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# The Educational Strategies of Danish University Students from Professional and Working-Class Backgrounds

JENS PETER THOMSEN, MARTIN D. MUNK, MISJA EIBERG-MADSEN, AND  
GRO INGE HANSEN

This article studies the educational strategies adopted by university students from different class backgrounds in a Scandinavian welfare regime. Studies show distinct differences among classes relating to economic considerations, risk-averse behavior, and patterns of socialization among university students. We investigate these differences through qualitative interviews with 60 students from six programs. We ask how and to what extent Danish students' choice of program and their educational strategies, attitudes, and behaviors are class related. We find that strategies are class based, but Danish working-class students do not refer to their class cultural background or to a collective working-class identity as either an asset or a challenge. Furthermore, financial constraints are not perceived as affecting their choice of higher education.

## Introduction

This article deals with the variety of educational strategies, attitudes, and behaviors adopted by university students from professional and working-class backgrounds, respectively. On one hand, access to university in Denmark remains unequal, with certain types of universities and fields of study attracting a much greater number of working-class students than others. On the other hand, a number of studies show that working-class students tend to be more risk averse than middle-class students when it comes to job security and to the economic costs of studying. They lack a sense of belonging to their higher education institutions, and some identify with their working-class heritage. We investigate these differences in Denmark through qualitative interviews with 60 students from six different programs. From an international perspective, Denmark is an unusual case because of the relative lack of financial constraints on students. We ask how and to what extent Danish students' choice of university program, their educational strategies,

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and their sense of belonging are class based, and we also examine differences in the strategies adopted by students enrolled in different university programs.

In Scandinavia, the discourse on equity in education traditionally has been very strong. Free and equal access to education has been a central pillar of the social democratic welfare state model (Esping-Andersen 1990) and a corollary of its aim to create equality of opportunity for all. Concomitantly, that model historically has been perceived as one that mitigates class differences to a substantial extent. The absence of class as a politically valid concept is reflected in that there are no special admission procedures targeting working-class or first-generation students in the higher education system. The underlying assumption is that such programs are irrelevant in a social democratic welfare state model, where there are no tuition fees and where all students receive relatively generous government grants (€740 per month for the duration of the program in 2011, with the possibility of 1 additional grant year). Yet, as shown by James McIntosh and Martin D. Munk (2007) and Jens Peter Thomsen (2012), there are still conspicuous class differences in access to higher education. Some researchers have linked this to the great importance of cultural capital at the family level, given that economic obstacles in accessing higher education in Denmark seem to be significantly smaller than in many other countries (Jæger 2009).

The Danish higher education system consists of three tiers: vocationally oriented business academies (short-cycle programs—usually 2–3 years), university colleges (medium-cycle programs educating primarily teachers, nurses, and child care or social workers—usually 3–4 years), and universities (long-cycle programs with a range of traditional and professional options—usually 3–5 years), on which this article is focused. The number of students attending higher education in Denmark has risen dramatically since the Second World War. Over the last 60 years that number has increased tenfold, and the number of available university places per 20-year-old has doubled since 1979. Today, the Ministry of Education expects that 50 percent of all young people in Denmark will obtain a postsecondary degree (compared to an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development average of about 40 percent; OECD 2010, 58)—6 percent will obtain one from business academies, 23 percent from university colleges, and 21 percent from a university. As of March 2013, the current government has set as a goal that 60 percent of a youth cohort should obtain a postsecondary degree, out of which 25 percent shall obtain a university degree. This dramatic increase in the number of university spots alone warrants looking into processes of social differentiation in access to different university programs. Arguably, it is increasingly important to address inequality not only vertically in the education system but also horizontally in terms of access to the variety of university programs.

Munk and Thomsen (2012) have found that the Danish university system

is characterized by conspicuous class differences in choice of field and university institution. They find that the university student body can be divided into two large groups: a “classical” nonvocational university group including students from homes where the transmission of academic and cultural capital is the primary mechanism of reproduction and a vocational university group including students from homes where education is valued as important because it grants access to “regular” well-paid and well-respected jobs for which demand is relatively high. Students in the first group usually attend liberal arts universities or creative arts institutions and are more likely to study law or medicine, while students in the second group are more likely to enter applied programs leading to specific occupations (e.g., pharmacy or business).

In this article, we focus on how students from different classes perceive and experience their choice of degree and their lives as students. We investigate class differences within university education and raise the following question: In what way, and to what extent, are Danish students’ choice of university program, educational strategies, and sense of belonging influenced by class? Many studies focus on the economic risk assessments involved in deciding whether to attend higher education and on the role of the students’ (working) class identity as a barrier for accessing and coping successfully in a university. We do the same, focusing on the case of Denmark, where economic obstacles regarding access to higher education are relatively small compared to other countries. This study adds significantly to the existing literature in at least two ways. First, it analyzes decision making regarding higher education in a Nordic welfare state from a class-based perspective, which in turn leads to new comparative conclusions (e.g., about differences in risk assessments between students from different class backgrounds). Second, we explicitly address differences in educational strategies between students attending different higher education programs. We therefore achieve a more nuanced assessment of the impact of class on students, depending on their choice of program.

### **Research on Higher Education and Social Class**

There are many qualitative studies on higher education and social class (for a review, see Brooks 2008). The great majority of these studies take the work of Pierre Bourdieu as their central theoretical point of departure, and overall they can be divided into three major thematic clusters. First, most of the studies on general class strategies and higher education focus on how the privileged classes use resources and knowledge about the education system to gain and maintain advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions. Studies by Diane Reay et al. (2005) analyze decisions about higher education in those terms (see also Crozier et al. [2008] and Lareau [2011] for an account of the differing patterns of socialization in working- and

middle-class families). Ann Mullen (2009, 2010) also describes how the upper classes use well-developed family strategies in their choice of higher education, while the choice of working-class students is more “arbitrary” and more dependent on dedicated teachers and student counselors.

