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Fear of falling – fear of fading: The emotional dynamics of positional and personalised individualism

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Abstract

This article explores the emotional dynamics involved in the shaping of middle-class subjectivities, aiming to move beyond the ‘fear of falling’ thesis and the attendant emphasis on the quest for positional advantage. I argue that this thesis offers a one-dimensional notion of what it is that drives middle-class perceptions, values and motivations, unsuitable for explaining current tensions between symbolic and economic fractions. Drawing on a comparative narrative interview study of managerial and professional parents in Norway, I describe the emotionally charged investments – ‘fear of falling’ and ‘fear of fading’ – as well as the excitements that drive different modes of socialisation in these groups. Further developing the phenomenological and psychosocial trajectories in Bourdieu’s practice theory yields a productive tool for exploring these modes of socialisation, contributing to an enhanced conception of emotional dynamics of different middle-class subjectivities.

Key Words: family socialisation, fear of falling, habitus, managerial and professional middle class, marketisation, middle-class, psycho-social theory

Introduction

Recent years have seen increasing interest in the emotional dynamics involved in the shaping of middle-class perceptions, values and motivations, particularly evident in the Bourdieu-inspired ‘new sociology of class’ (Savage, 2003). Bourdieu’s account of the dialectic of subjective and objective structures offers a way to explore the role of everyday routine practices in the reproduction of class, with the family as ‘the heartland of the formation of classed subjects’ (Vincent and Ball, 2006: 68; see also Lareau, 2003; Reay, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001). These contributions hold a potential for moving beyond the persistent structuralist bias in Bourdieu’s thinking (Atkinson, 2012), through greater insight into the subjective processes involved in ‘the acquisition of the primary habitus within the family’ (Bourdieu, 2000:164).

In this ‘new sociology of class’, the ‘fear of falling’ thesis (Ehrenreich, 1989) and the concomitant idea of a deep-seated ‘quest for positional advantage’ (Ball, 2003:21) have gained prominence (see Ball, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2007; Walkerdine et al., 2001). This notion of an anxiety-driven urge to optimise life chances has proven productive in accounting for processes of class reproduction, and offers insights into the dynamics of the processes whereby ‘neoliberalism has seeped into the middle-class soul’ (Reay et al., 2011:5). However, the ‘fear of falling’ and ‘quest for advantage’ theses promote a rather one-dimensional view of the inner life of the middle class and are poorly equipped to grasp dynamics that might produce resistance to a more pervasive competitive individualism. Recent studies describe how the intersections with race or working-class background can produce more resistant and divided middle-class identities, for instance seeing middle-class-ness as associated with whiteness and an individualistic mindset (Rollock et al., 2013:268). However, this focus on divided identities leaves the original account of middle-class motivations as ridden by a ‘quest for advantage’ unaltered.

In this article, I focus on a particular tension that surfaces in response to today’s intensified competition and the spread of more instrumental rationalities. More specifically, I seek to offer an enhanced understanding of the tensions between middle-class groups engaged in intellectual and in profit-intensive pursuits. Although increased marketisation tends to blur the institutional divisions between knowledge-intensive and profit-intensive enterprises, there is evidence of the continued salience of and intensified conflicts between differing values and perceptions linked to investments in discursive versus economic resources (Au, 2008; Power and Whitty, 2003; Jarness, 2015). Such tensions proliferate in response to the ‘corporate’ turn in academia (see Burrows, 2012) and are also evident in parental responses to greater instrumentalisation of education (van Zanten, 2005; Au, 2008) and the ‘obsessive race for credentials’ (Reay et al., 2011:7).

To account for these tensions linked to differing educational strategies in the economic and the symbolic fractions of the middle class, Basil Bernstein’s (1971;1977) theory of positional and personalised forms of solidarity has been revived (Ball, 2003; Moore, 2013; Power and Whitty, 2002; Power et al., 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2006). Whereas the ‘old middle class’ engaged in economic enterprises were, in Bernstein’s conceptualisation, protagonists of a positional or radical individualism (1977:127), the increasing emphasis on production of

knowledge and symbols also gives rise to personalised identities promoted by the ‘new middle class’ (Power and Whitty, 2002:599).¹ These different forms are linked to different patterns of socialisation: while the position-centred socialisation pattern is based upon explicit and unambiguous values and clear-cut, unambiguous definitions of the status of individuals (Bernstein, 1971:184), the ‘person-centred’ socialisation pattern emphasises the person rather than position: ‘continuously evoking, accommodating and assimilating the different interests and attributes of its members’ (Bernstein, 1971:185). Despite renewed interest in horizontal divisions in the middle class, there has been little investigation of the emotional dynamics involved in the formation of such differenced patterns of socialisation and subject-formation.

