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A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD?

A social anthropological study of occupational aspirations among Swedish senior high school students

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the future occupational aspirations of Swedish senior high school students and their possible interest in social mobility. Further, it explores the factors and strategies that these students find important when they are trying to reach their occupational aspirations. Finally, the study investigates how the students evaluate their possibilities to pursue their strategies and achieve their future occupational desires. The findings reveal that there were aspirations of both vertical and horizontal social mobility and that the main strategy of the students to move on the social class spectrum is further education. Furthermore, the students perceived that they have good possibilities to pursue their strategies and reach their future occupational aspirations. The central theoretical terms drawn on to examine the future plans, desires, and decisions of these students are *social*, *cultural*, and *economic capital*, *agency* as well as *do-it-yourself biography*. Data were obtained by conducting fieldwork in a public high school in Region Västra Götaland where participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out.

Keywords: capital theory, agency, future occupation, social mobility, high school students

Preface

I want to thank the students who participated in my study, let me into their conversations, and shared their thoughts with me. It was a pleasure to get to know so many amazing and generous young people with such great humour! I also deeply appreciate the teachers who let me be part of their classes and helped me before and during my fieldwork. Not only did you make my bachelor's thesis possible, but I also had the chance to be introduced to the Swedish high school world for which I am enormously grateful.

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1. Introduction

Thinking about the future can be exciting but also concerning and stressful, especially for young people. During upper secondary education, which is one of the steppingstones to adult life, most students start thinking about their post-graduation plans. At the same time, they try to manage different school tasks which can influence their future educational and occupational course.

The future options and possibilities for young people in Sweden to shape their own lives are wider than for young people in most countries in the world (OECD, 2018). Intergenerational and intragenerational social mobility is relatively high in Sweden (OECD, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2012), and therefore, the futures of young people in Sweden are less determined. The wide range of alternatives after high school allows the students to follow different routes which also makes their futures more unpredictable and thus, less certain. Simultaneously, it leads to prolonged and non-linear transitions to education, the labor market, and adulthood (see Evans, 2002; Lundqvist, 2020). Along with further education, a gap year, traveling, working for a paycheck, or as a volunteer are all possible alternatives that young people might these days consider after graduating high school.

Some modern societies, the Swedish one among them, are characterized by individualization referring to that individuals should construct their own lives, whilst at the same time they are expected to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions (Ambjörnsson, 2008; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Although being able to construct one's own life and a broad variety of options can be seemingly a merely good thing, the situation might not be a bed of roses for a young student who is trying to figure out their life: They can be uncertain about how to navigate in society and there might be just too many alternatives from which to choose which can cause stress and concern.

Knowing which occupation one desires is the first step after which comes the question: how to reach it? There can be several challenges when trying to pursue the aspired future occupation. Social, cultural, economic, and health conditions are not always in the favour of a young student, and family backgrounds continue to influence the futures of people in different ways. Factors, such as family situation, poor access to information, or not getting enough help and support from the social network can challenge the pursuit of future achievements as well. A

family situation might not allow a person to move away to another city to study and the goal can be achievable through different routes of which the person might not be aware. The support and help from other people are usually evident when trying to reach something, and not getting it enough can have a negative impact on a young high school student and his future aspirations: Trying to manage alone can consume energy and motivation and be mentally challenging.

Given this, one might want to explore how high school students themselves see their strategies, options, and chances to attain their occupational desires. What are their plans for the future? How do they see their prospects to realize their future occupational aspirations? Do they feel that there are economic, social, or cultural constraints when pursuing their strategies to achieve their aspired future careers? Hopefully, every high school student has some kind of occupational aspirations which they try, more or less and in one way or another, to pursue. This study tries to shine a light on that matter by examining Swedish senior high school students' thoughts and ideas about their future occupational desires.

1.1 Problem statement

A holistic understanding of young people's future occupational aspirations, their strategies to navigate in society, and their perceptions of their possibilities to achieve their desires play an essential role in addressing the issue of social reproduction and inequality since in societies with high levels of social mobility there is arguably more equality and less geographical segregation (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2012). To achieve more equality, some countries have adopted policies to advance intra- and intergenerational social mobility (Hoskins & Barker, 2017). However, discrepancies between policies and young people's occupational desires are not uncommon (2017). Thus, by exploring the occupational plans and desires of young people from their own perspective we might develop policies that aim at a more inclusive and equal society and be able to offer young students the best tools possible to negotiate their way to their desired future.

Compared to anthropology, sociologists have historically studied youth more extensively which has left anthropological studies of youth in the background (Bucholtz, 2002). Nevertheless, anthropologists have increasingly been engaged with youth studies and acknowledged the significance of the anthropological approach that offers an effective and holistic way to understand youth practices (Bucholtz, 2002). Furthermore, when studying

social mobility, the use of quantitative methods has been dominating, whilst the qualitative approach has been widely neglected (Froerer, 2012; Froerer & Portisch, 2012). Notwithstanding the increasing utilization of qualitative methods to understand the factors behind social mobility (Froerer, 2012; Froerer & Portisch, 2012), far fewer anthropological studies have approached this issue, particularly in Swedish settings. This social anthropological study contributes to the research area in question and helps to fill in the knowledge gap by scrutinizing the future occupational aspirations, prospects, and choices of Swedish senior high school students.

1.2 Objective and research questions

This social anthropological study aims to examine the occupational aspirations of Swedish senior high school students coupled with the exploration of their interests in social mobility. Further, it investigates the strategic decisions they plan to make to achieve their future occupational desires. Finally, extra emphasis is put on trying to understand how they perceive their possibilities to pursue these strategies and reach their occupational goals.