A second major subset of this literature focuses on working-class students specifically. This subset can be divided into two components. The first one addresses risk assessment and selection, the choice of higher education for working-class youth being a riskier, more uncertain choice, and one fraught with economic obstacles. Louise Archer and Merryn Hutchings (2000) analyze perceptions of higher education held by working-class young people and their reasons for not choosing higher education, focusing on assessments of risks and cost/benefits. Lyn Tett (2004) argues that, for working-class students, participation in higher education is more risky and financially demanding than for middle-class students (see also Reay 2002). Another subset of studies focuses on working-class students’ feelings of alienation, dislocation, or at least ambivalence (Christie et al. 2008; Reay et al. 2009). Among those, a number of studies report that working-class students identify with their working-class heritage: Jane Pearce et al. (2008) draw narrative portraits of how working-class students fit in the academic setting. Jocey Quinn (2004) describes how the prospect of dropping out tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy for working-class students, given the difficult economic conditions that they face. Wolfgang Lehmann (2009a, 2009b) finds that working-class students have a predominantly utilitarian and vocational attitude to university studies and use their working-class background to develop specific traits and advantages (being hardworking, responsible, etc.). Elizabeth M. Lee and Rory Kramer (2013) analyze the way students of low socioeconomic status at selective colleges manage their “cleft habitus,” balancing newly gained cultural capital with propensities rooted in their social origin. Jenny Stuber (2006) looks into students’ discursive strategies regarding class and claims that working-class students are more aware of class inequalities and of the significance of class than are middle-class students.

The third thematic cluster is made of a number of studies that address how the “institutional habitus” and extracurricular activities influence social differentiation in higher education, implicitly postulating and favoring specific types of students (Ulriksen 2009). Barbara Read et al. (2003) show that first-generation students are disadvantaged by institutional cultures that label them as “others.” Reay et al. (2009) report on the differences in the class-based sense of belonging in a diverse set of institutions of higher education. Other studies consider the curriculum as a mechanism for differentiation. Sarah E. Barfels and Michael Delucchi (2003) thus seek to locate a hidden curriculum in a variety of higher education courses—by looking at how ways of designing academically “similar” courses at different levels result in concealed social tracking (see also Bernstein 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1979;

Bourdieu et al. 1994). Stuber (2009) examines the importance of extracurricular activities for academic success among students from different classes, as does Thomsen (2012), who also explores the extent to which the importance of extracurricular activities varies across programs.

These qualitative, overwhelmingly convergent studies can be summarized as follows: privileged classes use educational strategies that enable them to maintain their privileged position; perceptions of the risks involved in making educational choices vary across classes, and students from different classes display different class-based attitudes toward studying; educational institutions and programs presuppose specific student types, in a way that often confers an advantage to upper-class students. In this article, we want to ascertain whether these conclusions also hold in the Danish case, especially as far as the first two points are concerned.

While the qualitative literature mentioned above contains references clearly relevant to our study, there is also a large stream of quantitative research on the sociology of higher education.<sup>1</sup> Some studies focus on differences in access to specific programs or fields (i.e., horizontal social differentiation within higher education) and on the different educational strategies adopted by students with different class backgrounds. In a recent study, Martin Hällsten (2010) finds that horizontal segregation in higher education substantially contributes to social reproduction and that class background affects the choice of the program of study, which then helps generate inequalities in the labor market. Other studies focus on the diverted enrollment of first-generation students into less prestigious programs or fields of study.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Marie Duru-Bellat et al. (2008) draw fine-grained distinctions among types of higher education institutions (see also Goyette and Mullen 2006; Espenshade and Radford 2009; Reimer and Pollak 2009). While these quantitative papers do not explicitly analyze the narratives of students' educational pathways, they do confirm that the different strategies uncovered by qualitative studies are supported by statistical research.

### Research Question and Theoretical Background

A shortcoming of some of the above-mentioned qualitative studies is that they have not used comparison groups in their attempt to identify class-specific traits in the experiences of working-class or first-generation students.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, if the sample only includes working-class students, it will not be possible to ascertain whether the specific features found do indeed solely

<sup>1</sup> For overviews, see Shavit et al. (2007), Gerber and Cheung (2008), Stevens et al. (2008), and Grodsky and Jackson (2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Davies and Guppy (1997), Astin and Oseguera (2004), Ayalon and Yogeve (2005), and Becker and Hecken (2009a).

<sup>3</sup> Studies including Reay (2002), Read et al. (2003), Reay et al. (2005, 2009), Stuber (2006, 2009), Crozier et al. (2008), and Mullen (2009, 2010) do have comparison groups, however.



pertain to this group or whether they are traits common to all students. In this article, we address this problem by focusing on differences between classes. We also consider the strategies adopted by students enrolled in different university programs and how these strategies intersect with class.<sup>4</sup> Do we find dispositions, attitudes, and strategies among university students similar to those found in many of the above-mentioned studies, or do we notice differences as a result of the strength of the Danish welfare model?

