ACTA UNIVERSITATIS UPSALIENSIS
Studier i utbildnings- och kultursociologi

22

Editor: Jonas Almqvist

Till Bo & Nils

Typesetting: Moa Lindqvist, Caitlin McEvoy, Christin Mays, Anna Bennich-Björkman.
Cover art: Sebastian Larsmo.

Anna Bennich-Björkman

The Higher Education Norm

Rethinking Paths to Independence and Adulthood in a Former Industrial Community

Sammanfattning:

Högre utbildning som norm

Nya sätt att bli vuxen och självständig i en tidigare bruksort

UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Dissertation presented at Uppsala University to be publicly examined in Sal X, Universitetshuset, Biskopsgatan 3,753 10, Uppsala, Friday, 14 February 2025 at 13:15 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The examination will be conducted in English. Faculty examiner: Professor Elisabet Öhrn (Institutionen för pedagogik och specialpedagogik, Göteborgs universitet).

Abstract
Bennich-Björkman, A. 2025. The Higher Education Norm. Rethinking Paths to Independence and Adulthood in a Former Industrial Community. (Högre utbildning som norm. Nya sätt att bli vuxen och självständig i en tidigare bruksort). *Studier i utbildnings- och kultursociologi* 22. 259 pp. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. ISBN 978-91-513-2333-6.

This study investigates the perception and navigation of higher education among young adults in a former industrial community in Sweden. Similar to other countries, the Swedish system of higher education has expanded considerably since the 1960s, to include more students and institutions. Alongside this expansion, a process of de-industrialisation has taken place since the 1970s. The thesis focuses on a locality severely affected by the diminishing of manufacturing industries, where higher education was unusual due to the prevalence of working-class occupations. The study asks how higher education is managed in a context where educational levels are comparatively low and where labour market participation did not previously require tertiary qualifications.

The thesis is designed as a single-case study of Söderhamn, Sweden. The main method used is in-depth interviews with young adults and parents. Through the study of how young adults reason about education in general, and a potential entry into tertiary education in particular, the thesis analyses how higher education is viewed within this social context. Using social class, gender, and dispositions to interpret the interviewees' reasoning, the thesis arrives at the conclusion that there exists a higher education norm among young adults in Söderhamn today. Far from everyone will or want to attend university, yet, the study points to the fact that young adults are required to negotiate the norm of higher education, even if they prefer a different path.

A significant conclusion is that this newly established norm of higher education is intertwined with older norms tied to the locality's industrial past. Young adults and parents share the view that higher education is necessary for a stable position in the labour market today. Thus, tertiary education is perceived as an instrument for becoming employable, thereby upholding values of independence and adulthood that have existed for longer. The thesis concludes that the processes of de-industrialisation and the expansion of higher education both sustain and create new social norms that affect young adults' perceptions and navigations of a potential entry into higher education.

Keywords: Sociology of education, higher education, industrial communities, de-industrialisation, rural youth, educational decisions, youth mobility, norms, social class, gender

Anna Bennich-Björkman, Department of Education, Box 2136, Uppsala University, SE-75002 Uppsala, Sweden.

ISBN 978-91-513-2333-6
URN urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-544774 (http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-544774)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Although writing this thesis has been demanding, it has been an absolute privilege to investigate something guided by my curiosity, which continues to spark my interest even as I lay the finishing touches. Many people have contributed to keeping that curiosity alive and without the conversations that sustained my interest, the result would have been worse than it is now.

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to the young adults, and their slightly older parents, who generously let me interview them. Without their participation, this thesis would not exist. Although they are anonymous to the reader, the people I met in Söderhamn have been anything but anonymous to me throughout the writing process. I hope that I have done them justice. I also received considerable help from teachers, headmasters, and guidance counsellors at Staffangymnasiet in Söderhamn – thank you!

I also want to thank the group of past and present doctoral students in the sociology of education in Uppsala who have been my colleagues throughout these years. Many of you have read drafts at different stages and unfailingly provided relevant and interesting angles. You have – collectively – helped me to make the thesis, its analysis, and conclusions, better.

Mikael Börjesson, Ylva Bergström, and Mette Ginnerskov-Dahlberg have been my supervisors. Mikael, your theoretical knowledge and reading of my manuscript during my years as a doctoral student has helped me greatly. Mette, your interest in the empirical findings and figuring out what was actually said has deepened the analysis. Last but not least, Ylva. Thank you for your help, your time, and especially your genuine interest for what I have been studying. Our discussions made me confident in my capacity to conduct research that is interesting to others. For that, I am forever grateful.

Apart from being in Uppsala and Söderhamn, I was able to go abroad. I was given the opportunity to spend three months at the Institute of European Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Two generous scholarships made it possible for me to go, Anna Maria Lundin and Håkanssons travel scholarships. Furthermore, I was able to spend time at Durham University as part of an Erasmus+ exchange.

Donald Broady, Sol Gamsu, and Karen Valentin were discussants at my review seminars. Andreas Melldahl, Esbjörn Larsson, and Håkan Forsberg have read and provided me with invaluable comments and discussions towards the later stages of the process. Without Emil Bertilsson's help, Chapter 5 would be

nonexistent. I also want to thank Christin Mays, Caitlin McEvoy, Jennifer Waddling, and Rebecka Göransdotter for unfailing support.

Astrid Collsiöö and Moa Lindqvist, I am not certain this thesis would exist if you two had not been doctoral students at the same time as me. Astrid, I am so thankful that we began this journey together and for the office that we have shared since. You are one of the most intelligent, curious, kind, and caring persons I have ever met. Moa, I am delighted to the journey with you as my companion. I admire your intelligence, critical thinking, generosity, and kindness. Astrid and Moa, you both share traits that I value highly, humour and integrity – never change! I cannot wait to hold your theses in my hand and celebrate with you!

Both my siblings, Oscar and Emelia, have read parts of the thesis at various points, thank you for always being interested and impressed! I want to thank my parents and their partners, Li and Karsten, Hans and Gunilla. Pappa, this thesis revolves around the town where you grew up and I would not have written it had you not sparked my interest in politics in the first place. Your critical reading, inquisitiveness, and willingness to discuss my work has helped me more than I think you know. Mamma, you are one of the most curious people I know, thank you for always extending that curiosity to whatever I am thinking or writing. You have supported me throughout this particular endeavour in every way. Thank you for being my mum and the most brilliant grandmother to my children.

Chris, it is almost ten years since we met and during that time, our respective lives became a shared life together with our children. I am so happy that we met and I am forever thankful to share my life with you. You are kind, loving, thoughtful, funny – patient and meticulous when I am sometimes the opposite. Thank you for taking care of everything while I have focused on finishing this book!

During my time as a doctoral student, my life changed in a much more profound way – both my children were born during the writing of this thesis. Bo came to us in 2020, in the midst of the pandemic and changed my life, all for the better. He is now four years old – funny, loving, inquisitive, and sometimes feral. Nils, still our baby at almost two years old. It is a pleasure to be your mum and seeing you dance and roar your way through life. Bosse and Nilsi, I love you.

Uppsala, 9 December 2024

Anna Bennich-Björkman

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The expansion of the Swedish higher education system and de-industrialisation are separate, but parallel, societal processes that have affected the places where industry was previously located.[1] Those who live in places that were once industrial are required to relate to education in general and higher education in particular, in a manner that was unnecessary when industrial communities were economically self-sufficient.[2] This study addresses how young adults in a former industrial community perceive and navigate higher education from a position of education-scarcity, both in terms of the population's relatively low level of education and a comparative lack of institutional educational resources. By studying young adults' perception and navigation of higher education *before* they potentially enter into tertiary education, this thesis adds to our understanding of why entry into higher education differs within Sweden, and what mechanisms are behind the statistical patterns seen on a macro level.

Just before the industrial decline, which began in the mid-1970s, the Swedish higher education system began to expand in the 1960s, and now, a large proportion of the labour market is inaccessible without having attended university. This case study focuses on Söderhamn, Sweden – one of many places where the town's local economy depended upon a manufacturing industry that downsized and has not been replaced by anything of equal economic significance. By investigating young adults in Söderhamn – a place where attending university is still relatively uncommon – and their view of higher education, this study answers questions regarding how the increased need for higher education is managed in a place where the concentration of educational resources is, and has long been, low.

Expansion and rising levels of higher education

In 2023, 47 per cent of the Swedish population aged 25–64 had participated in some form of tertiary education, with 31 per cent having completed at least three years of higher education.[3] However, the level of education is unevenly

[1] Backius, Stefan (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", 525–534.
[2] Corbett, Michael & Forsey, Martin (2017), 'Rural Youth Out-Migration and Education: Challenges to Aspirations Discourse in Mobile Modernity', 429–444.
[3] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Utbildningsnivån i Sverige 2023*.

distributed between social groups and throughout the country. Most relevant to the aim here, geography and parents' levels of education affect entry into the Swedish higher education system.[4] Higher levels of education and skills are concentrated in larger cities and regions, while lower levels of education and skills are more common in smaller towns and municipalities.[5]

In the municipality of Söderhamn, the focus of this case study, only 16 per cent of the population has completed three years or more of tertiary education; the corresponding share in Sweden is, as mentioned, 31 per cent and in the capital of Stockholm, 40 per cent.[6] Thus, although the Swedish population's level of education keeps rising, entry into and completion of tertiary education differs, depending on where in the country a person lives.

Following the expansion of higher education that began in the 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s, teritary education became a resource for a larger proportion of the population. The expansion of Swedish higher education was directly connected to political efforts and reforms to increase the population's level of education and enable social mobility through the education system.[7] Expanding the system to include more students and more higher education institutions in Sweden widened the geographical recruitment of students,[8] as well as included a more diverse student body in terms of social class and gender.[9] Furthermore, higher education in Sweden is tuition-fee-free and students are entitled to government subsidies and loans to finance their university studies.[10] Therefore, 'funding plays a marginal role in educational decision making, compared to many other countries'.[11] The absence of tuition-fees and the universalist financial support makes the Swedish system of higher education interesting in relation to educational inequalities.[12]

---

[4] Universitetskanslersämbetet (2019), *Rekryteringen till högskolestudier: Regionala och sociala faktorer påverkar*.

[5] Eriksson, Rikard H. & Hansen, Høgni Kalsø (2013), 'Industries, Skills, and Human Capital: How Does Regional Size Affect Uneven Development?', 601–603; Universitetskanslersämbetet (2019), *Rekryteringen till högskolestudier: Regionala och sociala faktorer påverkar*; Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Befolkningens utbildning 2022*.

[6] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Utbildningnivå efter kommun och kön 2023*.

[7] See for example: Hällsten, Martin (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality: A Swedish Test Case', 808; Thomsen, Jens-Peter et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective', 99; Gribbe, Johan (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*: *Reformer inom högre utbildning och forskning 1940–2020*, 64–66.

[8] Amcoff, Jan & Nauwerck, Gerolf (1993), *Övergångsställen: Högskolerekryteringens geografi*, 106.

[9] Berggren, Caroline (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education: Gender and Class Perspectives', 21; Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective', 102.

[10] Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective', 99.

[11] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 808.

[12] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 808; Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective', 99.

Previous research has consistently shown that the horizontal – field of study and which higher education institution students choose – and vertical – the length of the study programme – stratification of the Swedish higher education system persists, despite political efforts and reforms aimed at 'democratising' higher education.[13] Furthermore, international research indicates that parents who are not familiar with the higher education system are less able to guide their children through the maze of post-secondary education.[14] The expansion of higher education has made the system more complex, while new groups, less equipped to navigate it, have entered tertiary education. Research has therefore asked whether the expansion of higher education actually reduces social inequalities or whether inequalities remain, but in new forms.[15]

Research on Swedish higher education tells us that a student's gender and class background has bearing on their educational choices and trajectories.[16] Primarily, this research has either focused on how groups with an abundance of educational resources reason about their educational decisions;[17] or, on how groups with relatively few educational resources in urban environments perceive

[13] Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education'; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality'; Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective'; Hällsten, Martin & Thaning, Max (2018), 'Multiple Dimensions of Social Background and Horizontal Educational Attainment in Sweden', 40–52.

[14] Reay, Diane et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, `Race' and the Higher Education Choice Process', 855–874; Ball, Stephen J. et al. (2002), ''Classification' and 'Judgement': Social Class and the 'Cognitive Structures' of Choice of Higher Education', 51–72; Lareau, Annette (2011), *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 287–294; Shiner, Michael & Noden, Philip (2015), ''Why Are You Applying There?': 'Race', Class and the Construction of Higher Education 'Choice' in the United Kingdom', 1170–1191.

[15] Bourdieu, Pierre (1996[1989]), *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*; Ayalon, Hanna & Yogev, Abraham (2005), 'Field of Study and Students' Stratification in an Expanded System of Higher Education: The Case of Israel', 227–241; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 807; Melldahl, Andreas (2015), *Utbildningens värde: Fördelning, avkastning och social reproduktion under 1900-talet*; Börjesson, Mikael & Broady, Donald (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education: The Case of Sweden', 115–146; Thomsen et al.(2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective'.

[16] See for example: Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education'; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality'; Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education'; Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective'; Hällsten & Thaning (2018), 'Multiple Dimensions of Social Background and Horizontal Educational Attainment in Sweden'; Erikson, Robert (2020), 'Inequality of Educational Opportunity: The Role of Performance and Choice', S44–S55.

[17] See for example: Lidegran, Ida (2009), *Utbildningskapital: Om hur det alstras, fördelas och förmedlas*; Palme, Mikael (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet: Studier av symboliska tillgångar i det svenska utbildningssystemet 1988–2008;* Bergström, Ylva (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education, Navigating in a Polarised Landscape: Upper Secondary Students Transnational Strategies and Outlooks on Higher Education in Sweden' Waddling Jennifer (2024), *Playing with the Global: Family Dynamics and International Education in a Marketised Preschool Landscape*.

educational decisions.[18] However, few Swedish studies have focused on how those who do not live in places where educational resources are abundant and where parents are less likely to have attended university, reason about higher education. In the Swedish context, there is little qualitative research on students from education-scarce backgrounds, their navigation of higher education, and *why* they make particular choices. The existing research is mostly of a quantitative character. We know that students whose parents have comparatively low levels of education tend to make different choices compared to their counterparts whose parents have comparatively high levels of education. However, in the Swedish context, research has paid little attention to the rationales behind these choices.[19] We know even less about how higher education is viewed and reasoned about by prospective university students whose parents did not attend university and live in places where levels of education are comparatively low.

The thesis therefore aims to understand and explain how young adults in an education-scarce context perceive and navigate higher education. By studying, not least through interviews, how they reason about education in general and higher education in particular, the study adds qualitative evidence to the body of existing quantitative research of Swedish higher education, which shows that these groups tend to make other choices, compared to groups with an abundance of educational resources. Thus, this study adds to previous research on Swedish higher education by investigating young adults embedded in an education-scarce context and how they perceive and navigate higher education in relation to their future.

Former industrial communities and higher education

Higher education attainment is increasingly significant for labour market participation, also for those who live in rural or de-industrialised areas where previously, employment did not require tertiary-level qualifications.[20] 'Education becomes a metaphysical solution to wicked demographic and economic

[18] See for example: Skawonius, Charlotte (2005), *Välja eller hamna: Det praktiska sinnet, familjers val och elevers spridning på grundskolor*; Kallstenius, Jenny (2010), *De mångkulturella innerstadsskolorna: Om skolval, segregation och utbildningsstrategier i Stockholm*; Ambrose, Anna (2016), *Att navigera på en skolmarknad: En studie av valfrihetens geografi i tre skolor*; Sharif, Hassan (2017), *Här i Sverige måste man gå i skolan för att få respekt: Nyanlända ungdomar i den svenska gymnasieskolans introduktionsutbildning*; Forsberg, Sara (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice', 700–717.

[19] This type of research is much more common in international social science research. See for example: Reay, Diane (1998), ''Always Knowing' and 'Never Being Sure': Familial and Institutional Habituses and Higher Education Choice', 519–529; Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?'; Ball et al. (2002), ''Classification' and 'Judgement''; Brooks, Rachel (2004), '"My Mum Would Be as Pleased as Punch If I Actually Went, but My Dad Seems a Bit More Particular about It": Paternal Involvement in Young People's Higher Education Choices', 495–514; Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 287–294; Reay, Diane (2023), *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*.

[20] Beach, Dennis & Öhrn, Elisabet (2021) "Arbetsmarknad, utbildningsval och möjligheter på landsbygden: Den lokala kontextens relationer till metrocentrisk skolpolitik", 62.

problems'[21] that face rural and de-industrialising areas and the young adults who live in these places.[22]

The type of town studied here was historically referred to as a *bruksort*, an *industrial community*[23] or a *single industry town*.[24] These towns had certain characteristics that still have bearing on how these places function today.[25] A strict separation between social classes permeated public and private life, it assumed that people were aware of their social class and acted accordingly.[26] This generated a stable social order,[27] meaning that it was unusual to move between social classes by, for example, pursuing higher education or marrying someone of a different social standing.[28] Furthermore, industry and consequently the local labour market in industrial communities almost exclusively employed men. This was especially prevalent in manufacturing related to forestry – the type of industry that built Söderhamn.[29]

After the Second World War, industrial development made Sweden one of the richest countries in the world. Almost the entire male population was in employment and high taxes contributed to expanding public services; publicly available higher education was one of these services.[30] The state redistributed the riches, from the wealthy to poorer parts of the country, reducing and maintaining relatively low levels of inequality.[31] The economic and social aftermath of the de-industrialisation that began in the 1970s has been prevalent in former industrial communities, where manufacturing was part of the foundation of society until recently.[32]

Remnants of the gender and class structures of the industrial community are still noticeable in former industrial communities today. Despite de-industrialisation, the labour market in Söderhamn remains dominated by working-class occupations that do not require tertiary qualifications.[33] Throughout the thesis, the term *former industrial community* is employed, in reference to Söderhamn. It is not, by any means,

---

[21] Corbett & Forsey (2017), 'Rural Youth Out-Migration and Education' 435.
[22] Corbett & Forsey (2017), 'Rural Youth Out-Migration and Education'.
[23] This terminology is in line with previous research. See for example: Sunnerfjell, Jon (2023), *Un-Learning to Labour? Activating the Unemployed in a Former Industrial Community*.
[24] Other definitions include one company town, or resource-based town.
[25] These historical characteristics of industrial communities in Sweden are further developed and discussed in Chapter 4.
[26] Brismark, Anna (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 100.
[27] Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", 530.
[28] Lundqvist, Åsa (2001), *Bygden, bruket och samhället: Om människor och organisationer i brukssamhället Böksholm 1900–1979* , 57–64.
[29] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 99; Isacson, Maths (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige: Arbete, ideal och kulturarv*, 29.
[30] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, chap. 3.
[31] Isacson (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige*, 35.
[32] See for example: Glasmeier, Amy K. (2018), 'Income Inequality and Growing Disparity: Spatial Patterns of Inequality and the case of the USA', 63–77; Hansen, Kalle Emil Holst & Winther, Lars (2018), 'Employment Growth in Danish Towns and Regions since the Crisis: Industrial Structure, City Size and Location, 2008–2013', 246; Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés (2018), 'The Revenge of the Places That Don't Matter (and What to Do about It)', 189; Pike, Andy (2022), 'Coping with Deindustrialization in the Global North and South', 1–22; Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen".
[33] See Chapter 5, page 98–100.

a perfect or exhaustive description, but it is used to refer to a specific, historic phase that has ended, rather than describing this place as 'de-industrialised' which may indicate a static condition where no industry exists at all.[34]

Previous social science research on former industrial communities in Sweden has focused on the history of these places,[35] as well as the more recent labour market[36] and demographic consequences of de-industrialisation.[37] Recent qualitative studies of former industrial communities and rural places in Sweden have, to a large extent, focused on the out-mobility of young adults and their reasoning regarding staying or moving from these localities.[38] These studies have shown that a 'mobility norm' exists among young people in places such as Söderhamn – many young men and women urbanise after finishing school.[39] Out-mobility of youth has thus become a characteristic of former industrial communities.

Earlier studies show that place,[40] social class,[41] and gender[42] affect young people's desire and ability to move away from rural areas and small towns. The persistent result across qualitative research is that young women are more mobile than young men are.[43] However, quantitative research instead points to men and women's tendency to leave these areas as being similar, the difference being that women tend to be slightly younger when they move away.[44] Thus, given that previous studies point in different directions when it comes to men and women's likelihood to leave

[34] See Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", 526.
[35] See for example: Ambjörnsson, Ronny (1988), *Den skötsamme arbetaren: Idéer och ideal i ett norrländskt sågverkssamhälle 1880–1930*; Ericsson Christer (1997), *"Vi är alla delar av samma familj": Patronen, makten och folket vid Nyby bruk 1880–1940;* Lundqvist (2001), *Bygden, bruket och samhället*; Berger, Lundmark, & Strömberg (2006), *Bergslagsidentitet i förändring*.
[36] Sunnerfjell, *Un-Learning to Labour?*
[37] Svensson, Lotta (2006), *Vinna och försvinna? Drivkrafter bakom ungdomars utflyttning från mindre orter*; Forsberg, Sara (2017), ''The Right to Immobility' and the Uneven Distribution of Spatial Capital: Negotiating Youth Transitions in Northern Sweden', 1–2; Uddbäck, Hanna (2021), *Att stanna kvar: Arbete, plats och mobilitet i småstaden*.
[38] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*; Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility' and the Uneven Distribution of Spatial Capital'; Rönnlund, Maria (2020) '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay": Identification with Place and Imagined Spatial Futures Among Youth Living in Rural Areas in Sweden' 123–137; Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar;* Rönnlund, Maria & Tollefsen, Aina (2023), 'School-to-Work Transitions in Rural North Sweden: Staying on in a Reviving Local Labor Market', 1–18.
[39] See for example: Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*; Lindgren, Joakim & Lundahl, Lisbeth (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth: Social and Spatial Trajectories in a Segregated Sweden', 203–204; Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility''.
[40] Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth', 203.
[41] See for example: Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?;* Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility''.
[42] See for example: Gunnarsson, Yvonne (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv", in *Ungdomskultur i Sverige*, 22; Waara, Peter (1996), *Ungdom i Gränsland;* Jonsson, Gunilla (2003), *Rotad, rotlös, rastlös: Ung mobilitet i tid och rum*, 57; Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*.
[43] Gunnarsson (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv"; Dahlström, Margareta (1996), 'Young Women in a Male Periphery: Experiences from the Scandinavian North', 259–271; Jonsson (2003), *Rotad, rotlös, rastlös;* Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*.
[44] Forsberg, Gunnel, Stenbacka, Susanne & Lundmark, Mats (2017), *Demografiska myter: Föreställningar om landsbygden – mer myter än faktiska fakta*, 17–26.

rural areas, the gender differences in mobility patterns are perhaps more complicated than research has previously assumed.[45]

Swedish and international research has consistently showed that pursuing higher education is one of the chief drivers for this type of mobility.[46] Although out-mobility of youth is an aspect of former industrial communities and rural areas that has been researched extensively using qualitative methods, higher education is an under-researched aspect of these types of places. We know that former industrial communities tend to have relatively low levels of education and we also know that young adults tend to leave these areas in pursuit of higher education.[47] However, there is little research in Sweden on the role of higher education in out-mobility,[48] and even less on how higher education is perceived and navigated by those who live in these types of places.[49]

Apart from the out-mobility of young men and women, a recurring narrative about former industrial communities is that the level of education is low.[50] Given that young adults' out-migration from these places is predominantly driven by educational pursuits, the understanding in prior research of how education is viewed is inconsistent and under-researched. The little research that exists on former industrial communities and education, points to a historic 'resistance to education' as an explanation for low levels of education.[51] The idea that inhabitants of former industrial communities do not pursue higher education because of a general sense of 'resistance to education' is a vague and incomplete answer to why levels of education remain low in these areas. If this feeling still exists among inhabitants in these types of places, we need to further our understanding of what gives rise to that resistance.

This study adds to our knowledge of previously industrial communities by going beyond the research topic of leaving or staying, to engage in one of the main drivers

[45] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 88–91.
[46] See for example: Stockdale Aileen (2002), 'Towards a Typology of Out-Migration from Peripheral Areas: A Scottish Case Study', 345–364; Domina, Thurston (2006), 'What Clean Break?: Education and Nonmetropolitan Migration Patterns, 1989–2004', 373–398; Bjarnason, T. & Thorlindsson, T. (2006), 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Migration Expectations among Youth in Icelandic Fishing and Farming Communities', 290–300; Gabriel, Michelle (2006), 'Youth Migration and Social Advancement: How Young People Manage Emerging Differences between Themselves and Their Hometown', 33–46; Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?;* Corbett, Michael (2007), *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*; Drozdzewski, Danielle (2008), ''We're Moving out': Youth Out-Migration Intentions in Coastal Non-Metropolitan New South Wales', 153–161; Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth'.
[47] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 91–106.
[48] An exception being: Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility' and the Uneven Distribution of Spatial Capital.'
[49] An exception being: Rönnlund, Maria (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place. Rural Students Reflect on Their Future' in *Young People's Life and Schooling in Rural Areas*.
[50] Vallström, Mikael & Svensson, Lotta (2021), "Klassamhällets tystade röster och perifera platser", *Klass i Sverige: Ojämlikheten, makten och politiken i det 21:a* århundradet, 290–291; Areschoug, Susanna (2022), *I den moraliska periferin: Ungdomskultur, värden och politisk subjektivitet i rurala rumsligheter*, 11.
[51] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 98–100.

of this out-migration, namely, young adults' pursuit of higher education. By studying a previously industrial community, the thesis contributes to an understanding of the long-term consequences of de-industrialisation in Sweden, a perspective that is largely absent in previous Swedish research.[52] The study is also able to answer questions of how a young generation, who did not personally live through the decline in manufacturing industries, experiences and adjusts to the long-term consequences of de-industrialisation.[53]

The case of Söderhamn

Söderhamn was selected as the site for the fieldwork because it is located in a historically and continuously education-scarce region of Sweden. Gävleborg is the region with the lowest level of education in Sweden, with Söderhamn being the town in this region with the lowest level of education.[54] This is what I am referring to with the term *education-scarce context*, which is continuously used throughout the thesis. The low level of education among its inhabitants persists, despite Söderhamn's location 80 kilometres north of the nearest university college and 130 kilometres south of the closest university.[55]

Another reason for selecting Söderhamn is its industrial history. Industry and its employment opportunities made higher education irrelevant to most people living in the town before the major industrial decline that began in the 1970s. Many places in Sweden share Söderhamn's industrial past and its history as a former industrial community. However, the industrial legacy combined with being located in the region of Sweden with the lowest level of education, and within that region being the town with the lowest level of education, makes Söderhamn a particularly interesting case. How young adults reason about and perceive higher education could provide significant indications of how others, in less 'extreme' contexts, reason about and manage the process of making decisions about their future, and continued education.

The purpose of designing the thesis as a qualitative single-case study is to reach an in-depth understanding of a specific environment and the mechanisms at work when young people are in the process of making decisions about their continued education. However, the purpose of the case study design is also to understand 'a larger class of similar units (population of cases)'.[56] The results should say something general about the dynamic between young adults in former industrial communities and the higher education system. Although parts of the results are specific to the people and the area studied here, the former industrial

[52] Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", 532.
[53] Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", 528.
[54] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Befolkningen 2021 fördelad efter utbildningsnivå, län och kön. 25–64 år.*, 2022; For a historic overview, see also: Amcoff & Nauwerck (1993), *Övergångsställen*, 13.
[55] The university college in Gävle and Mid Sweden University in Sundsvall.
[56] Gerring, John (2007), *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, 37.

community's relationship to the higher education system can be generalised, since it is based in the economic conditions under which these types of places were founded. However, the results here are mostly relevant to former industrial communities of a similar size and with comparable economic and social challenges as those of Söderhamn.

Higher education in an education-scarce context

By studying how young men and women in Söderhamn reason about and address decisions related to their future and continued education, the study investigates how higher education is perceived and navigated in an education-scarce context. Interviews with young men and women in upper-secondary school, born around the year 2000, were used to gain insight into the *process* of making decisions about their future, in particular as it relates to the potential pursuit of higher education. At the time of the interviews, the young adults still lived in or around Söderhamn and had not yet entered higher education. Some of the interviewees had applied to higher education, others were in earlier stages of their upper-secondary school studies, and some young men and women had dropped out of school. Thus, the sample included young adults whose positions differed in relation to the potential pursuit of higher education. The interviews revolved around their views and plans for the future and the analysis throughout this thesis focuses on the potential role of higher education within those plans.

Apart from interviews with young men and women, interviews with mothers and fathers of young adults further and deepen the study's analysis of what shapes the perception and navigation of higher education in this environment. The parents' experience, familiarity, and knowledge of higher education, or lack thereof, is placed in relation to the young adults' view of higher education. The interviews with parents capture some of the consequences of the increased need for higher education and how this need is perceived and managed, not only by the young adults, but also by the wider context, represented here by the parents.

Thus, this study gives insight into how young men and women in Söderhamn, both those who are in upper-secondary school and those who have dropped out, reason and manage decisions about their future and continued education. The focus is on what shapes and contributes to the process that leads up to a potential decision about continued education or employment, not on the final decision itself. A limitation of the study is therefore that this decision-making process cannot be analysed in light of what the actual decision was, since I do not know whether the interviewees made a choice or what that choice might have been. However, I argue that focusing on the process before a potential decision is made can be perceived as a strength of the study.[57] First, examining these matters in the run up to making a decision means that there was usually a

[57] Cf. Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future'.

mode of uncertainty within the interviewees, which enabled an examination of how they weighed and reasoned about different possibilities. Second, since the study aims to answer questions related to the significance of place in how higher education is perceived and navigated, it is of relevance that the interviewees were still geographically and socially embedded in the education-scarce context at the time of the interviews.

Aim and research questions

The thesis aims to understand and explain how young adults in an education-scarce former industrial community perceive and navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education. By studying how decisions about the future and about continued education in particular are motivated and reasoned about, the thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of how groups without an abundance of educational resources – neither within their families nor within the wider context of the place where they live – perceive and reason about what comes after finishing upper-secondary school. Moreover, the study adds to the knowledge on former industrial communities and small towns in Sweden by focusing on young adults and their parents' general perceptions of education and higher education in particular, a topic that has been largely overlooked in previous Swedish research.

This thesis offers insight into the process in which young people in Söderhamn make educational decisions or non-decisions, and the thesis answers how young men and women in an education-scarce context manage an increased emphasis on education and higher education, compared to previous generations in the place where they live. Knowing how potential students from this type of context reason when making choices regarding higher education is an important addition to the more researched aspect of how individuals from education-abundant families and contexts reason on the matter. We know that these groups make different choices in relation to higher education, however, we know very little about the rationales for making higher education decisions that do not resemble those made by individuals with an abundance of educational resources. The study addresses this aim through three research questions:

I. How do young adults in an education-scarce context view continued education in general and how is this perception reflected in the various ways in which they navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education?

Chapter 6 addresses the first research question by analysing the interviews with young adults. The chapter analyses the different perceptions of education among the 40 young adults who were interviewed and relates these perceptions to their different positions relative the education system. By describing and analysing young adults' educational trajectories, family backgrounds, and outlooks, the

chapter displays the range of perceptions of higher education within the context of Söderhamn and how young adults perceive and reason about the possibility of entering into higher education.

The second research question addresses the role of familial assets in young adults' views of education in general and higher education in particular:

II. What is the relation between parents' experiences of education and young adults' perception of higher education?

Chapter 7 uses interviews with parents of young adults to understand how parents' educational and occupational trajectories contribute to their children's perception of higher education. The chapter analyses different trajectories and uses of education among the parents to understand how higher education has been used within this context previously and how this, in turn, influences the patterns discernable among the young adults.

The third research question addresses a specific part of the sample of young adults, namely those who attended a higher education preparatory programme at the time of the interviews:

III. How do young adults in higher education preparatory programmes in upper-secondary school navigate a possible pursuit of higher education and what considerations become evident in this process?

Chapter 8 analyses the higher education decision-making process that young adults in preparatory higher education programmes, to various extents, were engaged in. The final question brings the navigation of higher education options to the fore and is analysed in Chapter 8 in relation to where, what, and when young adults wanted to study.

Together, these three research questions bring together the general perception of higher education among young adults in a former industrial community, in what ways this perception is connected to their family background, and what the navigation of higher education options is characterised by in this education-scarce context.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis comprises nine chapters. The first four chapters outline the study. Following this introductory chapter, chapter two presents the previous research relevant to the study and discusses the contributions of this thesis to the research fields presented. Chapter three presents and discusses the methodological thinking that has guided the study and details how the fieldwork and interviews were carried out and analysed. Chapter four outlines the theory and analytical concepts that are employed throughout the study. Chapters five to eight are the empirical chapters of the thesis.

Chapter five is the first of the thesis' four empirical chapters and provides a contextualisation of the demographics, employment, and educational patterns in Söderhamn. The chapter uses publicly available and individual-level registry data to describe patterns within the context of Söderhamn deemed relevant to position Söderhamn in relation to a national context. Furthermore, the chapter gives a relevant sociological understanding of demographic, labour market, and educational structures that the interviewees in the study are embedded within. Chapter five is an empirical contribution in the sense that I have processed and analysed the data presented in the chapter; however, I have not collected the data myself. This chapter is therefore part of the empirical contributions of the thesis, but of a different kind than the more substantial contributions of the following three empirical chapters. Chapter five does not explicitly answer to one of the thesis' three research questions, but provides a necessary background and analysis for fulfilling the study's aim and answering the connected research questions.

Chapter six is the first of the empirical chapters where the interview material is analysed. This chapter addresses the first of the thesis' research questions by analysing the interviews with young adults who display a range of positions within the context of Söderhamn and most importantly, perceive and navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education in various ways. This chapter gives insight into how higher education can be perceived among young adults within this context and analyses the spectrum of perceptions of higher education in relation to their respective social positions.

Chapter seven presents the analysis of the interviews with parents in the study; it addresses the thesis' second research question. By describing and analysing the parents' own educational and occupational trajectories, the chapter uses the parents to understand the social context that the young adults are embedded within. Through an analysis of the parents' own educational pathways, the chapter establishes a connection between the parents' educational practices, their social positions, and their views of the children's previous educational decisions. This chapter provides an understanding of the young adults' familial backgrounds and how parents' past experiences and views of higher education contribute to how young adults perceive and navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education.

Chapter eight is the last of the thesis' empirical chapters and addresses the study's third research question. This chapter presents an analysis of a particular part of the sample of young adults; namely, those who attended a higher education preparatory programme in upper-secondary school. This chapter specifically analyses this group, which is positioned closest to a potential entry into higher education and therefore considered especially relevant in relation to the thesis' aim. The chapter presents the analysis of the patterns in these young adults' higher education decision-making process and the components of how this process is managed within this particular context.

Chapter nine is the final chapter of the thesis and discusses the study's main findings and contributions. The results of the study are related to relevant

previous research and finally, the generalisability of the results is discussed in relation to suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Previous research

This chapter presents and discusses Swedish and international research on former industrial communities, youth migration, the Swedish education system, and educational decision-making. The chapter carves out the specificity of the Swedish context and connects this case study to an international research context.

The first part of this chapter discusses research on former industrial communities. The research covers historic, economic, and cultural aspects of how former industrial communities used to function as well as how they function today, due to that history. Prior studies provide relevant context for understanding Söderhamn as a geographical and social place, relating the town to the larger Swedish society, and allows for comparisons to similar places internationally.

The second part of the chapter looks at rural migration and social class, with a specific focus on youth out-migration from places that are similar to the place studied here. Studies of this kind are relevant to the aim of the study, since higher education is often a pull-factor in young people's mobility practices. The previous research presented includes international research and research that specifically focuses on Swedish youth's out-migration from rural areas and the significance of gender and social class within those practices.

The third part of the chapter covers research on topics related to higher education. Firstly, the social structures in Swedish upper-secondary school provide a background for understanding differences in entry into tertiary education. Second, the structure of the Swedish system of higher education, its expansion, and the social stratification within that system is discussed. Third, international and Swedish research on how social class and gender influence educational decisions and pathways is presented and discussed.

The study contributes to each of the research fields presented in the chapter. These three fields are: Research on former industrial communities, specifically how higher education matters to classed and gendered social norms within these places. Research on youth's rural-to-urban migration, with a specific focus on how higher education is navigated in relation to geographical movement. Research on how education and higher education is navigated by different social groups, specifically among young adults with limited educational resources, both within their families and within the wider social context where they have grown up.

Transformation and continuity in former industrial communities

De-industrialisation has taken place at a remarkable pace,[58] as has the expansion of higher education. Only a couple of generations ago, it was unusual for those who lived in industrial communities to enter into higher education and manufacturing was still the motor of western economies. Despite rapid economic transformations and an increased need for higher education to access the labour market, many of the social structures that defined industrial communities remain present in these places. For example, the gender segregation that was characteristic of the industrial community is still noticeable in how the local labour market functions. Another example is the relatively low levels of education that continue to be a distinctive feature of these types of places. The social practices that existed in industrial communities are now part of history; however, they were a reality not long ago and in contrast to rapid economic change, there is a noticeable continuity in how these social contexts function.

De-industrialisation and regional inequality

De-industrialisation has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, but without being properly defined.[59] In the 1970s, the Swedish economy – as in many industrialised nations in the world – began to restructure.[60] The Swedish economy relied on processing industries such as mines, steelworks, and plants – these were important exporters, but were consequently also vulnerable to changes in international markets.[61] In 1975, an economic peak was reached, whereas comparable countries were in a deep recession following the first oil crisis. However, over subsequent years, Sweden's economic growth fell behind equivalent industrial nations.[62]

[58] Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen".
[59] Scholars debate whether the shift away from industrial production actually marks a 'Third Industrial Revolution' or not. For example, scholars of economic history and economic geography argue that the logic and patterns from the 'old' economy still exist, making it difficult to speak of a 'revolution', but rather a process of 'increasingly complex links between service and manufacturing'. This thesis does not aim to contribute to the theoretical discussion on de-industrialisation as a concept; de-industrialisation is used in the study to refer to the historic development described above, without making any claims about the newness or revolutionary aspect of this economic development. See for example: Lundquist, Karl-Johan, Olander Lars-Olof & Henning, Martin (2008), 'Producer Services: Growth and Roles in Long-Term Economic Development', 463–477; Henning, Martin (2009), *Industrial Dynamics and Regional Structural Change: Geographical Perspectives on Economic Evolution;* Schön, Lennart (2012), *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia: Tillväxt och omvandling under två sekel.*
[60] Henning, Martin, Enflo, Kerstin, & Andersson, Fredrik N.G. (2011), 'Trends and Cycles in Regional Economic Growth', 541.
[61] Schön (2012), *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia*, 489.
[62] Comared to other leading industrialised nations. Schön (2012), *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia*, 468–469.

The 20 years between 1970 and 1990 was a period of significant transformation for the Swedish economy, especially in terms of employment. During this period, the labour force was redistributed – agriculture, forestry, industry, and construction all shrunk in terms of share of the work force, while private services grew. The largest job losses were in the industrial sector; between 1965 and 1995, 400 000 jobs (one-third of the sector) vanished.[63] This shifted the proportion of blue-collar to white-collar workers in the population; in all sectors of the economy, the proportion of blue-collar workers decreased significantly.[64]

In parallel with the economic restructuring, Sweden underwent a process of increased economic inequality – between individuals and groups as well as between geographical regions.[65] Regional inequality is operationalised in the same manner as inequality between groups of people is operationalised – by measuring income.[66] Economists link Swedish regional inequality to the process of de-industrialisation.[67] Since the decline in manufacturing, the segments of the economy that have grown are located in metropolitan areas; sectors such as electronics, telecom, biotech, and advanced producer services require access to a highly educated and skilled work force that is often concentrated in major cities.[68]

Martin Henning et al. observes how economic growth was concentrated in Stockholm and Gothenburg between 1980 and 2009, and since the 1970s, the metropolitan regions have expanded economically, despite the general slowing down of the Swedish economy.[69] The stagflation of the 1970s made Stockholm the engine of growth and the de-industrialisation that ensued reinforced already existing urban-rural patterns.[70] According to Henning et al., economic resources have concentrated in metropolitan areas to an extent never seen before.[71] In contrast, rural and peripheral areas – such as Söderhamn – have struggled in trying to adjust to a new economy, redundancies in manufacturing have had severe economic effects; the same pattern can be seen elsewhere in Europe and in North America.[72]

[63] Schön (2012), *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia*, 475–477.
[64] Schön (2012), *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia*, 478.
[65] Bergh, Andreas & Nordin, Martin (2022), "Inkomstutveckling för människor från glesbygd och småstad", *Ekonomisk debatt*, 23-27; Finanspolitiska rådet (2024), *Ekonomisk ojämlikhet i Sverige: Översikt av fakta och framtidsutmaningar*, 33-34.
[66] Since these concepts are based on the same measurement – individuals' income – they can occur simultaneously, however, we can imagine a situation where there is a high degree of income inequality distributed evenly across regions of the country, making the regional inequality low. The concepts are closely linked but need to be theoretically and empirically separated.
[67] Henning, Martin & Eriksson, Rikard H (2021), 'Labour Market Polarisation as a Localised Process: Evidence from Sweden', 74–75.
[68] Henning, Enflo, & Andersson (2011), 'Trends and Cycles in Regional Economic Growth', 541.
[69] Henning, Enflo, & Andersson (2011), 'Trends and Cycles in Regional Economic Growth', 541 & 554.
[70] Henning, Enflo, & Andersson (2011), 'Trends and Cycles in Regional Economic Growth', 539.
[71] Henning, Enflo, & Andersson (2011), 'Trends and Cycles in Regional Economic Growth', 544.
[72] Hansen & Winther (2018), 'Employment Growth in Danish Towns and Regions since the Crisis: Industrial Structure, City Size and Location, 2008–2013', 246.

The history and culture of industrial communities

Söderhamn was built around sawmills and paper pulp production. During industrialisation, the town's access to the Baltic Sea was ideal for transporting and shipping timber from the sawmills, which drew capital and people to the locality. Industrial expansion peaked between 1860 and 1890, by the end of the 19th century, both the forestry and the sawmill industries faced increased international competition, a shortage of raw materials, and fundamental structural changes.[73]

As the sawmill industry declined, the paper pulp industry expanded and by the beginning of the 20th century, Söderhamn was the site of Sweden's largest paper pulp factory. This new forestry industry replaced most of the jobs that had disappeared from the sawmills. Throughout, the work in forestry-related industries was male-dominated, making it difficult for women to find work outside of the home.[74]

The economic depression of the 1930s had a severe impact Söderhamn's industry and economy; by 1940, only eight of 23 sawmills remained.[75] In 1942, the government placed an air force base in Söderhamn,[76] which along with the telecommunications manufacturer L M Ericsson (today simply Ericsson) opening a factory, counteracted the economic stagnation of the 1930s.[77] Between 1950 and 1975, Söderhamn – like the rest of Sweden – flourished, and the area grew by over 7 000 inhabitants. This period of economic development and in-migration to Söderhamn came to a halt in the middle of the 1970s. The reliance on manufacturing made Söderhamn vulnerable as Sweden began to de-industrialise.[78]

The economic restructuring that began in the 1970s continued over subsequent decades and its largest impact has been a significant loss of jobs in the region. In the ten years after 1975, Söderhamn lost over 1 200 manufacturing jobs. Another 1 300 jobs were lost between 1985 and 1995, mainly in forestry, but L M Ericsson and other engineering companies also downsized. Continuing into the 1990s, many factories closed or went bankrupt, the air force base closed down in 1998; two years later Ericsson was sold, eventually closing in 2004. The number of industrial employees had plummeted from 4 900 in 1990, to 2 400 in 2005.[79]

International literature on former industrial communities uses the concepts *industrial community, single industry town*, *one company town*, or *resource-based town* alongside industrial community. In Swedish, the word *bruksort* is used.[80] This concept describes a small town that is, or used to be, dominated by a single

[73] Isacson (2012), *Industrisamhället Sverige*, 20; Nilsson, Lars & Båve, Eric (2016), *Krympande orter: Avesta och Söderhamn som postindustriella samhällen*, 46–47.
[74] See for example: Bjerén, Gunilla (1989), *Kvinnor i Värmlands glesbygd: Försörjningsstrategier för skogsbygdens kvinnfolk*, 18; Isacson (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige*, 28–29; Nilsson & Båve (2016), *Krympande orter*, 48.
[75] Nilsson & Båve (2016), *Krympande orter*, 48.
[76] Isacson (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige*, 209–210.
[77] Isacson (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige*, 24; Nilsson & Båve (2016), *Krympande orter*, 49.
[78] Schön (2012), *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia*, 489.
[79] Nilsson & Båve (2016), *Krympande orter*, 49–50.
[80] Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 70.

employer.[81] Swedish industrial communities had a certain mentality – a specific mind-set held by the inhabitants toward the dominant industry and local business.[82] There was a strong link between the one employer and the towns' inhabitants; many would work for the same industrial employer their whole life, as would their parents and later, their children. In the literature, it is referred to as *bruksanda* [factory mentality/spirit][83] resulting in a mentality that:

> has both positive connotations such as loyalty, community and safety and more negative connotations that, among other things, revolve around learned helplessness and passivity. [The mentality] also contains ideas of conformity, traditionalism, conservatism, and social closure.[84]

One industrial employer dominated these towns, and affected the way people lived their lives. The work did not require any continued education and lifelong employment was common. Thus, it encouraged loyalty and 'immobility', and offered stable employment. It was not just a one-sided loyalty, the single employer reciprocated by taking care of the employees 'from the cradle to the grave'.[85] Employer and employees were involved in a paternalistic relationship[86] where:

> the workers and their families lived in relative financial security and were loyal to – and dependent upon – the employer, who exercised personal leadership. The research is by and large in agreement on the fact that the system at these industries [bruk] gave the workers better economic life chances than e.g. the workers in the city.[87]

Like similar industrial, working-class towns, Söderhamn is a place that underwent large economic transformations during the 20th century. Although economic changes can be drastic, the culture in a specific place does not necessarily change as quickly or in tandem with the economy. Practices, values, and norms can be examined in relation to the history and culture of specific places.[88]

In what has become a modern classic, *Den skötsamme arbetaren*,[89] Ronny Ambjörnsson studies a coastal community and the culture among its workers in the 1920s and 1930s. Ambjörnsson studies a specific place; however,

[81] Whether Söderhamn can or cannot be classified as a *bruksort*, I refer to previous research. For example, in his thesis in economic history, Henrik Lindberg argues that Söderhamn is 'if not the archetypical, than at least pretty close to the *brukssamhällen* in rural areas that developed around an abundant natural resource and that have shaped so much of the Swedish industrialisation' [My translation]. Lindberg, Henrik (2002), *Att möta krisen: Politikbyte på lokal nivå under industrikrisen i Söderhamn 1975–1985*, 36–37.
[82] Literally translated *bruksort* means factory/mill town. Ivener, Ramona (2013), *Kunskapens händer: Kunskapstraditioner, maskulinitet och förändring i Lesjöfors 1940 – 2010*, 25; Areschoug (2022), *I den moraliska periferin*, 30.
[83] Lundqvist (2001), *Bygden, bruket och samhället*, 57–64.
[84] Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 70 [My translation].
[85] See for example: Ericsson (1997), *Vi är alla delar av samma familj*, 48.
[86] Ericsson (1997), *Vi är alla delar av samma familj*, 49–56.
[87] Ericsson (1997), *Vi är alla delar av samma familj*, 52 [My translation].
[88] Massey, Doreen (1994), *Space, Place and Gender*, 5.
[89] In English, approx. *The Diligent Worker*.

sociologically, the results relate to a certain way of life and culture that existed on a larger scale. Not in the least, its results are highly relevant for understanding the way life was lived in Söderhamn roughly a century ago. A distinct working-class culture developed in these settings, a culture of '*skötsamhet'* – discipline, honesty, and diligence. Self-control was paramount – any apparent loss of it was fuel for gossip,[90] or discipline of a more formal nature such as exclusion from local trade unions. The concept of being 'conscientious' might be a fitting English translation of *skötsamhet*.[91]

Places where manufacturing was dominant centred upon manual labour. The physicality of the labour meant that women were rarely employed outside of the home in these parts of Sweden – paid work was a male sphere.[92] Women were in charge of the children and the home – a demanding, full-time task, as the home was also central to upholding *skötsamhet*.[93] Both women and men usually stayed near to where they grew up, close to parents and extended family, and married someone local.[94] Thus, both social and geographic mobility was restricted and the degree of social closure was high.

In this type of society, women and men's daily lives came with responsibilities that were clearly divided.[95] The construction of masculinity was inseparable from men's manual labour; these went hand in hand well into the late 20th century.[96] One of the most known studies of how young men are socialised into this type of work and life is Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*, published in 1977. Willis' now classic study on masculinity and education in the British Midlands found that school prepared some working-class boys for labour, rather than including them in a culture of learning and studying.[97] Willis wrote about a specific counter-school culture that may not lend itself entirely to the Swedish context. The role of school and education to young working-class boys is, however, relevant to other cultures as well; leaving school without qualifications and finding manual work was not limited to the United Kingdom. Although, since Willis conducted his study, the global economy and labour market has transformed:

[90] Cf. Elias, Norbert & Scotson, John L. (2010 [1965]), *Etablerade och outsiders*.
[91] Other options for translating '*skötsamhet*' to English may include diligent, upstanding, or respectable.
[92] Bjerén (1989), *Kvinnor i Värmlands glesbygd*, 18; Hedfeldt, Mona (2006), "Arbete och regionala genuskontrakt i en Bergslagskontext", 160–161; Isacson (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige*, 28–29; Nilsson & Båve (2016), *Krympande orter*, 48.
[93] Ambjörnsson (1988), *Den skötsamme arbetaren*, 17. See also: Rosengren, Annette (1991), *Två barn och eget hus;* Lundqvist (2001), *Bygden, bruket och samhället*, 54–55.
[94] Ericsson (1997), *Vi är alla delar av samma familj*, 96–97.
[95] Moqvist, Ingeborg (1990), "Familjen: Beständig och föränderlig", 118; Ericsson (1997), *Vi är alla delar av samma familj*, 92; Cf. Ward, Michael RM (2015), *From Labouring to Learning: Working-Class Masculinities, Education and De-Industrialization*, 39.
[96] See for example: Willis, Paul (1978), *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*; Ambjörnsson (1988), *Den skötsamme arbetaren;* Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*.
[97] Willis (1978), *Learning to Labour*.

> [T]he trajectory from school to factory, mill or manufacturing plant [...] has been severely curtailed. [...] The types of jobs that the young men whom [Willis] interviewed obtained have now vanished or are, in the main, closed to those young men who left school during the 1990s with few educational credentials.[98]

Linda McDowell argues that British, male manufacturing jobs have been replaced by 'low-paid, and often unskilled, jobs in the service sector which tend to recruit workers on a temporary or casual basis, offering little security as well as low wages'.[99] In towns where industries were located, well-paid, secure, manufacturing jobs have been lost.[100]

McDowell argues that the service sector work that has replaced the old industrial jobs demands an entirely different set of skills to the skills required in manufacturing: 'deference to superiors and clients, polite behaviour, cleanliness, subdued dress and bodily presentation as well as personal skills of pleasant social interaction'.[101] These skills are rarely found in the masculine, working-class culture that Paul Willis observed.[102] According to McDowell, this has led to a 'feminisation' of the labour market – male manufacturing jobs have disappeared and in the new service sector, women are often preferred over men.[103]

Results from prior research on the United Kingdom are, of course, not directly transferrable to the Swedish context studied here; there are significant differences between these two national contexts. Sweden has lower levels of economic inequality than the United Kingdom.[104] For a long time, Sweden has remained a social-democratic welfare state,[105] retaining high levels of unionisation, compared to the United Kingdom.[106] Despite differences between Sweden and the United Kingdom, there are also many similarities. Here, research on de-industrialisation in the United Kingdom is relevant for understanding mechanisms that might also be applicable to the Swedish context. Previous Swedish research has rarely engaged actively with the term de-industrialisation and its aftermath, these types of studies are much more common in the Anglo-Saxon research context,[107] which is why research of that kind is discussed extensively here.

For a long time, young working-class men could rely on finding work if they needed to, regardless of their educational achievements. However, the labour market shift toward services and the heightened demand for skills and education

[98] McDowell, Linda (2000), 'Learning to Serve? Employment Aspirations and Attitudes of Young Working-Class Men in an Era of Labour Market Restructuring', 391.
[99] McDowell (2000), 'Learning to Serve?'.
[100] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*, 5.
[101] McDowell (2000), 'Learning to Serve?' 395.
[102] McDowell (2000), 'Learning to Serve?'.
[103] Massey, Doreen (1995), *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*, 203; McDowell (2000), 'Learning to Serve?', 391.
[104] Dorling, Danny (2018), 'Inequality in Advanced Economies'.
[105] See for example: Esping-Andersen, Gøsta (1990), *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*.
[106] Kjellberg, Anders (2023), *Den svenska modellen ur ett nordiskt perspektiv: Facklig anslutning och nytt huvudavtal*, 78.
[107] Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", 526–528.

means that women challenge this position, as they are perceived as more suited to service work and more prone to leave rural and small towns for higher education. In *From Labouring to Learning*, Michael Ward revisits some of the questions Paul Willis asked almost three decades earlier. The young men from Wales that Ward follows are not 'learning to labour'; if they leave school without qualifications, manual work will be hard to come by given today's economic structure.[108]

> The service sector has, to a certain extent, replaced many of the former industries that would have employed those who left school at the earliest opportunities, but these jobs require different skills and attributes from those they replaced. On the one hand, there is the low-paid, low-skilled and repetitively unrewarding work found in telephone call centres, fast food outlets, shops, restaurants, bars or as cleaners, whilst on the other hand there are the high-paid, highly qualified, high-tech service jobs that are said to typify the 'knowledge-economy'.[109]

In conclusion, Ward writes that the main point of his study is that masculinity in a previously industrial context cannot be achieved as easily from education 'as from the former employment practices that shaped the area'.[110] What it means to be a man in this type of context has been linked to industrial employment practices for a long time – although the jobs are gone, the social function of the work still lives on.

Historical ways of organising society remain in how people in de-industrialised environments understand and shape their lives today.[111] In the intersection of gender and social class, the practices seem to conserve some of these patterns – or re-traditionalise them, as Ward puts it.[112] However, as national and global structures related to the economy, labour market, education, etc., change, these traditional, local practices become increasingly difficult to maintain.[113] Upholding of traditional norms and practices generates incongruences such as those seen in the work of McDowell, between traditional masculinity and service sector work, or between traditional female care of home and children and paid work.

Gender and 'resistance to education' in industrial communities

Women and men's responsibilities in the industrial community were distinct and separate. Men's manual labour required women's domestic labour – and vice versa.[114] Industrial communities were built upon this division and would not have

[108] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*, 4.
[109] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning.*
[110] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning,* 157.
[111] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning* ; Bright N. Geoffrey (2016), ''The Lady Is Not Returning!': Educational Precarity and a Social Haunting in the UK Coalfields', 142–157.
[112] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*, 155,157.
[113] Backius (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", 528.
[114] McDowell, Linda & Massey, Doreen (1994), 'A Woman's Place?', 191; Hedfeldt, (2006), "Arbete och regionala genuskontrakt i en Bergslagskontext", 160.

functioned without it. This historic gender division of labour lives on in modern day employment and educational patterns in Söderhamn.[115]

Many of the significant changes to women's increased labour market participation in Sweden took place during the 1970s. However, there is also reason to believe that important changes to women's working life since the 1990s have further changed social norms in relation to the balance of education, work, and family life. Around the time when the parents in this study were born, the gap between women and men's participation in higher education began to widen and women have continuously increased their lead since.[116] Theoretically, this development has consequences for all involved – women, men, and the education system itself. Large changes to the labour market during the period between 1970 and today can also be seen in parallel with the changes to education. This section adds a gender perspective on the consequences of de-industrialisation and the expansion of the higher education system.

In an article from 1992, Jane Lewis adds gender to the concept of welfare regimes, arguing that women's unpaid domestic work has been overlooked in Gösta Esping Andersen's categorisation of welfare state regimes in *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*.[117] Lewis argues that another way to distinguish welfare states from one another is to analyse the extent to which the state treats women as financially dependent on men. She goes on to show that there are large differences in welfare states' treatment of men and women in terms of taxation, parental leave, child care, etc. – differences that, in many cases, still exist 30 years later.[118]

Welfare states, Lewis argues, have developed away from a *male-breadwinner model* – where men shouldered the financial responsibility for the family, and therefore laboured, and women cared for home and children.[119] This model begins to transform during the 20th century, and different states adopt different models in its place. In Lewis's typology, Sweden is an example of a *weak male-breadwinner country*. During the 1960s and 1970s, women in Sweden were actively encouraged to become part of the workforce, becoming workers instead of dependents.[120] Yvonne Hirdman uses the term *two-breadwinner family* in reference to the changed model and norm of the division of labour.[121] Another common way of describing the development is to refer to Sweden as a *dual-breadwinner society*.[122]

---

[115] See Chapter 5 for further discussions on the employment structure and level of education in Söderhamn.
[116] "Jämställdhet i statistiken", *Universitetskanslersämbetet*.
[117] Lewis, Jane (1992), 'Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes', 159–238; Esping-Andersen (1990), *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*.
[118] Lewis (1992), 'Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes'.
[119] Lewis (1992), 'Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes', 161–162.
[120] Lewis (1992), 'Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes', 168–169; See also: Sommestad, Lena (1997), 'Welfare State Attitudes to the Male Breadwinning System: The United States and Sweden in Comparative Perspective', 153–174.
[121] Hirdman, Yvonne (1987), *The Swedish Welfare State and the Gender System: A Theoretical and Empirical Sketch*, 1-12.
[122] See for example: Ellingsæter, Anne Lise (1998), 'Dual Breadwinner Societies: Provider Models in the Scandinavian Welfare States', 59–73.

The traditional division of labour, which we have seen in Söderhamn historically, was built on strict gender segregation. A dual breadwinner model places very different demands on both men and women, compared to a traditional male-breadwinner model. An important aspect of the model and norm of the dual-breadwinner family is that both men and women are treated as individuals in the eyes of the state. The independence that wage earning contributes to, also contributed to women being perceived, to a larger extent, as individuals.[123]

The understanding that the Swedish welfare model has developed from a male-breadwinner, to a dual or weak male-breadwinner model, is important in how men and women relate to the labour market, and possibly therefore also to continued education. The labour market, the education system, and, possibly, men and women's use of these arenas in their lives face consequences as a result of being perceived and treated as individuals, both expected to earn a wage even while having children.

In an article published in 1998, Gunnel Forsberg adds spatial variations to Hirdman's concept of *informal gender contracts*.[124] Forsberg argues that in order to understand welfare regimes it is necessary to understand the local or regional level, where most welfare is produced and consumed.[125]

> [The regional gender contract refers to] the way in which the informal gender contracts between men and women display regional variations, thus affecting the daily life and the operating spheres of men and women in different ways in different regions. [...] Women (and men) act in different ways according to such contracts. They can develop different strategies for adopting [sic] to the model, or they can choose to migrate.[126]

Forsberg argues that a *traditional gender contract* is dominant in forestry and industrial areas of Sweden. She points to a high degree of labour market segregation, women's small roles in political life, the influence of religious norms and practices, and the private provision of social infrastructure as indicators of this traditional gender contract. In 1998, Forsberg notes the high levels of out-migration from 'industrial villages',[127] low educational levels for both men and women, women having children at a young age, and the wide income gap, partly due to women working part-time.[128]

Thus, Hirdman argued that informal gender contracts must be included in the explanation of why welfare states have moved in different directions, and Forsberg further argued that there are regional variations to these informal contracts. Certain of the structures that Forsberg notes as indicative of the

[123] Pateman, Carole (1988), 'The Patriarchal Welfare State'.
[124] Åström, Gertrud & Hirdman, Yvonne (1992), *Kontrakt i kris: Om kvinnors plats i välfärdsstaten*; Forsberg, Gunnel (1998), 'Regional Variations in the Gender Contract: Gendered Relations in Labour Markets, Local Politics and Everyday Life in Swedish Regions', 191–209.
[125] Forsberg, G. (1998), 'Regional Variations in the Gender Contract', 193.
[126] Forsberg, G. (1998), 'Regional Variations in the Gender Contract', 193.
[127] A sub-group within the wider group of forestry and industrial areas – Söderhamn fits into this category.
[128] Forsberg, G. (1998), 'Regional Variations in the Gender Contract', 203.

traditional gender contract – the labour market segregation, the income gap between men and women, and the part-time work of women – are still recognisable 25 years after the article was published. Although some aspects of the traditional gender contract remain intact in Söderhamn, the local level of education has risen since the 1990s, especially for women.