Drawing on a narrative interview study of parents from the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘economic’ fractions of the white upper-middle-class in the Norwegian welfare state, I describe differing formations of fear and differing perceptions of what is at stake in their everyday lives. For making sense of these different formations of fear and excitement, I find it fruitful to consider a practice-theoretical conceptualisation that emphasises how investments and motivations emerge in our practical engagement with the world. Here I turn to the phenomenological and psychosocial trajectory in Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory, particularly as developed in his later writings (Aarseth, 2016). With this strand of thinking, emotional dynamics involved in the socialisation of classed subjectivities may be conceived of not only in terms of differing *degrees* of anxiety-driven quest for advantage, but also in terms of differing formations of anxiety emerging along with different ways of being exposed to and invested in the world.

Dread and confidence in the middle class

Anxiety can be seen as the flipside of the heightened urge for autonomy and self-drive that is constitutive of middle-class subjectivities (Ball, 2003:56) – ‘an amalgam of dread and confidence’ (Ball, 2003:4).² Today, intensified marketisation is seen as invigorating and reinforcing this amalgam of dread and confidence (Ball, 2003; Reay et al., 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2006). With the distribution of resources increasingly based on competition, the virtues of competitive individualism – like boldness and the urge to succeed – gain greater importance. The shift from meritocratic to market dynamics instigates a self-energising ‘positional competition’ (Brown, 2000) where the aim is not to maximise one’s human

¹ In Bernstein’s scheme, the ‘new middle class’ is primarily associated with the cultural industries, rather than the ‘old professionals’ (Moore, 2013:167-168).

² Here Ball is drawing on a quote from Lewis and Maude (1950:273).

potential, but to gain advantages over others. Bernstein (1977) found that the mode of socialisation in the ‘new middle class’ was characterised by ‘a sharp and penetrating contradiction’ between ‘the release of the person and hierarchy of class’ (1977:136). Protagonists of the new sociology of class maintain that, among today’s middle classes, the release of the person fuses with a programme of differentiation and hierarchy (Ball, 2003:144; see also Vincent and Ball, 2006). This increasing emphasis on differentiation and hierarchy is evident in parents’ anxiety-driven and partly obsessive investments in their children, an enrichment aimed at distinction and privilege (Ball, 2003; Devine, 2004; Reay, 2000; Vincent and Ball, 2007; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

Recent studies modify the idea of the general spread of middle-class anxiety (Irwin and Elley, 2011; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014; Rollock et al., 2013). One line of argument notes how experiences of race or working-class background may produce a ‘divided habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1999:511; Reay, 2015; Friedman, 2016; Aarseth et al., 2016) or a sense of being ‘outsider within’ (Moore, 2008; Rollock et al. 2013:255) characterised by conflictual and resistant middle-class positions that, for instance, keep more in touch with notions of integrity and selflessness. Another line of argument is that ‘concerted cultivation’ – Annette Lareau’s (2003) much-cited term for a parenting style that sees the child as a developmental project – is not necessarily indicative of an anxiety-driven quest for future advantage, but, rather, ‘a natural attitude’ that ‘values diverse cultural pursuits as part of a child’s development’ (Irwin and Elley, 2011:488, see Moore, 2013). Those who adopt more anxiety-driven strategic orientations are perhaps those who are less assured about having inherited advantages (Irwin and Elley, 2011:486; Reay et al., 2011; Vincent et al., 2013).

A third line of argument, and my interest here, describes tensions linked to the horizontal division between the symbolic and economic fractions in the middle class. Groups belonging to the symbolic fraction, such as ‘public sector liberals’, are seen as more ‘liberal and social mix oriented’ in their educational strategies, less driven by ‘fortress mentality’ (Reay et al., 2011:2; 106), and also more ‘caring’ (Raveaud and Van Zanten, 2007:119) than their counterparts in the economic fractions. Moreover, the symbolic fractions are seen to hold more ‘inclusivist community values’ as opposed to ‘exclusivist individualist’ ones (Vincent and Ball, 2006:64). Yet, faced with intensified competition, it is argued, even parents with particularly inclusive ideologies and values need to ‘repudiate the vulnerable and needy parts of the self’ (Layton, 2008:3) and resort to mechanisms of distinction and more exclusivist orientations (Reay et al., 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2006).

However, when members of the symbolic fraction resort to distinction and closure, this is described as being at the expense of personal values (Reay et al., 2011), so the need to adapt to greater positional competition and the attendant instrumentalisation of education may prove painful (Vincent and Ball, 2006; see also Raveaud and Van Zanten, 2007; Au, 2008; Burrows 2012). While the emphasis on distinction and closure provides a fruitful account of the anxieties that energise a more widespread positional individualism in today's society, it is arguably less suited for grasping exactly what makes this subjection apparently more conflictual for groups belonging to the symbolic fraction. To understand this, we must investigate what it is that is at stake for this group, and why.