Our theoretical framework is inspired by Bourdieu and by what might be viewed as the competing theory of relative risk aversion. Most importantly, Richard Breen and John H. Goldthorpe (1997) have argued that offspring from working-class backgrounds will try to avoid downward mobility by opting out of educational investments perceived to be too risky. In this respect, they follow Raymond Boudon (1974), who states that different class origins will produce different cost-benefit calculations.<sup>5</sup> With respect to Bourdieu, we mainly draw on his concepts of capital and habitus and his work on student cultures and class.<sup>6</sup> In this work, Bourdieu shows how educational strategies differ between classes on the basis of what “makes sense” and what is sociostructurally possible. In this respect, the concept of habitus captures the structured and structuring systems of dispositions oriented toward a practical logic, making habitus “a highly economic principle of action, which makes for an enormous saving in calculation and also in time” (Bourdieu 2005, 213). According to Bourdieu, it is the propensity of families to invest in

<sup>4</sup> In this study we address only class, not race or gender. In the six programs under examination, the number of immigrant students is far too small to warrant any conclusion regarding immigrant status. However, from other studies (Thomsen 2008) we know that ethnic minority students choose programs that have a vocational profile, are not culture specific, and are not limited to one national context (dentistry is a very popular choice, e.g., while studying to become a primary school teacher is not). Apart from the most trivial differences in preferences between “hard” and “soft” programs (male students will generally outnumber female students in natural sciences, technical sciences, and hard social sciences), we observed few class-specific gender differences. However, male students tended to be more self-confident and undisciplined, while female students would be described—by males and females alike—as more structured, hardworking, and well prepared. This was most pronounced as far as the selective programs of medicine and sociology were concerned.

<sup>5</sup> Boudon (1974) distinguishes between the primary effects of class background on school achievement, establishing the potential range of educational outcomes and the secondary effects, i.e., the actual educational choices made by children and parents that will determine the realization of this potential. In general, this means that children from a professional-class background will tend to be less risk averse when it comes to program length and type than will their working-class counterparts. Being a selected group, there is good reason to believe that the working-class students in our data belong to the least risk averse fraction of working-class children, leading to downwardly biased class differences in our data and analysis. Furthermore, it was especially the working-class students at the less socially selective, utility-driven programs of business economics and pharmacy who thought they performed the lowest and expressed a lower level of ambition (in getting good grades and passing exams) relative to the working-class students at the other programs. This is probably due to the fact that within the group of working-class students, students at the selective programs are a more selected group: the bar is higher in these programs. In order to address downwardly biased class differences, ideally we should have included working-class nonuniversity choosers (this was part of the original design, but unfortunately their inclusion proved to exceed the budget awarded to our study. We do plan to pursue this at a later stage). However, this bias will affect most of the qualitative studies on this topic, and so we can still compare our study with other studies of this subset out of which participants were selected.

<sup>6</sup> See Bourdieu and Passeron (1979), Bourdieu et al. (1994), and Bourdieu (1996, 2000).

education and the chances of success for these investments that “determine the considerable differences in attitudes towards schooling and in success at school” (2000, 216).

Bourdieu also shows that in many programs the extracurricular culture is more accessible to the more privileged classes, that sociolinguistics structures educational practice (see also Bernstein 1977), and that this favors particular types of class-based student behavior. Similarly, Samuel R. Lucas (2001) emphasizes the privileged groups’ ability to maintain their relative advantage in the educational system, in such a way that inequality will tend to be effectively maintained. Students’ educational strategies and abilities to master linguistic codes in educational settings are closely linked to their social background and socialization patterns within the family.

Finally, as far as participation is concerned, one should pay special attention to whether class identity is perceived as a hindrance or an advantage in choosing and completing a higher education program. Recent years have seen the emergence of a growing body of literature on class identity and on how class influences and structures self-perception and identity construction.<sup>7</sup> In the work of Beverley Skeggs (1997, 2003), for instance, class is understood as a cultural asset used by less favored groups in establishing group identities with significant symbolic value for the group’s members (see also Lamont 2000). We believe that exploring whether class-cultural narratives or accounts of identity construction that normatively draw on class values are present in the case of Danish higher education students is particularly useful for further theory development, given the history of the egalitarian Danish welfare state.

### Data and Method

We interviewed 60 second-year students from six university programs in 2010, using semistructured interview techniques, and we coded the interviews with Nvivo.<sup>8</sup> Interviews were done using an ethnographic approach. We focused on the informants’ attitudes, their depiction of their practices, and the broader sociostructural context shaping their choices and behaviors.<sup>9</sup> On the basis of the Danish and international literature on education and class, we addressed a range of topics in the interview guide.<sup>10</sup> We targeted students from different class backgrounds. One group of professional-class students

<sup>7</sup> See Reay (1998), Crompton et al. (2000), Savage (2000), Bottero (2004), and Devine et al. (2005).

<sup>8</sup> We handed out information on the research project to almost all second-year students in each program. Students who returned the forms with their contact information formed the basis for selection to interviews.

<sup>9</sup> See Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Bourdieu et al. (1999), and Delamont (2002).

<sup>10</sup> That guide (see PDF, available in the online version of *CER*) included questions on the following topics: social and educational background, practices in the family setting, views on choice of education, expectations and experiences pertaining to the university program, student social life, academic and leisure activities, student identity, perceptions of belonging and class, and views on future life.

came from homes where at least one parent was employed as a professional in a job normally requiring at least a medium-cycle higher education (e.g., teachers, lawyers, doctors), and one group of working-class students came from homes where the parents were working in unskilled or skilled manual jobs (where the parents' highest education was vocational training).<sup>11</sup> We selected students in such a way that each program should preferably have a slight preponderance of working-class students, as this was our primary topic of interest (in total, 33 working-class students and 27 professional-class students).

