



JSSE

[Journal of  
Social  
Science  
Education](#)

2021, Vol. 20(4) 29-47

Edited by:  
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Article

## Mutual rejection: an ethnography of social science at a Swedish elite school

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**Keywords:** social science education, classroom ethnography, micro-interaction, power, elite school, recognition and misrecognition, Goffman

- At an elite school in Sweden, social science education contradicts the ideals of democratic education.
- Micro-power actions change when students outperform their teacher's subject knowledge.
- Micro-interactional power is expressed by recognition and misrecognition in the classroom.
- As an observer in the elite school, one simultaneously becomes loud and invisible.
- Further ethnographic “studies up from below” are needed in social science education.

**Purpose:** This paper offers insights into the dynamic of misrecognition in an elite school. It presents new findings on micro-interactional power relations in the classroom and argues for additional ethnographies of social science education in elite schools.

**Methodology:** This paper uses an ethnographic method. Its research employs the observational position of a “belonging stranger” is put forward in contrast to the idea of “going native”. The focus is on the power of micro-interaction.

**Findings:** A key empirical finding is the change in power relations that occurs when students outrank their social science teacher in subject knowledge.

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**Suggested citation:**

Lundberg, J. (2021): Mutual rejection: an ethnography of social science at a Swedish elite school. *Journal of Social Science Education* 20 (4). <https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-4459>

**Declaration of conflicts of interests:** none

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## 1 BECOMING INSIGNIFICANT

I am standing in front of the class at the upper secondary school. I am looking at the seated students who are eagerly keeping eye-contact, nodding, leaning forward, smiling politely, and listening carefully as I tell them who I am: an educational researcher, a former social science teacher and someone who has spent a lot of time in school and at the university. If they want to know anything about pursuing higher education, I tell them they are very welcome to ask me questions. One student raises a hand and asks the following: “Are you grading us; are you giving us any assignments?” I start to laugh and reply, “Oh no, not at all – I will not demand or require anything from you. Just be yourselves, but make sure you tell me if my note-taking makes you uncomfortable, or if you want to be excluded from my study. Try to ignore me and just carry on with your work without letting me bother you. If I make you uneasy in any way, be sure to let me know.” I am still standing in front of the class. I stop talking even though I had planned to say more about my research questions, my preliminary ideas, and opportunities for the students’ possibilities to influence my project. Though I have stood before a class many times before as a teacher, I suddenly become insecure in an unfamiliar way. I hear my laughter linger, but I suddenly feel silly. My eyes search for a friendly look. Glancing through the group, I see no one who meets my nervous stare. I wiggle a bit from side to side, but not one student follows my movements. The gaze of the students now rests on the white board behind me. Eyes pierce me like darting arrows. No one reacts. Their bodies no longer lean forward; rather, they are sitting straight and still. As if waiting for the next instruction from someone other than me. They have done exactly as I told them: I am now not noticed, not important, not significant.

This paper analyses ethnographically observed micro-actions within the classroom, as in the sample above. This is a study of micro-interactional power in the social science subject. I examine how interactional patterns serve in different ways to regulate the classroom and thereby also regulate the school subject of social sciences. In the classroom, students and teacher restrict one other’s actions in ways that narrow their respective social space. In the empirical sample above, I reacted to the students’ non-response. This reaction reminding me of Meads’ (1934/2015) ideas on the human becoming a subject, a self, in interaction with others. The same process creates the joint society. The process of response from others shapes the selves in society; the non-response becomes a way of ending this process. A response like the one in the sample above could also be interpreted as a direct answer to the instruction given to the students, i.e. not to pay attention to me. When I described my role as one of not being their grading teacher, I suddenly became invisible, an insignificant other. This was a starting point for understanding the micro-interactional power dynamics when social science education is directed by the students’ and the teacher’s relations of both recognition and mis-recognition in the classroom.

The main content of this paper consists of empirical material from an ethnographic study of an elite school and its social science teaching. In Sweden, the school subject here referred to as “social science” can be translated in different ways. The Swedish term “samhällskunskap” can literally be translated literally to “knowledge of society”. It consists of several academic disciplines, mainly political science, sociology, and economics, but sometimes also geography, law or theories of media and communication. In other countries, similar school subjects can be referred to as civics, social education or social sciences. The Swedish National Agency for Education translates “samhällskunskap” to Civics, but thereby narrows the scope of the subject to one mainly devoted to practical knowledge related to citizenship without economics. Often, history is a component of the subject, as in the Finnish example. However, the Swedish school subject has had a process of separation from the school subject of history over the last 70 years (Persson, 2018). I follow Blennow (2019) in choosing the term social science despite its unfortunate allusion to the subject being a “mini science” (p. 34).