Educational levels in de-industrialised areas, and especially in former industrial communities, are lower than in the general population. To smoothen the transition away from manufacturing, prevent unemployment and increase the level of education, the Swedish state invested heavily in regional university colleges – whether these goals have been reached remains uncertain.[129] In a chapter on education and *bruksanda*, Anna Brismark discusses whether the local mentality in industrial communities can explain the low levels of education and the perceived 'resistance to education' in these parts of the country. Building on earlier studies, Brismark points to the patriarchal, collective, working-class culture of these environments as a 'barrier' to higher education. The single industry environment had distinct class boundaries that were rarely traversed – education meant crossing over from 'us' to 'them'.[130] Brismark reasons that the masculine notion of what a 'real job' is, constructs barriers to education and might explain why levels of education remain low in today's former industrial communities.[131] Brismark's argument shares significant similarities to Michael Ward's reasoning about masculinity and education that we saw in the previous section.[132] However, women in these communities are educating themselves to a higher degree than the men. Women's higher levels of education are perhaps a consequence of their historic need for creative solutions to find paid work – education is another means for women to become 'employable'.[133]

Generally, what we see in former industrial communities in Sweden is a labour market that remains gender segregated. However, when it comes to education, women are pursuing higher education to a greater extent than men do. In a report on demography in the former mining region of *Bergslagen*, Gunnel Forsberg, Mats Lundberg, and Susanne Stenbacka conclude that women and men work in separate spheres and the female part is one-sided, dominated by health and social care occupations. These patterns are also recognisable in Söderhamn.[134] Moreover, men's earnings are higher than women's, especially among those who stay in the region. Both men and women who move away increase their income, compared to those who stay.[135] Moreover, Forsberg et al. confirm the general finding that women have higher levels of education than men. However, they also find that highly educated,

[129] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 96–97.
[130] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 100.
[131] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 98.
[132] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*, 157.
[133] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 99–100. The concept of *employability* is further discussed in the section on *The Swedish higher education system* later in this chapter.
[134] For a closer look at the specifics of the gendered labour market in Söderhamn, see Chapter 5 and the section on *Occupational structure* in Söderhamn.
[135] Forsberg, Stenbacka, & Lundmark (2012), *Demografiska myter*, 28–32.

young women are more likely to either stay in Bergslagen, or move back after graduating. This finding challenges the notion that young women abandon industrial areas for education, highly educated women actually remain in the local area to a higher extent than their male peers do.[136] Forsberg et al. conclude that labelling young men who stay in industrial areas as 'losers' in relation to their female peers is dubious, given that they out-earn women remainers, earning on par with the women who leave.[137]

Mobility practices related to social background

It is difficult – if not impossible – for young adults in non-urban places to avoid the question of whether to stay or leave. The young men and women who are investigated here are not yet geographically mobile, however, the prospect of higher education is intertwined with mobility. The geographical distance to institutions of higher education and the necessary mobility required for pursuing tertiary education can influence the perception and navigation of higher education.

Söderhamn is somewhat semi-urban,[138] having more in common with rural areas than urban centres. In terms of youth out-migration from rural areas, education and employment are the most common motivations for migrating.[139] These are the same reasons for why young people leave Söderhamn.[140] Regardless of whether Söderhamn is truly rural, the out-migration process resembles migration from rural places to urban centres. Although this study is not primarily interested in posing and answering questions about mobility, most of the Swedish research on young adults in former industrial communities has focused on their out-mobility. Therefore, the following pages address research on mobility that deepens our understanding of youth in these types of geographical and social contexts and their dispositions towards education. The first section discusses international research focused on European youth's outmigration from rural areas, the second section engages with research on Swedish youth's outmigration from rural areas.

Youth's rural-to-urban migration

From a life course perspective, migration from rural to urban areas is associated with young adulthood.[141] Unemployment forms a significant explanatory factor for

[136] Forsberg, Stenbacka, & Lundmark (2012), *Demografiska myter*, 26–28.
[137] Forsberg, Stenbacka, & Lundmark (2012), *Demografiska myter*, 32–33.
[138] What *rural* is, is a wider theoretical and empirical question that researchers have given various answers to for a long time. See for example: Shucksmith, Mark & Brown, David L. (2016), eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies*.
[139] Stockdale (2002), 'Towards a Typology of Out-Migration from Peripheral Areas', 355–358; Ní Laoire, Caitríona & Stockdale, Aileen (2016), 'Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings', 40.
[140] Svensson, *Vinna och försvinna?* (2006), Region Gävleborg (2019), *Hållbar regional tillväxt och utveckling i Gävleborg*, 55–56.
[141] Ní Laoire & Stockdale (2016), 'Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings', 40.

leaving rural settings early in life; young people move in order to find work.[142] Besides this, education is also noteworthy in several ways regarding the propensity to migrate. The general lack of higher education institutions in rural areas contributes to youth out-migration.[143] However, in Sweden, there has been active political drive to bring higher education closer to rural areas, resulting in the expansion of regional university colleges.[144]

Education is a motivating factor in adolescents' willingness to leave rural areas – both before an intended move[145] and after migrating.[146] Young adults whose parents have high levels of education are more likely to state an intention to migrate.[147] Despite results pointing toward the importance of the parents' educational level, '[f]ew studies of rural out-migration explicitly engage with questions of social class'.[148] Studies that do engage with social class and out-migration indicate that the rural education- and labour market affects adolescents in different ways depending on class. While the middle-class leave for education, the working-class are restricted to the local, low-skill sectors of the labour market.[149]

As much as out-migration from rural areas is a physical, geographical movement, it is also 'a journey in social space'.[150] Researchers who study rural youth's migration to cities agree that this type of movement often leads to movement in the social structure.[151] This could be understood as two separate processes. First, social class is not the same everywhere – class structures are local and therefore vary geographically.[152] Mobility may therefore entail encountering a different class structure than the one back home. Second, geographical mobility can bring about *social mobility* – typically upward class mobility through education or employment.[153] Both processes – attempting to position oneself in a different class structure and potentially advancing in said structure – can open up gaps between migrants and their families.[154] However, there are no guarantees that migrating to an unfamiliar social environment

[142] Domina (2006), 'What Clean Break?'; Bell, Simon et al. (2009), 'Rural Society, Social Inclusion and Landscape Change in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case Study of Latvia', 295–326.
[143] Domina (2006), 'What Clean Break?'; Corbett (2007), *Learning to Leave*.
[144] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 94–95.
[145] Drozdzewski (2008), ''We're Moving Out.''
[146] Stockdale (2002), 'Towards a Typology of Out-Migration from Peripheral Areas.'
[147] Bjarnason & Thorlindsson (2006), 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?'
[148] Ní Laoire & Stockdale (2016), 'Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings', 42.
[149] Corbett (2007), *Learning to Leave*.
[150] Rye, Johan Fredrik (2011), 'Youth Migration, Rurality and Class: A Bourdieusian Approach', 170.
[151] See for example: Gabriel (2006), 'Youth Migration and Social Advancement'; Corbett (2007), *Learning to Leave*; Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth'; Corbett, Michael (2013), 'I'm Going to Make Sure I'm Ready before I Leave: The Complexity of Educational and Mobility Decision-Making in a Canadian Coastal Community', 275–282; Farrugia, David (2015), 'The Mobility Imperative for Rural Youth: The Structural, Symbolic and Non-Representational Dimensions Rural Youth Mobilities', 836–851.
[152] Ní Laoire & Stockdale (2016), 'Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings', 42.
[153] See for example: Trondman, Mats (1994), *Bilden av en klassresa: Sexton arbetarklassbarn på väg till och i högskolan*; Gabriel (2006), 'Youth Migration and Social Advancement', 44–45; Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth'.
[154] Trondman (1994), *Bilden av en klassresa*; Gabriel (2006), 'Youth Migration and Social Advancement', 44.

will 'pay off' in terms of upward mobility.[155] A potential risk of out-migration is the experience of an increasing gap between oneself and family and friends.[156] A less obvious risk is that one's class position worsens by leaving a familiar class structure behind. Thus, a dimension of the decision to migrate or not is a form of risk-assessment, are the potential gains worth the risk?

In a qualitative study of youth in the Scottish Borders, Lynn Jamieson finds that class background and the family's history of migration affect the decision to migrate or not.[157] While Jamieson identifies how the father's occupation is linked to a tendency to migrate, Johan Fredrik Rye connects the father's educational level to higher levels of mobility.[158] In a 2006 study of youth from rural Norway, born in 1965, Rye shows that those from 'upper rural social classes'[159] were more likely to migrate and gained more through mobility than their peers from lower classes.[160] However, rural-to-urban migration was beneficial not just to those from the upper strata of rural society. 'On average, "urban migrants" have higher wage levels and are better educated than those remaining in the rural community.'[161]

Within the field of rural youth migration, researchers have also shown interest in those who choose to stay. In a study of Ireland, Caitríona Ní Laoire finds that the youth most likely to stay come from manual labour or unemployed backgrounds. They tend to leave school with few or no qualifications and are therefore restricted to the lower sectors of the labour market. Furthermore, they are more likely to be male. 'What appears to be happening is the persistence of a dichotomy between the necessary spatial mobility of many, particularly young women, and the spatial entrapment of others, particularly young men'.[162]

The finding that young men are more likely to stay in rural areas is perhaps not applicable to the Swedish context since there are indications that the difference in men and women's out-migration from areas similar to the one studied here, is small.[163] However, the gendered labour market and women's higher levels of education are patterns we see in Sweden as well.

[155] Jones, Glenda W. (2006), 'A Risky Business: Experiences of Leaving Home among Young Rural Women', 209–220; Rye, Johan Fredrik (2006), 'Leaving the Countryside: An Analysis of Rural-to-Urban Migration and Long-Term Capital Accumulation', 62–63; Rye (2011), 'Youth Migration, Rurality and Class', 174–175; Corbett (2013), 'I'm Going to Make Sure I'm Ready before I Leave: The Complexity of Educational and Mobility Decision-Making in a Canadian Coastal Community'.
[156] See for example: Gabriel (2006), 'Youth Migration and Social Advancement'.
[157] Jamieson, Lynn (2000), 'Migration, Place and Class: Youth in a Rural Area', 207–211.
[158] Jamieson, Lynn (2000), 'Migration, Place and Class: Youth in a Rural Area', 208; Rye (2011), 'Youth Migration, Rurality and Class', 174.
[159] Both in terms of higher education and average income.
[160] Rye (2006), 'Leaving the Countryside'; Rye (2011), 'Youth Migration, Rurality and Class', 175.
[161] Rye (2006), 'Leaving the Countryside', 62.
[162] Ní Laoire, Caitríona (2000), 'Conceptualising Irish Rural Youth Migration: A Biographical Approach', 237.
[163] Forsberg, Stenbacka, & Lundmark (2012), *Demografiska myter*.

Swedish youth's rural-to-urban migration

Several of the results presented in the previous section are mirrored in research on the Swedish case. The international pattern of youth mobility as linked to social class persists when studying Sweden. In a study of adolescents in three parts of Sweden, Joakim Lindgren and Lisbeth Lundahl find that the ability to be mobile is contingent upon social class and place:

> [The possibility] to move to desired places [is] unequally distributed between young people and between places. Thus they contribute to processes of social inclusion and exclusion.[164]

The authors further conclude that data from their study go against the idea that individuals have increased opportunities for social and geographical mobility. Since mobility has become an obligation and a way for the individual to attain education and find employment, those who have local attachments deviate from the norm and might even be regarded as socially deprived.[165]

However, the norm to be mobile may also produce resistance. In a study of youth in Kalix in northern Sweden, Sara Forsberg problematises the dichotomisation of mobility into 'movers' and 'stayers' and furthermore, argues that staying is not necessarily a reflection of disempowerment, and vice versa.[166] In particular, the author finds that 'stayers' can be 'individuals equipped with a symbolic capital that is locally recognised, and for whom the transition from secondary-school education is no less smooth than for the "leavers"'.[167] Forsberg argues that the perceived 'right to immobility' is a way to understand certain 'stayers' who make this choice 'from a privileged position, with access to a regional labour market and feelings of social belonging'.[168] Contrary to research that finds a simple connection between social class and mobility, Forsberg finds that social class is reflected in the choice of a vocational or higher education preparatory programme in upper-secondary school.[169] The educational choice of vocational or preparatory programme acts as a 'mediating variable' between social class and mobility.

Apart from social class, studies of rural youth in Sweden also points to gender differences in the likelihood of migrating.[170] International research has tended to identify that young women leave to a higher extent than young men do; however, in Sweden this is not necessarily the case. Qualitative research and the general 'narrative' points to women being more prone to leave rural areas then men are.[171]

---

[164] Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth', 203.
[165] Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth', 203–204.
[166] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 324, 339.
[167] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 328.
[168] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 330.
[169] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 340.
[170] Jonsson (2003), *Rotad, rotlös, rastlös*, 57.
[171] See for example: *Rotad, rotlös, rastlös*; Gunnarsson (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv"; Dahlström (1996), 'Young Women in a Male Periphery: Experiences from the Scandinavian North'; Jonsson (2003),; Stenbacka, Susanne (2011), 'Othering the Rural: About the

Nonetheless, quantitative and qualitative research shows that the difference in men and women's propensity to out-migrate from small towns and rural areas is small when a broader age span is included, or even that more young men leave certain rural areas.[172] This is not to say that there are no gender differences, rather, that the differences are complicated and more ambiguous than previously assumed.[173]

In an interview study, Yvonne Gunnarsson argues that the conflict between working and child rearing is especially pronounced among girls in a rural setting:

> Rural girls encounter two fundamentally incompatible role models, the capable housewife, who takes care of home and family and partly runs a subsistence economy, and the capable career woman who is successful in both male and female spheres. The difference compared to girls in cities is that the latter meet a greater variety of female role models, which means that they always find someone similar to themselves.[174]

While Gunnarsson's study was conducted in the 1990s, the gendered patterns are similar to those Forsberg encountered in Kalix in 2017 and to Lotta Svensson's findings in Söderhamn in 2006.[175] Young women who stay in rural areas and small towns may have fewer employment opportunities and expect a lower salary; mobility therefore becomes a reasonable option.[176]

Lotta Svensson is one of the few to have previously studied Söderhamn, in the dissertation titled *Where do the winners go?* The 2006 study investigates the mechanisms behind adolescents' real and perceived ability to stay or leave their hometown.[177] Svensson identifies patterns that align with previous research, both in Sweden and internationally. Class and gender are important to understanding where adolescents in Söderhamn stand in terms of staying or leaving.[178] She finds that the relationship that the adolescents have to the locality and to the local gender patterns, affect their strategies for the future.[179] This was also found in Peter Waara's dissertation about Tornedalen in northern Sweden.[180] Working-class youth in Söderhamn are rooted geographically, while the middle-class is seeking 'something better' and want to 'move on'. Some of the working-class girls mainly focus on family and close relationships – a pattern that is familiar from Gunnarsson's study.[181]

Construction of Rural Masculinities and the Unspoken Urban Hegemonic Ideal in Swedish Media', 235–244.

[172] *Glesbygdsverkets årsbok 2005* (2005), 24–25; Forsberg, Stenbacka & Lundmark (2012), *Demografiska myter*, 17–26; Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility''; Forsberg, Gunnel & Stenbacka, Susanne (2017), 'Creating and Challenging Gendered Spatialities: How Space Affects Gender Contracts', 223–237.

[173] Forsberg, Sara (2018), *Going Places: Local Settings and Global Horizons in Young People's Education and Work Trajectories*, 88–91.

[174] Gunnarsson (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv", 116 [My translation].

[175] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 144–145; Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility''.

[176] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'' 340.

[177] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 13.

[178] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 140.

[179] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 141.

[180] Waara (1996), *Ungdom i Gränsland*.

[181] Cf. Gunnarsson (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv".

Yet, some of the middle-class girls are intent on leaving, in pursuit of an urban future. The working-class boys are also more rooted geographically than their middle-class peers. However, the focus on future employment unites boys from both working- and middle-class backgrounds.[182] Svensson's results – along with many other researchers' – make a strong case for why questions on youth out-mobility need to be examined through an intersectional lens and furthermore, they need to be related to perceptions on education and employment. Without acknowledging the intersection of class, gender and place, the differences in migration patterns among rural youth become rather difficult to understand.[183]

From international and Swedish research, we have extensive knowledge on youth out-mobility from rural regions. The research shows the importance of family background – in terms of education, occupation, and previous migration patterns – for the likelihood to migrate. There are also robust results in the international literature, indicating that young women are more likely to migrate than young men are. We may also note that drivers of youth mobility are commonly education and work.

Educational practices related to social background

De-industrialisation, expansion of the higher education system and a subsequent demand for highly skilled employees has created a situation where young adults are required to care about education.[184] It is now valued in places where it was, until recently, irrelevant as a requirement for employment. The need for higher education has an inevitable effect on the age and class structure in smaller towns – in large numbers, youth leave to pursue education. While some return, a higher education degree can mean there is no qualified work 'back home'; you educate yourself out of the local job market. The following section looks at research on the Swedish education system and how gender and social class influences choices in upper-secondary school and higher education.

Upper-secondary school choices

In Sweden today, compulsory education consists of 10 years of schooling.[185] After compulsory school, upper-secondary schooling is in a formal sense optional. However, for the very small percentage that do not attend upper-secondary school,

[182] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 144–145.
[183] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?;* Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth'; Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility".
[184] Crivello, Gina (2011), "Becoming Somebody': Youth Transitions through Education and Migration in Peru', 395–411.
[185] For the young adults in this study who were born around the year 2000, compulsory education consisted of 9 years.

the options are restricted.[186] In practice, almost all adolescents in a cohort enter into upper-secondary school and aside from being formally optional, attending upper-secondary school is a necessity for employment and continued education. Choosing an upper-secondary programme is a defining decision for young adults. At the end of compulsory schooling, usually at age 15–16, adolescents choose which upper-secondary school and study programme they want to attend.[187]

In places where there is a school 'market', the choice of school is central. However, in smaller towns and rural areas, large 'markets' such as those in urban regions, do not exist.[188] Söderhamn has one upper-secondary school, and although some – around 30 per cent – choose a school in a different municipality, most stay and attend the local school.[189]

Having just one upper-secondary school challenges the notion of the existence of a school 'market'. In his thesis, Håkan Forsberg studies the emergence of an upper-secondary school market in Stockholm. Forsberg uses four criteria to define a school market: 1) public and private providers are allowed, 2) pupils are able to choose between providers, 3) pupils' choices determine the distribution of economic resources, 4) business economic principles and steering models are introduced.[190] These four criteria apply to the national school market, and therefore to Söderhamn as well. However, since the municipality of Söderhamn only has one upper-secondary school there are no competitors on this particular market. If pupils want to 'consume' education from a different provider, this comes at the relatively high cost of moving or commuting. This type of school 'monopoly' is rather common in less populous municipalities and it begs the question of whether it is actually a market – or something else. Regardless, there is an unmistakable difference in the educational supply-side depending on where in Sweden the presumed market is located.[191]

For prospective upper-secondary school students, a central question is whether to attend a vocational programme or a programme preparing them for tertiary education. Gender, class, and place affect the choice of a higher education preparatory or a vocational route. Young women and men tend to choose differently; the class-composition also varies between the programmes. Furthermore, the distribution of pupils between higher education preparatory and vocational programmes differs depending on place. In Söderhamn in 2019, 47 per cent of pupils attended a higher education preparatory programme and 40 per cent

[186] Czaplicka, Magdalena (1993), "Vägen till självförsörjning: Om ungdomars skolgång och inträde i arbetslivet", 125–126.
[187] The fundamental choice is whether to continue to upper-secondary school or not, but 90 per cent in Söderhamn choose to do so. Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), *Öppna jämförelser, Kolada*.
[188] Forsberg, Håkan (2015), *Kampen om eleverna: Gymnasiefältet och skolmarknadens framväxt i Stockholm, 1987–2011*.
[189] Approximately 70 per cent of students choose the upper-secondary school in Söderhamn. Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), *Öppna jämförelser, Kolada.*
[190] Forsberg, H. (2015), *Kampen om eleverna*, 52.
[191] Skolverket (2013), *Det svåra valet: Elevers val av utbildning på olika slags gymnasiemarknader*.

attended a vocational programme (13 per cent attended one of the introductory programmes).[192] The fact that half of students choose a route that prepares them for higher education arguably indicates that higher education assumes an important role in an area that has lost dominant industry – higher education perhaps becomes a reliable path to stable employment. However, the difference between Söderhamn and an urban setting such as Stockholm – where 78 per cent of pupils choose a higher education preparatory programme and only 13 per cent choose a vocational programme – is striking.[193]

Research has investigated the polarities within upper-secondary education, especially in regards to the choice of a programme in upper-secondary school and how this choice is related to gender and families' social class. Pupils from different class backgrounds tend to choose different programmes in upper-secondary school. In analyses of the Swedish upper-secondary school 1997–2001, Mikael Börjesson finds that gender and social class intersect in the choice of an upper-secondary school programme. Girls and boys tend to gather in different programmes, the difference is starkest among the vocational programmes.[194] Apart from gender, students' social class affects which programme they choose, higher education preparatory programmes is a more common choice among those whose parents are white-collar workers.[195] Together, gender and parents' social class, especially their level of education, account for the polarities in the choice of a programme. Håkan Forsberg notices similar fundamental patterns to those found by Börjesson at an earlier point in time, in a study of upper-secondary school in Stockholm 2006–2008. However, Forsberg notes that programmes that are favoured by boys from working-class backgrounds have become more isolated relative other programmes. This means that it is more common for boys to attend a girl-dominated programme than it is for girls to attend a boy-dominated programme.[196]

Among the preparatory programmes, the natural sciences programme occupies an exclusive position – it is a recurring choice for pupils from homes with both financial and educational resources.[197] Furthermore, pupils who have attended the natural sciences programme are most prone to continue into higher education after having graduated from upper-secondary school.[198]

[192] A further discussion on education in Söderhamn can be found in Chapter 5.
[193] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), *Öppna jämförelser, Kolada.*
[194] Börjesson, Mikael (2004), *Gymnasieskolans sociala struktur och sociala gruppers utbildningsstrategier: Tendenser på nationell nivå 1997–2001.*
[195] Börjesson, Mikael (2004), *Gymnasieskolans sociala struktur och sociala gruppers utbildningsstrategier: Tendenser på nationell nivå 1997–2001.*
[196] Forsberg, H. (2015), *Kampen om eleverna*, 186–187.
[197] Börjesson, Mikael (2016), "Sociala kartor över utbildningslandskapet", 431–432.
[198] Sandell, Anna (2007), *Utbildningssegregation och självsortering: Om gymnasieval, genus och lokala praktiker*, 49–50.

The Swedish higher education system

The Swedish higher education system plays an important role in this thesis – the institutions and programmes that comprise the higher education system are what many of the young adults are attempting to navigate. Therefore, this section presents the general structure of the Swedish system, and sociological research into its stratification. Prior research into these aspects of higher education in Sweden is used to understand the options available to the young adults in the study during the decision-making process, and it provides a basis for explaining recurring and preferred options.

From a comparative perspective, the most prominent feature of the Swedish higher education system is that is tuition-fee-free for all citizens of the European Union, the material constraints on higher education choice are thus less prevalent in the Swedish case, compared to others.[199] Apart from the absence of tuition fees, students are entitled to government subsidies and loans to finance their higher studies.[200] The financial cost for a prospective student is therefore the cost of living, foregone earnings, and for most, the accruing of student debt.

As in many countries around the world, the higher education system in Sweden expanded rapidly in the late 20th century – in terms of both the number of institutions and the number of students. Between 1955 and 1965, the number of students in higher education increased from 23 000 to nearly 70 000; by 1970, the number had increased again, and there were 120 000 students in higher education.[201] Today, the Swedish higher education system includes three times as many students, 370 000 people were registered in the autumn semester of 2023.[202]

Along with more students in tertiary education, the complexity of what they can choose between has also increased. At the beginning of the 19th century, there were two higher education institutions in Sweden. Uppsala University and Lund University. Two private university colleges were established in Stockholm in 1878, and Gothenburg in 1891. Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm had been training physicians since the early 1800s, in a manner that was on par with the other universities' medical education.[203] Incrementally, the number of higher education institutions grew throughout the course of the 20th century; Umeå University was established in 1965 and Linköping University in 1975.

Following the higher education committee that was appointed by the Swedish Government in 1968 (U 68), the higher education system was subject to reforms implemented in 1977. Significant suggestions from the U 86 committee included making higher education accessible to those outside of major

[199] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 808.
[200] Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective', 99.
[201] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 32.
[202] Universitetskanslersämbetet (2023), *Universitet och högskolor. Årsrapport 2023*, 16.
[203] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 5–6.

urban areas and areas where existing universities were located.[204] Before the suggestions from U 68, four subsidiaries or branches[205] of the existing universities opened in 1967 in Linköping, Örebro, Karlstad, and Växjö.[206]

An aspect of this considerable U 68 reform that is relevant to this thesis is the establishment of regional colleges – several of these are mentioned frequently by the young adults in the later empirical chapters. The university colleges were established to accommodate the need for higher education in different regions of Sweden, to distribute higher education in accordance to the needs of the labour market, and to widen the social recruitment to higher education.[207]

Today, there are 50 higher education institutions in Sweden[208] and these can be divided into three tiers. First, the old universities and specialised higher education institutions[209] that offer a wide range of first and second cycle courses and study programmes and run prestigious programmes such as medicine and law. Moreover, these institutions offer third cycle education and employ many of the country's scientists and researchers.[210] Second, the new universities such as Linnæus University, Mid Sweden University and Örebro University. These are younger institutions and smaller than the traditional universities. They were once subsidiaries of universities and later university colleges, but gained the university status in the late 20th century. To some extent, they are still characterised by their history as university colleges. They receive less government funding for research and third cycle education, and there is a high proportion of teaching staff without doctorates. Many of the students enter programmes directed towards working in one of the welfare professions or new professions, historically referred to as semi-professions,[211] such as social work, teaching, nursing, and there are fewer students in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences.[212] Third, the regional university colleges mainly provide first cycle courses and study programmes although they can apply to provide third cycle education in specific disciplines without being categorised as a university.[213]

Hence, although Sweden has a unified system of higher education, there are three distinct tiers, where different types of institutions offer different types of education, and have different financial capabilities and resources in terms of teaching staff. Almost all of the Swedish higher education institutions are state-run and the selection of students is, with very few exceptions, made on the basis of grades or the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (SweSAT), and entry requirements based on

[204] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 67.
[205] In Swedish: filialer.
[206] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 45.
[207] Olofsson, Gunnar (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?", 274–276; Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 66–67.
[208] *Universitet och högskolor. Årsrapport 2023*, 135.
[209] In Swedish: fackhögskolor.
[210] Olofsson (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?", 276.
[211] Brante, Thomas, Svensson, Kerstin & Svensson, Lennart G. (2019), "Inledning", 27–30.
[212] Olofsson (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?", 276–277.
[213] Olofsson (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?", 276.

having studied certain courses in upper-secondary school.[214] The unified system of higher education in Sweden makes the existence of elite institutions and programmes more elusive compared to higher education systems in the United States, with its Ivy League, the United Kingdom with its Russell Group, or the French *grandes écoles*.[215] Regardless, there are institutions and programmes where students from the Swedish upper and upper-middle classes congregate.

In a 2016 article on elite strategies in higher education, Mikael Börjesson and Donald Broady show that the upper and upper middle-class students in Sweden gather in a select few institutions. The universities of Uppsala, Lund, Stockholm, and Gothenburg, together with the Stockholm School of Economics, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, and the Royal Institute of Art are institutions with 'a concentration of students with vast amounts of highly recognized resources of various kinds'.[216] In contrast, students from 'lower social classes' attend second and third tier institutions – the young universities and the university colleges.[217]

Apart from students of different social origin separating into different institutions, there is also a pattern linking social origin to the choice of study programme. The choice of longer programmes in fields such as medicine, law, and political science is more common among the upper and upper-middle classes.[218] In contrast, teacher training programmes, healthcare programmes, and social care programmes are more popular among students from lower social strata.[219] The stratification of higher education can also be understood by looking at typical choices among male and female students. The gender differences are starker among students from lower social strata; gender typical choices for women are teaching, nursing, and social care and gender typical choices for men are shorter technology programmes.[220]

Inequalities persist, despite the expansion of the higher education system, paired with political efforts to broaden recruitment to higher education in Sweden.[221] In a comparative study on higher education participation in Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden from 1985 to 2010, Thomsen et al. find that the level of inequality in the case of Sweden is stable and shows 'no signs of decreasing' over the period studied.[222]

---

[214] Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education', 21; Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 117.
[215] Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education', 23; Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 138.
[216] Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 120–121.
[217] Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 121.
[218] Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education', 21.
[219] Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 121.
[220] Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 120–121.
[221] Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010—A Comparative Perspective'.
[222] Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010—A Comparative Perspective', 108.

Besides the formal structure of the higher education system and the social stratification within that system, there are also ideals connected to higher education and the idea of the university. What a university is and what tertiary education should be is connected to normative ideals that have changed over time. Without going into an extensive discussion on how these have shifted over time, it is clear that reforms of higher education mirror ideas and ideals of what higher education is and ought to be.[223]

Reforms to higher education since the early 2000s have focused on aspects that are relevant to the aim of this thesis. In 2002, the aim of widening the recruitment to higher education was written into law. Since then, universities and university colleges are required to actively work towards widening the social recruitment of students.[224] Widening the recruitment of students is both connected to increasing the number of higher education institutions in geographical areas where the participation in higher education is lower, and to attract students from different social backgrounds in terms of social class, gender, and foreign background.[225] Another development related to the aim of widening social recruitment to higher education was the expansion of distance education, which was also thought to be important to regional development within the country.[226]

Apart from the idea and ideal of widening the recruitment of students, strengthening of students' *employability* was an important idea and aspect of the *Bologna process*.[227] This process, guided by a will to harmonise higher education within the European Union, resulted in the implementation of changes to the system of higher education in Sweden in 2007.[228]

The idea of employability is relevant in relation to the idea and ideals of higher education itself. Sharon Rider argues that the idea of the university has evolved into including ideals that relate to the usefulness and market value of a higher education – the employability of its students.[229] The notion that higher education is supposed to make its students' more employable is perhaps not surprising today, but is far removed from historic ideas and ideals of what a university is and should be.[230] Today, 'producing' students who are useful contributors to the economy has become part of the university's mission.[231]

The concept of employability marks a shift away from the view of the state as responsible for full employment, and as a consequence, unemployment as a systemic

[223] Lindqvist, Moa (2025), *Striden om den högre utbildningen: En socioretorisk studie av remissyttranden inför svenska högskolereformer 1969–2007*.
[224] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 153.
[225] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 152–153.
[226] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 156–158.
[227] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 175.
[228] Gribbe (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet*, 175–178.
[229] Rider, Sharon (2009), 'The Future of the European University: Liberal Democracy or Authoritarian Capitalism?', 83–104.
[230] See for example: Karlsohn, Thomas (2016), *Universitetets idé: Sexton nyckeltexter*.
[231] Rider (2009), 'The Future of the European University', 84–85.

and therefore, collective responsibility.[232] Employability, on the other hand, became part of the European policy discourse in the 1990s and places focus on individuals rather than the collective. Instead of unemployed-employed, the discourse began focusing on unemployable-employable individuals.[233] Apart from focus being placed on the individual, this terminology also carries connotations of deservingness or legitimacy in relation to one's position in the labour market:

> The categories of unemployable/employable can not only be used to classify and sort individuals but also, by implication, to legitimize their status in the labour market – unemployment is explained and to some extent legitimized with reference to lack of employability.[234]

Today, employability refers to individuals' capacity to adapt to the demands of the labour market and a prominent way of making oneself employable is through education. As we saw previously, ideas on employability partly guided reforms connected to the Bologna process, and are therefore interwoven with the idea of higher education. The idea of employability is thus relevant for understanding and explaining how young adults perceive and navigate higher education.[235]

In policy discourse and documents, the term employability is often used in reference to groups or to abstract ideals. However, it can also be used on the analytical level of individuals.[236] Although Erik Berntson writes about the employability of individuals who are already employed, the notion that employability is a subjective phenomenon is useful in analysing how potential students view higher education. Berntson theoretically separates the *objective* level of employability and the *subjective* feeling or perception of employability.[237] The perception of one's employability creates a sense of control, and this feeling of control is important, 'regardless of whether the perception is based in reality or not'.[238] Through this lens, a possible pursuit of higher education can be perceived as attempting to achieve both objective and subjective aspects of employability.

Local conditions and educational decisions

The social and gendered structure of the education system is a national occurrence. However, a young person who is considering higher education might relate to the education system differently depending on *where* they live. Not only does interpreting the education system and finding a place in it – for example, what kind

[232] Garsten, Christina & Jacobsson, Kerstin (2004), 'Learning To Be Employable: An Introduction', 7.
[233] Garsten & Jacobsson (2004), 'Learning To Be Employable: An Introduction', 8.
[234] Garsten & Jacobsson (2004), 'Learning To Be Employable: An Introduction'.
[235] Garsten & Jacobsson (2004), 'Learning To Be Employable: An Introduction', 1.
[236] Berntson, Erik (2015), 'Market-Oriented Relationships in Working Life: On the Perception of Being Employable', 127.
[237] Berntson, Erik (2015), 'Market-Oriented Relationships in Working Life: On the Perception of Being Employable', 128.
[238] Berntson, Erik (2015), 'Market-Oriented Relationships in Working Life: On the Perception of Being Employable'.

of education 'suits' someone like me – depend on class and gender, it also depends on place.[239] Doreen Massey wrote extensively on the impact of place on the construction of gender and argued that what it means to be masculine or feminine in a certain place is not necessarily applicable to any and all other places.[240] The previously mentioned concept of *regional gender contracts* is in line with Massey's theory of place and gender. Doreen Massey and Gunnel Forsberg's thinking can also be applied to education. The circumstances, culture, and history of a specific place likely affects the way people perceive and relate to education and their place within that system.

In a study by Sara Forsberg that looked at young men and women in Kalix, she notices gender differences associated with choosing an upper-secondary school programme. She finds that the young men who choose vocational programmes have access to a 'local labour market that is somewhat restricted for others'.[241] In contrast to previous studies, her results show that students in vocational programmes have a 'positive self-image, a rich social life, a perceived smooth transition from education to work that is in line with what is valued as '"worthwhile"'.[242] Although Forsberg studies a town where mining has recommenced, her results are relevant to understanding the context of choosing an upper-secondary school programme and the transition from school to work or higher education in previously industrial areas, such as Söderhamn. Forsberg shows that there are local horizons that make 'certain paths [...] visible and obtainable'.[243] In the geographical context that Forsberg studies, where studying is not related to the quality or prestige of the educational institution, which students in other places are certainly aware of,[244] it is important that the place where the institution is located is '"nice"'.[245] Lastly, one distinct finding of Forsberg's study is that education is valued to the extent that it helps with acquiring a 'good job', but it is not valued in and of itself.[246]

In a de-industrialised, rural setting, choosing an upper-secondary programme that prepares a person for studying at university is less common than in urbanised settings. Consequently, continuing to higher education is less common, and the low levels of education in these areas is well documented. Former industrial communities are, as indicated in previous sections, contexts without a history and practice of pursuing higher education. In a study of adolescents' political interests, Ylva Bergström compares the mining towns in Bergslagen to the university town

[239] Morris, Edward W. (2012), *Learning the Hard Way: Masculinity, Place, and the Gender Gap in Education*; Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*, 74; Rönnlund, Maria et al. (2018), 'Vocational or Academic Track? Study and Career Plans among Swedish Students Living in Rural Areas', 360–375.
[240] Massey, Doreen (1994), *Space, Place and Gender*, 178.
[241] Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 330.
[242] Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 329. See also: Jamieson (2000), 'Migration, Place and Class', 203.
[243] Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 332.
[244] See for example: Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*; Bergström (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education'.
[245] Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 334.
[246] Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 333.

of Uppsala. The concentration of educational assets is much lower in Bergslagen, which is reflected in the population's lower levels of education, that a majority of pupils choose a vocational programme in upper-secondary school, and a smaller proportion of pupils continue into higher education after completing upper-secondary school.[247] Another indication of the low concentration of educational resources in these regions is the establishment of educational collaborations between municipalities. In Bergslagen, as in Hälsingland, where Söderhamn is located, neighbouring municipalities collaborate in order to offer a range of upper-secondary vocational and higher education preparatory programmes.[248]

With the expansion of the higher education system, tertiary education has reached more students – both geographically and socially. As opposed to upper-secondary school, the geographical distance to the closest higher education institution can often be great, despite the introduction of regional university colleges. Following the higher education reform of 1977, regional university colleges were established aiming to attract students from homes without a tradition of university studies and furthermore, to contribute to regional economic development. These university colleges were established in areas where the levels of education were low and the regional economy needed the positive externalities that a higher education institution can provide.[249]

Establishing university colleges has brought tertiary education closer geographically and socially to de-industrialised parts of Sweden. Many of the students at the younger regional university colleges are recruited from the surrounding areas and the institutions are more connected to and rooted in the local surroundings, compared to the traditional universities. For potential students in education-scarce areas, university colleges have made tertiary education more accessible. However, the increase in student numbers has not overthrown the overall structure of the system; certain institutions and higher education programmes are dominated by a societal elite in terms of educational, cultural and economic assets.[250]

As the previous pages indicate, there is extensive research and knowledge on how gender and social class lead to different educational choices and outcomes. Furthermore, research consistently shows that the educational levels and the share of adolescents who choose higher education preparatory programmes (and later continue into higher education) varies depending on gender, social class, and geographical place. However, we know less about the considerations that individuals in education-scarce areas have regarding their education and specifically, how they perceive and relate to higher education in their own lives.

[247] Bergström, Ylva (2015), *Unga och politik: Utbildning, plats, klass och kön*, 33–34.
[248] Sandell (2007), *Utbildningssegregation och självsortering*, 36; Bergström (2015), *Unga och politik: Utbildning, plats, klass och kön*, 33.
[249] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 94–95.
[250] Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 138.

Educational decision-making in higher education

Educational decision-making is a term used in the research on choosing elements such as a subject field, educational institution, or academic degree.[251] Decision-making is used alongside other terms and concepts including higher education choice,[252] educational practises,[253] or educational strategies[254] to describe and explain the choices individuals and groups make in relation to education, and how social class, gender, and ethnicity structure these choices. I will begin this final section of the chapter by explaining the meaning and use of the term *educational decision-making*, especially in relation to the thesis' third research question and the corresponding Chapter 8.

Most of the literature on educational decision-making stresses that it is not a question of 'rational' choices, therefore the term 'decision' is often used, rather than wanting to understand educational 'choices':

> Used without care, choice can "smuggle in" an unauthorized "free agent" [...] In many respects, what we address here may be better described as decision-making. [...] Where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint.[255]

In the above quote, Stephen J. Ball et al. point to the conceptual difference between choice and decision-making. While economists are often interested in (rational) choices and the implied 'psychology of preferences', decision-making takes into account both the opportunities and the constraints embedded in the process of making a choice. The distinction has bearing on how this study handles young adults' decision-making, both in terms of the methodology of the interviews and the subsequent analysis.

Educational decision-making is used in this study as follows: There are two educational decisions of concern: the choice of an upper-secondary school programme, and the choice of a higher education institution and programme.[256] In the interviews with young adults, the outcome of the choices related to upper-secondary school is known, but not the outcome for those who have not yet chosen a higher education institution and programme. Thus, it is the *process* of making a decision on higher education, what is being considered in this process, and the aspects that contribute to the decision (such as class, gender, place, family background, and peers) that are analysed in order to understand and explain how young adults navigate higher education.

---

[251] See for example: Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?'; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality'.
[252] Ball et al. (2002), ''Classification' and 'Judgement''.
[253] Waddling (2024), *Playing with the Global*, 25–29.
[254] Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*; Bergström (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education'; Krigh, Josefine (2019), *Språkstudier som utbildningsstrategi hos grundskoleelever och deras familjer*.
[255] Ball et al. (2002), ''Classification' and 'Judgement'', 51.
[256] The decisions made before upper-secondary school, i.e. of a compulsory school are also used to analyse the perception, navigation, and planned use of higher education.

Decision-making is therefore not used as a way to analyse 'rational choices', or to assume that young adults act in a manner that maximises their self-interest. It is a term used to understand and discuss the process that many are engaging in at the end of upper-secondary school, where some type of decision has to be made regarding what comes after their 12 years of schooling.

A large body of research – both quantitative and qualitative – offers insight into the educational decisions young people make and the effects of aspects such as social class, gender, and family background on these choices. Studies in British sociology of education research have increasingly sought to answer 'relevant questions about ethnicity and class in relation to higher education […] not just about who goes, but also about who goes where, and why?'[257] In certain countries, like the United Kingdom, the open distinction between established 'old' universities and less prestigious 'new' universities is central to the 'transfer of power and privilege between generations'.[258] Researchers have therefore focused on the stratification of the higher education system – for example, the social background of those who attend 'old' and 'new' universities – as well as the mechanisms behind the decision-making – in other words, why a certain university was chosen and for what reasons.

In a review of research on higher education choices, Rachel Brooks looks at two strands of empirical research: the sources of information that students use in their decision-making, and how students judge what is, for them, a 'feasible' choice.[259] Many studies find that parents are consulted in the decision-making process, while fewer studies have focused on the influence of friends and the peer group.[260] Furthermore, career guidance from schools has been noted to help students make 'realistic' choices. Where such guidance and advice is unavailable, there is evidence of young people making 'disastrous' choices,[261] especially those whose parents have little knowledge of higher education or have removed themselves from the process.[262] Furthermore, young people's awareness of higher education, and the status of different higher education institutions, varies. For middle-class families, success has been found to depend on attending a 'good' university, while working-class parents were less familiar with the higher education system and viewed all universities as exclusive.[263]

In relation to students' judgement about the feasibility of a certain higher education institution, research shows differences in gender, ethnicity, and social class (or socio-economic status). Women are concentrated in less prestigious

[257] Ball, Stephen J., Reay, Diane & David, Miriam (2002), ''Ethnic Choosing': Minority Ethnic Students, Social Class and Higher Education Choice', 354.
[258] Reay et al. (2011), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?'.
[259] Brooks, Rachel (2002), '"Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?" A Review of Research on Young People's Higher Education Choices', 218.
[260] Brooks (2002), '"Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?"', 219.
[261] Pugsley, Lesley (1998), 'Throwing Your Brains at It: Higher Education, Markets and Choice', 78.
[262] Brooks (2002), '"Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?"', 219.
[263] Pugsley (1998), 'Throwing Your Brains at It', 79; Brooks (2002), '"Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?"', 220–221.

institutions and courses – perhaps due to 'a relative lack of confidence on the part of female students and particular pressures from the school or family'.[264] In terms of social class, research has focused on familial dispositions, finance, and geography. Qualitative and quantitative research shows that geography matters in finding a feasible option for higher education. Students from working-class backgrounds appear more constrained by geographical factors, while at the same time having a stronger regional identity than their middle-class peers, and a positive desire to stay close to home.[265] The financial aspect of finding a feasible option for higher education is important in the British context; however, in a system without tuition fees, such as the Swedish, finances are much less of a direct concern. Family dispositions is the final aspect that Brooks mentions in relation to how students judge the feasibility of applying to higher education, and it is perhaps the most well researched of the three.

A student's family – typically parents – is relevant to explaining and understanding the higher education decision-making process. Studies in the United Kingdom have shown the importance of parental guidance in the process of choosing and applying to higher education.[266] First, upper-middle class students are more likely to be in schools that guide and prepare them for elite universities; the parents often help guide their children toward these institutions. Second, parents of middle-class students are more often familiar with the application process and can help guide their children into the 'best' institutions. Middle-class parents are increasingly using their economic and cultural assets to 'ensure their children are positioned competitively within an expanded system of higher education'[267]. Moreover studies find that working-class students lack these advantages and are 'left ill-equipped to engage with the process, often making uninformed choices about where and what to study'.[268]

In an ethnographic study of social class and family life in the United States, Annette Lareau finds similar class differences to the ones we see in the United Kingdom. In *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau identifies significant differences between middle-class parents on the one hand, and working-class and poor parents, on the other. The original study was conducted when the children were 10 years-old, but the second edition of the book adds a chapter where the families are revisited 10 years later, when the children are young adults. What Lareau and her colleagues find is that despite all parents wanting their children to succeed, 'there was a class divergence in informal information about how institutions, including schools, function'.[269] The class differences between the families when the children were 10 years old remained intact a decade later, when the children were considering college. The middle-class families had informal knowledge that

[264] Brooks (2002), '"Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?"', 223.
[265] Brooks (2002), '"Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?"', 224.
[266] Shiner & Noden (2015), '"Why Are You Applying There?"', 1173.
[267] Shiner & Noden (2015), '"Why Are You Applying There?"', 1172.
[268] Shiner & Noden (2015), '"Why Are You Applying There?"', 1173.
[269] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 286.

the poor and working-class families did not, and this information was often crucial for the college application process.[270] The working-class and poor families 'turned over responsibility for education to the school and to their children as they became adolescents'.[271] Among the working-class and poor families, both children and parents, had a 'hazy understanding of college'[272] and they viewed all diplomas as equal, failing to recognise the hierarchies in the higher education system that the middle-class families were acutely aware of.[273]

In the stage before making higher education-related decisions, parents are often the key to understanding why students attend a certain school. Students whose parents have cultural and economic assets often attend schools that are better at preparing them for higher education. Agnès van Zanten has studied how parents choose schools for their children and how these choices lead to 'the existence of inequalities in school results and educational trajectories related to social factors'.[274] van Zanten points to how middle-class parents with high economic resources and high cultural resources choose and employ different strategies for their children's schooling.[275] While economic fractions make use of the private sector and pay for extra-school support, parents with cultural assets have access to information about schools; they help and guide their children in the process of accessing prestigious schools that help prepare for higher education.[276]

Thus, when it comes to what Brooks refers to as 'family dispositions', van Zanten distinguishes between parents from the cultural or the economic fractions of French society. However, with the expansion of the system of higher education, far from all students have a middle-class background with parents who can guide and help them through the decision-making process. In a 2001 study, Diane Reay et al. focus on British working-class and minority students' higher education choice process. While these students clearly articulate material constraints, the researchers also notice 'emotional constraints' on choice, including 'psychological self-exclusion in which traditional universities are often discounted'.[277] In line with Pierre Bourdieu's writing, Reay et al. find that 'fitting in' is part of the decision-making process:

> The importance of choosing somewhere one feels safe and/or happy raises the issue of risk in relation to university choice. Most of the students are applying to low risk universities where if they are from an ethnic minority there is an ethnic mix, if they are privileged they will find intellectual and social peers, and if they are mature students there is a high percentage of mature students.[278]

[270] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 287–294.
[271] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 292.
[272] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 294.
[273] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291.
[274] van Zanten, Agnès (2005), 'New Modes of Reproducing Social Inequality in Education: The Changing Role of Parents, Teachers, Schools and Educational Policies', 155.
[275] van Zanten (2005), 'New Modes of Reproducing Social Inequality in Education', 156.
[276] van Zanten (2005), 'New Modes of Reproducing Social Inequality in Education', 161.
[277] Reay et al. (2011), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 863–864.
[278] Reay et al. (2011), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 865.

Cultural capital and habitus influence the students' choice of higher education, steering upper-class and middle-class students toward elite universities.[279] Working-class and minority students who lack such forms of capital are constrained in their choices and exclude themselves from elite institutions for reasons such as fear of not fitting in.[280]

There are no higher education tuition fees in Sweden for Swedish and European Union citizens and therefore, the material constraints are not as prevalent as in the British and other cases.[281] That is not to say there are no material constraints, a noticeable difference is the availability and cost of accommodation depending on where the higher education institution is located. In the Swedish case, the emotional and psychological constraints in Reay et al. find are perhaps even more important, since the material constraints are less pronounced.

In a 2010 study of inequality and educational decision-making, Martin Hällsten uses large-scale registry data to analyse vertical and horizontal stratification of the Swedish higher education system; vertical stratification being the level of education one attains and horizontal stratification being the choice of field of study.[282] In relation to social class and choice behaviour, Hällsten cites previous studies on three different mechanisms: risk and reward preferences; family resources; and transaction costs and economic constraints.

First, research has found that 'individuals from different social backgrounds differ in decision making because of differences in their risk aversion'.[283] In this view, 'investing' in higher education is a potential risk with an uncertain reward. Accessing education 'requires the acceptance of some risk, and strong risk aversion may be a detrimental strategy'.[284] In a study of the United States, Charles Halaby finds class-based differences in job values that can be linked to theories of risk and reward. Halaby estblishes that those from less advantageous backgrounds favour bureaucratic job values – i.e. pension rights and job security – while those of a more advantageous background prefer high pay and an attractive job – what Halaby refers to as entrepreneurial job values.[285]

Second, as we have already seen, family resources are significant to the process of higher education choices. The less information parents and children have, the less aware they are of both risks and returns of higher education.

[279] Reay et al. (2011), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?'.
[280] Shiner & Noden (2015), ''Why Are You Applying There?', 1173.
[281] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 808.
[282] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 806–807.
[283] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 811.
[284] Shaw, Kathryn L. (1996), 'An Empirical Analysis of Risk Aversion and Income Growth', 626–653; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality'.
[285] Halaby, Charles N. (2003), 'Where Job Values Come from: Family and Schooling Background, Cognitive Ability, and Gender', 251–278.

> Individuals equipped with knowledge and information about the functioning of the labor market and the educational system are likely to navigate to find institutions and programmes associated with inherent returns that are not publicly known. Since graduation from traditional universities is associated with a wage premium (Lindahl and Regnér 2005), to prefer traditional institutions over newly established university colleges will maximize earnings later on.[286]

Without an advantageous background, and the overview and information that comes with it, individuals 'may disregard information and choose programmes in a more random fashion, without considering the benefits or risks'.[287] Hällsten also points to studies in Sweden and the Netherlands that have shown that children choose educational trajectories that resemble their parents' choices.[288]

Third, transaction costs and economic restraints in the Swedish case solely consist of living expenses and foregone earnings. A longer study programme increases these costs for the student. Willingness to assume student debt differs depending on social class, and students from working-class backgrounds are more likely to perceive students loans as debt, rather than an investment.[289] Furthermore, Hällsten points to the cost related to migration – staying close to parents can minimise the living costs and reduce the social price of losing touch with friends. Hällsten finds support for the hypothesis that those with working-class backgrounds are more sensitive to geographical distance.[290]

Thus, the most prominent feature of the Swedish higher education system, in relation to decision-making, is that the economic restrictions are minimal compared to tuition-fee-based systems. Disregarding the cost of higher education then, previous research points toward the importance of family resources and dispositions, the assessment of risk and reward, geographic proximity to a higher education institution, the importance of previous schooling and the information and guidance provided there, and last, the impact of friends and peers.

Conclusion

This chapter has described and discussed previous international and Swedish research within fields deemed relevant to the aim and research questions of this

[286] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 813.
[287] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 813.
[288] Jonsson, Jan O. et al. (2009), 'Microclass Mobility: Social Reproduction in Four Countries', 977–1036; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 814.
[289] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 815.
[290] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 842.

study. The thesis aims to make contributions to these fields of research and in concluding this chapter I specify what these contributions are.

Firstly, the study contributes to prior research on former industrial communities through the single-case study of a place of this kind. Through the study of young adults' perception and navigation of higher education, the thesis adds a perspective on these types of places that is missing from previous research. When these places have been studied previously, research has mainly been of a historic kind or focused on youth out-migration and those who stay or leave. However, the increased need for higher education as a requirement for labour market participation and the significance of this change to former industrial communities has been largely overlooked.

Secondly, the thesis contributes to research on youth out-migration by capturing how young adults perceive and negotiate opportunities and risks related to staying in, or leaving, their hometown. The question of staying or leaving the former industrial community is impossible for young adults to avoid when they consider their future, and this aspect has been thoroughly researched previously. However, out-mobility for young people is often connected to the pursuit of higher education, and the thesis adds to the knowledge of how out-mobility is intertwined with young adults' perception and navigation of higher education.

Thirdly, the thesis adds to the body of research on higher education in Sweden by investigating how young adults who do not have an abundance of educational resources perceive higher education. These students tend to make different higher education choices, compared to their peers from education-abundant contexts. However, previous studies in the Swedish sociology of education have mainly focused on groups with an abundance of educational resources or dominated groups in urban settings. This study adds an understating of how higher education is perceived by young adults who, in a theoretical sense, occupy a dominated position in relation to the education system. By investigating their reasoning and the mechanisms behind their navigation of higher education, the study explains why they tend to choose certain institutions and programmes.

CHAPTER 3

Theory and analytical concepts

This chapter provides a theoretical foundation for understanding and explaining the perception and navigation of higher education in the particular context studied here. The chapter begins by positioning Söderhamn in relation to the national Swedish context, moves on to focus on the individuals in the study, and ends with how *social norms* connect individuals in Söderhamn with ideas and values that originate from other parts of the *social space*.

Depending on the *dispositions*, *gender*, and *social class* of the individuals in the study, their perception and navigation of higher education may differ. While individuals have their own unique set of dispositions, those who belong to the same social group and gender are often similar and therefore likely to, in this instance, relate to education uniformly. However, forces outside of the individuals may also shape the patterns of behaviour and reasoning. The concept of social norms is used to analyse how the perception and navigation of higher education is affected by collective ideas about education that exist locally, as well as in Sweden generally.

Local practices are inevitably influenced by norms that exist outside of the local context; and the norms that stem from parts of society that wield a lot of symbolic power are especially influential.[291] The local context of Söderhamn is related to the surrounding Swedish society using the concept of social space. Although the local social space has its own norms and logic, when Söderhamn is related to a national space, it has little of what other places have in abundance, most notably, economic, cultural, and educational assets. The relative poverty of these resources creates a relationship of dominance,[292] where Söderhamn occupies a dominated position within the Swedish social space.

[291] See for example: Segerstedt, Torgny T. (1968), *Att studera sociologi: En inledning till sociologiens studium*, 33–51.
[292] Bourdieu, Pierre (1999), 'Site Effects', in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu, 126.

Social space and dominance

When young inhabitants of rural or former industrial communities in Sweden have been researched previously, out-mobility is often the focus.[293] In studies of this kind, the questions being asked are related to staying or leaving, and the theoretical foundation is commonly concepts developed within geographical reserach, for example, place and space. Although this is a study of a specific geographical place, the focus lies on the historical and social structures in Söderhamn and how these influence inhabitants' perception and relationship to higher education, rather than geographical movement. Söderhamn is a specific social context, a town and municipality that was selected as a case for its position within the national social space of Sweden. Theoretically, the study considers Söderhamn as a dominated part of the Swedish social space in order to grasp what occurs when young people in this particular environment face decisions on higher education.

To relate the geographical place studied here to a broader context, I use the concept of the *social space*, developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The notion of social space was first mentioned in an article published in 1976 together with Monique de Saint Martin[294] and was developed further by Bourdieu in *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, published in 1979.[295] The idea of the social space of France was the foundation for explaining the distribution of taste in relation to objective positions in society.[296]

The general idea is that social space is a 'system of relations'[297] between social agents. These agents occupy a certain position; these positions are related to each other within the social space and are thereby defined in relation to one another.[298] For example, a certain level of education is low *in relation to* the highest level of education within a given social context.[299] These positions are a product of the volume and the forms of *capital* that 'individuals or groups are in possession of, when compared with what other individuals or groups have'.[300] Most important for defining a position within the space is the overall volume of capital – individuals and groups with a lot of capital are far from those with low volumes of capital. This notion of how society is structured is similar to many other theories on social class – individuals and groups with a lot of resources are related to, and sometimes put in opposition to, individuals and groups with few resources. The second important

[293] See for example: Jonsson (2003), *Rotad, rotlös, rastlös* ; Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*; Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth'; Trondman, Mats (2011), *Att flytta eller stanna? Om barns och ungdomars föreställningar om att vilja bo kvar i Hällefors kommun eller flytta därifrån*; Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility''; Uddbäck (2021) *Att stanna kvar*; Rönnlund & Tollefsen (2023), 'School-to-Work Transitions in Rural North Sweden'.
[294] Bourdieu, Pierre & de Saint Martin, Monique (1976), 'Anatomie du goût', 2–81.
[295] Bourdieu, Pierre (2010[1979]) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
[296] Melldahl, Andreas & Börjesson, Mikael (2014), 'Charting the Social Space: The Case of Sweden in 1990', 135.
[297] Bourdieu, Pierre (1989), 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', 16.
[298] Broady, Donald (1998), "Kapitalbegreppet som utbildningssociologiskt verktyg", 14–16.
[299] Cf. notions regarding relative poverty within the field of economics.
[300] Melldahl & Börjesson (2014), 'Charting the Social Space: The Case of Sweden in 1990', 135.

aspect of the idea of the social space is the opposition between economic capital and cultural capital.[301] Similar to many other theories on society and social groups, Bourdieu considered economic resources the most important aspect of how society is stratified. However, the cultural capital possessed by individuals and groups was also considered to define the relations between individuals and social groups. The opposition between cultural and economic capital becomes more pronounced as the volume of capital increases.

In this study, I use the notion of social space as a class analysis (rather than a study of cultural consumption and life-styles),[302] to be able to analyse social positions and class relations within the town of Söderhamn. The concept of the social space and its relational component is used as a tool to study a specific social and geographical context that is characterised by low overall volumes of capital (more on this in the following section). The relational aspect of the social space is useful here since it enables an analysis of class differences between individuals and groups that is adaptable to the context itself. What is of interest empirically is not primarily to compare Söderhamn to other places with large volumes of capital. Although it is necessary to make these comparisons throughout the thesis in order to relate and contextualise Söderhamn in a Swedish setting, the study aims to understand class relations and the perception of higher education in this specific place, at a specific time. For these purposes, a relational and contextual approach to social class is necessary not simply to conclude that many individuals in Söderhamn have low levels of education in comparison to other environments within Sweden. However, I do not use the theoretical concept of social space to construct a social space of individuals in Söderhamn. Social space and the role of capital within this space is a foundation for understanding the relations between individuals and groups in Söderhamn and to capture similarities and differences within this specific setting.

The positions that individuals and groups occupy within the social space shapes their horizons and point of view and make certain options and pathways visible while others are out of sight.[303] Thus, one way that social space is used within the study is to understand how individuals perceive and relate to higher education in different ways, depending on their position within the space. In this sense, the social space is a tool for understanding class relations within Söderhamn locally and the differences or similarities between individuals in a specific place. Foremost, the individuals' position within the social space relates to the differences and similarities in their perception and navigation of higher education. The use of social space and capital is further developed in the below section on social class.

