Distribution of capital and school-related stress at elite high schools

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Abstract

We investigate school-related stress at two very different elite schools in Norway, using a mixed-methods approach. Schola Osloensis (SO) has a high-grade average and students come from backgrounds with large amounts of cultural capital. At Oslo Commercial School (OCS), students' grades are average, while parents have large economic resources. Data are qualitative interviews of 35 students at each school, photographs taken by students with the mobile phone app *MyView* as well as focus groups. At SO, academic performance and the struggle for top grades was the most important source of stress. At OCS, much centred on family background and codes regarding style. Lack of integration in key networks was the central cause of stress. We suggest that the most important stressors at the two schools may be shaped by different factors: At SO, surrounded by high aspirations and much cultural capital, stress is a result of the fear of failing academically. At OCS, where tight social networks based in milieus with much economic capital predominate, stress is caused by not getting access to the right social circles. Thus, stress may originate from tensions related to values and codes based in key socio-economic dimensions in social systems.

Keywords: stress, adolescents, social class, cultural capital, economic capital, social capital

Introduction

The paper addresses the relationship between social class and the development of stress in two Norwegian upper secondary elite schools. The schools differ significantly in recruitment profile and sociocultural style among their students. We have previously described how the students' ambitions, school work and way of socializing in peer groups reflect the composition of cultural and economic capital at the two schools (Author ref 1 and 2). Here we ask: How do these class-related aspects of the schools and the student body also impact the development of school-related pressure and stress?

Early studies highlighted major changes in people's lives, often termed 'life events', as sources of stress. It was suggested that these events could overtax people's ability to adapt and cope (Rabkin and Struening 1976). The more negative events were experienced, the more likely were subsequent illness, disability and even death (Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend 1974). However, gradually it became clear that associations between such events and subsequent outcomes often were weak (Wheaton and Clarke 2003). For example, Pearlin (1989) suggested that although many phenomena can be stressful, the broader social context plays a key role in whether a stress reaction is in fact triggered. Still, McLeod (2012) pointed out that most scholars have tried to capture 'objective elements' in the stressors, while disregarding the broader cultural *meaning*. This disregard has led to *structural* factors (e.g. inequality, strict hierarchies) being regarded as more important than *cultural* ones (typically shared meaning).

Traditionally, poor socio-economic environments have been regarded as risk factors for stress, and adolescents who perceive their neighbourhoods as dangerous have been identified as being at risk (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996). However, recent studies have suggested that stress and mental health problems have actually increased most sharply among those with *high* socio-economic status (West and Sweeting 2003). The *Young in Oslo* study

shows that this is particularly true for girls from the ethnic majority population whose families possess a preponderance of cultural capital (Sletten and Bakken 2016). Many researchers have reported that pressures related to performance, tests and assessment may be important stressors (Banks and Smyth 2015) and that students at schools with high grade averages may be particularly vulnerable (Eriksson and Sellström 2010, Landstedt and Gaadin 2012). In the UK, Duffel (2010) has documented severe stress related to the boarding school system, and in the USA, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) described heavily pressured students at an elite New England boarding school. Thus, more detailed studies of how stressors are shaped by social context are needed, not least studies with an emphasis on elite education.

It has been suggested that lifestyles and identities may be formed less by tradition and social class than was the case in the past (Dawson 2012). For example, two decades ago it was claimed that elites have become 'omnivorous' (Peterson and Kern 1996) and that class-based symbolic boundaries associated with values and lifestyles are less important (see also Warde 2011). Others claim that an ostensibly 'omnivorous' style is based upon individuals having to master increasingly subtle and demanding rules, where class dispositions are hidden but still crucial (Jarness and Friedman 2017), or even that elite pursuits may be more blended with 'ordinary' forms of cultural participation (Friedman and Reeves 2020). Recent analyses have also emphasized the increasing differences within elites linked to the *composition* of capital (Flemmen, Jarness et al. 2018). Cultural capital involves the embodied mastery of social codes ('habitus'), based on scholarship, education and formal qualifications and plays a significant role in achieving educational success (Dumais 2002). In contrast, economic capital is based on income, wealth and property, whereas social capital is associated with resources gained through social relations and networks (Bourdieu 2005). Moreover, socialization always leads to an intuitive feel for what is 'natural' in a specific social context - a skill that gradually becomes embodied (Devine 2011: 45). Note however, that economic capital seems

to play a more modest role than cultural and social capital for class effects of educational attainment, at least in the Scandinavian context (Jaeger and Holm 2007).