The Swedish subject social science in upper secondary school is an interesting case for this study of micro-interactional power dynamics since the school subject involves knowledge about the individual in society. It is possible to study the very thing that students are learning about – society, its rules, laws and regulations and the individual citizens’ rights and opportunities –in action amongst the students themselves. The observations presented in this paper are not strictly limited to the frame of reference of political science and political historical facts highlighted by the teacher during class. This study emphasises the relation between self and society simultaneously acted out and taught about during social science class. The reflectivity of analysing what’s going on when it is going on – or ought to be going on – makes a sociological didactical study of social science education an especially interesting object. This will be made clear in the following empirical samples, and discussed further in the conclusion.

In Sweden, private schools are publicly funded within a highly marketised school system (Ideland, Jobér & Axelsson, 2021). The school chosen for this observational study is a private but publicly funded school with elite school marketing, located in southern Sweden. In comparison to other schools in the municipality, this school has more female than male students (61% female at the school, 49% on average in other schools), according to publicly available statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education. The same statistics show that the proportion of students who have highly educated parents are higher than in other schools (77% compared to the average for the municipality of 52%). When it comes to students with migration background the average for the municipality is 51%, while the observed school has only 12% students with a migrant background. Migrant background is here defined as either a student being born outside of Sweden or having two parents not born in Sweden. The students at the school also have one of the highest grade point averages in southern Sweden, both at the time of admission, and at the time when they are awarded their final education certificate (“studentexamen” in Swedish). The observed school is a highly segregated school, within the segregated

Swedish school landscape due to several recent policy changes (see e.g. Grannäs & Frelin, 2021).

The study was conducted over four years, following the same school-class during the last three years of their studies. An upper secondary school was the empirical field for the study. The students are 16-18 years old. The first year of the observational study was conducted with a variety of school-classes at the school, although always following the same social science teacher and the social science curriculum. The samples chosen from the study for this paper display social science education and expressions of power within the setting of the subject. The social science subject, its teaching and its learning is negotiated when the teacher and students take turns in rejecting each other's actions, behaviour, subject knowledge, and school specific conduct. The silent and polite fight for recognition and misrecognition (Honneth, 1995), when they discount each other's claims, is observed in a classroom filled with high-achieving students led by an ambitious teacher at a school desiring ivy-league-status. The lack of deviance is significant for this school (see Becker, 1963/1997, on the study of deviance). The enforcement of non-deviating normality matches Erving Goffman's (1963/1990) concept of *stigma*. The social effort to avoid stigma to maintain a strict normality appears as an intense objective in the social science classrooms observed in this study.

This kind of school is seldom studied in educational science and hardly ever in research on social science education. More common are studies on deviance, failing results or drop-outs. This has been the case for a long time, Alvin W. Gouldner already wrote in 1973:

I have acknowledged a sympathy with the underdog and with impulses to conduct researchers from his [sic.] standpoint. Yet in searching for the justification of my sentiments I must also candidly confess that I see no special virtue in those who are lacking in power or authority, just as I see no special virtue that inheres in those who possess power and authority. It seems to me that neither weakness nor power as such are values that deserve to be prized. (p. 35)

At stake in the episodes described in this paper are the formation of the school subject of social science, the expression of teaching and the space for learning: The students, the teacher and the unwritten curriculum all become parts of a struggle for the formation of the school's social setting.<sup>1</sup> The actors in class all affect each other in complex ways, taking turns dismissing each other's premises. This constructs a framework for the becoming of the student and the teacher as interacting subjects during class in social science. In other words, *what* they all become and *how* they will act outside of the school is also at stake (see Biesta, 2014; Arendt, 1961/2006, on becoming through education).

The observational findings included in this paper are framed by micro-interactional power theory, mainly based on ideas from Erving Goffman. I use this theory in the analysis of the classroom's *interaction order* (Persson, 2015, p. 145), which concludes this paper. This represents a sociological perspective with its origin in the theory of social interaction, mainly introduced by G. H. Mead (1934/2015). Persson's (2019) analysis of Goffman's view

on micro interaction and power, within the social interaction order, are used as an analytical concept for the observations presented. Goffman continues Meads' social psychology with his elaborated theory of the relation between oneself and others within society.

Power is in effect when someone exerts influence on others; therefore, power has a clear interactional dimension. Managing impressions of self in interactions with others is another dimension of interactional power (Persson, 2019). Goffman's view of interactional power is described in the following way:

The concept of power is perhaps mainly used in studies at the societal and institutional levels, but societies and institutions are created by individuals through social interaction, which is why the concept of power can also be used on the interactional level. (Persson, 2019, p. 128f.)

Goffman never discussed the concept of power, but can nonetheless be used to understand issues of power in interactions at the micro level (Persson, 2019). As with Lukes (2021), Goffman shows interest in socialisation as power. Where, when and how power is present can only be seen from below according to Persson's (2019) reading of Goffman: "the exercise of power is constructed from below through the constitution of the mutual definitions of reality of interacting actors in shared situations. This is what framing social interaction is about" (p. 141).