Here I turn to Bourdieu's (2000) notion of investment, or (his preferred term) *illusio*. An important aim with this concept is to explain how people are 'motivated' and 'moved by the stimuli sent by certain fields – and not others' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:26). As Diane Reay (2015:12) notes, an important premise in Bourdieu's theories is deeply psychosocial. Bourdieu argues that we are exposed to the world, and because of this exposure we are 'open to the world' and 'invested in the world' (Bourdieu, 2000:140–141). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology Bourdieu conceives of this investment in the world as something that emerges in response to 'what has to be done' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:128). Our perceptions of and investments in the world emerge as elements in a 'situated experience of *oughtness*' (Martin, 2011:253; see also Crossley, 2001; McNay, 2004). Read this way, Bourdieu's notion of *illusio* offers a tool for grasping the different formations of anxieties and desire that emerge in and in turn incite particular engagements with the world, an affective dynamic underlying the enchantment with the game (see Aarseth, 2016 for discussion). It is such affective dynamics and enchanted perceptions linked to different engagements with the world that I explore here.

Professional and financial upper-middle-class parents in Norway

The analysis draws on a comparative interview study of professional and financial upper-middle-class families in Norway. The interviewees come from a white, predominantly Norwegian ethnic, upper-middle-class.³ They have middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds, thus 'assured by inherited advantages' (Irwin and Elley, 2011:486). Concerning

³ For historical reasons, Norway has not experienced significant immigration until recently. There is an emergent middle class among descendants of South-East Asian immigrants, but the upper-middle-class groups studied here are still predominantly white.

class, Norwegian society represents a case distinctly different from the UK context. First, intensified individualism appears less urgent and pervasive in Norwegian society than in Britain. Though not unaffected by the accelerating forces of globalisation and economic liberalisation, Norway's educational system is (still) based on a state-funded comprehensive 'one school for all', characterised by modest levels of competition and high-stakes testing. The 'one school for all' has long been a significant element in Norway's social democratic welfare state policies and the more general egalitarian orientation that includes middle-class and elite groups (Ljunggren, 2015; Skarpenes and Saksliind, 2010). However, Norwegian society is marked by tensions, and even mutual antagonism between the symbolic and economic fractions of the middle class (Jarness, 2015) – evident, for instance, in clear residential segregation (Ljunggren and Andersen, 2014). Parents from these two fractions of the middle class are the object of my study here.

In all, 40 parents or 20 couples were interviewed individually. The parents were living together with two to four school-aged children, 6–18 years old; 18 parents were characterised as belonging to the symbolic fraction, and 22 to the economic fraction. The first group of parents, what I term 'the professional couples', hold higher university degrees, usually in the social sciences or humanities, and work in knowledge-intensive enterprises as architects, psychologists, journalists, researchers or public-sector consultants. They can be said to belong to a specific group within 'the professional middle class' (Savage et al. 1992). Instead of being part of the 'new middle class' (Bernstein 1977), they come closer to the 'old professionals' belonging to a liberal–humanist education tradition (Moore 2013:168). These professional couples are typically dual-career families where both parents work full-time or more, and they hold similar kinds of jobs. They practise an egalitarian family model where responsibilities for everyday tasks are shared rather equally. While this egalitarian model is increasingly becoming the norm in Norwegian society, it is particularly widespread among highly educated couples like those in my sample.

The families belonging to the economic fraction, the 'financial couples', can be seen as a particular group within the 'managerial middle class' (Savage et al. 1992). The fathers, and some mothers, hold senior positions in profit-intensive enterprises, as investors, proprietors or CEOs, or as partners in consultancy or law firms that provide financial services. Most of them

come from upwardly mobile middle-class families.⁴ With few exceptions, these parents started their careers in the City of London or other financial centres. Today, they live in privileged enclaves of economically well-off homogeneous all-white neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Oslo (Ljunggren and Andersen, 2014). Most of the mothers have opted out of careers in business to give priority to mothering and homemaking, often combined with part-time flexible work in advisory services, teaching arts and crafts, interior decorating or perhaps managing small investment companies.

