

Author's accepted manuscript (postprint)

A sense of unease: elite high school students negotiating historical privilege

Halvorsen, P.

Published in: Journal of Youth Studies  
DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2020.1844169

Available online: 13 Nov. 2020

Citation:

Halvorsen, P. (2020). A sense of unease: elite high school students negotiating historical privilege. Journal of Youth Studies. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2020.1844169

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Youth Studies on (13/11/2020), available online:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2020.1844169>

## **Author's Accepted Manuscript (AAM) of:**

A Sense of Unease:  
Elite High School Students Negotiating Historical Privilege

By **Pål Halvorsen**

**Nord university**

[pal.halvorsen@nord.no](mailto:pal.halvorsen@nord.no)

### **Abstract:**

The Scandinavian public school systems are free of charge and are central institutions upholding the egalitarian ideals that these societies are famous for. However, they do provide some students with privileged resources and enables trajectories that are out of reach for others. In this article, we address how students at two elite high schools in central Oslo acquire knowledge and relate to the 'eliteness' of their schools. Through individual interviews with 73 students we arrive at a closer understanding of elite schools and privileged students in the Norwegian school system. The two schools, Oslo Commerce School (OCS) and Schola Osloensis (SO), share elite characteristics, but have strikingly different school cultures. Their elite identification is examined through looking at their attitude towards learning, school work and elite status. The study unfolds how the 'ease' often associated with elite education is not necessarily developed, and is acquired in different ways. This glimpse into Norwegian elite schooling offers a challenge to the generalizability of studies from more market-oriented school systems.

Keywords: Egalitarianism, elite education, privilege, schoolwork, youth

### **Introduction**

The ways in which privilege is legitimised within elite high schools have been identified in several countries, such as the USA, (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a; Khan, 2011), Britain (Duffell, 2010), France (Bourdieu, 1996, van Zanten, 2016), Germany (Deppe & Krüger, 2016) Scotland (Forbes & Lingard, 2013) and Singapore (Goh, 2007). In Norway there is rich register-based research documenting how those who come from initially privileged families benefit the most from an apparently egalitarian school system (Andersen & Hansen, 2012; Wiborg & Hansen, 2009). This article poses the question of how privilege is acquired and legitimised in Norwegian elite schools. More specifically, the attempt here, as Sherman (2017: 12), is to compensate for the lack of scholarly accounts of elite experiences by focusing on 'how elite people talk about questions of privilege'. The schools are situated in what has been termed an

exceptionally egalitarian culture; where both economic inequality is comparatively low, due to the equal and fair distributing policies of the welfare state, and sophisticated cultural taste reputedly does not help to enhance privilege (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014). The schools are a part of the free public school system. The Norwegian culture has been described as occupied with “conspicuous modesty” (Daloz, 2010: 55), meaning that visible signs of belonging to the elite are toned down and not shown publicly. A hypothesis might be that this will lead to a different kind of acquisition of privilege than what has been found in elite schools in more market-oriented countries.

At the same time, during recent decades there has been both strong economic growth and rising inequality in Norway, mirroring a development found in many other countries (Aaberge & Atkinson, 2008). Oslo also stands out in the national context with a significant residential segregation by class and ethnicity. The western part of the city, where both the schools are located, is characterized by wealth, affluence and few minorities, in contrast to the eastern part, which is marked by the opposite. Certain parts of the western side has even been described as ‘golden ghettos’ because of the advantages this area offers (Ljunggren & Andersen, 2014).

The article is organized first with a section presenting perspectives on the connections between privilege, ease, adolescence and motivation, and discussing the central notions that are relevant for the present cases. After that there is a descriptive section about Oslo Commerce School and Schola Osloensis as examples of elite schools in Norway. This is followed by a section on methods and the sample which the study is based on, and further, the analyses of the students’ negotiations of elite identity. Finally, discussion and suggestive conclusions complete the article.

### **Privilege, and ease**

Building on Khan’s seminal (2011) work on elite schooling, Khan and Jerolmack (2013: 9) described the relationship between rhetoric and practice as one of “saying meritocracy and doing privilege”. They found that elite students use the discourse of meritocracy to explain their privileged position –they claim to earn their positions through “hard work”. However, Khan’s ethnographic data suggested that these students did not necessarily study a lot, but they learned to talk as if they did. The key competence they acquired was a specific and embodied attitude

towards the world, labelled as “ease”. In another article, Khan (2014: 136) defines ease as “a developed capacity to navigate a diverse range of social institutions”. “Ease” thus contains an extrinsic orientation towards a diverse range of social institutions, and excludes “narrowness” or specialisation. The idea of ease can be traced back to the concept of “sprezzatura” (Daloz, 2013: 186), which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “studied carelessness”. It is also related to Bourdieu’s (1984) conception of the “taste of freedom”, in contrast to the lower classes’ “taste of necessity”.

Arguing that you “work hard” while not actually doing it might seem the opposite of “ease”, but the main argument of Khan is that elite legitimation has shifted from a privileged to a meritocratic discourse, meaning that the content remains the same while the descriptions change. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) also charted the different ways elite students learn how to fulfil their elite position roles through what he calls a “hidden curriculum”. Chase (2008) has documented the darker sides of the extra-curricular elite high school experience – the pressure, the endless pursuit of perfection and excellence (where being average is considered failure), and how this may lead to “gender extremes” and exclusive social hierarchies. These findings also resonate with elite studies in Scandinavia (Author 2020, Holmqvist, 2017).

