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Distinction in higher education: educational strategies of upper milieu students in Germany

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to address the research question of which educational strategies are employed by upper milieus to establish or maintain the ‘structure of distances’ in the field of higher education in late modernity. Inspired by Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction and conflict, the study examined 95 qualitative interviews conducted with master’s students in Germany. In contrast to the extensive research on elite education, this study specifically focuses on the status reproduction of upper milieus in a country with a limited tradition of elite universities. The study incorporated three academic disciplines – management/business administration, medicine, and musicology – to account for the different capital compositions within the upper milieus. In this article, we discuss four exemplary strategies of distinction that appear to be particularly relevant for the upper milieus, comparing them with interviews conducted with students from middle and lower milieus. Finally, we relate the findings to current sociological diagnoses of social change in late modernity.

Introduction

In a period of ‘diploma inflation’ the disparity between the aspirations that the educational system produces and the opportunities it really offers is a structural reality which affects all the members of a school generation, but to a varying extent depending on the rarity of their qualifications and on their social origins. (Bourdieu 1984, 143)

Using the term ‘diploma inflation’ in this introductory quote, Bourdieu referred to the educational expansion of the 1970s, which led to increased social mobility of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is a trend that is currently reinforced by the demands of the knowledge-based society of the twenty-first century (OECD 2022). Adhering to Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, the question arises as to what extent the ‘dominant classes’ are under pressure to maintain the ‘structure of distances’ (Bourdieu 2001, 91) in the social space, in response to the perceived ‘massification’ in higher education. In his study Distinction, Bourdieu (1984) postulates that the expansion of...
education did not result in a societal transformation, but only in an upward shift of all ‘class fractions’ in the social space. Whenever disadvantaged groups come into possession of assets previously owned by social class fractions ‘above them in the social hierarchy or immediately ahead of them in the race’ for better positions, Bourdieu (1984, 160) argues, their efforts are counterbalanced by the ‘efforts of better placed groups in order to maintain the scarcity and distinctiveness’ of their cultural, social, and symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu’s relational theory, the greater participation in tertiary education would not result in increased equality among students, but rather would bring forth new and possibly more subtle forms of distinction and educational strategies in the field of higher education.

Inspired by Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, this article pursues the research question of which educational strategies upper milieus use to create or maintain the ‘structure of distances’ in the field of higher education at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To explore this question, 95 qualitative interviews with master’s students in Germany were analysed. Although our focus was on upper milieus, our comparative research design included students from lower, middle, and upper milieus. Moreover, we acknowledged that upper milieus are not a homogeneous group but occupy distinct social positions in the social space based on their capital composition.

Broadening the study of elite education: focusing on the upper milieus

There is a long tradition of research on elite education that confirms Bourdieu’s theoretical assumptions (cf. Karabel 2005; Maxwell and Aggleton 2016). However, the current state of research can only be used to a limited extent for the investigation of educational strategies in the field of higher education in Germany. One reason for this is the lack of elite educational institutions in Germany after the Second World War (Deppe et al. 2015). This phenomenon may be partly explained by the fact that the notion of an elite was long discredited in Germany because of its association with National Socialism. The ‘universities of excellence’ introduced by the German government in 2005 (Bloch et al. 2018) are hardly comparable to the Ivy League universities in the USA (van Zanten 2015; Deppe et al. 2015).

We therefore argue that, particularly in the German context, the focus on elite education needs to be extended to include an examination of the upper milieus in order to investigate educational strategies within the upper regions of Bourdieu’s social space. In this endeavour, our study employs Vester’s milieu model (Vester 2003). Michael Vester identifies eight social milieus based on a quantitative study that he conducted in Germany (Vester et al. 2001). Furthermore, he differentiates between three types of habitus in line with Bourdieu’s concept of social space:

1. The habitus of distinction, situated in the upper social space, includes the ‘liberal-intellectual’, ‘conservative technocratic’, and ‘postmodern’ milieus. These possess high cultural and economic capital, adhering to values such as an explicit sense of success, the exclusivity of social capital, or humanist orientations (according to Vester’s quantitative study: approximately 20% of the German population).
2. The habitus of aspiration, in the middle of the social space, encompasses the ‘meritocratic employee’, ‘hedonist’, and ‘petty bourgeois employee’ milieus. Members of these milieus are characterised by a striving for upward social mobility through the
acquisition of educational and professional qualifications and a pronounced adherence to meritocratic values (approximately 70%).

3. The habitus of necessity, at the social space’s bottom, includes the ‘hedonist rebels’, ‘fatalists’, and ‘status-oriented’. Members of these underprivileged milieus face limited access to economic and cultural capital, constraining their full participation in social life (approximately 10%).