We will focus on 'elite schools', a concept that remains vague in many studies, and the criteria utilized may vary (Maxwell and Aggleton 2016:3-10). However, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009: 1100-1111) offered a framework distinguishing between: (i) *typologically* elite, implying that the school identify as independent, (ii) *scholastically* elite, meaning that it offers high-quality courses, (iii) *historically* elite, implying that the school has not only reflected the perceived need of the elite, but also met competence demands from wider society, (iv) *geographically* elite, implying that the schools often are situated in certain areas, and finally, (v) *demographically* elite, referring to factors such as family background.

There are quite a few studies of elite education (Brendon 2009, Gaztambide-Fernández 2009, Howard and Gaztambide-Fernández 2010, Khan 2011, Maxwell and Aggleton 2016, Verkaik 2018). Nonetheless, all these studies ignore the possible impact of the *composition* of capital (i.e. cultural and economic) in elite school socialization. Still, a recent Norwegian study has shown that various elite factions rely on different types of capital resources to reproduce their social positions (Flemmen, Toft et al. 2017). Another Norwegian study demonstrated that class-based micro interactions within the family clearly influence differences in school-related socialization. Parents in different class segments influence their children's motivation in different ways, and cultural and economic capital are key to understanding these differences (Aarseth 2017).

Research questions

We investigate adolescents' experiences of stress at two very different elite upper secondary schools. OS has students from families with a preponderance of cultural capital; students at OCS come from families with much economic capital. What are perceived as stressors at the

two schools? How do the students manage the pressure? Which broader cultural meanings underlie the causes of stress?

Methods

This study is part of the Adolescent Elite Research Project, which has been described in detail previously (author reference 1 and 2). Drawing on previous research regarding the educational level and socioeconomic composition of secondary schools in Oslo (author reference 3), two elite schools were chosen for the study. Schola Osloensis (SO) is the oldest school in Norway, established in 1153, and for centuries it has recruited students into the cultural and political elite. Oslo Commercial School (OCS) was established in the late nineteenth century as a response to the perceived national need for a mercantile education. At each school we used a mixed-methods design, drawing on (i) qualitative interviews, (ii) the use of the newly developed mobile app *Myview* and (iii) finally focus groups (Schoonenboom and Johnson 2017). We interviewed 35 students at the end of the second grade, aged around 18 years, at each school. The project leader (the first author) also interviewed the heads at each school twice, before and after these data collections. The team of five interviewers were all sociologists, and they used a brief semi-structured interview guide designed to foster a conversational interview style, so that the participants were encouraged to elaborate on what they considered important. To aid in consistency of interview style, the first author trained all interviewers. The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and included topics such as family background, peer relations and cultural and aesthetic preferences, as well as the school context. We started out with open questions, such as 'What kind of students attend the school?' 'What kind of students are the most popular at the school?' 'Is it stressful to go to school?' Most students at both schools answered this latter question in the affirmative, and we then let them elaborate on this point without suggesting explanations as to why it could be stressful. After these interviews were finished, students at both schools collected visual data

with the *MyView* mobile phone app developed by the Information Technology Service at the University of Oslo in cooperation with us. It allows students to take photos of a set of pre-coded themes (each option was open during a 24 hour period), which were sent directly to a secure server at the university. The interviews had already revealed that "stress" was important. Thus, we decided that one of the themes in *MyView* app should be 'stress' (others were e.g. 'food', 'my room', 'physical activity'). Students were asked to take pictures of what was considered stressful and add a caption using a 'Snapchat format'. Finally, the students took part in focus groups where we showed photos opening up for conversations where stress-related themes were elaborated.

Individual and focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed and we removed all identifying information. The interviews were coded using HyperResearch, following general rules of qualitative research analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). When analysing data for the current paper, we identified key themes, such as family resources, the merits of the school and stress. Our initial coding included long sections of text so that the broader context could be identified. Students emphasized different aspects of stress at OS and OCS, and we first determined the contours of the students' stress experiences, and how these experiences seemed to be connected to the broader school contexts. A more detailed analysis was then conducted to chart how stressors (e.g. school marks and fashion trends) were imbued with different meanings at the two schools. Finally, we selected excerpts that reflected these larger themes. All ethical aspects of the project were approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