Research questions:

- Which occupational aspirations do Swedish senior high school students have and to what extent do they reflect movement on the social class spectrum?
- Which factors and strategies do Swedish senior high school students find important to achieve their future occupational aspirations?
- How do Swedish senior high school students evaluate their possibilities to pursue their strategies and achieve their occupational aspirations?

1.3 Previous research

In this section, I discuss the previous research of Kate Hoskins and Bernard Barker (2017), Hedda Askland (2007), Jessica Bok (2010), and Maurice Crul, Jens Schneider, Elif Keskiner, and Frans Lelie (2017), and how they can help me to illuminate the findings of this study.

‘Aspirations and young people’s constructions of their future: investigating social mobility and social reproduction’ by Hoskins and Barker (2017) is a qualitative study of 16-18 years old students’ desires for intragenerational social mobility and their perceptions of if their family backgrounds influence their future desires. The results of the study show the discordance between the future aspiration of the students and the government education policy texts of the United Kingdom: The education policies were formed to promote intergenerational and intragenerational social mobility, whilst the participants of the study showed little evidence of aspiration for social transformation. Instead, the results revealed that the students desired the transfer of family habitus and dispositions, and hence reflect the aspirations for social reproduction rather than social mobility (2017). In their study, Hoskins and Barker utilize Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (1977, 1984, 1990), and the concept of ‘disposition disruption’ (2017, p. 49). Disposition disruption refers to the discrepancies in the habitus of an individual which, according to Hoskins and Barker, occurs when the individual shows a desire to gain a better social class status than their parents, i.e., move upward on the social class spectrum (2017). I employ the term disposition disruption in this study as well. In addition, the research topic in my study is similar to that of Hoskins and Barker, and hence, I will use it as support to discuss my findings.

‘Habitus, Practise and Agency of Young East Timorese Asylum Seekers in Australia’ by Askland (2007) is an anthropological study on a group of young East Timorese individuals who arrived in Australia as asylum seekers during the 1990s. The study examined how these young individuals adapted to Australian society and coped with other challenges caused by the exile. As a theoretical stance, the article draws on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, practice, and capital (1977; 1984; 1990) as well as a theory of agency by Greg Noble and Megan Watkins (2003). Askland is critical of Bourdieu’s theories and argues that by the extensive focus on the unconscious nature of embodiment Bourdieu underestimates the reflexivity and consciousness of individuals’ behaviours. The habitus of young East Timorese were challenged as they faced unfamiliar social fields. Nonetheless, Askland shows how through their agency and accumulation of capital the individuals were able to improve their life situations and their social

position in the new society (2007). In a similar way to Askland, I will apply the capital theory of Bourdieu (1986) and Noble and Watkins' theory of agency (2003) both of which will be discussed more in the following section.

Bok (2010) investigated 11-12 years old students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and their capacity to aspire to higher education. The study was located in a public primary school in the capital city of Australia. Whilst the findings showed that these students desire to higher educate themselves, the complex set of challenges could hinder them from realizing their aspirations. Bok suggests that one of the factors affecting the educational prospects of the students was the knowledge of their parents about education: The parents' low level of experience with educational institutions may have limited how much they can help their children to navigate their ways to their educational aspirations (2010). I will use her study to discuss the future educational plans of my participants and how their parents' knowledge might have an impact on them.

Crul et al. (2017) provides analysis of descendants of low-educated immigrants who, despite their disadvantageous conditions, managed to move upward the social ladder and become professionally successful. The study explored the different circumstances for upward social mobility in France, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden across different labour market sectors. The findings demonstrate that, in an equivalent way to Askland's participants (2007), through an aggregate of cultural and social capital the individuals were able to overcome their challenges and improve their social positions, in this case, attain their professional success (Crul et al., 2017). As this study highlights how the individuals have achieved occupational success, it will help me to analyze the occupational aspirations of my participants and how they think they can reach these aspirations.

1.4 Theoretical framework

As a theoretical framework, this case study draws on the concepts of cultural, social, and economic capital developed by Bourdieu (1986), Noble and Watkins's (2003), and Saba Mahmood's (2001) theories of agency as well as 'do-it-yourself biography' by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) to analyze the future occupational aspirations of senior high school students. In this section, I will seek to define each one of these concepts and explain how they contribute to the perspective here developed.

According to Bourdieu, “capital is accumulated labor” which is a kind of social energy that individuals use within a social field (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). The possession of these capital forms determines the social position of an individual and the access to the forms of capital in part constitutes individuals’ possibilities to act in different social fields (1984; 1986; 1990). Capital has three fundamental forms: economic, cultural, and social capital. Economic capital refers to money and property ownership, whereas social capital is the social network, the social relationships of an individual: it is “a membership in a group” (1986, p. 247). Social capital is divided into potential and actual assets and potential assets can be converted into actual assets. Cultural capital, on the other hand, has three states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied state is the dispositions of the mind and body, whilst the objectified state refers to cultural goods and artifacts. The institutionalized state is the formal recognition of an institution, for instance, educational degrees or certifications. These capital forms can be converted into another (1986). The terms social, cultural, and economic capital help me to analyze the strategies that the students have to possibly move on the social class spectrum and achieve their future occupational desires as well as the possibilities that the students experience they have when taking action in their future plans. The students might perceive that they possess or need to accumulate certain forms of capital which can help them in the future.

When making decisions about how to navigate their way to the desired future, the students can use their agency. I apply the concept of ‘agentic reflection’, initiated by Noble and Watkins (2003), when exploring the underlying thoughts and reflections behind their different decisions. According to Noble and Watkins, agentic reflection is:

... that discursive practice in which we consider our behavior and its principles. ... It is not critical, in that it does not necessarily entail some engagement with relations of power or the sense of social location; rather it is an awareness of what we have done and what we can do (Noble & Watkins, 2003, p. 531)

This consciousness is both backward- and forward-looking which means that an individual has an awareness of and can reflect on what they have done in their past and what they can do in the future (2003). Noble and Watkins separate analytic and synthetic modes of consciousness.

