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Momentums of success, illusio and habitus: High-achieving upper secondary students’ reasons for seeking academic success

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ABSTRACT

Through interviews with 52 upper-secondary students from different socioeconomic, educational and migrant/native backgrounds, the article examines students’ own stories of what drives them to perform well in school. Different kinds of ‘illusios’ are reconstructed in terms of Bourdieu’s sociology; Revanche, Proficiency, Fear of failing and Entitlement. They relate to different forms of social energy and emotions, such as the desire for rehabilitation of the self or family in the eyes of the other, and the drive for justification. Some is fuelled with social shame of not reaching the same position as parents, or meaning falling out of the system, while others are driven by an urge to be knowledgeable. These illusios work differently in relation to the students’ habitus.

1. Introduction

An important goal for many educational researchers is to gain more knowledge about the processes that motivate students to perform well in school and to become high achievers. It is well known that if the family and the student’s network are engaged in activities that promote pro-academic values and skills, and in fact are part of their way of life, the more likely they are to succeed academically (e.g., Bæck, 2017; McCrory Calarco, 2018). Relevant sociological literature on high achievers from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds shows the importance of challenging the deficit discourses on students with immigrant backgrounds and to think intersectionally when it comes to high-achieving working-class students and ethnic minorities. High achievers from low-income households are not well researched, as previous research has shown (see Carrasquillo, 2013; Crul & Heering, 2008; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Ingram, 2009, 2011; Schmertz & Carney, 2013). There is a need to learn more about these students as they challenge the idea that poverty, racism/discrimination and low educational performance are linked (Chiang, Thurston, & Lin, 2020; Ingram, 2009, 2011; Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007).

In meta-studies, there is strong evidence for a universal effect of family background on students’ academic achievements, although it differs in magnitude depending on the education system and overall income inequality (Broer, Bai, & Fonseca, 2019). Some studies show enduring social patterns (Yang Hansen, Rosén, & Gustafsson, 2011; Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2019) and also consider the aspirations of ambitious children of immigrant parents (Arnesen, Lahelma, & Öhrn, 2008; Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011; Öhrn, 2014a). Other studies show how myths and discourses of underachievement limit both the students’ and the teachers’ expectations of academic achievement by students from different backgrounds (Asp-Onsjö, 2014; Bæck, 2017; Holm & Öhrn, 2014; Öhrn, 2014, 2014ab), and how students’ own positioning as ‘effortless achievers’ depends on intersections of institutional settings, ethnicity, social class and gender. Thus, a position of high achievement is difficult for all students to attain due to stereotypes of academic failure (Archer, 2010; Ingram, 2009; Jackson & Nyström, 2015; Louie, 2012; Reay, 2003, 2009). We found studies that question the homogenous image of

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migrant students by also considering sex, class, sexual orientation, ability, age and religion in research on educational achievement (Bilge, 2010). However, even within intersectionality studies, there is a risk of focusing on deficit mindsets – especially when migrant status is included as a ‘double disadvantage’ or ‘triple oppression’, as Christodoulou points out (2011). Our focus in this project and in this article lies on theorising how the social circumstances of students spur them to seek academic success – not to ignore their intersectional positions, but to emphasise their agency and meaning making.

Other studies address identity issues and emotional difficulties for high-achieving working-class students at school (e.g., Ingram, 2011), or students from segregated areas who drop out and then come back in upper secondary school (Lund & Trondman, 2017). Central questions are why these students return to school and how they find meaning in learning. Their social life in school is vital for identity development and for their feeling of belonging, as are friendships (Lund & Trondman, 2017). Students’ encounters with teachers and other students are painful when they are met with racism and/or supremacy (Lund & Trondman, 2017; Mirza, 2009) and, for some, these experiences build resistant capital (Carrasquillo, 2013). Research on educational aspirations risks explaining how to ‘climb the social ladder’, while the meaning-making processes that drive the aspirations, hopes, fears and future plans are downplayed. Several studies have nonetheless shown that aspirations are socially constructed and historically situated (e.g., Hoskins & Barker, 2017; Reay, 2003). In the meaning-making of schooling, especially in upper secondary school, the emphasis lies on career choice. The students are aware of the importance of high grades for being able to choose which path to take towards their professional futures (Öhrn, 2014; 2014ab) and their horizons of action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Students’ cultural and social capital is vital in the formation of support networks (Carrasquillo, 2013; Lareau, 2003; Öhrn, 2014b), for parental involvement in school, and in academic socialisation (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Some students with low socioeconomic and parental educational capital can achieve academic success by mobilising support from their social networks (Osman, Carlhed Ydhag, & Månsson, 2020; Chiang, Thurston, & Lin, 2020). Parents with low educational capital are limited in their ability to tutor their children at home and, for migrant families, the language barrier can aggravate this problem (Lund & Trondman, 2017).

In general, middle-class parents are aware of the importance of supporting their children in school, and they also have the skills to micromanage their homework and choose extracurricular activities to expand their children’s cultural repertoires. These school-related examples of middle-class parenting strategies are a cultural alignment process (Lareau, 2003) terms ‘concerted cultivation’ and Hofvander Trulsson (2014) calls ‘the child as investment’, where children are socialised academically (Bæck, 2017; Hill & Tyson, 2009), resulting in a middle-class advantage at school, which McCrory Calarro (2018) describes as a negotiated advantage. In contrast to parenting in the form of concerted cultivation, a parenting style called ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ is more likely to be found amongst working-class families. These two different child-rearing practices form distinct cultural logics which in turn shape children’s views of themselves, their value in relation to other people and thereby their sense of their place in the world (Lareau, 2003).

