Consecrating and Desecrating Elite Communities: Fearing and Dealing with Social Deviance in Sweden’s Wealthiest Neighborhood

Mikael Holmqvist
Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract
In this article I report observations from an ethnographic study of a Swedish economic elite community, including interviews with residents and service staff, and participant observations in various social contexts stretching over a period of five years that can contribute to an understanding of how elite communities respond to potential social deviance among its members, such as feelings of insufficiency and stress, thus trying to avoid any ‘desecration’ of their social and cultural capital. Specifically, I examine how the practices through which desecration is avoided, for example the exclusion of unwanted members, interplay in the further consecration of the communities, thus maintaining and strengthening elites’ status and standing. Studying the problems and difficulties experienced by elites in their neighborhood settings, and how they try to manage them, is potentially an important step forward to better analyze and understand the way powerful groups in contemporary society maintain and strengthen their privileges and power.

Keywords
consecration, cultural capital, desecration, elites, power

As witnessed by a steady growth of publications since the last few years of the 20th century, elites, that is, people with extraordinary access to social and cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1996; Khan, 2012), constitute an important field of research in contemporary cultural sociology (see e.g. Davis and Williams, 2017; Wiesel, 2020). But in relation to
research on deprived communities and neighborhoods, studies of ‘elite communities’, that is, the places where elites choose to live and exert their dominion, remain rare: Relatively few sociologists and other social scientists have examined how elite groups live in geographically distinct places, and how their communities affect their identities and selves as elites (see, e.g. Hay, 2016; Pincon and Pincon-Charlot, 1999, 2007; Pow, 2011). Noting that elites create social distinctions and borders between groups of people, thus reproducing classes based on money, morals and manners (see Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Molnar, 2002) that contribute to segregation and inequality in society (see Dorling, 2019; Rodenstedt, 2014; Wiesel, 2018), much of the existing reports of elite communities, including my own (Holmqvist, 2017, 2021), describe them as ‘consecrating places’, where residents are constructed as socially, morally and aesthetically superior in relation to other groups and classes (see Accominotti, 2021; Andreotti et al., 2015; Khan, 2011). One example of this construction is children being the subject to what Lareau (2003) named ‘concerted cultivation’, which involves various practices through which parents contribute to raising children’s social, communicative and aesthetic abilities (see also LeWita, 1994; Martin, 2015). Indeed, consecration is critical to elites’ legitimacy to act as powerful groups in society at large, and the way their communities are sacralized as superior places in social and moral terms legitimates inequality (cf. Dorling, 2019; Hay, 2016). Indeed, as Weber (1946: 262) concluded: formal authority positions can only become socially legitimate and influential if they are transformed from objective aspects of power into rights that are ‘sanctified’ (see also Bourdieu, 1996: 116–117; Durkheim, 1973: 175). Overall, the extant literature describes people in elite communities as well-educated, with good jobs, leading healthy and active lives; also these neighborhoods offer few signs of poverty and social problems in terms of homelessness, crime and unemployment, which, according to the residents’ own views, are typically not only attributed to their strong economic resources, but also to the way they manage themselves, standing out as exemplary individuals for people at large (see, e.g. Holmqvist, 2017; Wiesel, 2018). The title of Pincon and Pincon-Charlot’s seminal study from 1989, which describes life in an exclusive Parisian area, is representative of the image of these areas: Dans les Beaux Quartiers (‘In the Beautiful Neighborhoods’).

Consecration and Desecration in Elite Communities

Despite the standard images of elite communities’ consecration as offered by sociologists and other social scientists, there is some evidence that challenges the idea of the ‘positive side’ of consecration. Most notably Luthar and her colleagues in psychology have done a number of studies of children and adolescents in the upper-middle-class and upper-class environments, where they picture a world characterized by stress, mental fatigue, constant pressure to perform, feelings of loneliness and weak parent–child relations, and drug and alcohol abuse, describing how young people in elite communities are suffering from feelings of angst and insufficiency (see e.g. Luthar, 2003; Luthar and Becker, 2002). In essence, Luthar and colleagues’ studies suggest it can be tough being a kid in a world characterized by material affluence and parents with high expectations and influential positions in society. As Luthar and Latendresse (2005: 49) concluded: ‘Growing up in a culture of affluence can connote various psychosocial risks.’ Indeed,
these conclusions may appear counter-intuitive, given the familiar observations that inequality in societies, to which elite communities make a significant contribution, creates various forms of social problems and illnesses – for the already disadvantaged (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2007).

But Luthar and colleagues’ studies are sociologically interesting by suggesting how elite communities may not only offer their residents an environment through which they may acquire vital social and cultural capital to the benefit of their socially and morally elevated status in society at large, but how this consecration has a human price that may not only negatively affect residents’ individual well-being, but the aura and status of the communities as well. Essentially, people’s negative psychological experiences of elite communities through the very same processes that aim to socially elevate them, risk desacralizing such places if their problems come to be known widely by others (see Pargament and Mahoney, 2009; Pargament et al., 2005). Not surprisingly, people often go to great lengths to preserve and protect whatever they perceive to be sacred, which can explain the observation that residents of elite communities are often militant in defending their lifestyle and their communities’ image (see Pincon and Pincon-Charlot, 2007; Wiesel, 2018). As Pargament et al. (2005: 60), noted, history is full of examples of perceptions of sacred loss, such as a fall from grace (see also Newman, 1988). This ‘desecration’ is the process whereby the social and cultural capital of a community risk diminishment as a result of its members’ failure to ‘live up to expectations’, socially and morally. Desecration of elite communities comes about when residents fail to effectively reproduce dominant social norms, such as when they act in a way that is ‘socially deviant’, voluntarily and deliberately, as in protests, criticism, whistleblowing, criminal activity and so on, or involuntarily, as when being mentally or physically ill, thus not wanting or being unable to uphold an image of a supreme community lifestyle, as presented to others. According to this view, desecration is a serious threat to elite communities’ status and power by making their residents appear less socially and morally exemplary. This should have some important consequences for their authority to lead their environments, based on the standard definition of leadership as the creation of moral codes for others (see Alvesson, 2011; Barnard, 1968; Jackall, 1988).