According to Vester, the various milieus together form a milieu map (Vester 2015). In this article we use the term ‘upper class’ when referring to Bourdieu’s original terminology or to international research on upper classes, whereas we employ the term ‘social milieu’ when referring to Vester’s milieu model. In the Data and method section, we explain how we operationalised milieu membership for our qualitative study. Hence, what sets our study apart from the investigation of elite education is the widened emphasis on upper milieus. While our research design continues to examine educational strategies in relation to elite formation, it extends the perspective in the following ways.

Broadening the scope of educational institutions and study programmes

Many international studies focus on elite universities characterised by high tuition fees, selective admissions processes, and limited access (Karabel 2005; Binder and Abel 2019; Van Zanten et al. 2015; Maxwell and Aggleton 2016; Waters and Brooks 2013). However, Germany’s state universities typically charge minimal or no tuition fees and entrance examinations are rare. For a long time, the *numerus clausus* system was the main constraint on access to limited programmes. In our study, we assume that the educational strategies of upper milieus are not limited to elite universities. Thus, our sample includes 17 ‘regional universities’, three ‘universities of excellence’, six universities with a highly recognised ‘disciplinary reputation’, three private universities, and six universities abroad where our German interviewees had studied.

Expanding the study sample

As we have outlined, the upper milieus make up around 20% of the German population (Vester 2015). In contrast, the economic, political, and legal elites in Germany comprise only 1–5%, depending on the scientific definition (Imbusch 2003). In our study, we are not only interested in analysing the educational strategies of elites, but rather in exploring the status reproduction of upper milieus through education. In other words, we are interested in the ‘habitus of distinction’ of German students who are situated in the upper regions of Bourdieu’s social space. This includes, of course, German students, who can be considered as an elite in terms of their high economic, cultural, and social capital.

Research on upper milieus and educational strategies

While the study of the middle and upper classes in Germany was quite common in the 1960s, contemporary research in Germany primarily focuses on forms of educational disadvantage or upward mobility in education (Miethe and Soremski 2016). Upper milieus are only included in some studies as contrast interviews, where the epistemological interest
itself is again focused on social inequalities (Schmitt 2010). At the other end of the spectrum, some research on the previously mentioned elite education can be identified in Germany (Münch 2007; Hartmann 2010; Bloch et al. 2014, 2015, 2018; Mitterle and Stock 2015).

Only a limited number of studies in Germany focus on the interplay between milieus, habitus, and educational institutions, with a predominant interest in school education or peer groups (Helsper, Kramer, and Thiersch 2014). A particularly relevant study for research on upper milieus and higher education is the qualitative research by Lange-Vester and Teiwes-Kügler, categorising students from upper milieus into ‘Exclusives’, ‘Performance Distinguished’, and ‘Critical Intellectuals’ (Lange-Vester and Teiwes-Kügler 2004; see also Grunau 2017). Despite its relevance, this study leans more towards habitus forms or milieu-specific orientations than an explicit investigation of educational strategies.

When it comes to educational strategies, further research desiderata can be identified, especially with regard to upper milieus in higher education. Most of the studies on educational strategies in Germany do not relate to higher education, but to other areas of research such as schools, adult education, or the family. An exception is the study by Klebig (2021), which again focuses exclusively on elite education when examining educational strategies. Internationally, the qualitative study conducted by Rollock et al. (2014) is particularly noteworthy for its investigation of the educational strategies of the Black middle class. A recent study by Scherer (2022) examines the relationship between class position, higher education values, and curricular choices by comparing working-class and upper-middle-class liberal arts students at two public universities. Her study also sheds light on new strategies used by privileged students to secure their class position. A significant correspondence exists between our study and the research undertaken by Bathmaker et al. (2016), who compared the educational strategies of middle-class and working-class students in the UK in their Paired Peers project. In this study, respondents whose parents belonged to National Statistics Socio-economic Classification classes 1–3 were categorised as ‘middle-class’ (Bathmaker et al. 2016). This research approach is an important source of inspiration for our study, as it underlines our shared emphasis on moving beyond an exclusive focus on elites.

**Theoretical background: distinction, conflict, and educational strategies**

For an understanding of Bourdieu’s definition of educational strategies and distinction, his concept of social space is particularly relevant. Moreover, his model of social space suggests that upper classes are not homogeneous, but rather internally stratified. For him, the construction of space is defined by three fundamental dimensions: the volume of capital (vertical axis), the composition of capital (horizontal axis), and their development over time (past and potential trajectory) (Bourdieu 1984, 114). According to Bourdieu, the dominant class in the upper regions of the social space is organised in a ‘chiastic structure’, consisting of a ‘dominant fraction’ with relatively high economic capital but limited cultural capital, and a ‘dominated fraction’ with high cultural capital but comparatively modest economic capital. These different capital compositions also influence their respective social reproduction strategies (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

To Bourdieu, the term distinction encompasses both the recognition of a difference and the social practice of differentiation. In this sense, the concept of distinction refers to the power of the ‘dominant class’ to determine systems of classification that acknowledge certain
cultural practices, preferences, goods, and tastes as more valuable, significant, and rare than others (Bourdieu 1984). Distinction can be understood only in relation to others. Upper milieus attempt to distinguish themselves through distinctive practices. However, the power over the dominant classification system and social order is subject to contention between different classes and within the upper class itself. Consequently, the concept of distinction cannot be solely seen as a mere manifestation of the persistent mechanisms of social reproduction, but is also connected to Bourdieu’s conflict theory, which emphasises social struggles and potential for change (Bourdieu 1984).