This article describes and analyses the power dynamics of social interactions in the social science classroom at an elite school. The observational samples serve as illustrations of these dynamics. Even in instances where the students or the teacher dismiss one another, power in the classroom is a relational bond. Power exists between the teacher and the students, and is not in either the teacher's or the students' hands to control (Aspelin, 2021). As revealed in the empirical findings, interactional power is both given and taken, accepted, and approved, and can shift through a new framing of a given situation. This is realised through interaction. Without interaction there would be no power to exercise since power only exist where there is a social relation (e.g. Arendt, 1958/2018; Lukes, 2021).

## 1.1 Paper outline

Below, I first provide an ethnographic description of how I ended up placed in the classroom, making observational fieldnotes. The section "Method of Becoming a Belonging Stranger", describes the method of the study. I also present a brief view of the school and the ethnographical setting. The next empirical sample illustrates the teacher's authoritarian leadership and high demands in relation to an insult where the students are defined as resembling Valerie Solanas' (2004) "Daddy's Girls". This insult is received by the students without them showing any visible reaction. In the next case, the teacher creates tensions of shame and guilt in the classroom when a few students have disobeyed one given restriction during an event of a solar eclipse. The following extract shows how

careful the students are to never give the wrong answers to a simple question, in this case about monarchy. In the last case, the teacher loses his face when joking ironically, when he is corrected by non-laughing students when he mixes up irony with sarcasm. The students turn the teacher's leadership against him by using his own standards to correct him on paper formalities for an assignment.

These empirical examples show how the interactions in a social science classroom at a Swedish elite school are negotiated within frames of the social science subject's content. This paper further analyses the unwritten and written school curriculum and the teacher's and students' ways of understanding their own and the others' place in the classroom. Previous research on elite schools (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Howard, 2008; Khan, 2011) relates to principles of an egalitarian democratic elite school education (Törnqvist, 2018). The issue of power and recognition is considered in relation to the mechanisms of dismissing each other's claims. Micro-sociological theory on power and interaction (Goffman, 1963/1990, 1966; Persson 2019) is intertwined in the ethnographic methodology. This "theoretically informed ethnography" (Willis & Trondman, 2000) serves as an analytical tool and as a method for an educational ethnography of social science education at an elite school (see Walford & Delamont, 2008, on educational ethnography).

## 1.2 Method of becoming a "belonging stranger"

The writing, the *graphy*, of ethnography is often overlooked as a part of the methodology (Gullion, 2016). In this study the writing has been as essential a part of the fieldwork as it has analysis. During the observational study, I have situated myself at the back of the classroom, leaning towards the wall, or seated on a wooden chair, constantly taking notes on my laptop. I did not make any recordings or any other documentation of the observations except for my writing notes. My senses were directed towards the social interaction in the classroom, not towards my computer screen. Writing almost became automatic during the empirical study, which was an advantage as my presence and behaviour grew unobtrusive after some time (for more on writing ethnography see Jeffrey & Russel, 2018). The students got used to having me there: They barely acknowledged my appearance, but they were never impolite. Instead, they treated me as a furnishing, as something simply given. As Walford and Delamont (2008) points out, this is not an unusual event in classroom studies or other educational ethnography.

The students often acted with *civil inattention* (Goffman, 1996, p. 84f.): not bumping into me, neither reacting to my occasional but inevitable noise making nor asking me to be involved in anything. This was a beneficial position for making observational field notes: I felt close to transforming into the invisible fly on the wall, which several ethnographic methodological discussions claim to be impossible (Aspers, 2011; Fangen, 2005; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Because I am a former teacher in social science, my position is that of a familiar, belonging actor. School and teaching are for me a professional home, so I was already a native in this empirical field. As a researcher who is neither

teaching nor learning from the teacher, however, I was an outsider. Therefore, I call my position that of a “belonging stranger”, alluding to the dilemma concerning the classical ethnographic idea of “going native”. My version of Willis’ (1977) critical ethnographic ideal, questioning the position of going native, is to be the belonging stranger the school allowed me to be during the observational study. Further in-depth analysis of the observational position adopted in this observational study can be found in Lundberg (2020).<sup>2</sup>

Before I commenced my writing in each visit, viewing the teaching and classroom activities with the laptop on my knee, a number of incidents invariably took place. The following extract illustrates a typical way that I arrived to the class for observation:

My entry to the observation of a scheduled class in social science is late. The lesson is about to start. I have been in a hurry on my way to the school. Because I have forgotten the code to the locked door, I have to search through a long mail conversation on my cell phone at the entrance. My sweat starts to run as I struggle to connect with the school’s Wi-Fi. I begin to think that I must look like a weird stranger trying to break in when several students from the school hurry through the door using their memorized codes, pressing the numbered buttons without hesitation. I back off from the door and try to calm myself. At last, I manage to enter the school along with a student greeting me politely: “Hello, welcome, please come on in.” The student treats me in a very friendly manner, and I feel my breath calming as I make my way to the classroom, passing a huge plastic palm tree in the open three-story high lobby with a glass ceiling letting in daylight. A table counter with an aquarium below the countertop makes a buzzing sound, and I glimpse the colourful fish swimming in the glistening tank. I follow the spiralling stairs up one floor and smell fresh coffee from the open kitchen. I hear low voices talking. Here and there in corners of the open space area, furnished with cosy sofas and armchairs in groups, two or three students are having discrete conversations. Within a short moment, the few students and teachers not already in the right place make rapid moves towards their designated classroom.

I enter the door to the classroom. The lesson has already started before its scheduled time. Everyone is already in place. Straight lines of small school desks combined with hard wooden chairs are occupied by students directing their attention towards the teacher and the visual presentation on the whiteboard. I stumble clumsily through the door, starting to breathe loudly again. I look for a place to sit and understand that I must take a chair from outside of the classroom, then enter again with my jacket and backpack in one hand and the chair in the other, opening the door with my back. I am not discrete in any way.

Despite my noisy, dramatic entrance to the classroom, no one notices anything. Everyone directs their attention forward. Not one person turns around; not one person twitches or seems to even register my arrival. Neither the teacher nor the

students act when I drop my computer or when my chair, devoid of anti-scratch pads, makes an extremely unpleasant squeaking sound against the floor. At last, I am seated with my laptop on my knee. Finally, I can start making observational notes ...

With this extract, I exemplify how much disturbance a clumsy, mildly asthmatic body, such as my own, makes in the silent and orderly school environment. Outside of this school, I seldom think of myself as the one making the most noise or drawing attention to myself. As one treated as the invisible fly on the wall, I am making a lot of noise. Every breath and every movement feel like a disturbance, but the disturbance is politely ignored. The concept of “civil inattention” (Goffman, 1966, p. 84f.) becomes highly pertinent when searching for words to describe the experience of being at the school as an observer. I am clearly there, but at the same time do not belong despite having permission to enter and attend class. My way of not being as silent, calm, physically strong and cool as the others at the school, reveals me as a stranger. After a few visits my arrival to the class is more adapted to the code of silence and cool belonging invisibility.

## **2 REJECTION WITHIN SOCIAL SCIENCE**

This section elaborates on samples from social science classroom observations. These are all examples of mechanisms of regulating behaviour, subject knowledge, frames and writing instruction during social science class. Several examples show how the teacher regulates the students, but there will also be examples where the tables are turned, and the students discount the teacher’s behaviour and subject knowledge. The operations of power operate in a multidimensional way that makes it unclear if it is the teacher’s or the students’ influence that directs the classroom interactions. The active subject and passive object of regulation is not easily stated since the students expect an authoritarian teacher, and the teacher expects an obedient student.

### **2.1 Daddy’s girls**

This sample describes one of my first observations at the school. I had met the third-grade (18-19 years old) social science students just once previously. Therefore, this excerpt from the notes can, in retrospect, be viewed as the starting point or background to what is later on described as a pattern of changing relations between the teacher and the students as their education in social science proceeds. When in the first-grade (16-17 years old), the students and teacher were more kind and forgiving towards each other. The students and the teacher showed each other more of a mutual recognition when flaws and inadequacies appeared in class, that is, when they made jokes and were slightly misbehaved. However, in the second-grade (17-18 years old), the joking and low-levelled misbehaviour



disappeared completely from the classroom. Now, in third grade, both the teacher and the students are strictly serious about teaching, learning and focusing on educational targets:

In an incisive voice, the teacher starts the lesson by telling the students that they have just had an entire week, 40 hours, to work on their extensive final student essay. “You all ought to have a proper text to work with further on,” he says. “If you have not used your time, you ought to feel anxious by now.” He finishes his reprimand by informing the class that some of the students have actually come quite a long way with their work. I can sense some students’ concern, while others are straightening their backs, looking relaxed and satisfied.