As already implied, the sociology of culture in general, and the sociology of elites in particular, has so far concentrated on the ‘positive side’ of elite communities, which are critical to their ability to consecrate their residents and reproduce their socially and morally elevated status. Less attention has, however, been devoted to the way elite communities react to, and manage, the ‘dark side’ of their culture and lifestyle, thus trying to avoid any desecration; and how consecration and the potential of desecration interact in the reproduction of elites. As I will try to show in this article, studying the problems and difficulties experienced by people living in elite communities, and the way they try to deal with them in order to maintain their social status and standing, can give valuable additional insights into the practices and rituals of elites. If the social fears and problems of elites are exposed and examined systematically, a new understanding of how they constantly try to reproduce themselves may be gained: Effectively managing residents’ real and potential failures to uphold central norms and values is a critical, yet so far unexplored, aspect of elite communities’ consecration that can contribute to explaining why
these places appear so successful in appearing as ‘shining cities upon a hill’ (Fitzgerald, 1981; Pincon and Pincon-Charlot, 2007; Wiesel, 2018).

Certainly, consecration is ‘positive’ through the construction of legitimacy of the social and moral superiority of elites, which has already been reported in the sociology of culture literature. But as I will examine in this article, the process can also be ‘negative’, by trying to manage human behaviors that are seen as threats to this legitimacy, which, if done successfully, will further enhance elites’ legitimacy and consecration. Thus, consecration in elite communities is not only about furthering community status and prestige, for example people’s aesthetic, social and communicative abilities (see Khan, 2011; Wiesel, 2018), but also about managing what can be seen as potential and real social deviance, for instance youngsters’ stress and angst (see Luthar, 2003; Luthar and Becker, 2002) – both the direct and indirect promotion of consecration are vital strategies through which any desecration of the community aura can be avoided, thus maintaining and furthering elite cohesiveness.

One can only speculate why so little sociological research has been done on elite communities so far, particularly regarding their ‘dark side’, and thus on how elite communities respond to, for instance, social problems and criminality among their residents that risk desecrating them. Maybe it has to do with the belief among sociologists and other social scientists that no serious social problems exist in these areas that deserve scholarly attention, particularly in relation to ‘obviously deprived areas’, where community desecration is a constant, and overt problem (see Holmqvist, 2017; Luthar and Sexton, 2004). Or the reason may be the familiar problem among sociologists of accessing elite settings in more depth, and gaining residents’ trust to talk about, for instance, personal and family problems that may suggest that these places are not the kind of ‘shining cities upon hills’ that they appear to be (see Beaverstock et al., 2004; Cousin et al., 2018; Fitzgerald, 1981). Indeed, it can be hard to have people who look upon themselves, and are seen by others, as leaders and role models, to even acknowledge any personal problems and social failures that could contribute to making their image appear less solid, and their lives less enjoyable and enviable. A positive ‘presentation of self’ is a vital strategy of success of elites; any negative aspects should thereby not be disclosed (see Jackall, 1988; Khurana, 2003). Hopefully, the present article’s focus may therefore also offer some methodological guidance in how to make the world of elites more accessible for scholarly inquiry and analysis.

Research Context and Methods

In this article, I will report data from an ethnographic study of a Swedish economic elite community that can contribute to an understanding of how elite communities react to the potential of desecration through residents’ failure to ‘live up to social expectations’. The community that is the subject of attention in this article is Djursholm, a neighborhood of some 9,000 people located close to Sweden’s capital and financial center, Stockholm. It is the foremost community of Sweden’s economic elite; most residents work in business and finance – sectors that are fundamental to the country’s economy. That Djursholm is located in a country known for its relative social equality, and for its social-democratic tradition, may make the case seem less relevant for a general understanding of how the
privileged classes may suffer from various social problems and illnesses, and how they respond to them (cf. Wilkinson and Pickett, 2007). Still, by sharing a number of characteristics of elite communities in other countries, such as display of extreme wealth and conspicuous consumption and residents’ control of critical command positions in society at large, Djursholm is representative of global mechanisms of privilege and its perpetuation, consecrating a global, rather than local elite (see Andreotti et al., 2015; Wiesel, 2018).

I studied Djursholm during 2010 and 2015 and published my results in English in a book (Holmqvist, 2017; see also Holmqvist, 2020, 2021). Drawing on the notion of consecration, my study proposes a broad picture of a successful elite neighborhood, where a number of privileges are highlighted: the supreme economic wealth of the area that is manifested in exquisite homes, shops, and restaurants; residents’ active and social lifestyle; the idealization of performance and success among both young and old; and other privileges, all in all making it relevant to think about such a place as a consecrating community, where residents are socially and morally elevated as a result of the community’s cultural and social capital (see Bourdieu, 1984, 1996). But, in my study I could also observe that among its residents, Djursholm was not always seen as an ideal world thus challenging their self-proclaimed ability to act as role-models with the moral right and legitimacy to prescribe a certain lifestyle for people at large. These observations constitute potentially important aspects of the ‘negative side’ of consecration in Djursholm, which in turn suggest that this elite community not only excludes those elsewhere and lower down the class hierarchy in Swedish society, but also creates significant pressures within it.

In my study of the area, I did formal interviews consisting of meetings and conversations with people, set up by prior consultation (usually email). In all, 207 people were interviewed. They fell under the following categories: local inhabitants, people who lived or had lived in the area, and service staff, people who worked or had worked there. The first group consisted of 128 individuals. At the planning stage of the interviews, I did not attempt a rigorous breakdown of age and gender in the target groups, but I did try to maintain a reasonable balance. In the group referred to as service staff (79 in all), I set out to meet individuals holding down a variety of jobs: for example tradespeople and market gardeners; police officers; au pairs; preachers at the chapel; and shop and restaurant staff. Usually, the interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes, and all were undertaken with an assurance of confidentiality, on the understanding that there would be no recording. In other words, quotations presented here are not direct quotations from tape recordings, but rather reported speech annotated during the interviews. In the early stages of my study, questions tended to be broader in scope and more generalized than at the end of the project. Later in my study, when I wanted to deepen my understanding of certain issues that had been flagged earlier, such as the consumption of alcohol among both the young and the old, I chose more targeted questions.

