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Diving into the big pond: Transitions into prestigious education contexts

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Critical perspectives on transitions into, through and beyond higher education, 15/10 2018, Brighton/UK

Educational
Research



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Like being pushed under water?



Rasmus: It's probably good that there's so much cramming in the first year, to show that you need to study on this programme: 'if you're not up for it, you shouldn't do it'. Eh, then they sort of manage to increase it [the workload] gradually without you noticing. Because I think there was a lot in the beginning, but when you look back we studied less.

Hedvig: Yes.

Rasmus: Eh, and then you noticed in the last part of the first year, it was very very very much.

John: It's quite mentally exhausting to feel like you're drowning all the time and that school pushes you under water and it like '[inhales]', you hardly get some air, you never get up to rest, only a bit during summer, but then the fall begins.

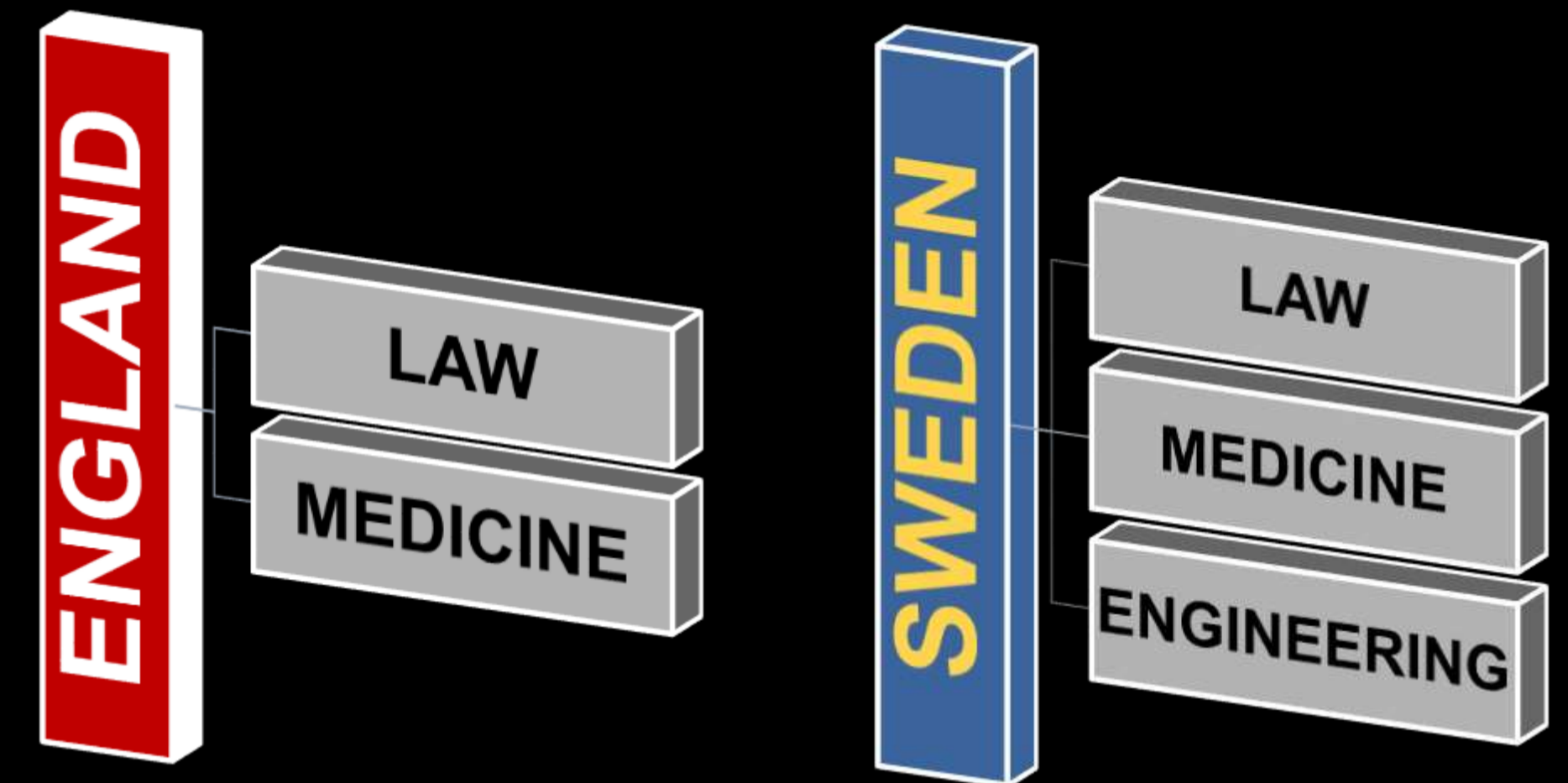
(Senior students, Engineering physics, Sweden, middle class)