Analytic mode refers to the “deconstructing of past or other’s actions and capacities” (p. 531), whereas synthetic indicates “thinking about future actions and capacities” (p. 531).

In the article ‘Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival’ Mahmood develops the concept of agency (2001). Mahmood suggests that “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability -” (p. 212). This indicates that agency should not be seen only as a practice of transforming one’s life but also as a practice that does not lead to changes (2001). This form of agency will be used in this thesis to understand the future aspirations of senior high school students to move or not to move on the social class spectrum. The future goals of the students can reflect a will for social mobility or social reproduction, or something in between and they can use their agency to move or not move on the social class spectrum. Throughout this thesis, progressive change is considered as a change in social class status, i.e., interest in upward social mobility in contrast to one’s parents. On the other hand, “toward continuity, stasis, and stability - (2001, p. 212) indicates social reproduction and is resulted when one does not want to change their social class position but is either not interested in moving on the social class spectrum at all or is interested in moving horizontally only. Horizontal social mobility in this study refers to social mobility inside a social class: When a child aspires neither to the same occupation as their parents nor to change their social class status to higher or lower compared to their parents.

Bech and Beck-Gernsheim have developed a concept of ‘do-it-yourself biography’ which is a characteristic of some modern societies as a part of individualization (2002). The theory proposes that the relationship between society and individuals has shifted in that now the individuals have freedom but simultaneously more responsibility to decide on which choices to make in their lives. It also includes the notion that the individuals are condemned to decide as societies demand that individuals contribute to the society indicating that they must choose whether it is easy or not. As the individuals must choose and take the responsibility, a ‘do-it-yourself biography’ is simultaneously a ‘risk biography’: If an individual is to ‘fail’, the blame is on them (2002). It can be argued that the Swedish society has undergone this kind of societal transformation (Ambjörnsson, 2008), and therefore, I intend to apply this theory of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) to explore how the students see their options and possibilities to achieve their occupational and if they think that there are factors that limit them from following their plans.

1.5 Research methodology and ethical considerations

1.5.1 Research settings and sample

In this section, I first describe the methodological steps undertaken in the concretization of this study, and secondly, I touch upon some ethical considerations. In the process of gaining access to the field, my first initiative was to contact the student counselor of the high school via email. The teacher, who was responsible for the students who later became my participants, answered, and told me that I had been accepted to conduct my fieldwork in their high school. Once I had gotten access to the field, I found participants who were willing to contribute to my study. After the voluntary participants had given their informed consent, the fieldwork started. The fieldwork took approximately seven weeks, from the end of January 2022 to the middle of March 2022.

The high school and the educational program were chosen with the hope of finding participants from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, the research was situated at a local public high school in Region Västra Götaland, and one university-preparatory program, the Social Science Program was selected. The Social Science Program is the most popular high school program in Sweden, and it accepts more students than other programs (Ambjörnsson, 2008; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021). Senior students, at the minimum age of 18, were chosen due to their life situation in which they had started to think about their future educational and occupational plans as their secondary school was nearing the end. The participants in this study represented a range of socioeconomic class backgrounds: from working-class to upper-middle class.

The results of this study are context specific as the fieldwork has taken place in a specific high school with a specific high school educational program and class, and I am aware that the findings would have been partly different had I chosen another high school, another educational program, and another class. Thus, the study sample is not representative of all Swedish senior high school students and the reader should bear in mind that establishing a comprehensive review of the future occupational plans and aspirations of Swedish senior high school students was beyond the scope of this study.

1.5.2 Participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews

With the aim of reaching a fuller understanding of the phenomenon, a qualitative mixed methodology was carried out (see DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011): The data were collected through triangulation of participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. A major advantage of participant observation was that whilst spending time in the school as much as possible, especially in the first half of the fieldwork, the students got used to my presence in the classrooms and the breaks. I perceived that this created trust between me and the students, and they became more comfortable with talking with me (see Ambjörnsson, 2008; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Furthermore, by employing this method, I was able to collect contextual information about the participants before carrying out interviews. In addition, a benefit of this approach was that it allowed me to become familiar with the Swedish high school system. As I have not gone to school in Sweden, being introduced to the Swedish high school system contributed to my understanding of the students' thoughts and ideas about their future.

Participant observation was conducted mostly in the high school area: in the classrooms during the lectures and in the lunch canteen and the common rooms during the breaks. Occasionally, the participation extended outside of the school as I would follow the students to nearby restaurants or grocery stores. During the lectures, the students would often use their computers as a studying tool which made it convenient for me to take field notes on my computer. Since the students often used their phones during breaks, I decided to take notes on my phone outside the classrooms.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to gain further information on the students' plans, ideas, and choices of the students for their future. The interviews offered an effective way to achieve a deeper understanding (see DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011), and the results in this study were mostly based on the data from the interviews. An interview guide was used as assistance, however not strictly followed, throughout the interviews. The participants were allowed to do the interviews with a classmate with the belief that some of them might feel more comfortable that way (Hoskins & Barker, 2017, p. 52). Nonetheless, only four of the interviewees decided to do the interview in pairs. Ten interviews were conducted with twelve participants ranged in length from fifteen to forty minutes. Most of the interviews were held with male students (8) and approximately half of the students had parents with immigrant backgrounds and the other half had parents with non-immigrant backgrounds. All interviews,

except one, were held in group rooms of the school and recorded with the permission of the interviewees. I transcribed the interviews for the analysis.