Sherman (2017) contests these depictions of elites as regarding themselves entitled. Quite the opposite, she writes, elites often acknowledge the role luck has played in their lives, and they struggle to legitimise their positions. This is not a way of ‘hiding’ privilege through the strategic use of a meritocratic discourse, she claims. It is in fact an *unease* with explaining their position. For instance the different family background influences how they see their position and that it depends upon what comparisons are made. “Looking upward” or “looking downward” are two different ways of speaking about one’s position where the comparison is either with more privileged people, or less privileged people. In other words, these elites do not represent themselves as outside of interest or politics – they are not “careless”, but connect their decisions to a “taste of necessity”. In the following, the case of two elite high schools in Oslo will be used to unfold elite identifications in an egalitarian culture . This will be done by analysing how students talk about schoolwork, privilege and the concept of elite. These traditional notions of eliteness as privilege and elite education allow us to focus on elite identification from the reflexive perspective of the students.

## **Adolescence, and motivation**

Adolescence is often perceived as a stage everybody has to pass through on the way from being a child to becoming an adult (Fine, 2001: 188). Instead of being an “in between” state, adolescence has become a category on its own terms (Zerubavel, 1994). In this article, adolescence is viewed as a period which offers the availability to “select behaviour characteristic of both child and adults” (Fine, 2001: 12). However, the theory of culture as a toolbox, which Fine relates to, implies an overly strategic view of the actor, and therefore this article considers the different characteristics of child and adult behaviour as repertoires of evaluation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Instead of using culture as tools, the repertoires of evaluation are drawn upon by the actors more freely, in order to attach their actions to meanings in the civil sphere. This article’s approach is abductive in order to ensure a sensitivity towards the empirical material (Vassenden, 2018, Vassenden & Jonvik, 2018, Tavory & Timmermanns, 2014), meaning that different theories form the basis for the research, but none were given a privileged status.

In a comparison of Norwegian and American youth’s responses to work rewards Hjort (2015) finds that his US respondents, ethnic minority youth in both countries and men in both countries are motivated by extrinsic work rewards, while young women, students who do well in school and students with artistic ambitions value intrinsic work rewards. This distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic has a long tradition, and broadly categorizes whether rewards such as money or success seem attractive, or rewards such as understanding and control have greater appeal (Hjort, 2015). In the school context I regard extracurricular awards or social status outside of the school context as extrinsic rewards, and good grades and social status at the school as intrinsic rewards. In principle grades might be both extrinsic and intrinsic, but as the analysis shows it is in practice a sign of intrinsic orientation when the students talk about their interest for knowing. Mullen (2010, cited in Pullman & Andres, 2019) finds that elite students are interested in ‘intellectual and personal qualities for the intrinsic satisfaction of doing so’ (209) instead of ‘the extrinsic goal of getting a good job or preparing for a specific career’ (73). Hahl and Zuckerman (2014) find that high-status actors, a category which I argue elite high school students fit into, are often perceived – both by themselves and others – as less authentic than lower-status actors. Their motivations are assumed to be geared towards gaining extrinsic rewards, such as money or titles, instead of professed values, such as the pursuit of justice for

future students of law (Hahl et al., 2017). However, such assumptions might cause people to feel uneasy, and thus spur them to justify their authenticity, as Hahl et al. (2017) defines as being what one claims to be, which they also describe in a Goffmanian way as a consistency between “front-” and “backstage”. In addition it is worth mentioning that these beliefs do change over the course of people’s lives (Pullman & Andres, 2019).

To some extent, the extrinsic-intrinsic binary can be read equivalently to the embodied form of cultural capital and the objectified form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), in the sense that objectified cultural capital of high status, such as works of art, can be seen as the extrinsic equivalent of the embodied knowledge of how to understand the meaning of an artwork. In order to appear authentic one has to have both, so to merely be in possession of an artwork without being able to talk about it or understand it will be perceived as inauthentic.

According to the theories of motivation discussed above, people value extrinsic and intrinsic rewards differently. The way they talk about rewards and what they value can be seen as performances by which they (try to) legitimise their positions. What is of interest here is which motivations the students voice in the interviews, rather than what they are actually motivated by, since this is believed to provide information about what they conceive as legitimate in the given contexts. When students within an artistic field claim to be motivated by intrinsic work rewards, they are most probably being genuine, but they also might be regarded as “learning the field”, in the Bourdieusian sense (Bathmaker et al., 2013). The same could probably be said about business students aiming at extrinsic rewards. When it comes to high school students, their positions are made legitimate by their entry grades – they have fulfilled the requirements to gain access. Nevertheless, the position as a student at a specific school – in the sense of belonging to the school – is something you have to prove yourself worthy of. Every year students change schools or ‘drop out’ giving as a reason that they fit better in at another school or in the workforce. The students themselves also have to make sense of their position. Studies of American high school students show that elite school students consider themselves “entitled” to their positions (Khan 2011), which means that they do not have to prove themselves worthy of attending the schools.

