Contested ease: Negotiating contradictory modes of elite distinction in face-to-face interaction

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Abstract
Research on elites and elite schooling mainly theorize the embodied elite distinction of ease as a dispositional phenomenon, drawing on a Bourdieuian framework. I respond to this by developing an interactionist perspective on embodied elite distinction not as a function of social position, but rather as means of communication used more or less actively to manage others' impressions of one's social position. Drawing on ethnography and interviews, I explore how students at two Swedish upper secondary schools with different elite profiles—an economic elite school and a meritocratic elite school—negotiate what counts as successful performances of their elite position in face-to-face interactions during conferences for "young leaders". The findings suggest that in order for performances to be honored as "confident ease," which is attributed with prestige and moral legitimacy in the peer group, the interacting students had to share the impression that the interaction was a "merit situation". In interactions defined as "privilege situations," similar behavior was labelled as arrogant superiority and seen as illegitimate performances of elite position. While "confident ease" was the hallmark of the male students at the...
Elite distinction refers to how persons or groups symbolically express their elite position through tastes, consumer goods, lifestyles, and behaviors (Daloz, 2010). How embodied marks may function as elite distinctions is a long-standing concern among sociologists, but it has received renewed attention lately through a focus on embodied ease and how it is learned in elite schools (Khan, 2011). In a recent study of a Norwegian elite school, the authors argue that "elite distinction is primarily expressed through a mode of conduct characterized by 'ease and naturalness'" (Jarness et al. 2019, p. 1415). This echoes The Inheritors, where Bourdieu and Passeron suggest that "ease or the affectation of ease are almost always the mark of students from the upper classes, where such manners signal membership in the elite" (1979, p. 20). A common claim in this literature is that the ability to convey elite distinction through one's embodied behavior is a function of sociocultural fit, of having a habitus that is well adapted to the particular elite setting. In this article, I demonstrate that this is just one part of the answer.

Recent overviews of research on elites and elite schooling have called for theoretical innovation as the field to a large degree is influenced by a Bourdieusian framework (Cousin et al. 2018; Kenway & Koh, 2015). Drawing on an ethnographic study of how students (aged 16–19) at two elite upper secondary schools in Sweden express their elite position symbolically through behavioral and emotional displays, this article attempts to develop an interactionist perspective on embodied elite distinction. The interactionist perspective sensitizes us to the uncertain, negotiated and vulnerable character of communication with status symbols in face-to-face interaction. How do interacting actors reach temporary consensus that a particular behavior is to be honored as an elite distinction? Under what situational circumstances do a particular behavior constitute elite distinction? How does it need to be performed in order to be honored as such?

Both schools in the study meet key criteria that have been used to identify elite schools in prior research, such as scholastic excellence, socioeconomic demographics, and geographic location (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, pp. 1100–1111). However, the schools have different elite profiles. Garden School (GS) can be characterized as an "economic elite school" as it is located in one of the wealthiest suburbs of Stockholm and attracts the highest economic elite school, the findings suggests that "confident awareness" may be understood as a contradictory mode of elite distinction characterizing the female students from the meritocratic elite school. They display confidence while simultaneously exploiting the unease they felt in the conference to craft a morally legitimate performance of their elite position. While the findings confirm that students' classed, gendered and moral dispositions are central to navigate elite distinction, they also demonstrate that meanings of such embodied distinctions emerge in relation to how situations are defined and are dependent on the interacting students' combined ability and interest to maintain working consensus on the definition of the situation.

**Keywords**

ease, embodied elite distinction, elite school, merit situation, privilege situation
proportion of students with backgrounds in the economic upper class in the region. City School (CS) can be characterized as a "meritocratic elite school" as it is located in an affluent area in the urban core of Stockholm and has the highest proportion of students with top grades from an earlier educational level in the region. While students with class backgrounds in the economic, cultural and professional upper classes are overrepresented, CS is more demographically diverse than GS. Furthermore, it is characterized by the strong conviction that it is a socially mixed and meritocratic school, attended by only the best of the best regardless of background. The economic-meritocratic polarity is also mirrored in the students' everyday conceptions of the schools; they use stereotypes such as "snob school" to describe GS, while CS is described as the "brainy school".

The elite school concept stands out from the traditional egalitarian image of the Swedish education system, which lack a clear-cut elite school sector where high tuition fees act as effective means of social closure (Börjesson & Broady, 2016). While education is still free of charge, research has shown that deregulation of the Swedish education system in the 1990s, which introduced private schools and free school choice, has driven inequalities across schools, leading to a more segregated school landscape regarding both achievement and socioeconomic background (Holmlund et al. 2014). Studies suggest that the social space, in Bourdieusian terms, of upper-secondary schools in the Stockholm region is vertically differentiated with regard to the capital volume of the school's student body as well as horizontally differentiated among the top schools with regard to capital composition (Börjesson et al. 2016). Qualitative and quantitative studies also show that these schools formally and informally prepare students for future elite positions in various ways (Holmqvist, 2017; Törnqvist, 2019), not least by crafting "ambitions" to apply for prestigious educations and jobs (Bygren & Rosenqvist, 2020).

1.1 Ease as an embodied elite distinction

In an ambitious attempt to bring together theory and research on elite distinction, Daloz (2010, pp. 81–84) shows that ease is often highlighted as a central behavioral and emotional cue that conveys elite position symbolically. It is characterized by feelings of confidence, assertiveness, and self-assuredness and is often visible through body postures, such as "commendable gait, lifted-up head, shoulders held back, steady gaze" as well as by the display of "a relaxed attitude and a certain control over one's emotions" (Daloz, 2010, p. 82). To embody ease means to navigate elite spaces with a certain degree of "naturalness" and "effortlessness" which stand in contrast to those who navigate these spaces in a less confident, pretentious or overconfident mode (Bourdieu, 1996; Jarness et al. 2019; Khan, 2011).