Elite H.E. and (upper) middle-class students



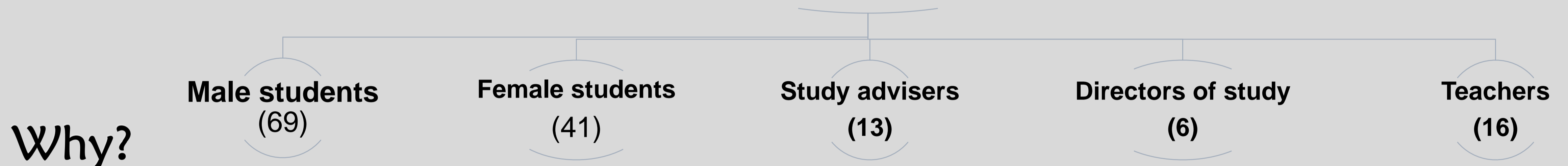
I. FISH IN WATER and some Others

“[W]hen habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a “fish in water”: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted”.
(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 127)



DATA

Semi-structured interviews



Why?

- I. Most research on disadvantaged groups; privileged = seldom subject to scrutiny.
- II. To explore the ways systems of stratification are produced, reproduced and transformed - need to analyse production of privilege as well as production of disadvantage.
- III. Educational achievement is not simply a celebratory success story for middle-class young people; Walkerdine et al. (2001) and Holmqvist (2017): anxiety, stress and profound fears of failure experienced by privileged young people growing up in a culture where anything less than excellence was regarded as failure.

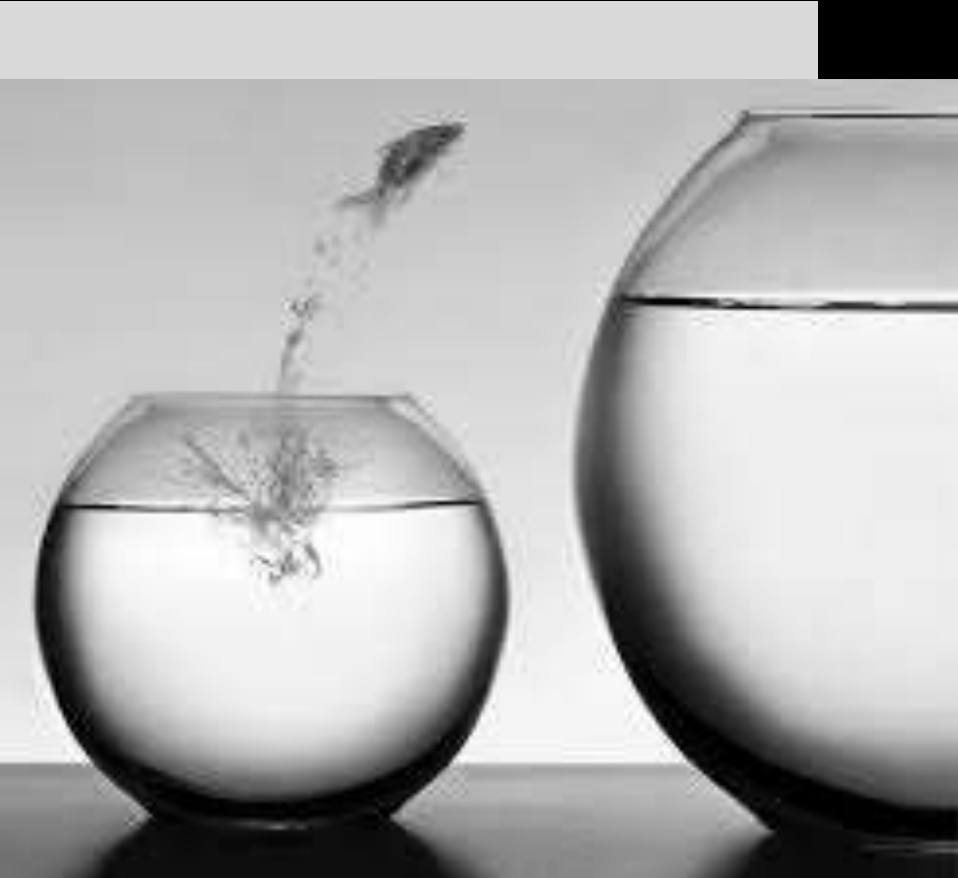
Prestige-related pressures

- 1) Changing frames of reference
- 2) Normalisation of high effort and stress

Mikaela: [T]here are of course some who [say] ... 'Yeah, but it should be stressful, it should be hard, it's prestigious because it's difficult. This is the best education in Sweden, we'll be the best lawyers in the country'; like you should be proud about being burned-out.