The two schools

Both schools meet criteria for definition as elite schools (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009: 110-111): Both were established as a response to national needs for higher education; they have been recognized for scholastic quality; both have exclusive student bodies in terms of socio-

economic demographics; and both have high-status alumni. Classified by their parents' occupations, all interviewees could be located in the upper levels of the class structure depicted in the Oslo Register Data Class Scheme (Flemmen and Haakestad 2018), typically with cultural capital-based positions at SO (e.g. professors, architects) and economic capital-based positions at OCS (e.g. managers, financial brokers). There is socio-cultural diversity at SO, and students tend to be preoccupied with anti-racism and feminism. They have extremely high school marks (author reference 1). At OCS, the student group is more homogenous in socio-cultural terms, and there are social hierarchies that most students also recognize (author reference 2).

Oslo is a divided city, with significant socioeconomic differences. The East–West axis is key to understanding such divisions (Wessel 2000, Toft and Ljunggren 2016). In Figure 1, we show the residential neighbourhoods of the two schools. Most students from OCS come from the wealthy western parts of the city (blue circles), whereas students from SO live throughout the whole city (red circles). Students at OCS consider their school to be a 'West End School', a code word for high social status groups. However, for SO students, the East-West axis played no significant role regarding the social interaction at the school.

[Figure 1 about here]

Schola Osloensis

An 'insane' quest for grades at SO

At SO, scholarly performance is the main source of stress. The students are ambitious, hoping to progress to elite university courses requiring top grades for entry. As Caroline told us: 'The difference between a four and a five can be the difference between getting to study medicine

or not. When I went down to a four, it was like everything collapsed'.[1] Grades are associated with entry to e.g. law or medicine at a top university, and the students know precisely what grades are required. At American elite high schools, this kind of knowledge is also an integral part of 'the hidden curriculum' (Binder, Davis et al. 2016).

[Figure 2 about here]

Teachers' and parents' expectations can also be 'sky high', Caroline said. Figure 2 shows a photo taken by Johanna. She is preparing for Old Norse and is worried about whether she has studied enough. Based on this and similar photos from the *MyView* app, Sara explained during the focus group that good grades were expected not only by students and teachers alike, but also by her parents, who were both academics. The school's reputation for top grades increased the pressure. Fredrik said: 'Students here feel we have to live up to SO's reputation for high grades, usually over a five'. The ambitions of the students themselves thus go hand in hand with the expectations of other students, teachers and parents.

The students' narratives about assessments and tests are rich in detail and tell of a demanding regime: written assignments, tutorials, spontaneous conversations, oral presentations and extra tests when a grade is in doubt. However, they also described how they could discuss these issues with the teachers, acknowledging the teachers' need of a robust basis to legitimate the marks they award. They did not only comply with teachers' expectations, but often requested assistance and attention, in the same manner that has been described as 'negotiated advantage', typical for middle class kids who are coached by their parents (Calarco 2018). Students at SO also told us how important it was to have a good relationship with teachers, in the way that middle-class youths often find it easier to relate to

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[1] In Norwegian upper secondary schools, the highest grade is six and the lowest pass is two.

figures of authority at school (Jack 2016). Susanne said: 'You can talk to the teacher, who might say: "I can't give you a six for the time being, but you can take another test and if you do really well, then you can have a six".' Teacher-student interactions were also important in the numerous extracurricular activities at the school, e.g. Model United Nations (MUN), offering informal contexts where students, guided by teachers, could learn about diplomacy, international relations and the UN. The school's goal was to send teams of students to MUN competitions abroad. Both teachers and students had much invested in these activities, which opened for positive interaction and often a resulting closeness between the two groups.

[Figure 3 about here]

Most students at SO appreciate the school itself, but in some cases their teachers' ambitions go too far, they said. In Figure 3, Julie shows a photo of herself with the flu. She said it was intended to be an amusing illustration of stress; she had to stay in bed and take vitamin C. However, in the focus group this was viewed more seriously: 'The most important [part of this] is that your performance at school will suffer', Julie said. Caroline elaborated by telling a story about once having concussion; a teacher told her to hurry back to school. As she said: 'You're seen as a machine'. However, many had techniques to tackle the pressure. Sara attempted 'to look at it rationally'. 'I think of it like this', she said: 'I've actually been working on this for a whole year. There's nothing I can do about it now'. Thomas puts as much pressure on himself as possible: 'In all tests, I try my best. I'm a *try-hard*. It helps. Smiling, he used the label *try-hard* to indicate something positive. Caroline had developed a complex technique: 'I visualize my own stress as an object. If I can't sleep, I feel the stress and imagine it's like a ball in front of me. I then think "I'm going to throw [this ball] as far

away as I can". Caroline said she developed these techniques by herself, but they resemble self-help techniques to aid sleep (Ho, Chung et al. 2015).