The research on ease as an elite distinction is highly influenced by a dispositional approach rooted in a Bourdieusian theoretical framework (see Nash, 2003, and Jerolmack & Khan, 2017, p. 8, for comprehensive introductions to the dispositional approach). However, scholars have made two partly different interpretations of the framework. The rigid interpretation of the dispositional approach assumes a tight coupling between embodied behavior and social position, emphasizing the ability to carry out practices with ease is a result of deeply seated, unconscious, and durable dispositions of habitus internalized during early socialization in a particular class condition. Bourdieu, for example, suggests that "ease is the privilege of those who […] have academic culture as their native culture" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 21). Drawing on data on elite school teachers' assessments, Bourdieu (1996, pp. 9–53) shows that teachers value students who write, speak, and carry themselves with ease, a competence developed through early childhood socialization in families with sufficient levels of legitimate cultural capital valued in the school. On a similar note, Thiele (2016) suggests that upper-class students at an American elite university, to a greater degree than working- and middle-class students, have acquired the necessary dispositions during childhood socialization to navigate faculty-relationships with ease.

These studies claim that in order to feel and behave with ease, students need to have "a habitus finely attuned to the school rules of the game of distinction" (Jarness et al. 2019, p. 1416). This view suggests that ease is a function of the "mutual fit" between habitus and field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 128–130). Ease is
thus the visible expression of “freedom from constraint,” which let the actor navigate the game of distinction “effortlessly” and seemingly “naturally”. Such an actor becomes a kind of “arbiter elegantum,” writes Bourdieu, “whose transgressions are not mistakes but the annunciation of a new fashion, a new mode of expression or action which will become a model, and then modal, normal, the norm”. In contrast, friction between habitus and field make actors "paralyzed by a reflexiveness which is the opposite of ease" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 255). Research on elite schooling shows that students with a working class habitus, that does not “fit” the elite context, experience considerable unease and is observed to engage in reflexive identity work (Aries & Seider, 2007; Reay et al., 2010; Lee & Kramer, 2013).

The other analytical pathway that scholars have taken makes a more dynamic interpretation of the dispositional perspective, suggesting a looser coupling between embodied behavior and social position. Ease is not seen as a mere reflection of social position, rather, social background provides the actor with resources to present oneself in an appropriate way in order to claim elite status (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b, p. 11). In his ethnographic study of the exclusive boarding school St. Paul’s, Khan (2011) shows that students depending on wealth, gender, sexuality and ethnicity appear to have different opportunities of knowing and performing the scripts of ease. However, ease is “not simply inherited from experiences with families; it is made in interactions at the school” (Khan, 2011, p. 60).

By combining Bourdieu’s practice theory with Butler’s performativity theory, Khan (2011, p. 136) problematizes the notion of ease as something people have as a function of social background. Rather, it is viewed as a learned interactional skill to perform elite position in a culturally legitimate manner portraying the position as meritocratically achieved rather than ascribed by birth. Students need to learn to perform in a mode of ease, meaning to tone down displays of entitlement and arrogance as well as inferiority and reverence, both of which make morally problematic hierarchies of social advantage visible (Khan, 2011, pp. 72–8; Rivera, 2016, pp. 172–9). These findings are in line with studies that has drawn attention to the importance of moral character as a status signal (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Halvorsen, 2020; Lamont, 1992; Ljunggren, 2017; Pedersen et al. 2018; Sherman, 2017; Törnqvist, 2019).

1.2 Theorizing embodied elite distinction from an interactionist perspective

The concept social distinction concerns how any social group—low or high—express their social position by various symbolic means in order to mark its distinctiveness from other groups. Literally, the word distinction denotes the condition of division and the act of dividing, and in the derived sense, it usually refers to distinguishing marks of excellence or eminence. When we speak about “elite distinction” we focus on how “dominant groups” “display signs of superiority that signal their upper social position” (Daloz, 2010, p. 6). A common feature of theories of social distinction is the relational assumption; one actor claims distinction through visible signs and the other actor honor or dishonor the claim (Bourdieu, 1984). The interactionist perspective emphasizes, maybe more clearly than others, that distinction needs to be achieved in and through interaction between two or more people (DiMaggio, 2012; Rivera, 2010; Sauder, 2005). Thus, face-to-face interaction is the main unit of analysis for an interactionist inquiry of elite distinction.

In 1951, this journal published Goffman’s first article Symbols of Class Status. While the article bears marks of being an early, undeveloped piece it does lay out a thought-provoking perspective on how status symbols, such as ritualized behaviors or consumer goods, are used by actors to signal social position to others as well as to infer others’ position by evaluating the symbols they display.² The article make use of “embryonic versions” of concepts such as self-presentation and working consensus to analyze the communication with status symbols, concepts that later were developed within the compounds of Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective (Smith, 2006, p. 19).