We specifically wanted to highlight the experiences of working-class students compared to their professional-class peers at socially selective programs, but we also wanted to contrast these with experiences of students in socially less selective programs. At the same time, we wanted to distinguish between more or less vocational programs, so as to better account for choices of degree courses by students of different social backgrounds (Goyette and Mullen 2006; Becker and Hecken 2009b). The institutions and programs chosen are shown in table 1.

As table 1 shows, sociology, medicine, architecture, and economics have the highest proportion of professional-class parents, while pharmacy and business economics have the highest proportion of working-class parents. The first four programs are thus very much socially selective and all require medium-high to high grade point averages in high school (*gymnasium*) to gain admission.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, among the four most socially selective programs, parents of sociology and architecture students more often have positions in which they enjoy large amounts of cultural capital, while parents of students in medicine and economics students more often have positions in which they enjoy large amounts of economic capital.

Danish labor market statistics show that sociology students will normally apply for advisory, administrative, or educational positions, while economics students are directed toward business and upper administration positions (often within the public sector). Architecture and medicine are occupation-oriented programs, providing degree courses that cater to occupations in architecture firms and hospitals or private practices, respectively. For students in sociology and architecture, job opportunities are less numerous than for medicine and economics students. The pharmacy program is also occupation oriented (most jobs are in drug stores or in the pharmaceutical industry, where the unemployment rate is very low). Both the economics and the

<sup>11</sup> In the Danish context, there might not be a large difference in income between a professional-class couple of, say, teachers and a skilled working-class couple made up of a carpenter and an electrician. Still, income differences between a couple of university professors and a couple of unskilled workers will be considerable.

<sup>12</sup> In Denmark, students are almost exclusively admitted on the basis of their high school grade point averages.

TABLE 1  
UNIVERSITY PROGRAM AND SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS

	Sociology, University of Copenhagen	School of Architecture, Copenhagen	Medicine, University of Copenhagen	Economics, University of Copenhagen	Pharmacy, University of Copenhagen	Business Economics, Aarhus University
Class origin of students (2007; %):						
Father's occupation:						
Management	9	12	11	16	9	19
Professional (highly skilled)	49	47	53	44	36	19
Medium-skilled nonmanual work	20	16	16	16	16	23
Skilled manual work	17	22	16	19	33	31
Unskilled manual work	4	3	4	4	6	8
Mother's occupation:						
Management	2	5	5	5	4	3
Professional (highly skilled)	43	39	48	36	22	19
Medium-skilled nonmanual work	33	35	30	36	37	34
Skilled manual work	20	17	14	20	29	39
Unskilled manual work	2	3	3	3	8	4
High school GPA needed (2008)	High GPA	High GPA	High GPA	Low GPA	Low GPA	Low GPA
Degree of social selectivity	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Lower	Lower
Degree of profession orientation	Less strong	Strong	Strong	Less strong	Strong	Less strong
Degree of job security	Lower	Lower	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher

SOURCE.—Authors' own calculations using data from Statistics Denmark.

NOTE.—Class origins of students are based on data on all university students enrolled in the respective programs. GPA = grade point average from the Danish high school (*gymnasium*).

business economics programs also prepare students for positions in a portion of the private sector where unemployment is relatively low.

### **Empirical Analysis**

Our research question and the parameters for choosing the six programs reflect our interest in investigating how program selection and class origin intersect. To do so in what follows, we draw an analytical distinction among three levels: general (not program-specific) class differences, program-specific differences, and, where relevant, the intersection of class and program differences. This will enable us to investigate whether some differences are common to the two classes regardless of program differences, whether some are mostly specific to programs regardless of class, and whether some differences can only be understood properly by considering the intersection of program and class. Below, we draw on theory and literature previously described, and we present the analyses under four thematic headings: the university program, which targets program characteristics and students' (extra-curricular) activities linked to the program; the family, as a factor shaping educational strategies and choice of education; the choice of a specific program after some risk assessment; and the student experience, especially as far as self-esteem and alienation are concerned. These themes represent a theoretically informed synthesis of the manifold questions from the semi-structured interviews—a synthesis that addresses the ways in which the students' dispositions, attitudes, behaviors, and educational strategies are class based.

### **The University Program: Characteristics and Student Activities**

In order to explore student perspectives on the program, student life, and the potential significance of extracurricular activities, we asked students to characterize their program and describe the “typical” student. Students in the sociology program depict the typical student as a socially conscious, reflexive, and theory-oriented individual, with highly educated parents and laid-back, liberal attitudes. There are many social and political activities linked to the program, and everyday student language is laden with political and theoretical terms, as well as “inside jokes” at the expense of sociologists (such as calling the student-run canteen the Weber Grill). Students frequently participate—and are expected to participate—in extracurricular activities such as reading clubs and organizing seminars, and they often belong to councils or administrative bodies (the tradition of the Danish student movement is strong in that program). Apparently, the institution expects them to be critical, reflective students, to the extent that words not connoting an independent academic habitus, like “homework” and “school,” have negative connotations.

Student social life in the medicine program is heavily connected to other curricular activities, and there are many groups organized around study cafes, study groups, medical interest groups, and the like. Extracurricular activities play a prominent role in the medicine program. The typical medical student is portrayed as hard working and ambitious; the environment is described as competitive and conducive to the formation of a strong professional identity. Students are tough on themselves and believe that this toughness is mirrored in the institution's expectations of high academic standards and sustained commitment on their part.