In this study the students’ rationale for performing well in school is explored by examining how they themselves make their efforts meaningful and thereby motivating. Through empirical material consisting of students’ own stories from in-depth interviews, we can study their meaning-making process and issues of agency. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and illusio give us ample opportunity to understand how their agency and this particular meaning-making process works in different living conditions and how their social and cultural resources come into play (Bourdieu, 1996, 2010).

1.1. Aim and research questions

The main aim of this article is to explore how students from different social and cultural backgrounds negotiate and find meaning in performing well academically. A secondary aim is to study how their aspirations in school and their career plans are related to their current situation and social and cultural dispositions.

Research questions

- Why is it important for the students to be successful in school?
- How do they negotiate meaning in relation to themselves and others?
- How do their aspirations and their reasoning about academic success relate to their social and cultural dispositions?

2. Theory

The study is theoretically embedded in Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology, which assumes that social life is positioned within symbolic and cultural systems of belief. Our practices in everyday life are, according to Bourdieu, silently orchestrated by doxa, the unspoken and undisputed ‘natural’ order. Individuals who have been socialised within a particular social space have developed a familiarity with its symbolic values and practices and its specific hierarchies and polarisations – and ‘a sense of one’s place’ and others in relation to them. Bourdieu writes that the dispositions of agents, ‘their habitus, that is, the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that world’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18). Furthermore, he describes habitus as a ‘system of schemes of perception and appreciation of practices, cognitive and evaluative structures which are acquired through the lasting experience of a social position’ (ibid., p. 19). In short, habitus produces actions and practices and at the same time schemes for perceptions and appreciation of practices. Thus, the habitus relates to objective structures while it also relates to the subjective view of the individual. By analysing the relation between the individual’s point of view, their dispositions and their relation to the positions in the social structure, we could obtain knowledge of the social practices within a certain field, also known as social praxeology.
In highly developed and specialized societies, social space is differentiated into social fields with different degrees of autonomy, in which different positions can be occupied by agents such as institutions or persons based on power accorded through different forms of capital – symbolic, cultural, economic, and social. Within these fields, certain symbolic values or resources can be field specific and can be used as symbolic capital. Analytically, field is a set of objective relations between positions (dominated, subordinated etc.) held together through strong social energy directed towards common interests and stakes, e.g. to monopolise symbolic values. The agents invest social energy in playing ‘the game’, *illusio* (from ludus, the game), in constant struggles over its stakes, using capital as weapons and as rewards (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). In our study, we assume that the field exists and presents itself through the students’ views and position takings. Thus, their preconceived estimation of succeeding while using a strategy they believe in is developed in relation to the field. They are well aware of the relative weight of their education in relation to others. All students in this study had chosen to enrol in a national higher education preparatory programme (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013) and not a vocational programme. They know what society expects from them, that growing up means that they are supposed to educate themselves in order to eventually become self-sufficient, by either being employed in a (well-paid) profession or starting a business of their own. At the same time, their own positions and dispositions, i.e. the social and cultural embodied resources embedded in habitus, affect their perception of the present and their actions.

The central theoretical concepts from Bourdieu’s sociology that we use, *habitus* and *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1990, 2010), allow us to shed light on the complex interplay between students’ social and cultural dispositions and their relationship to everyday practices, thus constituting their social persistence, their social identity and their positions in social space (Bourdieu, 2000, 2010). Habitus realises itself through social practices in relation to a distinct social space in which field effects are at play Bourdieu (1990). This means that specific norms, values and interests are hierarchised according to how different positions in the field relate to one another. Certain interests and norms are considered more valuable or desirable than others. A person’s habitus develops from their life conditions, first in family life and later on in school and at work. Habitus is an embodied product of lived history and orientating principles based on both the past and the interpretation of the present situation. Thus, habitus operates effectively in social spaces that are familiar, for example that students can ‘be themselves’. The familiarity and comfort with practices is dependant on a clear affinity between the dispositions, practices and their position within the field. Hence, the strategies in playing the game depend on the students’ preconceived considerations of their initial volume and structure of capital and of the probabilities to use and gain capital in the field over time (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In particular, we try to use illusio as a magnifying glass, focusing on the students’ strong dedication to participate in the social practices under study (also often called ‘the game’). The term illusio implies a feel for the game and its rules, but most of all a deep commitment to the specific practices of and beliefs in the benefits of investing time and energy Bourdieu (2010). Through the concept of illusio, Bourdieu has elaborated his thoughts about the passion in investments in relation to a specific field of practice and their absolute necessity in the individual’s meaning-making process Bourdieu (1996). It is an affective investment parallel to ‘libido’ in psychoanalysis, but sociologically it is social energy in the form of a belief, which gives the answer to the question of why the individual should bother at all. Specifically, it is about sincere enthusiasm, accepting the stakes and the game itself, which is “one of the preconditions of successful investment” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 86). The deeper exploration of illusio in study success in relation to habitus can enhance our understanding of the origins of the students’ aspirations at school.

Bourdieu writes: ‘Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127.) But we would like to focus more on what spurred the students to decide to play the game. What makes them believe the game is worthwhile? Illusio offers the potential to be used not only in terms of a belief in the necessity of an actual social investment, but also to study its catalysing origins in relation to specific life circumstances and habituses. Furthermore, we are interested in including the social targets (e.g. people) of the social energy, and the gains. Our approach makes it possible to explain the students’ motivations and commitment and their agency while they negotiate meanings and the forms their future could take. Used in this way, it functions as a magnifying glass for one dimension of the habitus. This can provide more knowledge about specific mechanisms that drive illusio and how the meaning-making process works. Moreover, it allows us to go deeper into issues of agency to understand in depth how students maintain momentum for success in upper secondary school.

3. Method

This study is part of a research project that examines how high-achieving students in Sweden decode upper secondary school practices and embark on a successful educational career. The project is longitudinal with a duration of four years covering 52 students’ transitions from year 2 in upper secondary school and into higher education or the labour market. We interviewed the participating students three times over the course of the project: at the beginning of their second year, at the end of their third year and finally when they had graduated. We have also interviewed one person in each student’s social network who has been particularly important for the student during their studies. The article is based on the first interviews with the students.