Many students said that the desire to perform and the stress itself come 'from inside'. In a study of academic stress among Norwegian youths, those with a high degree of cultural capital similarly talked about a perceived pressure that was most clearly located in their own self-drive or in a vague 'society'. This internalized and indeterminate pressure made resisting it difficult (Author ref 3 2020). Instead of resisting, the SO students adopted coping techniques that are in a sense 'embodied' (Gaddis 2013); their sources of stress cannot be tackled without the use of cognitive strategies, many claimed. However, the students also perceived pressure from parents, teachers and even the school's impressive history. Because this is so deeply engrained in the students' personal sense of motivation, drawing boundaries between this pressure and their own ambitions can be challenging. This will to perform manifests in the almost existential relationship with achieving good grades and in the physical reactions to stress that many students described.

'Everyone at SO is a bit nerdy'

The focus on scholarship and academic performance also manifests itself in what are regarded as 'acceptable' identities at SO. A number of the students at OCS condescendingly labelled their peers at SO 'hipsters', but this negative label was also in use at SO. At SO, hipsters were criticized for their commercialized style. Thus, at both schools, students took part in 'hipster bashing' (Greif, Ross et al. 2010). However, a number of students at SO considered themselves 'nerds'. As Hanna said, 'Everyone at SO is a bit nerdy'. Gro described being bullied at lower secondary school because the other students meant she was a nerd, but at SO, this label was turned to the positive. Previous research suggest that, in some milieus, a 'nerdy' reference woven into a conversation can be a badge of recognition (Brown 1997). The nerd's

high status at SO also indicates the high appreciation of knowledge.

There is a veritable smorgasbord of student organizations at SO, whether political, queer, green, historical, or based on role-play. An eclectic, hybrid style that seems to break with traditional 'highbrow' cultural forms is typical; some scholars have claimed that this constitutes the basis for new types of social divisions (Prieur and Savage 2013, Friedman, Savage et al. 2015). As Harald told us: 'If three students at SO share an interest, they start a student club'. According to the students, there is no truly elite group at SO; those in the school theatre may *think* they are a cut above the rest, but several laughed at this. However, everyone agreed that the school itself is an elite one. As Anette said proudly: 'We talk about the SO spirit. It's about traditions and a sense of community. We are SO students!'

Most students tend to be politically left wing and red–green. Several said that racists and anti-feminists would not fit in at SO. The school's seeming socio-cultural diversity is highly valued. However, some students may not master the subtle codes and do not quite fit in. In a similar vein to the description of an elite school in Stockholm, Sweden, we observed a tension between scholarly elitism and Nordic welfare state egalitarian ethico-political ideals (Törnqvist 2018). Thus, students whose grades are inadequate or who cannot make their voices heard in debates on topics such as the climate or immigration issues may have a hard time at SO. Students are accepted if they are knowledgeable and can demonstrate their personal interests, political involvement and academic skills.

Oslo Commercial School

'There's nothing special about grades at OCS'
Students at the Oslo Commercial School (OCS) also described the school context as an important cause of stress but in a different way to their peers at SO. Although many claimed that good grades were important, they were not too preoccupied with this theme. Figure 4

shows Christian working on an assignment about *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen's famous play, which has

an iconic status in Norway. It is captioned 'School is stress', but his main point is that there

was no point writing about the play *after* the final assessment has been awarded. Torstein

elaborated: 'Being caged in at school physically, *having* to just sit there till half past three,

that's the problem'. We asked whether there was a bad atmosphere at school: 'No, there's a

good atmosphere, but doing maths is just, like, boring', he said. Both said that lacking

motivation causes stress. Cecilie, for example, puts off handing in her work until the very last

minute: 'Oh God, I'm, like, supposed to write five pages about *Peer Gynt*. It's really stressful

because it's often, like, 'shit, I have to do it by tomorrow.' And you're sitting there the night

before thinking; I haven't even started it yet. Now that's stress'.

[Figure 4]

Christian had a relaxed attitude about grades: 'I don't stress much about grades. I get

well over the grade average in Norway. But I can't be bothered to spend time putting in as

much effort as I should'. Kaia agreed: 'Getting good grades is important because you'll have

more opportunities, but for me personally it's not important'.