As is the case with the program in medicine, the architecture program takes up a large amount of the students' time. One of them describes the program as "something you carry with you all the time," to the point of it becoming an identity-conferring factor. The curricular and the extracurricular, the academic and the "social" are intertwined, both in the students' interests (as reflected in their creative cultural production and consumption behaviors) and in their daily life, as they spend long hours at school (thereby strengthening their social network): "There is a lot going on at the different Architecture departments; it becomes your second home, with instant coffee and biscuits in your drawers, red wine and beer, and often you are there late at night working and having a good time" (working-class student, architecture). The typical student is described as focused on "performance" and focused on academic creativity and the development of an individualized taste for fashion. These are predominantly students from privileged homes. The institution expects them to be committed, creative, entrepreneurial, and very independent. There is a sense among them that a certain academic architectural style as well as specific aesthetic appearances and preferences are expected.<sup>13</sup>

The typical student in the economics program is described as a career-oriented, ambitious, politically conservative student—coming from a well-off home—enrolled in a relatively prestigious program ("This is real economics, unlike the programs at the business schools," as one student put it). In an economics program, extracurricular activities do not take up the same space and time as in the three other selective programs, and they are not linked to the academic component of the program in the same way. Individualist strategies prevail, and study groups, for example, are seldom used.

In the pharmacy program, student get-togethers and social activities are considered important prerequisites for having a good student life, but they are not connected to the curriculum the way they are in medicine, architecture, and sociology. Those extracurricular activities are mostly seen as helping students get through the study, which is probably also due to the fact that, more so than in the other cases, this program recruits students

<sup>13</sup> While not all architecture students identify with this ideal type, it does provide important insights into what is more or less implicitly expected of students.

from all over the country. Descriptions of the typical student are less clear-cut; some emphasize students' lack of concern for appearance and lack of interest in politics, while others say there are many different types of students.

The behavior of business economics students is similar to that of pharmacy students. Social and leisure activities are not connected to the curriculum. Reading groups are widely used to aid academic progress and as part of the student's social life, but generally friendships and social networks are separated from academic life and student peers. Like in pharmacy, there does not seem to be a very definite image of the "typical student."

As a general matter, students in the most selective courses (medicine, architecture, and sociology) have a lot of extracurricular activities, and the connection between them and the program is a tight one. In the vocationally oriented programs, in contrast, such activities are not considered as part and parcel of the program and of what it means to be an involved student. Similarly, in the selective courses students' descriptions of the typical student were "thicker," richer, and more homogeneous than they were in the vocationally oriented programs in pharmacy and business economics. In this respect, Stuber argues that the "collegiate extra-curriculum is an important site for stratification because it is there that students gain access to social and cultural resources valued by the privileged classes" (2009, 877). We find support for this view, but we also see indications of how working-class students in selective programs in sociology and medicine use these activities to gain access to some of the more "practical" and tacit knowledge about the program they have not have had access to in their upbringing.

### **The Family: Home Resources and the Choice of Education**

In almost all the professional-class students' accounts of their parents' attitudes, it was expected that their children would continue to *gymnasium*, the high school intended for students preparing for postsecondary studies. Most of these families take an active advisory role not only in securing that their offspring choose to go to university (some parents advise against the routine work that will result from a shorter/more vocational education) but also in choosing a field of study. As a female professional-class student from the economics program recalls, "There has been quite a bit of influence from back home. Both of my parents are academics, and they prefer . . . they exercise their influence on me and my siblings [so that we] go down that path. . . . I don't think it would have played well if I had come home and said I wanted to be a hairdresser."

In a similar vein, a female professional-class architecture student remembers that her parents were "100 percent supportive" and how their "eyes glowed" when she told them she had begun studying at the School of Architecture. As another professional-class student says about choosing sociology, "My dad is thrilled; he thinks . . . if he were to do it all over again,



he would study Sociology himself.” These quotes illustrate the overwhelming impact of parents with large amounts of cultural capital; they not only support their offspring’s choice but in some cases even project themselves into those decisions, as the last quote shows. In the interviews with the working-class students, however, the majority of parents support their children’s choice of education, but they do not have sufficient knowledge of the higher education system to allow active involvement—they are sympathetic but unable to actively advise in the selection process. A few working-class students described how their parents urged them to get a better education than they had, but some other parents advised against higher education as being too risky and uncertain an investment: “My dad sometimes asks me: what exactly are you studying? He actually doesn’t know. And I’ve told him lots and lots of times. ‘What kind of job can you get?’ It’s always about that and it’s hard to explain because first there’s a graduate program and your talent and supplementary courses and all kinds of things that determines what kind of job you can ultimately get. . . . He doesn’t understand that” (working-class student, business economics).

I was obsessed with the thought of studying Medicine. . . . But it was like my parents didn’t really support me. They were happy, of course, when I finished high school, but there was a period when I was feeling bad in high school and my mother urged me to stop and get an apprenticeship in H&M or something so I could start working. And when I later said I wanted to study Medicine they shook their heads like they were thinking: “Let her try and see if she can . . . .” But then they saw that I was actually very focused and they started supporting me a little bit more. (Working-class student, medicine)

Thus, working-class parents are often unable to actively support the choice to pursue higher education because they do not possess the intimate knowledge of the education system that professional-class parents do and because their approach to their children’s education involves less interference (see Lareau 2011). Asked whether she talked with her parents about her choice of education, a working-class student reveals that her parents said that they were not sure they understood her choice, “but you probably do and that’s very fine and we can feel that you are happy about it.” Generally, the working-class parents depicted in our study consider it important to get some qualification (“The only thing they have demanded was that I would get some sort of qualification,” as one student phrased it). In contrast, professional-class parents stress the importance of getting the right qualification.