1.5.3 Data analysis

To get an overview of the data I categorized the fieldnotes and coded each transcribed interview according to the main themes, namely, my research questions. Thereafter, to find general patterns, I organized the data into smaller topics inside those main themes. Then, with the help of different theories and previous research I had chosen, I further analyzed and discussed the findings and draw conclusions. When examining the obtained data, I was able to see what kind of research material I had and how I could connect it to the aim and research questions of the study: During this process, the perspective of this study changed slightly. The results I present here are a product of my decisions on which data to focus on, which theories and previous research to include, and to what leave outside. I decided to limit and structure the results and analysis part by dividing it into three main sections where each section aims to answer a specific research question: occupational desires of the high school students and their interest in social mobility, factors, and strategies that the students find important to achieve their future goals, and how they evaluate their possibilities to follow these strategies and fulfil their occupational aspirations.

1.5.4 Positionality

One of the inevitable aspects of doing participant observation and interviews is that the researcher has an impact on what kind of material is collected in the field (Ambjörnsson, 2008; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). As Ambjörnsson (2008) states, the researcher can never be only an objective observer but unavoidably affects the field, the informants, and the material. Hence, the data obtained in the field and what information the participants decided to disclose were influenced by me and my background. As a young female student, only a couple of years older than the participants, I perceived that access to the participants was relatively easy and the power imbalance between me and the students was not big. However, the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the informants always exists (Ambjörnsson, 2008). Thus, since I am older than the students, I study at a university, and they were my study “objects” the hierarchy was present. In a similar way to Ambjörnsson (2008, p. 47), one of the things I did to address the issue of power imbalance was to, after the interviews, allow the interviewees to ask me the same kind of questions as I had asked them.

1.5.5 Ethical considerations

Due to the young age of the participants, I took extra caution during the fieldwork. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to each one of them entering the study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). All the participants were informed, both orally and in written form, of the aim of the study, voluntary participation, and the right to discontinue at any given moment during the research. The participants were provided with confidentiality and anonymity during and after the research of which they were informed as well. The data collected in the field was used only for the purpose of this study. The information was documented and managed with caution and presented in a way that it is not possible to identify any research participants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The participants in this study are composite and they were given pseudonyms (Ambjörnsson, 2008). With the aim of making the recognition of the participants more difficult, in some cases, the information about them was altered, however, not in a way that would have changed the results of the study. The selected high school was anonymized as well. This study followed the ethical rules and guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017).

2. Results and analysis

The results and analysis part is composed of three sections whereby each section seeks to answer a specific research question. Thus, first, I discuss the occupational aspirations of the Swedish senior high school students and their interest in social mobility. Thereafter, I focus on the factors and strategies that these students find important when trying to pursue their occupational desires. Finally, in the last section, I explore how the students see their possibilities to follow their strategies and achieve their occupational aspirations.

2.1 Occupational aspirations and social mobility

2.1.1 Desires for future occupation

A common view among the students was that the future occupation needs to be something that brings happiness and that they enjoy doing. For example, Ali said, “If you’re miserable your whole life and work with something that you don’t even want to just to earn, what? Ten thousand extra... What’s the point? Money isn’t super important. I want to do something that I enjoy.” Christoffer, whose passion is to play ice hockey and who desires to become a professional player, explained, “I feel like if I’m going to work, I want to work with something that I like and I love ice hockey so why not work with ice hockey?” When asked Therese how she would describe a successful life, she commented, “I think that a successful life is when you have an occupation that you enjoy. You shouldn’t be in the morning like, ‘shit, I’m going to work now’ but it should be the opposite.” These comments are in line with those of Hoskins and Barker (2017) who found that their participants aspired to personal and professional happiness above everything else.

Another recurrent theme was meaningfulness of work. A significant amount of the participants reported that they want a job where they can help people and contribute to society. As Therese put it, “A successful life for me is to later be able to change the world ... the meaning with this successfulness, it’s not how much money I earn but how many people’s lives I manage to change,” whereas Daniel explained, “When my friends come and talk to me when they have problems and then I like to help them. To talk about the problem and give advice and that kind of thing. I like helping people.” Jesper, on the other hand, commented, “Because I like to help people and to do something for the society. Yeah, to help people, that’s the main thing. And that’s how I am as a person.” ‘Making a difference’ was a topic discussed in the study of

Hoskins and Barker as well (2017). Similarly to their participants, many students in this study expressed a “need to feel that there is an emotional value to the work they are planning to do in the future, not just an economic or status value” (2017, p. 57). However, contrary to Hoskins and Barker’s study, gender and the theme of ‘making a difference’ were not connected: both male and female students reported that they want to help people or contribute to society.

The third theme emerged in the interviews, when discussing future occupations, was financial security. According to most participants, future employment should lead to stable income as money is needed to have stability and independence in life. Nonetheless, they were unanimous in the view that money is not the most important aspect of life. Jesper, for example, said, “Profession is not a flex for me, you know. A flex is that you have like a stable life, stable income... that you are genuinely happy.” Christoffer, on the other hand, stated, “I want that my wife and children in later time have it as good as possible and then the money is needed... That you have like money that you get along, you can take care of yourself and your family... that you know you’re gonna manage,” whereas Mona commented, “... good economy, to not end up in *Lyxfällan*. That would be a little unfortunate.” The topic of financial security was also discussed in Hoskins and Barker’s study as some of their participants, in line with my participants, stated that it is important in the future.