The class continues rapidly, with the teacher going through the differences and similarities between a review and a summary. He asks the class rhetorically, “How many of you in this class have not written a review and gotten an A grade?” No one answers the question. The tacit consent seems to be that everyone gets – and has always gotten – an A in every school assignment.<sup>3</sup>

Now the students are supposed to start making their reviews of political novels. From now until Christmas (three weeks), they are expected to read, analyse and, finally, present their assigned novel in relation to the ideological perspective that has shaped it. The teacher starts to give brief introductory presentations on the novels. The first one is *The SCUM Manifest*, by Valerie Solanas (2004), which he describes as filled with an understandable hatred towards men. He explains Solanas’ experiences of violence from meeting horrifying men while working as a prostitute. He gives a thorough description of “Daddy’s Girls” – women who only act in favour of the patriarchy and never in favour of other women. He reads aloud from the novel:

The conflict, therefore, is not between females and males, but between SCUM – dominant, secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, arrogant females, who consider themselves fit to rule the universe, who have free-wheeled to the limits of this ‘society’ and are ready to wheel on to something far beyond what it has to offer – and nice, passive, accepting ‘cultivated’, polite, dignified, subdued, dependent, scared, mindless, insecure, approval-seeking Daddy’s Girls, who can’t cope with the unknown, who want to hang back with the apes, who feel secure only with Big Daddy standing by, with a big strong man to lean on and with a fat, hairy face in the White House, who are too cowardly to face up to the hideous reality of what a man is, what Daddy is, who have cast their lot with the swine, who have adapted themselves to animalism, feel superficially comfortable with it and know no other way of ‘life’, who have reduced their minds, thoughts and sights to the male level, who, lacking sense, imagination and wit can have value only in a male ‘society’, who can have a place in the sun, or, rather, in the slime, only as soothers, ego boosters, relaxers and breeders, who are dismissed as inconsequents [sic.] by other

females, who project their deficiencies, their maleness, onto all females and see the female as worm. (Solanas, 2004, p. 30)

Without a smile or the hint of a joke, he then says to the class, “not unlike all you Daddy’s Girls at this school.” No one reacts. No one shows anger or indignation. I myself feel my cheeks burn from the shock. How dare he? Does he have a point? How could he say this? Why are the students not protesting this very insulting remark? The students keep taking notes, looking ahead towards the teacher, waiting for the next summary of the four remaining political novels included in the assignment. I start to wonder whether we heard the same words from the teacher.

In this session, the teacher’s way of expressing his feminism and his analysis of the gender position for the female students is received as a fact – as something to simply be digested by the students when taking notes concerning their assignment. The content, the message, in what the teacher told them about themselves seems to go unnoticed. But could it be unnoticed? If I were a student in this class, I would be highly offended. The students in the class either ignore what the teacher said, or do they agree? Are they handling the interactional power through impression management, or are they taken by surprise and caught off guard by the insult thrown at them in the middle of the lesson? These questions are not possible to answer through observation, but they would be interesting to investigate further in a study combining observations with interviews.

## **2.2 A solar eclipse**

The empirical example below shows the level of commitment to social science and the teacher’s role as a regulating restricting leader. It also shows how the social science classroom at this school creates a world of its own: strictly cut-off from its surroundings, with restricting frames shutting out – quite literally – an astronomical happening: a solar eclipse. The observational session occurred during a solar eclipse a few years ago, within the first year of my observational study. In the field notes, I have included reflections on what happens later in the ethnographical study as an additional perspective on the event:

Three students arrive a few minutes late to the classroom, where the other 37 students are already seated well in time before the scheduled lesson is supposed to begin. The former stumble into the classroom in a way that surprises everyone. This is an uncommon event in this place. The lesson has started – as usual – a couple of minutes in advance of schedule. Now, the tardy students are given the harshest reprimand that I have witnessed during my three-year long observation of this social science class:

When the students enter the classroom – filled with excitement over having been on the roof of the building looking at the magnificent astronomical phenomenon a solar eclipse presents – the teacher exclaims in a short, but annoyed and

disappointed, voice, “I said no, when you asked for permission”. His voice is firm and decisive. It does not reach a scolding level. Still, his voice – which otherwise never rises – is louder and deeper in tone than ever before, or after, this occasion. The three tardy students enter the classroom and apologise discreetly. Three soft light voices swiftly whisper, “Sorry I am late”. Their whispers linger in the air. However, the teacher visibly shows that they are out of order in a manner beyond acceptance. Following his first harsh comment, his way of showing anger and disappointment is communicated through a cold and passively aggressive civil inattention. The students silently express their remorse for not fulfilling his expectations: they lower their heads, make themselves small, and apologize wordlessly a second time. They then move towards their places in the classroom as quickly and as silently as possible. Without a sound, they find their places and take a seat, despite the hard stone floor and the metal legs of the chairs making scraping sounds. And so, the social science lesson carries on as if nothing interesting is going on outside, although there is a strange dark orange fog shining through the windows – an orange fog noticeable to only those who dare to defy the teacher’s clearly outspoken but unsaid demand for total attention. There is only one person in that classroom who cannot tear her eyes from the window, and that is the belonging stranger making rapid notes on her keyboard at the back of the classroom ...