3.1. Selection

We targeted secondary schools in urban areas offering national higher education preparatory programmes (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). Some of these urban areas were known as socioeconomically disadvantaged, while other schools in smaller cities were the only schools offering this kind of programme. For our selection, we asked for lists of students enroled in their second year of upper secondary school who were high achievers at the end of the first year (with at least an A or B in English, Swedish or maths). At the time we approached the students, they had recently begun their second year and had not yet received any grades.
The lists contained the students’ names, addresses, phone numbers, study programmes and grades. We arranged meetings to inform the students about the project and the conditions for participation. They were also given written information on participation being voluntary and that the project had been ethically approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Those who wanted to participate filled in a short questionnaire asking for information such as their parents’ educational level and occupation, the parents’ and their own nation of birth, and questions about important people in their social network. As the students were over 15 years old, we did not need to obtain parental consent (Ethical Review Act, 2003:460). We did not manage to arrange meetings in all schools from which we had lists. Thus, using the lists, we also contacted students via ordinary mail and text messages, sending invitations and links to the research project’s website, which contained detailed information and an application form.

The selection was not statistically representative but was carefully developed from our theoretical point of view based on Bourdieu’s sociology. Hence, we aimed to create a pool of female and male students with mixed social backgrounds, including native Swedes and students with immigrant parents. We ended up having a sample of 52 students (19 male and 33 female students). We divided their parents’ birth countries into the dichotomous background variables of Swedes and Immigrants. In our sample, we had 35 students with migrant parents and 17 with native parents. Thirty students had parents with higher education whereas 22 had parents with no higher education. The parents had high or low educational capital, regardless of whether they were native-born or had immigrated. We had a broad mix of students with different national backgrounds from countries like Finland, Hong Kong, India, Iraq, Kurdistan, Norway, the Philippines, Russia, Syria, Somalia, Thailand, South Korea, the UK and the USA. This was the sample at the start of the project and interviews with all 52 students were used in this article.

### 3.2. Data collection

In the first wave of data collection for the main project, we conducted in-depth interviews with questions covering four themes concerning the students’ subjective views of: 1) why they were successful in school, 2) obstacles and different forms of support from parents or others, 3) reasons for their choice of education and future plans, and 4) how they arrange their studies and homework in practice. We also collected socioeconomic and demographic data such as e.g. parents’ educational levels and occupations, residential area, the family’s living conditions and the student’s social network for the purpose of contextualisation. For this article we have focused on excerpts from the interviews on themes 1 and 3, i.e. the reasons for their school success and their choice of education and future plans, and contextual data.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were recorded and transcribed. Each informant was coded, e.g., ‘Jonas-M-L-IMM-3-AAC’. The coding format was: fictive name, gender (‘M’ for male, ‘F’ for female), inherited educational capital (parents’ educational level, with ‘H’ representing high educational capital and ‘L’ low educational capital), place of parents’ birth (‘SWE’ if both were born in Sweden and ‘IMM’ if at least one parent was born abroad), the year in upper secondary school when our first interviews were conducted, and finally their grades in English, Swedish and maths, with the highest grade first.

### 3.3. Analysis

The theoretical tools described above were used were used in the basic design of the project, the current study and the interview guide. In the analysis of the interview transcripts, we especially used the concept of illusio to attain greater depth in analysing meaning-making processes. Following Bourdieu’s sociology, we believe that an important motor is grounded socially, i.e. in the individual’s search for recognition and belonging, which is not entirely based on reason (Bourdieu 2000). In other words, it is the students’ socially grounded actions we try to theorise. Thus, the purpose of the analysis, in line with Bourdieu’s social praxeology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 11), was to reconstruct the motivation and rationale behind the students’ own understanding (subjective views) of their practices in seeking success, in terms of why they invest so much in schoolwork and how they reason about it.

First, we repeatedly read the interview transcripts in full to get a holistic view of the students and their responses. Second, the transcripts were analysed using NVivo software – both in open coding and especially by coding in detail all responses relevant to the four themes regarding the students’ subjective views. We chose to analyse two of the themes, namely why they made an effort in school and the reasons behind their educational choices and future plans (applying to university, working, etc.) for this particular article. We named this theme ‘Reasons for seeking success’.

In the analysis, we asked the data questions such as: What spurred the students to decide to play the game? What makes them believe the game is worthwhile? And for whom is their effort important? As they already were successful in school, we assumed that they had decided to ‘play the game’. Now, we wanted to analyse the catalysing origins and specific logic of their actions in their current life circumstances and the way the students relate to other agents in the field. This could help us to conclude which social targets (e.g. people) the social energy in illusio was directed towards. For example, in the first subtheme identified in the analysis, Revanche, we collected excerpts which described students’ wish for restoration of how others had unfairly judged them or their ability to succeed. Another example is connected to the belief of restoring the social position of the family through the children’s success in school. In this case the catalysing origins of the social energy of the illusio were historical incidents or enduring situations of social shame. The social targets in the first example were other students or teachers who more or less cast a spell on the students to fail, conveying their low expectations. In the second example, the social targets are more unspecific others. The gains were new chances or restoration, and helping others from social shame. We interpreted and reconstructed the relation between the catalysing origin, social targets and gains as a specific type of illusio called ‘Revanche’.

Third, building further on the themes, we explored links between different aspirations and related driving forces on the one hand,
and social and cultural conditions (inherent to our coding of native/immigrant, gender, educational capital, etc.) on the other. In other words, how illusio is related to habitus, or rather how different types of illusio are related to different habitus.