All in all, in line with Bourdieu’s well-known arguments, the habitus of these professional-class students reflect home environments with intimate knowledge of the educational system, where the academic language of the home has prepared them for their future educational pathways and where there is a “sense” of the importance this choice holds for the reproduction of the social position of the families and for the maximization of life chances



(Bourdieu 1986). This is visible in the stories of architecture students with architect parents and even more so in the stories of those medical students who come from families in which one parent belongs to the medical profession: "You could say that there are things that are well known to me, because the language back home is . . . well you have just heard some things before. . . . You can always call dad and then he can explain this and that. . . . My mum is also, even though she's not a doctor, she's in the pharmaceutical industry, she knows a lot of stuff, so when we're talking over the dinner table, I think it's just a very medical jargon, where my boyfriend sometimes says: 'Hey, can you guys talk like normal people?'" (professional-class student, medicine).

Generally, in the interviews with the medical students, they made it clear that there were major advantages to having in-depth knowledge of the medical profession, to the hard work involved in the study and later career of medicine, to the amount of time spent on studying and working, and to the strong professional identity that often comes with this occupation. In contrast, working-class medical students gave accounts of participating in various extracurricular activities to compensate for the lack of this home advantage they felt the professional-class students had. The active involvement in the choice of a university program by the professional-class parents is particularly visible in the case of the four socially selective programs, medicine, architecture, sociology, and economics, while differences between classes are significantly smaller at the two less selective and more vocational programs, pharmacy and business economics.

Unsurprisingly, the professional-class students through their family environment apparently benefited from a much better preparation than did working-class students. This is also clear from the students' accounts of access to homework help, especially at later stages of their educational journey. Those working-class students that venture into university studies are much more dependent on random "inspiration" by charismatic teachers, friends, student counselors, and youth organizations. Networks are thus used in different ways in the selection process. Some students have an inherited family network and an intimate knowledge of the higher education system. Working-class students are more dependent on contingent encounters with role models outside of their family. This is a point also made by Mullen (2009, 2010), who stresses the systematic structurally embedded nature of the higher education selection process for middle-class students and the contingent nature of this process for working-class students.

Overall, from the interviews it is possible to identify four typical class-specific educational strategies across the programs (see also Irwin and Elley 2011). First, parents with an intimate knowledge of the higher education system are able to guide their offspring actively in the choice of a university program ("guided" choice). Another possibility is for parents to be supportive

of a given choice without guiding it (“implied” choice). Yet another possibility—and the dominant pattern among working-class students—is for parents to play a minimal role (“independent” choice) in which inspiration has been less structurally embedded (encounters with inspiring teachers, counselors, friends, etc.). Finally, a few students talk about their choice to pursue higher education as being in direct opposition to their parents’ path of life.

### **The Choice: University Program and Risk Assessment**

As mentioned above, a number of studies report that working-class students are more risk averse when it comes to the prospect of entering higher education and, therefore, more likely not to pursue it at all. They may well be deterred by the “strangeness” of the higher education experience and by uncertainty as to future job security. Working-class students face a number of financial hurdles: they have to pay tuition fees, and they will have to live on a considerably tighter budget than if they had full-time employment. At the same time, some sort of job is needed for them to sustain themselves while studying, and this in turn has consequences for the amount of time they are able to allocate to their studies. Yet it is a fact that there are universal government grants for Danish students and no tuition fees in higher education, a fact that the stories of the 60 students we interviewed do reflect. In contrast to many of the studies cited, we do not find that working-class students have been deterred from attending university for financial reasons, nor have they had experiences of financial constraint in their upbringing. They do not find the prospect of living mainly off government grants a deterrent. Besides, all students (regardless of class) have not weighed in the cost of education in terms of foregone earnings. Considering the relative lack of financial constraints in the Danish higher education system, this adds weight to the argument that cultural capital is extremely important in students’ upbringing since there are still significant differences in social selectivity for different programs in Denmark (Thomsen 2012).<sup>14</sup>

Regarding risk assessments pertaining to students’ future occupational and economic situation, there are, however, differences between the classes somewhat similar to differences reported in other studies. Half of the working-class students and just under one-fifth of the professional-class students have made risk assessments regarding future job prospects and future income in which they explicitly mention the importance of job security or access to well-paid or high-status jobs as a key factor in choosing their university program: “It has to be something with a clear label on it when you’re done, and that’s the Economics program. The employment rate is high, and that has

<sup>14</sup> We should, however, beware of generalized statements about economic risk assessments of working-class young people since we have not interviewed working-class nonchoosers. As we already emphasized, working-class students in university programs are a selected group. Working-class nonchoosers may well have other stories to tell about financial constraints in their upbringing.

definitely played a role in my higher education choice" (working-class student, economics). "I am really, really interested in history and read lots of history literature in my spare time, but I would never study History at the university—I mean, what kind of work would I be able to get?" (working-class student, medicine).