Every society tend to have some kind of arrangements that regulate what a particular status symbol stand for and who is authorized to use it (Mills, 1996, pp. 106–107). According to Goffman (1951, pp. 297–301), this
arrangement emerge as social groups attempt to guard status symbols from misuse by seeking to monopolize them through various closure mechanisms, such as economic costs or socialization. While such arrangements can be stable or ambivalent, Goffman stresses that there always tend to be some margin of uncertainty surrounding the meaning and appropriate use of status symbols. The risk, or chance, of status misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and deception appears to be an endemic feature when status symbols are used to represent social position during face-to-face interaction (Goffman, 1951, p. 296). Goffman's article makes us attentive to the potential “discrepancy between symbol and actual position” (Smith, 2006, p. 19), suggesting that status symbols are not reflections of social positions but rather means to influence others' impressions of one's social position. “This discrepancy directs attention towards both fraudulent presentations of self and towards the attempts of legitimate status holders to immunize their symbols against misuse.” (Manning, 1992, p. 37).

There are at least two important sources of contingency making face-to-face communication with embodied status symbols a rather uncertain and complicated accomplishment. In order to accomplish elite distinction in a given interaction, the actor who claims and the actor who honors distinction must respectively “share a similar interpretation of the situation; if either misinterprets a status symbol, the status relationship will likely break down.” (Sauder, 2005, p. 284). Thus, actors need to share definition of the situation (Thomas, 1923, p. 42). Goffman suggests when people meet face-to-face, they try to answer the tacit question “What is going on here?” (Goffman, 1986 [1974], p. 8) meaning what are the rules and expectations that apply in this interaction with these people in this setting. In order to figure out the definition of the situation, actors mutually monitor who is present, what attributes they display, how they behave, how the dynamic of the interaction unfolds, where it takes place, and so on. Furthermore, in order to avoid miscommunication or embarrassing faux pas, the actors seek to establish and maintain a tacit agreement with others that they have the same conception of the situation (Goffman, 1990 [1959], pp. 20–21). Such a “working consensus” also sets the ground rules for communicating with status symbols in any given interaction (Goffman, 1951, p. 294) and if it is maintained successfully, status misunderstanding and misrepresentation can be avoided and status deception may pass unnoticed.

The other source of situational contingency is captured in the concept of “performance,” which Goffman defines as the “behavior or activities that a person presents in front of an audience” (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2015, p. 196; Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 32). A “social position” “is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed” rather it need to be performed through “a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated.” (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 81). Hence, in order to accomplish elite distinction in face-to-face interaction—that is, when claims of elite position are honored by others—people need to perform embodied status symbols in a skillful way that the present audience accepts. Although the concept of performance tends to invoke an image of conscious strategic action, Goffman does not propose that performance necessarily is “conscious” or “strategic” (Smith, 2006, p. 44). Rather, performances involve both portions that are possible to consciously manage (the expressions “given”) and portions that are ungovernable to the actor (the expressions “given off”) (Goffman, 1990 [1959], pp. 14–18).

Overall, in addition to the embodied dispositions that actors bring to the interaction, the interactionist perspective sensitizes us to how actors make sense of situations and perform status symbols in presence of others. The interactionist perspective let us move from the concern for the embodied capacity of actors to perform elite distinctions such as ease, to questions regarding the negotiation of what counts as embodied elite distinctions, during which situational circumstances a performance counts as such, and who is worthy claiming it.

### 1.3 The empirical case

The present article builds on an ethnographic study of a site where selected students from two elite upper secondary schools, GS and CS, meet face to face. The site is a European-wide conference where both schools send their students as representatives in a parliament simulation, similar to the Model United Nations and Model European
Parliament format. The conference organizers and teachers at the schools frame the site as an international leadership conference for "young leaders" where students can practice leadership skills and build networks of presumptive future leaders. During the conference week, the students work in smaller groups to prepare a policy proposal. At the end of the conference, selected participants debate the proposals through speeches given in a plenary session. The conference also includes cultural events such as guided tours, visits to museums and classical concerts, as well as formal dinners and mingles, teambuilding activities, and meetings with high-level national and international leaders. Furthermore, the participants have free time, which includes informal dinners, pub nights, and shopping. Teachers and students from both schools view participation in the conference as a sign of excellence.

Altogether, this renders the conference an excellent ethnographic site for investigating what counts as embodied elite distinction in this adolescent elite as well as the potential differences between students from the economic elite school and the meritocratic elite school. Furthermore, the case allows us to empirically investigate how situational factors and dispositional factors dynamically affect the negotiation and performance of embodied elite distinctions in face-to-face interactions. While adolescents still is in the process of socialization, they may be expected to already have internalized important classed and gendered dispositions through family and school socialization.

2 | DATA AND METHODS

Data collection for the present article was part of a larger project focusing on internationalization in the Swedish upper secondary school. During the fieldwork at CS and GS, which included interviews with students and staff as well as observations of curricular and extracurricular activities, I found out about the international conferences and was allowed to follow students while they participated. In line with ethical guidelines, the persons who participated in the study were informed and gave their active consent to participate prior to initiation of the research. All names of schools and persons are pseudonyms.

The data presented here build on fieldnotes documenting around 100 hr of participant observation at two conferences, each lasting five full days. I have participated in activities directly pertaining to the conference, but also preparatory meetings before the conferences, travels with students to the sessions, and participation during free-time activities. In addition to observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted shortly after each conference with a majority of the Swedish participants. Two students declined to participate in the interview; however, this was a minor problem, as I was able to conduct conversations in the field with them. The interview material amounts to sixteen student interviews, lasting on average just over 1 hr. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using a qualitative coding software.