The second way in which social space is used within the study is to understand the relation between the specific place studied here and the overall,

[301] Bourdieu (2010[1984]), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*; Melldahl & Börjesson (2014), 'Charting the Social Space: The Case of Sweden in 1990', 135.
[302] Melldahl & Börjesson (2014), 'Charting the Social Space: The Case of Sweden in 1990', 136–138.
[303] Pierre Bourdieu et al. (1999), *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*.

national social space of Sweden. Compared to the national context, Söderhamn is a part of the social space where the concentration of economic, cultural, and educational capital in particular, is low. The study therefore considers Söderhamn as a dominated part of the Swedish social space. The dominance consists of possessing low volumes of capital, compared to many other parts of Sweden, particularly urban areas and university towns. Individuals and groups who possess large volumes of the forms of capital that structure the social space live in other geographical areas than in the town studied here.

When using the concept of social space, Bourdieu primarily referred to relations between positions within a nation-state, but occasionally applied it to a city or a region.[304] For example, in *The Bachelor's Ball*, Bourdieu analyses the social space of Béarn, to understand the local, rural practices rather than urban, elite practices.[305] Furthermore, in *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu connects social space to physical space in what is referred to as *site effects*.[306]

Individuals and groups are inevitably physically situated in a place, in this case in Söderhamn, and from that physical position, they are more or less able to access goods and services.[307] Bourdieu argues that social space translates into physical space, and that 'the value of different regions [...] is defined in this relation between the distribution of agents and the distribution of goods in social space.'[308] Thus, in certain *physically objectified social spaces* there is a concentration of goods, services, and various forms of capital, while other places 'collect the most disadvantaged groups'.[309] Physical space is therefore a site where power is exercised and where real effects of symbolic power can be discerned.[310]

In *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu et al. focus on social suffering and disadvantaged groups in '[housing] projects'; 'housing developments'[311], etc. While the focus of this thesis is not to study social suffering, the idea that social and physical space are intertwined, and that the access to public and private goods define the position and power of a physical space makes the study of a former industrial community in relation to higher education relevant.[312]

Hence, Söderhamn can be theoretically understood as dominated within the Swedish social space. When young adults from Söderhamn reason about higher education in relation to their future, it can be theoretically understood as individuals from a dominated part of the social space engaging with a system whose functioning and 'rules' are based in the culture and norms of the dominant

[304] Reed-Danahay, Deborah (2019), *Bourdieu and Social Space: Mobilities, Trajectories, Emplacements*, 8; See also: Wacquant, Loïc (2022), 'Rethinking the City with Bourdieu's Trialectic', 820–830.
[305] Bourdieu, Pierre (2008), *The Bachelor's Ball: The Crisis of Peasant Society in Béarn*.
[306] Bourdieu (1999), 'Site Effects'.
[307] Bourdieu (1999), 'Site Effects', 124–127.
[308] Bourdieu (1999), 'Site Effects', 125.
[309] Bourdieu (1999), 'Site Effects', 125.
[310] Bourdieu (1999), 'Site Effects', 126.
[311] Bourdieu et al. (1999), *The Weight of the World*, 3.
[312] For a further discussion on case selection and the empirical basis for positioning Söderhamn as a dominated place, turn to *Case selection* in Chapter 4.

part of the social space. Although students are formally equal in relation to education, Bourdieu argues that the educational system has its own inner logic, which perpetuates privilege rather than counteracts inequality.[313] Unfamiliarity with the education system manifested, for example, in parents without higher levels of education, is therefore assumed to make the navigation of the education system more complex due to a comparative lack of knowledge about the higher education system and its inner logic.[314]

The low level of education means that there are comparatively few people in Söderhamn who have attended university. Young adults' encounters with the higher education system is thus a way of studying the perception and navigation of higher education by individuals in a dominated place and what this domination might mean for their educational decision-making.

Social class

As mentioned, the concept of social space is not only used as way to compare Söderhamn to the national context, but also as a way to compare individuals within Söderhamn to one another. In this sense, social space is used as the theoretical foundation for how social class is understood in this study.

Since Karl Marx, social class has been theorised and researched extensively in the social sciences. When social class is studied empirically, it is common to operationalise it using factors related to an individual's occupation and position in the labour market. Income, education, the level of skills involved in the work, or work autonomy, are common indicators and ways of measuring different occupations' place within a larger class scheme.[315] Thus, there are many ways of describing, explaining, and categorising social classes.

The context I have studied requires a theoretical understanding of social class that can account for the differences within said context. To be able to say something substantive about social class within this context, a fine-grained theory and definition of social class is necessary. Therefore, Bourdieu's theory of social class, based on the social space and the volume and composition of assets within that social space, lends itself well to the study of the comparatively small class differences within Söderhamn.

As discussed in the previous section on the social space, Bourdieu's class theory is relational and classes are defined based on the volume and composition of capital and defined in relation to one another.[316] What functions as capital –

[313] Bourdieu, Pierre (1979), *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture*, 27.
[314] See for example: Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?'; Reay (2023), *Miseducation*.
[315] Bengtsson, Mattias & Berglund, Tomas (2010), "Social rörlighet och klassidentifikation", 13; Ahrne, Göran, Stöber, Niels, & Thaning, Max (2018), *Klasstrukturen i Sverige. Struktur, klass och inkomster: Kontinuitet och förändring 1985–2015,* 9.
[316] Bourdieu (2010[1984]), *Distinction*, 122–123.

thus, what defines a position within the social space – depends on the context being studied. Capital as a concept has been mentioned and used repeatedly throughout this chapter already, but requires further explanation in how it is used to define social class.

Among the theoretical concepts developed by Bourdieu, capital is one of the most known and used within and beyond the discipline of sociology. Economic capital is rather self-explanatory; it is cultural capital that requires further explanation here. To Bourdieu, cultural capital is a form of symbolic capital, and essentially, anything can function as symbolic capital insofar as it gains recognition within a given social context.[317] The concept is therefore malleable and adaptable to the specific context that is of empirical interest. Similar to the social space, symbolic capital is relational, any asset or resource can function as symbolic capital when people perceive this particular asset or resource as valuable.[318] This study is primarily interested in economic, cultural, and educational capital, rather than the overarching category of symbolic capital. Therefore, these specific forms of capital are reasoned about below, while the notion of symbolic capital and the specificities of this concept will not be further discussed here.

Bourdieu wrote extensively on the idea that cultural capital needed to be added to an individual's economic capital, to be able to define a position in the social space and thus, social class.[319] Bourdieu used the concept of cultural capital as a tool to explore French society and dominance within that social space. Like any type of capital within this theoretical framework, what functions as cultural capital depends on what context is being studied. However, in a French context, a cultivated language, knowledge of 'legitimate' culture, and having attended reputable institutions are examples of practices and assets that function as cultural capital.[320] A notable difference between economic and cultural capital is the ease with which one can transfer it to, say, the next generation. In many contemporary societies, cultural capital is acquired through the education system in the form of grades, diplomas, or attendance at specific institutions; such assets cannot be inherited in the same way as economic assets. Therefore, access, control, and success within the educational system is central to acquiring cultural capital within a country such as France.[321]

Contrary to the widespread notion that education is a key to class equality, Bourdieu could show that the education system is not neutral; pupils from homes with an abundance of cultural capital are systematically favoured by the education

[317] Broady, Donald (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi: Pierre Bourdieus författarskap och den historiska epistemologin*, 169.
[318] Broady, Donald (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 170.
[319] Bourdieu (2010[1984]), *Distinction*, 5–11; Wacquant, Loïc (1996[1989]), 'Foreword,' in *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, ix–x; Bengtsson, Mattias (2010), "Olika sidor av klass", 16–17.
[320] Broady (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 171.
[321] Broady (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 170–176.

system, leading to a reproduction of class inequality rather than equality.[322] Although cultural capital as a concept contains much more than just education, the most efficient way to estimate cultural assets is through a person's level of education.[323] Thus, when determining the interviewees' social class, the economic and educational assets that the families possess are taken into account, and what is considered a lot and less of these resources is defined in relation to one another within this specific social space.

The parents' occupation is an estimate of the interviewees' economic capital and their level of education is an estimate of their cultural and educational capital. Together, these aspects are used to determine the interviewee's social class and understand how families are positioned in relation to the education system. An operationalisation of class based on occupation and education captures differences that are relevant to how young adults reason about higher education. Furthermore, it is also the standardised way in which to measure social class in Swedish official statistics.[324] Using this measurement in the study therefore enables a comparison between the empirical results and descriptive statistics on the national Swedish context that is used throughout the study. Another advantage of this operationalisation is that it is reliable, most of the interviewees know their parents' professions, and most know their parents' level of education. For the purpose of the study at hand, knowing the parents' occupations and the education required for said occupation, provides enough detail to be able to draw conclusions about social class in relation to higher education.

Gender

I add the concept of gender to the theoretical concepts used in the study, since it is relevant for analysing differences in how young adults and parents in the study reason throughout the interviews. The social space is, in essence, a conceptualisation of social class, and in its original configuration, gender was not part of what structured the space. One reason for why gender was not included was the low labour market participation of women in France when *Distinction* was authored. However, in studies of the Swedish social space, gender is often one of the most important variables that structure the social space.[325] Women's labour market participation in Sweden has long been comparatively high, while at the same time the labour market is gender-segregated.[326]

[322] Bourdieu (2010[1979]), *Distinction*, 17–20; Broady (1998), "Kapitalbegreppet som utbildningssociologiskt verktyg", 10; Bengtsson (2010), "Olika sidor av klass", 16.
[323] Broady (1998), "Kapitalbegreppet som utbildningssociologiskt verktyg", 9.
[324] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Standard för svensk yrkesklassificering (SSYK)*.
[325] Melldahl & Börjesson (2014), 'Charting the Social Space: The Case of Sweden in 1990', 145.
[326] Sjöholm, Tommy (1983), 'Women in the Swedish Class Structure 1910–1975', 299; Nermo, Magnus (2000), "Hundra år av könssegregering på den svenska arbetsmarknaden", 35–65; Jämställdhetsmyndigheten (2023), *Analys av den könssegregerade arbetsmarknaden: Förutsättningar för en bredare rekryteringsbas till välfärden*, 12.

Thus, the concept of gender is used in addition to the concept of social class. Within the context of this study, gender is relevant both when Söderhamn is compared to other parts of the Swedish social space and when individuals in Söderhamn are compared to each other. When it comes to education and employment, gender differences are starker in Söderhamn than in the rest of Sweden.[327] Within this study, I use gender in a similar manner to how social class was defined in the previous section. The construction of gender, like social class, is seen as relational – what is perceived as male and female, masculine and feminine, is socially constructed in relation to one another.[328]

Similar to social class, the definition of gender varies depending on which theory is used. However, most who study gender agree that gender is separate from biological sex and that gender and gender roles are social constructs. Since the latter part of the 20th century, feminist scholars have wanted to separate the biological term *sex* from the psychological or social term *gender*. In this way, it is possible to study and discuss the socially produced differences between women and men.[329] Essentially, this view purports that gender is not biologically determined, but culturally learned or acquired; Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote that one is not born, but *becomes* a woman.

Hence, gender and gender relations are socially constructed within a given social space in the same manner as class and class relations are socially constructed. Toril Moi uses Bourdieu to understand and theoretically discuss gender and writes 'one of the advantages of Bourdieu's theory is that it not only insists on the social construction of gender, but that it permits us to grasp the immense *variability* of gender as a social construct.'[330] Gender, in this sense, is dependent on the social setting in which it is studied; it is a variable concept 'which carries different amounts of symbolic capital in different contexts'.[331]

Although it is variable, in most instances and social situations, maleness is symbolically dominant compared to femaleness.[332] As Moi further emphasises, we cannot assume that femaleness is always a negative capital in all instances and in all social contexts – 'sometimes a woman is a woman and sometimes she is much less so.'[333] Gender, like social class, influences other social categories and gender can be conceived as a factor that modifies social class, in the same way as social class modifies gender in different social contexts.[334]

Understanding gender in this way means that the emphasis is placed on the social practices and the social relations that create maleness and femaleness. Gender

[327] This is further described and explained in Chapter 5.
[328] Skeggs (2000[1997]), *Att bli respektabel*, 20–28.
[329] Mikkola, Mari (2024), 'Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.
[330] Moi, Toril (1991), 'Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture', 1035 [Emphasis in original].
[331] Moi (1991), 'Appropriating Bourdieu', 1036.
[332] Moi (1991), 'Appropriating Bourdieu', 1036–1038.
[333] Moi (1991), 'Appropriating Bourdieu', 1038.
[334] Moi (1991), 'Appropriating Bourdieu', 1035.

sometimes appears as relevant to the social practices and social norms that are analysed throughout the empirical chapters, while at other times being less significant. The variability of applying the concept of gender in this way means that we can understand the significance of gender differently based on who the interviewee is in relation to their social class, their age, or their perception of higher education, for example.

In Söderhamn, the difference between men and women's lives has historically been marked, and these patterns remain to an extent. Gender is especially relevant to the aim of this thesis, since the Swedish education system is stratified along gender lines. Both upper-secondary school and higher education programmes are gendered in the sense that the distribution of men and women is not equal across all programmes. The decisions that young men and women make regarding higher education are formally restricted by their grades and the entry requirements for the specific course or programme they apply for. Their gender or social class is, of course, not a formal restriction, although gender and social class are clearly structures that make certain options more likely than others. The pattern of who enters into higher education and what they choose to study creates structures that are likely to influence the perception and navigation of higher education, which is studied here.

Dispositions

The young adults' reasoning about a potential entry into higher education can be partly understood and explained using the collective categories that have been discussed above – social class and gender. However, individually, these categories are too general for explaining nuances in how specific individuals perceive and navigate higher education, thus their dispositions are also part of the analysis.

This chapter began by describing the concept of social space and how the positions within the space are defined by the volume and composition of capital that individuals or groups possess. The economic and cultural capital that structures the social space can also become embodied; Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to describe a system of lasting dispositions based in past experiences. Habitus 'produces individual and collective practices [...] in accordance with the schemes engendered by history'.[335] Through practices, capital can become embodied, and habitus can also be a way to describe the existence of capital in corporal form.[336] In the analysis of interviewees, I use the concept of *dispositions* rather than habitus.[337] Dispositions are tangible expressions of the habitus that can

[335] Bourdieu, Pierre (1977[1972]), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 82.
[336] Broady (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 226.
[337] An attempt to capture a person's habitus would require a different type of study with a richer, more in-depth knowledge about each person and their personal history.

be studied in an interview, for example, in taste and consumption of culture[338] and ways of talking.[339]

Social conditions shape a person's dispositions and habitus, and although individuals' dispositions may resemble each other given similar upbringings or histories, each individual's dispositions are unique.[340] Past experiences and practices affect how individuals approach decisions regarding, for example, education and therefore, these practices often result in a reproduction of the structures that shaped the habitus in the first place.[341]

A common critique of Bourdieu's theoretical framework is the deterministic element of how the habitus reproduces the social structures that produced it. If individuals make decisions and act in ways that are familiar to them from childhood, a specific habitus would be expected to reproduce the circumstances that shaped it. It should therefore be possible to determine beforehand where a person with a specific habitus would be expected to end up in the social space. Bourdieu and those who followed him counteract this type of critique by explaining that dispositions are not to be seen as deterministic. Dispositions are a set of conditions within the individual that afford them a range of possible ways of acting, thinking, and perceiving a specific social context.

> A specific manner of acting (voting for a certain party, consuming certain types of culture, choosing a specific educational track) can have different meanings and fill different functions to different groups. Conversely, depending on the circumstances in question, the same habitus may give rise to a wide spectrum of behaviours.[342]

However, within the context studied here, pursuing higher education is a relatively new phenomenon and many of the young adults that were studied are the first in their family to consider pursuing higher education. Theoretically, young adults' potential entry into higher education, and the perception and navigation relative this entry, is something that their familial habitus[343] is unaccustomed to – past experiences of higher education are unusual and although individual practices exist, there are no collective practices in relation to higher education to rely on in this social context. Therefore, the study investigates young adults' dispositions to something new or unknown within this context. Thus, the question of reproduction of the habitus and the possibly deterministic element of this mode of explanation is not relevant here.

The individuals' dispositions and their positions in the social space shape their points of view and highlight certain options and pathways while others are out of sight.[344] The empirical chapters use the term *horizon* to discuss and explain why

[338] Bourdieu (2010[1979]), *Distinction*.
[339] Bourdieu, Pierre (1991), *Language and Symbolic Power*, 37.
[340] Broady (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 226–228.
[341] Bourdieu (1977[1972]), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 86–87.
[342] Broady (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 228–229 [My translation].
[343] Reay (1998), '"Always Knowing" and "Never Being Sure"'.
[344] Bourdieu and et al. (1999), *The Weight of the World*.

certain options within the higher education system appear more or less likely to specific interviewees or to the young adults as a group. The theoretical foundation for the use of the concept of horizons is based on Bourdieu's notion of *a space of possibles*.[345] The idea of a space of possibles was developed in relation to Bourdieu's concept of fields (which I will not explore in detail here), but can arguably be used in relation to how individuals approach the space of higher education. The rules of the field, or the objective probabilities of accessing different positions within a field, are filtered through the dispositions of individuals and the perceptions that give rise to varying aspirations and expectations within those individuals.[346] Theoretically, within this study, the system of higher education is seen as a space of possibles for the young adults in the study. The space of possibles is defined as the relationship between the dispositions of each agent and the structured chances for accessing the different positions within the system of higher education.[347] Thus, when young adults approach the idea of higher education (in Bourdieu's terms, the field of higher education) the various options that are available to them are filtered through their personal dispositions, making certain alternatives visible while others are out of sight. The analysis of their educational decision-making process, which is the focus of Chapter 8, therefore includes an understanding of the space of possibles as it appears to the young adults in the study, or rather, the particular horizons that they have personally or as a group.

Including interviewees' dispositions in the analysis of their educational decision-making proces enables an analysis of the nuances in how they perceive and navigate higher education, based on elements such as past experiences and the context of their upbringing. In relation to the higher education system, the relevant local context is Söderhamn's dominated position within the Swedish social space.

The analysis of interviewees in the empirical chapters of the thesis focuses on dispositions related to social class and gender. Thus, ethnicity is not part of the focus here. The reason for this is twofold. First, Swedish registry data collection prohibits gathering information about ethnicity, making it more complicated to conduct research on ethnicity compared to areas such as gender or social class. Here, it has the effect that any conclusions on ethnicity that I might be able to draw from interviews cannot be related to larger patterns, for example, labour market participation, mobility patterns, or educational choices. Second, the interview sample does not reflect enough ethnic diversity to be able to draw certain conclusions that there are specific conditions related to ethnicity that shape the perception and navigation of higher education. Therefore, the focus is on gender and social class, as the sample displays a relevant variety and the analysis can be put in relation to larger statistical patterns.

[345] Bourdieu, Pierre (1983), 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed', 311–356.
[346] Bourdieu (1983), 'The Field of Cultural Production', 344.
[347] Bourdieu (1983), 'The Field of Cultural Production', 344.

The last part of this theoretical chapter establishes a link between the notion of social space and the reasoning of individual interviewees. The concept of norms is used as a way to understand how social practices and ideas influence the individuals' perception and navigation of higher education.

Norms

The individuals in this study are embedded in a local environment that is dominated in relation to the national social space. The last part of this chapter explores the composition of this domination when looking beyond economic, cultural, and educational capital. The concept of norms is introduced here, since the study considers norms to be another manner in which the dominant part of the social space influences the dominated. In this education-scarce, former industrial community, it is necessary to employ the concept of norms to understand how individuals encounter, adjust to, or resist ideas regarding higher education.

Norms are a necessary addition to the notion of social space, as the concept of norms captures reasons for pursuing education that are not outcome-oriented, but involve adjusting to the expectations of others.[348] A singular focus on higher education as an acquisition of educational capital risks disregarding other possible reasons behind pursuing higher education. The acquisition of educational capital does not necessarily put individuals in a better financial or cultural position, a pursuit of higher education may also be seen as something that one 'should' do.[349]

In early writings, Pierre Bourdieu used the term 'norm'; for example, in his study of Algeria in the 1950s.[350] Although the term 'norm' appears in Bourdieu's writings,[351] it is not among the concepts attributed to him or commonly associated with his theoretical framework.[352] Thus, using social space and social norms together means merging concepts from different theoretical strands of research. There are always concerns when combining concepts that originate from different theories; an orthodox understanding of Bourdieu will question whether adding a concept that is not endogenous to his theoretical framework is necessary. I argue that adding social norms as an analytical concept captures how individuals adjust to outside expectations, whether they be real or imagined. Norms function in a similar way to capital, specific norms can be established within a small group, however, there are also societal norms that virtually everyone has to adjust to and these dominant norms trump those of the smaller group.[353] Therefore, I argue that social space and

[348] Elster, Jon (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms', 111.
[349] Eriksson, Lina (2019), 'Social Norms as Signals', 579–580.
[350] Broady (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 234–241.
[351] Over time, he moved away from using the term and toward the use of 'habitus'. See: Broady (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi*, 241.
[352] The concept *doxa*, within the Bourdieu framework, has a definition that resembles that of a norm. However, doxa is used specifically in relation to a field. Since this is not a study of a field, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, I use norms instead of doxa.
[353] Segerstedt (1968), *Att studera sociologi*, 39.

social norms are theoretical concepts that can be combined, and that adding the concept of norms provides a theoretical perspective and interpretive lens that would otherwise be absent.

Definition of norms

The concept of norms has been used extensively in the social sciences to understand how an individual's behaviour is affected by the social system in which they exist; it is a way to connect the macro with the micro.[354] Several definitions of what norms are exist in the theoretical literature and prior research. In the following section, I discuss and define how this concept is used analytically throughout the thesis.

Norms refer to rules or principles that are accepted within a particular group or community.[355] They involve *normative principles* and *general requirements* – norms require something of the agents, either what they should or what they should not do.[356] A norm has its foundation in a normative principle and within a particular context. Generally, it applies to all agents while also requiring specific acts from a particular agent in that given context; for example, a norm in this sense could be wearing black to a funeral.[357] Furthermore, a normative principle needs to be accepted within a particular group or community for it to function as a norm[358] – wearing black to a funeral is a normative principle that is accepted within in a specific context and therefore, could be seen and analysed as a norm.

Given this overall definition of norms, different types of norms exist within society. A general division can be made between *formal* and *informal norms*. The most common example of formal norms are legal norms, such as wearing seatbelts. Formal norms often have a clear origin and explaining why agents follow these norms is rather simple. In the case of legal norms, the state is the source of the norm and the following of these norms is rational, due to the fear of sanctions.[359]

However, it is informal norms that are the focus here. Informal norms include *moral norms* that sometimes align with the legal norms in society, but can also deviate from these, depending on which group or community is studied. For example, a particular group's moral norm of polygamy might not align with the legal norms within the wider society and the nation state in which the group is situated. The interest within this study lies with another type of informal norm, namely, *social norms*. Although all norms are in some way social in their nature,

[354] Coleman, James S. (1994), *Foundations of Social Theory*, 241; Segerstedt (1968), *Att studera sociologi*, 33–51.
[355] Brennan, Geoffrey et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 2.
[356] Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 3.
[357] Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 3.
[358] Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 4.
[359] Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 5–6.

social norms are tied to the *social practices* of the group being studied.[360] These types of norms involve a generally accepted normative principle, however,

> they are not made, interpreted, and enforced by a central authority. Nor (unlike moral norms) do they principally derive their authority from any objective valid normative principles that they purport to represent. Rather, social norms purport to be somehow authoritative in their own right.[361]

Jon Elster adds that another defining feature of social norms is that they are not outcome-oriented. In attempting to bridge the gap between Adam Smith's *homo economicus* and Durkheim's *homo sociologicus*, Elster argues that acting 'rationally' does not conflict with acting in accordance with social norms.[362] However, acting rationally is guided by consequences of one's actions; it is out-come oriented, while acting in accordance with social norms is not. 'Social norms are either unconditional or, if conditional, are not future-oriented.'[363]

Elster stresses that social norms require being shared by other people, and are sustained by other people's approval or disapproval.[364] Obeying a social norm can give rise to positive emotions, while also being upheld by feelings of 'embarrassment, anxiety, guilt, and shame that a person suffers at the prospect of violating them'.[365] Social norms are enforced, not by the state, but by members of the general community.[366] Elster argues that following social norms can be understood as rational to individuals. Although social norms can sometimes constrain the pursuit of self-interest, and conversely, the pursuit of self-interest can constrain following social norms, they are often at play simultaneously and not necessarily in competition in an individual action.[367]

Social norms are therefore informal rules, shared within a specific group and tied to the practices of said group. They are the 'property of a social system'[368] and arise without a central authority or one of the persons involved being the source. Although they are connected to a normative principle, they are distinct from moral norms. Similar to moral norms, social norms are upheld and enforced by the general community and feelings of embarrassment, guilt and shame if the norms are not obeyed. Since social norms are tied to social practices, an important question becomes how to distinguish what is merely a social practice and what actions reflect a larger social norm.

---

[360] Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 6.
[361] Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 7.
[362] Elster (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms', 109.
[363] Elster (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms', 111.
[364] Elster (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms', 111.
[365] Elster (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms', 111.
[366] Elster (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms', 112.
[367] Elster (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms', 114.
[368] Coleman (1994), *Foundations of Social Theory*, 241; Bicchieri, Cristina, Muldoon, Ryan, & Sontuoso, Alessandro (2023), 'Social Norms', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Zalta, Edward N. and Nodelman, Uri.

One view of social norms and social practices is that they are one and the same, Brennan et al. refer to this as the 'norms as practices view'.[369] According to this view, social practices or conventions are an expression of a generally accepted rule or normative principle that individuals behave in line with and have positive attitudes towards behaving in this particular manner.[370] However, in agreement with Brennan et al.'s argument, this study does not consider social practices and social norms to be synonymous; a social practice is not enough for something to be considered a social norm.[371] Background *normative attitudes* for a social practice are also necessary for something to be considered a social norm.[372]

The study at hand is based on interviews with young adults and parents. It raises the question of whether it is possible to observe or analyse the existence of social norms through conversation, rather than through observation or an ethnographic method where people's actions can be studied. I argue that indications of social norms can be found by using interviews, as interviews are able to explore people's reasoning and attitudes in relation to their actions. I claim that through interviews, this study can point out normative attitudes among young adults and their parents, which in turn, are expressions of social norms that exist within this context.

Social norms as normative attitudes means that among a significant proportion of members of a group, there is a cluster of normative attitudes. Brenner et al. quote H.L.A. Hart's distinction between habits and norms as being individual's preparedness to take a 'reflective critical attitude' to certain behaviour in the light of the normative principles in question.[373] Social norms exist when most members of a group have corresponding normative attitudes and most members know that most other members of the group share these attitudes.[374] Importantly, this definition does not require that *all* members of the group share these normative attitudes for a social norm to be present; it merely requires that a significant proportion of the group do.[375] Furthermore members of the group need not follow the specific act that is required by the social norm, it does not necessarily need to be accompanied by the social practice that is linked to the norm.

If we take social norms to be normative attitudes, we can study these by speaking to people and by investigating the reflective critical attitude that separates the habit from the norm. It will become clear from the empirical chapters that through interviews, it has been possible to distinguish social norms among the group studied. However, the focus is on whether a social norm exists, rather than if it is generally complied with.[376] With this caveat in mind, throughout the interviews

[369] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 16–18.
[370] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 17–18.
[371] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 18–19.
[372] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 19.
[373] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 28–29.
[374] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 29.
[375] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 30.
[376] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 32.

there are many examples of expressions of attitudes towards higher education that are based on a normative principle. That is, for example, the use of normative language in relation to higher education decisions,[377] i.e. it is the 'best' option, or something that 'should' be pursued, and sometimes, disapproval of those who think or choose differently.

Localised social norms

In relation to the social space, this study views social norms in a similar way to how capital (within the Bourdieusian framework) functions. The dominated part of the social space may host local social norms, practices and ways of doing things that are specific to this particular part of the social space. In a context such as Söderhamn, distinct norms and value systems can develop and exist quite isolated from the dominant part of society.[378]

When writing about social norms, Torgny Segerstedt developed a theoretical line of thinking that lends itself well to the study at hand. Segerstedt distinguishes between *overarching groups* and *particular groups*.[379] In this case, Sweden is a typical overarching group and Söderhamn could be understood as a particular group (or rather, there are many particular groups within the context of Söderhamn).[380] Members of a particular group are connected by their co-existence in the physical-geographical space, as well as their social co-existence.[381] Segerstedt argues that stratification within a particular group depends on how far removed people are from the source of a social norm – the closer one is to the source, the more power a person has.[382] The residents of Söderhamn are far removed from any potential source of the social norm of higher education, whether that be the highly educated strata of society, higher education institutions, or politicians and bureaucrats who make decisions related to higher education. Although there might be particular, local systems of social norms in Söderhamn, interacting with the idea of higher education means adapting to a social norm whose source is located far away from the groups in Söderhamn.

Thus, Söderhamn is, in line with Bourdieu's theoretical thinking, located in a dominated part of the social space and, in line with Segerstedt's thinking, far removed from any potential source of the social norm of interest here. In reasoning about a potential entry into higher education, interviewees are – to various extents – mentally interacting with the higher education system. They are therefore required to relate to a social norm that has its origin in a dominant part of the social space – far removed from this particular place. Studying young adults' reasoning about a potential pursuit of higher education therefore offers a way to investigate how they,

[377] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 29.
[378] Brennan et al. (1991), *Explaining Norms*, 3–4; Segerstedt (1968), *Att studera sociologi*, 45.
[379] In Swedish: ramgrupper och partikulära grupper.
[380] Segerstedt (1968), *Att studera sociologi*, 41–42.
[381] Segerstedt (1968), *Att studera sociologi*, 43.
[382] Segerstedt (1968), *Att studera sociologi*, 45.

from a specific social space with its own local social norms, manage a dominant social norm of pursuing higher education.

CHAPTER 4
Methods

This chapter presents, explains, and reflects upon the methods used in the thesis. The purpose of the chapter is to give an account of how the research process unfolded, the reasoning behind the subsequent choices, and their strengths and weaknesses.

The chapter begins with a discussion on how to move away from preconceived notions about education in former industrial communities. This epistemological rupture is part of a methodological strategy to avoid a myopic focus on the lack of educational assets in the education-scarce context studied here.

The reasons for conducting a qualitative case study are discussed in relation to the fulfilment of the study's aim, followed by a discussion on how the in-depth interviews were carried out and analysed. The selection of Söderhamn for the case study is explained and the considerations related to the statistical data used in Chapter 5 are discussed. The chapter concludes by discussing and reflecting upon the ethical considerations in the choice of methods and in the research process.

Epistemological rupture

The idea that increasing the population's level of education will 'save' towns such as Söderhamn stems from the way we understand and interpret certain 'problems' faced by de-industrialising regions.[383] Research built on such a notion will therefore focus on questions such as, how to encourage men in these areas to pursue higher education; how to increase participation in the local labour market; or how to keep young people from moving away.[384] My approach to the design, data collection, and analysis in this study did not aim to solve such 'problems', instead, a first step was to move away from the very idea that Söderhamn is a town where these 'problems' exist, and instead study the *social facts* of this particular place.[385]

[383] These 'problems' are of course also a construct, based in our view of salaried work, integration, or gender equality, to name a few.
[384] See for example: Svensson, Lotta, ed. (2017), *Lämna eller stanna? valmöjligheter och stöd för unga i "resten av Sverige"*.
[385] Durkheim, Émile (1978[1895]), *Sociologins metodregler*, chap. I.

Undertaking an exercise of epistemologically breaking with preconceived notions and categories can be an important first step of social science research.[386] The necessity of an epistemological break stems from Émile Durkheim in the late 19th century, and was further developed and emphasised by scholars such as Gaston Bachelard and Pierre Bourdieu.[387] According to Durkheim, in order to conduct sociological inquiries scientifically, '[o]ne must systematically discard all preconceptions'.[388]

Another manner of expressing the same idea, of breaking with preconceived notions, is to speak of empathy walls – and to cross empathy walls when we attempt to understand persons, groups, or societies.[389] Arlie Russell Hochschild writes:

> An empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances. [...] But is it possible, without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling, and politics; that is, to cross the empathy wall?[390]

Although Hochschild writes about the Tea Party Movement in the United States, as she attempts to understand and cross an empathy wall related to politics, her argument is still applicable here.[391] While the polarisation is more apparent in Hochschild's research on politics in the United States, compared to the differences in how young adults approach a potential pursuit of higher education, a deep understanding of the perception of higher education in an environment where higher education is uncommon, involves the crossing of empathy walls.

There is an obvious risk involved in the study of individuals and groups who are studied because they lack something. Here, Söderhamn has been chosen as a case because of its relatively low levels of education, and thus, lack of educational resources on an individual and institutional level. If the empathy wall between me as a researcher of education, and those I have studied is not crossed, the analysis risks becoming flat and merely state that those who were interviewed lack the educational resources that other groups possess. Therefore, it is necessary – as a researcher and as a reader – to put oneself in the interviewees' place,[392] and to understand their point of

[386] See for example: Bourdieu, Pierre, Chamboredon, Jean-Claude, & Passeron, Jean-Claude (2011[1968], *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*, pt. one; Elias, Norbert (1956), 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment', 226–252.
[387] Broady, Donald (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi: Om Pierre Bourdieus författarskap och den historiska epistemologin*, 440–444.
[388] Durkheim, Emile (1982[1895], *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 72.
[389] Russell Hochschild, Arlie (2016), *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, 5–8.
[390] Hochschild (2016), *Strangers in Their Own Land,* 5.
[391] Hochschild (2016), *Strangers in Their Own Land*.
[392] Bourdieu, Pierre (1999), 'Understanding', in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, 612–613.

view in order to achieve an analysis that goes beyond a stating of facts that could be deduced from statistics.[393]

Thus, disregarding preconceptions applies to all stages of the research process, but methodologically, ideas or preconceptions about certain phenomena are more relevant for discarding, as they relate to the object being studied. In this instance, challenging ideas about education, and small towns or former industrial communities, appears to be especially important, since they are central to the study's aim and research questions.

Education is a term that we encounter on a daily basis. Being well-educated or having an education is, in the everyday sense of the word, something undeniably positive. However, in order to study this phenomenon scientifically, we must approach it differently. As a doctoral student in the sociology of education, researching education in an education-scarce town, it was particularly relevant to challenge any preconceived notions.

The most important rupture with spontaneous notions has been to avoid treating education as something inherently good or valuable in the research field that I have entered. I have resisted the notion of education as something positive and avoided replicating analyses of who has attained or has not attained a certain level of education. Instead, I was interested in the young adults' own perceptions of education, and this guided the empirical data collection. My understanding of higher education and its role in this environment was shaped by the interviewees' reasoning about wanting, or not wanting, to pursue higher education. By breaking with the everyday understanding of education, the young adults' understanding and my analysis thereof have guided the study's results.

As opposed to education, our common conception of former industrial communities (at least in Sweden) is that they are in various stages of crisis, and that the majority of (young) people are drawn toward urban regions, and move away in droves. An opposing view of these small towns is an idealised perception of small town life, its structure and organisation.[394] While some interviewees confirm certain of the common notions about these places, many other aspects of 'small town life' exist empirically.

When small towns are studied in the social sciences, one common research topic involves focusing on what drives young people to remain in their hometown or to move away (often for reasons related to education or work). The use of this 'dichotomy' in the construction of the research object and questions, risks pre-empting that staying or leaving is important to those who grow up outside of urban areas. This presupposition disregards the possibility that staying or leaving could be irrelevant, or a consequence of other considerations and decisions.

[393] See also: Horton Cooley, Charles (1983), *Human Nature and the Social Order,* chap. IV.
[394] See for example: Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 4; Vallström & Svensson (2021), "Klassamhällets tystade röster och perifera platser", 290–294.

A qualitative case study

The methodology that has guided this study is, in the wide sense of the term, ethnographic, but is more precisely a qualitative case study. Definitions of ethnography such as 'the art and science of describing a group or a culture'[395] are close to the methodological thinking that has guided the research design and choice of interviews as the main method employed. Although I have studied Söderhamn and its inhabitants over a number of years, I have not 'participated [...] in people's daily lives for an extended period of time'.[396] Before delving into how these interviews were conducted, I would like to focus on the connection between the specificity of Söderhamn and the ability to generalise the results generated here to other, similar cases.

Young people in former industrial communities, small towns, and rural places in Sweden have been researched before, especially in relation to mobility. Generally, investigations into the reasons behind leaving or staying are qualitative.[397] In relation to higher education, most of what we know about former industrial communities is that the level of education is comparatively low and women have higher levels of education than men.[398]

The thesis uses qualitative methods to add to the knowledge about why the level of education is lower among men and women in these former industrial communities than in many other parts of Sweden. While we are familiar with the low level of education, this study focuses on the reasons behind these statistics. By understanding how higher education is perceived and navigated, we can begin to explain why higher education is used differently in these types of places than in many other parts of Sweden. By using a qualitative method to understand the mechanisms behind the limited use of higher education, the study goes beyond the familiar pattern that inhabitants of former industrial communities have comparatively low levels of education.

Although the study at hand concentrates of one town, the results shed light on how higher education is managed by young people in other places where the material and social conditions are similar. It is therefore relevant to specify the type of case Söderhamn represents and therefore, what the results may say about other, similar, places.

Case selection

Söderhamn was chosen for the region's industrial legacy and its low levels of education among the population. Within Sweden, Gävleborg county has the lowest

[395] Fetterman, David M. (2007), *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*, 1.
[396] Atkinson, Paul (2015), *For Ethnography*, 3.
[397] See for example: Waara (1994), *Ungdom i Gränsland*; Svensson (2006) *Vinna och försvinna?;* Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility"; Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*.
[398] Turn to Chapter 2 for an overview and discussion of previous research.

proportion of highly-educated men and women,[399] with Söderhamn representing the lowest level of education among the county's five towns,[400] with only 15 per cent of the population having completed at least three years of tertiary education.[401] Thus, this is a case study of the town with the lowest level of education, in the county with the lowest level of education in Sweden. Furthermore, Söderhamn's relative proximity to higher education institutions makes it an interesting case, as levels education are low, despite the short geographical distance to several universities and university colleges.[402]

Beyond education, Söderhamn once had a significant forestry manufacturing industry, as did many places in northern Sweden. Historically, the town's labour market was dominated by working-class occupations with distinct boundaries between social classes, and between men and women. Apart from being a case study of a place where the population has low levels of education, it is a town where a single dominant industry has virtually disappeared and where it can be argued that de-industrialisation has had a significant impact, although the area has not been completely de-industrialised.

The previous theoretical chapter specified that Söderhamn is theoretically understood as a dominated part of the larger Swedish social space within this thesis. What suggests that Söderhamn is, in fact, a dominated part of the social space? It is certainly possible to perceive Söderhamn as being a dominant part of the social space if we, for instance, compare the town to the small surrounding localities, or to somewhere in a developing country. However, I relate Söderhamn to the higher education system, which is a national system connected to the Swedish state. It is therefore relevant to relate this town to the Swedish social space as a whole.[403]

Although there are of course individuals and groups within Söderhamn that possess large economic resources, they are few, relative other parts of the Swedish social space. The same reasoning applies to educational assets, there are of course individuals with long educational trajectories in Söderhamn, but compared to other parts of Sweden, the overall level of education is low.

In relation to the wider Swedish social space, Söderhamn can be positioned as economically dominated. The municipality is a net-receiver of tax redistribution within Sweden, meaning that the municipality receives economic resources redistributed from richer municipalities, rather than providing them. Furthermore, the level of unemployment and the proportion of the population relying on social insurance benefits is higher than the national average in Sweden. Unemployment figures show that 9.5 per cent of Söderhamn's population is

[399] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Befolkningen 2021 fördelad efter utbildningsnivå, län och kön. 25–64 år.*
[400] In Swedish: tätort.
[401] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Utbildningnivå efter kommun och kön 2023.*
[402] 80 kilometres to University of Gävle, 130 kilometres to Mid Sweden University in Sundsvall, and 160 kilometres to University of Dalarna in Falun.
[403] See Bourdieu (2010[1979]), *Distinction*, 118; and Bourdieu (1999), 'Site Effects', 125 for a discussion on the importance of geographical distance to economic and cultural assets when it comes to a position in social space.

unemployed, the Swedish rate is 6.4 per cent and the rate in Stockholm is 6.2 per cent.[404] There is a large difference in the proportion of those receiving social insurance benefits – 20 per cent in Söderhamn (the third highest in Sweden) compared to 12 per cent nationally.[405]

Söderhamn can also be positioned as dominated in terms of 'legitimate' culture. The town has a library, a cinema, and a small theatre seating 240 persons. Gävle is the closest town for those who want to attend concerts or visit an art gallery.[406] Söderhamn has a handful of restaurants, three cafés, and about 20 fast food restaurants and pubs serving food.[407] The town has two museums, Söderhamn Municipal Museum and an Aerospace Museum where an old air force base, F15, was once located. Most noteworthy are the Decorated Farmhouses of Hälsingland that are part of the UNESCO world heritage since 2012.[408]

Most important to the aim and research questions of this thesis, is Söderhamn's dominated position in relation to the Swedish system of higher education. Within the Swedish social space, the population of Söderhamn has a relatively low level of education. Compared to the entire population of Sweden, where 47 per cent of the population have completed some form of tertiary education, this level is 30 per cent in Söderhamn. In the municipality with the highest level of education, Danderyd, 76 per cent of the population have completed some form of tertiary education; the 46-percentage point difference compared to Söderhamn is significant.[409] The population's low level of education is the most important basis for choosing Söderhamn as the site for this single-case study.

Apart from the scientific reasons for choosing to conduct research in Söderhamn, there were also personal reasons behind this choice; Söderhamn was familiar to me before my research. My father comes from the town and his father built a house by the coast, where I have spent part of each summer since my childhood. My prior knowledge and familiarity with Söderhamn was one reason why I chose the town and which awoke my interest in the topics I explore here. I believe that my 'partial belonging' to this place has helped my research process on occasion. For example, when interviewees have asked why I am studying their hometown, I have been able to mention my family connection to Söderhamn. I believe that this contributed to building trust with participants, compared to if I had been a complete outsider.

My tacit knowledge of the town meant that any initial familiarisation was unnecessary and the process was able to progress more quickly. While this familiarity was an asset in this regard, it was negative in the sense that I inevitably had certain predetermined notions about the town that were based on my previous experiences, rather than the research process or the research of others. (These pre-existing ideas

[404] Ekonomifakta, *Nyckeltal för alla regioner.*
[405] Ekonomifakta, *Nyckeltal för alla regioner.*
[406] Located 80 kilometres south of Söderhamn.
[407] According to Tripadvisor in 2024.
[408] UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Decorated Farmhouses of Hälsingland*.
[409] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Utbildningnivå efter kommun och kön 2023.*

about the place I was studying made the aforementioned epistemological rupture all the more relevant.) I believe that on occasion, the results would have been interesing, if the interviewees had needed to explain more about their town than they felt they needed to. Had I been a complete outsider, I think certain things would have had to be said outright, rather than suggested; this may have opened up to other topics than those eventually discussed in the interviews.

In the following section, I explain and discuss what data was used to construct the tables and figures shown in Chapter 5 and how this data was handled. After the discussion on the quantitative material used in the thesis, I focus on how the interviews were conducted and analysed. I then turn to the ethical considerations of the research process.

Contextualisation through statistical data

Understanding and explaining how young adults perceive and navigate higher education in Söderhamn also requires an understanding of the social context that they are embedded within. Chapter 5 of the thesis therefore provides a contextualisation of demographic, employment, and educational patterns in Söderhamn. Chapter 5 makes an empirical contribution by describing these patterns; using already existing publicly available population data as well as anonymised individual-level register data from Statistics Sweden (SCB).[410]

Chapter 5 is divided into three parts – demography, employment, and education. The section on demography uses descriptive statistical data available through Statistic Sweden's website. However, the two following sections on employment and education also uses register data. The specificities of this data and how it has been used is detailed in the following paragraphs.

The section on employment uses anonymised individual-level register data to describe and analyse the local labour market in Söderhamn and what occupations are common in Söderhamn, compared to Sweden nationally. The data set includes all inhabitants in the municipality of Söderhamn and Sweden in 2018, aged 15–75 and describes their occupations in accordance with the Swedish Standard Classification of Occupations 2012 (SSYK 2012). SSYK 2012 is based on the International Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08). The occupational structure is presented in Table 1 in Chapter 5. In SSYK 2012, it is possible to specify individuals' occupations on a very detailed level. Since the purpose of Table 1 and Chapter 5 generally is to give an overview of the labour market, I chose to use 'major group' and 'sub-major group'[411] in SSYK 2012 to comprise Table 1. Some occupations listed are therefore shown on the more detailed level of 'sub-major group' while others are shown as 'major-group'. The reasoning for this grouping was that when there were

[410] The data from Statistics Sweden was accessed through the research project 'Aspirations in Action – Determinants and consequences of application behaviour to upper secondary and higher education'. DNR 2023–04801.

[411] In Swedish: yrkesområde/ensiffernivå och huvudområde/tvåsiffernivå.

no significant differences between Söderhamn and Sweden, I chose to include the 'major-group' rather than then more detailed 'sub-major group' in order to make the table more comprehensible.

The second table in the section on employment also uses anonymised individual-level register data. Table 2 uses the Swedish Standard Industrial Classification 2007 (SNI) to show in what sectors those who are employed in the municipality of Söderhamn work. The difference compared to Table 1 is that Table 2 describes individuals aged 15–75 who are employed in Söderhamn, but do not necessarily reside in the municipality.

The third section of Chapter 5 describes educational patterns in Söderhamn. This section uses publicly available data to describe the local level of education and the rate of entry into higher education after completion of upper-secondary school. Table 5 uses anonymised individual-level register data to depict where it is most common for inhabitants in Söderhamn to have studied. The table describes inhabitants in Söderhamn in 2018 and at which higher education institutions they had their first registrations between the years 1977–2018. The table includes the 20 higher education institutions where it is most common to have had one's first registration.

Together, these sections comprise a description and analysis of the social space of Söderhamn and its position relative Sweden as a whole. Apart from positioning Söderhamn in relation to a national social space, Chapter 5 provides a necessary background for understanding parents' educational trajectories and occupations, and the young adults' perception and navigation of higher education.

Conducting and analysing interviews

The fieldwork and empirical data collection involved in-depth interviews with young adults and their parents; throughout this chapter, they are often referred to as *the children* and *the parents*, in order to clarify the link between these two categories of interviewees. The interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2022. During this period, I interviewed 40 young adults and 12 parents. All bar one of the interviews took place in or around Söderhamn and were carried out in person. In addition to these 52 interviews, I also conducted interviews or held informal conversations with school headteachers, study guidance counsellors, teachers, employees at local youth centres, and municipal workers.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain knowledge about the children's current schooling, their family background, their view of potential continued education and/or work, and their perception of and potential plans for the future. The initial aim of the interviews was thus to learn more about the child's school situation and life at home, in order to gather information such as which upper-secondary school programme they were attending, their parents' occupations, and where they lived. Furthermore, there was a focus on the child's subjective view of education and their future, and relating these views to the first purpose.

The interviews with parents intended to access more information about the child's family background and the parents' subjective views of their children's education and future. The interviews with parents were also a way of finding insight into how the children grew up. The parents are placed in relation to their child in the study, but as a group, the parents also provide context to how an older generation perceives higher education, how this generation used higher education, and how this may affect their children's perception and navigation of higher education.

Interview sample

The sample consists of interviews with 52 individuals, 40 young adults and 12 parents. I begin here by describing the sample of young adults and later move on to describe the sample of parents who were interviewed.

The sample consists of interviews with 17 young women and 23 young men. The interviews were conducted individually, except for four of the young men and two of the young women, who were interviewed in pairs. Their ages range from 16 to 21 and the majority were attending upper-secondary school at the time of the interview. Most of the children, 23, attended higher education preparatory programmes, and the majority were in the second or third year at the time of the interview. Four children were in the second year of a vocational programme. The remaining 13 children had – for various reasons – left school. Of these, two had not completed compulsory school, seven had attended a vocational or an introductory programme, and four had attended a higher education preparatory programme.

The young adults in the sample expressed an interest in being interviewed, either when I visited their school to present the study or through a teacher or adult who had presented the project to them. Hence, I did not select the sample beforehand; it was determined by my ability to gain access to, for example, certain classrooms and teachers, and the young adults' subsequent willingness to participate.[412] Consequently, certain upper-secondary school programmes are not represented in the sample, either because I have not received a reply from teachers of these programmes, or because the pupils were unwilling to be interviewed. The teachers became gatekeepers and the relationship they had with the students sometimes affected the students' willingness to participate. Certain teachers, who seemed to have a good relationship with the young adults, actively encouraged participation, meaning more students volunteered. On occasion, these situations had a negative effect as certain students agreed to be interviewed, perhaps more out of a duty to the teacher rather than interest. This resulted in very short, superficial interviews.

Assessing the degree of 'representativeness' in the sample is difficult – it should not be considered as being statistically representative. I aimed for a sample that reflected a diverse group of young adults, a relatively even gender distribution, children who were either in and outside of the education system, and who chose different upper-secondary programmes. This was primarily achieved by contacting

[412] Davies, Charlotte Aull (2008), *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 89.

teachers of a variety of upper-secondary school programmes and employees at a municipal programme for young adults who were not in employment, education, or training.

The sample consists of 12 parents[413] from nine different households; eight mothers and four fathers. The majority of interviews were one-on-one, except for three of the fathers, who were interviewed together with the mother in their shared home.[414] At the time of the interviews, the parents were aged between 45 and 57. I contacted the parents through their children. At the end of an interview with a child, I asked whether their parent may be interested in being interviewed. Thus, accessing the parents through a type of snowball sampling, where their own children determined whether I gained access or not.[415] This is not an ideal way of accessing potential interviewees, since the children's trust in both their own parents and in me determined whether I could contact the parents.

Many children did not want me to interview their parents, meaning the group of parents is significantly smaller than the group of children. The decision to interview the children before the parents was intentional. I wanted the child's experiences and interpretation of their own situation to guide the interview, and therefore avoid the risk of parents' opinions colouring the interview with the child. Consequently, many of the parents were not offered an interview because their children 'excluded' them from the sample. The intention to include parents in the study was to use them as a backdrop to the study of the children – these samples were not meant to be equal in size, had that been the intention, a different sampling method would have been necessary.

Another weakness of the sampling of parents is that I began asking for interviews with parents later on in the overall interview process. This meant that I did not ask to interview the parents of the first children I interviewed. These early interviews were with children who were not in school and their family situation was generally less stable than the children who were still in school. Hence, I was unable to interview parents who, judging from what the children told me, had a more precarious background. I contacted these interviewees later on to ask about interviewing their parents, but without success. I do not know whether the children would have been more willing, had I asked them in person at the time of the interview.

---

[413] Although 12 parents have been interviewed, I only explicitly analyse interviews with 10 of these parents. This is due to the fact that one interview with a mother and a father was not possible to transcribe due to the poor quality of the recording. I therefore chose to not include this interview as part of the analysis in later chapters.

[414] The sample reflects the fact that it has been easier to get women (mothers) to participate than it has been to engage men (fathers). Only one father was interviewed individually, the remaining three have been interviewed together with the child's mother. In all three cases the mother has been the more active party, the father has come in and out of the interview, sometimes adding information or emphasising what the mother has already said. In these situations the fathers have typically not disagreed with the mother, rather, further confirmed her point of view.

[415] Small, Mario Luis (2009), '"How Many Cases Do I Need?": On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research', *Ethnography* 10, no. 1: 14; Robert Stuart Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 25.

It seems that children who had a 'well-functioning' relationship with their parents were more likely to allow me into their family circle. This is reflected in the fact that all of the parents that I spoke to were employed or studied, which does not apply to all of the parents whose children I have interviewed.

Gaining access and conducting interviews

Most of the interviewees were contacted through the upper-secondary school in Söderhamn. Initially, I contacted and met with the two head teachers, who later put me in touch with some of the teaching staff, who let me visit their classrooms. I was able to introduce myself and the project to a handful of classes, where I handed out forms pupils could fill out if they were willing to be interviewed. The subsequent contact was made via text message, to set up a time and place for an interview. Except for one interview in the home of an interviewee and two at a local café, the remaining interviews were conducted at the upper-secondary school.

The 13 young adults who were not in upper-secondary school at the time of the interview, were contacted through a municipal programme aimed at adolescents aged 16–20 who were not in upper-secondary school or in employment. I reached out to the organisation, who put me in contact with some of the young men and women who attended this programme. I was able to conduct interviews on their premises, which was generally a place where this group seemed comfortable and secure.

The students who were still in school were informed of the study's purpose when I presented the project in their classroom. All interviewees were then informed of the purpose, in writing, right before the interview began. The interviewees were also asked if they consented to being recorded, all but one agreed.

The interviews were structured around an interview guide which was tailored to whether the interviewee was a parent or a child.[416] The themes and questions that were prepared ahead of the interviews guided the topics addressed in the interviews. However, as with most qualitative interviewing, the conversations differed depending on the interviewee, and the interview guides allowed for a flexibility of this kind. Certain parts of the interviews had a more rigid structure, where I wanted to extract information such as educational choices, while other parts could be adjusted based on how the interviewee wanted to steer the conversation.[417]

The 12 parents were all interviewed in their own homes, except for one interview at the parent's workplace. I obtained the parents' contact details from their children.[418] They were contacted via text message to arrange a time and place for an interview.

Interview length varied between 30 minutes and two hours, generally, the interviews with the children were shorter than the interviews with parents. The longer interviews with parents subsequently generated a richer material in terms of

[416] See the interview guides in Appendices A & B.
[417] O'Reilly, Karen (2012), *Ethnographic Methods*, 120–121.
[418] Except for two mothers, who I was recommended to contact by another mother in the sample.

how much they were willing to share with me. The interviews with parents had a different dynamic than those with their children. I was significantly younger than all of the mothers and fathers I met, which I believe contributed to them feeling more in charge of the situation, compared to the children.

Analysing interviews and finding patterns

As is often the case, the analysis of what was said in the interviews began during the interview itself.[419] I transcribed the interviews to facilitate analysis, comparison and quotation of the material.[420] The process of transcribing was a step during which I revisited the interviews, sometimes heard or listened to new things, and often noted, commented, or highlighted segments or quotes that were analytically relevant.

I transcribed the interviewees in a manner somewhat verbatim, meaning that phrases such as 'you know', 'like', and hesitations or grammatical errors were kept, as a marker of the interviewees' personal speaking style.[421] Generally, I tried not to transcribe more than deemed necessary,[422] and therefore, on a few occasions, avoided transcribing detailed stories that were unrelated to the research topic. Apart from these types of tangents, everything else in the interviews was transcribed – a time-consuming task that I am glad I prioritised. When analysing and returning to the interview material over several years, topics and parts of the interviews that I did not see at the beginning captured my interest at later points in the process. The fact that I transcribed in a detailed and 'wide' manner allowed an openness in the data analysis.

I conducted and transcribed the interviews in Swedish but the selected quotes have been translated into English. I did not translate the interviews in their entirety, as this would have required large amounts of time and effort. Certain words or expressions, often colloquialisms, were especially difficult to find an exact translation for; my solution was to include the original Swedish expression in square brackets, as a way to reflect the original choice of words.

Although the aim, research questions, and subsequent analysis in this thesis concentrate on higher education, the interviews did not have a sole focus on questions related to education. The interviews revolved around the outlooks of young adults in a small town, and this was also the information given to interviewees ahead of the conversation. Although my position as a doctoral student in the sociology of education probably prompted certain answers, the interviews were not conversations that revolved exclusively around education; there was space and time for interviewees to express plans for the future that did not involve education and higher education.

---

[419] See for example: Elliott, Jane (2005), *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 51; O'Reilly (2012), *Ethnographic Methods*, 153–154.
[420] I have transcribed all of the interviews except for four. Because of time constraints, four interviews were transcribed with the help of a company that specialises in transcribing interviews.
[421] Davies (2008), *Reflexive Ethnography*, 127.
[422] Weiss (1994), *Learning from Strangers*, 55.

By practising reflexivity in relation to the analysis and theoretical interpretation of the interview material, I have tried to be critical and reflexive of myself as researcher.[423] This reflexivity, or epistemological vigilance,[424] has consisted of critical reflexion of the theoretical concepts used to interpret the interviews, how these shape the way we think and therefore, enhance the risk of distorting the interpretations we make. This reflexive approach has much in common with how Karen O'Reilly sees ethnographic methods, as an *iterative-inductive* way of approaching the fieldwork and analysis.[425] O'Reilly, writes about ethnography in particular, but also includes qualitative methods generally:

> Ethnography, like most qualitative research, is usually necessarily fluid and flexible [...]. But this does not mean that ethnography begins with no research design. It simply means that the design has to leave space for fluidity and flexibility [...] [I]n qualitative social science we try to avoid fixed or rigid hypotheses to apply, test, and adopt or discard. Nevertheless, as long as we remain open to surprises, it is acceptable to have 'working hypotheses' or 'guiding hypotheses'.[426]

The iterative-inductive approach that O'Reilly discusses has commonalities with the idea of *abduction* as a method for inference.[427] An abductive research approach is commonly used in case study research and offers a way to work with hypotheses generated from previous knowledge and theory, while at the same time being open to surprises and insights that might be gained throughout the empirical research process. Throughout this investigation, the different 'phases' of the research process were intertwined, which means that I went 'back and forth' between these phases, especially between the interview material and theory:

> Over time, [the analytical framework] is developed according to what is discovered through the empirical fieldwork, as well as through analysis and interpretation. This stems from the fact that theory cannot be understood without empirical observation and vice versa. The evolving framework directs the search for empirical data.[428]

Thus, the analysis of the interview material was guided by abductive reasoning, where hypotheses generated from previous research and theory were consistently tested against the empirical material to find 'the Best Explanation'[429] for what came out in the interviews.

---

[423] See for example: Bourdieu, Pierre (2004[2001]), *Science of Science and Reflexivity*; Davies (2008), *Reflexive Ethnography*. See also: Lamaison, Pierre (1986), 'From Rules to Strategies: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu', 111.
[424] Bourdieu (2004), *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, 89. See also: Elias (1956), 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment'.
[425] O'Reilly (2012), *Ethnographic Methods*, 30 & 40.
[426] O'Reilly (2012), *Ethnographic Methods*, 30–31.
[427] Douven, Igor (2021), 'Abduction', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Zalta, Edward N.
[428] Dubois, Anna & Gadde, Lars-Erik (2002), 'Systematic Combining: An Abductive Approach to Case Research', 555.
[429] Douven (2021), 'Abduction'

The analysis of the interview material began while the interviews were ongoing. As the number of interviews grew, the analysis also took on a comparative element, as I was able to compare differences and similarities in how interviewees responded and reasoned throughout the interviews. I began to form an understanding of what was important to these young adults when they considered what they wanted to do after upper-secondary school. Eventually, I realised that almost everyone I interviewed wanted to carry on into tertiary education; the times when they did not have plans to pursue higher education, they often mentioned pursuing this at a later point in life or stressed the value of a tertiary education. Although I did not strictly have a 'working hypothesis' as such, I realised I had expected to see a variety in how interviewees reasoned about their future – that realisation came when I noticed that there was very little variety in the answers I was receiving, most interviewees were wanting to pursue higher education. This went against the notion of a 'resistance to education' in former industrial communities, and was especially puzzling since the level of education in Söderhamn is markedly low.

The next step in the analysis of the interview material came when I transcribed the interviews. In this process, I began highlighting sections that confirmed or contradicted my own ideas or results from prior research. I found that transcribing was also a process of assuming another person's perspective.[430] Transcribing requires listening carefully for practical reasons, but I found that it also made me listen carefully in the more human sense.

When I transcribed the interviews, I created a spreadsheet with all of the interviewees, which included what I thought of as relevant 'variables'. This included their age, upper-secondary school programme, outlooks, their parents' and grandparents' occupation and place of origin, any siblings and their studies or occupations, and whether the interviewee wanted to remain in or leave Söderhamn. This provided a useful overview and helped me to identify patterns of social class, gender, and what was frequently occurring plans for the future.