2.1.2 Horizontal social mobility and social reproduction

Some students displayed interest in horizontal social mobility but not in vertical. This implies that they do not desire to change their social class position to higher or lower in contrast to their parents, nor do they aspire to the same occupation as their parents have. Therese, whose both parents have an office job, is a good illustration of this. When asked if she feels that her parents’ job or education affects what she is planning on doing in the future, she implied that before it did: “At the beginning of high school, my future plan was to get some office job. I wanted to earn some money.” However, she said that she does not think like that anymore and recounted, “I thought that I wanted to live up to the status... and then I thought that I want to do something similar as my parents... I don’t want to, now that I’m thinking. What I thought then was that I don’t want to change my lifestyle...” She continued by saying, “He [her father] works exactly with what I don’t want to work with. Just sits there the whole day. My mom has the same kind of job. An office job. Sits there also before the computer and has phone calls all the livelong day.” Therese wants to study further at some point in the future but is unsure of her future

occupational career. However, one thing is clear: She does not want the same occupation as her parents.

On the other hand, Therese shows no interest in moving vertically on the social class spectrum. “A goal is to not change the lifestyle you’ve grown up with... I don’t want to live a lot worse than I did in my childhood. The goal is kind of like to live the same standard as you did when you grew up, that you’re the most used to... Neither it’s about being a lot better, living a lot better [than when growing up],” she said. Even though Therese does not desire the same occupation as her parents it can be argued that her example demonstrates evidence of social reproduction as she does not show interest in changing her social status. Therese’s comments demonstrate that she wants to use her agency as a practice that aims “toward continuity, stasis, and stability -” (Mahmood, 2001, p. 212), since she desires to remain her living standards rather than as a practice that leads to progressive transformation, i.e., change her social class position to higher than when growing up.

2.1.3 Upward social mobility

In an equivalent way as in the study of Hoskins and Barker (2017), some students showed interest in upward social mobility. When asked Farah if she experienced that her parents’ choice of job or education affects her future plans, she said, “Not at all... and they say nothing about the choices I’ve made. So no, it hasn’t affected... and it doesn't affect.” Her answer was similar to Mona’s: “No, actually not. I have no interest in elder care or anything like that and I have no interest in working in a factory either” as well as Daniel’s: “I think that I wouldn’t want the kind of job that she [the mother] has.” Farah and Mona are interested in studying at a university. Farah is interested in working with law and Mona with economics. Daniel is also aiming to study at a university, but his plan is to become a psychologist. Farah’s, Mona’s, and Daniel’s parents have working-class backgrounds based on their employment and level of education. Therefore, it can be argued that Farah, Mona, and Daniel display a degree of disposition disruption (Hoskins & Barker, 2017) as they want to study at a higher level than their parents did and desire upward social mobility by raising up “beyond the occupational status achieved by” (2017, p. 63) their parents. Moreover, a significant similarity between these students is that they have parents with immigrant backgrounds.

Furthermore, both Farah’s, Daniel’s, and Mona’s parents encourage their children to get further education. For example, Daniel said, “My parents, their biggest dream, if you can say so, is

that I further educate myself and have a good job.” Their parents come from different societies where the possibilities for further education were not as good as their children have in Sweden. “They want me to study because they couldn’t do it,” Daniel stated. In a comparable way, when Mona talked about her mother’s thoughts, she commented, “She came from a very poor background. She didn’t have the best education so obviously she wants her children to get the best education.” These findings are consistent with the studies of Leo (2021), Raleigh and Kao (2010), and Roubeni, Haene, Keatley, Shah, and Rasmussen (2015). Their studies illustrate how parents with an immigrant background have a high level of aspiration for their children’s educational success. Raleigh and Kao’s findings suggest that in comparison with non-immigrant parents, parents with immigrant backgrounds “are more optimistic about their children’s educational trajectories” (2010, p. 1083) and “over time they are more likely to maintain consistently high aspirations for their children” (2010, p. 1083). One of the explanations for this is found in the studies of Roubeni et al. (2015) and Leo (2021) and supported by the comments of Daniel and Mona: Their parents want their children to educate themselves well and be socially mobile because they could not.

In general, the results seem to be in line with Stone and McKee’s (2000) study where no significant connection between the future educational and occupational choices and aspirations of the participants and their parents’ education and occupation was found. Furthermore, most students, whose parents come from immigrant backgrounds, displayed a degree of disposition disruption, but there was no remarkable correlation between interest in vertical social mobility and students with parents from non-immigrant backgrounds. Nonetheless, most students, regardless of the background of their parents, reported that they are not going to choose the same educational path and do not want the same career as their parents. Thus, according to these data, we can infer that, in a similar way as in Hoskins and Barker’s (2017) study, there was evidence of both vertical social mobility as well as horizontal social mobility. In addition, three general themes were identified when discussed what the participants wanted from their future employment: happiness, meaningfulness, and financial security, which were mentioned by most students independently of the backgrounds of their parents.

But how do these students try to reach their occupational desires? In the section that follows I discuss the factors and strategies that these young students find important when trying to achieve their occupational aspirations.

2.2 Factors and strategies

2.2.1 Self-reliance

When discussing the important factors to reach the future educational and occupational aspirations, the answers of the participants were multifaceted but had one common denominator: self-reliance and individualism. For instance, Jesper said, "... It's also about if you have the motivation to do it. Do you have the discipline?" When asked Daniel how he thinks he would overcome the challenges he might encounter in the future, he answered, "Think about all the solutions and consequences and say which path is the best based on... what information you have and then always search for information." Mona, on the other hand, offered, "It's about... to not be steered by your feelings but reason and be as logical as possible." Moreover, Farah commented, "It's what you yourself do out of the situation. If you want, you'll try your best to get what you want so it's up to yourself, you know. Yeah, there are challenges, but it's you who have to go through those challenges."

