socially and historically embedded processes for moving between strata in the social space. In so doing, they demonstrate the fallacy or myth of meritocracy. Instead, they highlight a ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011), or unfounded, excessive, and false promises of social mobility: that ‘young people are offered a fantasy of impossible dreams and non-existent opportunities if only they engage with low level vocational [or further] education within a divided education system which contributes to the reproduction of social inequality’ (Pantea 2022, in this SI).

Beyond these considerations, many articles emphasise the relevance of distinct opportunity structures (i.e. the chances that are structurally available to various social groups and different generations, depending on their social location) in terms of influencing the gains of educational investment. They also examine the role of spatial inequality alongside social and economic inequality in educational choice and mobility outcomes.

Our editorial manifesto can be summed up as advocating for the comparative study of the relationship between education and social mobility from an intersectional perspective. This perspective helps us go beyond country-specific, national social mobility trends to understand the hidden mechanisms underlying classed, gendered, and racialised inequalities. It reveals the factors that both drive and hinder the educational aspirations, choices, and outcomes of ‘othered’ and racialised ethnic minorities in both the Global South and North. We also advocate for more in-depth reflection on the individual consequences of education-driven social mobility under circumstances of racialised and socioeconomic inequality and prolonged uncertainty in our globalised contemporary world.

Note

1. Following Desmond and Emirbayer (2009), we use ‘racial domination’ to mean institutional racism beyond everyday interpersonal racism. As historically embedded, systematic White domination over People of Colour, institutional racism withholds from People of Colour opportunities, privileges, and rights that many Whites enjoy. In this usage, Whiteness is an analytical notion referring to the specific dimensions of racism that elevate White people over People of Colour. It delineates a location of unearned structural advantage and race privilege.

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