I also printed the transcribed interviews and began reading through each interview again, highlighting and noting things in the margins. Somewhere during this process, I could see even more just how relevant higher education seemed to be for young adults in this environment. I also began to see the specificities in their reasoning and relation to higher education compared to research on other environments with a lot of educational resources. Thus, the study's explicit focus on higher education and the process of making these decisions came quite late in the analysis.

The last, and perhaps most important, step in the analysis was to write the empirical chapters. This involved applying theoretical concepts and comparing the interview material to results from previous research and involved a constant back-and-forth between writing and re-reading the interviews and prior studies with a critical eye. Ultimately, I have a feeling the analysis will never quite be finished, and over time, you look at qualitative material from different angles, using new concepts,

[430] Bourdieu (1999), 'Understanding', 612–615.

or comparing it to other strands of research that shed light on something you did not notice initially.

Ethical considerations in the research process

The degree of voluntarism was significant for those who were asked to participate in the study. At several points in the research process, the prospective interviewees were able to decline my invitation to be interviewed.[431] They were informed of their right to discontinue their participation in the study at any point and were informed of how the data would be used. They were given written information about the purpose of the project and were then able to give their explicit consent to participate and to be recorded. All of the participants were 16 years or older at the time of the interview, thus, they were able to provide informed consent themselves.[432]

Managing the interview situation, and the data it generated, with care has been of utmost concern – especially since many of the participants were young. However, the risk of harm to the study's participants is low. The study entered their lives at one specific point in time when they were asked questions on topics such as school, education, their future, and their family's education, work, and mobility patterns. These topics may have caused interviewees to think in unexpected ways, but I do not consider thoughts related to these specific interview topics to be harmful. Although sensitive topics came up on occasion, the interviewees themselves always brought up these topics and I asked follow-up questions to the extent that I saw appropriate and necessary.

Since the interviews partly revolved around school, education, and educational decisions, I was in a position, in relation to the interviewees, that required ethical reflexion. My position as a doctoral student is based on a long educational trajectory, especially compared to many of the people I interviewed (both children and parents). This had two apparent consequences for the interview situations.

First, the interviewees seemed to feel obliged to confirm that education is important – this is probably related to general ideas and ideals in society, but this was further exaggerated by my presence and position, and the questions I posed. However, I want to emphasise that most interviewees did not display any knowledge about what a doctoral student is and it did not seem to carry any symbolic meaning to them. Rather than seeming impressed or intimidated by my title, they appeared confused. Likely, many had not come across this title before. This should be kept in mind in relation to what the dynamic was like between the interviewees and me. It is not necessarily the case that they saw me as someone far removed from them in matters related to education. My experience was that

[431] Typically, the children had to show an interest in participating when I visited their classroom, followed by replying to a text message suggesting a date and time for an interview, and thereafter accepting and signing a written consent form.
[432] Etikprövningsmyndigheten, *Vem ska lämna samtycke till forskning på barn och unga?*.

most interviewees related to me as if I was a university student writing an essay – someone ahead of them in the education system, but not by much.

Second, I have the knowledge, familiarity, and ability to navigate the educational system that exceeds that of the interviewees. Therefore, I was able to judge aspects such as whether their information and knowledge was correct or if their plans were realistic. This was a position of power that likely caused some interviewees to adapt what they said in the interview situation. Furthermore, occasionally the interviewees would ask for advice, help, or guidance in terms of education or work. If I felt a response was necessary for the social interaction, I confirmed or contradicted a specific statement or question from the interviewee. For example, an interviewee might have asked if they had the right information about the length of a certain university programme. If I believed a response was necessary to maintain the conversation, I would confirm or correct their assumption. Despite this, I never offered any concrete intervention in their educational or occupational trajectories, such as helping them to determine what or where to study, or assisting them with university applications.

This thesis' aim and research questions are not directed towards topics that require the collection or processing of sensitive personal data or personal data relating to crimes.[433] Therefore, the interviews were not conducted with the intent or aim of extracting such data from the participants. In cases when an interviewee mentioned sensitive personal data, for example, their own ethnicity, I decided to leave that particular piece of data out of the transcript of the interview since it did not serve any purpose for the aim or research questions of this thesis.

The main ethical concern of the thesis is related to those who participated in the interviews. Ahead of the interviews, an ethical consideration was therefore to make sure that they gave written consent for their participation and for the recording of the interview. After the interviews were conducted, I have had an obligation to keep the identities of those who were interviewed confidential. In order to ensure interviewees' confidentiality, all of the names of interviewees throughout the thesis are aliases, as are any other names of persons mentioned. The key between these aliases and their identities has been kept separate from the recordings and transcripts on an encrypted, secure external hard drive. The challenge of keeping the interviewees' identities confidential has been actualised throughout the writing process, in the analysis of the interviews in the empirical chapters, which I will describe in more detail below.

A common practice in qualitative research today is to anonymise – often through pseudonymisation of aspects such as the place, town, municipality, or school that was studied. Common reasons for de-identifying the site of the research is to guarantee the confidentiality of the informants in the text, or to avoid further

[433] In Swedish: känsliga personuppgifter eller personuppgifter om lagöverträdelser. This includes information concerning: ethnicity; political opinions; religious or philosophical beliefs; membership of a trade union; health; sexual orientation; genetic data; biometric data, that is being used to uniquely identify a person. While the study has handled personal data – mainly the full name of the interviewees – sensitive personal data (as it is defined by the law) has not been collected.

stigmatisation of an area or a school.[434] I have chosen to identify Söderhamn, and therefore the only upper-secondary school in town, for several reasons.

Since the purpose of the thesis is to study the role of education in a specific environment, it is of significance to describe and analyse the historical, material, cultural, and social conditions of this place. A reason for performing a case study that involves just one geographic place is to immerse oneself and the analysis in the specific conditions of the environment – these conditions are not exchangeable, Söderhamn could not be any other place in Sweden – that is a point of the single-case study design. Another option would be to give Söderhamn a pseudonym in the study, for example, 'Harbour Town'. However, this practice has implications for the quality and usefulness of the research. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to describe aspects such as the history, location, social conditions, etc., of 'Harbour Town' without it being easy to deduct that it is, in fact, a pseudonym for Söderhamn. More importantly, refraining from identifying the place that has been studied impedes the collective accumulation of knowledge in research. Pseudonymisation also makes challenging a researcher's results and conclusions impossible, a significant disadvantage to the collective research endeavour. Instead, by identifying Söderhamn, future research can build on or challenge the results generated here in a substantive and transparent way.

Naming the place that has been studied makes caring for the interviewees' confidentiality even more important. As previously mentioned, all those interviewed were given aliases in the empirical chapters of the study. However, since Söderhamn is a small place with just one upper-secondary school – and because readers of the text will know that it is about Söderhamn – it has been necessary to write the empirical chapters carefully, in a way that does not jeopardise the confidentiality of the interviewees. The process has consisted of balancing information that regards a specific interviewee – in practice it has meant keeping certain important details, while removing or making other information vaguer. None of the information about the interviewees has been substituted with something else – my practice has consisted of removing information or making a piece of information less specific. For example, if an interviewee's parents were born in a certain town and the name of this town needs to be redacted, the name has not been changed to a different town. Instead, vaguer information has been presented, i.e. if an interviewee's parents are from Malmö, this has been worded as 'southern Sweden'. Because they relate to the aim of the study, the young adults' aspirations – where and what they plan to study and why, what they want to work with, where they would like to live, etc. – are authentic. The reasoning behind this is that images, ideas, plans, and dreams are not actual, materialised conditions that can identify a particular person, even though they may reflect the interviewee's circumstances. Furthermore, interviewee's gender and their social class are also authentic, since these aspects are central to the study's analysis and conclusions.

[434] Forsberg, H. (2015), *Kampen om eleverna*, 69.

Writing an analysis of people who live in a small town, have attended the same schools, and whose families often know each other, while maintaining anonymity was a challenge. While interviewees will likely be able to identify themselves, I have devoted time and care into concealing their identities so that they will not be identifiable to anyone else.

CHAPTER 5

Demography, employment, and education in Söderhamn

This chapter constitutes the first of the thesis' four empirical chapters; it provides context to the study of the municipality and town of Söderhamn and functions as a background to the analysis in the three empirical chapters that follow. It focuses on three relevant aspects of the social space of Söderhamn – demographics, employment, and education. These local structures are important to the young adults' reasoning and approaches towards a potential entry into higher education.

The demographic development of Söderhamn contains an aspect of youth out-migration, patterns of which are important to understand when the young adults contemplate moving from Söderhamn to pursue higher education. The local labour market is relevant in relation to how the parents of the young adults are positioned socially. Furthermore, the structure of the local labour market and the educational requirements within common occupations is important in relation to how young adults orient themselves in matters of work and education. Lastly, the local level of education is a necessary background to understand the education-scarce context and how young adults' embeddedness in this context influences their navigation and perception of higher education.

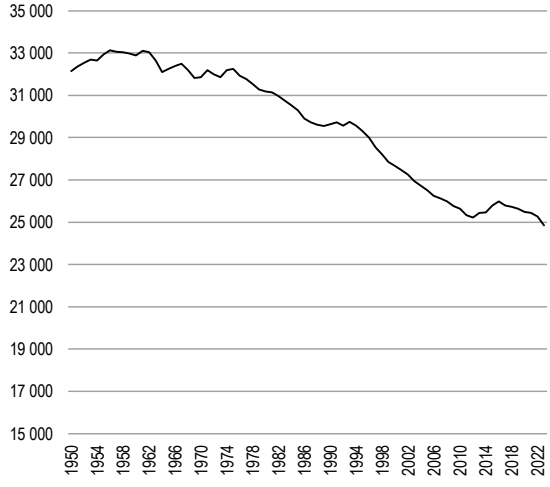
Demographic challenges

As with other Swedish towns similar in size and sharing industrial histories,[435] Söderhamn faces challenges related to the age of its inhabitants and the large share of the young population that decides to move away and live elsewhere. These types of places face at least two separate, but connected, challenges: population decline and aging inhabitants. In the interviews with young adults and parents in Söderhamn, it is clear that these demographic trends affect inhabitants' perception of where they live.

[435] See for example: Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?;* Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*; Sunnerfjell (2023), *Un-Learning to Labour?*. For an international comparison, see 'traditional production community in decline' in Corbett & Forsey (2017), 'Rural Youth Out-Migration and Education', 431–432.

With 33 126 inhabitants in 1956, Söderhamn was at its most populous. By 1976, the number of inhabitants had begun to decline more rapidly, a demographic trend that persisted up until 2013 – see Figure 1. Between 1976 and 2013, Söderhamn lost almost 6 500 inhabitants. There was a slight growth in population between 2013 and 2016, following the acceptance of refugees, mainly from Syria. As of 2023, 12.8 per cent of Söderhamn's population is born outside of Sweden.[436] The most common countries being (in order): Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Finland, Iraq, and Afghanistan.[437] However, the population began to decline after 2016 and by the end of 2023, the municipality was home to 24 858 residents.[438]

Figure 1. The population of Söderhamn, 1950–2023.



Source: Statistics Sweden (SCB). Population in the municipality of Söderhamn, December 2023.

Several aspects contribute to Söderhamn's demographic development over the four decades since 1976. First, Söderhamn's population is aging.[439] In 2023, the average age was 47 and 22 per cent of inhabitants were 70 years or older – nationally, the proportion of over 70s was 15.5 per cent.[440] Second, more people move out than move in – the net migration is negative.[441] Third, the age distribution of the inhabitants in combination with the negative net migration leads to the population

[436] Nationally, 20.6 per cent of the population is born in a different country.
[437] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Utrikes födda efter län, kommun och födelseland 31 december 2023.*
[438] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Population in the Country, Counties and Municipalities on 31 December 2023 and Population Change in 2023.*
[439] Svensson, Lotta, ed. (2017), *Landet utanför: ett reportage om Sverige bortom storstaden,* 29.
[440] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Sveriges befolkning, kommunala jämförelsetal, 31 december 2023.*
[441] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Folkmängd i riket, län och kommuner 31 december 2023 och befolkningsförändringar 2023.*

decrease.[442] There are not enough children born to maintain a steady – or growing – population. Thus, the demographic challenge facing Söderhamn has to do with an aging population and a pattern of mobility that slowly drains the municipality of inhabitants.

Youth out-migration from Söderhamn

We know from previous research that rural out-migration tends to be largest during young adulthood and is often connected to pursuing educational opportunities.[443] It is most common to leave Söderhamn between the ages of 20 and 24.[444] In 2023, 20.6 per cent of those between the ages of 20 and 24 left Söderhamn.[445] Among this age group, it is most common to move to a different county in Sweden; 64 per cent of those who left Söderhamn in 2023 moved to a different county; 35 per cent left for another municipality within the same county; and 1 per cent left for a different country.[446]

The tendency to leave Söderhamn differs with age, and with gender. For those aged 20–24, an average of 20 per cent of women left each year between 2018 and 2023. For young men, the average was slightly lower, 17 per cent. For those who are slightly older, aged 25–29, there is no gender difference in mobility: on average, 11 per cent of women and men moved away from Söderhamn in the years between 2018 and 2023.[447] Thus, it is more common for women to leave in the period after leaving upper-secondary school, while in the slightly older age group, women and men leave to the same extent.

Employment

The following section describes the local labour market in Söderhamn in relation to social class and gender. The opportunities for local employment are relevant for understanding the young adults in the study for several reasons. The type of occupations and sectors that dominate the labour market are likely to influence the decision of whether to move away from Söderhamn and pursue higher education. Furthermore, the empirical chapters will show that occupations in the local sphere spotlight certain jobs for young adults, and those that do not exist locally are less tangible and therefore less likely to be mentioned by the interviewees.

[442] Kåks, Helena & Westholm, Erik (2006), *När långt borta blir nära: Om rörlighet och lokalsamhällets framtid*, 17.
[443] Stockdale (2002), 'Towards a Typology of Out-Migration from Peripheral Areas', 355–358; Ní Laoire & Stockdale (2016), 'Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings', 40.
[444] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Flyttningar efter region, ålder och kön. År 1997 – 2021.*
[445] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Flyttningar efter födelseregion, region, ålder och kön. År 2002–2023.*
[446] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Flyttningar efter födelseregion, region, ålder och kön. År 2002–2023.*
[447] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Flyttningar efter födelseregion, region, ålder och kön. År 2002–2023.*

Apart from the local labour market being a structure that young adults relate to in how they reason about higher education, it is also a relevant aspect of understanding the parents in the study. This section is therefore also used to position the parents who were interviewed in relation to the overall adult population in Söderhamn and what they work with.

Occupational structure in Söderhamn

Table 1 below shows the occupational structure in Söderhamn and compares it to the occupational structure on a national level in 2018.[448] It includes the entire population of working age in Söderhamn and Sweden and shows the distribution of people between different occupations and occupational fields. Table 1 is structured by the proportion employed by occupations and occupational fields in Söderhamn. The population includes all those who reside in Söderhamn (and Sweden) between the ages of 15 and 75 and therefore includes those who live in Söderhamn but work in other municipalities.

[448] 2018 is the most recent year that was available in the labour market population data.

Table 1. Number and proportion of employees by occupational group, Söderhamn and Sweden, aged 15–75, 2018.

Occupational fields and occupations	Söderhamn	Söderhamn	Sweden	Sweden
	%	n	%	n
Personal care workers	18.9	2,144	13.6	675,547
Mechanical manufacturing and transport workers, etc.	9.8	1,111	7.0	350,720
Elementary occupations	7.4	841	6.2	306,679
Administration and customer service clerks	7.3	829	8.3	412,499
ORAAC* in education	6.6	753	7.2	358,329
Building and construction workers	5.5	622	3.9	192,463
ORHEQoE** in finance and management	5.3	597	6.7	335,146
Sales workers	5.1	574	5.6	278,920
Managers	5.0	562	6.4	316,593
Service workers	4.5	513	3.5	172,928
Metal, machinery and related trades workers	4.3	490	3.1	154,822
ORAAC* in healthcare	3.5	397	4.5	223,296
ORHEQoE** in technology	2.4	272	3.0	147,809
Agricultural, horticultural, forestry and fishery workers	2.3	266	1.8	91,417
ORAAC* in finance and management	2.3	256	4.5	221,708
Electrical and electronic trades workers	2.0	223	1.2	58,439
ORAAC* in law, culture, and social work etc.	1.9	213	2.5	125,924
ORHEQoE** in culture, wellness and social work	1.4	163	1.6	80,058
ORAAC* in science and technology	1.2	135	3.2	159,476
ORAAC* in information and communications technology (ICT)	0.9	100	2.7	134,245
Surveillance workers and fire fighters	0.7	75	0.8	41,712
ORHEQoE** in healthcare and laboratory	0.5	62	0.8	39,744
ORHEQoE** in information, communication (ICT), sound and light technologies, etc.	0.5	60	1.1	53,699
Precision-instrument makers, printing and handicraft workers	0.4	44	0.3	14,614
Handicraft workers in wood and textile	0.2	23	0.3	17,183
Food processing and related trades workers	0.1	8	0.2	9,332
Armed forces occupations	0.0	4	0.2	7,638

Source: Anonymised individual-level register data from Statistics Sweden (SCB). The classification is based on the Swedish Standard Classification of Occupations 2012 (SSYK 2012). The data in the table is a combination of 'major group' and 'sub-major group'.
* Occupations Requiring Advanced Academic Competence
** Occupations Requiring Higher Education Qualifications or Equivalent.

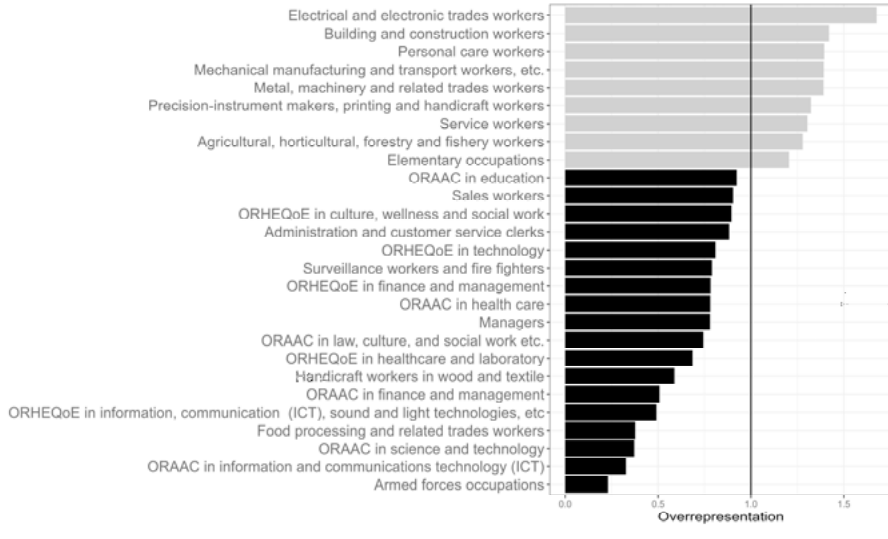
The most common occupational group among those who live in Söderhamn is *personal care worker*, with 18.9 per cent of residents working within this field. Together with *mechanical manufacturing and transport workers, etc.*, *elementary occupations* and *administration and customer service clerks*, these four occupational groups employ 43.4 per cent of Söderhamn's residents. None of these four occupational fields require having attended university. Out of the occupational fields that do require advanced higher academic competence or higher education,

working in education is most common, with 6.6 per cent of the population working in this field.

Compared to the national level, larger shares of the population in Söderhamn are employed in occupations that do not require higher education or the equivalent. Table 1 confirms the perception that the population of Söderhamn is mostly employed in occupations that do not require higher education and are not highly skilled.

To simplify the comparison between the local occupational structure in Söderhamn and the national structure in Sweden, Figure 2 below shows the over- and underrepresentation of each field of occupations in Söderhamn, using the same population as in Table 1 above.

Figure 2. Over- and underrepresentation of occupations, Söderhamn and Sweden. 2018.



Source: Anonymised individual-level register data from Statistics Sweden (SCB).
ORAAC – Occupations Requiring Advanced Academic Competence
ORHEQoE – Occupations Requiring Higher Education Qualifications or Equivalent.

More clearly than the distribution between occupations in Table 1, the above figure 2 shows the overrepresentation of manual and low-skilled occupations in Söderhamn, compared to the national level. It also shows the underrepresentation of all occupations and occupational fields that require higher education qualifications or the equivalent.

Table 1 and Figure 2 are representations of Söderhamn's residents and their occupations. However, a significant proportion of those who live in the town work in a different municipality – in 2020, 18 per cent of those who lived in Söderhamn

commuted to work somewhere outside of the municipality.[449] Thus, almost one-fifth of the working population live in Söderhamn but work elsewhere. Table 2 below describes employment per labour market sector in Söderhamn and includes all individuals who both live and work in Söderhamn. It is based on the location of their workplaces, thus providing a description of the employers that are geographically located in Söderhamn. Together, Tables 1 and 2 give an extensive understanding of the local labour market.

Table 2 lists the most common occupational sectors and shows the distribution of male and female employees in these sectors. If we look at the population all together, the most common occupational sectors are *human health and social work activities*; *manufacturing, mining and quarrying*; *wholesale and retail trade*; *construction*; and *education* – each of these sectors employ 10 per cent or more of those who work in Söderhamn. Looking specifically at men, the most common occupational sectors are *construction*; *manufacturing*; *mining and quarrying*; and *wholesale and retail trade*; together, these sectors employ 48 per cent of the men who work in Söderhamn. In comparison, the most common sectors for women to work in are *human health and social work activities*; *education*; and *public administration and defence*; together, these sectors employ 58 per cent of women who work in Söderhamn.

[449] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Antal pendlare per län och kommun, 2020.*

Table 2. Employment per labour market sector in Söderhamn, aged 15–75, 2018.

Labour market sector	Gender	n	Per cent
Accommodation and food service activities	Men	106	2.0
Accommodation and food service activities	Women	178	3.5
Administrative and support service activities	Men	304	5.8
Administrative and support service activities	Women	365	7.1
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	Men	203	3.9
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	Women	45	0.9
Arts, entertainment and recreation	Men	55	1.1
Arts, entertainment and recreation	Women	53	1.0
Construction	Men	896	17.2
Construction	Women	51	1.0
Education	Men	306	5.9
Education	Women	844	16.5
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	Men	20	0.4
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	Women	2	0.0
Financial and insurance activities	Men	23	0.4
Financial and insurance activities	Women	26	0.5
Human health and social work activities	Men	376	7.2
Human health and social work activities	Women	1,610	31.5
Information and communication	Men	66	1.3
Information and communication	Women	53	1.0
Manufacturing	Men	949	18.2
Manufacturing	Women	185	3.6
Mining and quarrying	Men	3	0.1
Other service activities	Men	88	1.7
Other service activities	Women	172	3.4
Professional, scientific and technical activities	Men	188	3.6
Professional, scientific and technical activities	Women	100	2.0
Public administration and defense; compulsory social security	Men	298	5.7
Public administration and defense; compulsory social security	Women	605	11.8
Real estate activities	Men	116	2.2
Real estate activities	Women	81	1.6
Transportation and storage	Men	401	7.7
Transportation and storage	Women	110	2.2
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	Men	17	0.3
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	Women	2	0.0
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	Men	628	12.0
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	Women	459	9.0
Unknown	Men	180	3.4
Unknown	Women	166	3.3

Source: Anonymised individual-level register data from Statistics Sweden (SCB). The classification is based on the Swedish Standard Industrial Classification 2007 (SNI).

Table 2 shows the gender divide in the local labour market, which has existed for a long time. To a large extent, men and women work in separate spheres of the labour market. Furthermore, the largest sector for each gender employs a significant proportion of the workforce. Over 30 per cent of women in Söderhamn works in human health and social work activities and 17 per cent of men is employed in construction. A gender-segregated labour market is a well-established sign that working-class employment forms dominate.[450] Women are active in female spheres of the occupational structure that focus on healthcare, education, and childcare. Most men work in manufacturing and construction – traditional, male domains, connected to our common perception of working class occupations. Furthermore, the gendered nature of the labour market means that most women are employed in the public sector and most men work in the private sector.[451] Several of the most common sectors among women require some form of higher education – working as a nurse, a teacher, or a civil servant typically requires tertiary education. In contrast, the educational requirements are typically lower within the sectors where male employees are concentrated.

The young adults in the study implicitly or explicitly relate to the local labour market when they reflect upon future work and higher education. Furthermore, the parents who were interviewed are already employed on this local labour market and their occupation and their level of education are the basis for analysing the young adults' social positioning. The following section therefore relates the parents of the young adults to the overall occupational structure in Söderhamn, thereby facilitating an understanding of how these families are positioned relative to the population of Söderhamn.

Parents' occupations and education

The 40 young adults who were interviewed were asked about their parents' work and highest level of education attained. This section describes all of the parents of the young adults in the study – not to be mistaken for the smaller sample of parents who were interviewed. The parents' occupations and their level of education are listed in Appendix C.

The parents of the young adults work in occupations that are common in Söderhamn. Most mothers work in care, health, education, or for a government agency, thus, they are employed within the three most common sectors for women in Söderhamn. Most fathers work within an industry or as some type of tradesman, for example, carpenter, electrician, or plumber, thus, they are employed within the most common sectors for men in Söderhamn.

[450] See for example: Bjerén (1989), *Kvinnor i Värmlands glesbygd*, 37; Ericsson (1997), *Vi är alla delar av samma familj*, 92; Forsberg, G. (1998), 'Regional Variations in the Gender Contract'; SOU 2014:81, *Yrke, karriär och lön: Kvinnors och mäns olika villkor på den svenska arbetsmarknaden*, 49; Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*, 39.
[451] Isacson (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige*, 31.

Women are much more likely to be employed in the public sector (24 mothers), and the corresponding number of fathers is seven. The most common form of employment for fathers is within the private sector (15 fathers); only five mothers are employed in the private sector. It is more common for fathers to be self-employed (six fathers) with two mothers being self-employed, one of whom manages a company together with her husband. Within the sample, it is more common for women to be unemployed (seven mothers), and two fathers are not in regular employment. The young adults' class background, their parents' occupations and education reflect – if not perfectly – the overall occupational structure in Söderhamn.

Out of the sample's 80 parents, 13 parents have experience of higher education (10 mothers, three fathers). Of the three fathers to have attended university, two are married to someone who also attended university. It is much more common for the young adults to have a mother whose level of education is higher than their father's. In line with the general population of Söderhamn's level of education, it is less common for men to have attended university, than women.[452]

All of the parents with higher education backgrounds had children in higher education preparatory programmes. However, the majority of young adults in the sample who attended one of these programmes had parents without tertiary education. Out of the 25 young adults who attended a higher education preparatory programme, 14 had parents without any experience of higher education. These young men and women would thus be among the first in their family to enter higher education, should they choose to do so.

Of the 10 young adults who had dropped out of school, no mothers or fathers had experiences of higher education. One mother and one father are noted down as 'maybe' having participated in higher education, since their children were uncertain about their parents' levels of education. Nevertheless, none of these families had experiences of higher education that the children were aware of. The pattern is the same for the five young adults who attended a vocational programme in upper-secondary school, none of their mothers and fathers had attended university.

The 10 young adults who had dropped out of school stand out in comparison to the young adults who were still in school. The overall situation within their families can be described as more precarious than their peers who attended upper-secondary school. Compared to the other families in the sample, their family situation was more often economically and socially precarious in the sense that for example, unemployment, early retirement, divorce, and absent or deceased parents were more common than in the sample in its entirety. These circumstances are likely to be contributing factors to why these young adults had left school.[453]

[452] See the following sections on the local level of education.
[453] Forsell, Tobias (2020), *"Man är ju typ elev, fast på avstånd": Problematisk skolfrånvaro ur elevers, föräldrars och skolpersonals perspektiv*, 18. See also: SOU 1993:85, *Ursprung och utbildning: Social snedrekrytering till högre studier: Huvudbetänkande*, 237–243.

Education

The final section of this chapter describes the educational patterns in Söderhamn in relation to upper-secondary school and higher education. The following pages provide context to the claim that Söderhamn is an education-scarce place and uses descriptive statistics to analyse what this entails empirically.

The local upper-secondary school and programme choice

In 2019, 88 per cent of those who resided in Söderhamn between the ages of 16 and 18 continued into upper-secondary education.[454] The majority of these, 73 per cent, attended Söderhamn's only upper-secondary school, Staffangymnasiet; the remaining 27 per cent attended an upper-secondary school located in a different municipality.[455]

When applying to upper-secondary school, pupils choose and rank the programmes they wish to attend. At Staffangymnasiet, 46 per cent of the student body attended a higher education preparatory programme, 39 per cent attended one of the vocational programmes, and 13 per cent attended one of the 'introductory programmes'.[456]

Table 3. Distribution of pupils on upper-secondary school programmes, Söderhamn and Sweden, 2019.

Programme type	Staffangymnasiet	Sweden
Higher education preparatory programmes %	46.6	58.6
Vocational programmes %	39.9	28.8
Introductory programmes %	13.5	12.6
Total %	100	100

Source: Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, Swedish National Agency for Education.

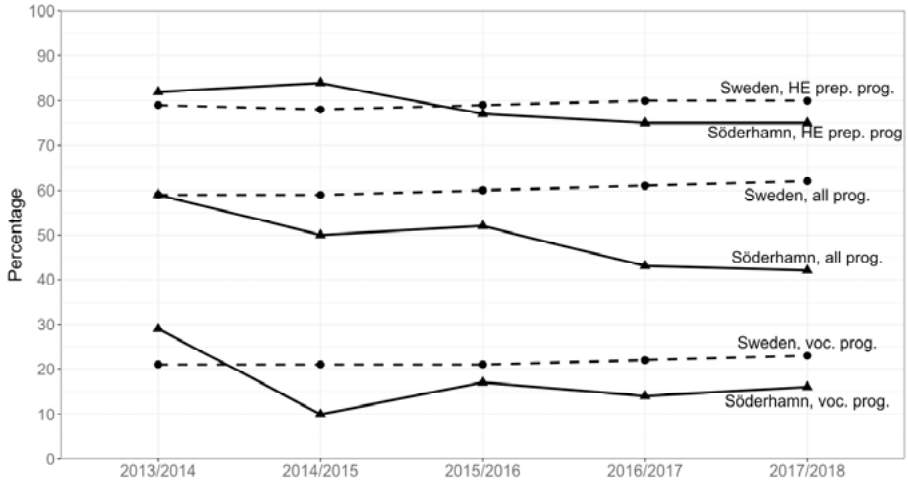
Generally, the pattern in Söderhamn resembles the national average in Sweden: more pupils are in higher education preparatory programmes than in vocational programmes. However, there are some differences. Vocational programmes are more popular in Söderhamn than they are nationally, the difference being over 10 percentage points.

[454] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), *Öppna jämförelser, Kolada*.
[455] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), *Öppna jämförelser, Kolada*.
[456] The 'introductory programmes' are four different programmes in upper-secondary school, aimed at pupils without full credentials from compulsory school. These programmes are meant to give the students a chance to complete their credentials and thereafter attend one of the other programmes of upper-secondary school, or to continue into work. The 'introduction to language' is the largest of the introductory programmes nationally, and is designed to introduce the Swedish language to students from other countries.

The sample of the young adults who were interviewed is weighted towards those who attended a higher education preparatory programme. Out of the 40 interviewed young adults, 10 had dropped out of school; five attended the vocational *Building and construction programme*; and 25 attended a higher education preparatory programme. The distribution of these 25 young adults is as follows: nine attended the *Economics programme*; eight attended the *Arts programme* with a specialization in music; five attended the *Natural sciences programme*; and three attended the *Social sciences programme*. The one higher education preparatory programme that is available at Staffangymnasiet that was not represented in the sample is the *Technology programme*.[457]

Depending on the upper-secondary school programme, the entry into higher education differs. Figure 3 below shows the rate at which pupils have entered into higher education five years after completing a vocational or a higher education preparatory programme at upper-secondary school. Figure 3 includes students who finished from upper-secondary school in Söderhamn and Sweden between 2008 and 2012.

Figure 3. Entry into higher education for five cohorts of upper-secondary graduates, 5 years after completing schooling.



Source: Statistics Sweden (SCB).

Since the number of students from Söderhamn's only upper-secondary school is so much smaller, the proportion of students to enter university fluctuates a lot more than for Sweden as a whole. Figure 3 shows that, naturally, students who attended preparatory programmes in upper-secondary school enter into higher education to a higher degree than students who attended a vocational programme. Furthermore,

[457] Apart from the *Technology programme*, the *Humanities programme* is a national higher education preparatory programme that is not offered at Staffangymnasiet.

the differences between Söderhamn and Sweden were smaller at the beginning of the period depicted. Over time, the share of students to have entered into higher education five years after completing upper-secondary school declines in Söderhamn, compared to the national average. By comparing students who have attended a higher education preparatory programme, we can see opposite trends in Söderhamn compared to Sweden generally. However, at the end of the period depicted, the difference is modest, even though the rate in Söderhamn has declined from around 85 per cent in 2014/2015, to around 75 per cent in 2017/2018.

Local levels of education

I will now turn to the level of education among the population in Söderhamn. Table 4 below compares the different levels of education among the population in Söderhamn and the population in Sweden, aged 25 to 64 in 2023.[458] The table also separates women and men's level of education.

Table 4. Distribution of levels of education in Söderhamn and Sweden, aged 25–64, 2023.

	Söderhamn			Sweden		
	Men %	Women %	Total %	Men %	Women %	Total %
Compulsory school	15	11	13	11	9	10
Upper secondary less than 3 years	30	22	26	20	15	17
Upper secondary school 3 years	32	27	30	25	21	23
Tertiary education less than 3 years	12	15	14	16	16	16
Tertiary education at least 3 years	9	23	16	24	37	31
Total	98	98	99	96	98	97

Source: Statistics Sweden (SCB). Utbildningsnivå efter kommun och kön, 2023.

The most common level of education in Söderhamn is at upper-secondary level, with 56 per cent of the population having completed either two or three years of upper-secondary schooling. Thirty per cent of Söderhamn's population have participated in higher education of some kind. There is a stark difference in the level of education when we compare Söderhamn to national levels. Nationally, the most common level of education as of 2023 is to have completed three or more years of tertiary education, 31 per cent of the Swedish population belongs to this category.

In both Sweden and Söderhamn, women have higher levels of education than men. The difference in Söderhamn is especially great among those with three years or more of tertiary education (nine per cent of men, 23 per cent of women). The biggest percentual difference between Söderhamn and the national average can be seen among those to have completed three years or more of tertiary education. Here, both men and women in Söderhamn are 14 per cent below the national average.

[458] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Utbildningnivå efter kommun och kön 2023.*

Experience of higher education in Söderhamn

The 30 per cent of Söderhamn's residents to have attended university either remained in Söderhamn and commuted or pursued a distance education; they have moved away and later returned to the town; or they have moved to Söderhamn after having studied. Regardless, one third of the population has some form of experience of higher education. In order to understand how young adults navigate the higher education system, this section looks at what higher education institutions that these inhabitants have attended.

Table 5 below shows the higher education institutions where the Söderhamn residents first registered and includes all first registrations from 1977 to 2018 for those who resided in Söderhamn in 2018. The table includes the 20 higher education institutions that are most common to have attended. It represents the most common higher education institutions for first-time registrations. Table 5 only includes residents of Söderhamn, thus, individuals who have moved away for higher education and not returned are not included. However, the table does show where inhabitants of Söderhamn (as of 2018) have been registered when they first entered into the higher education system between the years of 1977 and 2018.

Table 5. Population of Söderhamn 2018, first registrations in higher education, 1977–2018.

Institution	Type of institution[459]	n	Per cent	Distance (km)
University of Gävle	University college	1,560	38.3	80
Uppsala University	University	361	8.9	180
Mid Sweden University	University college	305	7.5	134/285/315
Umeå University	University	260	6.4	394
College of Health Sciences Gävle	Former university college	251	6.2	80
Stockholm University	University	139	3.4	249
Dalarna University	University college	125	3.1	164
Luleå University of Technology	University	89	2.2	659
Linköping University	University	74	1.8	441
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences	University	61	1.5	180/846
Gothenburg University	University	55	1.4	590
The university college in Sundsvall/Härnösand	Former university college	53	1.3	134/183
Karlstad University	University college	48	1.2	389
KTH Royal Institute of Technology	University	47	1.2	249
Teacher training college Stockholm	Former university college	47	1.2	249
Lund University	University	47	1.2	845
Örebro University	University	40	1.0	309
Mälardalen University	University	39	1.0	217
The university college in Östersund	Former university college	35	0.9	315
The school of health Stockholm	Former university college	35	0.9	249
Total		3,671	90.2	

Source: Anonymised individual-level register data from Statistics Sweden (SCB). The table includes all inhabitants in Söderhamn in 2018 with a higher education registration, counting the institution of their first registration between the years 1977–2018.

The overrepresentation of University of Gävle is significant, 38 per cent of Söderhamn's residents to have registered with a higher education institution chose to study at University of Gävle. The difference between this figure and the second most common higher education institution, Uppsala University, is also significant. Therefore, it is most likely that those living in Söderhamn who have studied at university level will have attended the University of Gävle. The university college in Gävle is a significant part of the local horizon when it comes to higher education, a fact that is reflected in the interviews with young adults.

Geography appears to be a relevant factor in where inhabitants decide to study. The three most common choices, the University of Gävle, Uppsala University, and Mid Sweden University (in Sundsvall) are geographically close to Söderhamn. These three institutions are located less than 200 kilometres away from Söderhamn,

[459] Former university college refers to institutions that do not exist in that form any longer, but there are still inhabitants who studied there when they still existed. There are three university colleges with more than one campus, therefore these have several notations in the 'distance' column.

with 55 per cent of first-time registrations being at these institutions. In contrast, the fourth most common higher education institution, Umeå University, is located 400 kilometres north of Söderhamn, significantly further than the less popular choice of Stockholm University. Although many intend to apply to the closest higher education institutions, there are also many examples of wanting to study further afield.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to show where the adolescents in this study come from and the local circumstances that they are embedded within. Regardless of whether they decide to stay in Söderhamn or not, the local structures described in this chapter are likely to have shaped their upbringing and schooling, in one way or another.

Young adults who want to continue their studies after upper-secondary school need to move, commute, or choose distance education, since Söderhamn does not have its own higher education institution. The local level of education and the local labour market necessarily reflect one another. Inhabitants have low levels of education relative the country as a whole, with both men and women lagging behind the national average of completing three years or more of tertiary education. The occupational structure mirrors the levels of education – occupations that do not require higher education are over-represented and occupations that do require higher education are under-represented, compared to the representation within Sweden.

A recurring theme in this chapter has been the gender polarisation related to education and occupations. Levels of education among men and women differ significantly and the labour market is gender segregated. Over 35 per cent of Söderhamn's men work in construction and manufacturing, while 48 per cent of women work in health and social work, and education. Women and men work in different sectors and large proportions of the workforce concentrate in a few sectors of the labour market.

Although the young adults who were interviewed were not selected as a representative sample, this chapter has shown that their parents' occupations and education reflect the overall occupational structure in Söderhamn. Throughout the three remaining empirical chapters, the contextualisation that this chapter has provided aids the understanding of how young adults and their parents are positioned relative each other, within the social space of Söderhamn. The following Chapter 6 analyses the interviews with young adults and their perceptions of higher education. The topics that have been analysed in this chapter, regarding mobility, employment, and education, are recurring aspects of how the young adults reason about a potential entry into higher education.

CHAPTER 6

Perceptions of higher education

This chapter is the second of the thesis' four empirical chapters and it is the first chapter where the interview material is analysed. The intention is to provide a foundation for answering the thesis' first research question: *How do young adults in an education-scarce context view continued education in general and how is this perception reflected in the various ways in which they navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education?*

This chapter uses excerpts from the interviews with young adults to understand how the prospects of higher education, work, and life appear through their eyes, given the context of where they have grown up. It presents an analysis of how individual pathways take shape and how different positions contribute to the perception of higher education among young adults in Söderhamn.

Positions and the possibilities of higher education

The sample of young adults who were interviewed was not selected to constitute a representative sample of young adults in Söderhamn. However, the analysis that follows in this chapter represents the span in the material, as it relates to young adults' perceptions of higher education, how these perceptions are related to their families' respective positions, and their own position within or outside of the education system.

Seven interviewees are used to exemplify, describe, and analyse themes related to the perception of higher education that are recurring throughout the entire sample of interviews with young adults. The chapter is structured around these seven interviewees in order to provide a substantial understanding of how dispositions, social class, and gender can influence the perception of higher education. Thus, the individuals that are analysed in this chapter are not representative of anyone else in the sample of young adults; however, the themes that they are analysed in relation to are representative of recurring themes throughout the entire sample. The individual interviewees were chosen because they are particularly expressive illustrations of one or more themes.

The choice to present these representative themes through individual interviewees has analytical strengths and weaknesses. The perception of higher education that young adults in Söderhamn express throughout this chapter differs

considerably from previous Swedish research on groups who are positioned differently, in terms of both place and their families' experiences of higher education. Therefore, I argue that providing more context around a small number of individual interviewees gives an understanding of the perception of higher education that exists within the entire sample of young adults.

The interviewees who are included in this chapter are chosen because they express perceptions of higher education that are representative of the sample of young adults. Instead of including excerpts from a larger number of interviewees to understand a specific perception, seven interviewees are analysed closely in order to understand what can shape these perceptions. Without the context that such an analysis provides, a comprehensive understanding of their perception and navigation of higher education becomes difficult to achieve. An in-depth analysis of a few people provides an understanding of the perception of higher education that goes beyond the individual cases.

The chapter is divided into analytical themes and uses the individual interviewees to describe and explain how their positions and perceptions of higher education are related. Out of the seven interviewees in this chapter, five attend higher education preparatory programmes, and out of the remaining two, one attends a vocational programme while the other has dropped out of school – this is a reflection of the sample of young adults, where a majority attend higher education preparatory programmes.

The first theme, *Becoming independent and employable*, uses three interviewees to analyse their perception of higher education as a guarantee for employment and economic stability. Since this perception of higher education exists and is recurrent throughout the young adults' perception of higher education, it is analysed from the point of view of three interviewees. The second theme, *Adulthood and employment out of reach*, uses one interviewee to describe and analyse how young adults who have dropped out of school manage norms related to education and work. The third theme, *In the cross-pressure of conflicting norms*, uses one interviewee to understand young adults who negotiate the norm of higher education in relation to other existing social norms within this context. The last theme of the chapter, *The higher education norm unchallenged*, uses two interviewees who occupy different positions within the social space, to analyse how higher education is reasoned about by those whose perception aligns with the norm of higher education.

Becoming independent and employable

The three interviewees who are analysed below are called Gabriel, Marcus, and Moa. Gabriel and Marcus attend a higher education preparatory programme, while Moa chose a vocational programme in upper-secondary school. Gabriel, Marcus, and Moa's parents are married and live together; all three have older siblings, and Gabriel has a younger sibling too. Their parents work in different parts of the local labour market – Gabriel's parents work as teachers and have both pursued higher education as adults, while Marcus and Moa's parents have not attended university. However,

in the social space of Söderhamn, a lack of higher education does not necessarily entail a lack of other resources. Economic affluence does not depend on having a higher education; Marcus' family is an example of this.

Thus, these three interviewees' positions within the social space of Söderhamn differ; they navigate the possibility of higher education in their lives from different viewpoints. Gabriel and Marcus have applied for higher education already, while Moa reasons about the possibility of pursuing tertiary education later on in life. Despite their different positions, and the various economic and educational resources they have within their families, their perception of higher education is similar. Higher education is viewed as a guarantee for employment and financial security. For many young adults in Söderhamn, a pursuit of higher education is perceived as a natural continuation of school, which becomes clear throughout the interview with Gabriel. Others, like Moa, do not see higher education as immediately relevant after upper-secondary school, but still perceive higher education as functional in relation to being *employable* throughout life.

In the three interviews presented here, but also throughout all of the interviews with young adults in Söderhamn, the connection between tertiary education and entering and retaining a position in the labour market is striking. For those who attend a preparatory programme, like Gabriel and Marcus do, the connection between higher education and employment is not surprising. However, young adults who attend vocational programmes, such as Moa, as well as those who have dropped out of school, also perceive higher education as important and relevant to future employment.

Having a stable job and earning money are important aspects of what young adults in this context want when they reason about their future. Tied into the idea of employment is also a strong sense of wanting to become independent. Young adults in this context reason in a manner that reveals their wish to become adults, independent from their own parents. The longing for independence takes on different forms for different individuals, which will become clear throughout this chapter. However, the most common embodiment of adulthood is having a job and being financially independent.

Throughout this chapter, the young adults reason in manners that reveal normative attitudes towards higher education, indicative of the existence of a social norm. Beginning in how higher education is, for most young adults in this study, perceived as a requirement for being employable and finding a 'good job', this chapter untangles the various ways in which the norm of higher education is managed by young adults in this former industrial community.

Gabriel

At the time of our interview, there are two weeks left of upper-secondary school. Gabriel is 18 years old, and he expresses mixed feelings about leaving school. He is anxious about parting with his friends, especially the boys in his class.

Nevertheless, he is excited and looks forward to finishing – he wants to 'go somewhere'. When I ask what he means he explains:

> I mean that I'll be earning a lot. What I mean is, like, maybe start my own company, be CEO of something, a large company or something, not be someone… someone… Well, some simple job, if you know what I mean. I want a higher-up job, so to speak, within a company.

Gabriel lives in a small community outside of Söderhamn with his parents and two siblings, one older and one younger than him. One of the parents has lived in the village where Gabriel has grown up for their whole life. Both parents are teachers, Gabriel's mother is a compulsory schoolteacher, grades seven to nine, and his father is an upper-secondary school teacher. While his mother studied at one of the older universities, his father changed career later in life, and studied at a regional university college. Both his mother and father worked as unqualified teachers before deciding to pursue higher education to become qualified teachers.

Thus, Gabriel's parents have attained higher education and it is clear that he can consult his parents in matters regarding education in a manner than peers whose parents did not attend university usually cannot. Before Gabriel chose an upper-secondary school programme, he asked his parents what he should choose, because 'They know me better than I know myself, kind of'. Their reply was that he should choose the economics programme and so he did. The decision seems to have been uncomplicated and Gabriel says that the reason behind his choice is that he has 'fairly high ambitions'. He thought about the technology programme, but since he wanted to avoid physics and chemistry, he finally chose economics.

Even though Gabriel's parents both attended university, his understanding of higher studies is related to how compulsory and upper-secondary education is organised. There is a tendency among all interviewees to speak of higher education as an extension of one's years in compulsory and (semi-compulsory) upper-secondary education. This tendency exists alongside the feeling of finishing upper-secondary school being a big step in life. Many refer to university as 'school' (the Swedish word *skola* normally refers to compulsory education and has not traditionally been used in relation to tertiary education), they speak about having a new 'class', 'teachers', and 'subjects'. The line between upper-secondary school and tertiary education is indistinct among many of the interviewed young adults in Söderhamn. Either, this line is genuinely indistinct for young adults in this context, or, it is perhaps a manner of speaking that makes the leap into higher education appear smaller than it actually feels – a way of managing this insecurity might be to speak of it as a minor transition that does not carry a lot of weight.

An example of how the blurring of lines between upper-secondary education and tertiary education influences educational decisions in this environment is wanting to continue one's educational trajectory immediately after finishing upper-secondary school; taking a gap year seems out of the question for many interviewees, including Gabriel:

> Anna: And you… want to begin [university] kind of straight away?
>
> Gabriel: Yes. I think, you know, that of course it would've been nice with a gap year and to take it a bit easy. But I think, you still have the summer break… it's not like you're going to be more rested just because you like wait another year. I would say. It's more like you become out of shape and that it's harder to get back, if you know what I mean.
>
> Anna: So that you, like… get it over with?
>
> Gabriel: Yeah, pretty much.

Gabriel's reasoning in the quotation above is typical for how young adults who plan on pursuing higher education in the autumn after graduation reason. When higher education is seen as a continuation of upper-secondary school, it is illogical to interrupt the schooling process through working or traveling. This view is in stark contrast to earlier research on young adults in the upper-middle class, who have been found to view education as a fundamental part of life and where taking a gap year is seen as a natural pause in this long-term endeavour.[460] The labour market for unskilled work such as shops, cafés, restaurants, factory work, etc. is limited in Söderhamn. For those who have not chosen a vocational programme, there are few options for work if they stay local. Thus, working in that type of job for a while and then studying is more difficult in this context than it is in a larger city.

Gabriel is among the adolescents who have thought about and planned what to do after graduation. He knows where and what he wants to study, and expects that he will be accepted, given his grades. As his first choice, he has applied for a Study Programme in Business Administration and Economics[461] at Umeå University. His second and third choice is to study Business Administration and Economics in Umeå, but with a specialisation. He has put Linköping University at the bottom of the list. He says his prioritisation is a combination of wanting to study economics and wanting to study in Umeå:

> Anna: Why Umeå, then?
>
> Gabriel: I have a pal who was born in -98[462] and you know, he moved there. And he's said that it's *really* good there. I've heard good things, that it's a good student city. I thought about at first… Linköping, because there I've also heard good things. But I also had my eyes on like KTH [Royal Institute of Technology] or something in Stockholm. But then I've heard, from people that I know, that have gone or that have, what do you call it, their nearest and dearest who are in Stockholm, they've said that it's not a very good student town. And I've thought like, I want a nice student town and then I've heard that Umeå is like Sweden's best. And I've not heard anything bad about Umeå and the programme is good there, so then you know, yeah it was pretty obvious.

[460] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 77.
[461] In Swedish: civilekonomprogrammet.
[462] In Sweden, the year someone is born is often how you refer to someone's age.

Gabriel is determined to study at Umeå University; his emphasis is on wanting to study in a 'student city'. Gabriel's idea of a 'student city' is connected to social and community aspects, rather than academic criteria. The focus on Umeå University that we see here shows up again in the subsequent interview with Marcus. Like many others in his graduating class, Gabriel is looking to move further north in Sweden:

> No, a lot of people are gonna move, Umeå's the place that's become really attractive, so to speak, for my class. [...] I'd say there are many who are a bit like, sceptical of the aspect that all friends go to different places and then it's like, if someone says "Yeah, well I'm going there" and you're torn between two, it's pretty much a given that you get drawn by friends. And then it's as if the whole group goes there. [...] That's how I experience it, you really want someone with you where you're going anyhow. [...] Now… like I, it feels like it'll be a bit different now. Most of all, the class is a lot bigger, maybe you don't all study the exact same thing at the same time, you don't see each other as often, I don't think we'll feel the same connection between the classes really.

Umeå University is an attractive option for Gabriel since other young adults from Söderhamn want to apply to go there. Applying for the same higher education institution as other young adults from Söderhamn is a way of exercising 'skepticism', as Gabriel puts it. The potentially big leap from Söderhamn into higher education somewhere else becomes more manageable by doing it together with friends; it reduces the uncertainty involved in this process. In a study of rural youth and the choice of an upper-secondary school programme, Maria Rönnlund notices similar patterns to the ones found here – wanting a companion appears as important to youth's educational choices.[463]

Gabriel's choice to apply for the Study Programme in Business Administration and Economics seems to be related to the economic position he aspires for. As we saw in the first quotation, Gabriel is interested in working as a CEO of a large company, having his own company, or a 'higher up job'. It seems that money is a motivating factor for Gabriel, something that his father confirms when I later interview him:

> Anna: What do you think he wants to work with then, Gabriel?
>
> Father: His main concern is earning a lot of money [laughs] [...] He likes having nice clothes. He likes nice things. He likes shopping. He likes looking good. That takes a lot of money. [laughs] It's his fault that we bought a brand new car. [...] I think in his world it's… Success is having a lot of money and that's what he wants, I think.

Gabriel sees higher education as a prerequisite for the kind of occupation he aspires for, higher studies is a process that will qualify him for the kind of occupation that he imagines. He has observed the increased need for education and explains why he perceives a need for higher education attainment in his own life:

[463] Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 72–73.

> Gabriel: Well… In today's society it's becoming more and more important that you have a good education because you want to go somewhere, if you know what I mean. If you want a good job, then it's, then it's becoming a requirement to have certain qualifications. [...] I think it's important that I have a good education so that I can, when I eventually know exactly what I want to be, then I can become that. And that I'm not restricted then.
>
> Anna: Some form of security?
>
> Gabriel: Yes. Exactly. [...] [M]ore education is required to become, well, to get to certain occupations today. Before, it was like, 'Yeah, take this job, like, here you go'. Now there's more limitations, you need to have that education to be qualified, you need this and that. I guess that what I mean is that it gets tougher, they demand more of you now, that you have to be educated and that.

Like many other interviewees, Gabriel experiences a need to pursue higher education in order to be employable.[464] The quote above shows how education is seen as an instrument that qualifies you for a certain occupation and a secure position in the labour market.

Gabriel has had guidance from his parents when it comes to his educational decisions. The parents' levels of education enable them to discuss these decisions with their son. However, in contrast to when the parents advised Gabriel on his upper-secondary programme, there does not seem to have been any explicit advice given in relation to higher education. One interpretation is that the parents occupations as teachers offer them an overview of the compulsory and upper-secondary school landscape, but the higher education system is less familiar and more complicated and their overview is less conclusive. Thus, their advice goes as far as encouraging tertiary education for their children but does not reach as far as comparing institutions or programmes.

Gabriel's older sibling began higher studies at a regional university college, together with some friends from Söderhamn, in the autumn after finishing school. They moved to another town together, but after six months the friends discovered that it 'wasn't really their thing' and moved back home to Söderhamn. The sibling stayed, started, and dropped out of a second programme before deciding to work in Söderhamn instead. Older siblings of the young adults are often the first to enter into the complicated higher education landscape that exists today. Thus, they can help younger brothers and sisters decipher good and bad options. An older sibling who has made 'bad' educational decisions seems to influence the younger sibling. The significance of siblings in how young adults imagine future studies and careers has been found in previous research on rural youth.[465] In the interview with Gabriel, we see how older siblings may become cautionary tales of the decisions not to make, which helps the young adults in the study understand what to avoid. We will

[464] Garsten & Jacobsson (2004), 'Learning To Be Employable: An Introduction'; Berntson (2015), 'Market-Oriented Relationships in Working Life'.
[465] Cf. Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 79–80.

recognise this pattern in the interview with Max, below, and it is noticeable in many other interviews where the interviewee has an older sibling.

Within the social space of Söderhamn, Gabriel's family is unusual in that they have a lot of educational capital. Regardless of the family's collective resources, and the parents' occupations as teachers, Gabriel reasons in an instrumental way about what a potential pursuit of higher education might entail. Like most of his peers in Söderhamn, his perception of higher education centres on employment and that continued education can yield large economic returns.

Marcus

Marcus is 19 years old and most of his life has revolved around sports. When he was 11 years old, he 'decided to go all-in' on his sport; at 14, he had signed with a team in a town close by:

> It's always been the goal, so it was a dream to play sports. I hadn't done anything else for… yeah, well ten years. You know, full on, from morning to night, there was kind of nothing else. It was, I was never with friends either, after school you know, I got in the car, went to practice for four or five hours and went home. Got home at 11, got up at 6 and like, worked out before school.

Marcus' parents were able to devote time to their children's activities since they both had occupations that allowed them to manage their own hours. Marcus' father ran his own businesses and employed his wife, who was in charge of administration and accounting for one of the firms. Marcus' father picked him up from school every day and drove him to Hudiksvall or Gävle[466] four to seven times a week for practice and matches; his mother was in charge of their other child's sporting activities. Now that the children are older, Marcus' mother has gone back to working in the public sector, something she took a break from in order to have a more flexible working schedule when the children were younger.

After finishing compulsory school, Marcus was accepted to attend an upper-secondary school that specialises in sports, the school was located further north in Sweden:

> I moved the same day I finished ninth grade I think. So, I was on the flight. It happened pretty quickly. [...] I guess it was something I was set on doing, it was the plan from the get-go, from the moment I decided to give it my all. It was, sport was the only thing that existed, you know. So there were no doubts that I was going, that's just how it was. So that was just something you had to accept, really. Because, well… I was going to play sports really, at the highest level, so there was nothing to think about. But, it was a bit different, for sure [...] There's a bit of a difference, moving that far away. You know, it's like several hours by car, it's not like you go home just for the afternoon.

[466] Hudiksvall is located 55 kilometres north, and Gävle 80 kilometres south, of Söderhamn.

His time at this upper-secondary school was focused on the sport he was playing; however, he still had to choose which upper-secondary school programme he wanted to attend. Marcus chose between the economics, technology or natural sciences programme. He felt he wanted to study 'something preparatory' so that he would have the option of pursuing higher education afterwards; he wanted to get a 'reasonably diverse education and be able to choose later'. Even though he says he liked mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics, he chose the economics programme:

> Marcus: So that's why I chose economics, since it's one of the… I guess it's, or less cramming than natural sciences and technology. And since the sport was taking up so much time then, so I guess I felt that maybe combining technology and natural sciences wouldn't work. And they discouraged that, the school up there, doing that. So economics it was.
>
> Anna: How, in what way did they discourage it? Or how did that happen?
>
> Marcus: No, but I guess they said that, they said that there's a lot, pupils who've gone to do natural sciences and technology but then changed programmes pretty quickly. Because they've felt that it's been too much. I suppose it wasn't really that they discouraged, but they said that you should know that it could be a lot.
>
> Anna: Was it someone, the guidance counsellor who said that, or who, how?
>
> Marcus: Yes, partly the guidance counsellor said it, both here and up there, I think. And then… a few coaches and that, said so too.

It is clear that time is significant to understanding what Marcus' life has been like while he was pursuing a career in sports. The time he (and his parents) invested in the sport he was playing is almost inconceivable; it was an all-consuming investment of time from the whole family. When I interviewed Marcus' parents, the time-consuming aspect of their children's pursuit of sports was central. Both parents decided to adjust their life to accommodate their two children's interest in sports. While both devoted almost all of their spare time to their children's sports, his mother is the one who made a significant adjustment to her working-life. This meant that both parents had flexible working hours, and it especially meant that Marcus' mother could be at home more. Apart from work, the parents remembered telling their friends: 'Just so you know, we're here, but we won't be able to see you for a few years'.

When Marcus chose an upper-secondary school programme, the school, through the guidance counsellor and his coach, seem to have encouraged making a choice based on what he would have time for, besides his sport. When I asked his parents whether they helped him and his sibling in the process of choosing an upper-secondary school programme, the mother replies:

> For Marcus… I guess he has thought that economics has been good and we haven't really, we have, since we didn't go [to university] ourselves we've not been able to place any value at all in it, in those choices. Actually. So they have probably formed their own opinion on what it is and what they want, kind of, in a way. I think.

Although the parents are supportive of their children's education, they have not provided substantive guidance or advised their children on what options they believe are better or worse. Instead, the parents have channelled their guidance, help, and involvement into sports. Both the mother and father find sports to have fostered certain traits in their children: community, humility, respect for others, thinking about others besides yourself, and responsibility.[467] These collectivist values that Marcus' parents wanted to instil in their children through team sports are in contrast to previous findings on young adults in the upper-middle classes. Although young adults from an urban upper-middle class are also engaged in time-consuming activities, they engage in individual sports, and emphasise individual rather than collective achievements.[468]

The emphasis on sporting activities has been found in earlier research on working-class parents' dispositions to their children's upbringing. Especially in relation to sons in working-class families, sports can be seen as a way to 'harness their energy'[469] and to be exposed to positive male role models.[470] Furthermore, sports has a long history in the type of small town and industrial community that Söderhamn is, especially for men.[471] Team sports, such as ice hockey, football, and floorball have constituted an important arena for interaction between men, as opposed to women's interaction in the private sphere of the home.[472] However, Marcus' parents cannot be considered working-class, given the father's position as self-employed and their economic affluence. Regardless, their dispositions to education and fostering through sports have much more in common with working-class practices than middle-class ones.

