

Why social mobility is key to explaining attitudes toward multiculturalism

*What explains attitudes toward multiculturalism in Europe? And how do citizens without a migration background react when the cities they live in become more diverse? Drawing on a new study, **Lisa-Marie Kraus and Stijn Daenekindt** show that social mobility is a key factor in determining why some people are more optimistic about multiculturalism than others.*

People without a migration background have become a numerical minority in numerous Western European cities such as [London](#), [Amsterdam](#), [Rotterdam](#) and [Vienna](#). Looking at the generation of children aged 15 and younger, these numbers are increasing, indicating that this is a lasting phenomenon.

These evolutions generate various challenges. One important aspect in this regard is how people *without* a migration background experience their changing status and, more generally, how this influences their attitudes towards multiculturalism. Some people may respond optimistically towards living in such multicultural societies: they may support ethnic diversity, embrace the idea of a multi-ethnic city and consider it as part of everyday life. Other people are rather pessimistic: they may insist on maintaining their 'own' culture and reject other cultural influences. How can we understand the variation in these attitudes among people without a migration background?

Inspired by numerous studies which have demonstrated the link between educational attainment and attitudes towards ethnic diversity, we hypothesised that we can find a partial answer to this question by focusing on *educational social mobility*. Educationally socially mobile people either hold a higher (upward mobility) or lower (downward mobility) educational qualification than their parents.

Previous research has shown that the experience of educational social mobility is an influential factor in various domains of social life and highlights the consequences of social mobility. In particular, downward mobility has been connected to feelings of frustration, depression and failure as it entails a drop in social status. Yet, even if upward mobility entails increased social status, it can also come with negative consequences.

This is because both upward and downward mobility ultimately puts individuals in a different social environment from the one they were raised in. Hence, the socially mobile are exposed to 'alien' lifestyles, perspectives, attitudes and habits. Because of this, socially mobile individuals may neither feel genuinely at home in the social environment in which they were raised, nor in the one in which they end up. We believe that this experience of different contexts is related to the multicultural attitudes of the socially mobile.

To investigate the role of social mobility in the formation of multicultural attitudes, we used data from people without a migration background who live in five highly ethnically diverse Western European cities: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Malmö, Rotterdam and Vienna. Our [analyses](#) show that the experience of social mobility is related to more optimistic multicultural attitudes.

Socially mobile individuals have a more positive outlook on multicultural societies than their immobile counterparts. Both upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals demonstrate greater openness to multiculturalism. While the experience of social mobility, and in particular downward mobility, has generally been associated with rather negative inter-ethnic attitudes, our study finds no evidence for this. On the contrary, both upwardly and downwardly mobile people are more open to multiculturalism than their immobile peers.

What explains this finding? We believe that the experience of social mobility allows people to adapt more easily to ethnically diverse social contexts. The socially mobile have encountered different social environments throughout their lives. This experience involves the adaptation to, and navigation of, lifestyles typical of different social environments. The exposure to different social environments may lead to a general ability to adapt to different contexts and moving between these environments may make the navigation of different contexts a 'habit'. Mobile individuals have, so to speak, embodied the ability to adapt to diversity and this is reflected in their attitudes towards multi-ethnic cities.

Our findings provide insights into the way attitudes towards multiculturalism are developed in general. They suggest that if policymakers wish to stimulate support for multiculturalism among those without a migration background, they might achieve this through policies which focus on other forms of diversity, such as the desegregation of neighbourhoods and schools along the lines of social class.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in [European Societies](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Alice](#) on [Unsplash](#)