For me, this is one of the strongest examples of how low the bar for accepted disobedience is set in the studied class. Before the lesson, I joked with the teacher as we walked towards the classroom. With sarcasm and laughter in my voice, I said, “So, I guess we ought to seize the opportunity to see the solar eclipse, right? Or would we argue that social science only concerns itself with social constructions, never with physical or natural phenomena?” I never expected my joke to be transformed into a literal reality in the classroom, considering the teacher laughed along and seemed to be on the same page as I was. Or did my sarcasm go unnoticed and get mistaken for a serious researcher’s perspective regarding the competition between natural and social science? Did we just have two completely different frames surrounding the shared social situation in a way that came in-between our common understanding? Is this why I was so confused when I observed the conflict appear in the classroom?

### **2.3 Head of state**

A recurring pattern I observed in the classroom was one in which the teacher asked questions and this was followed by the students giving rapid and correct replies without including additional superfluous commentary. Often the questions tended to control the facts. Here, I give an observational account illustrating the level of caution exhibited by students, who were not totally sure whether they had given the right answer to a seemingly easy question. The students were cautious and passive; the actively learning

student – practicing active citizenship through classroom activity – seems to have been absent in this classroom:

The teacher continues with an ongoing presentation on Swedish polity. He narrates the division of power and responsibility between the government and parliament in a detailed and complex manner. The teacher suddenly stops the lecture and throws out a question, abruptly, requesting active participation from the students: “Who is the Head of State in Sweden?” No one offers a reply. The classroom is silent, and the students keep their eyes fixed on the visual projection in front of them in a state that seems frozen. The teacher lets his eyes wander from student to student, never managing to catch a loose thread of shown interest to contribute with a reply to the question. “Come on,” he laughs. “What are you afraid of? You all know this. Besides, it’s not dangerous to give the wrong answer. You have a 50-50 chance of getting it right. Alright, I will turn around, close my eyes and then you all can give me the answer to this question at the same time. I will not peek; you are safe.” The teacher waits, eyes closed, facing the whiteboard with his back towards the students. “Okay, I will count to three: one, two, three”. “The King” and “Carl Gustav XVI”, some of them mumble silently. “Now there, that was not that hard was it?” the teacher shakes his head and laughs. Then he continues the lecture; no further questions interrupt the facts. The students’ computer keyboards create a constant clicking, like a discrete hailstorm in the classroom. No further participation from the students is required in this class.

This observation was made during the students’ first year (ages 16-17) at the school. The students were new to a school where everyone had top grades. The experience of being amongst other high-achieving students and competing at being “best of the best” (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009) made the students hesitate even when they knew the right answer. To become “best of the best” is not only the idea Gaztambide-Fernandes describes in his research on elite schools, but also an ideal stated as a business objective in the quality report from the school during the years covered by this study.

## **2.4 Sarcasm and the sound of keyboards**

After following the class for a longer period of time, I noticed a change in the teacher-student relationship: students began to be somewhat provocative. Partly, I noted them taking over the authority previously given to – and taken by – the teacher. Now the students were making corrections and asking questions with right answers, while the teacher suddenly seemed casual about keeping the previously strict frame around the subject and classroom:

A new assignment printed on paper circulates the classroom. The assignment is detailed in its instructions. No space for individual adjustment according to

interest or ability is given in the instructions. The students are being given information on how the assignment will be graded. The teacher says in a strict voice, "So, here is the assignment, due for Monday." Today is Friday. One of the students omits a silent "but", and then seems to regret her spontaneous reaction. The teacher instantly replies laughingly, "Isn't it lovely with irony?" He clarifies that the Monday deadline was just a joke: "Of course, you will get more time than that, for this is a difficult and demanding assignment." No one laughs at the joke. The teacher's sense of humour is not appreciated by the students. One of the students harshly and irritably respond to the teacher: "That's sarcasm, not irony."

When the students read through the assignment, they inform their teacher that he has forgotten one of the discussion questions on his visual presentation. They also comment on a year that's incorrect and a name that is missing. Several students criticise the teacher for writing the assignment instructions with an uneven margin on the right side of the printed paper. In a sarcastic and silly light voice, he responds, "Oh no, an uneven margin. This will make suicide statistics go up ..." and illustrates with his hand reaching upwards towards the ceiling while making a whistling sound. None of the students laugh at the charade. One student makes a remark in a serious and earnest tone, "You have trained us in writing following proper formalities for three years. You ought to live the way you learn."

When the teacher tries to laugh and lighten the tense situation, the student answers irritably to correct the teacher's use of stylistic terminology. I become impressed by the student's authority in correcting the teacher and can, at the same time, relate to the teacher's anxious, nervous attempt to make the situation less tense. There are additional occasions from the third grade when the teacher's jokes fall flat:

The teacher shows a picture of General McChrystal's PM to Obama on why the USA has failed in Afghanistan. The picture is extremely complex – it looks like a bird's nest of lines connecting dots with points, arrows, and numbers. The teacher says, "I will not go through this with you, but you will be required to know it all if you are to pass the test". As a reaction to the absurdity, I cannot stop myself from letting out a high-pitch laugh – I assumed I would not be the only one laughing. My laughter echoes in the silent room. No one gives a sign of hearing my laughter, so I make a vain attempt to suck it back into my mouth in embarrassment.