Between 2010 and 2015 I also frequented the area intensively, in public places or as a visitor to local associations or at events to which I had been invited. Additional observations were made in the many homes I visited to conduct interviews, dine, or attend social events. Of particular importance for this article, were visits to places I came to see as ‘free-zone spaces’, that is, places that acted as ‘refuges’ for residents (e.g. a gentlemen’s club where members acted in funny roles), where they could act in a more relaxed way,
so to speak, than normally. Over the course of these five years, I visited Djursholm by
day and night, weekdays and weekends, which gave me a good understanding of the
community and its residents. Overall, being a professor at a prestigious university was a
door opener in a community populated by a power elite. My basic command of the social
codes of the area, for example by speaking Swedish in a similar way as they did (accent,
tonation, etc.) and by behaving similarly in terms of body language, dress, and so on, a
result of my upbringing in a similar area and education as a day student at a private
boarding school, probably also played a significant role in gaining residents’ trust and
willingness to share experiences of various kinds. Indeed, although I did not live in the
neighborhood I studied, I was in many ways a member of it in terms of my preferences
and lifestyle, which, for better or worse, has affected the study.

The signs of ‘the dark side of Djursholm’ and the way these are handled that are
reported in this article, were not immediately obvious. But during the course of the study,
I started to observe issues related to alcohol abuse, stress and fatigue, and a general sense
of insufficiency and ‘not being good enough’ among the residents, both young and old,
resulting in a fear of social failure and potential loss of status, in other words, desecra-
tion. Certainly, several people told me they honored ‘integrity’ meaning an unwillingness
to talk about anything problematic in their private lives, and there was a saying among
the residents, ‘what happens here, stays here’, meaning that outsiders, such as a researcher
or a journalist, should normally not be informed about anything problematic in Djursholm.
Still, I also met people, particularly youngsters and elderly people, who wanted to share
personal experiences that were different variations on the theme of social failure; I even
got the impression that some of them thought it was a relief to talk to an outsider about
this. Also, from statistical material collected through Swedish government agencies, for
instance, on the kind of drugs prescribed to adults in Djursholm. I gradually came to
learn about ‘the dark side’ of this wealthy and seemingly privileged neighborhood.

For this article, my data on Djursholm’s ‘dark side’ come from two main sources: (a)
interviews with residents and service staff, where I was told about problems and feelings
of insufficiency and social failure among residents, for example divorces or alcohol
abuse; and (b) my observations on the way people related to one another on various occa-
sions, for example drinking much alcohol or playing games in private clubs that were
expressions of self-distance. In analyzing these data based on my theoretical framework,
I inductively made the following categories:

(a) **Expressions of potential social deviance**: A sense of failure and insufficiency
among residents, resulting in feelings of not being able to reproduce fundamen-
tal norms and values of performance and individual success. Indeed, communi-
ties with strong and homogenous values, which characterize most elite
communities (see Pincon and Pincon-Charlot, 1999; Pow, 2011) typically cre-
ate feelings of stress and anxiety to live up to social expectations (see Luthar
and Latendresse, 2005; Pargament et al., 2005). Not ‘managed properly’, such
experiences may result in desecration, that is, loss of social and cultural
capital.
(b) **Condemning and stigmatizing potentially deviant individuals**: elite residents’ lack of fully acting according to the social expectations of their communities prompt condemnation and stigmatization, whereby the aura of the community can remain intact (see Tyler, 2021), as well as practices through which the ‘dark sides’ are not disclosed to any external actors – these form a critical strategy of community consecration through which any desecration is avoided (see Pincon and Pincon-Charlot, 2007; Wiesel, 2018).

(c) **Disposing of potentially deviant individuals**: this too is a critical strategy of elite community consecration against a background of potential desecration, and together with the practice proposed in the previous point, contributes to sorting out the ‘non-worthy’ members of the community; a process that ultimately will strengthen the aura and status of the area. Hence, consecration is maintained by systematically excluding unwanted groups and classes of people that can be seen as ‘counter-desecrating’ practices (see Karabel, 2005; Stevens, 2009).

(d) **Individual strategies to escape the normative pressure of the community**: the escape to ‘free-zone spaces’, where residents can act in a more ‘personal’ and socially relaxed way, even doing mockery about themselves and the life in the area, suggests the importance of the back-stages of an elite community in order to understand how residents try to reproduce community values and norms front-stage wise (see Goffman, 1959). Thus, not only is there an interplay between the ‘positive sides’ of consecration and the ‘negative sides’ as manifested by the potential of desecration, there is also an interplay between ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ social arenas through which elites interact.

Overall, it can be argued that the consecration of elites operates through social separation and differentiation on physical, mental, and cultural levels (see Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Thus, points (b) and (c) are responses to point (a), in other words, there first needs to be a sense of failure and inability to live up to social expectations before any condemnation or disposing of community residents may occur; the risk of desecration triggers practices through which this is avoided, resulting in enhanced consecration.

As will be proposed later, these four analytical categories are proposed as fundamental aspects of the way residents in Djursholm respond to signs of potential social deviance as expressed by feelings of angst and failure that may desecrate the community, and practices through which they deal with it, thus securing the community’s continued consecration.