In Hoskins and Barker's study (2017) the participants who aspired to upward social mobility "fully believe that success and failure rest entirely with the individual" (p. 62) which led them to "emphasize their individual agency, over and above all other elements of becoming successful, including the influence of their families (p. 62). In a similar way, the students in this study raised aspects of individualism when pursuing their strategies to move on the social class spectrum and achieve their desired future occupations. This highlights the dominating paradigm of meritocracy where individuals are independent agents responsible for their own success and failure (see McGinnis, 2009; Leo, 2021) and that hard work, "intelligence, ability, and effort are the key factors in occupational success, not class background" (Giddens & Sutton, 2017, p. 516). Farah was the clearest example of this summarizing the mindset most students seemed to have as she commented that it's "up to yourself" and "there are challenges, but it's you who have to go through those challenges".

2.2.2 Working directly after high school

Approximately half of the participants reported that they are going to take a gap year or more before studying further. The most common explanations for this were school fatigue and not knowing what to study. Therese, Philip, and Christoffer are some of those who were thinking about pursuing this strategy. Therese said that she has been stressed with school and therefore, wants to take a gap year: "I'm thinking about working while taking a break. Get a job, work a

little and then study further.” Similarly, Philip commented, “I’m very tired of school, tired of schoolwork... you become tired of it [schoolwork] because you’ve done it for quite a long time...”, and then further explained, “I’m thinking about working, taking a gap year... No studying right after high school.” Christoffer recounted, “I feel I have school fatigue. We’ve gone to school for twelve years. I feel I’m starting to be tired of sitting at a school desk and studying theoretically so I think I want to work and earn money which I feel I need more right now than knowledge.”

This strategy to work right after high school gives the students time to think about which occupation they want and what to study to reach those aspired occupations as well as lets them gather energy and motivation to continue studying further. In other words, pursuing this strategy allows them to improve their situation and possibilities to achieve their future educational and occupational aspirations. We can conclude that the students display a degree of agentic reflection (Noble & Watkins, 2003) as those who reported school fatigue and who did not know what to study or which employment they wanted in the future, made conscious decisions to not study further right after high school graduation but take a gap year and work instead. Thus, they were aware of the benefits of pursuing this strategy and chose to follow it due to its suitability for their life situation.

2.2.3 Further education as a mobilizing force

The most significant strategy after high school to move on the social class spectrum and achieve their future occupational goals was education. Indeed, formal education is often considered a ‘liberating force’ (Froerer, 2012) and a key element of social mobility (Froerer, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2012). The majority of the students reported that they are going to study further at some point in the future. Even those, who did not know which major or future occupation they desired, reported that they want to study something.

This topic was raised for example by Mona: “My plan A, the one that I prefer, is to start studying at a university right after high school,” which resonated with Louise’s comment: “Mainly, I’m thinking about studying economics at a university. I prefer starting to study at a university right after high school.” Furthermore, Daniel stated, “I’ve planned to study further after high school. Absolutely,” and added, “Yeah, it’s my parents, they think that the key to life is education and knowledge and proficiency, and of course, I agree with the idea.” The

students mentioned other educational strategies as well, such as folk high schools (Folkhögskola) and municipal adult education (Kommunal vuxen utbildning). Daniel put it, "... If you don't get into a university you can get into folk high school or something like that. If you didn't do well in high school, you can study further anyway. Especially in Sweden, I think."

Education was not seen as a beneficial factor for the future only by the students but also by the majority of the parents. As discussed earlier, parents with immigrant backgrounds tend to aspire that their children would educate themselves and be socially mobile. Nevertheless, parents with non-immigrant backgrounds encouraged their children to study further as well. Christoffer put it, "Both of my parents have always pushed for the idea that it's good to have an education or something like that to fall back on in case something should go wrong." In a similar way, Jesper alluded to the notion that "She [his mother] has always said that I should get an education and focus on education so that I can become whatever I want. They've never said what I should become. They let me choose, but it is important that I have an education."

Education can be considered as an accumulation of cultural capital in embodied form, i.e., gaining knowledge and skills, as well as in institutionalized form, i.e., formal educational degrees (Bourdieu, 1986). Askland's study is a good example of how individuals through agency can aggregate capital and enhance their social positions (2007). As discussed in the previous section, the majority of the students do not want the same occupational career as their parents but desire to move on the social class spectrum, horizontally or vertically. Hence, in a similar way as in Askland's study, accumulation of capital, in this case, further education, is perceived as a significant factor to move on the social class spectrum and to fulfil the occupational aspirations.

But how do the students see their chances to study what they want and be socially mobile? In the next, and final, analysis part I turn to examine how the students evaluate their possibilities to follow their strategies that were discussed here and achieve their future occupational goals.

2.3 Possibilities

2.3.1 Freedom to decide: a blessing and a curse

When asked the participants if they feel like their parents' opinions or thoughts influence their future plans, the majority reported that they do not. For instance, Daniel commented, "Most of the time I don't care about what my parents say or do and that's because I think that I am my own person... I'm 18 years old, I make my own decisions right now." Louise, on the other hand, felt that in the past, her mother's opinions had a bigger impact on her. Nevertheless, she stated, "Not anymore because now I think totally independently. I don't care what people say. I do what I want to do." When asked Ali about this, he said, "I haven't felt affected by it. And the only thing they do is give some directions and advice." This suggests that the students want individual autonomy: to be able to negotiate their own lives and make decisions about their futures. This paradigm of striving for individual independency among Swedish high school students was discussed by Ambjörnsson (2008) as well. The high school girls, who Ambjörnsson studied, perceived individual freedom and being able to be oneself as important (2008).