Formally, students at OCS recognize that grades will be important when applying for

higher education and for prospective careers, but they emphasize grades much less than their

peers at SO. Two studies of American elite schools paint a picture reminiscent of our

observations. The authors of both studies were struck by how little effort students put into

their schoolwork, while their natural self-confidence or *ease* still allowed them to finish

school with reasonably good grades (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009, Khan 2011).

Figure 5 shows a photo Torstein submitted that has a light, summery feel. He's

wearing shorts, the weather is lovely, and he is relaxing. It bears the caption 'School stress

over for today!' After school he usually hangs out with his friends from class, goes to the gym or spends time with his girlfriend, all miles from the tedium and suffocating control of school. At OCS, quirky interests, scholarship, long evenings of homework and being 'nerdy' are far from the ideal.

[Figure 5 about here]

Compared with their peers at SO, the narratives of the students at OCS about tests and coping methods are recounted with a lack of interest and nuance. One could hypothesise that this was due to a carefully staged image of 'effortless achievement' (Jackson and Dempster 2009). However, we observed few signs of such mechanisms, these students were simply not very preoccupied with school efforts and results. Still, many were characterized by self-confidence and *ease* (Khan 2011) also when describing their experiences at school, their homework and exams. When asked whether standing in front of the class to give a presentation can be challenging, Christian's answer was succinct: 'No, it's been a big part of school ever since primary school. Most people have gotten used to it'. The other students in his focus group agreed and nodded. For many of the students at OCS, their behaviour could probably be described through terms such as 'polished' or 'confident' in an employment process, as evaluated through way of talking, dress and style (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Ingram and Allen (2019: 729) has described this type of capital conversion, from a resourceful background to a certain way of behaving, as 'social magic''. The behaviour is interpreted as a "natural" expression of self-confidence or self-esteem. Their perspective may be fruitful also for understanding our data: In interviews and focus groups, the *ease* of OCS students could easily be recognized as properties of the individual students, not as codes of valued behaviour typical for the milieu they came from.

'Network, network, network at OCS'

Nora at OCS said in a focus group that some students withdraw from the social side of class, isolating themselves. The conversation then shifted to the idea that quite a few students do not really fit in at OCS. As Linnea (from West Oslo) said: 'Our parents know each other. A lot happens via them. All the people I hang out with are good, old friends'. Eva (from East Oslo) said in an individual interview that the key social structures at OCS are bound by social networks where school and leisure intersect. 'It can be complicated to understand them and practically impossible to gain access', she said. Gradually, we revealed that one's social class and place of residence in Oslo could play a decisive role in such processes.

Eva had grown up in East Oslo; she knew hardly anyone at her new school, as she realized on her very first day: 'I just got the feeling: if I hadn't heard of you or met you at a party [before], then you weren't cool. At OCS it's all about the parties you go to. It's network, network, network'. Axel also came from a suburb of East Oslo and echoed her view: 'In my class there were a couple of lads everyone knew. They lived in really big houses, hosted large parties, but only some people got invited'. At first, Axel felt left out, but he was a sociable boy, very handsome, good at sport and caught the eye of a girl from a wealthy family in West Oslo, who also used to arrange large parties at her family estate. This was a 'way in' for him but he found it difficult to keep in touch with old friends, in the same manner as described in previous studies of the costs of social mobility at high schools (see: Lee and Kramer 2013).

Subtle markers of style, again depending on social class, are important at OCS. It is easy to make the wrong move, whether in terms of speech, appearance or even taste in music. However, clothes are in a class of their own. Malin too came from the east of the city but gradually became socially integrated because she won a role in the important school revue. In an individual interview, she said: 'There are loads of challenging norms and rules at OCS.

Every day it's like we're on the catwalk'. The rules are linked to who you 'really' are [i.e. your family background], and not least to where [in Oslo] you come from. Many students at OCS have brothers, sisters or neighbours at the school; parents had often been students there, as confirmed by the school heads. These students had an advantage because of their familiarity with the norms and rules.