To be able to answer our first research question (on why it is important for the students to be successful in school), we have analysed the students’ own understanding of their educational choices and success, and how they plan for the future. From their views we constructed the overarching theme of ‘Reasons for seeking success’ and four subthemes, which reflected the variation of reasons and were named with different kinds of illusio: Revanche, Proficiency, Fear of failing and Expectations. Following our second and third research question (on how they negotiate meaning in relation to themselves and others), in each subtheme we explored how the specific illusio came into play with the habitus, i.e. the students’ social and cultural dispositions and their prospects. Particular interest was directed to the types of capital that were predominantly active in the interplay (cultural capital including inherited and earned educational and social capital). The subthemes were not independent, and overlaps were expected. In the result section we also simultaneously discuss our findings in relation to the literature.

4. Results and discussion: reasons for seeking success

It is no surprise that high grades were seen by the students as signs of success and generally were the primary goal for them – they were all high achievers. Nonetheless, our analysis revealed a set of meanings related to how high grades were perceived and used by the students. In certain cases, high grades seemed to be expected and something that came naturally by attending school and doing the things the teacher told them to do. There were also accounts of fulfilling parental expectations to succeed in school, whereas other students reported a huge relief that came with getting an A-grade. The stakes and obstacles differed between the students, and so did the gains.

4.1. Revanche

The ‘Revanche’ illusio is fuelled by the desire for compensation and rehabilitation of the self from earlier experiences of social derogation or stigmatisation (catalysing origins). It shapes different forms of how this rehabilitation can be accomplished and entails visions of how the student can one day triumph and prove to others that the low expectations people had of them were wrong. The social targets are previous classmates and teachers, parents, or ‘Others’. For immigrant parents, their lower social status in the new country can be improved by their child’s aspirations. Another dimension of this illusio relates to the rewards the student can desire after having had a difficult time – especially if one’s own needs have been set back for a while. Thus, the social target is the self.

4.1.1. Revanche – to override low expectations

Students’ pathways can be described as being filled with struggle – not in terms of their performance in school, but rather the social dimension of other people’s expectations. Thus, the function of grades is like a process of proving oneself in the eyes of others – a revanche, or a way of proving oneself worthy of a good future despite the low expectations of others. Like the upper secondary students in Lund and Trondman’s study who reported other students talking down to them: ‘They thought they were higher and better than us newly arrived migrants’ (2017, p. 64). Aamiina gave examples of how she and her classmates have been met with racism from other students and schoolteachers:

Aamiina: We are not seen as real pupils who want to do something with our lives. We are looked upon as pupils who just come here and fiddle about or play and such, then we, after elementary school, or after upper secondary school, drop out, and that we will not become anyone. (Aamiina-F-H-IMM-3-AAB)

These experiences were exclusively expressed by students of immigrant background, who also experienced a segregated school environment. Due to the shutdown of the school in their area (which was socioeconomically disadvantaged), they were forced to move to another school in the centre of the city. Hence, their classes were incorporated into the existing classes in the new school. Their experience of segregation was connected to the fact that the school was dominated by native Swedish students. As a consequence, Aamiina and her classmates stuck together as a group. They perceived social divisions created by the colour of their skin and their social class. Their participation in an unfamiliar social space created a sense of not fitting in and a kind of habitus-field clash (Alanen & Alanen, 2011; Bourdieu, 1993; Lund, 2015; Maton, 2008; Sweetman, 2009). As Knight reports in her study, habitus-field clashes are uncomfortable but can also change the trajectory of the student and social mobility opportunities Knight (2015). For the students in our study, the fuel for the justification of their rights and human dignity was anger caused by experiences of derogations.

4.1.2. Revanche – make a fortunate future

One way of relating to high grades is to see them as the magic key to pursuing your dream of a fortunate future. For Liiana, who shared a story about having a criminal and drug-addicted older brother and absent parents, school became a refuge.

Liiana: So, it never went badly in upper secondary school for me. I did not feel that I had any kind of dip. It has always been a place that I preferred to be. So, it was nice to sit and read about chromosomes. And not, like, think about everything else that happened at home. (Liiana-F-L-IMM-3-ABB)

Liiana shared how she felt empowered by adapting to the school environment with other young women of migrant background (Galea, Attard Tonna, & Cassar, 2011).

Aamiina had a dream of her future profession and imagined proving herself to all the people who did not believe in her: ‘I still want people to see me as a black woman with a hijab who has made something great of herself’ (Aamiina-F-H-IMM-3-AAB). She expressed a strong commitment to schoolwork. Every morning she woke up early to study before her younger siblings woke up and disturbed her.
Clearly, Aamiina decided to not please others but to ‘make something great of herself’. What seemed to be the most rewarding to her was finding a way to be and become herself. This connects to Galea, Attard Tonna and Cassar’s study (2011) in which they describe young migrant women who decide to ‘be themselves’ in the sense of not making their ‘migrant selves’ invisible, but bringing together the new and the old in themselves. This is of course also true when it comes to adolescents in general, when finding out who they are in relation to others. It is about negotiations of the self in relation to different intertwined social aspects of age, class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. In addition, Aamiina also showed a wish to challenge oppressive stereotypes and social inequalities, similar to the high-achieving immigrant students in Carrasquillo’s (2013) study.

4.1.3. Revanche – repayment and compensation

Another motivation for getting higher grades was making one’s parents proud. This was a fairly common reason amongst these students, but for some it was a more profound matter relating to pride. When Lisa told us about how her father always made her compete with him, not only in school-related activities but also in other areas, she briefly mentioned that he had not had the educational opportunities that she has herself. ‘I’ve always wanted to do the best I can. So it may have been dad, that he didn’t have … all the opportunities when he was little, but there is one for me’ (Lisa-F-L-IMM-2-AAB). Thus, the feeling of indebtedness motivated her to do her best. Another source that fed into this was that her younger brother and mother both struggled a lot with dyslexia and were thus unable to help with her schoolwork. Lisa saw herself as fortunate and took on responsibility wisely and with gratitude.