For Bourdieu, the term ‘strategy’ refers to the practical sense of actors for the immanent logics of the ‘game’ in a particular ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1990). Educational strategies do not necessarily have to be conscious or rationally calculated; rather, Bourdieu assumes a frequently unconscious relationship between habitus and field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This encompasses, for instance, acquiring a pre-reflexive or practical sense of what kind of educational strategies have the potential to ‘make a difference’ in the field of higher education (Bourdieu 1984). In the present research project, we understand educational strategies as the individual, familial, and collective strategies through which upper milieus reproduce their position in the social space through education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). If Bourdieu’s theory proves accurate, the upper milieus would continually develop new rules within the field of higher education, in order to maintain their relative advantage.

**Data and method**

Our study is based on 95 qualitative interviews with master’s (or equivalent level) students enrolled at universities in Germany. The sample was limited to master’s students, because we expect that distinctive educational strategies among students in this phase of their studies would be more pronounced. As a consequence, there is already a certain degree of social selection in our sample despite the high transition rates from bachelor’s to master’s degrees in Germany (Neugebauer, Neumeyer, and Alesi 2016). The majority of interviewees were in their twenties, with a smaller number of students who were older and had completed vocational training or other study programmes. A limited number of participants were mature students in their late thirties to forties, who had extensive prior work experience. Thirty-seven interviewees were male and 58 were female, which reflects roughly the gender distribution in medicine, but not in the other two disciplines surveyed (Hüsch 2022). We have no further insights into why the response rate among female students was higher.

To examine differences between social milieus, we conducted 48 interviews with upper milieu students, which we contrasted – in accordance with Bourdieu’s relational approach – with 47 interviews with students from middle and lower milieus. The classification of students into upper, middle, and lower milieus was in reference to Vester’s milieu model (Vester 2003, 2015). Because Vester’s research approach is primarily quantitative, we developed a specific research design to operationalise students’ milieu categorisation with Bourdieu’s concept of social space in mind.

The vertical axis provides information on differences between upper, middle, and lower milieus (volume of capital). In our research project, this axis was determined by classic social indicators such as net income and highest educational attainment of the parents. For the milieu classification of the interviewed students, the parental occupations were also
classified into Vester’s classification system of occupational groups (Vester 2014). The students were also asked to report on the net worth of their parents, and to classify it into one of five predefined categories (Deutsche Bundesbank 2019).

The horizontal axis provides information about differences within the upper milieus (chiastic structure). In order to operationalise the horizontal axis, our research design made use of an auxiliary construction by including students from three different fields of study in the sample: management/business administration, medicine, and musicology. The criteria we use for the selection of academic disciplines are as follows:

- **High social reproduction rate of upper milieus**
  
  Quantitative research indicates that upper milieus in Germany reproduce themselves significantly through specific academic disciplines (Georg and Bargel 2016). Therefore, our study focuses on academic disciplines characterised by a high rate of social reproduction among upper milieus (Multrus 2006). This applies particularly to the subjects of medicine and musicology, while management/business administration shows a greater dispersion in terms of social milieus (Middendorf et al. 2017). The subject was nevertheless included in order to take into account the economic pole of the social space.

- **Academic disciplines prepare for specific occupational groups**
  
  Within the selected academic disciplines, students are educated for professions that Bourdieu positioned at the top of the vertical axis in his study *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984). In his diagram of the social space, Bourdieu positions different occupational groups according to their volume and composition of capital. At the economic pole in the upper regions of the social space, he places ‘industrialists’ and ‘commercial employers’. Therefore, we include the study of management/business administration in our research design. At the cultural pole, he maps professional groups such as professors, higher education teachers, intellectuals, successful artists, and artistic producers. Thus, we include musicology as an academic discipline with a high proportion of students from upper milieus. According to Bourdieu, doctors tend to be at the centre of the social space: ‘The medical and social services, drawn to a relatively large extent from the dominant class, are in a central position […]’ (Bourdieu 1984, 123). Physicians are classified by Bourdieu as free ‘professions’ in the upper segment of the social space. Hence, we incorporated the field of medicine into our sample.

