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## **SOCIO-GEOGRAPHIC EFFECT ON HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES**

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### **Some introducing remarks**

Geographic position matter. It is the geographic context where possibilities to conquer or gain cultural capital is set up says French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, P 1979). That's why you can't understand social action without a geographic or even more precise, the socio-geographic context (Hägerstrand, T 1982). A basic definition of "socio-geographic" is that every geographic context is framed and defined by its location in relation to other locations. This relation have impact of the residents in a specific geographic location since it influence their everyday habits, their way of defining themselves in the world and probably also their way of thinking, prioritizing and living. The geographic origin is imprinted or even embodied as a part of the individual habitus and can't be neglected when it comes to understand social action. In this presentation I will practice the usage of socio-geographic aspects to understand the student choice of university. I will also show *how* socio-geographic background is actually working when it comes to this kind of choice. I stress that it is an important factor that can't be unconsidered when it comes to understand educational choices. The main question to answer is how it is possible to understand socio-geographic impact on higher education choices and especially the choice of university.

### **The Socio-Geographical Effect in Sweden**

Similar to many parts of the World, the Swedish higher education system expanded after World War II. Especially the number of students, educational programmes and higher

education institutions has been multiplied during the last decades. One important part of this expansion was the establishment of new university colleges and universities during the last decades. The political objective to this has been to lower barriers for possible students from categories that traditionally didn't applied and performed academic studies such as women, working class and both ethnic and geographic minorities. Consequence of the last category is that almost every Swedish student today can commute on a daily basis to a Swedish university or university college. Geographical barriers have been torn down and people in regions where it traditionally once was quite rare to continue to academia now are attending university courses in large numbers. At least that was what the politicians aimed for. It is still possible to see quite noticeable geographic patterns showing *where* Swedish students are studying and where they are not studying. In urban areas near universities the frequency of youths transferring to academia after finished upper secondary school is large - sometimes over 60 %. In regions that lack from academic traditions the same number can be below 10 %. A sociologically influenced explanation is of course that regions dominated by highly educated people influence their children to study and the other way around when it comes to regions dominated by lower degrees of educational level. A consequence of social inheritance or disposition or a product of habitus if you like. In this study I separate this kind of resources as labelled *inherited educational resources* from *acquired educational resources* that is defined as formal rates of success, in school measured or illustrated by grades. Recent studies have shown that there are more than inherited and acquired educational resources that explain the choice of university. The social elite children (high amounts of both forms of educational resources) tend to choose more socially valuable education programmes (such as medicine and law) than their socially and merited equals in non-study-regions (choosing teaching and nursing) (Lidegran 2009). The prestigious programmes can't be found in the non-study areas meaning that the highly educationally resourced students must move away from home. They do not tend to do this and settle with less prestigious programmes. The existence of an effect beyond formal and informal selection when it comes to higher education choice can be unveiled. In this study I understand this as a socio-geographic effect.

## **The context of Linnaeus University**

Linnaeus University in Växjö is one of the new universities in Sweden (established in 2010). It lacks from long prestigious educational programmes such as medicine and law and it is dominated mainly by vocational academic programmes such as teaching, nursing and social work. The dominating socio-geographic structure of the students is first generation students and they're often brought up in small cities and villages near the university. Växjö is the natural urban centre in the region.

Coming to Linnaeus University in Växjö it's like coming to a big upper secondary school (Löfqvist, L, 2013). It looks like a school, which means that the students can act like they are used to from upper secondary school at home. There is something familiar, a fact that is strengthened by a quite close personal relation between teachers and students. The university is also located on a campus outside the city. Despite moving to a bigger city the actual social world is both familiar and dimensional in a way that many students can recognize and appreciate. The university is located in a region that lack from academic tradition. A sociologist has described it as located in a "delta of low educational level" (Eriksson, M, 2009) and that is quite true. Every surrounding part of the region has an average way below the national average of academic educated population. The city of Växjö is above though. This is of course a proper explanation of why the students more often are recruited from the working class or lower middleclass than universities located in regions with higher degree of academically educated inhabitants.

The 10 students in this study are upper secondary schoolteacher students. I have interviewed them three times during their time in the teacher programme (in the beginning, in the middle and in the end). I've also conducted a small survey including the whole group of 60 students from which the ten students were selected. This was conducted during the first out of nine semesters. The interviews had focus on educational experiences before and during (sometimes also after) the time at the teacher-training programme. Issues about motives and choice have been highly profiled in the interviews.

## Results and Analysis

Roughly the motives to choose Växjö University over other universities can be separated in two major themes. *First* motives concerning the **distance** between location of the student geographic origin and the university and *secondly* motives concerning the actual **social character** of the university and the city of Växjö.

### *Distance*

Distance seems to work in two ways. One argument to choose Växjö is the **short** distance between student geographic origin and Växjö while another argument, but less common, is that Växjö is **far enough** from the student geographic origin. Both can be understood as a form of sensitivity towards different aspects of distance: the former as *sensitivity towards long distance* and the latter as *sensitivity towards origin*. Both sensitivities are empirically based on the wish to avoid conflict and both sensitivities can be understood as structured by the possession or the lack of possession of educational resources.