This last occasion shows how the students can direct and regulate the teacher's actions through their ways of reacting to the teaching. The joking ends, and the hard work begins.

### **3 DISCUSSION: A SHIFT IN INTERACTIONAL POWER**

At the observed school, a hierarchical setting is already in place in the school's advertisements to potential students. The lack of deviation is clearly communicated in the

bright pictures of smiling students and teachers: all dressed in neat office-clothing in an open-space, indoor area shining bright with daylight. The school describes itself as an *Ivy league* or *Grandes école*, as a school which has sent its graduating students off to institutions of high status (Lundberg, 2020). This is a school for the best of the best, for those who envision themselves with a bright future, entitled to the best education. There are similarities to Gaztambide-Fernandez's (2009) positional categories of elite students, who see themselves in positions of "exclusion, engagement, excellence, entitlement and envisioning" (p. 197). However, Khans' (2011) elite-student habitus concept of "ease" is lacking at the school where these observations were made: No-one seems relaxed and comfortable during social science class. Rather, everyone keeps a very tense control over their body, knowledge, and expressions. In Goffman's (1959/1990) words, this would be described as a form of *impression management* affecting the *interaction order*. Khan (2011) uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* when claiming that ease is the elite-habitus that separates old elites from new ones (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984). In the analysis of the classroom interaction in this study, micro-interactional power is used as a concept on an even closer level than habitus. Habitus works on a group (meso-) level rather than at the level of interaction between self and others. It might be the case that those attending the school in my study are less relaxed about their superiority than those in Kahn's study. In my observational study, I noticed a tense struggle among students seeking to acquire the top position. The school seems to be a place filled with a kind of waiting for power, claiming superiority in time, but not for now, when a negotiation between the teacher and the students is performed.

An elite school in Sweden presents some inconsistencies: As stated by Törnqvist (2018), an egalitarian school struggles with its own elite status when students' idealistic values conflict with the school's status of superiority. Törnqvist has studied an unwilling elite. In the case of the study presented in this paper, the school has its own school-culture of wanting to be an elite-school, in contrast to the Swedish school system and its egalitarian common value regulated in the national curriculum and school law. Most of the students are critical of the nationally regulated common school-values on egalitarianism. But since they believe in the teacher's authority, they make notes of the facts and aim to get every correct answer in their tests. In my observational findings there is a vast distance from Tryggvason's (2018) agonistic classroom, where different opinions meet and create space for *radical democracy*. In this elite school, to study for the test is more important than the distraction a radical classroom democracy would support.

The boundaries surrounding social science education in general seem to exclude expressions of feelings. The empirical findings in this article are similar to those regarding the students silenced in Blennow's (2019) study of social science education in Sweden, although the classrooms studied in her doctoral dissertation are more heterogeneous. Social science in an elite school differs from the more heterogeneous classrooms since all of the students are directed to achieving top grades. When the students were finishing their education, at the end of the observational study, I noticed several occasions when

the students fought back against their teacher; they seemed to beat him at his own game in strictly adhering to formalities and facts. In this way, the students disrupted the school hierarchy and managed to mark the teacher as the outsider and themselves as the insiders in the ruling interaction order. They clasp the social order in the classroom by stigmatizing (Goffman, 1963/1990) the teacher for his jokes and lack of adherence to his own purported rules. The students enhance a social order where the social norm is constituted by careful control: neither laughing nor joking but remaining serious and focused on correct instructions for paper formalities.

As an ethnographic observer, I too am affected by the stigma avoiding approach resulting from the harsh normality-pressure at the school (Goffman, 1963/1990). At the beginning, I had critical thoughts about the teacher's authority in relation to an ideal of participatory, active school democracy education of active citizens. School democracy ideals are often related to the educational philosophy of sociologist John Dewey (1916/2004). I wondered why the teacher never gave the students the opportunity to debate or discuss the subject topics. As time went by, I started to understand that the teacher followed the students' requirement of him to be authoritarian. They expected the school to be a place for facts and unquestionable knowledge, not a place for deviance, plurality or differences of any kind.<sup>4</sup> The teacher used the promise of authoritarian teaching as an opportunity to teach uncompromising facts about inequality, human rights issues, feminism, and the necessity of the Nordic model for a welfare state. These political issues were far from in line with the students' political opinions. However, they learnt what they needed to learn to get a good grade, even if they expressed scepticism about feminism, human rights, the welfare state and social equality during the rare occasions they were given to express their own political views.<sup>5</sup> This stands in contrast to the teacher interaction described in Aspelin's (2017) research: "Relationally competent teachers are both effective and decent. They take responsibility for their own actions as educators in a conventional system, and as fellow beings in an interpersonal system" (p. 68). In the observational findings in this article, the interactional order in the classroom pushed teachers and students towards the conventional system and away from the interpersonal system described in Aspelin's (2017) study.

