



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Anne-Sofie Nyström, PhD in Sociology,
Dept. of Sociology, Uppsala University
Anne-Sofie.Nystrom@soc.uu.se

To be seen and to learn, without being seen to learn



A study of underachievement and identity-negotiation among privileged young men in upper-secondary school

Department of Educational Research seminar series

At Lancaster University, 13th March 2013



Ph.D. Project 2005-2012

“Once they have access to school, girls tend to do better than boys”.

UNESCO (2008, p. 82) *Education for all by 2015*

“... those who benefit from existing inequalities are often ‘let off the hook’ and [...] the role they play in reproducing inequalities is neglected”

Pease (2010, p. 7) *Undoing privilege: Unearned advantage in a divided world*

(2012) *Att synas och lära utan att synas lära. En studie om underprestation och privilegierade unga mäns identitetsförhandlingar i gymnasieskolan*. Diss. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Sociologica Upsaliensia 59. [English summery]

(in press) “Negotiating achievement: Students’ gendered and classed constructions of (un)equal ability”, in Maylor and Bhopal (eds.) *Educational Inequalities: Difference and Diversity in Schools and Higher Education*, NY: Routledge.



Gender, ability and achievement

Linus It feels as though the girls seem to struggle more with ...

Fabian Mm, mm.

Linus ...especially everything, even though they study pretty much.

Nils Yes, I absolutely believe that the girls in our class study more than boys.

Linus Yes, very much more

Nils But I still think they ... I don't know if it has to do with ability to learn or something, but they are (.) not as good. In all cases.

Fabian I have read that ... (uh) I do not know if one can generalize so much, but "the brightest ..." that "the intelligence of girls is pretty even (.) while among men there are some really stupid ones and some that are really smart".

(Interview with young men, Natural science program students)



Aim and research questions

Aim: ... to examine the role of education in privileged young men's identity processes, in order to (1) increase our knowledge of how masculinities are negotiated in peer-groups, and to (2) contribute to a deeper understanding of social processes that lead to some student categories' under-achievement and a less equitable education.

Research questions:

1. Negotiation of identity – discourses, recourses and situations?
2. Stratification and Educational achievement from the students' perspective?
3. Masculinity and Underachievement as analytical tools?



Theory

Sociology (of education) – Pedagogy – Social psychology – Gender studies

Boys and schooling (Frosh et al, 2002; Jackson, 2006; Öhrn & Weiner, 2009)

- “Underachievement” and gender constructions being a student
- Dominance relations beyond educational achievement

Identity theory (Jenkins, 2004; Burke & Stets, 1999)

- ‘External’ and ‘internal’ identification (of individuals/collectives)
- Level of order (individual/interaction/institution)
- Group/social category
- Interaction strategies for self-verification, c.f. self worth-protecting strategies (Jackson)

Gender theory (West & Fenstermaker, 2000; Pease, 2010)

- Gender (and its intersections of class/social age...) as interactional accomplishments
- Naturalization and normalization of privileged positions



Method

Selection

56 students (age 15-16) First year in upper-secondary school

Young men and women (Natural science and Vehicle program)

Two school classes, different schools in a middle sized University town in Sweden

Design

Participant observations in two school-classes

Semi-structured interviews

- Groups (8 all-young men, 4 all-young women, 1 mixed)
- Individuals (12 young men, 3 young women)

Analysis → High-achieving white, upper middle-class young people

Atlas.ti

Construction of meaning *about interaction* and *as interaction* (cf. Wickes & Emmison 2007)



Results

Hedonistic

"Having a laugh"

Relaxed

Intrinsic motivation

Ascetic

Disciplined, diligent

Nervous, insecure

Extrinsic motivation

Dominating NV-masculinity

- I. Self-confidence and 'authentic' individuality
- II. High educational ability and achievement
- III. Verbal and socially competent
- IV. Humorous, kind and humble
- V. Good looking and attractive to young women



Masculinities

Viktor But then if you hang out with, for example, 'Villa Quarter' people you ought to be a real 'bratt'. Well yeah, most expensive clothes and the finest shack perhaps - then you gain status!

Anne-Sofie It's about having cash?

Viktor Yes. Well yeah, you've ... They attended our school so I have spoken with a bunch of them. I'm not saying they're not okay, many are very nice, but ... (.) yeah ... yeah, among them it's like that. Yeah, they're more like a guy ought to be.

(Individual interview with Vehicle program student)



Faked effortless achievement and overstated ability claims

Anne-Sofie But, are they “swots”? [Reverts to a discussion about the young men as being very ambitious.]

Agnes No. (Laughter)

Moa No.

Agnes I don't think so.

Moa It's more about “doing well without effort”.

Agnes Yes, exactly. A bit like that.

Moa Quite so.

Agnes Yes.

Helen But really, I think they study pretty much, although they don't want to show it.

Agnes Well that could also be: “One [young men] shouldn't study much”. But then I wouldn't say that ... Well in fact, I also believe that they think of themselves as much better than they really are.

(Interview with young women, Natural science program students)



‘Sucking-up’ – as a masculinity practice?

Hugo You want to try to suck-up to teachers as much as possible.

Nils Yes, absolutely. I think the grade is easily raised if you’re sucking-up.

Anne-Sofie How do one do to suck-up?

Hugo Just talk.

Nils Give the teacher a compliment perhaps ...

Olle Give the impression that you’re interested, and (.) nod and like that.

Nils So it’s much about to raising your hand and looking eager and answering questions.

(Interview with young men, Natural science program students)



Self-verification strategies

“The purpose of self-handicapping is to deflect the attributions of others away from low ability causes and towards circumstantial or situational causes of failure; that is, to blur the link between ability and poor performance”

Leondari & Gonida (2007, s. 596)



Doing ‘high educational ability’ via time-accounting practice

Fredrik You notice if someone’s smart pretty quickly.

Anne-Sofie How?

Sebastian Good on tests.

Fredrik Raising their hands, talking. But you can’t know how much they prepared.

Hannes Just from what they say.

Fredrik (Hm.) You have to rely on what they say. If you ask: “Do you want to do something tonight?” “No, I’m going to study.” It could mean ...

Anne-Sofie But do you usually talk about how much you study or how little you’re studying?

Hannes Yes, that is, before each test, everyone tells exactly how much they have studied, practically. How many minutes that is. (Laughter in the group.)

Anne-Sofie Okay. (Laughter.) It’s a little accounting?

Hannes “I started at eleven o’clock last night and sat until two o’clock.”

Anne-Sofie Okay. (Laughter.)

Hannes Then you probably not a swot, if you start at eleven o’clock and end at two o’clock.
(Interview with young men, Natural science program students)



Constructions of 'the swot'

Stupid (Intelligent)

Nervous (Relaxed)

Naive (Knowledgeable)

Boring (Fun)

Ingratiating (authentic)

Self-centred (Generous)



What do we mean by underachievement?

Dimensions

- I. Natural – Cultural
- II. Central – Peripheral
- III. Legitimate – Illegitimate
- IV. Individual – Structural
- V. Ability related – Effort related