For students with parents who migrated to Sweden, there was another dimension of repaying or compensating for their parents’ sacrifice. The sons and daughters felt obliged to take school seriously so that their parents would not feel their efforts had been in vain. Migrant parents tend to value education as a means to get better opportunities in life, and their children often share these values Lund & Trondman (2017).

Dalmar: So, it is probably also about, for example, my mum coming from Somalia. And she, I think she came for the purpose for us having a better life. So, it feels like she did all that in vain, if I do not invest in school (Dalmar-M-L-IMM-2-BCE).

Some parents were highly educated in their home countries but have not had the chance to work in their profession in Sweden, which is a loss of status that the students are very aware of. Liiana struggled with her family situation and expressed her motivation to prove her ability to her parents. By showing them that she was performing well in school, she hoped to ease their burden regarding her brother’s dyslexia. The gains following this type of illusio are of altruistic nature, such as helping others from social shame and getting new chances and opportunities to restore social status.

4.2. Proficiency

The ‘Proficiency’ illusio is driven by the urge to achieve a knowledgeable, respected position – either as a professional or simply by becoming very skilled in an area of personal interest. This is a positive theme that is linked to the accounts of students who imagined futures for themselves in a profession or becoming knowledgeable within a certain area. Some students seem to realise that there actually can be a promising future for them, a place in social space, while other students seem to spot a specific place in social space in terms of ‘there is a future for me’.

4.2.1. Proficiency – learning to be a better self

For Theda, motivation was derived from the desire to be a better person tomorrow than she was today. When we asked her if she had a role model or if anyone had inspired her to perform well in school, she responded in a quite unexpected way. She expressed how she had learned from her father to think about life goals in general:

Theda: Actually, my model is myself. That I will be better today than I was yesterday. In terms of grades and personality, that I behave better than yesterday. If I had a bad day yesterday, I will have a better day today. And it… that was the way I learned about the concept of role model. I mean, he taught me that a role model is someone, it cannot be a specific person. It is someone you have to create. (Theda-F-L-IMM-2-BBB)

In this way, she managed to motivate herself to perform better and give herself new opportunities, rather than getting stuck in negative emotions about failure. It is similar to the turning point when students who are failing start to think of themselves as learners or ‘to think in that direction’ (Lund & Trondman, 2017, p. 65).

4.2.2. Proficiency – an idea of a professional self in the future

Some students were quite clear about which profession they wanted to pursue (cf. e.g., Öhrn, 2014b). They found inspiration in a variety of ways. Nusui, for example, said he got the idea to become a policeman from his best friend. The vision of himself as a policeman gave him strength in the struggle at school.

Nusui: He just… how can I put it… it was he who gave me the idea of what I wanted to become. Because, I did not know before. Then he came up with the idea that both of us could become policemen, and I thought ‘sure!’ (Nusui-M-L-IMM-2-ABE).

Elisabeth had a definite plan: she wanted to be an architect – a stable profession in which her aesthetical skills could thrive, and she would have good career opportunities.

Elisabeth: … I really enjoy art and drawing… It is a combination of being service-minded and… using my aesthetic side. I feel it is well-paid, which is no disadvantage … It is a stable job with career opportunities. (Elisabeth-F-H-SWE-2-AAD)

Leo shared the same dream as Elisabeth and was inspired by his grandmother to discover architecture. He had the grades to enter an engineering education but wanted to develop his aesthetic side. However, he had been struggling with maths and physics, which were a lot harder than he expected. Nonetheless, his aim remained the same (Leo-M-H-SWE-2-ABC).
Other students were a bit more uncertain in their attitudes towards their future professions. Like Hani, who was in her third and final year of school, who reasoned about a set of alternative ways to go after graduation.

Hani: … I want to study. I have different alternatives. Either study to be a social worker…or apply to become a radiography nurse. I read about it on the internet, it sounded like fun to do, handling a magnetic resonance camera and the like. //...// Also, I visited an open fair in Uppsala and…they had a political science programme that interested me…so you can become an ambassador, UN, something like that. I am not sure. (Hani-F-L-IMM-3-BCC)

Clearly, Hani expressed an uncertainty about how her abilities and interests can lead to a specific profession. For Nusui, it seemed that his horizon of action was the path towards police school – a pragmatic rational choice in a specific time and context, if we are to refer to Hodkinson & Sparks (1997) – whereas Hani elaborated on her horizon in a different way. Her horizon of action contained not only multiple possible choices, but also multiple horizons. As the quotation shows, when it comes to the content of the professional programmes, her alternatives differed immensely. Thus, her horizons of action were segmented, not fixed and exclusionary towards each other, but rather fluid and overlapping (Hodkinson & Sparks, 1997; Jonsson & Rudolph, 2011).

4.2.3. Proficiency – to become knowledgeable in line with current interests

Dipti came from India to Sweden when she was about 15 years old to stay with her aunt (Dipti-F-H-IMM-2-ACD). In her story, she talked about helping people and being able to make a difference in the world, and she felt that since starting upper secondary school she had been spurred to know more. Her cousins, who practically functioned as her brothers, also inspired her to study hard. For Dipti, her studies and her engagement in a local political party complemented each other.

Liban was orientated towards engineering and wanted to specialise in energy. He arrived as a teenager to Sweden from Syria and his desire to learn the new language gave him the energy to study hard in other subjects as well. His-drive came from the urge to know more and to also teach other people (Liban-M-L-IMM-3-AAC). Michael told us that he always had enjoyed discussing and analysing social issues. His-grades in social science subjects and natural science were quite similar and both high (Michael-M-H-SWE-3-AAB).