**Fearing and Dealing with Social Deviance in Djursholm, Sweden**

Djursholm is in many ways an attractive area, a place of beauty, calm, security – and impressive economic wealth. In this pastoral idyll there are large houses with extensive grounds, charming, winding lanes, surrounded by a varied and beautiful
landscape, and a small commercial center with high-class shops, restaurants, and other services. There are few signs of poverty, people invariably look healthy and beautiful. In addition to the salubrious areas of greenery, the community offers its inhabitants scenic paths for walking beside the sea, well-kept tennis courts, a golf club, sailing and nautical facilities, and a plethora of associations providing stimulating leisure activities. The schools are ranked among the best in the country with exacting entrance requirements and unsurpassed grades on graduation. In fact, the inhabitants of this community constitute an economic and social elite, whose position in society enable them to exert great influence over Sweden’s economic, political, and social development. Possessed of a higher educational level than anywhere else in the nation, the residents work primarily as executives and decision-makers in the corporate and financial sectors; but there are also famous artists and academics living there. A number of the country’s ‘super-rich’ who figure on Forbes’s ‘The World Billionaire’s list’ also reside there. Income levels are at the top of official national league tables. Property prices are the highest in the country. The alert visitor will note such phenomena as athletic housewives and active nannies, well-behaved and healthy children, as well as expensive and exclusive cars and boats – all of which add to the community’s aesthetic appeal. Indeed, Djursholm is a place where nice-looking people lead good lives in spacious and well-maintained houses or apartments on the strength of high incomes and large fortunes; greet one another by kissing of cheeks; and where foreign languages are often heard, thus making the area especially popular with ex-pats, diplomats or other successful global groups looking for a temporary base while remaining in the country.

Expressions of Potential Social Deviance

The residents are, of course, the very foundation of Djursholm, and they manifest its culture through their actions and way of life. The community was founded in 1889 by a wealthy Swedish banker, Henrik Palme, who wanted to create a culturally and socially supreme living area for the economic elites, with the implicit purpose to raise their social standing. Therefore, Palme not only invited wealthy people to come, he was also successful in attracting a number of well-known and established artists and writers as the first residents, strongly contributing to the area’s status. The fact that few, if any, of those that I interviewed or spoke to answered affirmatively to my question of whether they saw themselves fully as ‘Djursholmers’ seems to indicate the level of difficulty experienced by them to live up to the original and still defining lifestyle ideals of the community: The residents seem to take a bearing in relation to a norm that obliges them to live as role models, in the eyes of themselves and others, but there is a sense of not quite managing to do so. As one 83-year-old person who was born and bred there told me:

If you come from Djursholm there are no excuses for not being a success. This is obviously quite a pressure to be under. I never became a boss, and although I am now eighty-three years old, I still regard myself as a little boy who is fairly questioning and maybe also insecure about life. In that sense I am a bit of a failure.
A basic expression of ‘potential social deviance’ in my findings is a sense of failure among the residents, of not being ‘good enough’, which can be understood against a background of the community’s ‘superior’ character; this I could notice not only through interviews with residents, where they could criticize themselves for not being the kind of person, socially or aesthetically, they thought they should be, but also through various instances of observations, for example a constant pursuit of various sports activities among both young and old, where the main goal appeared to be to constantly ‘improve yourself’. But the sense of insufficiency and potential social deviance has not only to do with a lack of inherited cultural capital; it’s more about lack of individual performance, thus challenging a fundamental norm in contemporary society: For instance, a well-known Swedish business journalist who came from Djursholm, described in his book on Djursholm that it could be a torment growing up in a community that was perceived to be very privileged, where everyone was believed to go through life with a silver spoon in their mouths (see Herin, 2008). In his book, he writes that he would not have had any reservations about coming from a different kind of background and being ‘the guy who kept studying against all odds, forged himself a career, and struggled all the way to the top!’ According to him, performance and success are valued very highly in Djursholm, they are part of a norm and an ideal to which most people aspire, much as he also did himself. And yet it remains a fact, he argued, that many of these people will owe their success later in life not to their individual efforts, determination, and skill, but rather to ‘having the right contacts, the right educational background, and parents with money’. This insight gives rise to a feeling of not having succeeded in any substantial sense, which can be hard in a place that idealizes individual performance: One is expected to be a smart, hardworking person, but any successes in life may not have much to do with such qualities, leading to a sense of insignificance and worthlessness, and not at all a conviction that one is a leader – whether or not describing oneself as such.

Several of the people I encountered did in fact express, in a variety of ways, this precise sense of social insufficiency, and that the community put them under an excessive obligation to perform, resulting in constant fear of failing, a permanent situation of potential social deviance, and thus risking the desecration of the community’s aura. As two individuals said:

My parents always told me, ‘As long as you do your best that’s okay.’ But what does ‘your best’ really mean? Working twenty-four hours per day? Being good at tennis, golf, sailing, and having five children? (Man, 35)

The feeling of ‘am I good enough?’ is always there. (Man, 55)

I don’t have any strong data that would suggest that there are any differences between men and women when it comes to a feeling of not meeting expectations. Suffice it to say that my observations suggest that Djursholm is a man’s world, where men tend to dominate economically and socially, for example as a result of relatively many women being housewives and thus experiencing a subordinate status to their men by lacking an income of their own; overall, it seems reasonable to suggest that consecration is gendered in Djursholm to the extent that it is primarily the male sex that is elevated and made into a
norm; women are considered a greater potential source of community desecration (something that I will discuss later with regard to divorces).

Overall, the experience of not being perfect, of not making the grade, is intimately connected with the high activity levels residents feel are a defining characteristic of Djursholm, such as not only having a hectic (and successful) career, but also doing multiple sports, socializing at home and parties and restaurants with friends and relatives, and often traveling to remote places, all in all reproducing a norm of great activity, commitment and individual performance. Indeed, many of the parents I met with were keen on their children enjoying rich and varied leisure, with many different kinds of activities on offer. One mother asserted: ‘I want my children to experience a lot, so I want my daughter to try the scouts, or play some kind of instrument, or tennis and golf, or whatever the case may be.’ There is also another related phenomenon; of not feeling oneself to be physically flawless: To a large extent this is about striving for ‘the perfect body’, quite simply a body that corresponds to the high ideals to which Djursholmers seem to aspire, where most people are in fact slim and seem to be in good physical shape; not only enacting ‘appropriate’ behaviors but also having ‘appropriate’ bodies are critical aspects of residents’ image as morally exemplary individuals.