### **Elite Schools in Norway: Oslo Commerce School and Schola Osloensis**

The educational policy in Norway aims at universal access, the vast majority of students attend the public schools which are free of charge, and explicitly attempts to keep social inequalities low (Hegna et al. 2012). However, this policy does not exclude elite schools, but the elite schools are atypical in an egalitarian school system. Studies of elite schools in Norway is sparse, and the project this study is a part of can be considered a starting point for describing and understanding them (Jarness, Flemmen & Pedersen, 2019, Pedersen, Flemmen & Jarness, 2019, Author, 2020). Schola Osloensis (SO) is the most prestigious upper-secondary school in Norway, and ‘attracts the offspring of Oslo’s class fractions richest in cultural capital’ (Jarness et al., 2019). Oslo Commerce School is regarded as the best school for economically oriented students, and has the highest amount of students with background from the economic elite (Andersen et al., 2017).

Oslo Commerce School (OCS), and Schola Osloensis (SO) are both situated in the western part of Oslo city centre, which is considered to be symbolically important sites for power in Norway. They are both historical elite schools, and *functional* elite schools (Börjesson, 2016: 94) in that they are «understood as sites for the formation of tomorrow’s dominant agents». The geographical location of the schools shows which context the students grow up in, but are also symbolically important venues for the students. OCS has typically been associated with high-quality education in economics and marketing and with recruitment from the wealthy western parts of Oslo. SO has traditionally been regarded as the scholastically most prestigious high school in the country. It also has a more clearly meritocratic recruitment profile, independent of geographical and socioeconomic area.

OCS was established in 1875, and provides education with a focus on finance and business. It represented the highest level of commercial education available in Norway until the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration (NHH) was established in 1936, and there have been close ties between the two schools ever since (Larsen 2005). For instance the headmaster of NHH, in the *Festschrift*<sup>1</sup> of the 125-year anniversary of OCS, emphasized their relationship. Thus it is accurate to say that OCS qualifies as *historically* elite (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b). OCS is one of the largest schools in Oslo with 1000 students (16-19 years old) and 100 employees. The gender composition of the students is approximately 50% boys and 50% girls. The school is located in a grand functionalist building and has the National Library,

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a German phrase for a book, most often an edited volume consisting of several chapters, meant to honour an organisation or a person.

which the students use as their reading hall, as its close neighbour. Other nearby buildings include the Royal Castle, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and several embassies. The vision of OCS is “tradition and innovation”, which I interpret as a manifestation and expression of its long history, its close ties to the Norwegian Conservative party, and a long-standing emphasis on business life and entrepreneurship. The students mostly come from areas dominated by presumptively privileged families.

Schola Osloensis (SO) is the oldest high school in Norway, established in year 1153. The grade level requirement for access to SO is among the highest in Oslo, and has been so throughout the entire history of the school. The school’s motto is the Latin phrase *Non scholae, sed vitae discimus* ([We do not learn for] ‘the sake of school but for the sake of life’). This reflects the school’s cultural orientation. Another expression of this cultural disposition is that the school theatre stages plays by, for example, Strindberg and Dostoyevsky, as opposed to humorous school revues common at other high schools (including OCS). But as with OCS, Schola Osloensis takes great pride in having famous politicians and authors as alumni. There is a portrait of Henrik Wergeland, one of Norway’s greatest poets, on a wall in the centre of the building. There are marble boards with engraved names of former students – such as the former Prime Minister, now Secretary-General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg – hanging in the hallways. A wide range of notable politicians are former students, as is Norway’s King Harald. As well as being historically elite, SO can also be said to be *scholastically* elite (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b). Close by we find the buildings housing the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education, the main public library in Oslo, and a cemetery where several of the most prominent figures of Norwegian history are buried.

The school provides high-quality courses in a wide array of subjects, including Latin, a subject which is only rarely taught in Norwegian high schools. This school has maintained a position close to the top in Oslo when it comes to grades necessary for access. The school has around 600 students (16-19 years old) and 75 employees. The gender composition at SO is skewed, with approximately 70% girls and 30% boys.

As Fine (2001) has pointed out, schools differ in what activities are regarded as prestigious. The status systems at the two schools here are strikingly contrasting in this regard. High status pursuits at OCS include excessive partying, playing in or working with the annual revue, and sexual experiences, whereas such activities are regarded as vulgar and maybe low-



status at SO. The high status pursuits at SO involve being successful in an organisation (often political), participating in the Model UN, and doing well at school tests. Norwegian high schools normally do not organise school activities for the students after classes, but this is done at both OCS and SO, making them exceptional as elite venues.

### **Interviewing Adolescent Elites**

73 individual interviews, lasting approximately two hours each, were undertaken at the two high schools, with adolescents aged 17 or 18. We gained access to the schools through formal inquiries to the headmasters. We also interviewed the headmasters and conducted ethnographic observations at the final school day ceremonies, where diplomas were handed out.

The interviews were conducted by trained sociologists, 40 of them by the author, and provides the main material for analysis. They were open-ended and inductive (Weiss, 1994, Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), covering a wide variety of topics. These included parental education and employment, family wealth, networks at OCS and OS, social hierarchies at the school, the importance of studying, as well as plans for the future. However, other topics – such as sports, partying and holidays – were also broached. The interviewees were recruited through a focus group with four students. They in turn gave us ten interviewees each to contact, which makes it a sort of snowball sampling (Weiss, 1994: 25). In principle it would have given us 80 interviews, but not all responded or were able to fit the interview in their schedule. As Table 1 and 2 show there are differences in class background among the students but also clear similarities, and through the interviews we understand that both popular and successful students are among the sample. For instance we have students in important positions, such as leaders in different groups, and we have students that many of the other talk about in the interviews as examples of popular people.