The accounts from these three students – Dipti, Liban and Michael – demonstrate an illusion of becoming knowledgeable within an area of personal interest as holding intrinsic value. They differed, however, in how they could make use of this knowledge in the future; Dipti wanted to make a difference in society, Liban wanted to help others learn and develop their potential, and Michael wanted to use his skills in a prestigious profession like the law – a position in which he would be able to discuss and analyse social issues. The gain is to be acknowledged, included and accepted as a ‘player’ of ‘the game’, for example by being recognised as a professional in future adulthood.

4.3. Fear of failing

The ‘Fear of failing’ illusion is loaded with the social shame of not being able to capitalise on the attainment of higher grades or the prosperous opportunities that become available. The catalysing origin is in the experience of a risk of social shame or that things can take a turn for the worse and get out of control. The social targets are parents, ‘Others’, or the self.

4.3.1. Fear of failing – closing gates

The fear of failing is surprisingly associated both with having many options after graduation (due to top grades in many subjects) and with not having top grades. Thus, in the latter case the students had to rethink the option of going to university at all. Sometimes, students felt compelled to achieve high grades at all times; if they did not succeed, they suffered from severe performance anxiety. Billie was one of them, and when we asked her why she performed so well in school, her answer was this:

Billie: Erm… because I have performance anxiety. And I want to be like my parents and I know I want to make a lot of money. And I constantly think about…that I don’t know what I want to do in the future. But I think a lot about the future and I want to succeed in my future. I want to be able to buy what I want, I want to be able to go to restaurants, go to the cinema, I want to travel. So, I want to be economically independent and it is about getting high grades now. You can’t succeed without an education, so that’s why I want to anyway… When I stop and think ‘I can’t cope’, then I think if I don’t study, I will not get a high grade and I need a high grade to get a good future. (Billie-F-H-IMM-2-AAC)

We tried to understand why there seemed to be a fear of losing the ticket to higher education or a fortunate future. If they ended up with low grades, they believed the gates to higher education would be closed to them. They talked about their future in a dichotomous way, about success or failure, or as a matter of life and death. And with it there was fear.

4.3.2. Fear of failing – the dark alternative

Regarding their motivation to keep up their grades, some students mentioned seeing their peers who were less successful in their lives. For example, students who lived in socially marginalised areas were constantly reminded of what their future could look like if they failed in school. Completing an education with high grades was their ticket away from the neighbourhood. Tahiil was reminded of the ‘dark alternative’ when seeing his former classmates selling drugs outside the subway.

Tahiil: I know others who haven’t succeeded in school and they… When I see them and their situation, I see a warning to myself not to go there. I know students from my old class, now selling drugs outside the subway and the like. So every time I see them it is a constant warning to not end up there like them. (Tahiil-M-H-IMM-2-BCC)

For Liliana, who was mentioned earlier, her criminal brother’s situation gave her the energy to put all her efforts into school and improving herself. She refused to let it ‘break her down’, as she put it. When she leaves in the morning, she takes a deep breath and leaves the misery at home. The fear of failing was likely more profound for those students who felt very high expectations from their
migrant parents, regardless of educational capital, according to the accounts in the theme ‘Revanche – repayment and compensation’. For students with migrant parents, the success of the family rested heavily on their shoulders. Lund & Trondman’s (2017) termed this ‘performance gaps’, based on their study interviewing students with a migrant background who had failed at school. The students expressed emotional pain when not being able to meet their parents’ expectations. While the students in our study were not failing, there seemed to be a constant awareness of the risks of not succeeding. There was so much at stake, and the shame of failure was so frightening – especially for the students who were constantly aware of the stereotypes of immigrant students, as Louie reports in her study (2012). The gains following this illusion were in a way self-centred, linked to preventing the self from social shame. For example, it was about maximising the benefits in relation to one’s position – either access to any higher education programme or access to the best higher education programme. The former seems to be predominantly mentioned by students with low levels of inherited (parental) educational capital, whereas the latter was mentioned by students with high levels of inherited educational capital.

4.4. Expectations

The ‘Expectations’ illusio is, on the one hand, associated with ease and uncomplicated efforts. It is connected with top grades and implies that students experience a completely open horizon – they can choose whatever they want to do, and the golden gates to higher education will remain open. Another dimension of this illusio is, on the other hand, the social expectation of academic success, such as having parents who expect the student to perform well and thereby foster educational and occupational aspirations (Beck, 2017; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Holm & Ohrn, 2014). The high expectations of others contribute to productive social forces to fulfil the promises. The catalysing origin seems to be sprung from experiencing that ‘I am good/smart’ and ‘I can choose a goal within reach’. The social targets are mostly parents and more unspecific ‘Others’, but also the self.

4.4.1. Expectations – the golden gates are and will be open

For high-achieving students, high grades are low-hanging fruits that can be reached with minimal effort. Sam formulated her recipe for success thus:

Sam: I think it depends on my interests… and that I like to learn and think it is exciting and it is also because I have very good support from home. I don’t know if there is some genetics as well, I’m sure, and that I like to be in the school environment. (Sam-F-H-SWE-3-AAA)

The three top grade students, while all having A-grades in most subjects, differed in their outlooks on the future. Sam was in her final year, had highly educated parents and showed a relaxed attitude to the possible paths she could pursue after graduation, because she was completely free to make a choice, as she said. She had a wide variety of areas of interest, from literary design to astronomy. Hanna, who also was in her final year, was unlike Sam very determined. However, even though she could have chosen any university due to a very impressive grade record, she chose a smaller university college in her hometown. Although Sam and Hanna’s illusio was the same, their outlooks were affected by their differences in habitus. Hanna’s parents did not have higher education certificates and thus were not able to tell her about experiences from university studies and how university works (Hanna-F-L-SWE-3-AAA). Felix also had a strong grade record and going to university was a matter of course to him, but he had not yet decided whether to aim to work for Amnesty, become a political scientist, or teach social science in school. His-ambivalence was understandable as he was in his second year, with one year left to make up his mind (Felix-M-I-SWE-2-AAA).