Interviewer: It's the ordeal in a way?

Mikaela: Yes, this is how to sift the wheat from the chaff. And the more stressed you are and the longer you stay in the library, the more often you're the last to leave the legal library, the more enviable your life is. And the more things you do on the side, the more people look up to you. For me and many others it has meant reconsidering one's self-image ... 'cos all who come here enter with very high grades ... or have been very clever on the SweSat test. So they've got an image of themselves as smarter than the rest of the Swedish population. But even if you come here with very [personally] humble goals – you want to save the world [rather than have a prestigious career] - you also have high goals, 'cos otherwise you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be here if you weren't ambitious. And then we put a clique of ambitious students - who probably have stressed their entire lives - we put them together with the requirement that they should get top grades overall, in all subjects. And we tell you 'read these propositions in the weekend', and then we see what happens to people. Uh, it's not that funny, actually, people have breakdowns all the time. The law department merely [says] 'Well, but everyone is stressed, we have the Student Health'. And the Student Health doesn't help, 'cos it's not about an individual's experiences, it's about all students. It's not a private problem, it's a structural problem. (senior student, law, Sweden, middle class)



Diving into the big pond

(1) Changing frames of reference

I. FISH IN WATER and some Others

II. FISH IN BIG PONDS

- Peer comparisons and academic self-concept: From the 'best' to average
- Peer comparisons beyond academic success
- Social comparisons with successful family members

Austin: At school they've always been maybe towards the front and I think when they get here they maybe feel like they're lagging behind a little bit. Cos when they look at other people who've maybe got very high grades and theirs are slightly lower, it's kind of a first experience for them of that. Because they've always been used to having, you know, being at the top of the class. So I think that takes, for some people, a bit of adjusting to. (senior student, medicine, England, middle class)

Lina: You must realize that everyone else is also that smart person. So you're like a whole new group of, now you're a new selection group, so now it's like, 'it's okay that there are people who grasp better you' [...] I don't think people really get that, cos it's such a transition. (senior student, physics, Sweden, middle class)



Just keep swimming!

(2) Normalisation of high effort and stress

I. HIGH EFFORT

- You ought to work hard (selective + moral + rewarding + preparation for career)
- Identity: stamina, challenges and academic high achiever
- Peer culture – ‘everyone else works hard and manage’

II. HIGH STRESS

- (Di)stress is expected and a habit – ‘challenges are stressful’
- A test and preparation for work-life
- Community building – ‘we suffer together’

Interviewer: Ok, so how many people actually become sick, get burnouts? Do you have any idea?

Philip: I wouldn't know, and even if they did they wouldn't tell. It's that sort of hyper-masculine sort of culture and they would not tell, they would not tell, everyone's burnt out, everyone's at their limit, everyone's at the limit but we sort of enjoy that [laughs], it's crazy. Even me as an individual, I'm at my limit now and I'm pushing and pushing and pushing and I might fail, I might bomb my dissertation, I might, I might pass, and it's like, I don't know. It's like, I don't know, it's like I'm addicted to being uncomfortable.

(Senior student, law, England, working class)

Inside and outside the 'prestige bubble'

Nils: [W]e have a very strong community within the programme and that's good because you learn from each other and you also help each other in various situations. But that easily also makes you fixate in your tiny bubble as you only meet medical students ... It can be pretty nice to change company as well because otherwise you easily put too much blame on yourself if things go wrong; you come to think of yourself as completely useless.

(Senior student, medicine, Sweden, middle class)

Travis: I don't regret the raw emotion that I feel: that's the one that ends up determining your character ... I think that for someone whose had more of a sheltered life, if they've grown up being able to walk away from a situation that they don't like, then they aren't going to cope well when stress hits them on the ward. Whereas I've gone, you know, I have felt like 'my confidence has gone', I have felt like 'I'm not very good' and yet I can go onto the ward now and I feel I can cope with pressure a little better than other people can.