In the parents' dispositions to the upbringing of their son, there is stark difference between how involved they have been in his athletic endeavours and how absent they seem in relation to his education. Both parents used to play sports when they were young; it is an area of their children's lives that they are familiar with and able to navigate. Education, however, appears to be unfamiliar territory and they turn over responsibility to the school and to Marcus himself.[473]

Marcus ended up not completing his studies at the sports-profile upper-secondary school; due to injuries, he had to stop playing and returned to Söderhamn. At different points in the interview, Marcus speaks about adjusting to a life that does not revolve around sports. There is clearly a life before and a life after his injury and the decisions he made before were with the intention of playing professionally, which is no longer an option:

[467] Similar values are noticeable among young adults in 'lower social tiers' in Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 86.
[468] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 84–88.
[469] Brembeck, Helene (1992), *Efter Spock: Uppfostringsmönster idag*, 65.
[470] Brembeck, Helene (1992), *Efter Spock*, 65.
[471] Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus*, 113.
[472] Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus*, 113–117.
[473] Cf. how poor and working-class families in the United States trusted the school's professional authority in Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 292.

> Anna: How… what was it like coming back here, from the sports school?
>
> Marcus: No, I guess that also was a bit different, that readjusting to life, it was still like a life I had had the last few years. [...] So it was like a different life I had, it wasn't school that was the priority. I never had any spare time basically, or spare time, I chose to play sports in my spare time. So it was, it was a different kind of life. Coming home now, you know, the first six months when I went to school and came home from school and I had time off. It, like, didn't exist. I had so much time, it felt like. So that kind of adjustment in *life* was… was pretty strange to adapt to. [...] There was a big difference here, like, a lot of people here have never done sports and a lot of people here have barely been outside of Söderhamn. And I had like, I've been, you know to Russia, the Czech Republic, we've been to the US and played, I've travelled around and… So that was, yeah… I felt a bit odd in that sense. I'd lived a completely different life. But you adjust to that too.

Again, the subject of time is central to how Marcus speaks about himself. Having to give up his dream of being a professional athlete meant moving back to Söderhamn, back in with his parents, and suddenly having a lot of time on his hands. Coming back to his hometown after being away seems to create a feeling of being an 'outsider' in relation to his peers. He sees differences between himself and other people his age and point these differences out several times in the interview – standing out and not being the way he perceives everyone else to be is something positive for him. A significant part of what Marcus wants to do after finishing from upper-secondary school is to move away from Söderhamn. Unlike many of his peers, he has travelled and lived away from his parents. This has created a willingness to live independently and to move away from Söderhamn:

> Marcus: Now the thing is, well it's like I said, many of [my classmates] just want to stay living here. So they can't understand whatsoever why I want to leave. [...] I think most of them will stay [in Söderhamn]. Now I know that some have applied for college[474] and will move and study. But I think that 90 per cent of them will move back when they're done studying.
>
> Anna: How come you think that, then?
>
> Marcus: That's the way they sound. Now, they might get a different perspective once they've been to uni and maybe get a job where they're studying. But many of those I talk to don't want to go anywhere else. [...] I know I had a discussion with some girls in class and they said that they want to like live here forever, that's what they want, no but they want to be able to see the same faces every day and do the same things, say hi to the same people every day. But I guess they've grown up here and not done anything else their whole lives. And there's nothing wrong in that, but for me, someone who's moved around, I guess I feel that that's probably not something I want to strive for.

Marcus stresses that he is different and that he strives for other – implicitly, bigger – things than his classmates do. However, when it comes to educational decisions, he

[474] Throughout the interview excerpts, the term 'college' is used to reflect the Swedish term 'högskola'.

behaves in a similar manner to his peers. He mentions that 'everyone' in his class has applied to go to Umeå University, and so has he.

Although his actual plan after finishing upper-secondary school is to move to Gävle with a friend and work for a company that specialises in welding and pipes, he has applied to a physiotherapy programme at Umeå University. Marcus has applied to the physiotherapy programme at Umeå University to find out if his grades are high enough for him to be accepted:

> Anna: How come you've applied to Umeå, then?
>
> Marcus: I don't actually know [...] More or less everyone [in my class] has applied to Umeå, I think. [...] But [I've applied] because of their sports science programmes, they're, like, leaders within that category in Sweden. But I don't actually know why. But it's probably because… The campus in Umeå is really nice, and like, the buildings are coordinated, like, everything is in the same place. You live right next to the school and maybe that's something you want if you're from Söderhamn, it's sort of built in the same way. You live where you go to school basically, you see the same people day in and day out.[...]
>
> Anna: So what did you apply to?
>
> Marcus: Physiotherapy.
>
> Anna: Is that something you could imagine [doing]?
>
> Marcus: I don't actually know… It was mostly applying for the sake of it. Fun to see if I get in or not. But like, that programme is really good, you can start your own business, maybe become a personal trainer and have a clinic, your own gym, and that kind of thing. And it's within that training part that I might imagine working in the future.

Whether or not Marcus will attend the physiotherapy programme in Umeå is beside the point, the excerpt above says a lot about how decisions on higher education take shape in the environment where Marcus is from. He wants to work in a sector of the labour market that does not necessarily require higher education, but for him, education is a way of creating a secure position in working life. Becoming a licensed physiotherapist would of course require higher education, but that is not what appears to be his aim. Marcus wants to work with sports, personal training, have a gym, or maybe his own company much like his father. None of these occupations require a physiotherapy license. At the same time, Marcus demonstrates an awareness of the general perception that higher education is important and necessary. Therefore, physiotherapy becomes a route to work within the field that he mentions. And he is perhaps right, maybe a licensed physiotherapist would be more trusted as a gym owner or a personal trainer. However, it is noteworthy that he hopes to work in a part of the labour market where higher education is not a requirement, and he still perceives that this requirement exists.

The context around how Marcus perceives his future has changed; from outlooks that were independent of the education system, as an aspiring athlete, to outlooks that involve higher education. Whether he would actually need a higher

education qualification to work in the field he aspires for is irrelevant, in his own mind it is necessary. Furthermore, the excerpts above show indications of themes that are recurring in the interviews and that will continue to appear in the empirical chapters. Umeå University is, as Marcus points out, an often mentioned option for young adults in Söderhamn. Many interviewees mention the size of the town and the fact that others have applied there as reasons for it being a good option. But note also that in the quotation above, Marcus emphasises that the campus is 'built' like Söderhamn, you see the same faces every day. The campus as such creates familiarity for the prospective students from Söderhamn, since it resembles the town where they grew up.

The recurrence of Umeå University in the interviews is reflected in the population of Söderhamn's first registrations into higher education, where Umeå University is the fourth most common higher education institution.[475] The fact that inhabitants in Söderhamn have studied at Umeå University seems to make it visible to young adults. Although Umeå University is located further away than the closest university in Uppsala, the social distance seems to be perceived as smaller.[476] It appears likely that Umeå University's geographic position in the north of Sweden and its small size makes it a relevant option for young adults from Söderhamn.

Within the social space of Söderhamn, Marcus comes from a home with plenty of resources in terms of time and money; the parents have invested heavily into his athletic career. What the parents are not able to offer, due to their own trajectories, is resources related to education. His parents do not see a need, or lack the will or ability, to engage in education and schooling in the same way as they have with their children's sports. They seem to trust that the education system will work for Marcus, as long as he participates.

Moa

Moa is 17 years old and in the second year of the building and construction programme. Her parents are married and live in a small village outside of Söderhamn, but Moa mostly lives with her boyfriend who is also in upper-secondary school. They share a small house on his parents' property; it is closer to school and 'almost like living on your own'. Moa's mother works as an assistant nurse in elderly care, her father is 'older' and retired. When he worked, he did all sorts of things, owned a restaurant, worked on the docks, and when Moa was young, he worked as an assistant nurse. She has an older sibling who lives in the south of Sweden and, like their parents, works in elderly care.

Moa says that everyone she knows wants to have children, at least the girls, and she would like to have children with her boyfriend:

[475] See Chapter 5, page 109.

[476] There are also historic descriptions of Umeå University as a university for working-class students in the north of Sweden. Descriptions of the university as 'red', with teachers and students from non-academic backgrounds, and without academic traditions and hierarchies, refer primarily to the end of the 1960s, but may add to why interviewees are attracted to the institution. See for example: Runesson, Per (2010), "Det röda Umeå"; Hjelm, Jonny (2020), "Historia i Umeå", 181–198.

> Anna: What's your thinking on creating your own family then? Children?
>
> Moa: I absolutely want that. I want the generation to live on [sic]. I think babies are so cute. All the baby clothes…
>
> Anna: Yeah, I know. Yes, but is it something you think, like, that you want children soon or is it more, further down the line?
>
> Moa: I mean, I want to have kids whenever, but it won't work. I have to, like, move away from home and do all of that first. So, I'm thinking, like, at least 22. I have to have lived a little.

When Moa says that she has to 'live a little' before she has children, her plan includes working as a carpenter. Her boyfriend's father works in construction and his insight together with the knowledge gained through school seems to have given her a good sense of what she wants to do after finishing upper-secondary school.[477] When I ask her what she wants to do after leaving school Moa replies:

> Moa: I'm going to work somewhere else, but I'm going to live here. And then I'm thinking… when I've saved up some money I'll move myself further south and the end goal is Stockholm.
>
> Anna: Okay, mm. Interesting. First, you say that you'll work away, what do you mean by that?
>
> Moa: Yea, well, Gävle or Stockholm. You earn more the further you move in that direction. And if I work there, it's easy to get an apartment there, for example. Because then I know I have work there.
>
> Anna: Mm, how do you know… How are you aware of the differences in salary if you move closer to Stockholm?
>
> Moa: My boyfriend's dad works in Stockholm and he earns more money there than what he did here before. [...]
>
> Anna: How will you manage this then? Finding work in Gävle or Stockholm?
>
> Moa: Well, it's like any job I guess, you apply. And if I get it I'll just have to commute.
>
> Anna: Yes. Is that common?
>
> Moa: Yeah, it's very common. Especially in construction.

As part of the vocational programme that Moa attends, the pupils spend a lot of their time building and constructing together at school, or on work placements. Moa looks forward to finishing school since being in school is like 'working without getting paid'.

When Moa applied for upper-secondary school, she chose between the handicrafts programme with a specialisation in hairdressing and the building and construction programme. The former is offered in Gävle, but not in Söderhamn:

[477] Cf. the frequent reference to family members in relation to the future in Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 77.

> Moa: I wanted to attend [school] in Söderhamn. If they offered hairdresser training in Söderhamn I would've definitely chosen that. So, that's what stopped that.
>
> Anna: Okay, so actually it was… would you have rather taken the hairdresser programme?
>
> Moa: Mm, yeah. [...]
>
> Anna: Did you get in to the hairdresser programme?
>
> Moa: I got in to all of my choices.
>
> Anna: Yes, mm, okay. Did you consider it at any point? I mean, seriously, to choose Gävle?
>
> Moa: Yes, I did. Where I live is convenient [close to the train and bus station] [...] Yeah, but I wanted to go to school in Söderhamn cause all of my friends live in Söderhamn [...]
>
> Anna: Okay, mm. How does it feel now then? That you chose construction and not hairdressing? How does it feel now?
>
> Moa: I mean I started regretting it in the first year. Because when I see everyone else cutting hair and doing fun stuff at the handicrafts programme, I get a bit jealous. But then when I think about it… I'm in school to be able to earn money when I'm an adult. And that makes me feel like it's best attending construction, so I'll stick with it.
>
> Anna: Mm, okay. So you've thought about it in that way too, what the salary will be in the end?
>
> Moa: Mm.
>
> Anna: How big of a difference is it then? Do you know?
>
> Moa: I mean I looked it up and hairdresser is like, between SEK 15 and 20 000. Sometimes more, the longer you work. But that's the same in construction. And construction is between SEK 20 and 30 000 as an apprentice. And then it increases. So it's a lot more actually…

When Moa applied for upper-secondary school she knew she did not want to 'sit at a computer all day in the classroom', she knew she wanted to be mobile and do something physical. Her first choice was building and construction, the second one was the handicrafts programme with a specialisation in hairdressing, and her third choice was the vehicle engineering programme. Although she enjoys doing her own and others' hair, she chose to stay in Söderhamn. The prospect of having to commute to Gävle and the salary expectation as a hairdresser is what made her settle on the building and construction programme.

The upper-secondary school programmes that Moa chose between are interesting given the statistical distribution of men and women in these particular programmes. She chose between two of the most gender-segregated programmes nationally: in 2021, 91 per cent of students on the building and construction programme were boys, whereas 94 per cent of students on the handicrafts programme were girls.[478] Her choice is atypical for a woman, and she will enter a part

[478] Svenskt Näringsliv (2021), *Gymnasierapporten 2021: Attityder, antal och etablering.*

of the labour market that is equally unusual for women to work within; only 1 per cent of women who work in Söderhamn work in construction.[479]

Throughout the interview, it is clear that Moa sees school and education as preparation for working life. At various points she makes the connection between school, work, and money: 'I have to go to school to get a good job, and the job that I want. [...] If I don't graduate, I might not get a job'. Compared to many of her peers in higher education preparatory programmes, Moa has a distinct idea of what she will do after graduating from upper-secondary school, even though that is a few years away. The pupils on this upper-secondary school programme learn a trade and they also seem to gain tacit knowledge about how to navigate the labour market they will enter. The building and construction programme has institutionalised ties to local businesses, which contributes to making the time after leaving school tangible. There is a distinct difference between wanting to work in a field that exists in Söderhamn, like construction, and wanting to work with something that is unusual in the local labour market. Interviewees who aim for careers in fields such as law, medicine, or finance have a much less distinct idea of what their working life may look like. Moa, in contrast, has been on work placements and her teachers and boyfriend's father have experiences of the construction business.[480] She wants to enter into a common occupation – albeit not common for women – that has existed in Söderhamn for a long time. This contributes to the tangibility of her plans.

> Anna: What are you thinking… do you know what type of building and construction you would like to do once you're finished?
>
> Moa: I want to start by working as a carpenter, and then I'm considering… since I'm taking preparatory courses, I can attend college if I want to, and in that case I'm thinking architect. I'll earn even more doing that. That's why. That's also an option afterwards. [...] I mean, that's not in the near future. That'll be later on, in that case, if I want to climb the ladder. So, that's an option then.
>
> Anna: Mm, are you thinking… when you say climb the ladder, are you thinking like that you'll get to do more interesting things? Or does it have to do with salary? Or both?
>
> Moa: Yes, both.
>
> Anna: Mm. Do you know anyone who's studied to become an architect? Do you know an architect?
>
> Moa: No. But I know a lot of people who want to [become architects].

Moa's plan after graduation emerges throughout the interview. She wants to work as a carpenter and live in Söderhamn, if she needs to commute to Gävle or Stockholm to earn more money that is an option. She wants to save money to be able to move away from home and buy a flat; she 'doesn't want to be dependent

[479] See Table 2, page 102.
[480] Cf. The importance of social networks to finding work in rural localities in Beach & Öhrn (2021), "Arbetsmarknad, utbildningsval och möjligheter på landsbygden", 62; Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, chap. 7.

on her parents'. Buying a flat is important to her; she could rent, but feels like 'she might as well buy, to get it over with. So that it's not just money down the drain'. She wants to move further south in increments, first to Gävle, then eventually live and work in Stockholm. In addition, as she mentions in the quotation above that she might consider pursuing higher education to become an architect.

Although she is attending a vocational programme, she has taken courses that make her eligible for higher education. She chose to add those preparatory courses in the first grade of upper-secondary school upon the advice of her form teacher. He recommended that the class add these courses to their upper-secondary school education to avoid having to go back to school later on. This particular teacher seems important to Moa's class and has spoken many times on the significance of being eligible for higher studies. In contrast, Moa's parents are less active in decisions regarding education:

> Moa: They don't say much. They're really happy that I'm in school because my sibling wasn't. So, they're happy about everything that I can achieve, I think.
>
> Anna: Mm. Have they helped you in any way, in relation to school, your parents I mean?
>
> Moa: No. I mean, they don't have a lot of experience themselves. It was long ago that they were in school. So…

Like several of the parents in the sample, Moa's mother and father are noticeably absent in their child's educational decision-making process – at least from the child's perspective. However, well-informed and engaged teachers, like Moa's form teacher, appear able to compensate for parents who are less informed about the educational system.

Moa has a distinct plan for when she leaves upper-secondary school; she has a vocation in mind, is informed about salary expectations, working-conditions and has contacts that might lead to her finding work. She is pursuing an occupation that is embedded in the local labour market, has existed locally for a long time and many local companies and individuals work in that sector. This provides her with a tacit knowledge that many of those who aim for highly educated occupations lack. Despite her plan to become a carpenter, Moa still sees higher education as a relevant option for her. Even if Moa does not pursue higher education, it is evident that she considers it a possibility for the future.

Adulthood and employability out of reach

The following section is an analysis of the interview with Tess. Tess is among the young adults in the sample who have dropped out of school. She is included here since her reasoning about the future reflects what it entails to be in a position outside of the school system, without stable employment and in turn, how that affects the perception of higher education.

Tess, like several of the young adults who have dropped out of school, has parents who are divorced and whose positions in the labour market are, to varying extents, precarious. This mirrors prior research on factors that make dropping out of school more likely.[481] As we will see throughout the interview with Tess, these young adults often navigate their trajectory through school on their own, with little involvement from their parents or other significant adults. Dropping out of school puts them in a position where they can experience feelings of isolation and of not belonging, compared to others the same age. Dropping out of school makes finding stable work difficult and higher education is not within reach without an upper-secondary school education. For many of the young adults in the same positon as Tess, employment and economic stability is what they strive for.

Tess has vague dreams of pursuing higher education and a more grounded urge to have children. In Tess' example, we see how gender can be an important aspect of how young women experience the local context and its gossip and social control. Tess wants to become a mother, but does not have a stable partner to realise that dream with. As we will continue to see throughout this chapter, higher education, being employed, and having children are all representations of becoming an adult.[482] When the routes to reaching a state of perceived independence are out of reach, as they are for Tess and others within this group, it perpetuates the sense of not belonging, since their continued path towards adulthood involves a lot more uncertainty than it does for those who are about to finish upper-secondary school.

Tess

Tess is 19 years old and one of the first things she says in the interview is 'I don't have a real education'. She dropped out of upper-secondary school a year and a half before we meet and she is currently working two weekends per month in a shop in Söderhamn. Tess' father works in manual labour and her mother is unemployed. She does not want to end up like either of her parents. Although they were a couple, the parents never married, and while her mum has found new partners, her dad lives alone. She says she does not want to be 'alone', like her father, and she does not want to be unemployed and in a 'chaotic' relationship situation like her mother.

Before her last relationship ended, Tess planned to have children relatively soon. However, without a partner, that plan is out of reach. A fear of hers is having children and then splitting up from the father, as her own parents did. She mentions friends and acquaintances who have had children between the ages of 15 and 18 who have all become single mothers:

> I want to make sure I work a few years before [I have children], and that I really meet someone that I know it's going to work with. So yea… I see it in two ways. I love children, so I, yeah… But I have to wait, yes, and it's going to be with someone that

[481] Lundahl, Lisbeth et al. (2017), 'No Particular Way to Go: Careers of Young Adults Lacking Upper Secondary Qualifications', 39–52.
[482] Jones, Gill (2002), *The Youth Divide: Diverging Paths to Adulthood*.

> it's going to last with. [...] I mean I want to have kids, we'll see what happens, but if I got to decide it would be when I'm 22-23 maybe, and that's in four years.

Most interviewees, especially the young women, know of one or a few friends their age who already have children. For some of the young women in the sample, family formation is what they envisage when they think about the future.[483] Since Tess has cut ties with her former boyfriend, having children is unrealistic at the moment and she has had to reconsider what her plan for the future is. She wants to find work locally, in Söderhamn, Gävle, or Hudiksvall, but says it is difficult without upper-secondary qualifications. She applies for all kinds of work, but is pessimistic about her prospects:

> Anna: Does it feel, like, is it difficult to find work?
>
> Tess: Yes. In this town it's really difficult. If you log in to *Platsbanken* [the unemployment agency's job vacancy database] or any site like that, there's maybe 40 jobs, and then like 20 of those are like nurses or doctors, so it's… And the rest is maybe… assistant or… or like something else that requires qualifications. So if you don't have any qualifications then it's really difficult. And even if you have qualifications it's usually not like… Well, doctor, I mean there's probably not loads who have those qualifications here. So it's, I find it really hard.

Tess wants to stay in Söderhamn, where she has family and feels secure. She has had help from a woman who works at the municipal programme where she is enrolled;[484] they are in contact with a guidance counsellor about adult education at upper-secondary level, with the intention that Tess might be able to enter higher education in the future. She has attempted to complete her upper-secondary education through the adult education system before, but has so far not succeeded:

> But I think I only went like, for a month or something, but I felt that this wasn't for me, because… I don't know how to explain it, but it was a bit… It wasn't my thing. [...] And then I tried again next year, but then I felt the exact same thing.

Throughout the interview, it is clear that Tess' academic confidence is low, and like other young adults in a similar position,[485] it seems that her experiences of upper-secondary school is part of the cause. When she first applied for upper-secondary school, she chose a higher education preparatory programme, but switched to a vocational programme after two months:

> I think [the preparatory programme] was pretty intense. I mean, already in the first week, or weeks, it was like, bang on, really difficult, or like maths assignments, like, everything was so complicated, at least to me. Some people understand that stuff really easily, but I thought it was pretty difficult. [...] So I switched. [...] I regret that

[483] Cf. Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus*, 83–87; Kåks, Helena (2007), *Mellan erfarenhet och förväntan: Betydelser av att bli vuxen i ungdomars livsberättelser*, 151–157.
[484] A programme aimed at adolescents aged 16–20 who have left school.
[485] Lundahl et al. (2017), 'No Particular Way to Go', 45.

> I didn't choose [the vocational programme] from the beginning, because then I would've been able to keep up and I'd been able to finish school with my friends this year. So it was a lot of fun and I learnt a lot and that, but… Yeah, I don't know, I've never been much of a school-y person either, so even if I should've put more effort in, I don't know… I was probably a bit tired of school maybe. That's how it was…

The transition from compulsory school to upper-secondary school seems to have been an adjustment, both academically and socially, for Tess. This transition is described in research on young adults who drop out of school as a *structural turning point*. Lisbeth Lundahl et al. find that many of the young adults they interviewed had 'found primary school nice and enjoyable, reporting that they managed quite well there',[486] but that the entry into upper-secondary school had contributed to why they dropped out.

Tess' general experience of living in a small town is exemplified through her experience at the town's upper-secondary school:

> The majority [of people the same age] meet at school, so regardless of whether you want to or not, you run in to the people you don't want to run in to or… Yeah… So it's very clear that it's a small town [laughs] [...] It feels like people are all staring at you, even though you haven't done anything. [...] People kind of looked down on you if you didn't look a certain way or acted a certain way. You know, you weren't supposed to be loud or laugh or… I don't know, it sometimes felt like you couldn't really be yourself. [...] [In Söderhamn] everyone knows everyone. And like I said before, if anyone missteps, everyone knows about it. [...] A lot of times, you hear things about yourself and you're like "Okay, I didn't even know about that".

The upper-secondary school that Tess speaks about is a universe of its own for the around 600 young adults who choose to attend it. Given that it is the town's only upper-secondary school, this is where everyone around the age of 16 to 19 meets. What Tess describes in the quotation above can be interpreted as an expression of the social control and gossip that is indicative of small towns.[487] There is a gendered aspect of the social control that we will continue to see in the interview with Zoey, later in this chapter; it is also recognisable in other interviews with young women in Söderhamn. Young women are especially exposed to the type of gossip that Tess mentions – it typically relates to their appearance[488] or to their (supposed) relations with young men.[489] A 'mistake', or in other words, an action or behaviour that deviates from the sometimes rigid norms that apply to young women in this environment is fuel for gossip.

After almost a year, Tess fell behind in her studies on the vocational programme and 'decided' to drop out of upper-secondary school. Leaving upper-secondary

[486] Lundahl et al. (2017), 'No Particular Way to Go', 49.
[487] See for example: Elias & Scotson (2010[1965]), *Etablerade och outsiders*, 152–167; Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 131.
[488] Skeggs (2000 [1997]), *Att bli respektabel*, 164–176.
[489] Ambjörnsson, Fanny (2010), *I en klass för sig: Genus, klass och sexualitet bland gymnasietjejer*, chap. 5; Ekerwald, Hedvig (2010), *Varje mor är en dotter: Om kvinnors ungdomstid under 1900–talet*, 91–98.

school is a definite deviation from a strong norm that applies to both young men and women. The process through which she left school was not easy, and she feels like she was forced into a situation where the only option was to leave school:

> I think I was treated pretty unfairly, because I asked my form teacher and everyone, because I had a feeling I was a bit behind, so then I just asked "Yes, but how will I do?" and they were just like "No, nothing to worry about". [...] and then, out of nowhere there were meetings with the principal and then he said "You're going to have to retake this year, well, unless you want to drop put?" And that made me pretty sad… So then, I guess that ruined my view of school a bit, when they weren't able to be honest and tell it like it was, or it felt like that anyways. And then it was like a… a shock when everyone, the guidance counsellor, the principal, and all the teachers sat and I got to hear that I couldn't stay, even though they'd said to me like a day before that it wasn't a problem. So that kind of ruined my view of school so that, I just thought no, I'll work instead. And I can catch up… on school later, in adult education or something. [...] I was just pretty tired of the whole situation, I felt, like, let down. And like I said, it ruined the way I viewed school a bit. I didn't want to run into… Or I mean, it was a bit sad too, because I didn't want to be a year behind and then bump into my best friends and not be in the same class as them, I had a lot of thoughts, so I was just like, no… I can catch up on school later, maybe get a job.

When Tess recounts how the school, through teachers, the principal, and the guidance counsellor, treated her, it appears that she felt unable to understand what was happening and why. In previous research, receiving lacking support from one's family or school has been found to be decisive factors for dropping out,[490] and Tess seems to have been alone in the process that she describes above; she never mentions her parents being involved in any way. It is also clear that there is an important social aspect of being in school. Dropping out of school means that life becomes very different compared to almost everyone the same age – it can feel isolated and lonely.

Despite her previous experiences, Tess wants to complete her upper-secondary education and possibly pursue higher education later on. When I ask what she would like to work with in the future, she says that she would like to become a lawyer or an estate agent because she has heard that those occupations pay well:

> I don't know, it seems interesting as well, especially being a lawyer. Because I'm very interested in well… like, investigations and cases and that. And lately we've been talking about criminology too. So, it's something within that field. Or police. So, it's like, I keep changing my mind every day about what I want to do. But right now it feels like… I mean, lawyer and estate agent, that's more of like, a dream, I know that won't happen for a while. But right now I could get my grades and then apply to like, become a police officer. Because that's like, I think it's like a year and a half, so it's not really a very long time either, to study.

[490] Lundahl et al. (2017), 'No Particular Way to Go', 45.

For the remainder of the interview, Tess seems to settle on the idea of becoming a police officer. She mentions that becoming a lawyer or an estate agent is more of a dream – she is not sure if she would have the motivation and grit to study for five years to become a lawyer. In contrast, becoming a police officer appears more realistic to her, given where she is now. She seems pressed to name an occupation she aspires for, and settles on police. She is not being untruthful, but she is keen to put forward something for my approval. She has probably thought about working as a police officer before, but my feeling is that she makes it sound more like a plan than what it actually is. Regardless, she is many steps away from being able to apply to higher education in general.

The professions Tess mentions reflect very different positions in the social space. Moreover, estate agents, police officers, and lawyers require varying degrees of higher education. For example, becoming a lawyer requires five years of legal studies followed by three years of work experience, and finally passing the bar. Police, on the other hand, requires two years of studies followed by six months of work experience. When Tess compares these occupations, she considers the length of the education and each salary; the intellectual requirements of studying law, for example, are not something that she mentions. Tess is not the only interviewee who does not reason about her own ability to complete a tertiary education; throughout all of the interviews with young adults, there is a notable absence of any reasoning regarding their own capacity for pursuing higher education. Even young adults, like Tess, who have struggled with school and education, do not express any doubt regarding their own intellectual or cognitive ability to pursue and complete higher education. This is perhaps another indication of how higher education is perceived as a natural continuation of upper-secondary school.

Because Tess dropped out of school, she has a long road ahead if she wants to pursue one of the pathways that she mentions. Even though she did not finish upper-secondary school, and by her own account found studying at that level challenging and difficult, she still sees higher education as part of her future, in some way. Higher education is a gateway to an economically stable position which in turn is necessary to be able to start a family.

It seems that Tess has experienced a lot of instability in her life and she imagines 'solving' this instability in two ways. First, her lack of upper-secondary education puts her in a precarious position on the labour market. She has difficulty finding work locally and imagines higher education will give her access to more options. Second, her yearning for children and family life is also a search for stability and of becoming an adult; apart from entry into work, starting a family is an established indication of a state of adulthood.[491] Both of these aspects seem partially derived from her upbringing. She wants a stable occupation that her mother does not have and a nuclear family that she did not have growing up.

Tess is an example of a young person who is currently outside of the education system; nonetheless, she sees higher education as necessary if she is to establish

[491] Jones (2002), *The Youth Divide: Diverging Paths to Adulthood*, 21.

herself on the labour market. Since she did not complete the vocational upper-secondary school programme she attended, she feels that she does not have a 'real education'. Finishing a vocational track might have given her access to the type of occupations that are available in Söderhamn (such as assistant nurse, lorry driver, carpenter, etc.). Without it, she has difficulty finding work and would need to put in time and effort to complete her upper-secondary school education to qualify for tertiary education.

Since both of these dreams, one which can be connected to a traditional female norm of family formation, and another connected to a newer social norm of pursuing higher education, are out of reach for Tess she finds herself in somewhat of a no-man's land. Her search for stability can also be understood as a search for belonging, either as a mother in a family, as an employee in a workplace, or as a student in a classroom.

In the cross-pressure of conflicting norms

The following section is an analysis of the interview with Jenny. Similar to Gabriel and Marcus, she attends a higher education preparatory programme and sees a strong connection between higher education and access to the labour market. Jenny is included here because she, like several other young women in the sample, is in a position where she attempts to reconcile a wish for economic independence with a longing to become a mother. For Jenny, these perceptions of the future are in conflict with each other and thereby she attempts to manage competing social norms related to family formation, employment, and continued education.

Jenny navigates the possibility of higher education from a position as a young woman embedded in a context where gender is highly relevant to educational and occupational trajectories, as we saw in the previous Chapter 5. Jenny's reasoning below gives important indications of what it means to be a woman in the type of social context studied here. For several of the young women, it means navigating conflicting social norms: on the one hand, a norm that can be traced back to a traditional gender role, and on the other hand, a newer social norm of pursuing tertiary education, which is arguably stronger for women, given their significantly higher levels of education in Söderhamn.

Jenny

Jenny is 18 years old; she is at the end of her studies on the economics programme and is relieved that school is finishing. Even though she has 'always liked school, always been a good student and has had an easy time learning', she considers herself more suited to working life than to school:

> I've worked a lot, ever since I was young. And I feel that work suits me better [than school does] [...]. I'm not the type who wants a school assignment where you're meant to write and study for a test and have loads of homework, it's like never really stuck for me, I don't feel that I want to study. [...] it's just this thing with homework

> and hitting the books, I feel I want more, I'm more of a work-person than a school-person, so I think it's going to be nice to finish and get to work for a bit.

Jenny's father went to upper-secondary school and works in manual labour, while her mother is employed at a company in Söderhamn. When Jenny was little, her mother worked in different shops in Söderhamn. Her parents have been together for a long time and had their first child when the mother was young. When the children were little, the working hours in retail were too long and irregular and her mother began commuting to Gävle to study economics. That decision opened up a different part of the local labour market for her.

Similar to her mother, Jenny has worked part-time in several shops in Söderhamn. Her employment, her participation in local sports, and her boyfriend and close family tie her to the local community. A lot of what Jenny wants is similar to her mother's trajectory – she wants to study economics in Gävle, she wants to stay in Söderhamn, and she wants to have children relatively soon. She thinks school and education are important, but is not sure what to do after upper-secondary school:

> To get a good job, to get well-paid, you need an education. So, I feel that upper-secondary school is really important, above all. And then, college, it's neither here nor there, but it depends on how high you want to aim.

In upper-secondary school, Jenny chose between the economics and the social sciences programme, and eventually decided on the former:

> Jenny: No, but it just felt right, I've always been interested in maths, calculations and that stuff… I guess it was a choice between social sciences and economics that I chose between, and I felt like economics, law and that, appealed more to me. [...]
>
> Anna: But you chose between economics and social sciences? What was your thought process?
>
> Jenny: My sibling studied social sciences, I have an older sibling [...] who said good things about that programme and said that it's almost like a continuation of well, seventh, eighth, ninth grade. [...] but I felt like it would be fun with something different, like, focus more on business and entrepreneurship and law and that. [...] I feel like I made the right choice.

Jenny emphasises entrepreneurship and a good and stable salary when she speaks about what she wants to study and eventually work with. Jenny's tentative plan is to apply to a business administration and economics programme at the University of Gävle:

> Anna: What are your thoughts on what you're going to do after graduation, then?
>
> Jenny: Well, I see it in two ways. I feel like I'm tired of school, so I want to work. But at the same time I feel, I don't want to be stuck at ICA [major supermarket chain], I don't want to like work… there are, I don't really feel like there are a lot of jobs here. It's mostly like, ICA, Donken [McDonald's], or something like that where you end

> up. But it doesn't feel like I have the qualifications to be able to walk in to a bank and apply for a job there… But I also have plans to study at University of Gävle, because I don't want to move away from here. No, at first I thought about business administration and economics in Linköping, but then I'd have to… it is full-time, so I can't, or I'd have to move. So I guess it'll be distance learning and… apply for economics in Gävle. Something like that. So, I don't really know, it's not entirely clear, but I'm thinking I'll speak to the guidance counsellor, I'll at least apply and then we'll see if I get accepted.[...]
>
> Anna: How long, how many years is the programme?
>
> Jenny: It's three years, I think. So it's similar to upper-secondary school. [...]
>
> Anna: But why Gävle then?
>
> Jenny: Well, because it's so very close by. I mean, I guess it's the closest we have for distance education. And then I've been there for a study visit too, and I think the school in itself seems good. There's a lot of people who have like, said good things.[...]
>
> Anna: But you'd thought about Linköping, you said?
>
> Jenny: Yeah, exactly. That was the business administration and economics programme, that was also three or four years. But then I'd have to move and I have my boyfriend who I live with here, so I don't really feel that I want to drag him with me. I don't want to live separately, yeah, so, I'll stay here.

The University of Gävle is a university college that Jenny is aware of and familiar with. One of her priorities is to stay in Söderhamn with her boyfriend and family and therefore the proximity of Gävle makes it a good option. Her study visit to Gävle probably enhances the feeling of familiarity. One paradox in Jenny's reasoning about studying close to Söderhamn is that she is interested in a distance education; it is therefore irrelevant where the higher education institution is located since she will not be on campus. Regardless, she would prefer her studies to be based geographically close to home.

Jenny says that she wants to begin studying immediately after graduation:

> If I were to take a year out [take a gap year], it feels like I'm pausing life, I want to start my life. I want an education, I want to be able to work, I want to get up there, then when I'm 30, 40 – I want to have kids early – I want to be able to move in to a house. I want all of that early in life.

In the above sentences, the role and function of education – in Jenny's own life – becomes clear. Higher education is a path to employment, which in turn makes it possible to have a family. The studying in itself is not what Jenny looks forward to; however, it is a necessity in order to become stable enough to start a family:

> But still, you're fed up of school, so, I'm a bit hesitant. The best thing would be if I got in now straight away, so that I can finish it, so that I get it done. So I don't forget how to study, you know, that I still have it in me. [...] I have always wanted to have kids early. And I feel that, yeah well now I've met my boyfriend and… No, but it just feels right, if you know what I mean. So I would like to have, well I could… I do want an education, I want to be able to have a job, so I don't just want to force a

> child into the world like that, but I do want children early. That I do. So like, within one or two years I'd definitely be open to having my first kid.

Throughout the conversation with Jenny, she goes back and forth, sometimes certain about continuing studies while at other times sure she needs a break from school. Regardless, her certainness about wanting to have children is consistent throughout our exchange – becoming a mother is what she longs for. Higher education would allow her to combine having a family with a job that is interesting and pays well. Without higher education, the prospects of combining these two aspects are poor, especially since she wants to live in Söderhamn:

> I feel, the best, if I were to only invest in my career, to not think of this with family and everything like that, then I'd definitely move away from here. Move to some bigger city, to Gävle, or Uppsala, or Stockholm, even. Only because there are so many opportunities career-wise there. But if you get to choose, like, between career and family, then I'd choose family.

She sees two potential paths forward, which are in conflict with one another. One that would mean higher studies and a 'career'. She labels this the 'best' option several times. Nonetheless, she is imprecise in why she wants to study and where higher studies in economics would lead her. The other path, which Jenny perceives as incompatible with the first one, is to have children soon after finishing school. When she speaks about having a family there is a preciseness that is missing when she speaks of higher studies. She can imagine and visualise what having children would be like, in a way that she cannot when it comes to education and work.

Jenny is in the middle of two conflicting norms – on the one hand a practice within her immediate and extended family of having children at a young age, and on the other hand a norm within wider society of pursuing higher education and a career. She faces a familiar female dilemma: choosing between, or balancing, professional ambitions and raising children. Many women wait longer to have their first child – in Söderhamn, the average age is 29.[492] Being torn between these two roles, motherhood and career ambitions, has been found in previous investigations on young women in similar places in Sweden.[493]

Jenny's urge to become a mother, have a family, and a home, is a reflection of what young women in the context that she is embedded within have historically striven for, and been limited to. Setting aside the limitations that these outlooks entailed for women as a collective, we can focus on what this actually means and represents in Jenny's life. In an ethnographic study from the early 1980s, Annette Rosengren describes the daily lives of families, and the female and male spheres in a small Swedish town.[494] In many ways, the place that she studies resembles Söderhamn, and how life was lived there, 40 years ago. Her findings are very similar

[492] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Föräldrars ålder i Sverige 2023*.
[493] Gunnarsson (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv", 116; Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 144–145.
[494] Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus*, 39.

to Jenny's aspirations. The women placed the monotony of working life in contrast to the freedom they experienced in their own homes, where they were in charge.[495] Children were central to the women's lives, and in contrast to the men, their identity was built upon taking care of the home and children.[496] Becoming a mother would connect Jenny to her own mother, who had her first child at a young age: 'Everyone in my family started really early. I think the youngest was 17 and the oldest was 20 with their first child. So I've always wanted to have kids early'.

What Rosengren found is echoed in Helen Brembeck's interview study from the late 1980s, where becoming a mother was long awaited, and the transition into motherhood unproblematic for working-class women.[497] Brembeck notes that the women's 'early dreams about work appear increasingly to be pipe dreams that have been nourished by television series and girls' books, rather than through lived reality.'[498] Motherhood appears as natural, something that women have always done.[499] Although Jenny does not make the comparison herself, the natural progression into motherhood that Rosenberg and Brembeck note is very different to the idea and world of higher education and salaried work. However, in contrast to the studies discussed above, Jenny cannot be positioned as working-class, at least not decisively. Although her father works in manual labour, her mother has a higher education degree and the family has considerable economic resources within the social space of Söderhamn. Again, we see how working-class dispositions are prevalent, even among those who do not come from a working-class background.

During the interview, I get the sense that Jenny might prioritise children over education if the societal norms surrounding education and work were different. Children and a family is what she wants, and she would be able organise her life, studies and work around that. However, it seems necessary for her to mention higher education and a career, to show an awareness of what she 'ought' to do.

Jenny and her partner live together, he has a stable job, and her family lives in the same town. Structurally, there is nothing standing in the way of her having children – the obstacles are norms related to education and working life that are perhaps especially strong for young women in this environment, since they pursue tertiary education to a higher degree than men do. What we see clearly throughout the interview with Jenny, is how the norm of pursuing higher education can be in conflict with a norm of reaching adulthood, in Jenny's case, embodied by the idea of becoming a mother. She reasons about a potential entry into higher education from a position where she experiences the cross-pressure of these conflicting norms. There are, of course, ways of combining children and studies, both Jenny's mother and her older sibling have managed to do so. Distance education, especially, can offer a flexibility that makes it possible to combine these two paths.

[495] Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus*, 68–69.
[496] Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus*, 86–87.
[497] Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*, 30.
[498] Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*, 30 [My translation].
[499] Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*, 31.

The higher education norm unchallenged

The last section of this chapter analyses the interviews with Zoey and Max. They both attend a higher education preparatory programme, Zoey chose the social sciences programme and Max chose the natural sciences programme. While she has already applied for tertiary education, he is in the first year of his upper-secondary school education. Both interviewees have parents who immigrated to Sweden and ended up in Söderhamn; compared to the other interviewees in this chapter, Zoey and Max's families are newcomers to this social context.

Zoey's parents do not have experiences of higher education and as opposed to Marcus' parents (who we met earlier in this chapter), although they own and manage a private company, they have to work long hours to afford renting a flat in central Söderhamn. Here we see that a lack of higher education can mean being restricted to a part of the labour market that does not yield large economic returns and where one has little control over one's time. For Zoey, higher education means access to stable employment where she can control her own time to a higher degree than her parents do.

Max and his family occupy a different position, compared to Zoey and her family. Max's parents have experiences of higher education; furthermore, there are others within the extended family who have long educational trajectories. Max is an example here of one of few young adults in the sample who aims for a higher education programme with high admissions requirements at a top-ranked university in Sweden. Moreover, he is the only interviewee whose perception and navigation of higher education can be interpreted as part of a collective practice within his family. As opposed to most other young adults, he can discuss and receive help and guidance regarding school and educational decisions.

In contrast to the other perceptions of higher education throughout this chapter, Max does not only focus on the outcome of tertiary education or what higher education represents. This perception of higher education is unusual among the young adults in Söderhamn. Thus, he is an outlier within the context of this study, but his reasoning resembles research on how education is perceived and navigated within the urban upper-middle class.[500]

Both Zoey and Max have older siblings with experiences of higher education, who, to varying extents, help them navigate higher education. Zoey and Max aim for different programmes and institutions, and although their families have immigrated, their positions differ. What is consistent in their respective reasoning is the importance and value of an education, which has been emphasised by their parents and siblings. Unlike previous interviewees in this chapter, Zoey and Max are less concerned with reaching adulthood, and their perceptions of the future align with the norm of pursuing higher education.

An important aspect that unites these two young adults, and separates them from others in this chapter, is that they do not have longstanding ties to the local

[500] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 57–95; Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*, 217–222.

community. Their parents are from other parts of the world, and as such, do not have the historical connection to Söderhamn that many of the other young adults do.[501] Their reasoning about a potential entry into higher education is less coloured by opposing social norms that have existed historically in the context studied here.

A prominent feature of Zoey's perception of higher education is that it gives her a valid reason to leave Söderhamn – something that has been noted in prior research on rural girls.[502] For young adults who do not see a future in Söderhamn, higher education can be a reliable way to move somewhere else. For Max, the idea of higher education is less rooted in wanting to leave; he has a positive feeling about his hometown. However, from a young age he has known that leaving Söderhamn is necessary in order to pursue higher studies, and as such, part of his future trajectory. Although Zoey and Max relate to Söderhamn in different manners, they are less conflicted about the prospect of leaving than many of the interviewees who have longstanding and deeper roots in this local community.

Zoey

Zoey lives in a flat in central Söderhamn together with her parents and a younger sibling. Her parents migrated to Sweden together from abroad, but their children were born in Söderhamn. The extended family also lives in Söderhamn and appears to be a tight-knit family. Her mother and father own and manage a private company in Söderhamn and according to Zoey, they work from seven in the morning, until ten at night. Due to her parents' unrelenting workload, Zoey says she has grown up 'without parents'. Like several other young women in the sample, Zoey wants to have children, and she wants a job that allows her to spend time with those children. For Zoey, that type of occupation requires higher education. More importantly, she perceives higher education as a ticket out of Söderhamn. Zoey is 19 years old and she has just graduated from the social sciences programme:

> I passed all my subjects too. Maybe not the way I had expected. I had slightly higher expectations. But… I'm, like, I'm still happy I made it. I prefer that, than to leave school without grades. So I'm still happy. Yeah.

From what she tells me, Zoey chose the social sciences programme through a method of exclusion. She had 'no clue' where to apply, but knew she did not want to study a vocational programme. She also did not want to study natural sciences or economics, and she mentions several times how she struggles with mathematics – in that sense, social sciences was a good, 'broad' option. In applying for upper-secondary school, she wanted to study in a different town than Söderhamn:

> Zoey: I applied for social sciences in three different towns. Söderhamn, Bollnäs, and Gävle. [...] In Gävle and Bollnäs, like, I didn't really want to go there, I got accepted

[501] Cf. the description of old and new families in Elias & Scotson (2010[1965]), *Etablerade och outsiders*, 213.
[502] Rönnlund, Maria & Rosvall, Per-Åke (2019), 'Reproduction of Social Relations in Rural Schools and Communities', 105.

> into [the programme] in Bollnäs but I didn't want, I was more like Gävle, because I thought: I want to get away from this town. But I applied for Vasa [Vasaskolan, Gävle] and apparently it wasn't that easy to get in there. I didn't get in.
>
> Anna: Which one was your first choice out of these?
>
> Zoey: My first choice was Gävle. Bollnäs and then Söderhamn.

Her main priority in applying for upper-secondary school was geographical.[503] However, since she was not aware of the admissions requirements, she was not accepted to Vasaskolan in Gävle and stayed in Söderhamn. The partial information with which she made the decision on where to apply for upper-secondary school is a recurring aspect of how young adults navigate educational decisions and it shares similarities with findings in previous research on how working-class and poor families approach these types of decisions.[504]

Throughout the interview, Zoey speaks at length about her reasons for wanting to leave Söderhamn; her dislike of Söderhamn is connected to her self-identification as an immigrant. She describes Söderhamn as a divided town – there is a 'nice' part of town, with 'nice' people, but that is not where she is from. The division seems to be socioeconomic – her family lives in a flat in the centre of town. In contrast to some cities, the centre of Söderhamn carries connotations of social issues, perhaps because a lot of the municipal housing is located there and the 'nice' part of town is dominated by freestanding houses. Moreover, it is a division between those who are considered 'Swedes' and those with roots in other countries. Zoey's unease in Söderhamn stems from social relations and networks of 'non-Swedes', and the social control and honour system she experiences because of it:

> If I'm in town with like tight clothes on, which I tend to have [laughs] I don't really care. But as soon as you go into town or you look good or a bit of skin is showing or like, you know? Then all of a sudden, you're something bad, like a whore or something. And that's how I grew up. And it's still like that. [...] I don't know why, but there's so much of that and Söderhamn has a lot of those types, bullshitters. [...] I hear things about myself every day. Sometimes I come home and someone calls me and is like "Where have you been? What have you been up to?" We can't even be seen in this town, us girls, us immigrant girls [blattetjejer[505]] [...] If we walk through town, *walk* like just normal walking, "Yeah, but can you see, she's moving her bum". I mean, it's culture, a lot of it's about honour too, especially me and my immigrant friends [blattevänner], like, there's a lot of that. [...] It's enough to just be in town and you can feel everyone's eyes on you, like *all* of these guys [grabbar]. I don't feel that with Swedish guys. I'm a lot more comfortable with Swedish, like, guys, I can walk past them naked, they don't even look. No but seriously, our immigrant guys [blattegrabbar], they're like animals, they're never satisfied…

[503] Cf. Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 78–79.
[504] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291–294.
[505] *Blatte* is a derogatory term/slur used predominantly to refer to immigrants from MENA. Similar to the English n-word it is being reclaimed and used to establish a sense of community.

Zoey experiences boundaries between Swedes and those who have roots outside of Sweden.[506] This ethnic distinction is also socioeconomic, and she speaks fondly of hanging out on the estate[507] with neighbours with whom she shares both an economic and an immigrant background. Although she is critical of the culture described in the quote above, she has not abandoned her self-identification as an 'immigrant girl'. She seems to experience an ambivalence within herself, because as much as she despises the social control[508] of her 'own' group, she does not see herself as a 'Swede':

> I'm a second generation immigrant, I'm as much a Swede as anyone [laughs]. I was born and raised in this town. But I'm still not Swedish. [...] We all make choices, I could hang out with just Swedes, I have Swedish friends whom I really love, that I could give anything for, like family, but I… [...] Like I said, we have built a we against them long ago. I don't have any issues with Swedes, like I said, I have, both my parents have Swedish friends that are here [in our home] a lot, I have Swedish friends who also come here all the time, my two best friends are Swedes, like 100% Swedish and I get along with them great and their parents, we have lots of fun. But… the problem is that it comes from both sides, both from our side and the Swedish side, there's the wrong idea about each other.

Zoey's reasoning in the two quotes above is an example of what research has found to be common among young adults with some type of foreign background in Sweden; ethnic identification is often a combination of being Swedish and the ethnic identity of the parents.[509] Young adults with a foreign background are 'to a high degree able to create an integrated perception of themselves as being *both* Swedish *and* as belonging to another group'.[510]

Throughout the interview, Zoey describes several experiences of the antagonism between Swedes and non-Swedes. She mostly focuses on how school and teachers have treated her differently from her Swedish classmates. Her experience is that the education system has different rules depending on whether it perceives you as ethnically Swedish or not.[511] An interpretation of what she says is that being 'Swedish' in this context is not only about being of Swedish descent, but also a way to describe those who adapt and conform to the discipline of the education system. The malleability of ethnic identification has been described in a similar manner in Stéphane Beaud's study of an Algerian family in France, where one of the sisters is accused of 'having been 'bleached,' i.e., gone over to the side of

[506] Cf. Forsberg, S. (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice', 710.
[507] In Swedish: gården.
[508] Cf. descriptions of gossip and limited freedom in Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 131.
[509] Jonsson, Jan O., Mood, Carina, & Treuter, Georg (2022), *Integration bland unga: en mångkulturell generation växer upp*, 154–162.
[510] Jonsson, Mood, & Treuter (2022), *Integration bland unga: en mångkulturell generation växer upp*, 162 [Emphasis in original].
[511] Cf. Forsberg, S. (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice', 711–713.

'the French'.[512] This is also noticeable in previous research on Swedish youth. In Fanny Ambjörnsson's study of young women in upper-secondary school, the perception of 'Swedishness' is constructed in contrast to the 1990s subculture and concept of 'kickers' that share many similarities with 'chavs' in a British context.[513] Immigrants who did not dress, act, speak, or behave like 'kickers' were not perceived as immigrants.[514] Zoey reasons in a similar manner, regardless of origin, you can decide to become more or less 'Swedish'.

> Zoey: When we were in, like, sixth grade there was like two-three like "Swedes" in our class, you know like completely Swedish [helsvensk]. [...] That wasn't like a class, it was like a farm [laughs]. No, but we got along, it was fun, like, the teacher couldn't put up with us sometimes, so he would just walk out sometimes. But in the seventh, eighth, ninth grade, then it was more like, there's two of us and 25 of them.
>
> Anna: There were a lot more, like, ethnic Swedes?
>
> Zoey: Ethnic Swedes, exactly. And we were still a bit, not rowdy, but we made ourselves heard. So that bothered the teachers a bit.
>
> Anna: They were bothered by you?
>
> Zoey: Yeah. I mean, I understand them. But it's not like we got the same like, how do I put it? The same… help as the others got. I mean even though we made more noise, if we needed something, we were always like, it was impossible to get a higher grade than an E, we always got E, the entire group. [...] I've actually felt it like my whole, my whole school life, from when I began to understand things until now. [...] I can be on the same level as a Swedish girl and actually a little bit higher, but the help that she gets, I mean. If I ask for that help, I still wouldn't receive that help. [...] There were so many of us who felt the same way. And that – whether you want it to or not – creates an *us against them*. [...] It creates jealousy. You think, you get jealous of the others. And at the same time, you're angry with the teachers.

At this point in the interview, Zoey describes the unfair situation she experienced in school as the rules of the outside world interfering with school – a place that she seems to think should be governed by other, more fair rules. She gives examples of teachers not thinking she could get high grades, offering her minimal help compared to other 'Swedish' students, telling her not to worry about her low grades, and how she did not want to ask for help because it would label her as stupid. What she describes is mirrored in prior research on working-class students' experiences of unfairness and unequal treatment in school.[515]

Zoey and her parents' solution to the lack of support she experienced from the school was to pay for a private tutor. The tutor had previously worked as a teacher and helped Zoey to pass all subjects. Initially, she had hoped for higher grades, but throughout school, she has adjusted those expectations. Hiring a private tutor, as

[512] Beaud, Stéphane (2014), 'The Three Sisters and the Sociologist', 13.
[513] Ambjörnsson (2010), *I en klass för sig*, chap. 7; le Grand, Elias (2010), *Class, Place and Identity in a Satellite Town*, 2–4; Jones, Owen (2011), *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*.
[514] Ambjörnsson (2010), *I en klass för sig*, 248–249.
[515] Reay (2023), *Miseducation*, 146–147.

Zoey and her parents did, can be interpreted in different ways. It may indicate a lack of trust in the education system and its ability to disseminate knowledge. Circumventing the school is a behaviour that could be a sign of the parents' strong position in relation to the school, as they do not think the school is good enough. Alternatively, it is a way of avoiding putting pressure on the school and its teachers to help Zoey achieve better results. Given the entirety of what Zoey divulges in her interview, my interpretation is that the parents' position in relation to the school is weak and that they feel unable to pressure the school. The solution instead becomes to use financial resources to help their daughter, a sign that they perceive education as important and valuable.

Zoey is also an example of how the education system is used for purposes other than the purely educational or occupational – in her case, as a way to escape Söderhamn and settle down somewhere else. In the process of making decisions about higher education, Zoey is still driven by a wish to leave Söderhamn. She has applied to continue onto higher education, but at the time of the interview she does not know if she will be accepted or not:

> Like, I don't know what will happen next. I've applied to study legal science. And I've applied for upper-secondary school teacher training. But I don't know… I'm unsure about both and I don't know what, if I'll like it and how it'll pan out and… I want to get away immediately, I mean I want to study straight away, even though I've had enough of school. But it feels like it's the only way, right now the only way for me to leave this town. And I'm really excited about that. Or I don't want to be left here. So I guess I'll have to make do, take school as a way out.

Zoey is aware of the alternative of legal science since her older sibling has studied the subject at Luleå University of Technology. When I ask her *where* she has applied, she says 'Anywhere, wherever I can get in. I've applied for them all'. Taking me through the higher education institutions she has applied for, the impression that leaving Söderhamn is her motivation is strengthened:

> Zoey: Örebro would be great. Gävle too, actually, it's not too bad. Luleå, I'd rather not, that's my last choice. But actually, it doesn't matter, better that than nothing. What else do I have? I don't know where else. I know that for the teacher programme, both were in Stockholm. Yeah… I'm not really sure, but I know I applied for everything that was possible to apply for.
>
> Anna: What, but would you like to study straight away, this autumn?
>
> Zoey: Yes. Because I want to get away from here. Yeah, I don't want to be here. So my thinking is this, the sooner I start, the sooner it ends. I don't know. [...] I don't want to drag it out, I just want to be done. [...]
>
> Anna: Say you'd get into anywhere, out of the places where you applied. Where and what would you prefer?
>
> Zoey: Upper-secondary schoolteacher. In… like… I don't know, maybe Stockholm or… I don't know, maybe Örebro or something [laughs] Not too close to Söderhamn.

> Anna: No. Right. But you'd prefer teacher?
>
> Zoey: Mm. You know, my parents, they've always said "It doesn't matter what you study, as long as you study".

Zoey thinks her parents might prefer if she studied legal science, she thinks they think she would earn better, compared to the salary of a teacher. The quotation above also shows a typical reasoning about the entry into higher education; an immediate start in the autumn after upper-secondary school is preferable, since higher education is often perceived as something to 'get done' on the way towards employment and adulthood. Furthermore, since Zoey is motivated by the mobility involved through higher education, it is logical that she wants to begin her studies straight away.

Zoey's parents have immigrated to Sweden and ended up in Söderhamn, and although they are employed and manage their own private company, the family is not affluent. The parents' very long working hours have not generated the economic wealth that Marcus' parents have accumulated, nor do they have the same control over their own time. While both of Zoey's grandfathers had studied in the country where her parents were born, her mother and father did not pursue higher education. Although the parents lack experiences of higher education, Zoey's sibling has pursued higher education and she is intent on following in that path. Despite having 'had enough of school' and only just managing to pass all her upper-secondary school subjects, Zoey is set on pursuing tertiary education. Previous research in Sweden shows that young adults from foreign backgrounds have higher educational aspirations than those without, despite having lower grades and test scores.[516] These aspirations are also reflected in higher participation rates in tertiary education for young adults with foreign backgrounds, compared to 'ethnically Swedish' young adults.[517] Her parents' emphasis on the importance of further education – regardless of what it is she chooses to study – and their willingness to pay for a private tutor indicates that they perceive higher education as important for their children, perhaps because of their own lack of the same.

The interview with Zoey shows interesting patterns regarding how higher education is perceived in Söderhamn. She approaches the application process by casting a wide net, since her motivation is to move away from Söderhamn. Being unmotivated and tired of school is therefore not a hindrance to continuing her pathway through the education system, since it appears mostly to be a ticket out of Söderhamn.

Max

At 16, Max is slightly younger than the previous interviewees. Max is one of five interviewees in the sample attending the natural sciences programme and despite being in the first year of upper-secondary school, he is actively reasoning about

[516] Jonsson, Mood, & Treuter (2022), *Integration bland unga*, 81–82.
[517] Jonsson, Mood, & Treuter (2022), *Integration bland unga*, 90–91.

higher education decisions that are few years away, which is why he has been included here. Max is one of three interviewees wanting to pursue a higher education programme with high admissions requirements. Adding that he would study almost anywhere, he says that he would prefer to study medicine at the Karolinska Institutet (KI) in Stockholm.[518]

Max wants to become a physician, preferably a surgeon and therefore, he chose the upper-secondary natural sciences programme. He mentions the importance of structure and planning in relation to his studies, something he has learnt from his older sibling. He needs top grades to get in to medical school, which requires studies and the aforementioned structure – which he previously lacked:

> Anna: How were you doing in school then? Or how *are* you doing?
>
> Max: Yeah, it's going well now, lately, now that I've got a structure, now that I know what I want to be and that, when I know what I have to do, then it's been good. But then before, when I didn't really know what I was doing, it was much worse, because it was mostly that I handed everything in at the last minute and stuff. But lately it's been going great!
>
> Anna: Have you had any help with that structure or is it just something that you've come up with yourself, kind of?
>
> Max: No, I've really gotten a lot of help from my sibling.

The sibling, nine years Max's senior, is studying to become a physician abroad, in their mother's county of origin, so both siblings speak the language. Max wants to follow his sibling's example, but aims to attend medical school in Sweden, something that his sibling supports and encourages. It seems like Max does not want to repeat the 'mistakes' of his sibling, who realised too late that you need straight As in all subjects to get accepted into medical school:

> [My sibling] didn't get an A in everything, which you need. And that's why they are not in Sweden. So they know I want the same and they are really happy about that, and is always pushing me to get good grades in the first year [of upper-secondary school].