4.4.2. Expectations – compliance with high expectations

The students with top grades sometimes expressed their relationship to their parents’ high expectations by talking about making them proud or at least not disappointing them. William was a top performer and was not satisfied with average scores or, as he put it, ‘relatively low scores’. He said ‘…it would still feel like I disappointed them if I got a relatively low score as well, so I still try to get as many As and Bs as possible’ (William-M-H-SWE-2-AAB). Similarly, Simon also expressed this as his main incentive to perform well:

Simon: [To] fulfil my goals and not disappoint myself and, also erm, my parents, I also feel that eh, after all, everything, all the time they have spent on me and all the effort they put into me that eh, that I want to make them proud, that is perhaps the main incentive that I see…that they are happy when I’m doing well. (Simon-M-H-SWE-2-AAD)

4.4.3. Expectations – doing the very best

In this illusio, the effort is expressed in terms of doing your very best to make your parents proud, not necessarily getting the top grades for as an aim for itself. Fatema described it thus:

Fatema: My mum has never put pressure on me… that I need to come home with a certain grade or specific score, instead it is more like… It is for me… I want to make my mum happy. (Fatema-F-IMM-2-AE)

This illusio relates to another one mentioned above, namely the ‘Revanche – repayment and compensation’ illusio. Both illusions steer towards performing well for somebody else’s sake – in this case, for the parents. It is about making parents happy that their child is doing well. In contrast, in the case of the former illusio, it was a matter of proving oneself to others, which is a more socially driven force coming from experiences of social derogation.

There is a class aspect to the ‘Expectations’ illusio where, when parents are highly educated, there are expectations on their children to perform well academically and attend university as a matter of course (Beck, 2017; Maxwell, 2018). Parents with only an upper secondary education seem to push their children to do their very best in school and go to university if they are eligible. It is as if the parents’ habitus acknowledges the transition into university as a threshold, which they never crossed themselves. Framing it as a possible entry to university rather than a natural next step creates a distinction, regardless of which direction it takes. If the student’s
effort is great, which can be measured from the starting point whether advantaged or not, this effort is regarded differently by the parents. When you are in an advantaged position, you are expected to deliver high grades, whereas when the effort means bridging social clefts (which is the case for students from disadvantaged homes), parents seem to equate that with doing well.

The gains following this illusio lie in taking responsible actions to fulfil the expectations that come with success and opportunity. The way responsible actions are negotiated by the students differs; as mentioned above, doing one’s best can be enough, or it can be a matter of having to reach at least the same position as your parents.

4.5. The relation between illusio and habitus

Through the habitus, the individual student interprets daily life by using experienced history, including both their own experiences and their parents’ and family’s life experiences. As for the children to migrant parents, who experienced racism themselves just as their parents and their classmates in similar situations, their habitus carries a sense of defeat and an urge to take a legitimate place in the social space. It seems that the place does not need to be the highest in the social structure, but a place. It carries a sense of being either in or out. This habitus type is very sensitive to the social order, to the values expressed in society, and a strong sense of place. In addition, for children of low-educated parents, it carries an awareness of inherited disadvantage as Lisa and Dalmar expressed. The student reacts to unfair judgements, to exclusionary social boundaries that the habitus preconsciously recognises in a situation (the catalysing origin). For example, by being gifted and having the ability to study hard, the habitus becomes a component of the meaning-making process along with the reaction (the motivation to study). The student can use the energy as a motivating opportunity to raise the social status (the gain) of their family and their parents in the eyes of others (social targets). This act is of course not as conscious as it may seem here since the habitus’ state of operations is preconscious. Bourdieu (1990). The class-awareness and agency that emanate from the high performance shape a habitus of seeking knowledge to serve/help others. It can be seen as a broad, solidary and altruistic habitus with dispositions of wanting to save others from social shame. In contrast, a habitus that couples the agency of high performance with the position of privilege (and thus no class-awareness) is more narrow and characterised more by self-centeredness – i.e. saving oneself from social shame by not maintaining or exceeding the social position and lifestyle of one’s parents. The knowledge quest is therefore also centred towards the self, towards self-fulfilment. One is not obliged to accomplish social missions for anybody else. In sum, class-awareness as an example of a sense of one’s place in the social space is a crucial factor here which forms the ways of actually playing the game (study hard and perform well) and, as we have shown, it is why the students choose to do it.

Besides our insights into the students’ rationales and how they reason about why it is important for them to succeed in school, we identified differences between students with an immigrant background and students who were native Swedes. The Revanche illusio was activated or catalysed by habitus clashes or encounters with people who acted in a superior way towards the students with immigrant background, expressing racism or low expectations. It was fuelled with anger and a drive to restore their human dignity, and these emotions were strong in the meaning-making processes – it made the struggle worthwhile. The students with immigrant background also uniquely reasoned about their parents’ sacrifices in their country of origin and their loss of social position, which was to be recovered by their children’s success in school. Similarly, accounts of students who wanted to compensate for their parents’ lack of opportunity when they were young were also apparent in this type of illusio. Another variation of the Revanche illusio was when students with a difficult home situation rewarded themselves by seeing school as their own personal sanctuary, only taking responsibility for themselves and working for a fortunate future. School empowered them.

Another insight pertains to how a specific illusio comes into play with the habitus. Within the theme of Expectations, we explored different ways of sensing the high expectations of others, e.g. how the students experienced social expectations that came with having highly educated parents and their expectations of their ‘top-graded’ children. The high inherited educational capital gave a sense of calmness for the student to know that the ‘golden gates’ to a university education of their choice would always be open. But, at the same time, the high social position of the parents was what the student at the very least was expected to reach. This created high levels of stress and a sense of it being a matter of life or death, which is a certain kind of the illusio Fear of failure.