But the most evident sense of potential personal deviance in the eyes of other residents, service staff and the outside world, relates to the culture of performance that holds sway in Djursholm, where people are expected to be busy and successful – some of the residents feel that this creates a hard, cold, and competitive environment. For instance, one of the school principals that I interviewed commented: ‘The students are focused like arrows, they put a lot into their studies and work a great deal. They have lofty ambitions, but there’s a cold feeling, a lack of close relations between the students. It’s extremely competitive.’ In this context, comments have been made to the effect that there is a need for kindness and thoughtfulness and, by this, a positive contribution to a more ‘cozy’ and easygoing atmosphere so that people can feel that they are good enough just the way they are; but to discuss such feelings in public, among youngsters or adults, would be contrary to the dominant culture of the community. Such thoughts are therefore typically kept private, or ventilated only to confidants, such as family members, close friends or therapists.

Condemning and Stigmatizing Potentially Deviant Individuals

Experiencing a risk of desecration of community status is not only about the personal and collective experiences of not being good enough; it is also expressed by a condemnation of failure and the hiding of various problems that risk devaluing the cultural and social capital of the area. Indeed, Djursholm is a place defined by its ideas on social activity, surging ahead full steam, and dynamism; this is also how it is pictured in the media, thus reproducing its image as a ‘leader community’ in contemporary Sweden. In a world like this, there is a big risk of intolerance for illness, personal and social failures; indeed, as already suggested, any ‘lack of performance’ may be seen as a sign of sickness, of potential social deviance. People associated with such negatives are seen as a threat to the positive and ‘just-do-it’ spirit of the community:
You get the respect you deserve in Djursholm. It is based on your professional role. If you are a success, people are friendly and interested. If you are unsuccessful or things don’t work out, the mood turns icy cold here. (Male, 70)

In Djursholm people want a lot, people have ideas. You can’t say, ‘It didn’t work’ or ‘I didn’t have the energy.’ (Woman, 40s)

If something goes wrong here, you have much further to fall. I think one ought to think about that; it’s not easy around here if something messes up. You stand to lose so much more than in other communities. Not just money and a nice place to live, of course, but also status, friends . . . and even more. (Woman, 40s)

Even those who work in the health care sector in Djursholm and come into contact with residents in crises or problematic situations expressed a feeling that any kind of shortcoming or failure is strongly stigmatized by fellow residents, and for this reason not something that people choose to speak about, or reveal:

In Djursholm no less than in corporate life you make the grade as long as you are successful and things are going well. But if you have some problems, people quickly retract their feelers. They are strategic in their social lives; they don’t want to be friendly with just anyone, and not spontaneously. They want to know that a person is okay and does not have any problems that might affect them, or just the indignity of finding that they are socializing with a failure. There’s a fairly stern judgment meted out in this community when it comes to failure. This is a community with a great deal of surface polish. (Health-Care Employee)

Judging by the witnesses of residents and others, the important thing in Djursholm is to keep various problems and failures out of sight, and this relates to the nurturing of a collectively held aura, which otherwise hangs in the balance. Obviously, desecration, seen as the flip side of consecration, whereby critical social and cultural capital may be lost if any socially deviant behaviors, according to the norms and values that are cherished in Djursholm, become publicly known, needs to be managed by regulating what kind of information about the community is disseminated. Thus, ‘keeping up appearances’ is a critical strategy to avoid any desecration of the community’s status as a social and aesthetic role model in the eyes of others. As a result, problems remain hidden because of the social intolerance regarding any kind of open dialogue about them. Indeed, it is very hard to notice anything problematic in Djursholm when visiting the place; everything ‘seems fine’ at first glance; but most importantly, most people never visit Djursholm – it is an area that is geographically isolated; there is no through traffic, no railway or subway stations and so on. Essentially, the only people you meet in Djursholm are those that live there, or that work for the residents in the various service sectors.

A local police officer explained to me: ‘The problems are not so visible here; people are good at hiding crimes of various kinds’. Another policeman told me:

There are a lot of drugs in circulation here. We keep an intense surveillance on the area, but it’s difficult. Unlike in other areas, it happens out of sight here. There aren’t many public places
here where drug dealing takes place. It all takes place in the houses, and they’re off limits for us. Police work is far easier in other locations.

Open drug dealing in Djursholm would not only be criminal according to Swedish law, it would also be socially inconceivable. Therefore, out of respect for the collective identity and obviously also the theoretical risk of being caught, drug dealing has to take place unseen. But this is also true for other ‘social problems’. A woman in her 20s told me the following:

No one realized we had problems at home; we managed to keep it under wraps. Or people did realize but didn’t say anything. It took a while before I had the courage to open up about it, but then many of my friends told me it was just the same for them. People are so worried about rejection. You never speak about family issues in Djursholm – except maybe divorce – other than that it’s a case of keeping the lid on. (Woman, 20s)

As I understand it, people in Djursholm are well aware of the fact that the aura of the community is fragile, that desecration is a constant potential, which could seriously harm the collective capital of the place. As a result, it is not popular in Djursholm to have anything to do with the local authorities in cases of personal or social problems, whether these relate to a possible application for housing benefits, financial support in case of divorce, and so on – because of a generally held view that such contacts would make social problems in Djursholm visible. The Social Security Office of the municipality is also geographically located in the periphery of Djursholm, in the back-stage areas of the community, and not in the city center, the front-stage, where such departments as Municipality Management, Education and Culture are located – hence, people that suffer from various problems and need help from the authorities, are effectively ‘hidden’ and taken out of sight. Of course, this is an important way of managing the potential of desecration, which, effectively, becomes a mechanism of further consecration. One civil servant made the following claim:

Many people don’t seek assistance even when they are entitled to it, for instance, financial support for their homes, or dental care. There are plenty of impoverished widows in Djursholm surviving on very low pensions, and no significant fortunes to speak of. But they don’t want to move out of their expensive homes, which are so costly to maintain.

A colleague of hers went on to suggest that even with more serious issues, including crime, there was a similar reluctance to report problems:

In Djursholm it is considered shoddy to go to the local authority to ask for help, and I am not even thinking of financial support here, but rather support to help deal with problems at home caused by substance abuse, sexual assault, incest, or domestic violence against wives and children.