In an American study of an elite high school, a 'preppy style' based on exclusivity and money was regarded as important (Chase 2008). We observed a similar phenomenon at OCS, especially among the girls. A number of them used to have Louis Vuitton handbags, but at one point the symbolic status of the accessory shifted, coming to be more readily associated with East Oslo. As Olivia (from East Oslo) said: 'Fashions come to the east much later. Take Michael Kors [another expensive brand of bag], it's completely out. That's East End style, ghetto style'. The key to understanding such a sartorial 'fail' seems to be that students from East Oslo do not have an eye for the type of discretion that the French sociologist Daloz (2010) has dubbed 'conspicuous modesty'. One's family should have money, but it should not be flashed about, only subtly hinted at.

The boys at OCS were less interested in clothes, but similar processes could be discerned as among the girls. Stephen from West Oslo described a group of boys who lived in the wealthiest area in East Oslo (often described as "the west-end part of the east") as follows: 'Those guys dress up far too much when they're going to a party, wearing shirts and jackets. My gang has just as much money as them, but we wear hoodies, we *chill*. That gang are *try-hards*'. *Try-hard* is a pejorative term (see also: Linker, Valley et al. 2018) often used at OCS to describe people who try too hard to fit in where they do not really belong.

Students who managed to make the transition from east to west often felt that they were never entirely accepted by their new environment, at the same time as their old friends from the east felt they were being let down. Axel had been granted access to the inner circle at

OCS through his new girlfriend. He said that some of his new friends 'joked that "one should never go east of the National Theatre in the centre of Oslo"'. Laughing with them about this was not easy. Researchers have described similar experiences at elite schools in the USA—a painful estrangement from one's social class of origin combined with a profound feeling of remaining an 'outsider'(Lehmann 2014). Drawing on a Bourdieusian framework, Sam Friedman (2016) in a similar vein argued that the concept of divided habitus, or habitus clivé, may explain how the emotional pull of class loyalties may entangle subjects in the affinities of the past, and preventing aspirations of upward mobility.

We were struck by the symbolic divide between East and West Oslo among students at OCS, in a similar manner as described in previous reports (see e.g. Mendez 2018). The power of neighbourhood symbolic boundaries was an important cause of exclusion and stress. However, the students at SO were recruited from across the city. Students at SO were not interested in the east/west divide. Neighbourhood differences were less important at the school.

Stressors shaped by social context

Stress is thus generated entirely differently at SO and OCS. At SO, aspiring to top grades is a tremendous source of pressure. Many had experienced psychosomatic reactions such as trouble sleeping or abdominal pain. If their grades were poorer than expected, their world could 'collapse'. Such expressions, indicating that an academic failure is something akin to existential ruin, are common in social milieus like SO, and illustrate the close relation between academic achievement and self-worth (Author ref 4 2021). Many felt the pressure coming from the 'inside' – as well as from parents, teachers and peers. Rather than resisting the pressure, they used elaborate and nuanced methods to handle their stress. Academic performance, knowledge and the ability to take part in political debates were highly valued, but there were a number of other ways to gain acceptance as well. An unusual, slightly

introverted 'nerd' could also enjoy high status.

At OCS, the picture is different. Students do not emphasize the pressure to perform as a source of stress and they are less interested in top marks. Stress is more often linked to a lack of confidence about whether one actually belongs, and concerns about being invited to the right parties. Many say that 'everyone is equal at OCS', but our data point in another direction: there are profound socio-cultural and class-based differences among the students at OCS, to a large degree coinciding with the east/west divide of the city of Oslo. Students from low social classes or from East Oslo encounter difficulties accessing key social networks. Many strive to learn the codes of language, dress and party practices. Even within groups that seemed fairly similar to us from the outside, students risked being labelled a *try-hard*, such as when a student from West Oslo criticized the dress sense of young people from a wealthy area in East Oslo. This is reminiscent of what Freud (2013) called *Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen*: small symbolic differences can be important in the quest for self-esteem and identity. There is an array of potential pitfalls at OCS, not least those associated with being a *try-hard.* Peculiarly, this expression is also used at SO but with the opposite connotation. Here it stands for the core SO values of working hard and performing at maximum intensity.

Why are experiences of stressors so different at the two schools? The broader backdrop seems to be mechanisms anchored in social class, primarily the relative preponderance of cultural and economic capital. This may be linked to what is important for success in the cultural and economic sectors in the upper strata of Norwegian society (Flemmen 2012). At SO, the grade average is extremely high and the students are socialized into demanding discourses related to culture and politics. If one succeeds at the school, elite university degree courses await. At OCS, economic and social forms of capital are more important. Accessing the right informal social networks is vital, and such resources are also considered important for succeeding later in life.