To sum up, we assume that there is a homology between the three disciplines and Bourdieu’s horizontal axis of the social space (Klebig 2021; Bourdieu 1984), which will help to explore the differences between upper milieus.

The data collection method employed was the problem-centred interview, which blends narrative with problem-centred elements (Witzel and Reiter 2012). The interview consisted of three parts: an open inquiry about the interviewee’s life; general questions about family, school, studies, and future plans; and a battery of problem-centred specific questions aimed at the research project’s research interest. Theoretically based questions about educational strategies were not explicitly asked until the third part of the interview. For example, questions about attitudes towards grades and competition, university selection, the perceived importance of university prestige, participation in international activities, future career
prospects, and, finally, a question that directly addressed the respondents’ conscious educational strategies.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted utilising the documentary method (Bohnsack 2014; Nohl 2010). This method is based on Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and Mannheim’s differentiation between ‘communicative knowledge’ and ‘conjunctive knowledge’ (Mannheim 2013). As a result, the documentary method incorporates the concept of implicit knowledge into its methodological procedures and thus demonstrates a high level of productivity in the study of educational strategies, habitus, and distinction. The documentary method encompasses several methodical steps: firstly, ‘formulating interpretation’, which involves identifying themes in respondents’ accounts; secondly, ‘reflecting interpretation’, involving consideration of how a theme is addressed; and finally, ‘comparative sequential analysis’. The analysis looks at both explicit and implicit habitual practices, reconstructing their significance in habitus formation on the basis of theoretical considerations and comparing them across cases. Explicit and implicit practices are reconstructed by examining cases of different vertical and horizontal origins. Data analysis not only allows for a nuanced exploration of different perspectives, but also encourages reflection on the potential variance of milieu-specific orientations.

In conclusion, our research design accounts for the complexity of the upper milieus by recognising that these are not homogeneous. In this way, the different schemes of thought, perception, and action (i.e. habitus) that guide the educational strategies of the upper milieus will also be incorporated into the examination. This will allow us to explore the question of whether there are intra-milieu divisions among milieus in the upper part of the social space.

Findings

Drawing on the specifics of our research design, we will present four educational strategies that we identified in our research project as being particularly characteristic of students from upper milieus. The following educational strategies used to achieve distinction in an expanded higher education system may also partially overlap or inform each other.

Temporal condensation: gaining professional experience while studying

Employment as a Werkstudent (working student) is proving to be significantly more impactful for career development than internships or part-time jobs outside one’s academic field. This unique legal framework in Germany permits students to work up to 20 hours per week with minimal or no tax implications. This type of employment in companies or institutions related to their area of study allows for a deeper understanding of work processes, team and project integration, and increased self-responsibility. In comparison to internships that provide only superficial insights and less responsibility, or part-time jobs in unrelated fields, which are popular among interviewed students from lower and middle milieus, Werkstudent employment holds greater symbolic value. It offers the opportunity to acquire profession-specific capital and its associated social capital, which are directly relevant for professional development (see Flap and Boxman 2017):
And I really wanted this practical experience, so I started already in the first semester working part-time as a working student [Werkstudent] in a small consultancy. And it was like that throughout my studies, of course I was studying full-time, but I was always working as a working student – that is around 20 hours – in a company. (Lisette, upper milieu, management at a high-ranking international university)

By explicitly referencing the workload of her Werkstudent job, the interviewee demonstrates her self-awareness, while also sending a message to others that successfully balancing a heavy workload in both academic studies and employment requires a great deal of discipline, organisation, and endurance. This self-presentation of working long hours is reiterated later in the interview:

Certainly, being a working student is not the model for everyone, as some people need more time to study, more time for the university during the week. (Lisette)

By drawing a line between those, who require ‘more time for learning’ and students like herself, who seem to manage both work and studies, either by investing less time in their studies or compensating for it in other ways, Lisette emphasises that her path is not suitable ‘for everyone’ and is therefore rather exclusive. The quantification of working hours embedded in a competitive comparison fit into the numeral-economic logic of achieving outstanding results through workload, endurance, and capacity. In contrast to this approach, students from the other milieus are either working in unrelated fields for purely financial reasons or work as interns:

And then I just carried on with my studies, extended it a bit, because until 2017 I actually still had this supermarket job that I got in this town when I was 18, I just kept it out of convenience, and then I just worked at the weekend. That means I went home every weekend. (Sabrina, lower milieu, management)

Here, working in a supermarket was kept out of ‘convenience’. Not only did this mean that the lower-milieu student had to return to her hometown every weekend, but it had nothing to do with her studies and in no way helped her to develop her educational or professional profile as a management student.