Both the interview and observation guide were designed to capture how students negotiate what counts as valued ways of conducting oneself, and interacting with others, during the conference. In addition, the observations focused on students' body language and interactional dynamics by systematically observing how much verbal space they took as well as their turn-taking and speech interruption patterns. The interview guide included themes such as students' social background, experiences of being a student at the particular school, and their detailed accounts and experiences of activities and interactions during the conference. Furthermore, field note excerpts were used to construct interviewee specific questions focusing on significant episodes of interaction during the conference. Thus, I focus on both what students bring to the interaction in terms of dispositions shaped in the family and school as well as on how students interpret emerging situational dynamics during the conference.

The data were analyzed with a focus on how situational and dispositional factors influence the performance of embodied elite distinctions. The first round of coding focused on what is at stake for the students during interactions in the conference and how they verbally and non-verbally negotiated what counts as valued ways of conducting oneself in this setting. The second round of coding focused on patterns regarding what counts as
valued conduct across situations with regard to how they were defined and across students depending on gender, class and school affiliation. In order to code students' class backgrounds, information on their parents' occupation have been classified using the Oslo Register Data Classification (ORDC) scheme, which suggest that occupational classes can be distinguished both vertically (volume of capital) and horizontally (type and composition of capital).  

3  |  FINDINGS

3.1  |  Leaders and spectators

The conferences begin with a grand opening ceremony where selected students, organizing teachers, and invited high-level leaders set the tone for the event by giving speeches. “You participants in this hall are most likely the next generation of leaders in the world! You are young leaders!” one teacher exclaims from the podium during the ceremony, addressing the crowd of adolescents dressed in dark formal attire in the impressive assembly hall. An air of seriousness and importance characterizes the conferences. “You felt important when you were there” says Isabel, a GS student, in a post-conference interview.

The leadership-oriented framing is an important example of how these schools actively attempt to prepare adolescents for elite positions. My observations also show that the students are prepared for power in a more mundane way by virtue of their practical experiences in interactions during the conference, such as their work on policy proposals in small groups. The students from both GS and CS tried to assume an informal leader role in these groups. Karl explained that a student could have three different informal roles during the group work:

There were the ones who did nothing at all and then there were those who drove the group work forward and then there were some who supported [...]. It was like this, when you did a lot [...] you had a leader role, after a while you could feel that when you proposed something you got more support than someone who did not do as much as you. (Interview, Karl, Economic upper class, GS)

The students who had the “leader role” spoke extensively and contributed “good” and “smart” input, according to the other attendees. They became the people others listened to and were granted influence over the common work.

Usually during group work, just a few participants in the group were verbally active. The active students' verbal exchange formed the center of the interaction and the inactive students were assigned a spectator or non-participant role in the quiet periphery. The active students appeared highly confident and assertive; they sat close to the table in an upright, alert posture and were physically directed toward the others, maintaining a steady gaze. The less active students, who constituted the majority, were either directed toward the active students, giving them attention by nodding and making affirmative sounds, or diverted their gazes and bodies away from the interaction by looking downwards, not meeting the other students’ gazes.

Sarah were not able to take the leader role which she desired and equated with “winning”, which for her meant that “you get a lot said” and “you go home with the feeling you’ve changed something”. During the group work she was mostly silent and was frequently staring down giving a nervous and embarrassed impression.

If you didn't have a comment you thought was worth [laughs] submitting to the group [then you were quiet]. I wouldn't say I didn't care... I probably got nervous, I don't usually take that much verbal space. If someone else wants that space I go down, you know. [...] But... you didn't really feel like part of the group then because you didn't say much. So it felt like you were observing the others speaking, not really being part of the group. (Interview, Sarah, Professional lower middle class, GS)
Sarah’s experience contains both nervous resignation, submission, as well as embarrassment over becoming an inactive spectator, not being able to perform as a leader and thus meet the tacit expectations of the situation.

While the work in small groups officially is predefined as “teamwork” by the conference organizers, the students’ experiences of the interaction suggest that another definition of the situation emerges organically. Peter, for example, describes the group work as a situation where one struggles to “pass a crucial point that you really like, that you really worked for”; “You succeed in passing it, you get incredibly satisfied. You fail in passing it, you get incredibly unsatisfied.” (Peter, Professional upper class, CS). Furthermore, Emma’s question, that occupied her before the conference, “Will I be completely silent or will I really contribute?” underlines what is at stake for the students in these situations (Interview, Emma, Cultural upper middle class, CS). Hence, the students seem to define the group work as a “competitive situation” where you can “win” or “lose” and where you perform in front of an audience of other students who evaluate each other.

When interaction in the conference is defined as a situation of competition, both the active and inactive behavior becomes “performances” that is treated as symbols by the students of whether or not they “incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values” honored in the elite school context (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 43). The leader performance, expressed through active, confident and self-assured behavior functions as a status symbol as it demonstrates one’s full belonging to the group of elite school students.

This performative aspect further becomes evident during a situation where the students in a mundane manner talk about a long day of group work that ended with each group appointing students who would make speeches during the plenary session. As the Swedish students and I eat pizza at a restaurant in the evening, Karl says to the others, “We had four guys in our committee who didn’t say anything at all for two whole days. Completely silent. One guy in my committee even approached me and apologized for not contributing at all.” (Field notes). The others laugh at the story and Albert, from GS, tells the other students that he and his classmate Gustav, who were in the same group, were responsible for “ninety percent of everything that was done.” Therefore, he concludes, “it was obvious that we should make the speeches at the plenary session.” (Field notes). A bit later during the dinner, Emma, from CS, tells the other female students that she and her classmate Rebecca, who were in the same group, were selected to make speeches, “I tell you, Rebecca and I came up with ninety percent of the content on the whiteboard yesterday during the brainstorming.” (Field notes). The students use the active leader role as a status symbol to claim elite status, both by embodying it during competitive face-to-face interactions and by claiming it afterwards by telling about one’s role in the interaction, building a reputation of being a true leader.