All participants filled in a short survey with questions from the “Young in Oslo” study (N 24 000) (Andersen & Bakken, 2016). The combination of survey and interview data enabled us to establish a rather precise classification using the Oslo Register Data Class scheme (Hansen, Flemmen, & Andersen, 2009) (see Fig. 1) of the participants. The ORDC classification draws on the notion of the social space according to Bourdieu (1984), and is based on occupational classification. Through information about the parents occupation and descriptions of what they do at work we could locate them here. It consists of a hierarchical dimension which differentiates

between six levels, and a horizontal level placing each class into fractions according to the principle of capital composition. One fraction of professions categorized as consisting of cultural capital, one fraction consisting of economic capital, and lastly, a balanced fraction, where those with a fairly similar amount of cultural and economic capital is located. Where the parents diverged we used a ‘dominance approach’ where the highest class position became the counting, and if the parents were at the same hierarchical level we prioritised the capital with the highest esteem at the respective schools.

<b>CAPITAL +</b>				
<b>Cultural upper class</b> Professors, artists, architects, art directors	<b>Balanced upper class</b> Doctors, judges, dentists, civil engineers	<b>Economic upper class</b> Top 10 % executives, managers, financial brokers, rentiers, self-employed		
<b>Cultural upper middle class</b> Upper and lower secondary school teachers, librarians, journalists, entertainment musicians	<b>Balanced upper middle class</b> Consultants, engineers and technicians, computer programmers	<b>Economic upper middle class</b> P50-P90 executives, managers, financial brokers, rentiers, self-employed		
<b>Cultural lower middle class</b> Pre-school and primary school teachers, technical illustrators	<b>Balanced lower middle class</b> Office clerks, nurses, police officers	<b>Economic lower middle class</b> Bottom 50 % executives, managers, financial brokers, rentiers, self-employed		
	<b>Skilled workers</b> Auxiliary nurses, electricians, carpenters	<b>Farmers, fishers, foresters</b>		
	<b>Unskilled workers</b> Assistants, cleaners, shop assistants, drivers			
	<b>Welfare dependents</b>			
	<b>CAPITAL -</b>			

Fig. 1: The Oslo Register Data Class scheme (CC = cultural capital, EC= economic capital).

As Table 1 shows, the class backgrounds at Schola Osloensis are predominantly (66.7%) from the upper or the upper middle classes as measured by the occupation of the parents.

	Father	Mother	Dominant
<b>Upper classes</b>	9	10	17
Cultural upper class (CU)	4	5	8
Balanced upper class (BU)	1	2	3
Economic upper class (EU)	4	3	6
<b>Upper middle classes</b>	13	8	11

Cultural upper middle class (CUM)	5	3	3
Balanced upper middle class (BUM)	4	4	6
Economic upper middle class (EUM)	4	1	2
<b>Lower middle classes</b>	3	10	6
Cultural lower middle class (CLM)	1	8	4
Balanced lower middle class (BLM)	2	2	2
Economic lower middle class (ELM)	0	0	0
<b>Working classes</b>	4	3	2
Skilled working class (SW)	2	2	2
Unskilled working class (UW)	2	1	0
Farmers (F)	0	0	0
<b>Welfare transfers (WT)</b>	0	0	0
<b>Missing</b>	9	7	2
<b>Sum</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>38</b>

Table 2 shows the class backgrounds at Oslo Commerce School (OCS) which is predominantly from the upper classes measured in the same way.

	Father	Mother	Dominant	
<b>Upper classes</b>	16	11	21	
Cultural Upper Class (CU)	0	2	2	
Balanced Upper Class (BU)	7	8	10	
Economic Upper Class (EU)	9	1	9	
<b>Upper Middle Classes</b>	11	15	10	
Cultural Upper Middle Classes (CUM)	3	6	2	
Balanced Upper Middle Classes (BUM)	4	6	4	
Economic Upper Middle Classes (EUM)	4	3	4	
<b>Lower Middle Classes</b>	1	3	0	
Cultural Lower Middle Classes (CLM)	1	2	0	
Balanced Lower Middle Classes (BLM)	0	1	0	
Economic Lower Middle Classes (ELM)	0	0	0	

<b>Working Classes</b>	0	1	0
Skilled Working Class	0	0	0
Unskilled Working Class	0	1	0
Farmers	0	0	0
<b>Welfare Transfers (WT)</b>	1	0	0
<b>Missing</b>	5	4	3
<b>Sum</b>	34	34	34

## Findings

We here ask the question of whether traditional notions of privilege and elite education contribute to elite identification and identity constructions among these elite students. This is done by scrutinizing how the students talk about schoolwork, privilege and the concept of elite.

### School Work and Elite Orientations

Intrinsic and extrinsic orientations are highly intertwined in the cultures at the two schools covered in this study, and maybe connected to the different subject focus they have, namely economics and culture. “Art for art’s sake” is, for instance, an intrinsic orientation, and the classical conception of the art world as a reversed economic world depicts the economic world as extrinsically oriented. In this section I will focus on how the interviewees described themselves and their background, their fellow students and the student culture at their schools. I argue that by analysing how students talk about their school and their family background, we will see when and how they orient themselves in terms of rewards, motivation and values. This has consequences for how open different arenas of society are perceived as being, and also influences the choice of school and, in turn, vocational choices (Lund, 2015).