The dynamic between the older sibling and Max is significant – the sibling is guiding and helping him navigate the education system and provides substantial help with Max's studies. The pattern is recognisable in research on migrant families, where older siblings can 'forge an upward educational path in the family',[519] provide an example for younger siblings, and supervise schoolwork and help with important educational decisions.[520] Furthermore, the sibling motivates Max by being an example of what to avoid, the consequences of not studying enough become very concrete since the sibling was unable to study medicine in

[518] The programme has the highest admission scores in Sweden. The Times Higher Education ranks Karolinska Institute as no. 41 in the world and the Shanghai ranking puts it at number one in Sweden.
[519] Cf. Beaud (2014), 'The Three Sisters and the Sociologist', 5.
[520] Beaud (2014), 'The Three Sisters and the Sociologist', 5–6.

Sweden. Having older siblings who have attended university is a significant asset that helps young adults navigate the higher education system, we previously saw this in how Gabriel and Zoey reasoned about their educational decisions.

Max's parents and extended family are highly educated, which is reflected in his view on education and what he plans to work with. His parents have always wanted him to have 'an education that will last' and for him to work with something that is 'sustainable'. He says ambition is important, as is being willing to do what it takes, and not to be lazy, in order to have a good future and life. Aside from his sibling's trajectory, one way of understanding Max's aspirations is through his family's background. His parents emigrated from different countries, both studied at university there and met in Sweden.

The family travels a lot, they see Max's maternal grandparents 'at least four times a year' and apart from that, his parents 'think it is important to discover the world and know what's going on around the world and what it looks like'. The family lives in a house in Söderhamn and own an overnight apartment in the larger town where Max's mother works as a civil servant. The parents have educational assets; however, they have perhaps not been fully able to convert these assets into their Swedish equivalent – especially Max's father, who owns a restaurant in a different part of Sweden, despite having a higher education degree from his home country. The children are in a position to use the education system in a way that the parents have not been able to, and they are encouraged to do so.

The family's foreign background, extensive travel, and the sibling's studies abroad, contribute to how Max views the prospect of moving after graduation. He is rooted in Söderhamn – he has spent his whole childhood in the same house – but knows that he will have to move eventually: 'It feels sad to leave everyone here, but at the same time it's a step that I know I have to take.' Max's reasoning here is similar to results from previous research on slightly younger adolescents in two Swedish small towns – mobility is perceived as something necessary, but the close social relationships within their hometown makes moving away ambiguous.[521]

At the end of the interview, I ask him whether there is anyone his age that he thinks will do really well in the future, and he replies:

> I remember when I was in sixth grade, I was really good friends with a boy, his name was Gustav. And I was really, I don't know, *amazed*, because he knew everything! He knew everything and he moved to Stockholm. I'm sure that things are going really well [for him]. [...] And his parents were professors. I'm certain things are going really well for him. But that I've known, no… It'll be fine, I know it'll work out for them but there won't be anything groundbreaking.

The above quote illustrates how Max connects educational and occupational success with leaving Söderhamn. Max sees a geographical move from Söderhamn

[521] Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"'.

as a movement in social space: those with ambitions, who 'want to take a step forward', leave the place where he was born.[522]

Although both Max and Zoey want to leave their hometown, there is a contrast in how they reason about this expected move. While Zoey is motivated to pursue higher education partly because it gives her a reason to leave, Max seems more ambivalent about what he is leaving behind. Although it is clear that staying in Söderhamn is not an option, he seems to perceive the move as a sacrifice that he is willing and prepared to make, rather than a welcome escape from his hometown.

Discussion and conclusion

This chapter analysed the perception of higher education in the education-scarce context studied here and how young adults navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education. There are many ways of relating to higher education and this chapter has shown how different positons and circumstances create specific ways of perceiving the future in general, and tertiary education in particular. This concluding section analyses the overall conclusions that can be drawn from this chapter, and the commonalities and differences in how young adults who were interviewed perceive higher education.

Given the analysis provided throughout this chapter, of young adults who are positioned differently within the social space of Söderhamn and relative the education system, there is grounds to speak of the existence of a social norm of pursuing higher education. When the young adults reason about their future, higher education is present as an alternative, and often as the 'best' option, or as something that they 'ought' to do. Normative attitudes that are indicative of the existence of a social norm seem to exist in Söderhamn today, despite the relatively low level of education in the general population. What we see throughout this chapter is how young adults manage and negotiate this social norm in relation to what they aim for, or dream of doing in the future.

The entire sample of interviewed young adults contains very few young adults who are motivated by the university studies in and of themselves, Max is one of three who come close to this 'ideal type'. So, how can we explain why so many of these young adults still want and plan to pursue higher education? At the root of why young adults in this context express that they want to pursue higher education is their strive towards economic independence and adulthood.[523] Given the demands of the labour market, they incorporate higher education into their perception of what is required to achieve that independence. This gives rise to an instrumental view of higher education that is consistent among all of the young adults who were interviewed – even those, like Max, who are interested in a 'prestigious' higher

[522] Cf. Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 116; Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 131.
[523] Bynner, John et al. (2002), *Young People's Changing Routes to Independence*.

education programme, focus on the profession they want to work within, rather than education as a 'fundamental part of life'.[524] It is the *outcome* of higher education that they value, primarily a good job,[525] which in turn symbolises the aforementioned state of adulthood.

The increased need for higher education has contributed to a prolonged period of adolescence in Western societies[526] and although these interviewees want to pursue higher education, they do not want to prolong the phase of young adulthood. The historic social practice of entering employment after finishing compulsory or upper-secondary school is not as easily achievable as it previously was within industrial communities, at least for young men.[527] When a short *transition* to independence, in this case of going from school straight into employment, is less common and likely than it previously was, young people are pressured to 'pursue the alternative pathway of staying in education as the best route to a job'.[528] A way to understand their perception of higher education is that they view it as a necessary step towards becoming an adult – someone who has a job, an income, owns a home and a car, and has children. This connection, between adulthood and labour market participation, is not unique to Söderhamn, it can be found in prior research and is a part of how adulthood is defined.[529] However, it offers an explanation for the rush that interviewees feel to enter into higher education, and the generally described feeling of wanting to 'get it over with'. The drive to become an adult permeates the interviews with young adults and is also reflected in their parents' views on upbringing and educational choices, which the following chapter explores further.

What is also noticeable throughout this chapter is how working-class practices and norms, connected to the history of Söderhamn, live on in how higher education is perceived and reasoned about. Despite the various positions that the interviewees in this chapter occupy, there is a considerable homogeneity in how higher education is perceived. Young adults who have two parents who have attended university, like Gabriel, perceive tertiary education in a similar manner to those whose parents have not attended university, like Marcus, do. Different volumes and compositions of capital do not seem to create any fundamentally different perceptions of higher education within this social context. A consistent disposition to higher education among the young adults, is the idea of a short transition from adolescence to adulthood, which earlier studies show is more common within the working-class, compared to the middle-class. Typically and historically, working-class families provide economic support for a shorter time than middle-class families do, indicating a short transition from education to employment.[530]

[524] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 77.
[525] Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place. Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 72.
[526] Kåks (2007), *Mellan erfarenhet och förväntan*, 33–34.
[527] McDowell (2000), 'Learning to Serve?', 391.
[528] Bynner et al. (2002), *Young People's Changing Routes to Independence*, 25.
[529] Kåks (2007), *Mellan erfarenhet och förväntan*, 32–33.
[530] Jones (2002), *The Youth Divide: Diverging Paths to Adulthood*, 3.

What this chapter also suggests is that newcomers to this former industrial community are less affected by the historic social norms that influence interviewees whose families have lived in Söderhamn for generations. Although the perception of higher education that Zoey and Max are examples of is also focused on subsequent employment, their view of higher education is less in competition with other social norms, most notably, the norm of a short transition to adulthood. Their parents have different amounts of educational capital, leading them to consider different higher education programmes. However, both sets of parents have instilled in their children the idea that education, in and of itself, is important. This perception of higher education is not in competition with ideals of quickly becoming an adult or finding employment, which can be seen among the vast majority of the interviewed young adults. Part of this perception of education is likely linked to their families' experiences as migrants to Sweden, and the importance of education in establishing oneself in a new country.[531] However, in relation to the sample of young adults as a whole, it is more viable to interpret this result as a question of being 'established' or an 'outsider' to this local context.[532] Max and Zoey, as opposed to the other interviewees in this chapter, are outsiders, less affected by historic social norms and practices. As outsiders, or newcomers, they are also less ambiguous about leaving Söderhamn than those with longstanding connections to the area are.

Thus, this chapter lays bare the existence of normative attitudes towards higher education that are rooted in a normative principle – that higher education is a good option for becoming employable and financially stable as an adult. This is a social norm that cuts across gender and social class within this social space, and affects young adults' dispositions to higher education. Although pursuing higher education is a relatively new social practice in this milieu, the value of work and employment is not. Having work and being economically independent is a value that has historical roots within this type of community and can be analysed as an upholding of '*skötsamhet*', or conscientiousness. Given how the local labour market has changed since the 1970s, but also as recently as since the 2000s, higher education is now incorporated into what young adults perceive as necessary for finding work and thereby upholding the value and social norm of conscientiousness.

However, higher education is not the only way of achieving conscientiousness; the social norm of higher education is negotiated in relation to other competing norms and practices. Having children is a gendered social norm that still exists for young women within this social space. That does not mean that all young women consider having children at a young age, but we can clearly see how it is seen as an important part of life and something that is actualised at an early age, compared to other social contexts.[533] The existence of a higher education norm becomes even

[531] See for example: Urban, Susanne (2012), 'University Education as a Compensation Strategy Among Second-Generation Immigrants', 919–940; Forsberg, S. (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice'.
[532] Elias & Scotson (2010[1965]), *Etablerade och outsiders*.
[533] Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*, 78–80; Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 78.

clearer when we see how some young women struggle to manage competing social norms. On the one hand, they feel pressure to pursue higher education and work, and on the other, to follow a traditional social norm of becoming a mother, which is often much more similar to what their mothers and grandmothers have done.[534] Within this social context, the young men are less exposed to the cross-pressure of social norms that are difficult to combine. In contrast to young women, young men's wish to find employment is similar to what men in industrial communities have done historically; it requires a detour through higher education, but the objective is similar to what men in this context have strived towards previously – employment and economic independence.

[534] Cf. 30–33, 85; Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus;* Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*.

CHAPTER 7

Parents in an education-scarce context

The previous chapter focused on the young adults' perception of higher education and how this perception is shaped by their respective social backgrounds. It touched upon the parents' role in the young adults' schooling and educational choices. This chapter delves deeper into an analysis of the role that parents play in the young adults' views of higher education and thus provides a basis for answering the thesis' second research question: *What is the relation between parents' experiences of education and young adults' perception of higher education?*

With the occupational and educational structure that was presented in Chapter 5 as a background, this chapter therefore presents an analysis of the parents' educational trajectories. It continues by analysing the educational decisions that the young adults have already made – the choice of a compulsory school and an upper-secondary school programme – from the point of view of the interviewed parents. The chapter concludes with a reasoning about the value that both parents and young adults place on independence and its influence over the young adults' navigation of education.

Parents' educational trajectories

The correlation between parents' levels of education and children's educational attainment is one of the most evidenced in the sociology of education.[535] Previous research, both in Sweden and beyond, shows that young people's educational decisions are linked to their parents' social class.[536] Within the Swedish education system, research shows that a pupil's choice of a vocational or higher education preparatory programme in upper-secondary school is more or less likely, depending

[535] Boudon, Raymond (1974), *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality: Changing Prospects in Western Society*; Bourdieu (1979), *The Inheritors*; SOU 1993:85, *Ursprung och utbildning*; Crompton, Rosemary (2008), *Class and Stratification*, 118.

[536] Jonsson, Jan O. & Erikson, Robert (2000), 'Understanding Educational Inequality: The Swedish Experience' 345–382; Reay et al. (2011), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 854–859; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 844–847.

on the parents' levels of education.[537] Furthermore, higher education attainment is more likely among children whose parents have attended university.[538]

Nevertheless, many of those entering into higher education today are the first in their family to do so, even if the recruitment continues to be skewed.[539] Many young adults in this study come from families without a higher education background. Yet, higher education is perceived as a possible and relevant part of the future for almost all of the interviewees, since it is viewed as a requirement for employment, as we saw in Chapter 6.

In this chapter, the perspective on the young adults' perception and navigation of higher education is widened by explicitly relating it to their social context, represented here by the parental generation. The context is referred to as education-scarce throughout the thesis and this chapter describes and analyses what this actually means empirically. Research has pointed to the importance of parents' occupations and positions to how young adults visualise and understand work, and how they envisage the future.[540] The parents' perceptions and their reasoning about their own and their children's educational trajectories allows for an in-depth understanding of how the context surrounding young adults in Söderhamn shapes their view of higher education.

The interview sample includes 10 parents, between the ages of 45 and 57.[541] Six of these parents have attended university, which means that over half of the interviewed parents have experiences from the Swedish higher education system. Thus, the sample is more familiar with higher education than a random sample of adults in Söderhamn would be. Most of the young adults in the sample attend higher education preparatory programmes, which probably contributes to the sample of parents having higher levels of education than the average in Söderhamn.[542]

The parents interviewed can be divided into groups, based on three different educational trajectories: those who pursued higher education after upper-secondary school; those who pursued higher education as adults; and those who have worked since upper-secondary school. The parents in the sample are distributed between these groups and the analysis presented below is grouped in accordance to these three trajectories.

---

[537] Sandell (2007), *Utbildningssegregation och självsortering*, 40; Erikson, Robert & Rudolphi, Frida (2011), "Social snedrekrytering till teoretisk gymnasieutbildning"; Forsberg, H. (2015), *Kampen om eleverna*, 185–188, 245–248; Mellén, Johanna (2021), *Stability and Change*, chap. 6.

[538] See for example: Universitet och högskolerådet (2017), *Utbildning går i arv*; Universitetskanslersämbetet, *Higher Education. Level of Parental Education among University Entrants 2021/22 and New Doctoral Students 2020/21*.

[539] Universitet och högskolerådet (2017), *Utbildning går i arv*.

[540] Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place. Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 79–80.

[541] Although 12 parents have been interviewed, I only analyse excerpts from 10 of these interviews. This is due to the fact that one interview with a mother and a father was not possible to transcribe due to the poor quality of the recording. I therefore chose to not include this interview as part of the analysis in this chapter.

[542] A comprehensive discussion on the sample of interviewees and the sampling method can be found in Chapter 4.

Norm-breakers: encouraged to pursue higher education

The three parents who pursued higher education in connection to finishing upper-secondary school are women. Laura chose to study social work at a regional university college; Ulrika began studying chemistry but switched to preschool teacher training; and Irene studied biology. As opposed to how the young adults in Söderhamn today reason, the mothers who were interviewed seem to have been less concerned with their subsequent employability.[543] The step into higher education appears as bigger when the mothers speak about their decision to enter into higher education, if we compare it to how the young adults reason. Although these three mothers also decided to pursue higher education immediately after upper-secondary school, it was less usual than it is today and therefore the boundary between upper-secondary school and higher education appears to have been more distinct. The consequence thereof is that the mothers' decisions to enter higher studies was a choice made in contrast to what many others in Söderhamn decided to do after upper-secondary school.

Laura is the mother of a son who attends the natural sciences programme; she left Söderhamn after upper-secondary school to pursue studies in social work:

> Laura: I finished [upper-secondary school] in -88. [...]
>
> Anna: How come you chose [to study] then?
>
> Laura: Oh! [laughs] That gives me a bit of anxiety. I'm not sure to what extent it was a choice. I remember I had conversations with my guidance counsellor. [...] And then I applied and got into both [places I was considering]. And then I thought 'Well, I'll only get lost in Stockholm', so I better go to [smaller town] [laughs] So, that decided it.
>
> Anna: It was the place that…?
>
> Laura: Yes, that made the decision. [...] But the fact that I did social work, I can't, I can't really put my finger on [why]. [...]
>
> Anna: But when you had finished upper-secondary school, what, like, you said you were fed up of school, were you tired of studying, or…What made you not want to step foot in [university]?
>
> Laura: I don't remember. No. It could have been the boyfriend. Because I knew that [further studies] meant [leaving Söderhamn]. And, for that, I have to thank my parents, absolutely, because they urged me. I can't remember that they forced me or anything, more that they… encouraged me. They didn't have to say too much… [...]
>
> Anna: Can you recall, do you remember anything about what it was your parents did? To get you to, like, move in that direction?

[543] See for example: Rider (2009), 'The Future of the European University'; Boden, Rebecca & Nedeva, Maria (2010), 'Employing Discourse: Universities and Graduate 'Employability'', 37–54; Vesterberg, Viktor (2015), "Formandet av anställningsbara studenter: En reflektion kring karriärvägledning inom högre utbildning", 99–105.

> Laura: I need to think so I don't make stuff up. [...] I think they spoke to me about [the alternative being to work as a shop assistant in Söderhamn]. I have a memory of my mum saying "You won't be happy doing that". I can hear those exact words. And they were probably right about that. [...] I think there were three from my class in compulsory school who continued [to university], four. [...] One more social worker. One in economics. Me, the social worker. And one who works as a cardiologist.

Laura emphasised several important aspects when she recalls how she decided to pursue higher education. The location helped her decide where to study and it also seems that leaving Söderhamn was part of why she wanted to pursue higher studies. Her mother set the perceived opportunities in her hometown in relation to the opportunities she might gain from having a tertiary education, and the school's guidance counsellor further encouraged her to continue her educational trajectory into higher education. The importance of guidance, encouragement, and advice from a social network – parents, teachers, friends, and others – is an aspect of navigating higher education that I will return to throughout this chapter.

The second mother, Ulrika, has two daughters who have both chosen the technology programme in upper-secondary school. Ulrika attended the natural sciences programme, after encouragement from her grandmother:

> Ulrika: I took the natural sciences programme. Yes. It was my [maternal] grandmother's fault [laughs]. Which I'm very thankful for. But I wanted to attend the children and recreation programme [...] because I wanted to work with kids. But no, I was persuaded into taking the natural sciences programme, and that turned out well. And then I was a bit like, "Well… I might regret it if I don't try something a bit more advanced", so I went to Uppsala and studied chemistry. [...] My grandmother was very proud of the fact that, that I had completed upper-secondary school.
>
> Anna: You said that she encouraged you to choose natural sciences?
>
> Ulrika: Yes. Yes, that was my grandmother. I… I was going to take the child recreation. But I had such good grades and she was really, like… [...]
>
> Anna: Can you remember what she said?
>
> Ulrika: No… I can't remember, but I know that she, she was very much like, 'But could you at least try?' And it was this thing – finishing [upper-secondary] school. It was. So I get it, yes, later as an adult, you know, how and why she felt that way. Because it was really her that… I promised her that I'd try. And the guidance counsellor nagged of course. [...]
>
> Anna: So why did you start with Uppsala?
>
> Ulrika: Yeah, it's always been my dream. I've always wanted to study in Uppsala.
>
> Anna: Mhm, how come?
>
> Ulrika: Well, it's such a great student city. [...] But it was just something I had, like, if I'm going to uni, I'm going to uni in Uppsala. Because I wanted to go there because, it's meant to have such a great student life.
>
> Anna: Had you been there before?
>
> Ulrika: No. I hadn't. I had… an aunt, she lived there and we'd been to see them.

Pursuing higher studies at Uppsala University was important to Ulrika and the fact that she had been to Uppsala to visit her aunt likely helped steer her in that direction. Ulrika did not stay and finish her chemistry studies in Uppsala, after a few weeks she dropped out and found work. The next semester she moved to Gävle to study to become a preschool teacher, a programme that was not available at Uppsala University. When she realised that the programme she wanted to study was not offered at Uppsala University, she almost had a 'full breakdown' because she was so intent on spending her time as a student there.

Both Laura and Ulrika describe important aspects that shaped their educational decisions. The geographical place mattered to both of them – this is something that the third mother who continued directly into higher education, Irene, describes too. Irene studied at Lund University. Similar to how the young adults in the previous chapter reasoned about higher education, the location is relevant to the decisions these mothers made in the end. Although Ulrika finished her studies in Gävle, she had been intent on studying in Uppsala. It seems to be a consistent pattern over time, that coming from Söderhamn, an education-scarce context without a higher education institution, means that the town or city matters significantly when deciding where to apply for higher education. The mobility aspect is a significant part of the navigation of higher education, and knowing where it is you will settle down for a few years is an important factor. The significance of place in these types of decisions is noticeable in previous studies on similar small towns in Sweden; what to do in the future often includes an aspect of *where* this future will take place.[544]

A second important aspect of how these women made their decisions on higher education is the advice they were given by adults around them. Consulting guidance counsellors appears to have been common when the mothers were in upper-secondary school, just as the young adults consult guidance counsellors today. Furthermore, both mothers described significant moments where family members guided them in a certain direction. For Laura, her parents, especially her mother, seem to have been pivotal to her leaving Söderhamn to pursue tertiary education. In Ulrika's case, her grandmother urged her to attend the natural sciences programme and be the first in her family to complete upper-secondary school. In later sections of this chapter, we will also come to see that Laura and Ulrika have gotten involved in their children's educational decisions in a manner that is unusual among the parents who were interviewed. The mothers' experiences of family involvement in their educational choices seem to have made them more inclined to do the same with their children, compared to parents who do not share this experience. It is relevant to note that it was a mother and a grandmother who involved themselves in these decisions. There is a gendered aspect of the parental involvement into these matters – a pattern that is noticeable in earlier research on working-class dispositions to education.[545]

[544] Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 80.
[545] Reay (2023), *Miseducation*, 72.

In hindsight, both mothers express that these adults helped them make the 'right' decision. It may be that some of the young adults in the study also have these types of pivotal moments in relation to their educational decisions, and that with hindsight, such moments appear more clearly. However, from what the interviews with young adults show, it is unusual for parents or relatives today to get involved in the manner that Laura and Ulrika describe that their relatives had done. Although young adults whose parents have experiences of higher education are able to discuss and consult their parents to a certain degree, it is unusual for parents (or grandparents) to have explicit advice or opinions about the educational decisions that their children have made or are about to make.

Between norms: improving a labour market position

The second group of interviewed parents are those who have attended university, but have studied as adults, after they have had children of their own. The group is internally cohesive in the sense that these parents used higher education with the purpose of accessing a particular occupation, or sector of the labour market, with better working conditions and pay. It often means that they studied a vocational programme in upper-secondary school, worked in manual or low-skilled work, and then, through education, qualified for highly skilled or professional occupations.

> Anna: How long was it from when you finished upper-secondary school to when you began your [university] studies?
>
> Camilla: Well, you know, I had a few kids and that in between [laughs] [...] And I wanted to try and work at a few different places in between, before I felt sure about higher education and that. But what was it? Hard to tell, 20 years at least. I think. [...]
>
> Anna: But when you decided to study [...] was it… I'm thinking, why? Was it because you thought it seemed fun or was it because you wanted to move to a different part of the labour market, or what was your thought process?
>
> Camilla: No, I thought, I've tried working in a [service sector job], and that was fun for a while, but it wasn't really for me. I had tried jobs with staff responsibilities and I did find that interesting, but I had tried working in a shop, and I missed that contact with [clients] and I missed… helping people I think. [...] No, I wanted to be able to decide a bit more and I wanted to increase my salary, as well. And I wanted more options, [I could] choose between more workplaces. [...]
>
> Anna: Do you think, like… did you get what you were looking for? Did you get more opportunities?
>
> Camilla: Yes, I think so. [...] I'm glad I did it. I'm content.

Camilla studied at the university college in Gävle and became a nurse. She chose Gävle for practical reasons, her two children were young and she chose distance education to be able to stay in Söderhamn with her young family. Nursing is a traditionally female profession[546] and, as we have seen, the health and care sector

[546] Holmdahl, Barbro (1994), *Sjuksköterskans historia: Från siukwakterska till omvårdnadsdoktor*.

employs 30 per cent of the women who work in Söderhamn. Apart from wanting to earn a better salary, Camilla explicitly mentions that she wanted to be able to 'decide a bit more' – an expression and a reflection of the increased control over a person's work that often comes with professions that require higher education.[547] Furthermore, Camilla's mother worked as an assistant nurse in elderly care, perhaps contributing to her choice of profession. Camilla was the first in her family to pursue higher education and she described her own mother's reaction to her decision in the following way:

> I think, even though I had the support of my mum, she thought I was mad going to college! Nobody in my family had studied at college before. [...] She probably thought that, I was, well, mad to study for three years in a different town when I had kids at home! [laughs] Yeah, but it was a bit like that. I had kids and a family at home, should I study in a different place for three years and did I really know what I was getting myself into? When I could get a job to go to every day?

Although she says that she had her mother's support, there is a contrast in Camilla's description of her mother's reaction and how Laura and Ulrika described their families' support of their educational ventures. Camilla's mother perhaps perceived the pursuit of higher education as an adult, and as a mother nonetheless, as a somewhat selfish and economically risky endeavour. The quote above alludes to a generational distance between Camilla and her mother in how higher education is perceived and used, and it gives an idea of how quickly practices around tertiary education have changed in this social context. Gender is significant in relation to how these practices have changed. It is primarily the female part of the gender segregated local labour market where occupations now require higher education. Today, female-dominated occupations that are common in Söderhamn, such as nursing, teaching, and social work require higher education. Thus, 'men are not forced to pursue studies within higher education in order to obtain a decent employment to the same extent as women are'.[548]

Camilla is also among the women interviewees who mentions children of her own when asked about what she hoped for when she was around 18 years old:

> I knew I wanted to have a family and I wanted to have children, I knew that. Because I'm very fond of children and I knew I wanted to have children, I knew I wanted that. And I wanted a job and I wanted children.

Camilla's sentiment and wording is very similar to how some young women expressed their longing for children in the previous Chapter 6. It further strengthens the impression that having children has been an important part of how young women in Söderhamn imagine their future, which is in line with prior

[547] Bengtsson (2010), "Olika sidor av klass", 13–14.
[548] Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education', 22.

research on similar places and social groups.[549] Starting a family has been the way to achieve adulthood for women in this social context.

Another example is one of the fathers in the sample, Mattias, who pursued higher education as an adult. He described the environment he grew up in and how it likely affected his decisions about work and education:

> Mattias: I never struggled in school, really. Didn't struggle at all. I guess I lacked motivation [laughs] [...] Had pretty decent grades when I left compulsory school. Got told off by a teacher because I chose a vocational programme [laughs]
>
> Anna: Okay, tell me about that. That's interesting.
>
> Mattias: No, he… It was my form teacher, he thought I was throwing away my… well, my future [laughs] if I was going to work in [manual labour]. He thought I should study at a college instead, he did [laughs] [...]
>
> Anna: Did you know, roughly, what you wanted to work with when you started upper-secondary school?
>
> Mattias: Yes, yes, I knew before. [...] So, that was pretty clear. I think it can be… When you're from a small village [outside of Söderhamn]… Parents were regular workers, so I'm from the working class. And I think it actually mattered, that… Yeah, if you thought about those who went to the technology programme, maybe especially… You saw them like… "Who do they think they are?".
>
> Anna: Yes, yes.
>
> Mattias: "A bit better than the rest of us" [laughs] So, I actually think it mattered a bit. It wasn't… Yeah, if you were from my village, you were supposed to work with your body. That's something I've thought about in later life, after education [laughs] [...]
>
> Anna: Do you remember… When you think about the end of upper-secondary school or when you were around 18, do you remember what plans you had, or hopes for the future?
>
> Mattias: No, it was just to work [in manual labour]. It was… Yeah, that was pretty much it. It was pretty clear. I moved away from home quickly, so... The upside when you went to, same as now, when you do a vocational programme… "After two years in upper-secondary school, I can earn enough money to have my own car and I get to live by myself and take care of myself on my own with my own salary". Compared to those who attended preparatory programmes, so…

The father quoted above analysed his own educational trajectory as shaped by his working-class surroundings, both his family and the wider society where he grew up. Mattias sticks out in relation to the other parents in that he is the only interviewee who explicitly reasons about social class, and the significance of his working-class background. Among the young adults, this type of class-identification is completely absent,[550] and while some parents implicitly speak of class, they do not analyse themselves as belonging to a certain social class. Thus, apart from Mattias,

[549] Rosengren (1991), *Två barn och eget hus*; Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*, 30–37; Gunnarsson (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv", 116; Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 144–145.

[550] Cf. Beach & Öhrn (2021), "Arbetsmarknad, utbildningsval och möjligheter på landsbygden", 61.

the parents do not mention social class throughout the interviews. The interviews did not involve any specific questions related to class-identification; however, for Mattias, the questions that were brought up made him reflect on his class background. The relative absence of class in the interviews with parents may be a reflection of patterns in class-identification that have been noted in previous research on Sweden.[551] In a 2008 survey on class-identification, Mattias Bengtsson and Tomas Berglund find that when asked about their *cognitive* class identification,[552] the pattern of a decrease in the identification as working-class has continued since the 1980s. They find that 43 per cent of those who were objectively positioned in the working-class identified as middle-class.[553] The absence of class-identification among the parents and the young adults is a reflection of the questions that were posed to them. However, it is potentially also a reflection of a continuous decrease in class-identification.

Towards the end of the excerpt, Mattias also notes that the reasons for, and advantages of choosing a vocational programme are similar today to when he was young. Becoming financially independent is a value that several of the parents described that can be seen in the interviews with young adults. This financial independence offers the possibility to have a car, a home, and to live independently and it is connected to the idea of adulthood. As we saw in the previous Chapter 6, the young adults place a similar value in aspects of life that are connected to becoming an adult.

Going against the advice of his compulsory school teacher, Mattias chose a vocational programme and worked in construction after having finished upper-secondary school. He describes it as a natural consequence of what men were supposed to work with where he grew up. However, after 20 years of working in construction, he decided to pursue higher education:

> If you go back all the way to the beginning, I actually said when I was in upper-secondary school [...] that "No, now I'm going to work for ten years. And then I'm going to work as a teacher". [...] But then 20 years passed and… [...] I can't say that I had gotten tired of working in construction, but this felt like something, well, more fulfilling somehow.

Similar to Camilla above, Mattias chose to study at a university college close by. Dalarna University in Falun is the closest higher education institution to offer students teacher training as a distance programme, and Mattias did not choose between different places to study. Both Camilla and Mattias had families in Söderhamn and chose the university college closest to Söderhamn that offered the ability of distance education.

Mattias and Camilla have similar educational trajectories, they chose to pursue higher education as adults and they both had children at the time, leading

[551] Bengtsson & Berglund (2010), "Social rörlighet och klassidentifikation", 34–35.
[552] Bengtsson & Berglund (2010), "Social rörlighet och klassidentifikation", 33.
[553] Bengtsson & Berglund (2010), "Social rörlighet och klassidentifikation", 35–36.

them to choose the closest distance education option – this confirms patterns found in earlier studies on higher education choice, where students' choices were restricted by practical conditions such as family and not wanting to move.[554] Mattias and Camilla both opted for professions that are common on the local labour market of Söderhamn. The third parent who belongs to this group, Marie, studied economics on distance from University of Gävle. She too had young children when she entered higher education. Students who choose distance education are more likely to have children as well as having parents with low levels of education, [555] Mattias, Camilla, and Marie all fit this description.

These parents, both mothers and fathers, are relevant in relation to the development of the labour market and the expansion of the higher education system. Many of the parents in the study finished upper-secondary school in the late 1980s, or early 1990s. It was at this time that Söderhamn underwent large transformations of the local labour market when several factories closed down. In 1998, the air force base closed down and Ericson closed down its factory in 2004. The number of industrial employees in Söderhamn went from 4 900 in 1990, to 2 400 in 2005.[556] The practice of pursuing higher education later in life can be seen as an adjustment to these structural transformations of the Swedish and local labour markets, and to the increased need for higher education in general.[557] Although these three parents did not work in one of the sectors that shut down during this period, they all wanted to transition from manual or low-skilled occupations into occupations with better salaries and working-conditions. For these parents, control over their work appears to be one of the reasons for why they decided to pursue higher education and access other types of occupations.

Norm-followers: natural transitions from school to work

The third group of parents are those who decided to work after upper-secondary school and have continued to do so. This group of parents have followed a historically common working-class trajectory, from school to work and economic independence.[558] Below is an excerpt from an interview with a mother and a father who have been married to each other for many years and who both belong to this category of parents:

> Anna: What did you do straight after upper-secondary school?
>
> Johan: Worked. I had, since I did the electrical engineering programme it was, back then you had a lot of work placements in the final year. So, I actually just studied on Wednesdays [...] I didn't have to go to school much, because they [the placements]

[554] Beach, Dennis & Puaca, Goran (2014), 'Changing Higher Education by Converging Policy-Packages: Education Choices and Student Identities', 71.
[555] Högskoleverket (2011), *Kartläggning av distansverksamheten vid universitet och högskolor*.
[556] Nilsson & Båve (2016), *Krympande orter*, 49–50.
[557] Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education', 25.
[558] Bynner et al. (2002), *Young People's Changing Routes to Independence*, 1–2.

wanted me to work. I thought it was really good, you got to earn money and that's where it was at. [...]

Sara: Yes, I worked, I worked in a home for elderly people where I'd worked during the summers when I was younger. So, I went there straight after school finished. [...]

Anna: Do you remember, like, the plans you had at the end of upper-secondary school, or straight after? What were your future hopes?

Sara: Yes… I mean, I think… the idea for me was further studies I think. Mm. It was. And I applied for university in Stockholm and I got in, but turned it down.

Anna: What were you going to study?

Sara: I was going to study premature babies. So, the idea was continued studies about children in some way, but yeah, that didn't happen.

Johan: You were a bit of a chicken.

Sara: Yeah, I guess I was a bit of a chicken. I was. And I was a bit comfortable and then, this boyfriend thing, it gets in the way a bit.

Johan: My fault again, then! [laughs]

Sara: No! No, but, like, absolutely not, that's the way it is at that age [...] That was the thought, there and then, but I don't think I've like, regretted not continuing to study, so. Yeah…

Johan: And me, no, I didn't have anything. It was just work and earn money. Yeah, but I didn't have any ambitions towards anything then. No. [...]

Anna: Can you see any, like, why did the people who stayed [in Söderhamn] stay and why did the people who left leave? If you have any idea? [laughs]

Sara: Yes…

Johan: I think education makes people move away, I think. And then… especially university and that, people stay away I think. That's the feeling I get.

Sara: I think so too, I think it was about, a lot of people who studied like, social sciences, economics, technology and that, maybe they continued their studies after, they had a different education, and these more, vocational tracks, stayed here. Because there's an entirely different range of jobs here too. Now, today, there isn't, but back then it was endless, you just had to knock on a door.

Johan: *Nobody* was unemployed if they did a vocational programme. [...]

Anna: What year was this, then? When did you finish upper-secondary school?

Sara: This was in -89.

Similar to the parents who pursued higher education as adults, these two parents spoke about the labour market in connection to education, as we can see towards the end of the quotation. The parents express the same view of education as the young adults did in Chapter 6, employment is central and the need for higher education today is connected to a change in the local labour market. As will be further expanded on the following quotation, Johan (and to a lesser extent Sara) perceives higher education as necessary for his children's ability to find work.

For Johan, finishing school meant a natural transition into working and earning money. This echoes the interview with Mattias where he mentioned his urge to earn his own money, have his own car, and take care of himself. This value, ideal or social norm of financial independence from their parents is an important aspect of why these fathers wanted to work after upper-secondary school. As we have already seen in Chapter 6 and will continue to see in Chapter 8, it remains an important part of why many young adults today want to pursue higher education.

Unsurprisingly, parents who did not pursue further education have thought less about their educational decisions than the parents who did, regardless of whether they studied as young adults or later on in life. While upper-secondary education seems to have been a given, higher education was not on Johan's horizon when he chose what to do after upper-secondary school. Sara, on the other hand, applied and was accepted to 'study premature babies' in Stockholm. However, she ended up turning her place down and stayed with her boyfriend (now husband) in Söderhamn. Both Sara and her husband explain her decision to refrain from pursuing higher education by saying that she was 'a bit of a chicken'. The expression mirrors Hanna Uddbäck's findings in her study of young adults in a small Swedish town in the mid-2010s; there is a perception that those who stay in a small town are 'a bit cowardly or almost a bit comfortable'.[559] Uddbäck analyses it in relation to norms of mobility and the negative connotations of staying where a person feels content, thus avoiding the risk of mobility.[560]

It is impossible to know for certain what contributed to Sara's decision, but it seems as if the step of moving away to Stockholm and leaving her boyfriend felt too uncomfortable at the time. Laura told a similar story of being torn between staying in Söderhamn and moving away to pursue tertiary education, in the end, Laura decided to move. Sara's decision to stay in Söderhamn highlights the fact that leaving the place where you grow up and the social ties that you have there is complex and for most, not an easy or simple decision – aspects that can be found in prior research on leaving rural or peripheral places.[561]

Sara and Johan are from similar social backgrounds, his father worked in forestry, his mother in a factory. Her father worked as a tradesman and her mother in elderly care. While Johan went on to run his own business, Sara works in health and social care, work similar to that of her mother.

Although they do not have any experience of higher education, both are keen for their son to attend university. Their son has applied to the University of Umeå, but is uncertain if he wants to continue immediately after upper-secondary school or not:

[559] Cf. Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 92.
[560] Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 92–94.
[561] Wiborg, Agnete (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration: Students' Attachment to Their Rural Home Places', 416–432; Sørensen, Niels Ulrik & Pless, Mette (2017), 'Living on the Periphery of Youth: Young People's Narratives of Youth Life in Rural Areas', 1S–17S; Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"'.

> Anna: What do you think about your son's plans, then?
>
> Sara: Yeah, we're completely open, so… No, but I think that he can do whatever he wants to do.
>
> Johan: We think he should continue his studies, if he has the chance, you know.
>
> Sara: But we also say that, if you don't feel motivated, you shouldn't do it now, but wait and see what you want to do and do something later on.
>
> Johan: I still think it's good to study something, have a bit of a university education and really study. It'll make things easier in the future, with work and everything. Actually. [...]
>
> Anna: What's good about him studying, then? What would be easier?
>
> Johan: Future work, I think.
>
> Sara: Future work, and… he'll have completely different options if he studies something, I think.

Throughout most of the interview with this couple, they agreed. However, the excerpt above shows how the father is convinced that the son will need a degree, while the mother emphasises that the most important thing is that their son gets to make his own decision and that they, as parents, are 'completely open'. Despite his own educational trajectory and what has, from what I can judge, been a successful career as self-employed, Johan wants his son to continue into tertiary education. It does not seem to be because he wants the son to live out an unfulfilled dream of his; rather, it is about the son's job opportunities. The father goes on to reason about the necessity of a higher education:

> My impression is, I believe that you *have* to have other types of education to reach higher positions. Before, you could work your way up to those positions, a little bit. [...] I mean, today you almost have to have an academic degree to become… a semi-manager [sic] in a municipality.

Johan wants his son to pursue tertiary education, not because he wants his child to climb socially, but rather, to avoid a downward trajectory. From Johan's perspective, higher education guarantees that his son will not be in a worse position financially and socially than his parents.

Karl is the third parent who has not attended university. He works as a plumber and is married to Marie, who pursued higher education as an adult and was briefly mentioned in the previous section. I interviewed them together, but Karl came in and out of the interview and therefore I was not able to ask about his educational trajectory. However, he expressed views on his children's need for higher education, and they resemble what Johan said in the quotation above:

> Karl: Yeah, well, going to school and learning, college, that's like, that's what you need to have today. To access a good part of the labour market, so that you have opportunities. There's not much here, Gävle has some [labour market opportunities], but not within economics that [one of our daughters] wants to study. [...] No, but there were 5 000 people living here [in the community outside of Söderhamn where

> they live] when I was young, now there's 2 500 who live here and they're not getting any younger, instead… They're getting older and older.
>
> Marie: I know that I've heard you say that there aren't any jobs in Söderhamn?
>
> Karl: Well, no… Yes [laughs] They're going to disappear more and more. That's what I think. A lot of things are being shut down, they shut down the air base, the lumber yard shut down and everything… It's just getting worse. [...]
>
> Marie: No, and that's how it is. But sure, we've insisted on this with school, to make sure they continue their studies, we both have. That you have to have, you know make sure that you have an education so that you have a secure job in the future.

Karl, Sara, and Johan do not have any experiences of higher education themselves, and neither did their parents. None of them felt a need to pursue higher education in relation to their own working life. However, they all see higher education as necessary for their children, in order for them to have a stable working life in the future. Overall, the parents – regardless of their respective level of education – reason this way in relation to their children's future; it is not so much about wanting the children to ascend socially, rather it is about not falling behind.

What we see among the parents who were interviewed is a strong emphasis on work and employment, both when they reason about their own trajectories, and when they reason about their children's need for higher education. Like the young adults, the parents who were interviewed also manage the norm of higher education, not in relation to themselves, but in relation to their children's trajectories. Regardless of their respective educational trajectories, these parents want their children to pursue higher education of some kind. However, it is important to note here what was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter – most of the parents who were interviewed have children who attend higher education preparatory programmes, which likely effects how they view the necessity of higher education for their children. A notable exception is therefore Katarina, whom we encounter in the following sections. Since her three sons have attended vocational programmes and two of them work as tradesmen, higher education is much less of a concern.

With the parents' educational and occupational trajectories as a background, this chapter continues by analysing how the parents view their children's previous educational choices.

Parents on the sidelines

For the young adults in the study, a potential pursuit of higher education follows after an educational trajectory through compulsory and upper-secondary school. To understand how the young adults navigate higher education, the continued analysis focuses on how the parents view the educational decisions that their children have made so far – the choice of a compulsory school and an upper-secondary school programme. For most of this period, the young adults in the

study were children, and have likely made these decisions together with their parents. In contrast to the previous Chapter 6, these choices are analysed using the interviews with parents to understand their view of and involvement in their children's educational decisions.

'Choosing' a compulsory school

Understanding and explaining how the young adults in the study reason about a potential entry into higher education requires an understanding of how previous educational decisions were managed. The choice of an upper-secondary school programme especially has consequences for the higher education options available to the young adults. I begin here by analysing how parents perceive the choice of a compulsory school for their children. It will become clear that neither young adults nor parents consider the choice of a compulsory school as a 'choice' *per se*, which in turn has bearing on how continued education is perceived and navigated by these families.

Which compulsory school to attend is among the first choices parents make, the young adults who are studied here entered the education system in the autumn of the year they turned seven. Following the national introduction of a choice and voucher system in 1992, families have the right to choose their child's school.[562] The reform enabled parents and children the opportunity to choose a different school than the one in their catchment area. While families have the right to choose a school, it is not compulsory.[563] Research in sociology, economics, cultural geography, and education has focused on the effects of this reform – especially in relation to questions of equality of opportunity and compulsory schooling's compensatory obligation. Most research shows that free school choice, together with increased housing segregation,[564] has made schooling less equal, compared to before the introduction of choice.[565]

[562] Wiborg, Susanne (2015), 'Privatizing Education: Free School Policy in Sweden and England', 473–497; Holmlund, Helena (2016), *Education and Equality of Opportunity: What Have We Learned from Educational Reforms?*, 136.

[563] Wiborg (2015), 'Privatizing Education'; Holmlund (2016), *Education and Equality of Opportunity*, 147.

[564] See for example: Holmlund, Helena et al. (2014), *Decentralisering, skolval och fristående skolor: Resultat och likvärdighet i svensk skola*; Yang Hansen, Kajsa & Gustafsson, Jan-Eric (2016), 'Causes of Educational Segregation in Sweden: School Choice or Residential Segregation', 23–44.

[565] See for example: Hartman, Laura ed. (2011), *Konkurrensens konsekvenser: Vad händer med svensk välfärd?;* Holmlund et al. (2014), *Decentralisering, skolval och fristående skolor: Resultat och likvärdighet i svensk skola*; Bäckström, Pontus (2015), "Hur påverkar förändrad elevsammansättning skolors resultat?", 55–72; Böhlmark, Anders, Holmlund, Helena, & Lindahl, Mikael (2015), *Skolsegregation och skolval;* Forsberg, H. (2015), *Kampen om eleverna*; Blomqvist, Paula (2016), "NPM i välfärdsstaten: hotas universalismen?", 39–67; Yang Hansen & Gustafsson (2016), 'Causes of Educational Segregation in Sweden: School Choice or Residential Segregation'; Fjellman, Anna-Maria (2019), *School Choice, Space and the Geography of Marketization: Analyses of Educational Restructuring in Upper Secondary Education in Sweden;* Holmlund, Helena, Sjögren, Anna, & Öckert, Björn (2020), *Jämlikhet i möjligheter och utfall i den svenska skolan*.

There are 13 compulsory schools located in Söderhamn Municipality,[566] with 11 being municipal schools and the remainder 'independent'.[567] The interviews with parents indicate that an active choice of compulsory school is rare. In contrast to research on other towns and cities in Sweden, such as Stockholm,[568] the decision on which compulsory school to attend is not seen as a 'choice' in the context studied here. Parents and children align in an uncomplicated view that the child attends the school closest to home. The quotation below is representative of how all parents answered the question of how they chose a compulsory school for the child or children:

> Sara: No. No, I'm not sure if it was, it was just… Could you choose? I didn't know…
>
> Johan: No… No, I don't know [laughs] No, there's not much to choose from.

It is difficult to tell in written form, but the interviewees – both parents and young adults – were often surprised or confused by the question of how they 'chose' their compulsory school. It would appear that most interviewees had not considered this a choice until they were asked about it in this context. In practice, parents do not seem to perceive compulsory schools as something that they can choose between, it is determined by where they live and the catchment area of the closest school. The question of choosing a compulsory school is answered similarly, regardless of the parents' various levels of education, their employment in different sectors of the labour market, and their children's attendance at various compulsory schools and upper-secondary school programmes. The practice of choosing a compulsory school, which certainly exists in other parts of Sweden, is not evident among parents and young adults in Söderhamn. In the few instances where an active choice of a compulsory school was made, it was connected to a perceived dysfunction with the school closest to the home, for example, bullying or not 'fitting in'.

Thus, although children and their parents have the right to choose both preschool and compulsory school, empirically, the first educational decision for most young adults is in relation to upper-secondary school. Previous studies on the choice of a compulsory school in other contexts in Sweden have pointed to the importance of this decision. Research shows that parents in urban contexts make both active and passive compulsory school choices for their children.[569] How active the choice is and what choice they eventually make for their children differs depending on, for example, social class, ethnicity, and housing segregation. The results here suggest that parents and their children in Söderhamn address the choice

[566] Independent schools are publicly financed, but headed by private actors. Söderhamns kommun, *Grundskolor*.
[567] Wiborg (2015), 'Privatizing Education', 474–475.
[568] Ambrose (2016), *Att navigera på en skolmarknad*; Kallstenius (2010), *De mångkulturella innerstadsskolorna.*
[569] See for example: Skawonius (2005), *Välja eller hamna*; Kallstenius (2010), *De mångkulturella innerstadsskolorna*; Ambrose (2016), *Att navigera på en skolmarknad.*

of a compulsory school differently. The parents and young adults who were interviewed here do in fact not perceive it as a choice.

In relation to compulsory school, what we see among the parents who were interviewed is a non-choice – their children attend the school that is closest to the family's home. In relation to higher education, it is relevant to understand practices and perceptions regarding choices and decisions relative education, as it pertains to earlier parts of the educational trajectory. Since the parents who were interviewed do not perceive that they chose a compulsory school, there does not appear to be any discussions within the families about this decision. The practice of discussing education and educational decisions within the family, or more precisely, between parents and children, is unusual within this context, and it has bearing on how continued education is managed by the young adults. In the subsequent section, we see how the first actual educational decision for young adults is the choice of an upper-secondary school and programme, and we continue to see how most parents observe this decision-making process from the sidelines.

The first educational decision

Chapter 6 showed differences in the level and nature of the parents' involvement into the young adults' educational decisions. Although parents were generally quite absent in the process of making educational decisions, the young adults who had parents and older siblings with experiences of higher education had more conversations about education at home, compared to young adults whose parents did not attend university. Chapter 6 showed how the decision of an upper-secondary school programme appeared to the young adults; the following section analyses how the parents perceived this choice.

Based on the fact that it seems unusual to perceive the decision on where to attend compulsory school as a choice, deciding which upper-secondary school and what programme to attend are the first educational decisions that parents and young adults are involved in. These decisions are usually made when the child is in the 9th grade of compulsory schooling; the child is typically 15 or 16 years old. The first actual decision on the child's education is therefore made when he or she is almost an adult. This is a stark difference in comparison to urban contexts in Sweden, where families may put a lot of time and effort into deciding where a child attends preschool[570] and compulsory school.[571]

The decision related to upper-secondary schooling consist of two separate but related choices – which *school* and what *programme* to attend. The young adults

[570] Waddling (2024), *Playing with the Global*; Waddling, Jennifer (2024), "Främmande språk som pedagogisk profil: Val av internationell friskola".
[571] Kallstenius (2010), *De mångkulturella innerstadsskolorna* ; Ambrose (2016), *Att navigera på en skolmarknad*.

who were interviewed decided to study in Söderhamn[572] and the analysis is therefore focused on the choice of an upper-secondary school programme.[573]

When choosing an upper-secondary school programme, most young adults chose from either the vocational programmes *or* the higher education preparatory programmes. Applying for a mix of both types of programmes was less common. It is well known in the literature that the choice of an upper-secondary school programme is linked to parents' occupations and levels of education.[574] When looking at the distribution of young adults between preparatory and vocational programmes in Söderhamn, almost 50 per cent of pupils are enrolled in a higher education preparatory programme.

When asked about the choice of an upper-secondary programme, some parents expressed the same view as their children did: that the son or daughter chose their programme without any interference from the parents. Other parents indicated that they had taken a more active role in the process. Below are excerpts from interviews with three mothers who exemplify different practices and ways of reasoning about education in general and their children's educational choices in particular. The length of the quotations reflect how much the interviewees had to say on the topic, the mothers with longer educational trajectories had more to say than those with shorter educational trajectories themselves.

Katarina is a mother of three sons who all attend, or have attended, vocational programmes. After she finished upper-secondary school in the north of Sweden, she moved around and has had several different jobs. She trained and worked as a dental nurse before taking her current job as a cleaner for a private company in Söderhamn. When Katarina is asked about how her children chose the upper-secondary school programmes that they have attended, she replies as follows:

> Katarina: I think my youngest son, he had someone who visited his [compulsory] school, from a vocational, or someone came and spoke to them about education. And I guess they said that it was really easy to get a job, yeah, that they earn well. [laughs]
>
> Anna: So they visited in the 9th grade?
>
> Katarina: Yes. So he just came home and said "I'm going to do this programme". Yes, and I thought "Okay, but shouldn't you think about something else? Don't you have any alternatives?" "No", so he just decided then and there. And the [two older sons] I'm not sure how… They're like, they wanted something practical. So maybe it was by exclusion, I don't know.

[572] Except for one interviewee whose parents are not included in the analysis here.
[573] Several of the interviewees considered studying at a different school located in another municipality. Since the upper-secondary school in Söderhamn does not offer all national upper-secondary school programmes, the school collaborates with adjacent municipalities. Therefore, certain programmes (or specific orientations of a programme) are only available in neighbouring municipalities. For those who considered attending school outside of Söderhamn, the reason was often that a programme they were interested in was not on offer at Staffangymnasiet.
[574] Börjesson (2004), *Gymnasieskolans sociala struktur och sociala gruppers utbildningsstrategier*, 38; Erikson & Rudolphi (2011), "Social snedrekrytering till teoretisk gymnasieutbildning".

> Anna: But like, did they choose pretty much themselves, or was it something that you like, discussed?
>
> Katarina: Yes, no, they… we [Katarina and her husband] didn't push them towards anything in particular. That was something they had to figure out themselves. And they went to these information meetings and stuff, so they became interested [in particular programmes].

The second example is Ulrika, whom we met earlier in this chapter. She is the mother of two daughters and she works at a leisure-time centre,[575] but qualified as a preschool teacher:

> Anna: How come both [daughters] chose the technology programme?
>
> Ulrika: Well [...]… they're both good at maths. So… the younger one, said for a long time when she was younger that she wanted to become a meteorologist, so she found out what she needed and natural sciences was the best. So, she's been very torn between natural sciences and technology, she's very affected by her sister [...] So no, we've [Ulrika and the father] probably steered her toward technology, but they both have the natural sciences bit.
>
> Anna: Why did you steer them toward the technology [programme] then?
>
> Ulrika: Because we see that it's easier for them to get a job after. And broader.[...]
>
> Anna: But you think it's easier to get a job, compared to what?
>
> Ulrika: Than natural sciences. Natural sciences you have to study, you need to further specialise… Well, it's not like when we were young and you could, you got a job straight away, you probably don't get that today. But… no, I don't know. I think there's a better future with the technology programme as a foundation.

The final excerpt is from the interview with Laura, whom we met earlier in the chapter; she is the mother of one son in the first year of the natural sciences programme. She works as a social worker and has a degree from a regional university college:

> Anna: Did you look at different upper-secondary schools? Or was it clearly Staffangymnasiet from the start?
>
> Laura: It's like this, I want to say that my son has said since the 6th grade that he wants to do the natural sciences programme. [...] He enjoys maths and physics. [...] One morning he comes to me and says "I think I'm going to change my choice of programme" [...] To the technology programme, so it wasn't a big difference, but there was still a difference and it was like, sudden. [...] And then I did something cheeky, I don't know if it was really, but I wrote to the guidance counsellor at his school. [...] His grades meant he could get in to any programme, basically. But if you change your application late on you end up at the bottom. So the best option is, said the guidance counsellor, that you leave it as is and start at the natural sciences programme and see if you want to switch once you've started. [...]

[575] In Swedish: fritidshem.

> Anna: What was it that made you, not want to steer him, because I don't think that's what it sounds like, but help him to, like…?
>
> Laura: No, but I did want to steer him. [laughs]

When asked about the upper-secondary school her son chose, Laura describes in detail the moment where her son was close to changing his mind. She describes her decision to write to the guidance counsellor regarding her son's choice of an upper-secondary school programme as doing 'something cheeky'. Although she did interfere, she also implies that this is something you are not meant to do as a parent, inadvertently showing an awareness of the social norm of not interfering into these decisions, which I will return to throughout this chapter. A few days after her son first mentioned wanting to choose the technology programme, he called and said that he was meeting with the school's guidance counsellor to sign a few papers. To which Laura replied:

> "Yes, I'll go with you. I can wait outside, but I'll go with you." Because I thought, then I'll have the opportunity to speak with him in the car. He called at least, I think about that sometimes. He could've gone regardless, but he called for a reason, I'm completely convinced he wanted us to discuss it on the way there. So, we discussed it on the way and I went inside with him and was fairly quiet.

By the end of the summer after 9th grade, Laura's son had decided to take the natural sciences programme. She asked whether he had been torn between the technology and the natural sciences programme because most of his friends had chosen the technology programme, to which he answered 'yes'. Having friends with whom to do a specific upper-secondary school programme has been found to be significant in previous research,[576] and we will come to see how this plays a role in the navigation of higher education in Chapter 8.

Laura is the only parent in the sample to have interfered in her child's choice of an upper-secondary school programme in such a tangible way. It is rare for the parents who were interviewed to have an opinion on which programme their child applied to, and it is even less common for a parent to contact the guidance counsellor themselves. Among the parents who were interviewed, Laura is an exceptionally involved parent when it comes to her son's educational trajectory. The prospect of her son choosing the technology programme instead of the natural sciences programme led her to react strongly and to act in order to get her son 'back on track'.

Although Laura stands out as one of the most involved parents in the sample, she still needed to consult the guidance counsellor to understand the potential implications of her son's choice. More to the point, she wanted the son to be convinced by the guidance counsellor, not by her. Although she ended up getting involved, she seems to think it was supposed to be a decision between her son and his school, rather than between the son and his parents. Even for the most

[576] Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 72–73.

involved parents in this context, the school – many times embodied by the guidance counsellor – is an authoritative figure. Although Laura does not occupy a working-class position, what she describes mirrors research on working-class parents' dispositions to education, where a lot of trust is placed in the school and its guidance counsellors.[577]

Ulrika and Laura show an awareness of the existence of different upper-secondary school programmes and implicitly or explicitly compare them. In comparison to Katarina, they think certain programmes are better than others are by expressing that a particular programme suits their child better, or that they wanted their child to avoid attending a particular programme. The way that they speak of the process of choosing an upper-secondary school programme shows that they perceive that something is at stake for their children – this way of speaking about educational decisions is absent when Katarina speaks.

Katarina's perception of her role in her children's educational decisions is common among the parents who were interviewed. As the excerpt from the interview with Katarina shows, it is often a decision that seems to involve the child and the school, rather than the child and the parents.[578] Judging from how parents and young adults describe the choice of an upper-secondary school programme, it is common for the child to inform the parents about the decision they are about to make, but less common for there to be a discussion or active interference from the parents. The school provides information, through meetings or the guidance counsellor, and the child forms an opinion by themself or together with someone at the school, and lets the parent know what they have decided. Generally, the choice of an upper-secondary school programme is perceived as something that the child makes a decision on, but the parents can help if they are consulted by the child.

Whether the parents get involved in this decision or not is not a matter of what the child is choosing between or the possible implications of those choices for their future. We can compare how Laura acted to what Moa in the previous Chapter 6 recounted about her choice of an upper-secondary school programme: she chose between the handicrafts programme and the building and construction programme, this also involved choosing between studying in Gävle or Söderhamn. In contrast to Laura, Moa's parents were seemingly not involved at all, 'they don't have a lot of experience themselves. It has been a long time since they were in school'. Moa's options were much further apart than what Laura's son was choosing between. It is a matter of the parents' general level of involvement in these types of decisions, their interest and knowledge about the educational system, their own experience of the education system, and their perception of whether there is anything at stake and if so, is it their place to get involved?

[577] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291–293.
[578] See for example: Forsberg, S. (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice', 708.

Within the social space of Söderhamn, the first substantive decision that children and young adults make in relation to education is choosing an upper-secondary school programme. In comparison to other parts of the Swedish social space, there is no practice of making an active choice of a compulsory school. Furthermore, there is only one upper-secondary school in the municipality, making the practice of choosing between different upper-secondary schools less common than in other parts of the country.[579] Thus, the practice of exercising choice in relation to school and education, as an individual or as a family, is much less pronounced here than in other contexts. When the child aged 15 or 16 chooses what programme to attend, many families have never discussed educational decisions before – and according to the interviews with young adults and parents, many families continue to not discuss educational decisions. It is far more common for the young adults in the sample to have asked the guidance counsellor or their sibling for advice on the choice of an upper-secondary school programme, than to have asked their mother or father.

Fostering independence

The excerpts above showed how three mothers addressed the concrete situation where their child had to make a choice, but the interviews with parents also show how mothers and fathers perceive their role in their children's schooling in a more general sense. Despite there being a range of practices and perceptions of the role a parent could and should play in the child's educational trajectory, it is more common to leave a lot of responsibility to the child and the school. Several parents reason in a manner that places a lot of trust in the ability of the school to help their child navigate and decide about their further education.[580] When the child has reached a certain age, it seems that there is also a social norm of 'letting go' as a parent, to not be controlling, to not take away the child's 'freedom' to make their own decisions – to parent from the sidelines.

We met Sara, Camilla, and Mattias earlier in this chapter. All three parents have several children, and those who are old enough to attend upper-secondary school have chosen higher education preparatory programmes. Sara did not attend university, while Camilla and Mattias pursued higher education as adults:

> Sara: We [the mother and father] decided early on, when the kids were… when they were in 5th or 6th grade, I think you could login, where you could check how things were going with homework and tests and how it was going and that. But we decided there and then that we won't do that. Because the children need to learn to take responsibility themselves and if they miss a quiz or a test, so be it. But then you learn for the next time. So we've, they learned that early on. [...] We told the form teacher early on, this is how we've set it up and we've decided on this, you have to get in touch if you notice that it isn't working. They were never in touch and we had

[579] Some young adults and families choose to attend an upper-secondary school outside of the municipality, but that process goes beyond the scope of what has been studied here.
[580] Cf. working-class parents in Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 286–294.