The strong value attached to being a leader corroborates prior studies on how elite schooling is observed to shape students who are “ready to take command without self-doubt” (Cookson & Persell, 1985, p. 25) and who cherish “the will to win” which prepares students more for “the game of every man for himself” than teamwork and cooperation” (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 87–88). This also resonates with studies of elite schooling in the Swedish context where educational activities to a large degree is designed to train students to assume leadership positions (Holmqvist, 2017; Sandgren, 2015; Törnqvist, 2019). Such a pedagogy may have the (un)intended consequence that “winning becomes the measure of success” instead of, for example, the “discovery [of] truth, solving the problem, or reaching consensus.” (Fine, 2008, p. 247).

3.2 When the working consensus dissolve: Between a merit and privilege situation

The analysis above describes how the interaction during these conferences played out on a regular basis. The students—both the active and inactive—regularly maintained a “working consensus” (Goffman, 1990 [1959], pp. 20–21), collectively defining group work as a “competitive situation” where you can win or lose. Most of the time, the students tended to take this routinized definition of the situation for granted and accept it as the normal state of things. However, during a few interactions, students began actively reflecting on the character of the interaction itself and their role in it. In such situations, the fleeting consensus faded into definitional disagreement.
During a meeting in which the Swedish participants were supposed to work together as a team, a competitive and hierarchical interaction dynamic emerged. The male students from GS had most of the speaking time, the female students from CS were verbally active but to a lesser degree, and the female students from GS were mostly silent. The students shared the impression that the interaction was more of “competition” than “teamwork”. Marcus said, “those who didn’t hold the floor, didn’t get to talk as much.” (Interview, Marcus, Economic upper class, GS). Sarah felt that it was the active students “who held their [own] meeting” and the others were mere spectators. “I wouldn’t say that the other of us were silenced but it was more like you’d let them speak. I didn’t say much during that meeting but rather let them be with their discussion and sometimes others broke in.” (Interview, Sarah, Professional lower middle class, GS). Rebecca experienced, not just in this meeting but in many interactions, that it felt like a struggle; “‘boys against girls’, ‘the professional against the un-professional’, [...] ‘they who know the drill and they who don’t’” (Interview, Professional upper class, CS). While the students appear to agree that the situation was characterized by competition, the CS and GS students disagree on the point to whether the situation was fair or not.

What happened in the situation, from Emma’s perspective, was that the “Garden Boys”, a notion with both gendered and classed meanings, assumed the leader role by holding the floor aggressively and silencing others by interrupting.

I wanted to take up a lot of verbal space, I wanted to take more space than I did. [...] They [the “Garden boys”] took up very, very much space, very often in every situation I was with them in. I don’t think it was that they wanted to prove themselves just in this meeting, I think they’ve gotten used to having that space. (Interview, Emma, Cultural upper middle class, CS).

Emma, and the other CS students, interpret the group work interaction as a "privilege situation" where access to the active leader role depends on a gendered and classed sense of having the right to hold the floor rather than on formal merits and an ambition to contribute to the collective work.

Emma explains how she tried to nonverbally signal the male GS students’ lack of respect and violation of turn-taking norms during the interaction, "When they noticed that I reacted to it, because they discovered it themselves, then they backed off. When I got quiet and stared at them, then they went silent." This emotionally controlled and decorous way of drawing attention to the breach of turn-taking norms is contrasted to my observations of some of the other CS students’ more aggressive non-verbal signaling, such as interrupting the male students frequently or holding the floor to assert oneself. Emma describes how one of her classmates seemed to think “I don’t give a fuck, I interrupt because they do it” and then she adds “Yes, [my classmate] is a feminist but I am too, it’s more about the method.” The CS students do not just reflect on the interaction pattern in post-conference interviews, but are monitoring the dynamic of the interaction in situ as it emerges. They interpret the interactional dynamic in relation to cultural and political discourses about masculinity, class and male privilege, as well as feminism and justice and respond by symbolic nonverbal gestures during the meeting.

The GS students do not share the impression that the interaction was a "privilege situation". In a poised manner, Gustav reasoned about why some students held the floor more than others did,

I was very well prepared compared to many others. So probably that’s why I took quite a lot of verbal space. I keep objective in these situations you know, and look at it from a holistic perspective [...]. You have the aim in sight: this is what we want to achieve, and then you try to achieve it in the best way possible. And in this case, I felt... I assessed that the best way to achieve it was that I say what I know, spread my thoughts (Interview, Gustav, Professional upper class, GS).

Gustav suggests that the competitive situation in fact was a "merit situation". The reason why some students held the floor extensively is not a matter of class or gender; rather, they are just taking responsibility for leading the
group work forward, contributing to the collective by working harder, sharing invaluable knowledge and having vital rhetorical skills. The female students at GS, who made very few verbal utterances during the group work, were more ambivalent regarding what kind of situation they were faced with:

Maybe you could have thought about this thing with boys and girls [...] Distributed who has the floor or something. But now when I think about it once more: no. I mean, if you have something to say, you have to say it... Otherwise don't. That's your own responsibility to say and speak for yourself. For me it's more of an observation: Yes, the boys dared to hold the floor more, but then the girls must sharpen up if they want to be at the same level. (Interview, Isabel, Economic upper class, GS).