How to show cleverness is a typical problem at elite high schools, and something the interviewees speak about as well. Sociological research finds that it is dealt with by pretending that one does not care (Mijs & Paulle, 2016). At OCS this attitude was demonstrated by the

claim that no-one did homework, everybody ‘naturally’ got good grades (author,2020), which is an example of what is called “effortless achievement” (Mac & Ghail, 1994, Jackson & Dempster, 2009). At SO we find no traces of this attitude, instead there is a common and legitimate openness around reading and trying to be clever. At SO you do not have to pretend that tests do not matter, everybody embraces tests as something that matters, and to such a degree that it builds up a potentially problematic pressure. Sander (balanced upper class), one of the students interviewed at SO, argues this makes SO different from other schools:

We have explicit focus on good moral of learning and to enjoy it. It is the vision of SO, erm..., I don’t quite remember it, it’s in Latin: *you do not learn for the sake of the school, but for the sake of life*. You don’t experience that if you attend for instance [names another school].

In this regard SO is atypical, with group activities both in and after classes, such as groups for different types of games, political and religious discussion groups, resembling the practices of elite education in the U. S. and England. When asked if they hang out at SO after school, and relate to it as more than a school, Sander affirms: “Yeah, exactly. It’s like a second home.” The intrinsic orientation towards school work is both explicitly voiced by the school, and put in motion by the students. As mentioned earlier, the school theatre also puts on plays of high culture, in contrast to the other Oslo schools which stage comedy revues. SO students generally embrace high culture, whereas OCS students distance themselves from it. The latter grumble, though, that their plays are not reviewed in the newspapers (as the revues generally are), and that their peers from other schools are not interested, so attendance at the shows tends to be lower. This might an expression of high culture working “quietly” in Norwegian society, and not functioning as a source of distinction (Skarpenes, 2007).

### **How the students relate to the concept of elite**

When questioned about the elite status of the school, students at OCS acknowledge their traditional elite status even though they refine the point by saying that it does not necessarily mean that they are elite, at least not in the same manner as before. For instance they claim to be more “chilled out” both in attire and conduct than earlier generations of students, who they portray as somewhat “uptight” and formally dressed. This historical transformation is confirmed in the mentioned *Festschrift*. After equating Oxford and Cambridge in England with OCS in

Norway as elite schools in the sense that they make you “become something”, Magnus (economic upper class) says:

Because everybody that – most of those who have attended OCS have their life partly planned for them: study, travel a bit, get a job, get married. And we live in Norway, and come from families with money, so there isn’t any... [...] We will not end up on the street anyway.

Magnus is thoughtful in his answers throughout the entire interview. He constantly corrects himself as he does in the beginning of this quote when he says “everybody”, and then corrects it to “most of”. This sort of awareness was apparent in many of the interviewees’ answers. When asked whether OCS should be considered an elite school, many say yes with reference to the school’s historical or symbolic sides. They acknowledge their privileges as white, West End students, but they also point out that elite in this context could mean different things.

At SO, the sense of historical elite status is perhaps even more tangible than at OCS given their large exclusive collection of Henrik Wergeland books in a special library in the basement, and the presence of an even longer history in the array of portraits on the walls. Nonetheless, the students at SO are hesitant to label their school as an elite school; a reluctance exemplified by Cecilia (balanced upper middle class):

I don’t really want to call us [elite], but I know that there is a sort of consciousness around maybe confirming that we are, in a way. I mean, yes, we’re an elite school because we’re so proud of our traditions, and these paintings, and that it’s so great and we get good grades, and yada, yada ... So yeah, that’s why I have a kind of negative... [Elite] is a negative word for me...

She elaborates:

Elite school, it’s like – what I – or it’s like almost everybody has an impression of like “yes, we are the best” (mimicking a self-indulgent voice). And then I don’t want to – I won’t call it an elite school anymore, of course there are good, good grades and – but I think it’s like that in many other places as well.

Cecilia notes traditions, paintings, good grades and an impressive building as indications of elite status, but plays it down by adding “yada, yada”. She associates elite schools with self-indulgent students, which she does not want SO’s student body to be. She dismisses grades as a sign of elite status because she thinks other schools do just as well. . As Kenway and Lazarus (2017) I experienced that the students had “difficulties” with implications about the schools as elite. They

find that disavowal of elite status is common among elite school members, and that it is connected to strategies of “deflecting critical attention”, for instance by portraying themselves as ‘diverse and inclusive’. At SO and OCS the disavowal is not as clear and strategic. Students at Oslo Commerce School for instance are open about the school lacking diversity and being too exclusive, and preoccupied with changing it (Author, 2019).

Monika (economic upper class), another SO student, takes the opposite position of Cecilia. She connects the elite status with high performing students and an understanding that attending this specific high school is useful in itself and will serve as an asset to get ahead in life. Being elite, as she conceives it, means always striving to become “the best of the best” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009):

To the degree that it facilitates for everybody to be bring out the best, because everybody is so conscious of the importance of the period, and how we manage now will have a large influence on how we will do afterwards. Erm..., that we do the best of it now makes it an elite school, I feel, and it’s very often difficult to be with people who manage that well.

She also notes the darker side of the academic focus, which is lack of recognition from students who are better than you. This leads us to questions of whether there is an academic “pressure” at the school, and how not-so-well-performing students are treated. While acknowledging some “pressure”, it seems that the general mood among the students is to help each other, and an understanding that an ethos of helping enables everybody to learn more. This way of relating to the challenge of not getting good results indicates a solidary and anti-competitive attitude among the students. Nevertheless, the high status they give to knowledge and doing one’s best at SO makes it legitimate to regard underperformers as naturally not smart, or outright “dumb”.