Similarly, a female working-class student studying business economics considered applying for the architecture program: "I think I am rational enough to consider job security after I graduate, and there's no job security if you're an architect. . . . I would have liked to be an architect, as I like what I am doing now, but it was too uncertain a choice. The risk was too big." In line with the arguments made by Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) and with the findings of numerous quantitative studies on risk aversion, this working-class student rules out educational pathways that are perceived as being too risky in terms of future outcomes. And in line with Bourdieu (1996, 2000), the working-class students quoted above embody a habitus such that a pathway into higher education is not the obvious choice: "the subjective hope of profit tends to be adjusted to the objective probability of profit" (2000, 216). Pursuing higher education is perceived as more risky, and a way of coping with this risk is to make a choice that makes sense in relation to one's habitus, which means making the "safe" choice—a program that is application oriented and provides the student with clearly decodable qualifications. In contrast, a female professional-class student at the highly selective architecture program talks about her program choice as being integral part and parcel of her identity: "The architecture program is 100 percent identity-creating as you spend all your time at school. . . . It's like when people talk about having a work with no limits, something you carry with you all the time." She continued her thoughts on the future prospects of studying architecture: "I really don't think about what to do after I'm finished. . . . It's all about being educated in a certain way." Here she uses the word "educated" in the sense of the German word *Bildung*, that is, a nonutilitarian attitude toward education that is typical for students endowed with a habitus that is conducive to this kind of valuation of higher education. Similarly, another student conveys a typical story about what is important among students in the sociology program, namely, having a "deep-felt interest" in the program and being able to use its content to "grow personally." These quotes mirror the findings from Mullen's study of undergraduates at an elite institution (Yale) and nonelite state university (Southern), where she claims that the experience of university is a "full life experience" for elite institution students, while it is much more instrumental for nonelite students: "When it came to choosing majors, the Southern student selected fields not for what they wanted to do but for the kinds of occupation they hoped to enter. . . . The Southern students also approached academic knowledge from an applied perspective, evaluating course content in terms of its usefulness to their future

lines of work. . . . In contrast, the Yale students prized theoretical or abstract knowledge and evaluated knowledge less for its applied purposes and more for its intrinsic qualities" (Mullen 2010, 207).

Differences in risk assessment also vary considerably across programs. The highly selective and highly occupation-oriented programs of architecture and medicine are characterized by a strong professional culture and identity in which risk assessments seem absent. In that case, inspiration is said to come from parents and from humanitarian or artistic interests. The same goes for sociology students. This is the student group that most clearly exhibits an interest-driven choice of program (a general interest in society and everyday social phenomena) and a view of that program as an end in itself; thoughts on the precariousness of future work life are not expressed. Economics students share the view that their program provides access to a wide range of prestigious jobs, and they are able to combine an interest in society and science (mathematics) with the more application-oriented aspects of the program. Business economics students emphasize the economic aspects and the practical applicability of the program and the access it grants to good jobs in the private sector. They also want to complete their program relatively quickly and see no reason to continue their studies indefinitely. Pharmacy students all emphasize access to jobs that are not "too routine" as being important for their choice of the program, and they see their course as a means to get a good job.

All in all, accounts of financial constraints limiting choice of university differ from student accounts reported in other studies. Risk assessments about future work and income are made four times as often by working-class students, and, unsurprisingly, these assessments are predominantly found in programs of business economics and pharmacy, which are oriented toward a particular employment path.

### **The Student Experience: Academic Self-Esteem and Sense of Belonging**

Another goal of this article is to analyze class differences in students' perceptions of academic self-esteem and general feelings of belonging. These are all important factors in the students' experience of barriers in the different programs, and we would expect to find that working-class students face more difficulties in this respect.

A common feature of all students is that, when asked directly, they state that they feel at home in their program regardless of class. In this respect, feelings of dislocation may be less present than reported in other studies (Read et al. 2003; Aries and Seider 2005; Christie et al. 2008). Most students emphasize the importance of forming and using study groups and of having good social relations with other students. Experiences of lack of self-discipline, critique of teachers, and occasional motivational problems are also common issues mentioned by half the students across social classes and pro-

grams. Students in the highly competitive medicine program report being stressed far more than do students in the other programs, whereas stress in the less selective programs of business economics and pharmacy is much less pronounced.

As for class differences, working-class students generally have lower expectations of their academic performance than do their professional-class peers. When asked to assess it, only one in four working-class students thinks she performs above average, while three out of four professional-class students believe they perform above average. Interestingly enough they seem to draw on different resources here: the majority of working-class students stress extracurricular competencies as important for good academic performance, like the ability to work in a disciplined manner, having practical skills, and so on, while professional-class students place more weight on their academic competencies. Generally, working-class students have personal accounts of having to live up to higher standards than they are used to, while professional-class students frame this as having problems with excessively high expectations of themselves.

As mentioned above, while Danish working-class students may feel more at home in their program than is reported in other studies, one-third of working-class students in our sample experience feelings of strangeness: "This doesn't come naturally to me, getting high grades and stuff, I have to fight my way through university," as one working-class student from business economics says, or, as another working-class student put it, referring to her family background:

I miss someone to ask for advice. Of course you can ask your lecturer if you are unsure about something, but it would still be nice to have a place where you don't feel stupid when you ask about things. . . . And they [the parents] don't really have the same sense of what I am going through, like when I say I have to study for exams and then spend all my time at school studying and I can feel that they don't really understand that you can be so busy studying and all stressed out, they don't get that. (Working-class student, business economics)

Generalized feelings of insecurity are also more prevalent among working-class students, half of whom mention having experienced them. In contrast, whereas professional-class students mention feelings of insecurity, they link them to specific academic or administrative issues. These more or less pronounced and diffuse insecurities reflect class differences as to previous expectations regarding university studies. While the professional-class students' expectations look tangible, concrete, and realistic (e.g., expecting the program to be a "serious place to study," as a result of having invested time in "getting quite familiar with what the program is going to be like"), the working-class students' expectations of university studies are diffuse, vague, and often implicit. Four out of five working-class students (as opposed to one in 10 professional-class students) describe their expectations using stereotypes

and using a language that is less informed and familiar with academic life than that reflected in the language used by the professional-class students. A female working-class business economics student thus expected it to be “a lot more stilted than it turned out to be” and continues: “It’s because of what you see in American films, about what it’s like to attend college. So I thought it would be more stilted.”