This reluctance can be seen as an expression of the importance residents seem to attach to maintaining the community’s aura, and thus to its ‘positive’ consecrating potential: As long as Djursholm shines, they will shine too, and in a society that values people’s social,
communicative and aesthetic abilities more than their intellectual and analytical skills, this is critical to their power and influence in society (see Holmqvist, 2017; Khuarna, 2003).

Of course, people in Djursholm are not naïve in relation to the social problems that exist there. I spoke to one middle-aged person who felt that:

many parents in Djursholm have far too much belief in ‘good old Djursholm’. They don’t want to see the problems, do not want to recognize the drinking, the drug-taking that is going on, and that these young people are not doing so well. There’s a feeling of wanting to live in a sort of bubble of contentment.

And a teacher who had previously taught at one of the schools, felt that:

this is a community that idealizes the small-town idyll, a place where people care about each other, where everyone is happy, the children are good and feel great. That’s why it’s such a humiliation when there are divorces, because then you see how this place is just like any other. Trying to keep up this idyllic image probably also makes people want to hide problems for as long as possible. They want Djursholm to look like a little paradise, protected from the world’s evils, populated by smart, good people. But in fact there’s a lot of dirt under the surface.

An entrepreneur who lived in Djursholm felt that ‘on one level Djursholm is an idyllic place and on another level it just isn’t. Many people are very stressed, and they run about like crazy’. When I spoke to a father that I met when visiting at one of the pre-schools, he told me: ‘To believe that Djursholm is a perfect environment, with perfect people and perfect families, is obviously not true. There are problems here like anywhere else.’ Another man, a pensioner, said: ‘We’re living in a wonderful place but of course there are problems here behind closed doors. In other communities the problems are visible in a quite different way.’

Disposing of Potentially Deviant Individuals

I have so far focused on the sense of failure that Djursholmers may experience in the face of pressing social requirements that may potentially result in social deviance such as stress and other problems; also the way the community reacts to and tries to manage such behaviors by condemnation and stigmatization as well as maintaining a low degree of transparency. Overall, in Djursholm there seems to be social consensus on problems, poverty, and other concerns not being something that should be aired in public, which has to do with the risk of desecration. An elderly citizen put it this way:

The residents are aware that they are scrutinized by outsiders, that they live in a society that stands out in terms of status. They are also aware that Djursholm is a strong brand and that it is in their interest to protect this brand. Many have invested a lot both financially and socially in this environment, and then you are very concerned that the reputation is not challenged in any way.

However, in cases where certain people do get embroiled in scandal, there is social pressure on them to move away and not besmirch or contaminate the aura, status, and
prestige of the community. Even when the odd person falls in a moral or social sense, Djursholm must always remain shiny and perfect. For instance, pupils in the local high school expressed strong pressure to perform excellent school results, not only in order to be accepted at top universities in Sweden or abroad, but also in order to maintain the idea of the school being an ‘elite school’. Some pupils who failed were either diagnosed as dyslexic in order to give a medical explanation for their failure (see Holmqvist, 2020), or chose to move to other schools, such as private boarding schools, in order to continue their studies where they could be ‘hidden away’ so to speak. To this extent, the community disposed of its ‘problematic’ youngsters; ‘problematic’ in the sense of them not being able to fully reproduce the community norm of ‘social excellence’ as manifested by supreme school results, which otherwise could contribute to a desecration of the community. There is a general expectation that the schools in Djursholm are of top standard – ultimately manifested in the grades obtained. Staff, primarily teachers, are a key factor in this context – and thus, in a certain sense, are the most important ‘asset’ of the community. A teacher expressed this as follows:

There’s pressure on us as teachers, from the school head, from students, from parents, and also there’s the pressure we put on ourselves, to achieve top grades. If you don’t give someone very good reports there’s a great burden of evidence on you, which can be quite hard work, and sometimes you have to take a lot of crap from angry parents. As far as the school is concerned, its reputation will start to wane if the grades start coming down.

Avoiding desecration by disposing of ‘problematic residents’ seems, in addition, to be gendered, which is illustrated by divorces in the area. Certainly, official statistics (from Statistics Sweden) indicate that the incidence of divorce is lower in Djursholm than in the country as a whole (14.6% in Djursholm to Sweden’s 22.2%), which may have a number of reasons – social, moral and financial. Still, when they occur, I have been told of several instances of women being harder hit by divorce than their spouses. In most cases the men have had by far the higher incomes, in certain cases the men were even the only breadwinners of their families. After a divorce, it is rarely the man who moves into a flat or a terraced house (one woman explained to me that one area in Djursholm was known as ‘the divorce ditch, where all the women lived who had been kicked out’) after the assets have been divided. The aura and status of the man should not be affected; it’s the woman who should be demoted. One woman that I spoke to, who had divorced her husband and been forced out of their home, had the following to say:

Yes, like many others I ended up living in one of the areas with terraced housing. Everyone knows it is called the ‘divorce ditch’, and that it’s a place where divorced women live. I lost my old house, but I also lost a lot of our old friends. They probably just felt, ‘We don’t want to socialize with a loser.’

Thus, consecration is not equal in terms of gender; Djursholm is essentially a man’s world, which is effectively manifested in the way through which women are disposed of when jeopardizing the community’s aura. According to one person who had been working for a long time in Djursholm,
the community here is not very equal, despite the fact that many of the women are highly educated. Some of them choose not to work when the children are small, and when they have many children, they are out of working life for a relatively long period of time. Typically it’s the man who keeps an eye on the finances, and when there’s a divorce this may mean that he bulldozes the woman . . . Usually it’s the woman who has to take a hit.

Hence, disposing of or socially isolating people or groups of people who for various reasons have ‘scandalized’ themselves are critical aspects of consecration by avoiding desecration. When seen in this context, it is not so remarkable that the residents of Djursholm choose not to talk about or in any other way show themselves, or their family members, as having any kind of problems. One father of four children said to me: ‘The name of the game here is knowing how to behave yourself, and even when something negative happens, you’re expected to keep schtum about it.’

