European societies have gone through dramatic economic, socio-cultural and demographic changes in recent decades, and migration – within European countries as well as from other parts of the world – has been instrumental in driving these transformations. We spoke to Dr Katrine Fangen, who is Scientific Coordinator of a project that looks to assess what it is like to be a young immigrant in a modern European society, and what factors can determine social exclusion or inclusion.

Understanding the barriers immigrants face in Europe

**EUMARGINS, a project** instigated by Katrine Fangen at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo, investigates the experiences of young adult immigrants from seven urban-metropolitan areas in seven different European countries.

More than 200 young migrants and descendants from Norway, Sweden, Italy, France, Spain, Estonia and the UK were interviewed about their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in school, work, in the neighbourhood and in the city, with the overall aim of finding out exactly what it is that hinders their inclusion in these countries, and what factors can help it open up for them.

With the project drawing to a close on the 1st October 2011, the team working on it have written two books that outline what their findings have shown. The first book, which was published by Ashgate in 2010, is about the national contexts, and how they form the conditions for exclusion and inclusion for young immigrants in terms of circumstances such as migration policy and job opportunities.

The second book, which is being published by Palgrave Macmillan in October 2011 is an attempt to simultaneously trace the life stories of the young immigrants and to make analytical comparisons between countries. By focusing on different life arenas, like work, school, neighbourhood, family and networks, they reveal how young adults experience being excluded in some settings, while being included in other settings. Comparing life stories across countries is in fact quite a complex task and there are not many projects that have done this sort of thing before, so the findings should be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders, such as researchers, policy makers and NGO workers on a European level. Areas that will be focused on include migration experiences, education, labour market, civic and political participation, and identity.

Fangen talks about some of what the project has allowed them to find out: "For
example, there is a big difference between the southern European countries and Nordic countries in terms of opportunities that young immigrants find,” she explains. “There is a large irregular economy in Spain i.e. a lot of people who are working who are not complying with some aspect of immigration law, and so in fact it is a lot easier for these irregular migrants there than it is for them in a country such as Sweden.

“The problem with this is that because so many of them are existing in this irregular fashion, their job opportunities are limited and they have very few opportunities to get involved in education as they must earn money to get by. The same sorts of obstacles are now arising in more liberal economies such as the UK and Estonia.”

Another issue that is touched on in the books is the effect that the recent financial crisis has had on these young immigrants. Opportunities for study and regular work are in steep decline in countries that have been overtly affected by the recession, whereas in countries such as Norway that have not been hit so hard, there is a much better situation in this sense.

The way in which people identify themselves within a society can be very revealing, and it is interesting to see the variation in young immigrants between each country in regards to this, as Fangen explains: “A lot of young immigrants in Norway expressed a sense of feeling different; even those who were 2nd generation often labelled themselves as ‘foreigners’ despite being technically Norwegian.

“In countries such as the UK that have a much more multicultural society, this was a lot less common. I think this is an interesting point, as it encapsulates the complexity and ambiguity of what is meant by exclusion or inclusion. In some contexts it can mean whether someone is involved in the education system or has regular work, whereas in others it can be about whether that individual feels like they belong to a society or not.”

Comparing France and the UK in terms of this sense of identity also provides some intriguing results.

“These two countries have a similar past in terms of their histories of colonialism; however, in contrast to the UK, France has a policy of assimilation meaning that immigrants are encouraged to try and become ‘French’ as possible. This has led to a situation in which young immigrants who embrace this policy experience a lot less exclusion than those who wish to remain different.”

Fangen explains a little about the methods that were used to interpret the data: “Our main analytical tool was what is called the ‘extended case method’,” she says, “which is based on a primary qualitative data sample consisting of 250 life story interviews from seven different countries.

“Although EUMARGINS is primarily a qualitative project, analysis of existing national quantitative statistics was also used in conjunction with the life-story interviews and participant observations. We feel that the combination of these methods enabled us to illustrate the complexity of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, and what factors can cause the transition from one to the other over time.

“We also made sure in regards to the qualitative data to speak to young migrants from highly varied backgrounds in terms of ethnic background, migration status and whether they were 1st or 2nd generation immigrants, as we were very keen to work out which groups were most excluded and included in each country.”

The overall aim of the project is to help provide a better understanding of what barriers young immigrants from around Europe meet throughout their life, so that governments and other organisations can aid them more effectively in achieving their full potential. The latest book goes into depth about exactly what factors have helped and hindered these young people throughout the courses of their lives, and so hopefully the information it provides will eventually have a positive impact on their well-being.

Katrine Fangen

Katrine Fangen is associate professor and Scientific Coordinator of EUMARGINS at the University of Oslo (Norway). Fangen has contributed to the field of youth research since 1990, and immigration research since 1999. More specifically, she has done research on issues such as political orientation among youth, belonging and ethnic identity. She is a co-editor of Nordic Journal of Youth Research (YOUNG), which is a SAGE journal and she is a board member of the Sociology of Migration network of the European Sociological Association (ESA).

At a glance
Project Information

Project Title:
EUMARGINS—On the Margins of the European Community

Project Objective:
The main objective of EUMARGINS is to examine the processes that contribute to the inclusion and exclusion of young adult immigrants and descendants in seven European countries. Specifically, to identify the aspects of social exclusion that most frequently have an impact on the lives of young adults with immigrant background and the variations that exist among immigrant groups and national contexts.

Project Duration and Timing:
The project started 1 October 2008 and the project period lasts for three years (concluding on 30 September 2011).

Project Funding:
Funding (source and/or amount): EUMARGINS is a collaborative project financed by The Seventh Framework Programme for research and technological development (FP7) of the European Union. Maximum financial contribution to the project is EUR 1,418,732.00.

Project Partners:
NORWAY: Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo (Coordinator Institution)
ESTONIA: Institute of Baltic Studies
FRANCE: Association Recherches Observations Formations Enseignements (AROFE)
ITALY: Department of Anthropological Sciences, University of Genoa
SPAIN: GRUP IGIA
SWEDEN: Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg
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