(senior student, Law, England, working class)



Class and gender

Middle-class students were seen to experience...

- i) *less fear* of failure due to cultural, social and economic resources, e.g. academic and social integration, recognition and 'safety-net'
- ii) *more fear* of failure due to exaggerated expectations (from themselves and others) and restricted experiences of managing failure.

Men were seen to ...

- i) experience and express *less fear* of failure due to cultural norms, e.g. recognition despite mistakes and low effort
- ii) *manage better* due to self-confidence and work/rest balance, e.g. avoiding distress
- iii) *fail more often* due to lower competence (lower effort in school and H.E.) and conceal vulnerability (e.g. stress, fear)

Masculinity in transition

Josef: It started really lousy. I had cruised through elementary school and the entire upper secondary school; I never studied, because I managed anyway. Eh, then I thought, I thought it would be almost the same here: that it was enough to attend the lectures. [...] My attitude was 'this shouldn't be that difficult', at least that was what I hoped, blue eyed. Eh and it was just crazy and then I flunked my first exam, flunked the second exam and then, yeh, a downward spiral.

(Senior student, Physics, Sweden, middle class)

Daniel: People react differently when you tell them you're studying to be a doctor. Some just think 'Wow, how awesome, how cool', sort of. Some think 'OK, wow! Then you've gotta be very smart' or 'you must study a lot'. And I've noticed that people get a bit upset when I say that the difficult thing was to enter, and that I don't think I'm studying as exceptionally as you might expect a medical student to do. And people seem to be slightly annoyed sometimes: 'Why don't you need to make more effort? Why do you manage without having to study excessively?'

Interviewer: *As something negative?*

Daniel: They think I ought to, that a medical student should be required to study more. I don't know why.

(Senior student, Medicine, Sweden, middle class)



Transitions without elevated stress levels

- i) **Strict work hours:** regular office hours and restricted engagement in ECA
- ii) **Belonging:** feeling 'normal' in a peer community characterized by highly ambitious students with similar interests (e.g. among 'nerds')
- iii) **Completion as success:** top H.E. seemed unreachable and was attained; quit competing because of the fierce competition
- iv) **Wellbeing as a goal:** dropped work pace due to being 'done with' a high-stress lifestyle and academic perfecting (e.g. health risks, widening goals)



Conclusions

- The transition into prestigious H.E. was an expected ‘challenge’ by the students, still, a shock for most of them (e.g. BFLPE).
- Students generally emphasised the importance and joy of sharing workloads and difficult experiences with peers, but the peer community was also identified as a risk.
- Stress-related mental health issues and poor wellbeing may be exacerbated in particular programmes and universities by what we refer to as ‘prestige-related’ stress.
- Our data suggest that to justify and maintain their elite status, programmes (and professions) must be regarded as sufficiently difficult that only the ‘best’ will cope, and also involve excessively long working hours and very high levels of stress.
- As concerns about student mental health and wellbeing grow, we need to scrutinise and challenge cultures in which high levels of student stress, excessive working hours and burnout are normalised and sometimes valorised.
- Structural and cultural changes are required in addition to providing individual counselling and support.
- As Francis and Mills (2012) argue, we need to explore possibilities for developing non-damaging models of education, and we argue for professional life too.



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Thank you!

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Publications

- Nyström, and Jackson. Forthcoming. 'Coping with Higher Education Expectations: Stress and Wellbeing in Prestigious Degree Programmes'. In Beasley et al. (eds.) *Social Justice in Times of Crisis and Hope*. Peter Lang Publishers.
- Nyström, Jackson, and Salminen Karlsson. 2018. 'What counts as success? Constructions of achievement in prestigious higher education programme', *Research Papers in Education*
- Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson. Forthcoming. *Men and Masculinities in Higher Education: Privilege and Pressure*

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Implications of learning cultures and subjective success definitions

- 1) Changing frames of reference
- 2) Normalisation of high effort and stress
- 3) Dominating success definition – Stress-less achievement



LAW – Teacher-oriented (EN) and PBL (SW)

- Low or moderate grades = shame + ‘no’ career
- Competitive and individualistic culture, ‘the harsh lawyer’



MEDICINE – PBL, graded (EN) and non-graded (SW)

- ‘Moral beings’ and social engagement
- Being a ‘good doctor’ is more about ... ‘the compassionate doctor’



PHYSICS – Teacher-oriented (SW)

- Intelligence at stake
- Social and academic ‘failure friendly’, ‘the nerdy physicist’