> conversations with them, once per term? And then we found out how things were going and that. And things were good. So…
>
> *
>
> Camilla: That choice [of the arts programme] wasn't something we thought was great to begin with. The people who did arts when I was in school were the wasters who didn't get in anywhere. [...] I think we had discussions and that. But then I came with [child] and spoke to the guidance counsellor and the guidance counsellor said that, "Well, the arts programme isn't how it used to be, it's actually preparatory now and you can add subjects if you want". [...] So we said, yes, but it's your choice, you have to choose what you want. We can't influence in any way, so.
>
> *
>
> Mattias: I'm not sure what the kids will end up doing, I'm not sure, but I think they will sort it out for themselves. It feels like they have that strength. [...] I've told them one thing since compulsory school [...] "Don't end up in a situation that makes you regret today's laziness later on" [laughs] Well, "Yeah, create the opportunities to do what it is you want to do" [...] And that thought, I think it's important that they have that later on as well. "Nobody will do it for you, you have to do it yourself".
>
> Anna: Right. A sort of independence as well?
>
> Mattias: Yes, exactly.

These three parents have various, but similar, ways in which they address, help, and guide their children's way through school. The practices vary, but they all share the idea that their children make their own, autonomous, choices. These parents seem to perceive their role as a supportive by-stander, someone who allows their child to make independent decisions – even when there is a risk of making the 'wrong' choice. For example, two of the parents have older children who moved away to study, then quickly dropped out and moved back home. Such decisions are partly perceived as valuable life lessons, rather than a mistake that could have been avoided. Another important element in this way of reasoning is that many parents do not seem to perceive any risk involved in the educational decisions the children are making.[581] This can be an explanation for why the children are 'allowed' to make their own educational decisions.

However, the parents' view on how involved one ought to be in these types of educational decisions varies. The variation makes it clear that there is a scale regarding how much trust is placed with the child and the school. The three quotes above can be contrasted with the quotation below, from one of the mothers who attended university:

[581] Cf. risk and reward preferences relative social background in Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality'.

> Ulrika: [My children] have always, well, been made to understand the value of an education. That's how it is, we [their parents] have pushed them, yeah.
>
> Anna: What have you done, then?
>
> Ulrika: Made sure they did their homework, helped them with quizzes and before tests and… "Yeah, what's happening this week? Okay, have you studied enough for that? No, okay, but then you have to stay at home and do it today. No, I have practice first. Alright, when's the test? Thursday, okay, then you'll study after practice and stay home tomorrow [evening]".

Ulrika has a different approach to her children's schooling, compared to Sara, Camilla, and Mattias. She refers to it as 'pushing' her children, and there is certainly a difference in the level of involvement and control over the children's schoolwork, compared to several of the other interviewed parents. This mother is not alone in finding it necessary to insert herself into her children's schoolwork, but it is less common than the view that homework and decisions related to school is something that the child himself or herself is responsible for managing.

Thus, the parents' distanced approach to their children's educational decisions and trajectories leaves young adults to make these decisions on their own. There are instances of parents, or rather, mothers, getting involved in the decisions that their children are about to make, but the children are mainly the ones responsible for gathering information and making a decision. The school's role in this is significant for many of the young adults. Guidance counsellors stand out as important players in the decision-making process around upper-secondary schooling and higher education. In Chapter 6, the young adults mentioned consulting the school's guidance counsellor, both in relation to upper-secondary school choices and prospective higher education choices. Furthermore, the parents, both in relation to their own trajectory and their children's educational decisions, mention guidance counsellors.

The parents who were interviewed emphasised the importance of education and higher education to varying degrees depending on their children's choice of an upper-secondary school programme. The mothers who had attended university formed stronger opinions on their children's choice of upper-secondary school programme and were the only examples of active interference in the decision-making process. Unsurprisingly, the parents whose children would likely enter higher education talked more about the significance of higher education, than parents such as Katrina, whose children had chosen a vocational programme. However, parents who did not attend university also voiced strong support in favour of their children pursuing higher education.

Hence, there is a difference in how the parents act in relation to their children's education and educational choices; the social practices vary and the clearest difference among the parents is that those with higher levels of education were more actively involved in homework, quizzes, and educational choices. However, when it comes to the perception of a parent's role in relation to the child's educational decisions – the values or social norms that can be discerned in what the parents say

– there is an apparent homogeneity among the parents who were interviewed. Regardless of their respective level of education, the parents express themselves in a manner that can be interpreted as an expression of wanting their children to make independent choices and decisions. This value or ideal can be connected to working-class dispositions to fostering children.

In Helen Brembeck's study of social class and child rearing in the late 1980s, she finds that parents from working-class backgrounds view childhood as something natural, which need not be interfered with. Similar to nature, 'children grow and grow up naturally, without any other contributions from the adult world, besides food and care'.[582] In this view, the child has its own inner strength[583] and to raise children is to care for them, correct their mistakes, 'but hardly to actively control them or guide them to experiences and knowledge that lead to individual growth'.[584] Despite the time that has passed since the quoted studies, we can see the same view and ideals in how the parents who were interviewed here relate to their children's education. There is a sense of natural progression that does not require parental involvement in the decisions and choices that the children have made or are about to make. The young adults are left to make educational decisions themselves, which can make the navigation difficult. However, it also entails a degree of freedom from their parents, being left alone and, perhaps, being given room to grow.

While the parents do not generally perceive risks in relation to their children's educational pursuits, they are apprehensive about risk in relation to other parts of their children's trajectories. When asked about what they wish their children could avoid in the future, a recurring answer is having children 'too early'. Parents echo the social norm expressed by the children: that it is better to study first, and have children after:

> Ulrika: I was 29 when I had my first daughter, so I was, I was done [with other things in life]. That's also something that I have [told them], don't have kids too early, that's… I want a lot of grandkids, but not too early. You need to study, get a job first, and then. And I've never worried about my firstborn, but the second daughter, I think she's starting too early. I don't think you should be 'married' at 17 [laughs].

Ulrika pursued higher education before having children herself, but even the parents who entered tertiary education after having children express themselves in this manner. Having children too early is perceived as a risk in relation to what all of the parents who were interviewed see as important – that their children have a solid base, usually a tertiary education, and become financially stable and independent. Therefore, another common reply to questions surrounding hopes and fears about their children's future is focused on the child's financial situation:

[582] Brembeck (1991), *Efter Spock*, 64 [My translation].
[583] Brembeck (1991), *Efter Spock*, 64.
[584] Rosengren (1992), *Två barn och eget hus*, 86 [My translation].

> Irene: I hope they are reasonably well off, so that they don't have to feel that they are poor and have to scrimp and save.
>
> *
>
> Anna: The opposite then, is there anything you hope that they can avoid? Except for this thing with stress?
>
> Katarina: Yes, but it's stress and debt and [laughs] unemployment and sick leave and all of that. A lot of things can happen, unfortunately.
>
> *
>
> Marie: I hope they don't have to be unemployed. No, God, how terribly boring. And if that's what happens, if it turns out there aren't any jobs around here, I really hope they move to where the jobs are. So that they can, like, support themselves and sustain themselves. [...] I don't know what I'd do with myself if I didn't have a job. It would be, like, ugh, how horrible to not have anywhere to go and feel like you're doing something useful during the day.

The risks that parents perceive in relation to their children's future are related to occupational and financial stability; these risks take the form of unemployment, poverty, sick leave, debt, and stress. These perceived risks traverse gender and class boundaries within the sample of parents and thus seem connected to the social context studied here, where the centrality of work and employment appears as especially relevant. In different ways, all of the risks that parents perceive are related to their children's future work and financial situation. As we have seen throughout this chapter and the previous Chapter 6, for most parents and young adults, higher education is perceived as a safe route to employment and financial security and thus a way to avoid these risks.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis in this chapter has focused on the parents' perceptions and reasoning about their own and their children's educational trajectories in order to understand the relation between these. Regardless of their own level of education, the parents are very positive towards education in general and higher education in particular. The parents want their children to participate in higher education for the purpose of finding a stable job. Thus, the parents and the young adults are united in connecting higher education with future employment opportunities.

The parents who pursued higher education as adults and the parents who never did, focused on the function of higher education, more specifically, on how it contributes to a favourable position in the labour market for their children. For parents who pursued higher education as adults, this mirrors how they themselves used higher education. The value of higher education is instrumental, and it is less about what higher education can offer and more about what the lack of higher

education might mean in relation to future employment. Since the focus is not on what higher education can offer, parents seem to have few opinions on where or what their children study at university or university college.

Although a small number of parents, who themselves had attended university, were involved in their children's choice of an upper-secondary school programme, none of the parents voice strong opinions regarding higher education institutions or programmes – which is why these lines of reasoning are absent from this chapter. The important decision, where risks and rewards are involved, is the decision to pursue higher education at all. An interpretation is that the parents perceive higher education as a unified system without significant academic differences in relation to where and what one studies. The following chapter further explores the young adults' views on the matter, but it is a perception of the system of higher education that has been noticed in previous studies on working-class families and higher education.[585]

Working-class dispositions to the upbringing of their children can be discerned in how the parents reason about their children's education. The perception of what is at stake, how and in what capacity parents should be involved is different among the parents in Söderhamn, compared to other environments where middle-class parenting practices are more prevalent.[586] The parents who were interviewed here demonstrate trust in the professional authority of the school, in contrast to studies on urban middle-class parents, who trust themselves to know best.[587] The parents' approach to the children's educational trajectories forces the young adults to make decisions that are 'independent' from their parents' involvement, and they navigate educational decisions using other means. The following chapter delves more into what the young adults use to navigate the higher education decision-making process, whereas Chapter 6 showed how young adults use guidance counsellors, peers, siblings, and in some cases, television, media and the internet to make the kind of educational decisions that are studied here.[588]

The lack of parental guidance and involvement in educational decisions cannot only be interpreted as an absence of resources for the young adults studied here. A value that the young adults expressed in the previous chapter, the strive towards becoming an adult, is also echoed in how the parents perceive and treat their children. The children of the parents who were interviewed are allowed to make their own decisions, and sometimes mistakes. The parents' reluctance to intervene in educational decisions should also be interpreted as respect for their children's integrity and their prerogative to make their own choices in life. The young adults' strive towards becoming independent adults is also respected by their parents, who, to a large extent, allow their children space to forge their own path.

---

[585] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291–292.
[586] See for example: Pérez Prieto, Héctor et al. (2003), 'Together? On Childcare as a Meeting Place in a Swedish City', 43–62; Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*; Waddling (2024), *Playing with the Global*.
[587] Brembeck (1991), *Efter Spock*, 88–89; Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 74–84; Krigh (2019), *Språkstudier som utbildningsstrategi hos grundskoleelever och deras familjer*, 157–158; Laurin, Emma (2021), *Barn med diagnoser: Mödrars och skolors strategier i Stockholm*, 240–244.
[588] Cf. Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 15–16.

CHAPTER 8

Navigating the decision-making process

This chapter is the fourth and final of the thesis' empirical chapters. Building on the analyses from the previous empirical chapters, this chapter returns to the interviews with young adults. With young adults' perception of higher education and its relation to their parents' experiences of education as a foundation, this chapter focuses specifically on the higher education decision-making process. Thus, this chapter uses interviews with young adults in higher education preparatory programmes to answer the thesis' third research question: *How do young adults in higher education preparatory programmes in upper-secondary school navigate a possible pursuit of higher education and what considerations become evident in this process?*

The analyses presented in the two previous empirical chapters indicate that young adults, especially those who attend higher education preparatory programmes and their parents, perceive higher education in relation to employability – a route through which to access a good job and avoid the risk of unemployment. Before a potential entry into higher education, the young adults' general interest in higher education needs to be turned into tangible options. The process of formulating these options includes at least three components: what, where, and when they want to study. It is in the process of answering these questions that the young adults begin limiting the options that they will eventually choose between.

This chapter presents an analysis of what the relevant considerations are for young adults who are in the process of deciding what, where, and when to study. It focuses on the 23 young adults in the sample who attend a preparatory higher education programme. To varying degrees, these young adults are in a process of higher education decision-making, which is analysed throughout this chapter. Thus, while Chapter 6 analysed themes in all of the interviews with young adults, also those who attend vocational programmes or have dropped out of school, this chapter focuses solely on students in upper-secondary school programmes to answer the thesis' third research question.

Where to study

Regardless of where young adults in Söderhamn consider applying to university, those who want to pursue tertiary education are faced with the prospect of leaving their hometown. The question of where to study is the most prevalent component throughout the analysis of the process of deciding on higher education.

To understand how young adults decide where to apply, we must first understand the alternatives they consider in the decision-making process. In an individual interview, it is natural if only a few higher education institutions are mentioned. For example, we do not expect each interviewee to juggle all 50 higher education institutions, their selection is naturally smaller. However, when the patterns in all of the interviews with young adults are analysed, certain higher education institutions are mentioned regularly in the interviews, while others are not mentioned at all. Certain towns and higher education institutions are visible for the young adults, while others lie outside of their point of view. One way to interpret this is to think about it in terms of *horizons*. Although young adults can apply to any higher education institution in Sweden, certain places are more visible on their horizons than others are.

Studies of locations akin to Söderhamn in fields such as migration studies, cultural geography, or rural studies have contributed to our understanding of youth's outmigration, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This research has found that education and work are central motivating factors for why young adults decide to move away from peripheral parts of a country.[589] In this study, outmigration appears as a possible – and sometimes desired – consequence of a potential pursuit of higher education for interviewees in higher education preparatory programmes Mobility is a less common motivator, with education simply a means, although it does occur as was exemplified by Zoey in Chapter 6. Similar to previous studies of small towns and rural places in Sweden[590] and beyond,[591] there are labour market opportunities locally for those who intend to work in manual or less-skilled jobs, making the question of mobility more pressing for those who feel they need a degree to find work.

The following two sections analyse how the young adults reason about where to study. In the process leading up to a decision, mobility is potential and imagined and it involves two connected aspects – the decision to leave home and the choice of a higher education institution, which is intertwined with the geographical place

[589] See for example: Stockdale (2002), 'Towards a Typology of Out-Migration from Peripheral Areas'; Wiborg (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration'; Domina (2006), 'What Clean Break?'; Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?;* Corbett (2007), *Learning to Leave*; Drozdzewski (2008), '"We're Moving Out"'; Bell et al. (2009), 'Rural Society, Social Inclusion and Landscape Change in Central and Eastern Europe'; Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"'.
[590] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 8; Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 168–169; Rönnlund & Tollefsen (2023), 'School-to-Work Transitions in Rural North Sweden', 6–7.
[591] Corbett (2007), *Learning to Leave*.

where interviewees can imagine living for the foreseeable future – a pattern that is familiar from prior research on similar places.[592]

Leaving home

Although the mobility that young adults need to undertake if they want to pursue higher education does not necessarily involve large distances, considering higher education forces them to imagine leaving home. The aspect of losing something in a mobility process is more developed in research on international migration,[593] but should not be overlooked when studying the type of mobility that occurs from places such as Söderhamn. That is, mobility of young people within the same country, over relatively short geographical distances. The idea of leaving something familiar for the unknown is a distinct and important part of how higher education decisions are reasoned about and addressed in this environment. Previous research on youth in rural areas finds similar patterns – a consideration of what to do in the future often involves *where* one imagines going.[594] We will see how leaving home is significant in the decision-making process and although many interviewees have negative feelings about their hometown and want to leave, they seek out higher education institutions located in areas that resemble their home in different ways.

For those who wish to pursue higher education 'on campus', leaving home becomes an inevitability.[595] While many are critical of, and do not seem emotionally attached to, the town or region of Söderhamn, strong family ties to the area are common. Geographical mobility will create a distance between the young adult and their family and friends. The distance created by geographical movement can also be expected to involve a social distance.[596] The pursuit of higher education and a subsequent occupation sets the young adults on a trajectory that might separate them from those who surrounded them throughout their childhood.[597] While moving away to pursue an education and an occupation can be theoretically explained as being socially mobile, or as an accumulation of resources, it also means leaving something familiar behind.

Since mobility in this study is potential and imagined, the interviews touched upon what the young adults might leave behind if they were to pursue higher education. At the time of the interviews, they still lived in Söderhamn and the interviewees' relationship to and feelings relative their town varied. Most had

[592] Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 80.
[593] See for example: Rosenblum, Marc R. & Tichenor, Daniel J. (2012), 'Introduction'.
[594] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 17; Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place. Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 79–81.
[595] Cf. Sørensen & Pless (2017), 'Living on the Periphery of Youth', 11S.
[596] See for example: Wiborg (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration', 420; Gabriel (2006), 'Youth Migration and Social Advancement'; Lindgren & Lundahl (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth'; Rye (2011), 'Youth Migration, Rurality and Class'.
[597] Gabriel (2006), 'Youth Migration and Social Advancement'; Eribon, Didier (2018), *Tillbaka till Reims*; Trondman, *Bilden av en klassresa*. See also: Lundberg, Patrik (2020), *Fjärilsvägen*.

positive experiences of their hometown from when they were children, which confirms Lotta Svensson's findings from a decade earlier,[598] but this sentiment had shifted somewhere between childhood and adolescence. Around the age of 18, most young adults think that there is 'nothing' to do in their hometown[599] but they have difficulty specifying what it is that is missing. This is a feeling that generally exists in many places besides the one studied here, among people at the stage between childhood and adulthood.[600] When it comes to Söderhamn specifically, there is broad agreement that the town has considerable 'issues', especially when it comes to drug distribution and use.[601]

> Anna: How would you describe Söderhamn?
>
> Mikaela: Very small. A lot of, like… there's not much going on. It's small and not much happens, plus, there are a lot of like, junkies there. I know that my sister's very worried when she's in town [...] I've heard that sometimes Söderhamn is called Sweden's Dallas? Detroit? No? Well, something like that [...]
>
> Anna: Is it something that… you notice? I guess, it doesn't seem like you've been involved in that?
>
> Mikaela: No, no, God, no.
>
> Anna: But it's noticeable even if you're not, like, part of it?
>
> Mikaela: Yeah, it is. You notice.
>
> Anna: How do you notice it, then?
>
> Mikaela: But, there's like people around you who, you can tell when they're on something. [...] You can tell straight away, by the eyes and everything.

The above quotation is from the interview with Mikaela who has applied to study at Uppsala University. Her general view of Söderhamn is shared among both the young adults and parents, seemingly traversing class and gender boundaries. Many young adults describe discomfort in relation to the town centre, especially at nighttime:

> Max: For example, in the evenings, when you go out, you see a lot of people standing outside of the shops and that, and you feel uncomfortable. But otherwise, all of the people here, whom I know, they're fantastic. It's just that little bit of discomfort in the evenings that's a bit sad.
>
> Anna: Why… Where does that discomfort come from, then?
>
> Max: Well… there's people who stand outside of a few of the shops and, for example, smoke something and look and shout at you and that. And there might've been

[598] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 102.
[599] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 115.
[600] Cf. Wiborg (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration'; Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 84–90.
[601] See for example: Larsson, Stefan (2020), "Söderhamn värst drabbat av unga som dör i överdoser", *SVT Nyheter*; Canoilas, Viviana (2021), "I "knarkstaden" har 34 mist livet av missbruk de senaste nio åren", *Dagens Nyheter*; Söderhamns kommun (2022), *Användning av droger i Söderhamn: Samma nivå som i övriga landet*.

> arguments and that kind of thing. So that is a bit uncomfortable, but other than that, it's a really nice town.

The problems with drug dealing and use that emerge from the interviews with young adults and parents are not isolated to Söderhamn. To some extent, they have become a characteristic of former industrial communities in Sweden.[602] Some of the interviewees, mostly those who had dropped out of school, were often outspoken about these issues, using the term '*knarkarstad*' – junkie town – when they described their hometown. But, as the quotations above indicate, most of the young adults mention drugs when they are asked to describe their town.

The town's well-documented issues with substance use are a common way for interviewees to exemplify why they do not like Söderhamn or why they want to move away. It is also a manner in which to summarise a feeling that the town is developing in the wrong direction. One suggestion is that drugs are not the only negative aspect of how inhabitants relate to their town. However, it is easy to point to drugs as a proxy for other issues that inhabitants experience. Other problems that add to inhabitants' – both young adults and parents – perception of their town is the negative development of the labour market, that there are fewer jobs locally than before:

> Samir: I think people will move away [from Söderhamn]. But the first reason for that, it's because there's no college here, and there are no jobs. There's almost no jobs here. So that's bad for those who really want to become something, because they can't find it here. So I think that there's a lot of people who don't find what they're looking for here.
>
> *
>
> Anna: How would you describe Söderhamn?
>
> Linus: Well, slowly dying. You could say. A lot of shops close down, that's decreasing. A lot of new places have opened, in the middle of the town square, but I don't know if any of them are serious. So, no, it's heading in the wrong direction, I'd say. But, yeah… Other than that, it's a pretty good town. But if there's anything you need to go and buy, you can't really find it here, you have to go to Gävle or Hudiksvall or Bollnäs.

In different ways, Samir and Linus describe their view that Söderhamn is slowly being drained of jobs, people, and local businesses. Although these negative emotions are common among the young adults, there is ambivalence to how they relate to their hometown, which can be seen in previous studies of small Swedish towns.[603] There are also positive aspects of living in Söderhamn that seem more difficult to formulate. While many interviewees plan or want to move away, others want to stay. The closeness to nature, the ability to buy and own a house, the desire

[602] Cf. Sunnerfjell (2023), *Un-Learning to Labour?*, 91–92.
[603] Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 133.

to live in the countryside and own animals, the ability to stay close to family, and the prospect of raising children are some of the positive aspects that interviewees point to in relation to living and possibly staying in Söderhamn. These results confirm findings in previous research on small communities and towns in Sweden, where nature and the outdoors[604] a sense of security and control,[605] and social ties to family[606] are positive aspects of how young adults perceive their hometowns.

The decision to leave their home for something largely unknown, both geographically and socially, is easy for some and difficult for others. While interviewees do not speak in terms of a social distance being established between themselves and their families, which has been noted in Agnete Wiborg's study of Norwegian students from rural backgrounds,[607] moving away is a complicated decision. Wanting to pursue higher education is often an uncomplicated quest for the interviewees, but venturing into something unfamiliar is complex and creates feelings of ambivalence.

The young adults expecting to move away can be roughly divided into two groups, based on their feelings about leaving. The first group is prepared to move away, but ambivalent about leaving Söderhamn. It is common to see mobility as necessary and wanted, but also to express a sense of losing something in the potential mobility process. In a 2020 article on young adults in lower secondary school in two small towns in Sweden, Maria Rönnlund finds similar patterns, leaving their hometown was 'experienced as essential to get on in life and as *something one must do*.'[608] As can be discerned in interviews with young adults in Söderhamn, the students in Rönnlund's study connected the necessary move with finding work.[609]

Prior research in rural studies suggest that having parents with higher levels of education makes mobility more likely.[610] Furthermore, parents' social class has been noted to matter to young people's decisions to migrate[611] and their perceived ability to stay or leave a small town.[612] Lotta Svensson's 2006 study of Söderhamn found that working-class students were rooted geographically while the middle-class students, especially boys, were more inclined to move away.[613] Typically, the young adults in the sample who belong to the first group of interviewees, those who are prepared to move away but ambivalent, are young adults who know that

[604] Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 8; Rönnlund (2020), "'I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 133; Similar patterns are noticeable in Denmark: Sørensen & Pless (2017), 'Living on the Periphery of Youth', 8S–11S; and Norway: Wiborg (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration'.
[605] Wiborg (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration', 422; Rönnlund (2020), "'I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 133; Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 92–94.
[606] Wiborg (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration', 421.
[607] Wiborg (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration', 421.
[608] Rönnlund (2020), "'I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 131 [Emphasis in original].
[609] Rönnlund (2020), "'I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 131–132.
[610] Corbett (2007), *Learning to Leave*; Rye, 'Youth Migration, Rurality and Class'; Bjarnason & Thorlindsson (2006), 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?'.
[611] Jamieson (2000), 'Migration, Place and Class', 207–211.
[612] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 140.
[613] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*, 144–145.

they have to be geographically mobile in order to pursue higher education. An example is Maryam:

> Anna: But, do you think you will stay here or that you'll move?
>
> Maryam: I think I'll move. I'm a huge fan of big cities, a lot of people all the time, it's open, everything, all the time. [...] I'm a fan, I like it. So maybe, Stockholm, or some very big city, in America for example. New York, or a really, really busy city. I'd want to live there. So, I don't think I'll stay here, no.
>
> Anna: No. What, do you think you'd miss Söderhamn if you move?
>
> Maryam: Yes, of course I will. Like I said, I've lived here for a long time, so I'll miss it.
>
> Anna: Mm. What would you miss, then?
>
> Maryam: I don't actually know what I'd miss. Mostly the feeling of home, really.

Maryam expresses what emerges in several of the interviews when the person feels that it is necessary to move for studies or work – they leave behind a feeling of 'home'. In contrast to the constant of home, geographical mobility is a temporary (or permanent) state of instability. In many ways, the interview material shows that young adults in this local environment seek stability and security. Paradoxically, their long-term pursuit of stability – in how they plan to use higher education to reach a stable position in the occupational structure – may cause short-term instability. The instability lies in entering an unfamiliar geographical and social space and a mostly unfamiliar higher education system.

The second category is a smaller group, consisting of fewer interviewees, who strongly feel that they *have* to leave Söderhamn. The important thing is the leaving, not where they are going. Below is an excerpt from the interview with Bianca, who attends the arts programme with a specialisation in music:

> Anna: Are you thinking you'll stay here or do you want to move?
>
> Bianca: No, I'm not going to stay here. I want to move. But I don't know where. But I'm not going to stay here, because there's so much to do, you need to develop and learn a lot and I don't think that you can do that when you're here all the time.

We can recognise Bianca's way of reasoning from how Zoey, in Chapter 6, reasoned about wanting to move away. Thus, this way of relating to Söderhamn exists among those who want to apply for higher education, albeit to a lesser extent than among those who have dropped out of school. Those who express their desire to leave in this manner often have fewer resources in the sense that they are more likely to have left upper-secondary school without qualifications, and have a less stable family situation, for example, absent parents, divorced parents, or parents who are unemployed.

At the time of the interviews, few saw themselves returning to their hometown if they did decide to move away. In a 2017 study, Lina Bjerke and Charlotta Mellander find that university graduates from rural regions in Sweden who returned

home were 'clearly more likely to have a family and children [...] [and were] also less likely to have a creative job'.[614] Their findings suggest that 'family structure is one of the strongest dividers in determining the location of graduates'.[615] Wanting to move back to rural areas in connection with having children has also been noted in interviews with young adults.[616] Statistically, some interviewees will move back to Söderhamn and this is more likely if they come to have a family and children. However, at the time of the interviews the decision to move away to purse higher education is perceived by many as a permanent decision. Thus, it is a decision that carries a lot of weight for the young adults, and the feelings of ambivalence that many express have to be seen in the light of this permanence.

Horizons of higher education institutions

Although many Swedish higher education institutions offer distance education, it is only mentioned sporadically in the interviews. The general understanding is that pursuing higher education will entail geographical mobility to the place where one wants to study. The geographical place appears as a tangible 'variable' in the process of deciding on higher education, while specific higher education programmes are harder to assess and compare for young adults in this context.

A common view of mobility in relation to higher education among the young adults is to avoid moving too far away. Given that many have a negative perception of Söderhamn, as we saw in the previous section, it appears paradoxical that they want to remain close to the town where they are from. Therefore, it is necessary to separate the young adults' perception of the town – which is often negative – and their strong connection to their home place,[617] which is often discernable in how they talk about family and friends in Söderhamn. Essentially, their social ties to the community where they are from matter to how they perceive the choice of where to study.[618]

Choosing to study somewhere that is close to Söderhamn can be understood as a way to handle the perceived permanency of the move. Leaving home becomes easier if the destination is not too far away geographically, and appears familiar and safe in some way.[619] In previous research, staying geographically close to the home is a common constraint on higher education choice among working-class students in the United Kingdom.[620] Similar patterns are recognisable among Swedish students'

[614] Bjerke, Lina & Mellander, Charlotta (2017), 'Moving Home Again? Never! The Locational Choices of Graduates in Sweden', 726.
[615] Bjerke & Mellander (2017), 'Moving Home Again? Never! The Locational Choices of Graduates in Sweden', 726.
[616] Beach & Öhrn (2021), "Arbetsmarknad, utbildningsval och möjligheter på landsbygden", 61.
[617] Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 127–130.
[618] Beach & Puaca (2014), 'Changing Higher Education by Converging Policy-Packages', 72.
[619] Cf. Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 90–91.
[620] Pugsley (1998), 'Throwing Your Brains at It'; Reay (1998), ''Always Knowing' and 'Never Being Sure''; Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 860–861; Brooks (2002), ''Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?', 224.

choice of a higher education institution, 'distance to university acts as a constraining factor for individuals from manual labor backgrounds'.[621] Geographical distance appears to function as a constraint among young adults in preparatory programmes. Many interviewees plan to apply to the closest university college in Gävle:

> Raoul: I want to try and get into the real estate brokering programme in Gävle [...]
>
> Anna: How… why Gävle?
>
> Raoul: Why Gävle specifically, that's because I've been on a study visit to Gävle and looked, also at other places. And looked like at the college and that. And I think Gävle is a really good, like, city. I think, not too big, not too small. It kind of has everything you need.
>
> Anna: Mm. What other places have you looked at then?
>
> Raoul: Um… I've been down to look at, like, Uppsala and that. I've looked around at schools there. But Gävle sounds most appealing.

The excerpt above shows a common way of thinking about why the university college in Gävle is a good option for tertiary education: it is geographically close, which means it is not too far away from home. Gävle is also commutable for the small number of interviewees who do not want to move away in the pursuit of higher education. Generally, interviewees have visited Gävle before and this familiarity makes it easier to imagine moving to and living there. Another reason for why the University of Gävle is popular, which the quotation above shows, is that the upper-secondary school has ties to the regional university college. Several young adults and parents mention study visits to the University of Gävle, as did the guidance counsellor for the higher education preparatory programmes when I spoke to her.

For Raoul, the University of Gävle was the only option he was considering. For other interviewees, going to Gävle is one alternative among several others. The following interviewee also wants to remain geographically close to Söderhamn, but considers other alternatives besides the University of Gävle:

> Anna: So, when you applied, did you apply to more than the compulsory school teacher programme? Did you apply to any other?
>
> Mikaela: Yes, I've applied for the compulsory school teacher programme in Uppsala first, then in Gävle and then in Sundsvall.
>
> Anna: Okay. How… What was your thinking then? With those, like, Uppsala, Gävle, Sundsvall?
>
> Mikaela: I mostly thought that it's close to home, so if I want to go home I can just take the train and go home. So it was mostly that, that it was close to home, because I could never move to Umeå, it's too far away from home. From Uppsala it's only

[621] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 842.

> like an hour and a half home. And from Gävle it would take 40 minutes and from Sundsvall, like an hour.
>
> Anna: What made you have Uppsala first?
>
> Mikaela: Because I think it seems like a good school and also, some of my family live in Uppsala.

In the excerpt above, from the interview with Mikaela, it is clear that her decision on where to apply is partly based on how far away from home she is prepared to move. We can recognise the negotiating of geographical distance from interviews with working-class students in the United Kingdom.[622] The University of Gävle, Mid Sweden University, and Uppsala University are her options and although Umeå University is part of her horizon, she considers it too far away from Söderhamn to be a realistic choice. Uppsala University, one of the old research universities, is an option to Mikaela for two reasons: it is relatively close to home and she has family there. Uppsala University appears familiar and more similar to home than it does for many other interviewees in the sample. Although Uppsala University is geographically close to Söderhamn, it is uncommon for interviewees to consider studying there.[623] Mikaela's prior familiarity with Uppsala makes the university part of her horizon. She also mentions that Uppsala University 'seems like a good school' in relation to having chosen it as her first option. However, it seems that the geographical proximity to Söderhamn and her familial ties to the town were the more important factors in her decision-making.

Another recurring way of thinking about distance, mobility, and higher education is to apply – or plan to apply – for various programmes at the same institution, to ensure a move to a specific place. We saw this line of thinking in how Gabriel reasoned in Chapter 6, and several other interviewees reason in similar ways:

> Aron: I've applied for a programme in business administration and economics at loads of different schools. Applied to Umeå, the first three choices. First, I applied for a programme in business administration and economics and then I chose several different specialisations to like have a better chance at getting into Umeå. Then I guess there was Linköping, Örebro, Jönköping. [...]
>
> Anna: What's like, your impression of Umeå University then, like in general?
>
> Aron: It seems, I've heard a lot of good things about the city and the university. It's a good university. [...]
>
> Anna: But how, when you, because you said that you were on studera.nu [the online application platform for higher education] and looked around? Did you sort of just think you could get into Umeå or was it other things? Like, what drew you towards Umeå?
>
> Aron: No, I mean, I wanted a good university. And it felt like Umeå is that, compared to like, I don't know, Kalmar or Kristianstad, or something like that. I don't know.

[622] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 861.
[623] Including Mikaela, three interviewees in higher education preparatory programmes mention Uppsala University as an option.

> Then there's the thing with friends of course, friends went there and it was, it looked like a good programme too.
>
> Anna: What would a like, worse university be then?
>
> Aron: A bit like… You almost look at the admissions grades first. Ok, this was low, why is it low? Do you look at universities? Maybe… I don't know. I don't really know what a good or bad university is. [...] There were a few cities that you hadn't even heard of. Or like, where is that? No idea. But I don't know, the admission statistics is maybe because Umeå is a bigger city, because of that maybe people choose to study there or are drawn there, people maybe live there more. Linköping is a good student town I've heard, a lot of people are drawn to that. The grades you need to get in become higher.
>
> *
>
> Oscar: Once I finish school, I'm hopefully going to Linköping to study a programme in business administration and economics there. [...]
>
> Anna: Why Linköping then?
>
> Oscar: I've chosen Linköping because I've heard it's a really good school. I have acquaintances who've been there and studied and they like the school a lot. Then, Linköping also offers six months of study abroad if you want to. [...]
>
> Anna: Are you choosing between, are you aiming for, is it Linköping? Or do you have other choices as well?
>
> Oscar: It's Linköping that I'm aiming for, actually. But I could imagine studying in Jönköping too, or some other place [if my grades aren't good enough]. [...]
>
> Anna: When you think about Linköping, is it mostly like that it's a good programme or are you thinking you want to go to Linköping specifically?
>
> Oscar: I mean I think the education is the same regardless of what school you go to, actually. But then it's mostly the school and the city that I am aiming for. And that they offer, that you have access to studies abroad, not all schools offer that.

The two interviewees quoted above are both in the economics programme at upper-secondary school and both want to continue by pursuing studies in business administration and economics.[624] Both Aron and Oscar primarily mention the quality of the university and the programme, but it seems that their choice is largely influenced by the geographical place where they prefer to study – similarly to Mikaela and Raoul quoted above. The higher education institution or specific programme on the one hand, and the city or town where it is located on the other, are difficult to separate when they reason about where to apply.

In the excerpts above, Aron and Oscar give insight into how they have decided that Umeå University and Linköping University are their preferred choices. In both cases, friends and acquaintances who have applied or are already studying there, appear important to why these specific higher education institutions are relevant to

[624] In Swedish: civilekonomexamen.

them.[625] Knowing what other institutions they are considering helps in understanding their horizons. Besides Umeå University, Aron mentions Linköping, Örebro, and Jönköping University as well as Kristianstad University, and Linnæus University in Kalmar. Oscar mentions Jönköping University in addition to his preferred choice, Linköping University. A particular horizon appears, Aron includes several university colleges, spread over large geographical distances, and both Oscar and Aron mention Jönköping University. Jönköping University is one of the few higher education institutions in Sweden that is managed as a private foundation. Furthermore, the university has an international business school, which might be the reason for why both interviewees are aware of this option. Among the higher education institutions that Aron and Oscar are choosing between, both prefer the oldest higher education institution with the status of a university (rather than a university college).

Neither Aron nor Oscar have parents who went to university, yet, they display a sense of the differences in status between the universities and university colleges that they are choosing between. Aron expresses it as wanting to attend 'a good university' and Oscar prefers to attend what he perceives as 'a good school'. When asked further, what they mean by this, they have similar answers – they are not sure what a good university or school is, or at least, they do not verbalise it in the interview. Oscar later says, 'the education is the same regardless of what school you go to, actually' and Aron says that 'I don't really know what a good or bad university is'. Although they are unable to specify it, their reasoning and their preferences suggest that they know what a 'good university' is when they see one.

Both Aron and Oscar implicitly express that there are differences between the higher education institutions that they are choosing between, but they have difficulty being explicit about what these differences entail or how to distinguish them. The idea of 'the good university' is present in research on non-traditional applicants to higher education.[626] However, compared to the students that Reay et al. study, Aron and Oscar are much less explicit about what a good university is for them and the anxiety and difficulty that some students in Reay et al.'s study describe in terms of 'fitting in' is absent in their reasoning.[627]

Aron mentions the grades required to be accepted to a programme as a way to separate good and bad universities, and together with the location, this seems to be how he navigates the decision of where to apply. The next excerpt is from the interview with Kira, one of three young adults in the sample whose reasoning is focused on the academic aspects of where she wants to study – the institution and the programme. Her reasoning is similar to how Aron and Oscar reason, with the difference that the location is of very little concern to her. The three interviewees who reason in this way have at least one parent who attended university and they aim for 'prestigious' higher education institutions and programmes. These are

[625] Brooks (2002), '"Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?"', 219.
[626] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?'.
[627] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 865–868.

highly ranked old research universities, combined with a long study programme with a high degree of competition for admission that leads to highly skilled occupations. Kira wants to study law:

> Anna: Do you know where you're applying for?
>
> Kira: The problem for me right now is that I just want to get in. That's my thinking. [The grades you need to get in are] high enough that I'm thankful as long as I get in somewhere. So, I'm going to apply to all of them, that's what I'll do.
>
> Anna: But where would you rather go then?
>
> Kira: I'd prefer I think, my first choice is going to be Lund. But that feels a bit impossible. [laughs] But I'm hoping for Uppsala or Gothenburg.
>
> Anna: Okay. Why would you rather get in to Lund then?
>
> Kira: Well [laughs] What I feel is, Lund is, it's a very like, it's hard to get in. [...] It's a bit like, well, it's, it's a difficult school to get in to, that's pretty cool, that's sort of how you think. Of course you want to go to the good schools, so you want to try.

Kira mentions the geographical places where she would prefer to study, but does so in a different manner than previously quoted interviewees in this section. Similar to Aron and Oscar, Kira is concerned with getting into a 'good school'.[628] Mikaela, above, also mentioned studying at a 'good school', but was at the same time concerned with not having to move too far away from Söderhamn. Kira, and two other interviewees, stand out compared to the vast majority of interviewees in the study, whose reasoning often involves aspects of, for example, staying close to home, studying somewhere familiar, studying in a 'good student town', or applying to where friends have applied. Although several interviewees consider applying to one of the old Swedish universities, it is rare to mention institutions that are far away geographically, such as Lund University. Furthermore, what is even less common is the combination of applying for an old university and a long study programme where there is a high degree of competition for admission, such as law. Apart from Kira, the sample contains Max (who we met in Chapter 6) who wants to apply for medicine at Karolinska Institute, and August who wants to study physics at KTH Royal Institute of Technology. Max and August were in the earlier stages of their upper-secondary education, whereas Kira was interviewed a few months before she planned to apply to university and was speaking as if she had already filled out the application. Max and August attend the natural sciences programme and Kira attends the economics programme, all three have at least one parent who attended university.

The informal knowledge that young adults have, or do not have, affects how they navigate the decision-making process.[629] The more information young adults

[628] Cf. Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 865–868.
[629] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 287–294; Beach & Puaca (2014), 'Changing Higher Education by Converging Policy-Packages'.

have, the more aware they are of both risks and returns of higher education.[630] Those who are equipped with knowledge about the educational system are likely to find higher education institutions and programmes 'with inherent returns that are not publicly known'.[631] In a 2003 article, comparing siblings' choice of higher education institution, Lena Lindahl and Håkan Regnér find that choosing a traditional institution rather than a newly established university college will maximise earnings later on. Graduating from one of the old Swedish universities established before 1965 is associated with higher earnings.[632]

Thus, young adults' overviews of the higher education system and the institutions at its core are partial; certain universities and university colleges appear as highly likely choices and others are out of sight for the interviewees. One way of understanding what contributes to the likelihood of young adults mentioning a specific university or university college is to look at where inhabitants with higher education in Söderhamn have studied. Others' experience of higher education at a specific institution is likely to make that option visible and part of a common horizon in Söderhamn.

Chapter 5 displayed the higher education institutions that are most frequently attended by inhabitants in Söderhamn. The university college in Gävle is, by far, the most frequently attended higher education institution among those who have attended university in Söderhamn; 38 per cent chose to study there. This is reflected in the interviews with young adults, the University of Gävle is an often mentioned choice. It is also clear, by looking at where the inhabitants of Söderhamn have attended university or university college, that these higher education institutions are often located geographically close to Söderhamn. Over 65 per cent of inhabitants to have attended university went to a higher education institution located less than 200 kilometres from Söderhamn.

Among the interviewees who mention remaining geographically close to Söderhamn as a priority, Umeå University is among the most common places mentioned. It is also the fourth most common higher education institution for residents of Söderhamn. Although Umeå University is further away than many other options, it is perceived as similar to Söderhamn, in some ways. Interviewees who want to apply to Umeå view it as a small town and they value the possibility of moving to somewhere that does not feel like a big city.[633] Furthermore, interviewees seem much more inclined to consider moving further north and attend one of the few universities located north of their hometown. The social space that they grew up within seems to

[630] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality' 813.
[631] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality' 813.
[632] Lindahl, Lena & Regnér, Håkan (2005), 'College Choice and Subsequent Earnings: Results Using Swedish Sibling Data', 456–457.
[633] Cf. how interviewees contrast the small town and big cities in: Sørensen & Pless (2017), 'Living on the Periphery of Youth', 7S; Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 130–131; Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 94–96.

have shaped dispositions that lead them to favour smaller university towns in the north of Sweden, rather than large cities or university towns in the south.[634]

When the young adults consider higher education, they are faced with imagining geographical mobility and leaving their home. In choosing where to study, they express preferences for remaining close to family and friends,[635] or orient themselves towards places that feel familiar. This aspect of higher education choice has been found in previous Swedish research. Dennis Beach and Goran Puaca find that 'maintaining long-term relationships and commitments (to a place and its people)' matters for how *semi-skilled choosers* decide where to study.[636] Those who Beach and Puaca refer to as semi-skilled choosers – in contrast to skilled choosers – had lower levels of cultural and economic capital and more often had to make educational choices for practical reasons, such as being a parent, or needing to find work in a local labour market.[637]

The young adults in preparatory programmes express values related to their families and social ties. The families are often tight-knit, with extended family, older siblings, cousins, and grandparents a short distance away – and remaining close to this family unit is an important value that conflicts with moving away from Söderhamn.[638] Herein lies an explanation for why young adults orient themselves toward certain higher education institutions: a way in which to bridge the inevitable mobility with the need and want to remain close by is to opt for educational opportunities geographically close to home.

What to study

The aspect of what to study is, naturally, an important part of what young adults consider when they are in the process of deciding on higher education. However, in interviews with young adults in Söderhamn it is often less prominent than the previous question of where they want to study. When young adults consider what they want to study at university, there are certain aspects that contribute to how they formulate what programmes they are choosing between.[639]

The upper-secondary school programme chosen at an earlier point in time is an important part of understanding why certain higher education programmes appear as options while others do not. One aspect of this is formal, the admission requirements to specific higher education programmes will make pupils eligible or

[634] Cf. Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 90–91.
[635] Cf. Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place. Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 72–73.
[636] Beach & Puaca (2014), 'Changing Higher Education by Converging Policy-Packages', 72.
[637] Beach & Puaca (2014), 'Changing Higher Education by Converging Policy-Packages', 71–72.
[638] Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 84–90.
[639] Swedish higher education consists of programmes and freestanding courses. None of the interviewees spoke about or mentioned freestanding courses as an alternative, therefore, I consistently use the term programmes to reflect their reasoning and manner of speaking.

ineligible, depending on their grades and the courses[640] that are included in the upper-secondary programme they attended.[641] The second aspect of how the upper-secondary programme affects the choice of degree is informal and is part of the student's own perception – the horizon of options that appear possible or desirable.

The analysis below focuses on the latter of the two aspects mentioned above – the interviewees' horizons and the alternatives they perceive when it comes to choosing a higher education programme. However, part of what affects their horizons is the upper-secondary programme they chose and it is difficult to understand why certain options are prominent if we are to disregard the formal constraints that the choice of an upper-secondary school puts on the choice of a higher education programme.

Finding a 'good job'

Young adults in this study perceive higher education as a way of accessing stable employment, a tendency that is familiar from research on similar places in Sweden.[642] Thus, the education system becomes a way to reach or consolidate an economic position. Young adults perceive it as way of avoiding the risk of unemployment and as something to 'get done' on their way to becoming adults, whether that means having children, or being financially independent from their parents. Interviewees in different class positions – based on their parents' education and subsequent occupation – share the same fundamental view of why higher education is relevant and have a noticeably homogeneous view of the need for and value of higher education.[643]

Compared to pupils in vocational programmes, interviewees in higher education preparatory programmes have a less precise idea about what they want to work with. Those attending higher education preparatory programmes study programmes with a less defined labour market, such as economics, natural sciences, or social sciences, and most imagine needing and pursuing higher education before they can find employment. Thus, permanent work or a career likely lies several years away for those who attend higher education preparatory programmes, while pupils in vocational programmes are often already on work placement, doing what they might work with after finishing upper-secondary school.

The time between the interview and the time when the interviewee expects to be in employment is thus a contributing factor to how tangible their idea of a future occupation is. However, other factors contribute to the vague idea of what a good job is for those who study higher education preparatory programmes. The low level

[640] For example, a pupil who has attended the economics programme is not qualified to apply to study medicine.
[641] SOU 2017:20, *Tillträde för nybörjare: Ett öppnare och enklare system för tillträde till högskoleutbildning: Betänkande*, 121–127.
[642] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility''; Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 72.
[643] This perception of higher education in Söderhamn is described and analysed in Chapter 6.

of education in Söderhamn means that working in certain occupations and labour market sectors is very unusual, compared to urban areas.[644] This, in turn, means that many young adults are unlikely to have met an adult who has studied or worked with what they imagine pursuing. This creates an unfamiliarity and a vagueness in relation to what certain programmes and occupations entail. The quotation below is typical of how a future occupation is spoken about among those who study a preparatory programme. They often have an idea about what they want to study and work with, but it is vague and involves uncertainty:

> Anna: What are your thoughts about, what do you want to do after upper-secondary school?
>
> Fredrik: I mean, I've had so many ideas, but I have no idea right now. Before, I wanted to become a, like, an engineer or something like that. But now I have no idea about what to study, or what to do, something towards music. Really no idea.
>
> Anna: What made you think about engineering then?
>
> Fredrik: Well, because my brother is studying to become a mechanical engineer now, so I don't know, I got a little… And he's always been very into that and I've, like, looked up to him, so…

The quotation above shows how complicated it can be to know and decide what to study and work with. Fredrik's parents did not attend university, his mother works within social services and his father runs his own consultancy company, working with industry. Again, we see that a sibling, who has already chosen a path toward a particular occupation, makes that trajectory and occupation visible and concrete.[645] Nevertheless, deciding on a future degree and occupation in this way involves a level of arbitrariness – the interviewee above mentions studying engineering or music, two very different educational trajectories with very different labour market outcomes.

Uncertainty about what to study and therefore, what to work with in the future, does not affect all interviewees in preparatory programmes. There are a few examples of young adults who are certain about what they want to work with in the future:

> Anna: But you're thinking that you want to be a police officer?
>
> Amir: Mm… I will be a police officer.
>
> Anna: You will be a police officer. How come?
>
> Amir: I don't know, I've always wanted to work with that, I don't know.
>
> Anna: Since you were little?
>
> Amir: Yeah. And I find it very interesting.
>
> Anna: What is interesting about it?

[644] Cf. Rönnlund (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay"', 124.
[645] Rönnlund (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future', 70–71.

> Amir: Yeah, well… Why people do what they do. I mean, I want to see, well, a bit of excitement in my day to day life [...]
>
> Anna: When you're thinking about being a police officer, do you want to like…?
>
> Amir: Help people. Yes.
>
> Anna: But are you thinking you want to be a detective or…?
>
> Amir: I'm going to work as a police officer for three, four years. And then I'm going to study criminology. And immerse myself in criminology.

Amir's father works as a sheet metal worker and his mother works in a preschool; neither has attended university. Amir is certain about what he wants to work with and therefore, what higher education he wants to pursue. It is unusual for the young adults to know both what and where they want to study, as well as the specific target occupation. Another similar example is Patrik, who wants to work as a land surveyor:

> Anna: So what are your thoughts after upper-secondary school, then. What do you think you'll do?
>
> Patrik: Well, get into the land surveyor programme in Gävle.
>
> Anna: Okay. And that's at Gävle university [sic]?
>
> Patrik: Yes, it is.
>
> Anna: Okay. What… and you become a land surveyor then, I guess?
>
> Patrik: Yes. Work at Lantmäteriet [Swedish land surveying authority]. Yes, they measure plots and property and estimate the value.
>
> Anna: How did you figure out that's what you want to do?
>
> Patrik: I know someone who studies there. Who strongly recommends it. When I heard about that labour market and the subject you study, I thought 'This suits me'.

Patrik's father used to work as an electrician and his mother works for the Swedish Public Employment Service; neither has attended university. Similar to how engineering was an option for Fredrik because of his older sibling, the land surveyor programme was recommended to Patrik by someone he knows. Apart from the feeling that it 'suits him',[646] he also mentions the labour market opportunities for land surveyors as a reason for why he wants to choose that programme. These two excerpts are examples of the type of occupations that are common for the young adults to aim for. When interviewees can specify an occupation that they want to work within, it is typically work within a *welfare profession* or *new profession*, for example, nursing, teaching, and social work.[647] Interviewees also mention occupations that can be classified as *pre-professions*, for

[646] Cf. the importance of fitting in and 'knowing one's academic place': Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 863–865.
[647] These occupations have historically been referred to as semi-professions. See: Brante, Svensson, & Svensson (2019), "Inledning", 27–28.

example, estate agents. To lesser degree interviewees mention working within a *profession*, such as law and medicine.[648]

Thus, for many young adults in Söderhamn, the 'good job' that they imagine higher education will lead them to is employment within a welfare profession or new profession, many times within the public welfare sector.[649] These types of occupations have concrete, tangible tasks, and there is often a higher education programme directly connected to the specific occupation. Another aspect of these types of occupations is that they have existed for a long time, in contrast to occupations within, for example, information and technology, or finance, which are, historically, newer and rarely mentioned by the interviewees.

Interviewees who have dropped out of school often have plans and expectations of the future that are disconnected from their current situation; rather than concrete plans, they often express dreams about the future. We can recognise this in how Tess expressed herself in Chapter 6. However, they resemble interviewees in preparatory programmes in that both groups think primarily about working within a profession, or in something perceived as a profession – they seek out the security of a qualified and well-defined position in the labour market.

The strive toward a well-defined and concrete occupation, makes young men and women perceive certain pathways as routes to a profession, even though they are not. For example, studying business administration and economics is perceived to lead to a well-defined occupation and job market. The same can be said for criminology, which is an often-mentioned choice in the interviews, with interviewees believing that criminologists work with solving crimes. The perception of higher education as a route to employment leads to the view that any higher education will qualify you for a specific position in the labour market. Those who aim and apply for general higher education programmes such as economics, sociology, or biology, expecting their studies to result in a specific occupation risk confusion or disappointment at some point during, or after, their studies.

The focus that interviewees have on working within a profession or semi-profession reflects the structure of the Swedish higher education system. In an analysis of Växjö University (now Linnæus University) Gunnar Olofsson distinguishes between traditional universities, new universities, and regional university colleges.[650] If we use Olofsson's typology to analyse the higher education institutions that are commonly mentioned by interviewees in Söderhamn, Uppsala University is a traditional university, Örebro University and Mid Sweden University are new universities,[651] and University of Gävle is a regional university college. At one end of the spectrum, traditional universities offer programmes for the traditional professions (for example, medicine and law), at the other end of the spectrum,

[648] Brante, Svensson, & Svensson (2019), "Inledning", 27–32.
[649] Brante, Svensson, & Svensson (2019), "Inledning", 28.
[650] In the typology, Lund University is an example of a traditional university, Linnæus University is classified as a new university, and Halmstad and Kristianstad University are examples of regional university colleges.
[651] Olofsson (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?", 277.

regional university colleges do not offer any programmes for the traditional professions, some for semi-professions, and many programmes for what Olofsson refers to as 'new vocational programmes'[652]. The new vocational programmes attract students who want to work as police officers, estate agents, within tourism, etc.[653]

Olofsson's typology can be used to analyse what the young adults in Söderhamn want to study. Although traditional professions are mentioned by some of the interviewees, wanting to apply to new vocational programmes and programmes that lead to work within a semi-profession is much more common. Among the few interviewees who want to pursue a traditional profession, there is a mix of mentioning the new universities and the traditional universities. Many interviewees who are interested in new vocational programmes, for example, the real estate agent programme, orient themselves toward regional university colleges, typically the University of Gävle. Those who are interested in semi-professions, for example, police, teacher, nurse, orient themselves toward new universities and university colleges. Thus, young adults' preferences for what they want to study generally match the type of higher education institution that typically offers the type of programme that they are interested in.

Employability and job values

The young adults' tendencies to connect higher education with labour market participation has been described from several angles in this and the previous Chapter 6. This perception was mirrored in parents' views of their own and their children's educational trajectories in Chapter 7. The notion that tertiary education leads to labour market opportunities and that further education is required for a stable position in the labour market is not a phenomenon isolated to the specific environment studied here. Previous studies on similar environments in Sweden show the same tendency, of valuing higher education's ability to lead to employment.[654]

One of the most important aspects of why young adults in Söderhamn want to pursue higher education is therefore their motivation to find a work. Higher education is valued since it is perceived to lead to employment, salary, financial independence, security and stability. The absence of higher education, on the other hand, entails risk, mostly the risk of unemployment. The higher education decision-making process is guided by instrumental values connected to a position on the labour market. In the education-scarce environment studied here, the higher education system is not seen as hierarchical, which is mirrored in how most interviewees do not generally place any specific value on the academic aspect of the institutions they are choosing between.[655] What matters is entering into higher education and receiving a degree that functions as a stamp of approval on the labour

[652] In Swedish: Nya slags yrkesutbildningar.
[653] Olofsson (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?", 279–281.
[654] Ward (2015), *From Labouring to Learning*, 92; Forsberg, S. (2017), "The Right to Immobility", 11–12; Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*, 123–125.
[655] Cf. Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291–294.

market – a tendency that has been noted in earlier studies on higher education choice in Sweden.[656]

The choice of what to study is thus related to the young adults' perceptions of 'a good job' and can be interpreted as an expression of wanting to become employable, or perhaps more to the point, avoiding a state of being unemployable.[657] A potential pursuit of higher education seems to increase young adults' subjective feeling of being employable.[658] By deciding to enter into higher education, their sense of being in control of whether they can find employment increases. However, there is little reflection throughout the interviews on objective aspects of employability, for example, the labour market demand for certain occupations and how this might affect what they want to study.[659] On the other hand, many young adults aim for higher education programmes that lead to welfare professions, most of which have a stable and consistent demand for employees. A notable exception to the overall pattern of aiming for work in a welfare profession is the commonly mentioned alternative of studying business and economics, which I will return to below.

Thus, a tendency throughout the navigation of higher education is aiming to make oneself employable by entering into tertiary education. What the young adults want to study is implicitly a weighing of the risks and rewards of choosing a specific study programme. Typically, the young adults prefer programmes that lead to secure employment and a clearly defined labour market – indicative of what prior research has termed *bureaucratic job values.* In a 2003 article, Charles Halaby identifies and explains 'how late-life adult beliefs regarding the importance of core job properties like pay, autonomy, job security, and the like are rooted in the major dimensions of social origin' such as family background.[660] Halaby builds on Miller and Swanson's[661] distinction between *entrepreneurial* and *bureaucratic* job values. Entrepreneurial jobs can render great rewards, but are risky, and in contrast, bureaucratic jobs are stable, guarantee security but only provide modest rewards.[662] Halaby finds that agents mix these values by weighing expected returns against expected risk – and the perception of risk is rooted in elements such as family background. 'Parental education, occupational status, self-employment, and income all press in the direction of entrepreneurial over bureaucratic job properties'.[663]

The typology and the results from Halaby's study can help understand young adults' perceptions of what a 'good job' is, and therefore what they want to study. Bureaucratic values are more prevalent among the young adults who were interviewed – most want to pursue higher education in order to access a secure job

[656] Beach & Puaca (2014), 'Changing Higher Education by Converging Policy-Packages', 74.
[657] Garsten & Jacobsson (2004), 'Learning To Be Employable: An Introduction', 8.
[658] Berntson (2015), 'Market-Oriented Relationships in Working Life', 128.
[659] This can be compared and contrasted to young adults in vocational programmes' reasoning about labour market demand and salary expectations, exemplified in the interview with Moa in Chapter 6.
[660] Halaby (2003), 'Where Job Values Come From', 251.
[661] Miller, Daniel Robert (1958), *The Changing American Parent: A Study in the Detroit Area.*
[662] Halaby (2003), 'Where Job Values Come From', 254.
[663] Halaby (2003), 'Where Job Values Come From', 275.

market. However, many also emphasise high pay and a 'higher up job', or esteem as Halaby puts it.[664] In line with Halaby's findings, the young adults in Söderhamn mix entrepreneurial and bureaucratic job values in their preferences for a higher education programme and a subsequent occupation. Despite the emphasis on a high paying job and working with something that is 'higher up', there is a clear tendency among the young adults to avoid educational programmes that entail more risk in relation to a subsequent employment.

A commonly mentioned alternative is a Study Programme in Business Administration and Economics, a four-year programme that several of those who attend the economics programme in upper-secondary school mention. We saw this option mentioned by Gabriel and Jenny in Chapter 6, and by Aron and Oscar earlier in this chapter. The option of studying business administration and economics stands out in that it is does not lead to a welfare profession, and is more connected to entrepreneurial job values than, for example, policing or teaching. The labour market demand for those who have a degree in business and economics is favourable,[665] and the choice is therefore not fraught with risk for the young adults who consider it. However, it is relevant to consider the values that are expressed in relation to this, somewhat more unusual and risky choice, given the local labour market and social context of Söderhamn. Apart from the bureaucratic job values that are expressed by almost all of the young adults – regardless of whether they are in a vocational or preparatory programme, or if they have dropped out of school – there are instances of entrepreneurial job values, but they are almost entirely connected to economic gains; that is, a high salary and becoming economically successful. In some cases, when young adults in preparatory programmes perceive that there is potential to find employment that pays well, they are prepared to assume some level of risk. That risk can mean choosing a Study Programme in Business Administration and Economics at a higher education institution located far away from Söderhamn, for example in Jönköping or Umeå, and where the chance of finding work locally in Söderhamn is much more restricted than if one were to choose policing, nursing, or teaching. Which means that the move away from Söderhamn is likely permanent.

While riskier options that might lead to economic gains are present throughout the interviews with young adults in preparatory programmes, options connected to cultural production are largely absent. Wanting to study, for example, journalism, art, or humanities is almost non-existent, despite the fact that eight of the interviewees attended the arts programme with a specialisation in music. Although these interviewees sometimes mention wanting to study and work with music, as Fredrik did in the beginning of this section, it is rarely expressed as a viable option. Educational and occupational trajectories connected to cultural spheres that entail a lot of risk, such as music, are not seen as realistic alternatives for the young adults studied here.