#### **4 CONCLUDING REMARK: POWER IN MICRO-INTERACTIONAL ORDER**

The social science subject in this paper has been used simultaneously as a case study and a framing device. The Swedish school subject of social science consists of developing knowledge within three main areas: political, social and economic perspectives on societal issues. In this study, the social perspectives in micro-interaction and power in the classroom are analysed within a sociological frame.

This paper has discussed the mutual struggle for recognition at an elite school during education in social science – the presentation of self and others, the everyday life in school and the fear of stigma. The school was more or less lacking in deviance (Goffman, 1963/1990; 1959/1990). The teacher made the case for core values concerning gender

equality, human rights and the welfare state, but did so in an authoritarian manner. When the teacher compared the students to the “Daddys Girls” of Solanas (2004) *Scum-manifesto* as a controversial didactical method, the students did not even react. The students themselves placed their teacher in this authoritarian position by never letting him know if they were in need of more factual knowledge or other guidance. Still, they were not given opportunities to discuss or debate. On the rare occasions when they did get a question, they still kept silent even though they knew the answer. Eventually, the students did fight back by using the teacher’s own game, letting him know when he broke his own rules. The tables were turned only when the students were ready to leave the school and their teacher behind. By then, the fight for recognition seemed to be over. Or had it just begun? The students were perhaps from then on ready to interpret the frames surrounding the next high status place, education or internship, where they end up; a new place where other dimensions of power becomes relevant to recognise (Lukes, 2021). Maybe they will acquire a “Khanian” ease when they find out what interaction order they are supposed to become an actor within?

However, power in this study is not visibly taken or forced, it is a complex power adapted to the interactional frame for the situation (Persson, 2019). The observed interactional micro power is highly relational and never rests just in the students or the teacher’s hand. Instead, the observational samples have shown how power shifts between different positions upholding the social interaction in the classroom: the students and the teacher and the observer in the classroom are all actors who are noticed, accounted for, recognised and misrecognised. As in Aspelin’s (2021) discussion on teaching as bonding, the entire classroom at this elite school is involved in relational work, cutting, or strengthening the bonds seen as most significant and needed for the future within an interactional order of complex power relations.

Social micro actions, such as those studied in this paper, should be studied in more settings than the one narrated here. Furthermore, ethnographies intending to “study up” (Nader, 1974), but still from the observer position “from below”, can illuminate further perspectives on what happens in social science education as well as in society at large. Too many aspects of interactional order and its power-producing relations among teachers, school subjects and students in classrooms remain unknown.



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The written curriculum is the publicly available instruction on educational common grounds, purpose of education, school subject content, goals and criterions for grading. In Sweden, these are the same for every school within the country. The National Agency for Education (Skolverket) is the authority supporting schools to work in line with the national curricula (Skolverket, 2013). The unwritten curricula, phrased as “hidden curricula” by Jackson (1968/1990), consist of every unwritten regulation of education. Here, norms, discourses, habits, conventions and other socially taken-for-granted-aspects of education are included. Jackson’s classic example was that of standing in line and asking for permission to use the bathroom. I choose to call these parts on education “unwritten”, rather than “hidden”, since rules and habits often are highly visible, though not always written down. This is an argument also been made by Persson and Sæther (2016).

<sup>2</sup> The conclusion in Lundberg (2020) states that the belonging stranger is the position of the natives in the studied school. The students at the elite school seems to learn how to distance themselves from each other and the teachers as well as from the surrounding society. This is the conclusion from an analysis of the alienation of the elite student constructed within social science education when a growing distancing from social science subject content, themselves and “others” are observed.

<sup>3</sup> In the school statistics, this school’s students body has the highest average grades in the south of Sweden. Amongst those admitted to the school are very few without the highest possible grades on their diploma. Therefore, all student here expect top grades upon graduating. Graduation grades are also high on average, with the majority of the students leaving with A’s across the board (the current Swedish grade scale starts at a failing F, E being the lowest grade for passing a course, and ends at the top grade of A).

<sup>4</sup> An education in line with agonistic democracy, inspired by Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe, was far out of sight (Ruitenbergh, 2009; Tryggvason, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> One occasion for the students to express their political view was during the school election, where right-wing parties got more than 85% of the student votes. Another was a debate where the one student with social democratic values told the teacher after a presentation that “It’s not so easy letting you see what I know about politics when everybody is voting for Moderaterna.” Moderaterna is a political party opposing the Social Democrats. They have a conservative-liberal ideological basis (Lundberg, 2020).

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