The study began as a study of the professional couples (Aarseth, 2011) but was later developed as a comparative study that included a new series of interviews with financial couples (Aarseth, 2015). Parents were interviewed separately and in their own homes when possible. Interviews lasted for one and a half to two hours, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews and analysis draw on Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) free-association narrative method where interviewees are invited to tell stories instead of answering questions. The idea is that whereas answering questions tends to induce more reflective *accounts of* motives and values, free association will allow insights into more implicit and pre-discourse ways of perceiving and relating to the world (Campbell, 1996; Martin, 2011). After introducing the overall aim of my study – to explore how different job situations influenced everyday life in the family –

I asked interviewees to tell about their current job and the trajectory that had brought them there. From this initial question, I could prompt interviewees to elaborate further, by asking for minor clarifications or elaborations, typically by repeating something the interviewee had just said.⁵ The aim was to allow interviewees to stay within their own narrative frameworks and associative connections, in order to get at the interviewees' way of making sense of their world, and relating to it. In analysing the interviews, I focused on emotional investments or patterns of emotional concern (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000:41). I looked for themes that seemed to reoccur throughout the individual interview, and subsequently across the

⁴ Only a few of the financial parents describe family backgrounds with upper-class characteristics. A couple have parents working as public-sector professionals. The remaining majority (15 out of 22) have grown up in families where the father has been a private-sector professional, typically an engineer, who has done fairly well financially, while the mothers have worked as teachers, nurses, secretaries or shop assistants, often combined with a period as stay-at-home mums.

⁵As a rule, I did not introduce new themes. However, in some interviews, I had to intervene to direct the conversation towards everyday life in the family. Also, at the end of the interview, I asked about themes of interest that had not been taken up.

interviews, such as an emphasis on personal growth, on health or on safety. Because the interviews with the professional couples were conducted and analysed before the interviews with the financial couples, the patterns that emerged in this first group directed my focus towards comparable themes in the interviews in the financial couples. Whereas Hollway and Jefferson (2000:19) conceive of emotional investments as emerging from the ‘defended subject’, I focus on how these emotional concerns are linked to the interviewees’ ‘situated experience of oughtness’ (Martin, 2011:253) as noted above: the anxieties and desires that arise from, and in turn incite, their particular way of investing in the world.

Joy of learning? The professional parents’ narratives of everyday socialisation

Much in the interview narratives indicates that both these groups of upper-middle-class couples practise ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2003), investing substantial emotional and practical energies in their children, with much daily ‘hands-on’ parenting centred on school and after-school activities. As such activities in Norway are largely parent-driven and not commercial, parents devote vast amounts of time and energy to these activities, not only by providing transport for their children, but also by leading or contributing practically to the local football or skiing team, organising jumble sales to finance school trips and, for the professional couples, operating local theatre groups and choirs. This form of parental engagement also serves as an entry ticket to the dense social networks of the local community. However, I found some clear differences between the two groups in how they tell about these activities and everyday socialisation more generally.

The stories of the professional parents centre on their children’s own interests and pursuits: indeed, these interests and pursuits appear as something almost sacred. With the noteworthy exception of computer games, the *kind* of activity their children engage in seems less important – the main thing is that the children are passionate about something. As part of this ‘cult of passion’, the children are encouraged to pursue the activities they like most. A recurrent challenge is how to accommodate these passions by limiting the number of activities, and by encouraging the children to ‘stick to it’ when an activity begins to lose its appeal. Parents are excited about their children’s passions, but seeing the children ‘waste their time’, ‘just staring blankly at the TV set’ or being ‘completely absorbed in computer games’ leads to parental anxiety. Jonas admits that he does not really worry that his teenage children might get mixed up with drugs ‘or things like that’, but he is anxious ‘on a more profound

level', as he puts it. This 'profound level' is related to the lack of engagement and 'focus' signalled by too much 'staring at the television' (Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011).

To a certain extent the emphasis on letting the children follow their own passions seems to be applied in relation to homework as well. A few parents mention that one of their children does only moderately well at school. 'It's has been a bit up and down with schoolwork' says Sidsel. However, these parents demonstrate a noticeably laid-back attitude. 'He [the youngest son] is really bright, he's just so extremely lazy', as John puts it. Interestingly, when laziness in schoolwork is mentioned, it is often accompanied by stress on what the child *is* passionate about. John's son, for instance, 'is not so good in his school subjects', but he is 'passionate about football'. John is one of the many fathers who are involved in practical work in the local football club. He attends every match and many of the weekly practice sessions. 'I see this [his son's interest in football] as related to schoolwork. [...] If you really want to be good at something, you can also learn this through football.' This apparently relaxed attitude should be understood in light of the Norwegian educational system, where future life chances are not totally dependent on results in lower secondary school. Also, unlike for instance their UK and US counterparts, Norwegian parents tend to value qualities like imagination and independence above hard work (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2014).