When asked about the typical student at SO, Sander (BUC) answers:

I would say a bit more free thinking, independent from society, erm, interesting maybe? A bit like... vintage. Erm, not really thinking about what other people might think of them. They do what they want to do, and feel that they are, kind of. Without a lot of pressure. Because of the milieu at SO. Erm, they... knit. Heh.

Sander is here constantly referring to “they”, meaning he does not regard himself as this typical SO student. He thinks of himself as more normal, and not so preoccupied with school. Most important is the appeal to worthiness by an intrinsic orientation.

While students at SO appeal to the moral worth of working hard, the OCS students claim to hardly be working at all. The OCS students try to position themselves somehow in the middle by “looking up” (Sherman, 2017) and drawing boundaries against ostentatiousness. For example Gustav (economic upper class), when he answers a question about the presence of money at the school:

Yes. And it’s not really something that you can see extreme expressions of at school, or, of course, there is always someone, someone who flashes lots of different stuff, and gets a new car from mum and dad, you know. But others, I find ... I think most people try to keep it a bit hidden, you know, not hidden but they do not talk a lot about it, but when you are at their place, it is just like “Wow!” you know, just insane. That’s how it is.

Here he both acknowledges the presence of money, and decries those who show it too obviously. This is echoed in the other interviews from OCS and shows that while the students recognize the elite status of the school, they regard their behaviour as “normal”.

### **Making Privileged Positions a Result of Efforts**

The position of being a student at both these schools is not something they seem to think they are entitled to, but something they have made efforts to achieve. Even after they have been admitted, they have to keep on making efforts in order to uphold the status of ‘belonging’ at the school. At OCS the students engage in activities, both at school and in their spare time – including pursuits not relating to school at all – which are talked about in a way that links to the moral values of work. Extracurricular affairs at OCS are described in terms of work. Like the “stay at home wives” who do “consumption work” in Sherman’s (2017) study of affluent New Yorkers, the students at OCS talk about organising “party buses” as “entrepreneurial work”, an activity which “actually” is central to their curriculum.

At SO students prove their right to belong to the school in other ways. The culture at SO is in some ways quite strict, in that everybody seems to agree about what is and is not accepted at the school. Theodor (economic upper middle) explains this with the example of politics:

It’s a tricky thing, because it’s a school where everybody talks about how open it is, and stuff like that, but to be politically conservative is totally taboo. I feel that certain things are ‘closeted’ sometimes, for example Polo [the brand], and house music, and everything related to preppy culture. It’s, like, put in a taboo-closet.



He also uses the example of Harry Potter and its associated fandom culture as a signifier which is highly regarded at SO:

I think that typically SO people will think, “Those who haven’t done the same as me within fandom aren’t as huge a fan as I am”, and because I haven’t read the books, I think a lot of people underestimate my relationship to Harry Potter.

Theodor here explains how his own version of his relationship to Harry Potter is not accepted among his peers because it’s not authentic enough. The example of knowing Harry Potter is brought up by many in the interviews, either in the same way as Theodor or from an ‘inside’ perspective of having read the books and engaging in different aspects of the fan culture. This resembles the importance of authenticity in subcultures (Bennett, 1999) and might be regarded as an intrinsic orientation because it is the status system within the culture that matters, not the status system in society generally. This fits with the argument we presented earlier in this section about the SO students being oriented towards intrinsic rewards. However, there is also a resemblance with the students at OCS who are eager to present themselves in a specific way, i.e. as not interested in school work. The common trait between the SO and OCS students is the wish to identify with a specific culture (a subculture), and to do so authentically. In the case of OCS this authenticity seemed to be linked to a cultural logic of legitimate entitlement (Sherman, 2017: 232). The three characteristics of making entitlement legitimate are first, work hard, consume prudently and give back; second, be aware and modest; and third, don’t portray yourself as more deserving of wealth. Even though OCS students do not work hard at school, many of them have jobs on the side, and prudent consumption is very important. Most importantly, they are aware, modest and do not depict themselves as more deserving. The students at SO do not fit all of these traits either. They work hard, consume prudently and give back, but are not as aware and modest as the Sherman model advocates, and are more conflicted regarding their deservingness. In this respect both groups seem to align with the Norwegian narrative of being part of an egalitarian culture. One might think of this as two different trajectories towards learning the same way of legitimizing their privileges.

## **Discussion**

Students at the two schools do not seem to fit descriptions of elite students emanating from international research. Most importantly the lack of entitlement and ease makes them special.

The intrinsic school orientation makes the SO students appear idealistic, whereas the extrinsic orientations of the OCS students make them appear more realistic and experienced. This resembles the “leadership community” that Holmqvist (2017: 48) has studied in Sweden, where both parents and children are considered “doers” – preoccupied with being flexible and active in many arenas, and not overly concerned with academic learning and reading. Many of the OCS students might be tomorrow’s leaders. This constitutes a sociological puzzle (Vassenden, 2018). Bourdieu’s theory on taste and class (1984) could lead us to assume that the OCS students would appear as careerists, since they come from families with economic capital, and less cultural capital, and they are extrinsically orientated. On the contrary, they have acquired an ease with their elite position. The SO students, on the other hand, who could be assumed to display ease without hesitation, actually strive a lot with homework and to such a degree that it becomes stressful. Several students at SO talk about the anxiety connected to get good grades, it is not something that comes naturally, as the OCS students gives an impression of. How can we understand this seemingly surprising phenomenon?