Furthermore, most students felt that their parents do not want to interfere in the decisions of their children but rather gave them freedom to choose which educational or occupational paths to pursue. For example, Jesper said, "She [his mother] thinks that it's good that I want to work with that... I think it's good that she thinks like that and is not like 'you have to work with this here' but allows me to do what I want, to work with what makes me happy... So, the mindset is quite free, you know. I have quite a lot of freedom to choose what I want and don't want." Jesper's comment was echoed by Philip: "I think that my parents have tried to keep it to themselves so that it wouldn't affect me, that I would be able to have my own will, get to decide a little. That I could get to choose my own future." These comments support the idea that post-industrial societies are characterized by the paradigm of individualism where the parents offer their children freedom to decide (see Hoffman, 2013; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015).

Moreover, the participants were unanimous in the view that there are enough alternatives from which to choose after high school. A couple of students pointed out the possibility of working directly after high school. Farah commented, "Yeah, there are a lot of educations and other stuff to take and then there are jobs that you can get without having an education after high school, so I don't think that there are many limitations in that way. You can do whatever you want after high school if you think about it." Some students mentioned the different educational

paths one can take after high school. Mona put it, “As long as there is municipal adult education, as long as there are folk high schools you have all the possibilities in the world to do what you want, how you want. You can improve your grades and take whichever courses you want. You have all the freedom in the world to go to folk high school if you want.”

Some students considered that there might be even too many alternatives which makes it harder to decide which path to take. As discussed earlier, Philip is one of those who are planning on taking a gap year or more to work. He wants to study further in the future but does not know what. Talking about this issue, Philip said, “The problem is that there are too many alternatives...” and added, “It would have been better to have like three alternatives: ‘These are the three alternatives, choose now!’ I almost feel like it would’ve been better.” Therese felt the same way: “I think there might be even too many alternatives. It’s hard to choose and decide.”

Most of the students perceived that there are a lot of options after high school from which to choose, and some even expressed that there might be even too many. Moreover, most students said that their parents give them the freedom to choose for themselves and additionally, the students seemed to want to think independently and make their own future decisions. These findings above demonstrate that the students perceive that they are provided with freedom not only by society but also by their close social network. Therefore, it can be argued that they have good possibilities to follow their strategies and achieve their occupational goals. As they get to decide, negotiate, and construct their own lives, we can conclude that the discourse of ‘do-it-yourself biographies’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) is evident.

However, that the young students are allowed to choose and decide can be considered freedom but also a demand (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The wide range of alternatives can be a good thing as the students are not forced to pursue a path to which they do not aspire. Nonetheless, as the students stated, there might be just too many alternatives from which to choose which makes it more difficult to decide, but in the ‘do-it-yourself biography’ discourse, there is also embedded the notion that one must act on their life, no matter how hard it is. Hence, freedom can become rather a demand (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Further, it can be suggested that a ‘do-it-yourself biography’ is simultaneously a ‘risk biography’ (2002) as the students should make decisions about their futures even if they do not know what.

2.3.2 Family background's influence on the future

When asked about the influence of their family backgrounds on their future, most participants perceived their family background as a neutral or positive factor in their future planning. However, the students approached the question from different perspectives. For instance, Mona, whose parents have an immigrant and working-class background and whose educational and occupational aspirations were discussed earlier, stated, "I wouldn't argue that it [family background] has a big influence... It's a little hard to say, but it doesn't have that big of an influence on my plans." Philip, who comes from a middle-class background, reported, "I have nothing that limits me except maybe my grades. But that's what you're responsible for. No, I don't think I have so many limitations." Although the family background of an individual tends to affect their future prospects (see OECD, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2012) globally, according to OECD, Swedish people are comparatively optimistic about their futures: The social class position of parents is not perceived as a deterministic factor of the future of an individual (2018), resonating with the comments of Philip and Mona.

Furthermore, Christoffer and Therese perceived their family backgrounds rather as a positive aspect of their future. Christoffer, who had been playing ice hockey for a long time, raised the topic of economics. He said that his family has had the economic conditions for him to do what he wanted: "We haven't had problems economically that I couldn't have played ice hockey." Hence, he has been able to come this far and can continue playing ice hockey even after high school. Therese, who sees her family background as a positive influence on her future as well, commented, "My background helps me in a good way, to be able to see what is possible and which realistic goals I can have." Christoffer and Therese showed how one can benefit from their family background which was also found in the study of Konyali (2017): Descendants of Turkish migrants from relatively disadvantaged conditions used their backgrounds to their advantage when pursuing their professional careers.

Christoffer and Therese give an example of how one can use aggregated capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as assets that contribute to their possibilities to take action in their future strategies and achieve their future occupational desires. For example, Christoffer has the social capital, i.e., his parents, which through conversion becomes economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). He is aware that he has had economic capital that has enabled him to play ice hockey which sequentially, provided him with the right tools to continue playing it even in the future and possibly have it as a profession. It can thus be suggested that social capital has broadened his

chances to pursue his future plans, i.e., move on the social class spectrum and become a professional ice hockey player. Therese, on the other hand, did not give as a specific example as Christoffer but talked about her family background in general. Here, the family background can be considered embodied cultural capital: accumulated knowledge and skills (Bourdieu, 1986). She is unsure of her future major and occupational career, but she stated that for her, cultural capital is beneficial when planning her future by being able to make decisions, i.e., set realistic goals. According to Christoffer's and Therese's comments, we can infer that by possessing different forms of capital one has a wider range of possibilities to act on one's future plans. In sum, as most students stated that their family background has a neutral or positive influence on their future, rather than a restrictive, they perceived their possibilities to pursue their strategies and reach their occupational desires as good.