This does not mean that these parents do not mind when their children are not so keen on schoolwork. The point is rather that evoking and accommodating personal growth by letting the children follow their own enthusiasms is more important. Eric, for example, expresses some hesitation about his son's priorities. He is not quite convinced that his 13-year-old son will eventually become a professional football player, as the boy intends. 'I believe that the day will come when he'll have to admit that he's not as good as he thinks.' How wise is it, then, he muses, to invest so much time and energy at the expense of everything else? Then he adds, 'I can recognise this very strong interest, this passion. Actually, I too had a similar passion at his age, though mine was for music.' This comment might be interpreted as some kind of 'a poor man's consolation', but it also indicates approval of his son's priorities. Eric is today a highly successful architect, and it emerges elsewhere in the interview that it was his passion for music in lower secondary school that put him on this trajectory, introducing him to 'guys who were a bit different', with more creative interests than otherwise common in his surroundings.

These parents seem to find it extremely important to incite some kind of 'passion' in their children, so that they acquire 'the ability to enjoy', as Vincent and Ball put it (2007:1070). In the more fortunate instances where children become deeply involved in school assignments, enthusiasm emerges. When her daughter was working on a film project at school, Kristin was heavily involved and arranged a premiere party where all the involved students and their parents were invited. 'It's fun to make something out of it.' Arguably, this manifests what Irwin and Elley (2011:488) call 'concerted cultivation in practice', an attitude that values enriching activities as an aim as such. However, that does not exclude the excitement of future potentials. Ingrid and Espen talk about their 11-year-old daughter's passion for reading. They see her as a 'writer-to-be', and are always involved in some major reading project (*Lord of the Rings*, at the time of the interview). Passions are seen as the source of all subsequent learning and fulfilment. As David explains, 'it's about getting them on the track when you perceive an interest' and 'motivating them to pursue this interest, to see what they might get out of it'.

Shared experiences and shared passions are crucial elements here (Aarseth, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011). Parents stress the importance of taking part, 'dropping by' at practice sessions, 'hanging around', and 'watching the matches' – all with the aim of 'creating some shared experiences we can talk about and share', says David, 'because when you have a personal relation to these activities yourself, then you can talk about it in a very different way'. It is also essential not to push your own interests onto your child, or get involved in ways that might induce expectations – or pressure. Peter, heavily involved in his son's skiing activities, thinks a lot about this. How can he know whether the boy really experiences his father's involvement in his skiing 'as supportive and positive' and not as expectations he might feel obliged to fulfil? 'I've tried to find out, but it's really difficult', says Peter: 'you can never really know, but the crucial thing is to try to interpret his [the son's] various reactions'. The importance of constantly interpreting and developing sensitivity to their children's feelings and reactions is a recurrent theme in interviews with the professional parents. Much in line with Bernstein's person-centred mode of socialisation, the overall aim is to support the children in their pursuit of their own personal interests in order for them to develop as persons. This is also reminiscent of what Kusserow (1999:223) describes as 'soft individualism', where parents stress the 'unfolding' and the 'flowering' of the person: 'The energy of true desire, authentic preference, and unique feelings and tastes will naturally motivate them to be good at what they love' (1999:222). Following up on these passions will instil a self-energising desire for new learning, and new investments.

Also couples in the 'economic fraction' are deeply involved in concerted cultivation, enriching activities and constant work of following up on their children, practically and emotionally. As many of these mothers work short, flexible hours and hire domestic help, there is more time and energy to put into these investments. However, whereas the narratives of the professional couples centre on shared interests and the importance of personalised passions, and sensitivity to their children's' inner feelings, the financial parents (that is, the mothers) tend to frame their stories about practical and emotional engagement differently.

A good start? The financial parents' narratives of everyday socialisation

The overall aim is to provide their children with 'a good start'. This requires a solid foundation and also a specific orientation towards achievement. 'To me, the most important thing is that they do well and get the best possible foundation, so that they can accomplish as much as possible in life', says Maria, a stay-at-home-mum. As with the professional couples, a good start is seen as dependent on being very hands-on in their children's everyday activities. However, the focus is now less on shared passions and more about standards and quality.

A good foundation involves good routines, says Maria: 'you should set a standard for how things should be done'. In her view, the child who gets this at home will be 'well prepared for later challenges'. However, as a few mothers note, this 'requires some effort'. Perhaps partly encouraged by a need to justify their choice in a country where only two per cent of women are stay-at-home-mums (Kitterød and Rønsen, 2011), there is considerable focus here on the time and effort spent on the children's schoolwork. Cathrine explains that she takes care to organise her days so that all other tasks are finished before her three children come home from school, so she 'can be available to help with their homework'. While the professional parents express a certain sense of ambiguity and irony about their 'smart but lazy' children, there seem to be less ambiguity and fewer 'ups-and-downs with school work' in the financial families. Some mothers mention daily struggles, even battles, in order to get their children to do their homework. 'No-one forces them to do anything at school, so if I don't force them, then nothing will get done', Cathrine explains. However, this does not exclude stories about homework activities involving engagement and interest, as in the accounts of the professional parents. Here too, it is 'fun' to make something out of it – but with a more distinct flavour of 'fun with a purpose' (Vincent and Ball, 2007:1065). As one mother puts it, 'if you could get grade A, then you just don't settle for a B.'