Isabel first seems to consider the possibility that the interaction was a “privilege situation”; however, she concludes that it in fact was as a “merit situation” where some students had prepared more, had deeper knowledge, were more confident, and knew what they had to do to achieve the collective aim of the group. Thus, the female students need to “sharpen up” if they want contribute to the same degree.

These finding suggests that as long as the students maintain the shared impression that the interaction is a “merit situation,” the competitive and hierarchical interaction is appreciated as fair and legitimate. During such situational circumstances of meritocratic consensus, the active, confident, self-assured leader behavior function as a unanimous status symbol that is honored with prestige in both the GS and CS peer groups. It is seen as a morally legitimate performance of elite position. However, when the shared definition of the situation dissolve, as it does during the group work when the CS students claim that it is a “privilege situation”, the same kind of behavior is disputed as a status symbol. To just carry on, confidently holding the floor in a “privilege situation” appear, from the CS students’ perspective, not to be a sign of confidence and ease but rather a faux pas, a tone-deaf lack of tact and respect, that signals overconfidence, arrogance and classed and gendered entitlement.

Nevertheless, given the “merit situation,” that the GS students maintain, staring, interrupting, symbolically silencing oneself, and holding the floor in order to signal unfair treatment also constitutes tactless behavior as it deviates from the meritocratic idea that one’s standing in the competitive situation mirrors one’s true individual merit. In addition, some of the CS students feel that this kind of behavior may be problematic, as we saw above when Emma differentiated between different ways of signaling the breach of turn-taking norms. Rebecca also felt that one of her classmates in the meeting was “just looking to steamroller over [the ‘Garden boys’] for its own sake” because they appeared to think they were “the best”.

You should ask factual questions [...] while [my classmate] just said “I think like this ...” [mimics]. She just wanted to speak. Then she was quiet a short while to think, to come up with something, and then she gave her personal opinion whether it was a good proposal or not [...]. I just thought “You don’t say... okay”. But are you going to criticize it? Will you write an amendment? Will you bring it up in the parliament? (Interview, Rebecca, Professional upper class, CS)

While Rebecca sympathizes with the intention of challenging the “Garden boys,” it must be performed in a way that gives the impression of contributing to the common work in a relevant way, signaling leadership, not just pretentiously holding the floor to be noticed or convey a message of unfair treatment.

Altogether, this draws attention to how vulnerable embodied status symbols are as their meaning appear to depend on whether they are performed poorly or skillfully and on how the situation where the interaction unfolds is defined. By managing performances and turn-taking properly, the students can maintain the impression that the competitive and hierarchical interaction is a result of differences in individual merit. As long as the students maintain consensus that the competitive interaction is a "merit situation," the active leader behavior may avow as a symbol of legitimate elite status.
Leading with confident ease or confident awareness

Confident ease appears to be the most valued way of symbolically expressing one’s elite position in this setting, and it appears particularly to be the hallmark of the male upper class students from GS. They consistently perform as leaders with ease, displaying a high degree of confidence and self-assuredness. Even when their behavior and conception of the situation is contested, as in the group work examined above, they do not resign, get angry or agitated, rather, they maintain a show of relaxed, “natural,” confidence.

This sense of ease stands in contrast to the female students and less affluent students who described that they often felt awkward, anxious and nervous when encountering the elite-coded conference. Female students, at both CS and GS, felt that it was more “natural” for male students to assume the leader role, while female students who behaved in a similar manner risked being seen as “angry” or “aggressive” and labelled as “bad,” “super-feminists” or “bitches.” For instance, Rebecca discussed feeling that she needed to balance her performance between holding the floor confidently like the male students did, while at the same time standing back and being nice to give the impression that she and other active female students were “not bitches.” Furthermore, gender intersects with social class in various ways.

As we saw above Sarah, who has a lower middle class background, report that she felt nervous and paralyzed during the conference, a context that appeared alien to her. When she moved around in formal attire, participating in group work and plenary sessions, she did not feel as “natural” as her classmates, who have a background in the upper classes. Sarah contends that “it did not feel so strange” to see the other GS students dressed in formal attire because “they dress pretty formal” in school too. But “if I would see any of my old friends who weren’t as rich and stylish and all that I would be more surprised, it would feel more strange, but now everyone felt … everyone from Garden at least … it felt natural that they wore suits” (Interview, Sarah, Professional lower middle class, GS).

Students with middle class background engaged in extensive reflexive work to understand and attempting to fit with the elite-coded conference setting. Emma, who has an upper middle class background, described that she felt awkward in many situations during the conference. The formal attire made her feel “stiff in some way, because I’m not at all used to it.” When buying new clothes for the conference, she anxiously pondered “How nicely dressed will the others be?”. And while she was proud of making a speech in plenary, “wow, I did it”, she was still “awfully nervous” standing at the podium with shaking legs and stumbling on words (Interview, Emma, CS).

Students with upper class background felt more “at home” in the elite-coded conference setting. The male GS students with upper class background described feeling confident in most situations during the conference. For instance, Marcus, who has a background in the economic upper class, says that when he dressed in dark suit it enhanced his sense of “self-confidence” and “authority”. While he admits that he was a bit nervous before he made his speech in plenary, the “nervousness vanished” when he entered the podium and he felt “pretty calm,” in “control,” and “completely natural” so “I just talked freely on the stage” (Interview, Marcus, CS).

These findings confirm prior studies on how classed dispositions matter for the capacity to navigate elite spaces with ease (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1996; Reay et al., 2010; Thiele, 2016). The upper class students appear to have the appropriate embodied resources to navigate the conference setting “effortlessly” with “natural” ease. In contrast to the middle class students, they do not need to waste any energy on attempting to reflexively grasp the code of the setting in order to “fit in”.