At both schools, parents play important but different roles. Students at SO say their parents are preoccupied with their school performance, and they often coach their kids to request assistance and attention, described as 'negotiated advantage' (Calarco 2018). Most parents at SO have completed a university education, and many help their kids with schoolwork. In contrast, the tight networks of friends at OCS are often rooted in neighbourhoods and circles of family friends in wealthy Oslo West. Parents were less engaged in their kid's school work, but play an important role in social life; for example their children's friends are often invited on trips abroad or to country retreats in the holidays.

The schools' organizational cultures contribute to these ends. At SO, the teachers, leaders and alumni were proud of the traditions at school, where numerous students have been trained for key national positions in e.g. politics, science and literature. There are paintings or photos on the walls of famous students, spanning many centuries. The principal and teachers were also proud of being one of the few schools in the country still offering courses in Latin. OCS, on the other hand, offered high-quality courses in economics, marketing and law, preparing the students for jobs in private sector. However, at OCS, there was more ambivalence regarding the semi-closed networks based on class and neighbourhood. The first author presented some of these preliminary findings to the school's principal at an informal meeting. The principal listened, and then said that he and his staff of course recognized the significance of these networks and that they make the inclusion at OCS difficult for students from lower socioeconomic strata and the eastern parts of the city. It worried them, he continued, but changes would be difficult, as these networks reflected longstanding traditions and a deep-seated school culture.

We suggest that the students' descriptions of stress and their reactions to it at SO and OCS reflect what have been dubbed 'capital-specific mobility barriers', as outlined by Flemmen, Toft et al (2017). Class reproduction depends on both the volume and composition

of parents' capital. The relative chances are higher for obtaining a place in the cultural fraction of the upper class if one's parents' capital was predominantly cultural, while chances for joining the economic upper class are higher for those coming from families richest in economic capital. Reflecting this, at SO, the main cause of stress was the pressure to perform. At OCS, it centred more on difficulties accessing social networks and to understand class-specific codes of language and style. Students at SO use nuanced terms to describe stressors and stress reactions, pressure at school and coping strategies. Students at OCS talk about stressors more indirectly. In the focus groups at OCS, the failure of *others* to be included in key networks was often mentioned. However, in the individual interviews, many spoke of the stress and pain of exclusion if you come from Oslo east. At SO, stress reactions were spoken of more freely—trouble sleeping, upset stomachs, poor grades and failure was openly described. Why is talking about performance and stress so easy at SO? It is because stress reactions also enjoy a *status* similar to that of good grades. When students strive to do their utmost, their quality of sleep can suffer. However, at OCS, the quest to access the right circles can hardly be an ideal. One should be born into the right social network, not strive towards it. The expression *try-hard* has the same connotation that *nouveau riche* probably has among the parents of students at OCS (Chabrak, Craig et al. 2016).

Conclusion

In the current study, we have responded to challenges in research on stress posed already thirty years ago by Pearlin (1989), arguing that that scholars over decades have tried to capture 'objective elements' of what may cause stress (stressors), at the same time as the social context obviously play a great role if a stress reaction is triggered. More recently, McLeod (2012) pointed out that researchers should take into account the broader cultural meaning of potential stressors. In line with this, it is vital to investigate young people's

experience of stress in the context of different cultural systems.

The main finding of the study is that at both these elite schools, stress develops from the tension in the cultural and social field that is regarded as most important. At SO, school performance is the main cause of stress, while at OCS, stress is related to gaining access to the right social networks. At SO, the students know that students at their school receive the highest grades in the country and thus gains access to the most prestigious university degrees, and their cultural capital is developed in a well-known collaboration between the home and the school (Barone 2006). At OCS, many students belong to semi-closed social networks based on families with large stores of economic and social capital. Such networks are part of the management of all forms of economic capital, and students at OCS may take advantage of such resources later in life (Huber 2009).

It thus seems reasonable to anchor the stressors and stress reactions in two rather different systems of capital, culture and meaning. Social class is a crucial part of both systems. Both schools can be considered elite, and we have found little to support the notion that class markers are less important and that the elites have become more 'omnivorous'. Rather, it is striking that the *composition* of types of capital (Savage, Warde et al. 2005) affects both schools but in entirely different ways. 'Stress' is common among the students at SO and OCS, but the common term masks entirely different processes. Hence, effective preventive efforts to reduce stress should probably target completely different and deep structural aspects of the school- and peer cultures at the two schools.

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