The same is evident in the talk about the children's after-school activities, which here means sports. There was little or no mention of activities like playing a musical instrument, singing in a choir, joining a theatre group or other forms of cultural enrichment described in the interviews with the professional couples, as also in comparable groups in the economic fraction in Britain (Vincent and Ball, 2007). Instead, I find an abundance of sport activities, and here the narratives reveal more of the emphasis on passion conveyed in the interviews with the professional parents – at least in interviews with fathers: 'I just love it, running around on the football field with the boys', says Fredric. Here too, there is an explicit emphasis on achievement. Many children from these families are involved in several sports at the competitive level. Fredric tells me that the coming summer his 14-year-old son is to attend an elite football programme in Britain. That the boy should someday be selected for this, he explains, was actually 'the goal they [father and son] set when he [the son] was nine years old [...] – and this year it happened'. Parents also tell of switching to a different football team or local club, to secure the best environment for developing their children's talents.

Sport activities are crucial for other reasons as well. Particularly the mothers' narratives underscore sport activities as part of the general emphasis on physical and mental health, key ingredients in the 'good foundation'. A general view is that children should do sport activities at least three to four times a week. This emphasis on health also includes nutritious food – 'getting them to eat their broccoli', as Cathrine puts it – as well as getting enough sleep, and spending time outdoors. A marked contrast emerges in the narratives, between the chaotic, stressful and exhausting life in the City of London, where many started their careers, and the peaceful, green suburban Oslo neighbourhood where they have settled. Several mothers highlight the *Gemeinschaft* they feel in their community—it is a place where 'everybody knows everybody' and where, as Margaret underlines, the children can 'walk in and out of each other's homes and gardens.' The local community is described as providing a general sense of safety and calm, in contrast to the harsh 'world out there' (Aarseth, 2015).

Further, children should be protected from 'disturbing elements' like computer games and the social media. 'I don't believe that the human mind is so different from what it used to be' (before the advent of television and the Internet), says Charlotte. Some explain that their school-aged children must follow a regime of no TV, no computer games or friends visiting on weekdays, and some 13-year-olds are not allowed to be on Facebook. Again, the rules seem to be quite clear-cut, and the parents – that is, the mothers – do not seem to have great difficulties in implementing them. 'The children know me, they know that I can be pretty

strict, they know where the limits are drawn, and they know that they must listen', says Maria. Importantly, the struggles about schoolwork, the strict limitations on computer games and television and the broccoli and early bedtimes depicted above – applies only from Monday to Friday afternoon. Weekends are described in very different terms. While weekdays are associated with strict rules, hard efforts, healthy living and high standards, Fridays become, as Cathrine formulates it, 'a real treat'. Weekends are associated with having 'dinners all together', going to one of their holiday homes, having neighbours in for drinks or, for fathers, 'just running around on the football field with a bunch of boys'.

Thus, the enriching practices in these different upper-middle-class families are organised and engendered in significantly different ways. Whereas the professional parents describe how they interpret feelings, cultivate passions and cherish 'subtle encouragements' in order to release their children's inner potential, the financial parents seem to operate according to more fixed and clear-cut ends. They invest in hard work and a 'good start', emphasising 'a certain standard', tenacity and goal-orientation. Again, the described differences have much in common with Basil Bernstein's (1977) person-centred and position oriented socialisation pattern, and the attendant distinction between an emphasis on measurable achievements independent of a particular child's 'authentic preferences' and 'true desires', and an emphasis on the evoking of and facilitating exactly such 'authentic' and 'true desires'.

In part, these differing patterns could be explained by greater confidence among parents from the symbolic fraction (Au, 2008; Raveaud and Van Zanten, 2007). Much in the interview narratives indicates that the professional parents can afford to be more relaxed because, deep down, they feel fairly confident that their children will eventually do well despite their current laziness. Again, the educational system in Norway characterised by a general lack of high-stakes-testing may be seen to facilitate this sense of 'ease and confidence'. That the financial families have stricter regimes might be interpreted in light of their feeling greater urgency and less ease and confidence in intellectual pursuits, perhaps amplified by their upward mobility (Irwin and Elley, 2011; Reay et al., 2011). However, these differences cannot be accounted for solely in terms of different levels of confidence and urgency. I suggest that what we have here are different *forms* of confidence and urgency. Greater attention to the organised strivings of these parents in their professional fields could help in explaining these differences.