**Individual Strategies to Escape the Normative Pressure of the Community**

There are ways of (temporarily) escaping from one’s feelings of insufficiency related to the social culture of this ‘elite community’, which can be seen as spaces that allow social failures or at least social deviation, which too becomes a way of managing the risk of desecration. For instance, during one of my visits to a small orienteering club in Djursholm, one of the members expressed: ‘It is a subculture with a lot of people involved. Here it does not matter who you are’, and when I participated in a sports activity arranged by one of Djursholm’s other sports associations, one of the participants expressed:

*Here you should not win. That way, I think this can be a bit of a free zone in such a society where so much else is about winning and performing. It can be a breathing hole to be with us. All of this surface that exists here can eventually be very tough to handle. It’s so nice to meet people who do not check you up in the income calendar.*

Also, one gentlemen’s club that I visited several times seemed to play the role as a free zone for its members: it was characterized by many bizarre and funny rituals, where the members enjoyed playing extreme characters of themselves, for example by wearing double ties or addressing one another with excessively long titles. Clearly, this club relieved the members of some of the social pressure they experienced as a result of living in the area, offering them a form of legitimate social deviance. For women, visiting the local riding stables appeared to play a similar role – even for those who didn’t practice the sport. When I visited it on a number of occasions, it was full of women, but no men. The premises were rather dirty, including the toilets – and it (of course) smelled of horses and hay. One woman said to me: ‘When I come here I feel strong, when I go into a stable I grow. Here people listen to me. You become strong as an individual of being here. It raises an independent type of women.’ Another woman I talked to in connection with a visit there explained that ‘in the stable I can be myself, I would not dream of lipstick and clean clothes. You do not have to wear the mink [mink coat], it is not important. No one cares. We are there for who we are.’ Thus, this behavior – confined to certain
environments – creates a context whereby female residents can ‘be themselves’ without risking to jeopardize what is expected of them in Djursholm’s front-stages; namely to appear aesthetically and socially excellent. The riding stables offers an alternative environment where the risk of desecration is much less obvious. As one woman put it:

When you come here and change clothes, you become partly a different person. You go into another world . . . Something happens to the girls when they change into riding clothes. They kind of let Djursholm out. After a quarter of an hour, you are very dirty and smell like a horse instead of perfume.

Further, a high consumption of alcohol in Djursholm can also be seen as a medium through which residents can escape from the everyday social pressure, thus also relieving themselves from a pressure to reproduce the community’s aura. Essentially, alcohol helps you manage the risk of desecration by making your potential social deviance appear less problematic. Indeed, alcohol is present everywhere in the area, in a way that is uncommon in the rest of Sweden (which by tradition has a very restrictive view on alcohol, particularly if it’s consumed in public places). Certainly, there are no people in Djursholm sitting on park benches drinking beer or booze; rather, alcohol is plentifully consumed at lunches, suppers, on public and private occasions, drinks parties, and during other communal events. One person working in health and geriatric care, expressed the following during our conversation:

We have many very elderly people here. In general they are very healthy. They have lived a good life. Eaten good food, taken regular exercise, been conscious of their lifestyle. But the major health problem here is alcohol related. People drink far too much; we can see that when we test them for various illnesses. It is very difficult to recognize this just by talking to someone.

One resident speculated on the reasons for the consumption of alcohol in the area:

I think one of the reasons why people consume more alcohol in Djursholm is because they suffer from anxiety and the pressure to live up to something. Alcohol is a classic way of self-medicating, after all. Many people try to live up to a certain role, but they don’t always manage it.

This perspective was echoed by an employee at a health-care institution in Djursholm: ‘The tolerance for alcohol is much higher here than in other places. Anguish and misery are kept at bay with wine and champagne.’ Hence, heavy consumption of alcohol may help residents to cope with their sense of not being good enough, thus relieving them from the stress of not being able to ‘self-consecrate’. But even though the use of alcohol may offer an individual a temporary relief from the social expectations of the community, it must never become obvious that drinking is a problem, which could otherwise desecrate community capital. As one young woman said in a rare newspaper interview about alcohol consumption in Djursholm, based on her personal experiences of a father who was an alcoholic:
There are so many requirements in Djursholm that you must look a certain way, that you must dress in a certain way, that you must go to the right place on holiday and have high grades. Such an environment made it even harder to break the norm and show that we were not that perfect family.

Conclusions

The way the Swedish elite community of Djursholm’s residents try to cope with their fears of social deviance, can be seen as expressions of the importance of maintaining the community’s consecrating potential, and hence avoiding any desecration (cf. Newman, 1988; Pargament et al., 2005). Desecration would mean the reduction of residents’ social and cultural capital, that is, the decline of their status as role models in society at large. Overall, the inhabitants of Djursholm are engaged in a constant struggle to make themselves radiant, and they seem to manage this more or less – which is crucial to the ability of the community to appear in the eyes of the surrounding world as an exemplary place with the right to admonish, prescribe, and provide moral guidance – hence to be perceived as an elite community. Any missteps in terms of ‘deviant behavior’, including voicing concerns about any negative aspects of the culture and social context, will therefore likely not only risk an individual’s standing in such a world; but the status of the community itself. Essentially, consecration is about maintaining exclusivity for a select group of people, much in the same way as selective, and non-meritocratic admission criteria operate at elite schools (see Karabel, 2005; Stevens, 2009); and they contribute to making extreme social and economic inequality seem acceptable, by offering elites a sense of entitlement (see Sherman, 2018). As a result, the risk of desecration is something that constantly needs to be taken seriously by members of elite communities.

Elite communities are important study objects as they set the agenda for people at large; by creating moral codes for others, they are ‘leader communities’. A leader community consciously works to create an aura around itself, its nature, its buildings, and, not least, its residents. By living there, one can express, at the same time, social prestige and status, financial worth, and cultural capital: these co-ordinate as the multi-dimensional expression of wealth (see Holmqvist, 2017). But, as suggested in this article, residents’ consecration is constantly being threatened by their failure to live up to social and aesthetic expectations, thus risking the desecration of the community aura, and thus of their own ‘social and cultural creditworthiness’. The aura that marks an elite community is, therefore and by necessity, an aura that requires distance, both social and geographical. As Pincon and Pincon-Charlot (2007: 63) noted: ‘In all countries, the wealthy live in separate areas, protected from any undesirable social contact.’ If one gets too close to it, the community is seldom quite as radiant as it appears to be: therefore, any demystification of elites, either through external parties’ critical inquiries, or through residents’ own stories and accounts of their neighborhoods’ ‘dark sides’, remains a significant threat to elites’ claims to lead and dominate society at large.