Because practical phases are mandatory in medicine, students do not achieve distinction by engaging in different forms of practice during their studies but by focusing early on a specific medical discipline. While practical sections in medical studies are often intended for orientation, students gain a competitive advantage by using these sections as early opportunities for specialisation, which they can then deepen in later stages of their education. This strategy requires a clear understanding and goal-setting in a medical discipline, which is often found among students whose parents or extended family members work in the medical sector and can pass down knowledge and orientation. Kathi’s father and three older siblings are doctors, and her mother is a pharmacist, which has likely helped her develop a strong sense of direction in her medical studies:

I then chose gastro[enterology], because internal medicine, that is my biggest favourite, also for my assistant physician later. And I find gastro[enterology] extremely interesting. (Kathi, upper milieu, medicine at a prestigious university)

While in other interviews, the mandatory internships were not devalued, the difference between internships for orientation and those for specialisation became clearer in terms of
liminality (Reed and Thomas 2021) and the temporal advantage of the latter for career-building.

**Advantages of extra-curricular activities**

Another educational strategy identified in our sample, partially linked to the first theme, is engaging in extracurricular and voluntary activities. Prior research has highlighted the importance of extra-curricular engagement for higher educational careers (Brooks, Gupta, and Jayadeva 2021; Roulin and Bangerter 2013), although its impact may vary based on the nature of the activities (Tchibozo 2007) and the art of ‘selling’ them – that is, integrating them in a meaningful way into the overall educational–professional trajectory (Stevenson and Clegg 2012). One of the most evident examples is voluntary work, both on and off campus, yet there exists a divide in terms of motivation and utilisation of such activities:

> During my bachelor I was actually active from the first semester in a student initiative. It was a collegiate marketing consulting and on the one hand, I found it important not only for the CV, like I knew that engagement counts, regardless of that to meet new people, meeting people from other disciplines. And I just find it very interesting to have an exchange with other study programmes or other industries. (Lisette)

Engaging in volunteer activities serves not only as a signal for one's CV, but also as an effective approach to accumulate more social capital. Moreover, there is a strategic professional undertone ('industries') in terms of fostering analytical and other soft skills through these new contacts.

This approach contrasts with the intrinsic and social motivation for community work that is more prevalent in interviews with students from middle and lower milieus:

> So I gave private tuition for quite a while. Since sixth form, there was a programme at the school where I did my Abitur, a programme, I don't know exactly what it's called, but in any case, the sixth form students supported weaker students from the lower and middle school levels, which I did until this year. The boy I supported also did his A-levels with my sister, but to be honest, there was no extrinsic motivation behind it. I saw myself in it a bit, because I saw myself very well in this student. And I got him with an average grade of three point seven, and he's now done his A-levels this year with one point nine. That rather motivated me myself. (Marvin, lower milieu, management)

The identification with a younger student, who shared a comparable disadvantaged educational and social background, impelled Marvin to partake in this voluntary programme throughout his university studies. Often, these students are driven to use their own profession to benefit marginalised and underprivileged communities (such as volunteering at charity hospitals abroad in medicine or playing classical music in prisons in musicology), or to inspire and assist new generations of students in their study programme or school to overcome obstacles that they themselves have faced due to their socio-economic background. In our study, non-traditional students tend to exhibit a greater disposition for acts of solidarity and communitarianism, as well as a preference for cooperation rather than competition within the context of higher education, in comparison to their counterparts from upper milieus (see Sommet et al. 2015).
Although upper-milieu students acknowledge the relevance and symbolic value of extra-curricular and voluntary work, they tend to approach such activities in a more utilitarian manner:

So during my bachelor’s degree I was at the student management consultancy on the one hand practical relevance and on the other hand also getting to know people, a bit of networking and as a bachelor’s student at the beginning it was super cool to get to know the people from the master’s programme and this very informal exchange that you don’t get otherwise. […] Now here I helped with the alumni association, on the one hand to get to know other people and for a good conscience. (Tessa, upper milieu, management)

While this utilitarian orientation is typically found among management students, representing the economic pole of the upper milieus, this perspective also mirrors the broader shift in higher education towards an economic logic and intensified competition within the labour market (Tomlinson 2008). Furthermore, a student’s economic capital is a decisive factor in relation to select extra-curricular activities, since financially unrewarding internships that hold professional relevance and expensive study-abroad programmes that provide greater symbolic capital are more commonly accessed by students with greater monetary resources (see Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015).

The instrumental perspective towards extracurricular activities among upper-milieu students is closely tied to the perceived potential risk of extended studies. This means that these activities are only considered beneficial when they can be integrated into the tight schedule of a typical study period. Furthermore, adopting a pragmatic stance towards such activities may make it easier to restrict or temporarily suspend one’s non-academic pursuits when necessary. However, this is not the case for intrinsically motivated students, who are fully committed to their volunteering initiatives.