Fading or falling? Fear and excitement in parents' professional practices

The emotional concerns perceptible in these narratives of everyday parental practices resonate in interesting ways with their narratives about their own professional practices. The parents engaged in knowledge-intensive pursuits focus on the projects they are involved in and on the levels of stress and pressure that they experience. Here, a major concern is whether they find their current work situation sufficiently intriguing, challenging and meaningful. Jonas took on a somewhat less demanding job for some years when the children were small and his wife was in a particularly intensive period of her career. In those years, he says, 'I was about 50 per cent mentally present at work. It got pretty tedious and trivial.' Jonas likes work that fires his personal involvement. Too much tedium breeds feelings of not being fully alive, almost 'dying a bit'.

Other parents speak of experiencing an inner pressure that they almost depend on to feel alive. Anna is an architect; at the time of the interview, she was working for a company that she considers to be lacking in ambition. Instead of participating in major architectural competitions, they focus on more 'bread-and-butter' assignments. Lately, she has been thinking a lot about what to do: 'because this can't go on like this much longer. I feel I'm withering away professionally.' Similarly, Peter has started at another research institute, because of the lack of invigorating challenges at his former workplace. 'I fully supported him in that decision' says his wife Sidsel; 'he was getting too much like a grey municipal worker, if you ask me'. Professional couples also mention how low energy at work affects their energy at home, and vice versa. 'It's odd', says Anna, 'you tend to think that when there are less stressful periods at work you'll have more energy to do things at home. But for me it's the other way around.' Peter expresses a similar experience, in what he calls 'recession periods' at work, 'when it's all routine'; he feels a lack of drive and energy at home as well. What they fear is stagnation or fading, being 'only half-alive'.

The financial couples emphasise different emotional concerns. They mention career trajectories and satisfaction with their current job situation, but as if they were talking about being in a race, with all the thrills and excitement as well as strain involved. Sports metaphors are frequent. Chris likens his job to taking part in a contest – recalling how, in his youth, he had unexpectedly won a gold medal in an international tennis championship: 'Everyone said that I had no chance. But I just decided that I was going to win, and I focused on that goal, and I made it.' At the time of the interview Elizabeth was under consideration for an even more influential CEO position than her current one. She said she was dreading this position,

as she would be left much more alone ‘at the top’. However, ‘Once I’ve started on this race’, she added, ‘I must go the whole way, I can’t drop out halfway through’. There is one track, and it goes upwards, heading towards ‘the gold’, literally speaking: it is the winners who stand to reap the profits. Only a few reach the top. ‘Maybe one of ten becomes a partner and then again one of ten [partners] become a general manager in the end’, Maria explains in relation to her husband’s successful trajectory in a well-known law firm. Again, it should be kept in mind that my focus is on the differences in narrative emphasis. Maria’s account of the logic of her husband’s career undoubtedly shares important features with trajectories within academia or the media – but the professional couples do not speak about their jobs in that particular way.

This total focus and goal-orientation seem to be associated with thrill and excitement, not to mention economic rewards, but life in ‘hard-core finance’ is also tough. Determination and resilience are important. Getting ‘the gold’ seems to require considerable sacrifices, working extremely long hours, under tremendous pressure. Several of the men talk about periods where they get only a few hours of sleep at night and feel they are moving into a zombie-like existence, where the only one thing is to remain firmly focused on the goal. Cathrine describes how they recently experienced ‘a real storm’ where the chairman of the board in her husband’s law firm tried to ‘destroy him, totally’. The only way to survive was to keep going: ‘hang in there, don’t give up’. The ceaseless pressure to win and the concomitant fear of losing seem central in the desires that emerge in the encounter with the requirements of the ‘hard-core finance’. Although most of these couples have substantial private investments to fall back on if the business collapsed or they were fired, there was much talk of the fear of ‘losing everything’ and being ‘a total failure’, as Alex put it. Some told of friends or colleagues who had committed suicide after ‘losing everything’ and ‘being a total failure’. Their requirements of ‘hard-core finance’ and the particular *oughtness* they experience provide a certain rationale for the stress on the good foundation, the importance of physical as well as psychological fitness and resilience.

From closure and distinction to ‘enchanted perceptions’?