However, despite the nervousness and awkwardness that the less affluent female CS students felt in the conference, they successfully seized the leader role in many situations, displaying a high degree of courage and confidence. In the group work explored above, the CS students did not respond with nervous resignation or dominated submission when they felt challenged, rather, they challenged the male GS students’ behavior by performing in a mode of confident awareness, continuing to hold the floor with confidence and authority while simultaneously signaling outwardly the unease and social injustice they experienced in the meeting. This finding suggests that the lack of sociocultural fit not necessarily result in resignation but likewise can be turned into a mundane form of micro-political resistance.
The CS students' performance of confident awareness may partly be understood as an expression of a moral disposition (Sayer, 2005, pp. 30–35). GS and CS students appear to feel a varying moral sensitivity to behavioral and emotional signs of “elitism,” of performing in a way that conveys that one thinks that one is the “the best” or even “better than others.” This becomes apparent when the students reflect on the fact that they were selected as representatives in the conference through harsh competition at their respective school. Emma feels that there are strong expectations of modesty and self-deprecation at CS and that one needs to handle the fact that one was singled out as better than others with care. While the teacher making the selection “knows who would contribute more than others” it is important “if you get selected” that “you don’t talk about it and others don’t elevate you either.” (Interview, Emma, Cultural upper middle class). This attitude is also apparent in Rebecca’s account of what she wrote in her application letter, where she was supposed to justify why she was the best candidate for the conference:

I wrote that all students from City School are very different and that there is no typical City student. And therefore I think I would be just as good a representative as anybody else. And maybe it’s precisely for this reason I’m good, you know. (Rebecca, Professional upper class, CS)

The CS students appear to be highly sensitive to any sign of elitism. This stand in contrast to the GS students, who report that they received “a lot of praise” from their classmates for participating in the conference (Interview, Gustav, Professional upper class, GS). The conference “is prestige, it really is. If you’re selected, then you’re good” as Isabel states, continuing to say in a conspicuous manner “I don’t want to brag, but I guess I’m one of the best students at the school. And the teachers know that [so] then they chose me” (Interview, Isabel, Economic upper class, GS).

The GS students’ ease about being labelled as elite, in the broad sense of the term, and the CS students’ unease about it probably play into their differential responses to the asymmetric interaction pattern during the group work. For the CS students it is crucial to not stand out as better than others. Thus, for them a morally legitimate symbolic expression of elite position is not confident ease, but rather confident awareness which let them perform elite position in a way that is deemed morally legitimate in their school.

4 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article, I have explored how students symbolically express belonging to a group of the most successful, high-achieving elite school students. For this elite group of adolescents, ease seems to function widely as a behavioral and emotional status symbol. Nevertheless, to pull off a performance of confident ease one must be regarded as an indispensable contributor, who works hard for the group’s common good. It includes handling hierarchical interaction carefully by giving the impression that one has superior merits and by successfully managing feelings and displays of superiority and inferiority. This resonates with Khan’s (2011, pp. 72–78) and Rivera’s (2016, pp. 172–179) suggestion that ease should be understood as a self-presentation skill to manage confidence displays and an interactional skill to put others at ease.

However, the present findings suggest that ease not just depends on individual skill but also on the interactants’ combined interest and ability to maintain working consensus regarding the moral legitimacy of hierarchies, such as the hierarchical interaction pattern in the conferences. Both the highly active and inactive student must define the interaction as a “merit situation” by tactfully giving the impression that every individual’s position in the hierarchy depends solely on differences in achieved merits, not ascribed privileges. When the students were able to maintain such a meritocratic consensus, the informal leaders’ confident and assertive behavior was recognized as ease. In interactions where the working consensus were contested, the same confident and assertive behavior could be labelled arrogant entitlement and seen as illegitimate in light of unearned privileges. These findings point to the importance of investigating ease as a collective accomplishment, achieved in and through interaction, in addition to looking at the individual skills and dispositions that facilitate it.
Furthermore, the present analysis suggests that classed, gendered and school-related moral dispositions are important in order to understand differences in students’ unequal opportunities to perform in a mode of confident ease. Similar to prior findings on how class (Bourdieu, 1996; Reay et al. 2010) and gender (Jarness et al. 2019; Khan, 2011) influence opportunities to perform with ease in elite settings, the class-advanced male GS students experienced sociocultural fit with the elite-coded conference context, making them feel more comfortable and confident than female students and students from more disadvantaged class backgrounds.

However, the students from CS performed in a mode of “confident awareness,” meaning they behaved with confidence and authority, while simultaneously exploiting the unease they felt in the conference to draw attention to how privilege appeared to structure who gets to speak and who is listened to. They draw on moral-political discourses of privilege and feminism to challenge the established “merit situation” and to give the impression that it is a “privilege situation”. In contrast to the GS students who tend to feel proud about their elite position or take it for granted in most situations, the CS students cultivate a highly reflexive, distanced orientation toward their own and others’ elite position, because such a position seems illegitimate if it is not based on superior merits. Leading with confident ease is for them only legitimate in interactions defined as “merit situations”. While male students from GS, the economic elite school, attempted to keep their display of “confident ease” regardless of situation, the female students from CS, the meritocratic elite school, typically switched between performing with “confident ease” and “confident awareness” depending on situation.

The CS students’ performance of confident awareness is not primarily coded as an act of resistance from a position that is perceived as subordinate the male students from GS, but rather as a contradictory way of claiming elite status in a way deemed morally legitimate. The behavioral and emotional display of confident awareness is key to craft a morally legitimate performance of elite position by signaling a certain unease, discomfort, and awkwardness in relation to privilege and hierarchy in situations that give the impression that one’s elite position may be unjustified.