Striving for academic success: research, PhD, professorship

Our study reveals that professional aspirations among the sample are primarily associated with careers outside academia, which leaves room for another educational strategy focused on academic merits or a research-intensive career. A clear differentiation between completing a PhD and pursuing a full academic career emerges when we examine the statistics on doctoral education in the three disciplines. In the field of medicine, a PhD is almost a prerequisite, with 63% of graduates also finishing a PhD as a standard procedure (Hachmeister 2019). In contrast, the percentage of management graduates who complete a PhD is only 7% (Hachmeister 2019), while there are no data available for musicology.

If an academic career is desired in management, it often involves entering at a later stage as a professor at a university of applied sciences, which in Germany requires several years of practical experience:

I can imagine later in life, doing a PhD and then possibly aiming for a professorship, with, I don’t know, 50 years, joining a university of applied sciences where I can show students how practice works. To prepare them for life. And I would like that. (Johanna, upper milieu, management)

Johanna is a student who has already converted some of her undergraduate work into academic publications, which strengthens her inclination towards an academic career. However, she openly acknowledges the importance of completing a PhD in achieving a
higher social status and symbolic status. Her interview and profile demonstrate a practical focus, indicating that a professorship at a university of applied sciences would offer an ideal balance between practical interests and symbolic recognition.

The importance of practice-relevant research is particularly evident among upper milieu students in the field of medicine. On the one hand, their studies lead to a well-defined, practical job profile (e.g. becoming a physician). On the other hand, horizontal differentiation among physicians can largely be achieved through medical research, often in combination with practical work. This distinction is crucial for the various educational strategies pursued by our interviewees, as it serves to differentiate research-focused university hospitals from other hospitals and thus holds the potential to impact future career opportunities:

and then I always wisely decided to only go in directions that are more like surgery, but in the last year, two years, I’ve also worked in things that I’m not really interested in, just to see, is it really mine, or is it not mine at all? I do research in genetics, I don’t like genetics at all [laughs]. Research in genetics is even harder [laughs], but it helped me a lot because it really got my critical thinking going. (Vanessa, upper milieu, medicine)

For these students, pursuing research in medicine does not necessarily entail an academic career at a university or becoming a professor, but rather presents an opportunity to advance within the hospital system, such as to the position of deputy (Leitender Oberarzt) or leading physician (Chefarzt). Only by recognising the significance of complementary research work alongside practical work can they realise a higher educational strategy in a field where vocational skills are highly valued, but where field-related symbolic capital is linked to ‘theoretical’ research contributions (see Burri 2008). The middle to lower-milieu medical students in our sample are content with their studies and are more oriented towards secure employment opportunities in their profession. They seldom envision themselves in academic or research-intensive positions, whether at a university in an academic position or at a university hospital. Yet their options are not constrained, as the job market for physicians is quite good in Germany:

[I have] actually, very good [job chances], you could say. It gets worse with age, but medicine is very much in demand at the moment, not necessarily university hospitals that is always difficult, certain areas like dermatology or plastic surgery it’s very difficult to get in. But internal medicine or surgery, they’ll take almost anyone. And if it wasn’t for that, I’d go into pharmaceuticals, so I think that it’s very good, yes. (Susanka, lower milieu, medicine)

In contrast to upper milieu students in medicine, musicologists view the university as the sole setting for an academic career and the reason to pursue a PhD. However, since alternative forms of distinction such as seniority in a hierarchical order or high salaries are less prevalent or less esteemed in musicology, the pathway to a professorship becomes a central component of a distinct educational strategy in this field, also reflecting the high value placed on cultural capital (see Blake 2017).

Upper milieu students appear to have a particular advantage in pursuing this path, given their familiarity with the rules and dynamics of academia through their highly educated parents. Often, they work for professors during their studies or conduct small-scale research projects, which pave the way for entry into academia (see Schneickert and Lenger 2010). The position of professor in musicology offers a unique combination of symbolic and cultural capital, as well as financial stability, which stands in contrast to the non-academic job
market. Through the cultivation of an academic habitus during their studies, upper milieu students demarcate themselves from colleagues who are perceived as being ‘too practical’ and not interested in the ‘higher’ knowledge of scientific insights and theoretical discussions (Bourdieu 1988). This attitude is also reflected in their devaluation of a combination of musicology with management studies, such as music management, which seems more attractive to students of the other milieus:

Then musicology caught my eye, and then I thought, okay, I’ll just have a look at it, I’ll start, and of course you’re always told: ‘Well, you’re actually studying an unprofitable art, what do you want to do with it?’ Okay, well, business studies on top of that to secure myself, then you can always work in an office if needed, you might not enjoy it, but, well, then you just sit in the office until five, and then you just go home and play the piano [laughs]. So and then it’s all right [laughs]. (Magda, lower milieu, musicology)

Instead of solely relying on the unprofitable art of musicology, Magda also studied management and business studies to secure her economic future. Pursuing only a pathway within musicology, such as academia, appears too risky for someone who comes from a milieu lacking in economic and cultural capital. This academic trajectory is simply not considered.