It could be argued that the different modes of socialisation in these professional and financial families serve to optimise the form of capital deemed legitimate in their respective fields (Power and Whitty, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2006). Just as the professional parents invest in intensive reflexivity and ‘joy of learning’, the financial parents nurture a ‘fit-for-fight’ habitus that equips their children with a ‘joy of competing’ to facilitate later success in increasingly

more marketised business organisations. Still, their everyday mode of socialisation cannot be explained by these potential outcomes. I suggest that the differing formations of fear – ‘fear of fading’ in the symbolic fraction and ‘fear of falling’ in the economic fraction – and the associated excitements – the search for liveliness and the heated goal-orientation – show distinct ways of being exposed to, and invested in the world. The couples invested in knowledge and reflexivity fear losing their ‘energy’, the inner pressure they need to feel alive; but they also fear becoming ‘ordinary’ and replaceable. They feel the need for constant contact with a personal source of meaning, the vibrancy that arises in close exchanges – in personal relationships as well as in worldly pursuits. To achieve maximum contact with this personalised source, they seek shared experiences and shared passions (Aarseth, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011). When these parents are eager to create joint experiences they can share with their children, this is not motivated solely by the urge to secure distinction and positional advantage. The urge for intimate vibrancy and what Kusserow (1999:222) describes as ‘the energy of true desire’ is part of, perhaps foundational to, the *illusio* that emerges in the encounter with the oughtness of intellectual pursuits.

Similarly, when the financial parents nurture the ability to focus, concentrate and achieve, it makes sense to interpret this in relation to the *illusio* that emerges in response to the competitive requirements of these profit-intensive enterprises. This competitive drive and the concomitant anxieties seem to incite a desire for ‘a sound foundation’ which includes psychological safety and assuredness (Aarseth, 2015). This involves self-confined-ness and closure, symbolised by the tight, privileged enclaves where they live, ‘where everybody knows everybody’. However, such investments in a foundation are not solely about closure, because they are shaped by these parents’ enchanted perceptions of the world. Within this cosmology, the feelings of security and holding logically demand a safe distance from the battlefield of finance. Building up a sound foundation requires protection from the race, with its competitiveness and need for positioning. These practices may work to enforce privilege, but are arguably *driven* by other motives than the need for distinction and closure.

Conclusions: Emotional dynamics in formations of middle-class selves

This article has explored the emotional dynamics underlying the tensions between and within middle-class fractions, by examining distinct modes of family socialisation among ‘professional’ and ‘financial’ upper-middle-class families in Norway. While offering valuable insights into the underlying drivers of intensified positional competition in modern society,

the ‘fear of falling’ thesis, with its attendant emphasis on distinction and exclusion, ignores important dimensions of the emotional dynamics involved in the tensions between the symbolic and economic fractions.

I have argued that the phenomenological and psychosocial trajectory in Bourdieu’s practice theory provides a tool for grasping the anxieties and desires that emerge in, and in turn incite, different experiences of oughtness, and different ways of being exposed to and invested in the world, within these two fractions. Thus, when parents in the symbolic and the economic fractions hold different values, this need not be framed as individualist versus inclusive ideologies, thereby implying that some individuals are more altruistic and some more egoistic than others. It is not a structurally induced inclination for altruism that makes some persons more inclusive: it is the particular *oughtness* and attendant enchantment of investing in reflexive resources that presumes close contact with a personalised source of meaning and passion. It makes sense to view the differing values – the search for liveliness and personal self-fulfilment on the one hand, the heated goal-orientation on the other – in terms of differing formations of individualised selves, reminiscent of Basil Bernstein’s (1971;1977) person-centred and position-oriented modes of socialisation. However, better insights into how these different modes of socialisation emerge as part of ways of being exposed to and invested in the world, and as being formed through different ways of being and relating in everyday routine practices in the family, allows us to move beyond the structuralist bias of Bernstein’s concept of ideologies as well as the structuralist bias in Bourdieu’s theory (Atkinson, 2012).

The phenomenological and psycho-social approach may yield an enhanced concept of the affective dynamics involved in the formation of middle-class subjectivities, beyond the one-dimensional conception of ‘fear of falling’ and the equally one-dimensional ‘quest for advantage’. By conflating the quest for distinction and the urge for self-fulfilment, this one-dimensional notion tends to equate middle-class subjectivity with positional individualism – producing an undesired emphasis on differing degrees of selfishness and advantage-seeking in individuals and groups. Closer investigation of how we are exposed to and affected by differing requirements re-directs attention to how different societal and institutional contexts require and nurture different ways of being and relating to the world. Indeed, a major potential of middle-class research may be precisely this: enabling enhanced insights into the motivational drives nurtured within different societal formations and social institutions.

Finally, this investigation can indicate what it is that is violated by current processes of marketisation and instrumentalisation of education, providing new insights into the emotional dynamics underlying the tensions experienced by members of the symbolic fraction in their encounters with intensified competition in today's world.

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