Overall, the risk of desecration of contemporary elites through individuals’ social deviance is an issue that has not been given much attention in earlier elite studies, which so far have been mostly concerned with its opposite, the strengthening of power through the accumulation of social and cultural capital and similar expressions of ‘positive’
consecration (see Accominotti, 2021; Holmqvist, 2017; Khan, 2011). But, desecration, and how it is manifested through social deviance among elites, should be regarded as an equally important mechanism for understanding the ongoing reproduction of elites, and hence of how power and status in society are expressed (see Pow, 2011; Wiesel, 2018): Desecration happens when various expressions of ‘social failure’ in an elite community, such as social problems and crimes, become publicly known and are associated consistently with the community. As a result, any attempts at managing and avoiding desecration, which has been the focus of this article, are in fact further practices of consecration.

Overall, the observations reported here should have the potential to extend the dominating analysis of elite communities as consecrating environments by focusing on their ‘dark sides’, specifically by extending the observations of Luthar and her colleagues in psychology of children’s and adolescents’ experienced social and personal problems in such places (e.g. Luthar, 2003; Luthar and Becker, 2002). In relation to their research, the risk of desecration in elite communities, may, however, not only have to do with the observation that material wealth can be associated with low psychological well-being (‘money doesn’t make you happy’; see, e.g. Luthar and Sexton, 2004); but also with an inability to reproduce social expectations and fulfill social roles, that is, the enactment of deviance in relation to some dominating cultural standards (see Tyler, 2020). To this extent, desecration among elites can be seen as a process through which single individuals are desacralized and lose their social and cultural status that ultimately may result in their expulsion, which, however, is necessary in order to preserve the group’s exclusive standing. Becoming a member of an elite community, and upholding one’s position, not only requires substantial economic resources, but social and cultural capital as well, which is the reason why, for example, parents generally devote much attention to their children’s performance at school in such areas (see Kusserow, 2004; Lareau, 2003); not performing ‘excellently’ risks even being considered a disease, requiring medical diagnosis and treatment; hence the medicalization of elite cultures (see Holmqvist, 2020).

The risk of desecration of elite communities, and the way it is handled, is both an individual and a collective phenomenon: it is something individual by requiring a sense of failure and feelings of insufficiency among residents, resulting in a loss of faith in their ability and position. It is something collective in that it involves social processes of condemnation and disposing of members that appear to unsuccessfully reproduce central cultural norms and values. Managing the risk of desecration also involves people’s flight into contexts where they can escape pressing social forces of individual performance and social excellence, intellectually and aesthetically. Therefore, a theory of desecration of elite communities, must involve both individual and social aspects when examining the potential loss of important cultural and social capital, where an individual’s inability to perform according to expectations may lead to condemnation and ultimately isolation and exclusion; ‘free-zoning behavior’ offers but temporary relief.

Although my focus has been on elite communities, the proposed theoretical framework should be useful for the analysis of how elites are reproduced in other settings as well, for example higher education. Indeed, cultural sociology is very much concerned today with how education can maintain elites’ privileges, and how elite schools make students powerful in a social and moral sense (see, e.g. Gatztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Karabel, 2005; Rivera, 2016); but the risk of desecration of elite schools through, for example, students’ failed performance, ‘misbehavior’ or other acts of social deviance is
something that has so far escaped systematic attention; for instance, the observation by Anteby (2013) of an elite business school where silence is a dominating norm of the school culture seems to be consistent with some of my findings. Likewise, in another study of mine, of Sweden’s elite business school, the Stockholm School of Economics, there were allegations about sexist behavior by some male students during Freshers’ Week, which clearly risked the image of the institution as an ‘elite school’; this resulted in the condemnation and temporary exclusion of these students by the school’s rector (see Holmqvist, 2022). Obviously, this condemnation and exclusion of unwanted students contributed to the school’s further consecration; hence the relevance of understanding fears of desecration as an important mechanism of consecration.

But the observations reported here should also have some important political implications: elite communities and elite schools are breeding grounds for future leaders who are likely to set the norms for what is good and bad behavior in general, socially, culturally and morally. Leaders are often pictured in heroic and even angelic forms, giving them a God-like status (see Alvesson, 2011; Jackall, 1988). My observations of ‘leaders’ in an ‘elite community’ suggest, however, they are ‘just like anybody else’, even though they struggle hard not to appear so, thus manifesting the importance of elites for managing their images, and maintaining a low degree of transparency of the institutions they control (cf. Goffman, 1959; Khurana, 2003). Thus, by including analyses of how elites fear social failures and try to control them, thus avoiding desecration to the benefit of their continued consecration, sociologists will be able to offer a deeper understanding of the often secret culture of the world’s wealthy and powerful groups.

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ORCID iD
Mikael Holmqvist https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4725-8757

Note
1. According to statistics from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet), the most common crime committed by Djursholm residents, whether in Djursholm or elsewhere, is traffic violations (speeding, etc.), which is not considered a serious crime. The police officer that I talked to referred to other, more uncommon crimes that Djursholmers are committed for, such as domestic violence; crimes that presumably are not reported to the police in the same way as other crimes.

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**Author biography**

Mikael Holmqvist is associate professor of sociology and professor of business administration at Stockholm University. His present research focuses on economic elites in contemporary neo-liberal society. Recent books include *Leader Communities. The Consecration of Elites in Djursholm* (Columbia University Press, 2017) and *Elite Business Schools. Education and Consecration in Neo-liberal Society* (Routledge, 2022). For more information: https://www.su.se/english/profiles/holmq.