**Strategic combination of academic disciplines**

While this strategy may not be as prominent as the previous ones, it is still worth examining because the rarity of this educational strategy determines its distinctive value. The combination of two or more characteristics, even when individually commonplace, can often lead to a more distinctive outcome. In this instance, the characteristics in question are degrees in different study programmes. However, to ensure a successful distinction, the second subject should not be randomly selected, or for purely economic reasons to secure a livelihood, as in Magda’s case, but rather align with the first subject in a meaningful way that serves as a recognised educational strategy rather than an aimless accumulation of knowledge. The following are some combinations identified in our sample: musicology paired with psychology or sociology, management paired with philosophy, and medicine paired with public or global health programmes. These combinations serve as notable illustrations of how strategic pairing of academic disciplines can produce a distinct advantage, which stands out in comparison to more common degree combinations:

I see myself professionally, or what I strive for, is definitely towards academia, academic work in the area of, yes, musicology, music or neurology. Mixed, like this area of transfer between music and psychology and neuroscience. (Livia, upper milieu, musicology)

Combining musicology and psychology, the options available to the interviewees we surveyed focus on either research or therapy. However, combining the two subjects allows for a level of specialisation that is unattainable through a single programme, as both disciplines can be meaningfully related to each other with an objective that aligns with the cultural capital emphasis of the respective milieu.

For the upper milieus, which have traditionally relied more on economic capital, the integration of cultural capital into their strategic combination of academic disciplines – such as management and philosophy – may enrich the graduate’s distinctive strategies. Given that management is a relatively new academic discipline and is perceived to be more focused
on economic outcomes than intellectual engagement (Nairz-Wirth and Wurzer 2015), the inclusion of philosophy can help to mitigate this perception and provide a more sophisticated and enriched profile for graduates. Finally, students of medicine who opt for a master's degree in public or global health have the opportunity to combine medical practice with medical management, while also enabling them to pursue specialised profiles with ambitious objectives:

And I thought I would like to do a doctoral thesis, and I would like to do it in the public, global health field. Public, global health, I’m interested in the sociological political side of medicine, but somehow I didn’t have the approach and was a bit lost, and now I had a relatively difficult year, now the last one, because fortunately, I had a great, yes, how should I put it? [Laughs.] So I found a counsellor who I really admire and appreciate, but who is very tough. (Ronja, upper milieu, medicine)

Although the path might not be easy due to its unusual objective, obtaining a public health degree serves as a signal for management and leadership qualities, while a global health degree can accentuate an internationalised career path, both related to higher level of economic and cultural capital alike.

The various combinations discussed share a common trait: they are not essential for securing employment after graduation, but they can certainly provide an advantage in terms of standing out and demonstrating a willingness to ‘go the extra mile’. The underlying message resonates with the strategies of pursuing professional experience and engaging in extracurricular activities as it demonstrates an exceptional ability to manage a higher workload, exhibit cognitive flexibility, and display multifaceted interests (see Morley 2007). Students from the lower milieus are less likely to have the resources to combine their subjects in an imaginative way, in contrast to their upper-milieu counterparts, and are content to be able to study at all. For them, the combination of subjects becomes primarily relevant when they are enrolled in teacher training:

Then I thought about what I could do, and I knew it had to be something to do with music, so my areas of life have always been music and religion, so my faith, and that’s why I knew: okay somehow my job has to revolve around that and that’s why I ended up studying to be a music teacher and religion is my second subject. (Anka, middle milieu, musicology)

Because the teaching position provides her with economic and professional security, Anka is free to choose the combination of subjects that is close to her heart, but it is not a combination that could be used to further differentiate her strategic positioning outside her job as a teacher.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In the context of increased participation in the German higher education system, our study aimed to investigate the educational strategies adopted by students belonging to the upper milieus. The horizontal differentiation along the three academic disciplines – management/business administration, medicine, and musicology – in our research design has proved particularly insightful, as our findings show that upper-milieus are not homogeneous in their educational strategies. Depending on their position in the social space, upper milieus bring different configurations of capital into play when they seek to re-establish the ‘structure of distances’ in the social space (Jarness and Strømme 2022). Thus, the strategies
discussed in this study involve different forms of capital and habitus (Bourdieu 1984, 1988). For example, management students from families with high economic capital can afford expensive complementary activities that enrich their educational biography. Cultural capital, in turn, is important for research-intensive careers (Bourdieu 1988). However, the prevalence of this strategy in musicology (Hentschel 2013), where almost a third of our interviewees aspire to an academic career, raises questions about the challenges of transforming cultural capital into economic and/or symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), due to the dominance and ubiquity of cultural capital in this discipline. Pursuing dual degrees requires both cultural and economic capital. In any case, descendants from upper milieus bring either or both forms of capital with them and can transform them more flexibly, quickly, and efficiently into symbolic capital (Lee 2016).