The most extreme way of expressing *sensitivity towards long distance* was the student who claimed that “It was Växjö or nothing” when I asked about other possible universities. She expressed and also acted upon mistrust against the academic context (“I’m not like the others at the university, This is not my world. I don’t fit in”). Like many other students from working-class she didn’t use student loan, she worked part-time and she didn’t move immediately to Växjö. One consequence of this very cautious establishment as a student was that she failed in her studies, a possible dimension of conflict in the new world. Using this cautious establishment, conflicts did occur at the university but eventually also in the other end. By taking distance from the social origin conflicts in relation to the social origin occurred. The people back home didn’t understand her new habits and the new words she was using. Even though the sensitivity of long distance creating conflict the actual attractiveness of Växjö was the close distance to the socio-geographic origin of the student since it allowed the cautious establishment. Conflicts caused by a social position in-between can be understood in what Bourdieu called *hysteresis-effect* – some sort of divided habitus not able to fit in anywhere in the attempt to fit in two worlds at the same time (Bourdieu, P 1972; Bourdieu, P 1997). In order to manage the scepticism towards academia the cautious

behaviour served as a kind of social insurance. If they couldn't manage academic studies the bridges back to the origin wasn't burned. One possible interpretation of this sceptic relation towards academic studies is the lack of both forms of educational resources. They lacked from important and socially close role models since no one in their family or even in their social network could help them or support them in a natural way with academic work and ambition. This is a lack of inherited educational resources. Maybe this is also an explanation to their quite moderate possession of educational acquired resources. They often expressed themselves as comfortable in school but this isn't shown in their school results. Despite the cautious choice of higher educational institution they couldn't avoid conflicts but they were better prepared when the conflicts did occur since they had been able to collect new educational resources during their stay at the university.

*The sensitivity towards origin* can be interpreted as another form of cautiousness. The students left their home in order to *avoid* conflicts attached to their socio-geographic origin. Choosing a university far from home, uncomfortable and destructive social pressure and environment could be avoided. Hysteresis-effect didn't occur until suddenly and unexpectedly "ghosts from the past" turned up in Växjö and tried to re-connect. This kind of sensitivity was especially observed among students with high possession of some kind of educational resources. The context of conflict came from the origin and not the academia and as long as origin was kept away, conflicts didn't occur. Instead of origin academia was the insurance towards social contexts that the student wanted to avoid. Educational resources became the tool to avoid conflicts and uneasy situations. Växjö became attractive due to its far distance from the socio-geographic origin of the student.

### *Social character*

In a national context Växjö isn't particularly big but in a smaller context it is the biggest city in the region. For students from the region the city represented a place to shop with a more various supply, a place where you could visit the regional hospital or a place where you could enjoy more exclusive cultural events - things that you have to travel to Växjö. More than 70 % of the original student-group was brought up in places smaller than Växjö and 70 % of these students had Växjö as the geographically closest

university. This character of being a representative of a big city but in the same time being a well-known city and not a too big city is a commonly expressed motive to choose Växjö. In the third interview students are describing themselves as changed – “I’m more like big-city-people now. I have higher standards now”.

Actual big cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg or Malmö aren’t excluded due to their geographic location so much as they are excluded due to their size. “It’s too crowded” or “it’s too big” the students says. The big cities are also excluded in relation to what Växjö actually has to offer and what the big city universities can’t offer – a campus. The life on campus can be considered the heart of the everyday student life. The campus is what the students saw when they came visit before they did their higher educational choice. Students stress that the social cohesion on campus was an important factor that really impacted their choice of university. The campus represents something small, limited and most important, well-known for students from smaller places. In campus you meet and live nearby people you know. Campus lack from anonymity. A small city in a big city, but not big enough to carry the problems of a big city... Social structures that remind the students of something well-known, something close to what they experienced from home. Växjö is big and familiar enough for students from small places. The campus can be representative for a social cohesion recognized in small places where the social control is higher (although campus serves as a representation and not an actual fact – loneliness and alienated experiences can probably take place also in the vivid student-life on campus). Moving to Växjö does represent something new but in the same time a certain amount of social familiarities in relation to the dominating socio-geographic background in the group of students.

## **Conclusion**

Why do students choose a particular university over other universities and Why do people choose universities not only geographically close to hem but also socially close to them? As a sociologist I claim that these choices aren’t rational from interest or some specific socioeconomic strategy. There is more to it. Choices are deeply influenced by the social environment you have experienced and also embody. You are a carrier of social experiences not only from your own life and from your closest social relations such as family but also in a both wider spatial and deeper temporal context. One way of

understanding these settings for action is by using the notion of *habitus*. In this paper I have investigated one particular aspect of this structuring social environment: the socio-geographical effect on higher educational choices. The socio-geographical origin impact social action and social action in this particular case is how students motivate their choices of higher educational institution.

People choose the familiar or in order to keep the familiar close. Pierre Bourdieu & Loic Waqcant use the analogy of being “a fish in water” (Bourdieu, P & Wacquant, L, 1991). To minimize the risk of being confronted with the unknown they chose the university close to them and the university that represent something well-known, something familiar, something unrisky. To choose the unexpected, to be a fish out of water, there are empirically reasons to claim that this need some kind of resources, in this case educational resources. With these, the student can construct the illusion of trust in a system strong enough to break up with his or her own socio-geographic origin. If your out of possession of these resources the struggle to do unorthodox educational choices are accompanied with high degrees of conflict, a conflict that sometimes occur anyway but in a situation where the student are better prepared by the new life in the big city and by a positive establishment in a new social environment. A social safety if you like. No matter what, a linkage between choice of university and socio-geographic background can be established. In this presentation it's theoretically understood as an aspect of habitus – a *socio-geographic habitus*. A way to understand geographic action is by using the socio-geographic dispositions held by the individual or the collective. From that point of view geography do matters. It is something to take into account when it comes to understand the setting of social action.

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