2.3.3 Supportive family members

Not only were the family backgrounds of the students seen as a positive force on their futures but their parents as well. Farah's parents told her, "Choose something that you are interested in. We don't want you to regret it," whilst Louise said, "They're just like 'everything is enough for us if you do your best'." Therese, on the other hand, implied, "They have told me that 'you can do as you want but the only thing we can do is to give you advice and if you ask us we are here to answer but the choice is still yours'. It's not like they've forced me to do anything."

This demonstrates that these parents support their children, want them to be happy, and give them advice. Hence, in general, it seems that in a similar way as demonstrated earlier, the students possess a degree of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986): in this case, constituted by the students' parents. Indeed, parental support was found one of the key importances to upward social mobility and occupational success in the study of Crul et al. (2017). Moreover, the general hope of parents that their children find happiness in the future was discussed for example, in Ball and Vincent's (1998) and Bok's (2010) studies.

However, the knowledge and information acquired by the parents can be considered only as potential assets (Bourdieu, 1986) which, if the students decide to ask and listen to their parents' advice, become actual resources. Bok proposes that access to information about education may influence which future educational decisions students make and if parents provide their children with their knowledge about education "... it can also affect their capacity to navigate

alternate pathways (2010, p. 172). Hence, it can be argued that converting potential resources (the knowledge of the parents) into actual resources (that the parents share their information with their children and the children make use of this knowledge) can indeed, improve the capacity of the students “to navigate alternate pathways” (Bok, 2010, p. 172). Therefore, it can further increase the chances of the students to act on their future occupational goals by being able to reflect and make decisions about their educational paths and moving on the social class spectrum.

Some of the students, who had siblings, reflected if and how their siblings have an impact on their lives and future plans. For instance, Philip commented on the topic: “I’ve had it as an example like, okay he did this and it went like that so I’m not gonna do that then.” Louise said that she is not interested in having the same jobs as her brother and is not even sure if he even likes the job he has right now. She further stated, “I feel like that motivates me to work hard so that I can work with what I want to work with.” Ali’s older sister has gone to the same high school educational program and is now studying at a university. This, according to him, has had a quite big influence on him: “The high school program, it influenced me... It was quite good that she said to me that the program is quite wide so you can choose a lot. That’s why I chose it.”

Philip’s, Louise’s, and Ali’s comments demonstrate that some students' social capital is not formed only by parents but also by siblings. In this case, the siblings of these three students had helped them to make decisions about their future. In addition to the possessed social capital, the participants’ statements illustrate the level of agency they have. The students are aware of what their siblings have done in the past and can use this knowledge when making decisions for their future. Hence, they are using their agentic reflection (Noble & Watkins, 2003) which, at first, is in analytic mode: Philip, for example, has seen the mistakes that his brother has made in the past, and now Philip can reflect on these mistakes made by his brother. His analytic mode shifts into synthetic mode as he thinks about his own “future actions and capacities” (2003, p. 531) and may make future decisions based on the past actions of his sibling. Similarly, Louise is conscious of the actions of her brother who has chosen a job he presumably does not like. This, in turn, motivates her to make different decisions, namely, study further and get an occupation she likes. The social capital that the students possess can mobilize them to use their agency when making decisions about their future. Therefore, it can conceivably be argued that social capital and the utilization of agency improve the possibilities of the students to follow

their strategies and move on the social class spectrum, horizontally or vertical, and reach their future occupational goals.

3. Conclusion

By employing a social anthropological perspective and conducting participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews in a public high school in Region Västra Götaland, this study set out to investigate the ideas, desires, and decisions of Swedish high school students about their future occupations. These aspects were discussed in three main sections divided according to the three research questions. First, I focused on the future occupational aspirations of the participants and if they displayed interest in moving on the social class spectrum. This study has revealed that a significant amount of the students desired an occupation that brings happiness and financial security and where they can help people and contribute to society. Furthermore, there was evidence of social reproduction as some students showed interest in using their agency to move horizontally on the social class spectrum but not in changing their social class position, i.e., vertical social mobility. Some students, on the other hand, aspired to change their social class status by moving upward the social ladder and therefore, displayed a degree of disposition disruption (Hoskins & Barker, 2017).

Following that, we sought to understand the factors and strategies that these students found important with the aim of reaching their future occupational desires. The factors and strategies that most of the students found important when trying to pursue the desired future occupations concerned self-reliance and individualism, further education, and working right after high school before further education. Most students had an individualistic view on how they can achieve their occupational aspirations and tackle the obstacles they might encounter in the future: being motivated and disciplined were some of the aspects they mentioned. The main strategy to move on the social class spectrum and reach their occupational aspirations was through an accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) by studying further as the majority of the participants reported that they are planning on studying at some point in the future. Nevertheless, many of the students stated that they plan to take a gap year or more and work before studying further. The most common explanations for this were school fatigue and not knowing what to study or work with in the future.

The final purpose of this study was to examine how the participants evaluated their possibilities to pursue their strategies and achieve their occupational aspirations. The findings revealed that most students evaluated that they have good possibilities to follow their strategies and achieve their future occupational desires. Most participants saw their possibilities to construct their

lives as good as they reported that their parents gave them freedom to make their own decisions and that there are enough alternatives from which to choose after high school. Additionally, in most cases, the family backgrounds were seen as a neutral or positive factor in their future and the parents and the siblings were considered a supportive force to the students. This demonstrated that the students possessed different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that they found useful when acting on their future plans. The aggregate of their social capital mobilized them to use their agency and make decisions about their future.

A major limitation of this study is that it focused on a specific educational program in a specific high school. Being limited to time and sample, this study lacks an overview of the occupational aspirations of senior high school students in other educational programs and other high schools in Sweden. Thus, further research should be undertaken to develop a full picture of Swedish high school students' thoughts, choices, and decisions about their occupational desires.

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