Our findings depart from research on elite students, which predominantly concentrates on selective elite institutions, exclusive capital configurations of elite students, or the impact of elite networks on career opportunities (Karabel 2005; Golden 2006; Van Zanten and Maxwell 2019). The educational strategies of the upper milieus that we identified in our study appear to be far more subtle. Moreover, in terms of social capital, our upper milieu students cannot rely on the same distinguished social networks as elite students (Tholen et al. 2013). Instead, they must exert more personal efforts to cultivate their professional networks.

In addition to Bourdieu’s theory of capital, our research findings also relate to current sociological diagnoses of social change in late modernity. With regard to questions of time, for example, the educational strategy of Temporal Condensation refers in its structure to forms of acceleration in contemporary society as analysed by Hartmut Rosa. In his critical theory of *Acceleration*, Rosa defines the term as the ‘heightening of the pace of life through an increase of episodes of action and/or experience per unit of time’ (2013, 64). Rosa argues that the acceleration of the pace of life and its underlying 'logic of escalation' (2013, 287) in late modernity can be attributed to the fact that subjects carry out more activities in less time. As a result, actors respond by ‘compression of episodes of action’ through employing techniques of acceleration, reducing the duration of pauses, or overlapping activities through multitasking (2013, 156).

In our sample, we can observe these techniques of temporal compression at a different level, namely in the construction of one’s own educational and professional biography. Typically, gaining work experience, specialising in a particular field of medicine, or participating in research projects is undertaken in the initial years after graduation. However, in our sample, students from the upper milieus attempt to incorporate these activities already into their studies. Consequently, the use of acceleration techniques seems to be significant for late modern educational strategies in order to re-establish the ‘structure of distances’ in social space. In general, a key characteristic shared by all the educational strategies presented is that their distinctive potential can only be fully realised when they are integrated into the standard duration of a study programme. Timed education becomes a distinct factor in its own right (Bennett and Burke 2018). As our study shows, achieving this integration requires mobilising specific resources that extend beyond mere economic capital. These resources include for instance a strong work ethic, reliance on family work experience, or social capital.

The importance attached to a specific work ethic and drive by students from upper milieus in our study also challenges Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) observation that effortless achievement is a prevalent characteristic among upper-class students. Our
findings are more in line with Brown et al.’s research on English and French elite students, where they emphasised that ‘willingness to work hard and dedicate substantial effort was central to their perception of personal success and legitimate achievement’ (2016, 201). Similar to Moor and Friedman’s (2021) study of the justification of wealth in the broader context of intergenerational inheritance, meritocratic discourses seem to become more important in the contemporary era to obscure one’s own economic and educational privileges.

Another reference to current social diagnoses of late modernity in our research findings is the desire of students from the upper milieu to create a singular educational biography. According to Andreas Reckwitz’s (2020) study *The Society of Singularities*, late modern subjects are interpellated to strive for uniqueness and exceptionality. He argues that in a system of singularised labour, formal qualifications are forced into the background in favour of the creation of a unique profile composed of informal competences, talents, and networks. The working subject of late modernity is expected to cultivate a singular, non-interchangeable, and visible profile. In order to be recognised as singular, the set of competences is expected to combine two contradictory characteristics: versatility (*Vielseitigkeit*) and coherence. To meet this requirement, the late-modern subject must adopt the attitude of a curator towards itself. Permanent investment in one’s social status becomes crucial for survival in the risky markets of the late modern social world (Reckwitz 2020). Students from the upper milieu in our sample have understood that it is important to develop a singular educational biography, for example through strategic combination of disciplines, early specialisation, or time-controlled social engagement (Scherer 2022).

Finally, it is important to note that this article and its insights have certain limitations. Possible limitations include sample bias as only certain students may have responded, for example because of their pro-social behaviour or academic interest. This, in turn, may have impacted their educational strategies or biography. Another potential bias stems from the underrepresentation of management students from highly ranked private and public institutions. This may be because our recruitment strategy was limited in its ability to persuade these students to participate in our study. This also hindered a more comprehensive examination of private higher education institutions and their significance in implementing specific educational strategies, which we theorised to be important, particularly in the field of management. However, we observed that private universities in the field of medicine are often associated with a negative connotation and perceived as a symbolic burden in Germany. Students in these institutions must develop strategies to overcome their university’s reputation, rather than to benefit from it (Schäfer 2023). Subsequent studies exploring the relationship between educational strategies and social distinction among university students may investigate the impact of private and international universities in a more systematic manner.

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