Given the particular welfare state model found in Denmark, an important point is whether we are able to find explicit accounts of class identity or expressions of class consciousness that resemble those found in other studies. This might come both in the shape of individualized class qualities or in more explicit collective class-cultural qualities (see Lamont 2000). International literature provides mixed evidence of this. Archer and Hutchings (2000, 570) analyze perceptions of risk by working-class nonparticipants in higher education regarding the latter and note that they are torn between the potential benefits of higher education and the “potential cost of ‘losing’ one’s working-class cultural identity.” Pearce et al. (2008) report how working-class students actively draw on their working-class identities in encountering and coping with university culture, and Reay et al. (2009) argue that working-class students in elite universities at least partly retain a working-class habitus. Stuber writes that, in contrast to those of middle-class students, “the narratives of working-class students, in their totality, show a greater sensitivity to social class and a greater likelihood of concluding that social class does matter. Finally, these students also share the tendency to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and those above” (2006, 312). Lehmann (2009a, 631) shows that “these students draw on their working-class backgrounds to construct uniquely working-class moral advantages, such as those associated with a strong work ethic, maturity, responsibility, and real-life experiences,” even though this comes in the shape of individual qualities, not as part of a collective narrative of working-class consciousness.

While our study identifies a range of class-based expressions that can be interpreted as pertaining to individualized class consciousness (like feelings of insecurity), we find only weak evidence of positive expressions of individualized class qualities in which class-cultural background is considered a valued asset. Some working-class students say that they have profited from moral values acquired at home (being disciplined, hardworking, and independent), but this is so for only a small fraction of them. As to expressions of collective narratives of class, like taking pride in a working-class cultural background, these are virtually absent; we are unable to find any narrative of collective class consciousness similar to those found in the studies mentioned above. The fairly explicit account of working-class identity (as something invested with a specific cultural value) present in many studies is missing in the case of the Danish working-class students (see Lamont 2000; Skeggs 2003). However, these students may also rightly be seen as class travelers, that is, former



members of a class having left their economic, cultural, and social origin. Therefore they could be expected to identify less with their class origin, as Lee and Kramer (2013) argue. The lack of identification with a working class or working-class culture may also be a result of the Danish welfare state model and of the relatively prominent discourse of equity in Denmark. We should beware, however, of drawing conclusions too hastily given how heterogeneous the existing research literature is.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have studied students in six Danish university programs in order to investigate the relationship between educational strategies and class origin. The highly occupation-oriented, socially selective programs of medicine and architecture have a strong professional identity as a prime signifier of their educational strategy. As part of this professional identity, medical students mention humanistic ideals, prestige, and parents, and architecture students mention creative interests as important factors in their choice of university program. In another socially selective program, economics, students stress the versatility of the program, its status, and usability. Choice of the even more socially selective sociology program is said to be “purely” interest driven, thoughts on future employment and the applicability of the program being more or less absent.

In the less socially selective programs of pharmacy and business economics, applicability is the main factor accounting for program choice, and job opportunities and income-related considerations are strongly emphasized.<sup>15</sup> Here the students have a utilitarian or vocational attitude toward university education. Overall, these attitudes toward choice of university program are in line with the findings of Munk and Thomsen (2012) that use register data to find similar class differences in the choice of less selective, vocational, application-oriented “newer” programs and more socially selective “classical” university programs. Also, students do not adopt a utilitarian or vocational attitude toward university education only because it is easier to get accepted into the vocationally oriented programs (in terms of grade point average needed); even if they have a very high grade point average, working-class students will favor business school programs over, for example, programs in the humanities. Coming from homes in which education is considered a means to an end, they will choose programs with instrumental aims.<sup>16</sup> This type of behavior can be interpreted either as risk aversion or as a result of a practical logic pertaining to the person’s dispositions: working-class students

<sup>15</sup> These strategies are specific to field or program, and a more comprehensive study would probably be able to identify a whole set of more or less “ideal-typical” strategies.

<sup>16</sup> This type of research design does not allow us to compare, e.g., motivations of working-class youth before and after entering university. In other words, we do not know whether our working-class students’ motivations have changed or whether they differ from those of working-class nonchoosers.

tend to be risk averse insofar as they will avoid educational pathways perceived to be too risky in terms of future work and income—these risk assessments are four times more frequent for working-class students than for other students. Similarly, even though Danish working-class students generally feel more at home in their program than what is reported in other studies, a third of the working-class students still do not experience a sense of belonging similar to their professional-class peers. As evidence of the differences in familiarity with university education, professional-class students' experiences of barriers have been seen to pertain to relatively concrete intracurricular issues (about the academic level, scholarly difficulties, etc.). In contrast, working-class students' experiences of barriers pertain to broader, more intangible issues of academic culture—feelings of generalized strangeness, insecurity, and having low academic expectations of themselves.

No students, however, emphasize financial constraints as limiting educational choices. This is a specific feature of the Danish case. Finally, not only do Danish students abstain from mentioning economic barriers as far as access to a university program is concerned; they also do not refer to their class-cultural background or to a collective working-class identity as either an asset or an impediment. Whether this is the result of the relatively low economic inequality and the social-democratic values underpinning the Danish welfare state or of some other factors is a question that should be addressed by future research.

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