Students of immigrant background had another fear of failing, namely ending up selling drugs outside the metro. This fear was about wasting their chance to recover the family’s social position or to educate themselves in a way their parents never had the chance to. Their stories were fuelled with a Revanche illusio, to prove wrong those who did not believe in them, or just to get away from miserable home conditions and repay themselves for their suffering. The former type was fuelled with social shame in the eyes of others, of not reaching a high social position, whereas the other was fuelled with a fear of failing out of the system, which we called the ‘dark alternative’. The losses when failing would be greater for those who have low levels of educational capital, or – in our study – native capital, i.e. capital pertaining to having native-born or immigrant parents. The lack of knowledge about how things work after failing an exam created a need to hang on, to keep pace, to not lose grip and fall out of the system. When you are out, you are out, and there was no knowledge about how to get back in. Thus, fear of failing involved serious concerns, but for very different reasons.

Students with low levels of inherited educational capital but very high earned educational capital showed more uncertainty or had lower aspirations in terms of university or programme. They had the opportunity to choose, but did not seem to relate their choices to their parents’ social position or realise that it was possible to change their path – even after entering university. Also, the Expectations illusio contained accounts from students who were not top graders, but whose parents’ expectations were not about the final destination, but rather about simply doing their very best, which is considered enough. However, the parents differed in terms of their cultural capital and in their ability to discuss suitable learning strategies and future plans with their children. Another important parental skill when it came to academic socialisation was to be able to link topics discussed in school with the students’ own interests, which led into desirable and clear future goals, for example in higher education.

The theme of Proficiency was not clearly related to any specific set of the students’ social and cultural dispositions. It captured an
illusio driven by a desire to be knowledgeable, either in terms of working within a specific profession or nurturing personal interests in a professional practice, or just focusing on self-improvement.

There were some overlaps in the themes, for example between Proficiency – an idea of a professional self in the future and Revanche – repayment and compensation. Thus, the school as a refuge was also relevant to those who spent their days in school without friends, but found a way to visualise themselves in a future occupation and found meaning in pursuing that path. Success in school also offered rewarding feedback and many of the students we interviewed were competitive and ambitious. There were students who aimed for the most popular university programmes and universities, but seemed less certain about the content of the programme. The competitiveness itself had a value; if you could earn a place in a prestigious programme, it meant that you really were successful. This approach, however, had a downside in that it caused much stress and self-doubt in their capacity to reach their goal.

In sum, there were more similarities than differences between the high-achieving students. They had high expectations of their own abilities, they knew they had to devote time and energy and work hard to have a bright future. They benefited, however, from being in different spheres where the value of school was acknowledged, that is, at home, at school and amongst their peers. This result is in line with the findings of Lund & Trondman (2017). To make learning matter, the three spheres of family, friends and school must be connected (ibid.). Apart from the students having high ambitions and aspirations, studies also show that social, economic and family capital can hamper the fulfilment of students’ potential (Allen, 2014; Brown, 2011). Hence, we need to know more about what the consequences are for students when their parents face challenges in adapting to the change in their social position before and after migration.

Students struggled with stress and anxiety related to their urge to perform at their best all the time – something that predominantly the female students expressed. Their parents seemed to play an important role in dealing with these negative emotions, telling their children not to overwork themselves. Talking with their parents helped the students to balance their investments and their costs in terms of health and contentment. In our previous study, which focused on the support the students could mobilise Osman, Carlhed Ydhag, & Månsson, (2020), we concluded that the most important thing for the students was unconditional personal support. This came mostly from parents, but for students who did not have this kind of relationship with their parents, another adult could be that significant other – somebody with their best interests in mind.

5. Conclusion

As we have tested the potential of using the concept of illusio as a supplement to habitus, as a magnifying glass for one dimension of the habitus, we have been able to sketch the logic of practice behind a particular social investment in oneself – to perform well in upper secondary school. This means that we went beyond the individual’s belief of the necessity of a social investment (I need/want to perform well) and to study its specific catalysing origins (why), the social targets for the social energy (for whom) and the gains in relation to the field/social space and different habituses (the rewards). This tentative model of illusio of student success needs to be further developed through more studies. In addition, information from interview excerpts that we did not use for this article (see Section 3.2) could be assessed in order to add more information about the students’ agency and other practices like how they in fact organise their studies and what the studies mean to them on the whole. Moreover, in the project there is more data: we have two additional interview waves with at least half of this sample, and interviews with a significant person of their choice. Thus, this article takes one step towards deepening our understanding of high-achieving students and how they maintain momentum for success in upper secondary school. We hope that the model can assist researchers in empirical studies to further develop the concepts of habitus and illusio.

Our contribution is partly to challenge pre-conceived notions of students with backgrounds of lower socioeconomic status or immigrant backgrounds systematically getting lower grades. We referred earlier to studies on the effect of family background on students’ academic achievements. Our intention is not to question these findings, but rather to focus on the stories of success against and with the odds, and to find other ways of understanding how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds achieve high grades in upper secondary school and how they find meaning. We show how agency works differently in creating meaning and motivation, and in shaping the students’ futures by managing demands in upper secondary school. The article may hopefully bring insights to teachers, parents, career counsellors or other school staff about how to find keys to students’ motivation. Based on the words of these students, parents, practitioners and politicians could support opportunities for students in upper secondary school to formulate and cope with emotions that come with fear of failure, racism and the empowerment that comes with proficiency and high expectations. But there is also much more to learn about strong social motivational forces and how they could be used and conveyed within school, also in order to encourage the students with lower academic achievements.

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