Wouters (1992) suggests that overt displays of superiority and self-aggrandizement, especially when based on birth or inheritance, became increasingly problematic in the West from the mid-twentieth century and could lead to “loss of status and face” (Wouters, 1992, p. 231). This resonates with Sherman’s recent study of elite parental strategies, suggesting that parents strive to raise children who perform privilege with “modesty, reciprocity, ‘awareness’, and hard work” (Sherman, 2017, p. 11). It seems like the more egalitarian orientations of the CS students should not be interpreted as either an expression of a subordinate position or a thin legitimation strategy, but such moral dispositions may be strategically drawn upon to forge elite distinction (Halvorsen, 2020; Törnqvist, 2019). Are these differences between GS and CS students’ performances of elite position indicative of contradictory modes of elite distinction within the contemporary period?

While the present study is limited, the findings align with Jarness, Pedersen and Flemmen’s more extensive interview study of elite distinction at two Norwegian elite schools. It shows that students at the economic elite school cultivated a style of ease and naturalness (Jarness et al. 2019) while those from the cultural elite school valued a “non-elitist style,” emphasizing “nerdiness” and liberal values such as gender equality (Pedersen et al. 2018). The mode of elite distinction appear more diverse in the contemporary situation compared to earlier periods, emphasizing both more mundane and popular practices that signal ordinariness and authenticity while simultaneously catering practices of exclusivity and elitism (Friedman & Reeves, 2020).

The present study demonstrates the usefulness of a Goffmanian, interactionist perspective on embodied distinctions (cf. Daloz, 2010; Draelants & Darchy-Koechlin, 2011; Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Such a perspective appears to be rather hard to combine with the rigid interpretation of the Bourdieusian dispositional approach, which emphasizes that the ability to convey elite distinction mainly is a function of fit between habitus and field. While the habitus concept was launched as a way of transcending the structure-agency problematic, it has repeatedly been criticized for privileging a view of practice as a mere “reflection and replication of exterior structures” (Alexander, 1995, p. 136; Nash, 2003).
Partly as a response to such critique, scholars studying elite distinction have attempted to make a more dynamic interpretation of the Bourdieusian framework (see King [2000, pp. 419–422] regarding the more dynamic practice theory present in Bourdieu’s writings). Drawing on Bourdieu’s practice theory and other theoretical sources, it suggests that students learn a “sense of practice” through daily negotiations with other students and teachers of the expectations of particular elite institutions, thus developing skills to express their elite position in a way that is deemed appropriate in the given context (see e.g. Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b; Khan, 2011). Thus, dispositions of the habitus does not “determine” situated practice, rather it provides the actor with “microinteractional resources” that can be used to navigate explicit and implicit expectations of elite institutions (Lareau & Calarco, 2012, pp. 78–79). Such a dynamic interpretation appears to bridge the Bourdieusian perspective and the interactionist perspective as it stresses how actors negotiate what counts as elite distinction during open-ended processes of face-to-face interaction.

Nevertheless, this study stresses that scholars need to pay more attention to the situational contingency that haunts performances of elite distinction. The performance itself provides one source of contingency as it is carried out in front of an evaluative audience and because it needs to be skillfully staged “so that it will express during the interaction what [the actor] wishes to convey” (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 40). The maintenance of working consensus provides another source of contingency as it is fleeting and highly vulnerable. The maintenance of working consensus is necessary for facilitating smooth communication with status symbols in face-to-face interactions. Behavioral and emotional displays do not have intrinsic meanings, but acquire meaning as status symbols through interpersonal interpretive processes in face-to-face interaction.

Embodied status symbols, such as confident ease or confident awareness, should thus not solely be understood as durable dispositions that students have and that they carry from interaction to interaction. Rather, they appear to be fragile performances that becomes possible for some students who embody particular classed, gendered and moral dispositions when interactions are defined in a particular way. Status symbols, and perhaps especially those expressed through ritualized behavioral and emotional displays, are vulnerable to other persons’ interpretations and the prevailing situational circumstances. While some behavioral and emotional displays appear to be more exclusive status symbols for one or the other elite group, there tend to be a margin of uncertainty in which negotiations of the meaning of status symbols play out. This margin of uncertainty appears to be wider in the contemporary situation, where elites are more demographically diverse (Khan, 2011) and where contradictory modes of elite distinction are at work simultaneously (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Altogether, this indicate the relevance of continuing exploring how embodied elite distinctions are negotiated in situated interaction.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The Author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared due to ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES
1 This characterization is based on fieldwork in the schools as well as on statistics from Statistics Sweden analyzed by Senior Lecturer Håkan Forsberg at Sociology of Education and Culture (SEC) at Uppsala University.
2 Goffman (1951) differentiates between "status symbol" and "esteem symbol". Conventionally, “status” is seen as a property of positions while “esteem” is accorded through the evaluation of the person in the position. In this article, I conflate these two, viewing status symbols as “observable markers of social position” (Sauder 2005, p. 281).
3 For ethical reasons, the exact format is not disclosed as this would make it easier to identify individual students.
Because three students participated in both conferences, the number of unique students interviewed is thirteen.

For more information, see https://www.sv.uio.no/iss/english/research/projects/ordc/. While the scheme initially were devised for classifying register data, it has been used on interview data as well (Personal communication with Dr. Jørn Ljunggren).

No male students from CS attended the meeting.

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