While the intrinsic school orientation and hard work at SO goes against the empirical findings of other elite high schools (such as Khan, 2011), the “slacking down” at OCS might be analysed as a specific type of ease, making the exclusionary practices of elite schooling less visible, while I claim here that it is a way of embedding oneself in a broader culture, hence the extrinsic orientation. Khan (2011), Khan and Jerolmack, (2013) and Sherman (2017: 11) treat allusions to hard work as justifications, while in this material I interpret it as part of an attitude “intimately intertwined with their formation and training towards authority” in line with Törnqvist (2018: 3). However, it might be argued that disavowal of elitism may mask what indeed are elitist attitudes based on a sense of social security, or that elites can profit from downplaying differences, but to answer questions like that requires other data than the ones at hand in this study.

It might be specific for the Norwegian schools that they are less active in “instilling identities” (Forbes & Lingard, 2013) than international elite schools, and as such the students have to be more active themselves. Elite schools are often understood as important sites for reproducing and reaffirming beliefs in the self as above others, but this study rather questions such an assumption. The students have to deal with the tension between elitism and egalitarianism instead of adopting a narrative provided by the school, which might point to elite

schools being less entrenching in Norway than elsewhere. Nevertheless the students acquire a learned skill that appears natural to outsiders, and therefore is a sign that the students have been consecrated at the school, elevated out of the sphere of ordinariness and into the elite. SO can be said to have a more academically meritocratic admission process than OCS, which might explain some of the differences between the schools. Based on earlier research it is still a surprise that elite schools such as these do not "instill" similar identities in its students, but rather they retain an attitude of striving. This also helps to make their privileged positions morally worthy.

Given the meritocratic ambition of the Scandinavian school systems, and that it is free of charge, many ask if elite schooling is a «contradiction in terms» in such a setting (Börjesson et al., 2016). Particularly therefore it is important to highlight some cases of this. Historical elite schools have played an important part in Norwegian culture, and are still a part of the system. The symbolic and traditional aspects of elite recruitment make these elite arenas more accessible to students with parents in the upper echelons, and thus might ensure reproduction. It is nonetheless worth pointing out that some do drop out, and that the depiction of schools as machines of reproduction is primarily rhetorical, if not polemic. Historical elite schools might lose their position if they do not keep being intertwined with other definitions of elite schools, such as social or meritocratic ones. The question of how overlapping between different definitions of elite schools work out in Scandinavia is one of the next steps in order to gain an understanding of this under-researched phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

This article aims to map cultural patterns at the different elite schools, and at contextualizing the theoretical discussion of ease among elites students. While we might assume that extrinsic or intrinsic orientations correlate with ease or unease among the adolescent elite in some way, the findings here indicate that a sense of unease is rather a general part of the egalitarian culture, and as such prevalent among a wide range of groups, across class divides (not to be mistaken with actual inequalities in education). In a Bourdieusian analysis it becomes obvious when the middle classes try to aspire to the tastes of the upper classes, which is also called the problem of pretentiousness. Being pretentious is harmful for being perceived as authentic, in that it opens up for a lack of consistency between frontstage and backstage. In Norway, however, this takes another form: since the tastes of the upper class and the middle classes are more similar than not,

pretentiousness is harder to call. Given the geographical proximity, and both schools being part of the same Norwegian school system, they have strikingly different cultures. This feature shows how elite schools might cultivate different aspects instead of developing similar elite traits.

## References

- Aaberge, R., & Atkinson, A. B. (2008). *Top Incomes in Norway*. Retrieved: <https://www.ssb.no/forskning/discussion-papers/top-incomes-in-norway>
- Andersen, P. L., & Hansen, M. N. (2012). Class and Cultural Capital – The Case of Class Inequality in Educational Performance. *European Sociological Review*, 28(5), 607-621. doi:10.1093/esr/jcr029
- Andersen, P. L. & Bakken, A. (2016) *Ung i Oslo 2015* [Young in Oslo 2015]. Oslo: NOVA
- Andersen, P.L., Pedersen, W. & Bakken, A. 2017 ‘Russetid i Oslo [Russ Celebration in Oslo]’, in J.Ljunggren (ed) *Oslo - Ulikhetenes by* [Oslo - The City of Inequalities], Oslo: Cappelen Damm.
- Bathmaker, A-M., Ingram, N. & Waller, R. (2013) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34:5-6, 723-743, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2013.816041
- Bennett, A. (1999) Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste. *Sociology* Vol 33, Issue 3, pp. 599 - 617, DOI: 10.1177/S0038038599000371
- Boltanski, L. & Thévenot, L. (2008) *On Justification*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Bourdieu, P (1996) *The State Nobility*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P (1984) *Distinction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Börjesson, M., Broady, D., Dalberg, T. & Lidegran, I. (2016) Elite Education in Sweden. A contradiction in terms? i *Elite Education. International Perspectives*. Maxwell, C. & Aggleton, P. (Eds.) London and New York: Routledge
- Chase, S. A. (2008) *Perfectly Prep*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Daloz, J. P. (2010) *The Sociology of Elite Distinction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Daloz, J. P. (2013) *Rethinking Social Distinction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Deppe, U. & Krüger, H.-H. (2016) Elite Education in Germany? Trends, developments and challenges. in Maxwell, C. & Aggleton, P. (eds.) *Elite Education*. New York: Routledge
- Duffel, N. (2010) *The Making of Them. The British attitude to children and the boarding school system*. London: Lone Arrow Press.
- Fine, G. A. (2001) *Gifted Tongues. High School Debate and Adolescent Culture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Forbes, J., & Lingard, B. (2013). Elite school capitals and girls’ schooling: understanding the (re)production of privilege through a habitus of ‘assuredness’. In C. Maxwell, & P. Aggleton (Eds.), *Privilege, agency and affect: understanding the production and effects of action* (pp. 50-68). London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan .

- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2009a). *The Best of the Best. Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2009b). What is an Elite Boarding School? *Review of Educational Research*, 79(3)
- Goh, D. P. S. (2015). Elite schools, postcolonial Chineseness and hegemonic masculinities in Singapore. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(1)
- Hahl, O., Zuckermann, E. Z., & Kim, M. (2017) Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture: Overcoming High-Status Denigration with Outsider Art. *American Sociological Review* 82(4)
- Hansen, M. N., Flemmen, M. & Andersen, P. L. 2009. The Oslo register data class scheme (ORDC). Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo (1), 1–22.
- Hegna, K., M. Dæhlen, I. Smette, and S. Wollscheid. 2012. “‘Too Much Theory’ in Vocational Education and Training a Question of Conflicting Objectives?” *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* 53 (2): 217–232.
- Hjort, J. L. (2014) Individualized youth subjectivity and social background: subjective understandings of advantage and disadvantage among Oslo youth, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17:6, 733-748, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2013.844780
- Hjort, J. L. (2015) Intrinsic and Extrinsic Work Motivation among US and Norwegian High School Students *YOUNG* Vol 23, Issue 4, pp. 293 - 312, First Published October 16, 2015,
- Holmqvist, M. (2017) *Leader Communities. The Consecration of Elites in Djursholm*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Jackson, C. & Dempster, S. (2009) ‘I sat back on my computer... with a bottle of whisky next to me’: constructing ‘cool’ masculinity through ‘effortless’ achievement in secondary and higher education, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 18:4, 341-356, DOI: 10.1080/09589230903260019
- Jarness, V., Pedersen, W., Flemmen, M. (2019). The discreet charm of the children of the bourgeoisie: Economic capital and its symbolic expressions at an elite business School, *British Journal of Sociology* 70 (4), 1402-1423.
- Jane Kenway & Michael Lazarus (2017) Elite schools, class disavowal and the mystification of virtues, *Social Semiotics*, 27:3, 265-275, DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2017.1301791
- Khan, S. (2011). *Privilege*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Khan, S. (2014) The ease of mobility. In T. Birtchnell & J. Caletrio (Eds.), *Elite mobilities* (pp. 136-149). London: Routledge.
- Khan, S., & Jerolmack, C. (2013). Saying Meritocracy and Doing Privilege. *Sociological Quarterly*, 54(1), 9-19. doi:10.1111/tsq.12008
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann (2009) *InterViews*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Larsen, Eirin (2005) *Invisible Strategies. Gender in French and Norwegian Business Education, 1870-1980*. Bergen: Rökkansenteret
- Ljunggren, J., & Andersen, P. L. (2014) Gylne ghettoer [Golden ghettos], in Korsnes, O., Hansen, M. N., & Hjellbrekke, J. (eds.) *Elite og klasse i et egalitært samfunn* [Elite and class in an egalitarian society]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget

- Lund, Stefan (2015) *School Choice and Symbolic Boundaries*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Mac & Ghail, M. (1994). *The making of men: masculinities, sexualities and schooling*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Mijs, J. B. J. & Paulle, B. (2016) The burden of acting wise: sanctioned success and ambivalence about hard work at an elite school in the Netherlands, *Intercultural Education*, 27:1, 22-38,
- Mullen, A. L. (2010) *Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press
- Pedersen, W., Flemmen, M. & Jarness, V. (2018) The Revenge of the Nerds: Cultural capital and the politics of lifestyle among adolescent elites. *Poetics*
- Pullman, A. & Andres, L. (2019) General and work-based extrinsic educational beliefs across time: from late youth to middle adulthood, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22:3, 291-311, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2018.1497782
- Roth, M. (2012) *The Scientists*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Sakslind, R., & Skarpenes, O. (2014). Morality and the Middle Class: The European Pattern and the Norwegian Singularity. *Journal of Social History*, 48(2), 313–340.
- Sherman, R. (2017) *Uneasy Street*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Tavory, I. & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive Analysis. Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Törnqvist, M. (2018) The making of an egalitarian elite: school ethos and the production of privilege. *The British Journal of Sociology*
- van Zanten, A. (2016) Promoting Equality and reproducing privilege in elite educational tracks in France, in Maxwell, C. & Aggleton, P. (eds.) *Elite Education*. New York: Routledge
- Vassenden, A. (2018) Produktive anomalier [Productive Anomalies]. *Norsk sosiologisk tidsskrift*
- Vassenden, A. and Jonvik, M. (2018) Cultural capital as a hidden asset: Culture, egalitarianism and inter-class social encounters in Stavanger, Norway. *Cultural Sociology*.
- Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning From Strangers. The Art and Method of Qualitative Interviewing*. New York: The Free Press.
- Wiborg, O. N., & Hansen, M. N. (2009). Change over Time in the Intergenerational Transmission of Social Disadvantage. *European Sociological Review*, 25(3), 379-394. doi:10.1093/esr/jcn055
- Zerubavel, E. (1993) *The Fine Line*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press