[664] Halaby (2003), 'Where Job Values Come From', 258.
[665] SACO, *Civilekonom: Information om lön, arbetsmarknad, utbildning etc.*

Regardless of the interviewee's social background, the motivations for higher education are instrumental and young adults orient themselves toward programmes that are perceived as stepping-stones to positions in the labour market. None of the young adults in this study express that they want to pursue higher education in order to learn something new or engage in an intellectual environment. Although it is perhaps unrealistic to expect young adults to pursue higher education solely on the basis of ideas of *Bildung*,[666] the absence of any competing ideals or motivations for higher studies is noteworthy.

When to study

Where, and to a lesser extent, what to study are the most prominent components of the process that potentially leads up to making a decision on university studies. The third component is the question of when to study. Interviewees typically have less to say on the matter of when they plan to begin their studies and therefore this part of the chapter is less extensive then the previous two. Regardless, the timing of any potential studies is an equally important part of the decision itself. The studies that interviewees plan to pursue begin at a specific point in time and the question here is *when* do they want to enter into higher education, once they have finished upper-secondary school.

The question of when to study is a part of the decision-making process that is more prominent the closer the young adults are to finishing upper-secondary school. Before reaching the end of their schooling, few have any concrete thoughts on the timing of their studies. Therefore, those at the end of a preparatory programme employ more explicit reasoning about when to apply for and begin higher studies and the analysis here is focused on those students.

Higher education as a continuation of school

The most common answer to the question of when interviewees want or plan to begin studying is immediately after upper-secondary school. That would typically mean applying for higher education in the April of the last year of upper-secondary school, finishing in June. Admissions results are sent in July or August, and studies begin in early September. Several of the young adults in the sample were interviewed in the spring of their final year in upper-secondary school and had already applied.

Although the share of young adults in Söderhamn who begin higher education in the autumn after upper-secondary school is relatively low, many interviewees consider that the best option:

[666] Gadamer, Hans-Georg (2018), 'The Idea of the University: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow', 123–126.

> Anna: Would you prefer to start in the autumn or would you prefer to take a break and do something else?
>
> Anton: At the moment, I'd prefer to start in the autumn. Cause then it feels like I'll get it done. But… It wouldn't matter so much if I worked for a year or two. And then continued.
>
> Anna: What are the pros and cons of that, then?
>
> Anton: Well, the upside of starting straight away is, I guess, well, that you get it done. And… I'm not too tired of school, but… I could become tired of school, I guess that's the downside. If you don't have the energy to study. The upside of working, you earn money. [...] The downside of that I guess is that you get stuck working and nothing comes of it. That's happened to a lot of people I know.
>
> *
>
> Anna: But you want to start straight away?
>
> Raoul: Yes, I do. I'd prefer that.
>
> Anna: Mm. How come?
>
> Raoul: Number one, it's because, for example, my sisters have studied straight away and they're like young now and have very good jobs. [...] And I feel like, I want to have a secure footing somewhere, I wouldn't want to like, take a gap year and travel and that. I feel like I'm very young, like three years studying is like nothing. [...] And I also feel like, I'm very dependent on, if I get stuck in like, a basic job, like working in a restaurant, that's like easy money and then you can do fun stuff, like travel. I'd probably become pretty comfortable with that, I'd imagine, so it would probably not be, I don't know… I think I want to continue following this dream of becoming an estate agent.

Even though many of the young adults express a tiredness with school and studying, planning to enter into higher education in the autumn after finishing upper-secondary school is common. Anton and Raoul are two of many examples and several of the interviewees in the previous Chapter 6 were also planning to continue their studies immediately after finishing upper-secondary school.

Although it is highly unlikely that all those who state that they want to pursue higher education in the autumn after upper-secondary school will do so, it is relevant that it is considered a good option. The reasoning behind pursuing higher education straight away is connected to the fact that interviewees see higher studies as the route to employment. The interviews give other indications of the strong link young adults perceive between upper-secondary and higher education. For example, interviewees consistently speak about having homework, a class, teachers, classrooms, and being in 'school' when discussing higher education in the interviews. The language used is indicative of how tertiary education is perceived in this social context.[667] The consistent use of 'school' (skola in Swedish) and '[university] college' (hög*skola* in Swedish) rather than university, indicates that the

[667] Cf. Hjelm (2020), "Historia i Umeå", 182.

boundary between upper-secondary and higher education is blurred for those who have been interviewed.[668] Compared to research on other environments, both in terms of place, class composition, and educational assets, the language used when young adults speak about higher education is noteworthy.

In studies of Stockholm and Uppsala, young adults in upper-secondary school speak of 'universities' [universitet], rather than 'university colleges' [högskolor].[669] Although the authors do not analyse the use of language in the interviews, it is clear from a comparison with the interviews in this study that the use of the terms 'university' or 'university college' is a reflection of the institutions interviewees are aware of and perhaps a reflection of class and educational assets. The interviewees here generally aim for university colleges and therefore use the term frequently, however, the term university is rarely used even if they are referring to a university (for example, Umeå University). Moreover, interviewees in Stockholm and Uppsala were able to distinguish between freestanding courses and programmes in a manner that is completely absent in the study of Söderhamn.[670] This is also a reflection of how familiar interviewees are with the inner workings of the higher education system. It is clear that the way young adults speak about higher education is related to their perception of the same.

The view of higher education as a route to and requirement for employment reflects a deeper understanding of tertiary education as a continuation of upper-secondary school. While immediate continuation into higher education is more or less a norm in certain other countries, such as the transition from high school to college in the United States,[671] it is not as common in Sweden.[672]

Risk and the timing of higher education

The specific ways in which young adults speak about higher education lends support to the notion that upper-secondary school and higher education are intertwined for the young adults in preparatory programmes. Continuing into higher education is perceived as the route to employment and the absence of higher education implicitly increases the risk of unemployment.

When the young adults reason about when to pursue higher education, it becomes clear that there are perceived pitfalls along the road to accessing the kind of jobs that they aspire for. Interviewees mention two types of dangers related to taking time off between upper-secondary school and continuing studies. First, as Anton mentions in the excerpt above, they consider it a risk that they might lose

[668] Cf. working-class parents and youth's use of the term 'college' to include both proprietary vocational programmes and research universities in Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291.
[669] Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*, chaps. 11–13; Bergström (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education'.
[670] Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*, chaps. 11–13; Bergström (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education'.
[671] Hanson, Melanie (2024), 'College Enrollment Statistics & Student Demographic Statistics', *Educationdata.org*.
[672] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Nyckeltal: Övergång till eftergymnasiala utbildningar inom 1 år. Fördelning på kön. Procent*.

the ability to study if they decide to take a gap year to work or travel. Although many are tired of school and do not look forward to the studying part of higher education, there is a perceived risk of losing the ability or motivation to study if there is an interruption between upper-secondary school and tertiary education. Being in education and the practice of studying seems to be perceived by the young adults as a skill that can be forgotten if they do not maintain it. An immediate entry into higher education means that the ability and motivation to study is maintained, while an interruption entails the risk of losing it.

Second, as mentioned by both Anton and Raoul above, finding work and earning money after upper-secondary school is often mentioned as a risk in relation to higher studies. Getting comfortable with earning your own money is perceived as an obstacle to higher education and the occupation and salary that tertiary education will lead to. Since working and earning money is what many of these young adults want to do, there is a danger in finding work and then having to 'get back into' studying at a later date. Since interviewees are not driven towards higher education because they want to learn or want to immerse themselves in further studies, taking a gap year does not appeal to them, instead it means delaying a requirement for stable employment. Furthermore, it means extending the period of adolescence, and delaying the entry into adulthood.

In relation to risk, young adults in the study appear to perceive little risk in relation to the overall pursuit of higher education. As we have seen throughout, higher education is instead viewed as a safe option in relation to the goal of accessing stable employment. Among the young adults in the study, the perception of risk in relation to the pursuit of higher education is related primarily to the timing of their entry into tertiary education. Theoretically, investing in higher education requires that the individuals accept a degree of risk, and 'strong risk aversion' may be detrimental to the rewards that assuming risk can lead to.[673]

What is not evident in the interviews with young adults in higher education preparatory programmes is whether they perceive any risk in relation to *what* they want to study. Given the value that interviewees place on becoming employable, their choice of what to study and the related labour market opportunities is relevant in relation to risk. Throughout the interviews with young adults in preparatory programmes, the explicit risk they mention is related to the timing of their entry into higher education. However, they implicitly manage risk through their choice of certain programmes. In the previous section of this chapter, we saw that young adults prefer higher education programmes that lead to welfare professions or new professions. These preferences can be interpreted as an implicit management of risk.

Previous Swedish research shows that both women and men from manual labour backgrounds, compared to those from service class backgrounds (typically

[673] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 811; Shaw (1996), 'An Empirical Analysis of Risk Aversion and Income Growth'.

university trained),[674] tend to favour low-risk options and in turn, trade off high earnings.[675] Martin Hällsten exclusively studies those who chose the natural sciences programme in upper-secondary school; thus, these results are not completely transferrable to the study at hand. However, Hällsten's study shows a difference in the risk young adults assume in relation to their choice of a higher education programme that is contingent upon social class.[676] Similarly, the young adults in preparatory programmes in Söderhamn, many of whom have manual labour backgrounds, seem to favour higher education programmes that lead to a secure position on the labour market. Examples that have been brought up in this and the previous Chapter 6 are, policing, engineering, physiotherapy, teaching, medicine, land surveying, law, and business and economics. We have also seen how parents with experiences of higher education, in the previous Chapter 7, have mostly pursued similar higher education programmes – for example, teaching, nursing, and social work. The young adults' preferences for these types of new professions or welfare professions are likely a reflection of what their parents have studied and thus, of occupations that are common in the local labour market. Nevertheless, it is also a reflection of their management of risk. Especially welfare professions have a large and stable labour market, where the risk of unemployment is small, but where high earnings are also unusual.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis in this chapter has focused on interviewees in preparatory programmes and their higher education decision-making process. The young adults, especially those who are about to graduate, are on the threshold of something new and are required to make some type of decision about what comes after their 12 years of schooling.

The decision-making process has been analysed as containing three components: where, what, and when to study. The picture that emerges is a perception of higher education that is rooted in the former industrial community where the young adults have grown up. We can speak here of place-specific dispositions to higher education that almost all of the young adults share regardless of their own, personal dispositions. Although some of the interviewees have parents with higher levels of education, their navigation of higher education is similar to how peers with no history of higher education in the family approach the decision-making process. The education-scarce environment that they are

[674] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 826.
[675] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 840.
[676] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality'.

embedded within affects how the higher education system is understood and therefore what the decision-making process is characterised by.

The general tendency among young adults in the study is to focus more on *where* they want to study, compared to *what* they want to study. The interviewees typically choose between programmes connected to welfare or new professions, options that reflect a specific horizon of possible future jobs. Rather than upper-middle-class professions, the programmes and jobs that most young adults mention are typical middle-class professions or jobs seen as yielding larger economic returns than the working-class occupations that dominate the local labour market. The alternatives they see for where to study are based on what kind of geographical place, usually a town, they can see themselves fitting in to. Small towns located close to Söderhamn are favoured over larger cities or university towns located further away and in the south of Sweden.

The patterns in this chapter echo tendencies in working-class students' higher education decision-making that Reay et al. found in 2001. Young adults are in a process of self-exclusion in relation to higher education, 'where traditional universities are often discounted'.[677] Compared to the British system of higher education, where working-class students are outspoken about not fitting into elite universities,[678] the interviewees generally perceive the Swedish higher education system as egalitarian. Although young adults in Söderhamn exclude themselves from traditional universities in a similar manner to working-class students in the United Kingdom, they do not speak about it in the same way. There is simply very little mention of the traditional and 'prestigious' higher education institutions. Self-exclusion is at work, but there does not seem to be a language for interviewees to talk about why these institutions are not part of their horizons.

Since the Swedish higher education system is not divided into tiers in the same way as, say, the British or American higher education systems, young adults from Söderhamn do not overtly distinguish differences in status, prestige, or academic quality, between different universities and university colleges. Judgments about specific universities as being a 'working-class university'[679] or 'an ethnic university',[680] are absent in how young adults in Söderhamn reason. Although it could perhaps be viewed as a positive aspect, that universities and university colleges in Sweden are not labelled in the same strict or judgmental way, I would argue that it makes navigating the Swedish higher education system more difficult for groups that lack 'informal knowledge'[681] of the differences within and between higher education institutions.

The perception and navigation of higher education has commonalities with working-class and poor families' perceptions and subsequent behaviours in the

[677] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 863.
[678] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 864.
[679] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 869.
[680] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 868.
[681] Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality', 813; Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291.

college admissions process in the United States.[682] Although the young adults in Annette Lareau's study had hopes and ambitions, they shared their parents' partial understanding of college and their knowledge of the higher education system was 'imprecise at best'.[683] What the working-class and poor parents in Lareu's study did is the same as the families in Söderhamn do; they rely on the school and its guidance counsellors to help their children make decisions on their further education.[684] However, the school in Söderhamn is not embedded within a social context that harbours the informal knowledge that is necessary to make informed decisions about higher education.

The decision-making process that has been analysed in this chapter is firstly, a consequence of an environment where there is little informal knowledge about the higher education system distributed among young adults and parents, and secondly, a consequence of the class composition within this social space. The decision-making process reflects the social space and the volume and composition of capital within the families that were studied. Generally, parents have low levels of educational capital, and work in occupations where higher education is not required. Therefore, parents are not usually able to disseminate knowledge about the higher education system; this role is sometimes taken over by older siblings instead.

Furthermore, there are small differences in the volume and composition of capital within the social space as a whole; it is an education-scarce context. The small differences between families' volume and composition of capital creates a navigation of higher education that is homogenous – this homogeneity in dispositions has been mentioned throughout the empirical chapters. Therefore, young adults whose parents do not have experiences of higher education cannot look to other 'role models' to decipher what a good decision might be, since the navigation of higher education is similar, regardless of whether parents have a higher education degree or not. Throughout this chapter and the previous Chapter 6, we have seen how young adults search for this type of guidance. Primarily, they use guidance counsellors, older siblings, and peers as ways to understand what a good or bad decision is. It seems clear that apart from the lack of educational capital within the families, institutionalised educational resources are scarce. The kinds of resources that might help young adults counteract the lack of educational capital within their families are largely absent.

Thus, the higher education decision-making process is a reflection of the resources, or lack thereof, in individual families. At the same time, it is a reflection of the larger social space and the low volumes of capital that families collectively possess. The navigation of higher education is sometimes more connected to social norms and practices that exist in Söderhamn generally, than to individual families' levels of education and positions in the social space. Although young adults in this social space want to pursue higher education, Söderhamn's dominated position leads

[682] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291–294.
[683] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 294.
[684] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 292–293.

to a navigation of higher education where they prefer higher education institutions that are themselves dominated within the space of higher education. Thereby, inequalities within higher education, between institutions and programmes, are upheld, rather than counteracted.

CHAPTER 9
Conclusions

With the expansion of the Swedish higher education as a backdrop, this study focused on Söderhamn, a small town 260 kilometres north of Sweden's capital, Stockholm. Through interviews with young adults and parents in this former industrial community, where the level of education remains low, the thesis posed questions about how higher education is viewed in an education-scarce context.

More specifically, the study focused on young adults and their parents who live in a former industrial community where educational resources are scarce, both among inhabitants and on an institutional level. By investigating how a potential entry into higher education is reasoned about and processed, the study aimed to understand and explain how higher education is perceived and navigated by young adults in an education-scarce, former industrial community. In this, the study's concluding chapter, the overall conclusion and its individual elements are discussed in more detail, and the main findings of the thesis are put in relation to results from previous research and suggestions for future research.

Points of departure revisited

This first section of this chapter reiterates the thesis' points of departure to situate the results in relation to its aim, research questions, and theoretical framework.

While prior research on young adults in Swedish small towns and previously industrial communities exists, studies have not investigated the role of higher education within these types of contexts. Instead, these studies have primarily looked at young persons' motivations for leaving former industrial communities;[685] young persons' motivations for staying in small towns;[686] as well as un-employment activation in former industrial communities.[687]

Moreover, apart from research on industrial communities, research on educational practices and educational strategies in Sweden has predominantly, but not exclusively, focused on urbanities and university towns. Furthermore, within these geographical places it is often the upper-middle class and its educational

[685] Svensson (2006), *Vinna och försvinna?*; Svensson (2017), *Lämna eller stanna?.*
[686] Uddbäck (2021), *Att stanna kvar*.
[687] Sunnerfjell (2023), *Un-Learning to Labour?.*

choices that the studies focus on.[688] Hence, perceptions of higher education among groups without an abundance of educational resources, and the consequences of these perceptions for how higher education is navigated, has received less attention in the Swedish research context. Therefore, the results contribute to knowledge of how higher education is perceived and navigated by groups who are not in possession of an abundance of educational resources and where middle-class educational practices are not as common.

Given prior research into industrial communities, rural youth's out-mobility, and studies into educational practices and their effect on social structures in higher education, the aim of the thesis was formulated in the following way: *The thesis aims to understand and explain how young adults in an education-scarce former industrial community perceive and navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education*. Based on this aim, the thesis posed three research questions:

I. How do young adults in an education-scarce context view continued education in general and how is this perception reflected in the various ways in which they navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education?

II. What is the relation between parents' experiences of education and young adults' perception of higher education?

III. How do young adults in higher education preparatory programmes in upper-secondary school navigate a possible pursuit of higher education and what considerations become evident in this process?

Each of the Chapters 6–8 were used to provide an analytical foundation for answering the respective research questions I–III. In these chapters, the study's theoretical concepts and tools were employed to analyse and answer these questions.

By using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concept of *the social space* – where agents' volume and composition of capital determine their position relative each other – Söderhamn was theoretically understood as a dominated part of the larger Swedish social space. Throughout the study, this dominated position was assumed to matter to how young adults navigate and perceive higher education. By living in a place where the level of education is low and experiences of higher education are relatively unusual, young adults navigate higher education from a dominated position.

The idea of the social space was also used as the basis for analysing *social class*. The volume and composition of capital among families in this specific geographic and social context was used to analyse class differences in how parents had used higher education and how young adults perceive and navigate a potential entry into tertiary education. Parents' educational and economic capital – operationalised through their levels of education and occupations – were central components to

[688] See for example: Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*; Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*; Forsberg, H. (2015), *Kampen om eleverna*; Bergström (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education'; Waddling (2024), *Playing with the Global*.

understanding young adults' positions relative the education system in general, and the higher education system in particular.

Apart from social class, *gender* and *dispositions* were relevant aspects of how the analysis of parents and young adults was carried out. The study shows that within Söderhamn, there are stark contrasts to previously researched upper-middle class and urban dispositions to educational choices.[689] The young adults and parents do not view the decision on where to attend compulsory school as a *choice* – where they live and the closest school determine this decision. In relation to higher education, young adults do not perceive these decisions as involving risk – an exception being when it comes to the timing of their entry into higher education, which I will return to further on in this chapter. Moreover, the interviews with parents in Söderhamn point to parenting practices and ideals that are very different to how the urban, upper-middle class parents its children in relation to education. I will return to the results regarding the parents' views on their children's education in the section on *Independence, adulthood, and higher education*.

Thus, social class, gender, and dispositions were used to analyse individual interviewees' positons relative a potential entry into higher education. On a collective level, the idea of *social norms* was used as a theoretical tool to understand perceptions and navigations of higher education that are not outcome-oriented, but relate to normative principles and ideas of what one 'ought' to do in the context studied. Chapter 6 laid the foundation for the claim that a social norm of pursuing higher education exists within the social space of Söderhamn today, and this concluding chapter focuses considerably on a discussion of what this result means and how it can be interpreted in relation to previous research.

The following sections discuss conclusions related to the perception and navigation of higher education among young adults in Söderhamn. It focuses on the combination of a higher education norm and the unfamiliarity and weak infrastructure around higher education that is noticeable in Söderhamn.

Conscientiousness and the higher education norm

In this section, I will concentrate on three of the conclusions that the thesis arrives at. Firstly, the existence of a norm of higher education, secondly, the homogeneity in thinking on higher education as a continuation of school and as a route to employment, and thirdly, how the value of conscientiousness affects the two former. Beginning with the first conclusion, this thesis shows that an increased need for higher education generally has led to the establishing of a social norm that requires active choices in relation to higher education in Söderhamn, despite its history of education-scarcity. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to it as *the higher*

[689] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*; Forsberg, H. (2015), *Kampen om eleverna*; Forsberg, Håkan, Waddling, Jennifer, & Alm Fjellborg, Andreas (2024), 'Class-Based Preschool Enrolment: Social Stratification and Quality Differences in the Swedish Preschool Market', 104–125; Waddling (2024), "Främmande språk som pedagogisk profil: Val av internationell friskola".

education norm. Young adults need to reflect and decide on whether or not to venture into higher education, and how to rationalise these decisions. Furthermore, the thesis shows the specificities and complexities of how this norm is handled by young adults embedded in a context that is not familiar with the higher education system and its inner workings. Hence, this thesis does not find the 'resistance to education' that prior research has found to be a characteristic of former industrial communities.[690] The masculine working-class culture that might have previously created barriers to education[691] is no longer obvious in the case of Söderhamn. However, dispositions to higher education in Söderhamn are noticeably homogeneous, as the connection between higher education and *employability* is a common thread throughout the interviews with young adults and parents alike. This, in turn, is related to how employment is intertwined with the value and norm of conscientiousness, or *skötsamhet*, as will be further discussed below.

Starting with the concept of social norms, defined here as *normative attitudes* that exist among a significant proportion of members of a group, this concept has been used to understand how young adults perceive higher education today. The study has been able to show that young adults in general need to relate to higher education, even if they do not plan to pursue it themselves. By stating that they have to relate to higher education, I refer to the fact that none of the interviewed young adults (or parents) questioned the value of higher education in a general sense. Furthermore, on an individual level, the absolute majority of interviewees saw higher education as relevant to them specifically. For young adults in preparatory programmes in upper-secondary school, this is no surprise. However, the study also showed examples of young adults in vocational programmes who took courses to make them eligible for higher studies and planned to pursue tertiary education later in life, despite the existence of a stable, local labour market for them. Furthermore, even young adults who had dropped out of school perceived higher education as a relevant option. Even though many were far from completing their upper-secondary school education, they expressed interest in pursuing higher education in the future, since higher education was perceived by most as a requirement for stable, well-paid employment. In relation to this group, who had dropped out of school and were far from being able to actually enter into tertiary education, the concept of a social norm becomes especially relevant to discuss in more detail.

The young adults who had dropped out of school were formally unable to access the higher education system at the time of the interviews; in a theoretical sense, they were unable or restricted from performing the social practice connected to the social norm discussed here. However, the interviews with these young adults were filled with the normative attitudes indicative of the existence of a social norm, in the sense that it has been used within this study.[692] Although this group was

[690] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 74.
[691] Brismark (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet", 98.
[692] Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, 28–30.

unable to enter into higher education, they still expressed themselves in a manner that is indicative of a *normative principle* – in this case, that higher education is good, valuable, useful, something that one 'ought' to do, or the 'best' option, even if that option was not currently available to them.

The higher education norm, that has existed in other parts of the Swedish social space for much longer, is historically new within the social space of Söderhamn. Beyond the result that a higher education norm exists in Söderhamn today, conclusions can also be drawn about what occurs in an environment when social norms change. Practices around finding employment used to be connected to industrial employers in Söderhamn and when de-industrialisation forced these employers to shut down or re-locate, individual and collective practices had to change. Thus, norms around work and how to find employment have necessarily had to change in places like Söderhamn. Higher education seems to have taken industry's place as a guarantee for employment. However, pursuing higher education used to be, and still is, uncommon in Söderhamn, and the perception that it is a requirement for future employment, new. Thus, what we can see are practices and norms around requirements for employment that have changed drastically over a relatively short period. The results indicate that although a higher education norm has been established, the practices related to the perception and navigation of tertiary education are largely based in values that have a much longer history in Söderhamn, such as the importance of employment and economic stability. Apart from individual families' unfamiliarity with how to approach higher education, the education-scarce environment lacks collective ideas and practices that may otherwise be able to help young adults handle the pressure of this newly established norm. I am referring here to collective ideas and practices exemplified in research on other social groups and contexts. For example, parents who encourage their children to study abroad as an 'investment in the future',[693] or to choose the natural sciences programme in upper-secondary school,[694] or the view that education is a 'fundamental part of life' up until the age of 25.[695]

Continuing on to the second conclusion, Chapter 6 showed how the young adults in the study perceive higher education in various ways with diverse intentions. Earlier studies on families who possess large amounts of capital, especially educational and cultural capital, show a perception of education as a long-term pursuit, something which cannot be forced, but needs to be cultivated over a long time, in tandem with personal development.[696] In contrast to this type of perception of education, this study shows a different view of education in general, and higher education in particular. Throughout the interviews with young adults, the connection between higher education and employability is evident. Young adults believe that their subjective employability[697] is improved by attending

[693] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 75.
[694] Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*, 191–193.
[695] Palme (2009), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 77.
[696] Palme (2009), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 89.
[697] Erik Berntson (2015), 'Market-Oriented Relationships in Working Life'.

university and will increase their chances of finding a 'good job'.[698] However, employment is typically something that happens in competition with other applicants and the combination of where and what you study affects the chances of being chosen by an employer. Since young adults in Söderhamn have a partial overview and understanding of how the higher education system works and what options are actually available, they risk making simple mistakes in the process of deciding what to study.[699] The particularities of this result are discussed further in the two subsequent sections of this chapter.

Regardless of the interviewees' individual social positions, their perception and navigation of higher education is indicative of working-class dispositions towards higher education. For example, several of the young adults who were interviewed have one or two parents with higher education and occupations that position them in the middle-class; despite their social positioning, they navigate higher education in a manner that reveals working-class dispositions to education, rather than middle- or upper-middle class dispositions. These dispositions generate a horizon of higher education options where certain programmes and institutions are recurring while others are out of sight. It is a question of individual self-exclusion[700] as well as a contextual lack of informal knowledge[701] and educational resources in Söderhamn. As we saw in Chapter 8, the result is a *decision-making process* where only a small number of higher education institutions and programmes is mentioned throughout the interviews with young adults. This small number of institutions and programmes almost completely excludes traditional and 'prestigious' options for higher education.

On a more concrete level, the existence of a norm of higher education creates a situation where the potential entry into tertiary education is perceived and treated as a natural continuation of school, while at the same time being a large leap for most young adults in Söderhamn. The link between higher education and employment makes the former appear completely necessary, and therefore a small step, a continuation of upper-secondary school. On the other hand, due to the education-scarce context, and the relative lack of experiences of higher education in Söderhamn, it is a venture into the unknown for those who are considering it. There is no mistaking that in considering a pursuit of tertiary education, young adults in Söderhamn reason about a decision that will affect their lives beyond educational attainment. This is especially prominent in relation to geographical mobility – moving away from family and friends in Söderhamn is perceived as a life-altering decision for many of those who were interviewed. Therefore, their navigation of higher education is characterised by holding onto the familiar, by opting for higher education institutions geographically close to home, or for higher education programmes that lead to occupations that resemble what others around them work with.

[698] Forsberg, S. (2017), ''The Right to Immobility'', 10–12.
[699] Pugsley (1998), 'Throwing Your Brains at It', 78; Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 294.
[700] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?'.
[701] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291–294.

Thirdly, previous research has emphasised *skötsamhet*, or being conscientious,[702] in relation to working-class culture in industrial communities.[703] There are traces of such conscientiousness ideals present in the interviews with parents, who occasionally express that they want their children to be *'skötsamma'* in school and in life in general. Employment is the most common embodiment of conscientiousness, which is clear in interviews with both parents and young adults. Diligence and conscientiousness are ideals that remain intact in the social space of Söderhamn, but the conditions for how to achieve conscientiousness have changed since Ronny Ambjörnsson wrote about the predominant values of working-class culture in northern Sweden in the early 20th century.[704]

Despite the historical changes, employment is nevertheless at the heart of how conscientiousness is achieved and upheld in Söderhamn. The parents in the study dread the thought of their children becoming unemployed or accruing debt. And a significant difference in relation to when industry dominated Söderhamn, is that unemployment is an actual risk, as the unemployment rate for those aged 16 to 24 in Söderhamn is 16.5 per cent.[705] Thus, higher education can be seen as a way of avoiding unemployment and upholding conscientiousness.

The higher education norm has been shown to be a local adaptation of the dominant norm in the larger Swedish, social space. It is adopted and interpreted in a specific manner in Söderhamn that can be understood if it is put in relation to the industrial, working-class history of this town. Higher education is perceived as an instrument and pathway to employment and is thus a way to achieve employability, and adhere to the norm of *skötsamhet*, or conscientiousness, that has existed in places akin to Söderhamn for a long time. Although tertiary education is related to employment for many social groups who enter into this part of the education system, the combination of what appears to be a strong higher education norm with the unfamiliarity and weak infrastructure around higher education decision-making that is noticeable in Söderhamn, raises concerns on a structural level.

Independence, adulthood, and higher education

This section focuses on two conclusions that tie the young adults' perceptions and navigation of higher education into broader themes of becoming independent and becoming adults.

Starting with independence, while research on middle-class parenting practices shows parents involving themselves in every aspect of the child's education, from preschool to tertiary education,[706] parents in Söderhamn cede

[702] Skeggs (2000[1997]), *Att bli respektabel: Konstruktioner av klass och kön*.
[703] Ambjörnsson (1988), *Den skötsamme arbetaren*.
[704] Ambjörnsson (1988), *Den skötsamme arbetaren*.
[705] Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Arbetslöshet efter region, kön, ålder, födelseregion och år*.
[706] Brooks, Rachel (2003), 'Young People's Higher Education Choices: The Role of Family and Friends', 283–297; Brooks (2004), "My Mum Would Be as Pleased as Punch If I Actually Went, but My Dad

control and responsibility to their children and the school. The young adults navigate higher education and the related decision-making process without parents' involvement. Although there are a few instances where parents engage in schooling and choices relating to education, the general pattern is that young adults handle these questions themselves. Throughout the third empirical chapter, Chapter 7, parents expressed themselves in ways that reflect working-class dispositions towards involvement in the children's schoolwork and education.[707] Compared to middle-class practices, mothers and fathers in this context take a passive role and let the children manage education on their own, regardless of the risk of making mistakes; making mistakes can even be perceived as a useful lesson for the child.

In line with prior research on working-class parents, these parents also place a lot of trust in the school's ability to educate their children and help them navigate continued educational choices.[708] Typically, guidance counsellors embody this aspect of the school's responsibility to help students achieve good results, understand the educational landscape, and make wise decisions. Normative attitudes on how a parent 'ought' to act in matters regarding school and education appear throughout the interviews with parents. In general, the parents who were interviewed for this study want to allow their children to make their own decisions about education and for the children to handle these matters themselves. Together with parents' trust in the school, their will for their children to become independent and the responsibility that comes with that independence explains why young adults navigate higher education decisions without much involvement from parents.

The parents' will for their children to become independent is mirrored throughout the interviews with young adults. Generally, the young adults want to reach a state of adulthood where they are financially and otherwise independent from their parents. Having a good, stable job and being financially independent was the most common symbol for gaining this type of independence, and it was mentioned by both the young men and the young women in the sample. However, among the young women it was also common for this strive towards adulthood and independence to take the form of wanting to become a mother. For young women in Söderhamn, having children of one's own appears to symbolise and embody independence and adulthood.

Wanting one's children to become independent, and to help them become an adult, is a value shared across class-boundaries.[709] What is striking within this study, especially in comparison to research on urban, upper-middle class groups, is that the parents in Söderhamn seem to *act* in accordance with this value. In contrast to

---

Seems a Bit More Particular about It"; Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*; Forsberg, S. (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice'; Waddling (2024), *Playing with the Global*; Forsberg, H., Waddling, & Fjellborg (2024), 'Class-Based Preschool Enrolment: Social Stratification and Quality Differences in the Swedish Preschool Market'.

[707] Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*, 26–71.

[708] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*.

[709] See for example: Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 74–95.

research on the upper-middle class, where parents plan their children's days in detail,[710] and exercise control over their children's leisure activities and schooling,[711] the parents who were studied here actually allow their children independence to navigate and make decisions on education themselves. The social norm of independence for their children is also connected to a *social practice* of granting the children that independence, to make their own choices and mistakes.

Closely intertwined with independence is how adulthood is perceived and valued. Thus, independence from one's parents is a value that comes to light throughout the interviews with young adults. Moreover, throughout the interviews with their parents, it becomes clear that young adults are allowed room to 'practice' this independence since they are given the space to do so, by their parents. For most young adults in Söderhamn, a potential entry into higher education is perceived as a step towards becoming an adult. Therefore, it is not higher education itself that is central to young adults in this context; it is what higher education represents. This is an explanation for why higher education is perceived instrumentally, it is viewed as a requirement for reaching adulthood. This also explains their view, which was shown in Chapter 8, that it is important to enter into higher education immediately after upper-secondary school. In contrast to previous research,[712] travelling or taking a gap year did not appeal to the young adults studied here, since they were not interested in prolonging the phase that precedes adulthood. Instead, they want to enter into tertiary education immediately in order to 'get it over with'. At the end of that higher education trajectory awaits employment, a family, a home of one's own, or whatever it might be that represents independence and adulthood.

Expanding higher education while preserving inequalities

The homogeneity in how higher education is navigated by young adults in Söderhamn has already been mentioned. The similarity in how interviewees reason about higher education simplifies the drawing of conclusions about the entire sample of interviewees. A result of the study is the existence of working-class dispositions to higher education that create a particular navigation of higher education, regardless of the social position of the individual interviewee. Nevertheless, to understand the specificity of how higher education is reasoned about and handled in Söderhamn, it is necessary to compare these results to studies where different dispositions and navigations are clearer. Comparisons of this type have been made throughout the empirical chapters but I want to emphasise the most prevalent differences in how other social groups handle educational decisions, compared to what has been observed in Söderhamn. Research on the middle-class and the upper-middle class in urban environments shows parents who stress the

[710] Brembeck (1992), *Efter Spock*, 102.
[711] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 85,89.
[712] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 77.

importance of education as a long-term pursuit, and therefore place a lot of value on the educational decisions that they make for their children, or that the children make themselves.[713] The parents' emphasis on education and the importance of related choices is transferred to children within these families, who become aware of hierarchies between, for example, upper-secondary schools, or within the system of higher education.[714]

In this study, Söderhamn is understood theoretically as a dominated part of the Swedish social space. Most importantly, it has been interpreted as dominated in relation to the higher education system in Sweden. In the process leading up to a potential decision on higher education, young adults in Söderhamn begin interacting with the idea and system of higher education and their social positions and dispositions influences the shape of this process. Their positions were analysed as determined by their social class, their gender, but also the place where they are from. The study shows that young adults in middle-class positions in Söderhamn, based on parents' education and occupations, are positioned in a certain way in relation to the higher education system because of the place where they have grown up. Thus, the results are in line with Doreen Massey's and Pierre Bourdieu's reasoning that the social structure and physical space intertwine; social class is not the same everywhere, and positioning in social space is also contingent upon *where* you live.[715] In relation to the higher education system, interviewees are in a dominated position, regardless of their families' social class. There are place-specific dispositions to higher education that generate a specific way of perceiving and navigating higher education in Söderhamn.

What might this specific perception and navigation of higher education result in, when it comes to the internal structure of the higher education landscape? I argue that the results of lay bare some of the mechanisms behind the stratification of higher education in Sweden. The statistical patterns of how higher education is stratified are well established in prior research,[716] and this study builds upon this with an understanding of why some of those who enter into higher education make higher education decisions in a manner that contributes to existing stratification within Swedish higher education.

A key to understanding and explaining the perception and navigation of higher education among the group that has been studied here is their instrumental perception of higher education and their view of the system of higher education as non-hierarchical. The decision-making process that was analysed in Chapter 8, takes on a specific character because of how higher education is perceived. Knowing how

[713] Palme (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet*, 57–95.
[714] Lidegran (2009), *Utbildningskapital*, chap. 13; Forsberg, S. (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice'.
[715] Massey (1994), *Space, Place and Gender*, 5; Bourdieu (1999), 'Site Effects'.
[716] See for example: Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education'; Hällsten (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality'; Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education'; Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective'.

young adults' reason about preferences and choices related to higher education gives insight into why they end up choosing in a specific way. This study has shown a high degree of self-exclusion from prestigious, traditional universities – this aspect is especially prominent in relation to where young adults want to study, but is also distinguishable in relation to what they want to study. Young adults in Söderhamn have a place-specific horizon when it comes to the higher education institutions that they can choose between. The study demonstrates that they do not choose between all of Sweden's universities and university colleges – and certainly not between institutions abroad[717] – there is a selection of institutions recurring in the interviews, indicating that there is a collective self-exclusion from a specific part of the higher education landscape. This is partly explained by the young adults' search for as much familiarity and security as possible, when they travel into, using the wording of Annette Lareau, the foreign lands of higher education.[718] They are unfamiliar with rules and norms, uncertain of what to expect. This lack of familiarity becomes evident as they navigate higher education, making it challenging for young adults to understand what factors to consider when making these decisions.

The decision-making process related to the unfamiliar territory of higher education has to be understood in relation to, on the one hand, the importance of stability and security, and on the other hand, the perception of risk. When young adults in Söderhamn reason about higher education, stability and security is typically what they strive for. The employment that they anticipate that higher education will lead to is a concrete form of economic stability that many interviewees value: permanent employment, salary, being able to buy a house, and having children, are motives for pursuing higher education. Depending on their dispositions, these aspects represent stability and security for the young adults in Söderhamn. In the actual decision-making process, analysed in Chapter 8, there are also elements of seeking out alternatives that appear familiar or secure. The most common example of this is wanting to study in a place that they are familiar with, that is geographically close to Söderhamn, or where friends are applying.

A conclusive result is that the choice of a higher education institution is linked to a geographical place where the interviewee can imagine living. The foreign land of university studies becomes more manageable when they are familiar with the town they are going to study in, know other people who are applying there, or feel some type of kinship to the place where the institution is located. University colleges located close to Söderhamn is a favoured option for many of the interviewees.

The prestigious, traditional universities, such as Lund, Gothenburg, Stockholm, and Uppsala are more or less completely absent from the young adults of Söderhamn's horizons (Uppsala University is occasionally mentioned because of its geographical proximity or because interviewees have family who live there, rather than its academic qualities). There is no mention of the Stockholm School of

[717] Cf. Bergström (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education, Navigating in a Polarised Landscape: Upper Secondary Students Transnational Strategies and Outlooks on Higher Education in Sweden'.
[718] Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 294.

Economics, although several interviewees want to study business administration and economics and work within that field. Nor is there mention of any of the prestigious arts institutions, such as Konstfack, the Royal Institute of Art, or Stockholm University of the Arts. Prestigious higher education programmes are mentioned more frequently, for example, law, economics, and medicine, although this is also unusual, but these programmes are rarely mentioned in combination with a prestigious institution. What conclusions can be drawn from this? My interpretation is that although there are young adults who want to work within prestigious fields, most are unaware of the hierarchies between different universities and university colleges. The knowledge and informal information is sparse and incomplete, meaning that the most symbolically dominant institutions within the space of higher education are often completely out of sight. Therefore, young adults' decision-making operates within a section of the higher education landscape where, for example, Umeå University appears as a better alternative than the University of Gävle for some of the interviewees, but older universities are not even an option.

Based on this investigation, it is difficult to know whether young adults are unaware of certain prestigious options, if they exclude themselves from these places because of their grades, or if it is an exclusion based on their dispositions, feelings of not fitting in, or search for familiarity, which was evident throughout Chapters 6 and 8. It is likely a mix of these aspects, depending on who is asked. This aspect of how educational decisions are shaped, and where young adults eventually apply, needs to be researched further. The stratification of higher education does not only depend on how those with a lot of resources choose, it is also very much a question of how groups with less resources – such as the one studied here – handle higher education decisions. What this study does show is that young adults from an education-scarce context do not generally aspire for the most competitive and prestigious higher education options. Instead, their attention is directed toward the lower and mid-tiers of universities and university colleges, thus contributing to the stratification of higher education that they are themselves unaware of.

The goal of widened recruitment to higher education has contributed to making higher education available and relevant to the social groups studied here. Although the system of higher education has expanded to include more students from different social backgrounds, there is still a reproduction of existing inequalities in higher education:

> There is a political rhetoric of widening access, achievement-for-all and meritocratic equalisation within mass higher education. Yet changes in the scale and scope of higher education, however significant these may be, should not distract attention from the continuing and developing forms of social stratification within higher education. While more working-class and minority students are entering into university, for the most part they are entering into different universities to their middle-class counterparts.[719]

[719] Reay et al. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice?', 858.

The results show precisely what Reay et al. discuss in the quote above. The working-class dispositions to higher education that are prevalent in Söderhamn make young adults prefer other higher education institutions than their counterparts from other social and geographical backgrounds.

The expansion of the higher education system has not lead to a decrease in inequality rather, 'Sweden maintains a stable level of inequality'[720] in comparison to other Nordic countries.[721] Although a considerable share of the population enter into higher education today, the system of higher education is stratified in a manner that maintains inequality. The low economic thresholds to higher education and the complexity of the system likely contribute to the maintaining of this inequality. This study has shown how young adults perceive higher education as a natural continuation of school. When it comes to the academic aspect of higher education, the step from upper-secondary school into tertiary education is perceived as small and the choices that have to be made in relation to this step are treated as involving little risk. Young adults are therefore entrusted to make these decisions themselves, without parents' guidance or involvement. They navigate these decisions without a complete overview of the options and with very little of the informal knowledge that is often required to make good decisions. Given the parents and the young adults' own views of higher education, the lack of guidance and overview does not pose a problem, since the higher education system is not perceived as stratified. In essence, entering into higher education is a safe route to employment, and by choosing to do so one avoids the risk of unemployment.

Although the expansion of higher education over a period of almost 60 years has brought tertiary education closer, both geographically and socially, to the social groups studied here, the way that they perceive and navigate higher education raises questions about equity in relation to the system of higher education. The expansion of the number of higher education institutions, programmes, and courses, has created a system that is difficult to navigate for prospective students from education-scarce contexts – here, I include both the familial context and the larger environment where one has grown up. An advantage of an elite system of higher education was that the few universities that existed had 'high uniform standards',[722] arguably, that is not the case anymore. Although the Swedish higher education system is unitary and centrally controlled,[723] universities and university colleges are heterogonous in terms of what they teach,[724] the teaching staff's qualifications[725] and the students'

[720] Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective'.
[721] Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective'.
[722] Trow, Martin (1972), 'The Expansion and Transformation of Higher Education', 64.
[723] Trow (1972), 'The Expansion and Transformation of Higher Education', 64.
[724] Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education', 121.
[725] Olofsson (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?".

credentials and social backgrounds.[726] Instead of navigating a handful of universities with high standards, young adults are now able to choose between 50 higher education institutions and in the education-scarce context that was studied here, they do so believing, to a large degree, that there are no hierarchies between these institutions and that all degrees are equal. This result mirrors Lareau's findings in the United States.[727] This perception and navigation of higher education contributes to the persisting inequalities we see in the Swedish system of higher education on a larger scale.

Implications and further research

By studying how young adults in Söderhamn reason about a potential entry into higher education, the thesis was able to draw conclusions about the mechanisms behind why young people in this context perceive and navigate higher education in specific ways. While certain patterns are specific to the case that was studied here, the mechanisms are generalisable to similar cases. This concluding section of the chapter discusses the generalisability of the results generated by the thesis, and uses this a basis to suggest areas where further research is necessary.

First, the thesis' overall result that a norm of higher education exists in Söderhamn is likely applicable to most parts of Sweden. If a perception of higher education as valuable and necessary for achieving employability is established among young adults and parents in Söderhamn, where the level of education is notably low, it is likely established in most other parts of the country as well. Given previous research on other types of social contexts and groups, the perception of higher education as strongly tied to employment is probably more pronounced in areas where industry dominates or used to dominate the labour market, and where the level of education is relatively low. However, this is a single-case study that uses qualitative methods and is therefore unable to conclude with certainty that a higher education norm exists universally in Sweden. Future research would be able to investigate the claim made here by conducting similar research into a strategic sample of geographical places within Sweden. More importantly, the value placed on independence and adulthood within the context studied here calls for further research. The results generated here are in contrast to previous studies that have focused on urban and upper-middle class practices related to education. Continued research would be able to investigate the extent of these classed views and practices, and their possible implications, not only for the perception and navigation of higher education, but for how young adults and parents manage the children's transition from childhood to adulthood more generally.

[726] Berggren (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education'; Börjesson & Broady (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education'; Thomsen et al. (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective'.
[727] Cf. Lareau (2011), *Unequal Childhoods*, 291.

Second, results regarding how the higher education system is navigated should be generalisable to other places and areas that can be classified as education-scarce. The manner in which young adults navigate the educational decision-making process in Söderhamn relates to the families' low levels of education and the overall education-scarcity in the area. Education-scarce is, however, a broad term and many places can potentially fall within that category. I believe these results are most applicable to other former industrial communities with similar levels of education among the population.

Future research needs to investigate the groups studied here more comprehensively. Coming from a context and familial background where higher education is uncommon seems to lead to a specific navigation within the landscape of higher education, where other considerations and rationales apply, compared to in urban and education-abundant families and contexts. Despite the results of found here, we still do not know enough about the decision-making process and the motives and reasons for the final decisions that these groups make in relation to higher education. Further research into the actual decisions made by young adults from education-scarce context – both geographically and within their families – is necessary in order to understand stratification within higher education and students' rationales for choosing specific programmes and institutions.

Third, results related to young adults' higher education decision-making process are less generalisable than those mentioned previously. The specific higher education institutions mentioned in interviews are often geographically close to Söderhamn. However, the programmes that young adults plan to apply to are linked to their social class (and therefore the parents' levels of education), and the local labour market. When young adults in this study want to pursue higher education, they often choose between programmes leading to work within a new or welfare profession, such as teaching, nursing, social work, and policing. It seems that growing up in a place where the labour market is dominated by working-class occupations, the occupations you are aware of are often those that can necessarily be found almost anywhere, and if not, they are described in books, films, and television. The connection between the place where you have grown up, and *what* and *where* you prefer to study requires more research.

The regional university colleges and new universities are important to how young adults navigate a potential entry into higher education and these institutions' strategies for attracting students should be researched further. Furthermore, guidance counsellors appear as especially important to young adults' navigation of education in general, in the context that was studied here. Future research needs to study the substantive work that guidance counsellors in education-scarce environments do. Throughout the interviews in this study, a lot of importance is attributed to their role and ability to provide the guidance that parents are unable to give; however, there is evidence here to suggest that they are perhaps not able to help young adults in these social contexts to see beyond their own horizons of higher education. A resourceful and knowledgeable guidance counsellor would be able to help a motivated student by guiding him or her to

higher education options that they are unaware of themselves. Given the relatively low level of education among families in Söderhamn and similar places, the institutional role of the school, its teachers, and guidance counsellors becomes even more important to the goal of widening the social recruitment to higher education in Sweden.

This thesis has shown how young adults perceive and navigate a potential entry into higher education; they approach the idea and system of higher education from specific positions. These positions are individual – their parents have various resources and the young adults themselves acquire knowledge and skills throughout their schooling. However, a significant point of this thesis has been to understand and explain their shared position: how is the transition from adolescence and the decisions involved experienced in an education-scarce, former industrial community? The thesis has been able to show that in navigating their future, specifically continued education, young adults also incorporate the past. Social norms and values that have existed in former industrial communities take on new forms, but live on in practices and ideas about how life should be lived. In Söderhamn, it seems that higher education has become part of a common perception of the life cycle. Higher education can follow as a natural continuation of upper-secondary school and as a point of transit towards the goal of independence and adulthood. As a new instrument in an already existing toolbox, higher education can be used to find one's place in the labour market and thereby live up to ideas and ideals of conscientiousness, employability, and independence.

SAMMANFATTNING:

Högre utbildning som norm
Nya sätt att bli vuxen och självständig i en tidigare bruksort

Avindustrialiseringen och expansionen av det högre utbildningssystemet i Sverige har haft betydande effekter på platser som tidigare har dominerats av tillverkningsindustri. Denna studie granskar Söderhamn, en före detta industristad med generellt låg utbildningsnivå, som ett tydligt exempel på en sådan plats. Fokus ligger på hur unga människor resonerar om och förhåller sig till möjligheten att påbörja högre studier. Studien belyser hur deras förhållningssätt formas av det industriella arvet, bristen på lokala utbildningsresurser och deras socioekonomiska bakgrund. Dessutom undersöks sambandet mellan ungdomarnas syn på utbildning, deras föräldrars utbildningsbakgrund och yrkesliv, samt hur uppväxten i en specifik miljö kan prägla förhållningssätt till högre utbildning.

Avhandlingen undersöker hur ökade utbildningskrav hanteras av unga vuxna som vuxit upp på en plats där koncentrationen av utbildningsresurser är, och länge har varit, låg. En huvudslutsats är att högre utbildning numera har blivit en norm i denna tidigare bruksort, det vill säga något man förväntas genomgå eller åtminstone förhålla sig till även om planerna för framtiden inte explicit involverar högre studier. Detta förhållande står i kontrast till föräldragenerationen och tidigare generationer, då högre studier varit förhållandevis ovanligt. Normen innebär också att vissa individer väljer en annan väg. Avhandlingen ägnar även utrymme åt att analysera resonemangen hos de ungdomar som sannolikt inte kommer att studera vidare.

Genom 52 djupintervjuer undersöker avhandlingen hur ungdomar i Söderhamn resonerar om och motiverar ett eventuellt inträde i högre utbildning och hur högre utbildning i stor utsträckning har kommit av bli en del av att bli självständig och därmed vuxen. En central slutsats är att högre utbildning av flertalet intervjuade betraktas som något nödvändigt för att kunna få ett arbete, vilket i sin tur uppfattas som en betydande del av att vara en ansvarstagande vuxen. Avhandlingen kontrasterar detta mot deras föräldrars erfarenheter av utbildning. På så sätt ger studien en förståelse av hur avindustrialiseringen och den i huvudsak samtidiga expansionen av högre utbildning skapat nya förutsättningar och krav för unga på dessa platser idag.

Studien bidrar till flera etablerade forskningsfält, inklusive forskning om utbildningsbeslut och stratifieringen av det högre utbildningssystemet i Sverige, forskning om tidigare bruksorter, samt forskning kring ungas beslut att lämna eller stanna i småstäder och på platser som påverkats kraftigt av avindustrialisering. Den bidrar också till att förstå hur normen om högre utbildning påverkar och fördröjer

övergången till vuxenlivet, i kontrast till tidigare mönster och normer som snarare betonade ett tidigt inträde på arbetsmarknaden och familjebildning.

Kapitel 1 innehåller en presentation av studiens syfte, en diskussion kring valet av Söderhamn som fall, en genomgång av metodvalet, samt en översikt över avhandlingens struktur. I kapitel 1 presenteras även studiens tre forskningsfrågor:

I. Hur förhåller sig ungdomar i en utbildningsfattig kontext till fortsatt utbildning generellt och hur speglas detta förhållningssätt i hur de navigerar möjligheten att söka sig till högre utbildning?

II. Hur ser relationen mellan föräldrars erfarenhet av utbildning och ungdomars syn på högre utbildning ut?

III. Hur navigerar ungdomar på högskoleförberedande gymnasieprogram möjligheten att söka sig till högre utbildning och vilka överväganden gör de i denna process?

Studien utgår från och bidrar till forskningsläget som presenteras i kapitel 2. I relation till den fallstudie som genomförs i denna avhandling kan relevant forskning delas in i två huvudspår: studier av orter som liknar den som studeras här, och studier om sociala gruppers förhållningssätt, strategier och beteendemönster i frågor som rör utbildning.

Den tidigare forskningen om före detta industrisamhällen i Sverige kan delas in i två huvudspår: de studier som är av historisk art eller de som är inriktade på den demografiska utvecklingen, med särskilt fokus på unga personers utflyttning eller deras önskan att stanna kvar i dessa regioner.

Forskning om sociala gruppers sätt att navigera i utbildningssystemet och mellan utbildningsval i allmänhet har undersökts tidigare. I den svenska kontexten är det känt att föräldrarnas utbildningsnivå har stor betydelse för hur deras barn förhåller sig till högre utbildning. Medan tidigare svensk forskning i stor utsträckning har uppmärksammat medelklassens och den övre medelklassens uppfattning om och navigering av utbildningssystemet, har färre studier ägnat sig åt hur grupper utan stora utbildningsresurser ser på och hanterar dessa typer av beslut. De studier som undersökt dessa gruppers förhållningssätt till utbildning har framför allt fokuserat på urbana miljöer.

Denna avhandling förenar således flera forskningsfält genom att studera en tidigare bruksort samt de utbildningsnivåer och den arbetsmarknadsstruktur som formats av dess historiska utveckling. Till skillnad från tidigare forskning, som främst fokuserat på ungdomars utflyttning från sådana orter, riktar denna studie uppmärksamheten mot en central drivkraft bakom utflyttningen: högre utbildning. Avhandlingen utforskar dessutom sociala grupper som sällan studerats inom utbildningssociologin i Sverige, nämligen de individer vars föräldrar saknar högre utbildning och som vuxit upp i ett område där eftergymnasial utbildning är relativt ovanlig. Även om arbetarklassens dispositioner, attityder och strategier för att

navigera högre utbildning har studerats i stor utsträckning i länder som Storbritannien, har dessa frågor fått begränsad uppmärksamhet i en svensk kontext.

I kapitel 3 diskuteras avhandlingens teoretiska utgångspunkter och analytiska begrepp. Teoretiskt använder avhandlingen begreppet *det sociala rummet* för att positionera Söderhamn i förhållande till det övergripande svenska samhället. Detta relationella angreppssätt belyser Söderhamns dominerade position, särskilt vad gäller utbildningsresurser, där Söderhamn utmärker sig som den tätort med lägst utbildningsnivå inom det län, Gävleborg, som har lägst utbildningsnivå i Sverige. Det relationella synsättet, vilket är grunden i Pierre Bourdieus begrepp det sociala rummet, används också som ett verktyg för att analysera intervjupersonernas sociala bakgrund och positioner i relation till varandra, inom Söderhamn. De viktigaste kategorierna som används för att analysera deras positioner i förhållande till varandra är social klass, kön och dispositioner.

Utöver detta används begreppet *sociala normer* för att analysera uppfattningen om och sättet att närma sig och hantera högre utbildning som en anpassning till andras förväntningar. En social norm definieras som bestående av principer, allmänna krav och attityder bland en betydande andel av medlemmarna i en grupp. Enligt detta synsätt kan sociala normer existera även om de inte åtföljs av den sociala praktik som är kopplad till normen. Genom att använda begreppet sociala normer tolkas intervjuerna med de unga vuxna i Söderhamn som en indikation på förekomsten av en norm om högre utbildning.

Kapitel 4 består av en diskussion gällande metod och material som ligger till grund för avhandlingens genomförande. Studien är utformad som en kvalitativ fallstudie som främst använder djupintervjuer som metod. Urvalet består av intervjuer med 52 individer, 40 unga vuxna och 12 föräldrar. De flesta av de unga vuxna gick på gymnasiet, majoriteten hade valt ett högskoleförberedande program. Förutom de 27 intervjupersonerna i gymnasieskolan hade 13 unga vuxna av olika anledningar hoppat av skolan. Urvalet bestod av 12 föräldrar, åtta mödrar och fyra fäder. Föräldrarna var vid intervjutillfällena mellan 45 och 57 år gamla.

Förutom djupintervjuer använder studien även offentligt tillgänglig statistik samt anonymiserad registerdata på individnivå från Statistiska centralbyrån (SCB) för att beskriva demografi, sysselsättning och utbildningsmönster i Söderhamn. I avhandlingens första empiriska kapitel, kapitel 5, presenteras och analyseras dessa. Kapitlet visar den stora befolkningsminskningen i Söderhamn efter den avindustrialisering som inleddes på 1970-talet. Trots den ekonomiska omstruktureringen domineras yrkesstrukturen i Söderhamn fortfarande av arbetarklassyrken och den lokala arbetsmarknaden är könssegregerad. Den lokala utbildningsnivån ligger under det nationella genomsnittet och kvinnor har i mycket högre grad än män genomgått högre utbildning.

Med strukturerna i kapitel 5 som bakgrund, är kapitel 6 det första empiriska kapitlet där intervjumaterialet analyseras. I detta kapitel presenteras intervjuer med sju unga vuxna som representativa för återkommande teman och uppfattningar om högre utbildning i samtliga intervjuer med unga vuxna. Värdet av självständighet och vuxenliv är ett återkommande tema och löper som en röd tråd genom kapitlet,

även om intervjupersonerna föreställer sig dessa värden på olika sätt, beroende på deras respektive position och dispositioner. Högre utbildning framstår dock som en av de med betydelsefulla vägarna för att uppnå den självständighet som majoriteten av intervjupersonerna strävar efter. Bland de unga vuxna framträder ett tydligt mönster där högre utbildning värderas och betraktas som viktigt, oavsett om de själva planerar att studera vidare eller inte.

Kapitel 6 visar hur ungdomarna hanterar och förhåller sig till högre utbildning som en social norm. Denna norm står ibland i konflikt med andra normer som finns i det lokala sociala rummet. Särskilt för unga kvinnor framstår de traditionella vägarna till vuxenlivet, såsom att bilda familj, vara oförenliga med deras uppfattningar om att högre utbildning är nödvändigt för att få ett tryggt och ”bra jobb”.

Att ha ett arbete och vara ekonomiskt oberoende värderas högt av de unga vuxna som intervjuades. Även om högre utbildning är en relativt ny företeelse i den studerade kontexten, så är inte värderingen av arbete och sysselsättning det. Högre utbildning har blivit en del av det unga vuxna uppfattar som nödvändigt för att bli *anställningsbara* och därmed upprätthålla värdet och den historiska sociala normen om *skötsamhet*.

I kapitel 7 analyseras intervjuer med föräldrar till de unga vuxna. Detta kapitel riktar fokus på föräldrarnas uppfattningar och resonemang om sina egna och sina barns utbildningsbanor för att förstå relationen mellan dessa. I motsats till hur de uppfattade sina egna behov av högre utbildning ser föräldrarna högre utbildning som nödvändigt för att deras barn ska få en stabil position på arbetsmarknaden. Oavsett deras egen utbildningsbakgrund ser föräldrarna högre utbildning som en nödvändighet eller åtminstone som en positiv möjlighet när det gäller barnens karriärvägar och de val som uppstår i samband med att barnen avslutar sin gymnasieutbildning.

Oavsett föräldrarnas respektive sociala ställning framträder arbetarklass-dispositioner i fråga om hur och på vilket sätt man som förälder bör engagera sig i sitt barns utbildning och de val detta inbegriper. Det finns en stark känsla av att man som förälder inte bör lägga sig i sina barns skolarbete eller utbildningsbeslut, istället betonar föräldrarna tilliten till lärarna, skolsystemet och barnen själva. I likhet med de ungdomarnas resonemang vill föräldrarna att deras barn ska bli självständiga och låter dem i hög utsträckning fatta egna beslut, även i de fall då besluten kan tänkas resultera i ”misstag” av olika slag.

Det avslutande empiriska kapitlet, kapitel 8, fokuserar särskilt på de unga vuxna som går ett högskoleförberedande program på gymnasiet. Kapitlet är inriktat på deras beslutsprocess inför valet av högre utbildning och deras resonemang kring *var*, *vad* och *när* de ska studera. Den bild som framträder är en uppfattning om högre utbildning som starkt präglad av den tidigare bruksort där dessa ungdomar har vuxit upp.

Betydelsen av var man studerar framstår som centralt i hur unga vuxna resonerar kring valet av högre utbildning. Lärosätets placering framträder som en påtaglig ”variabel” i beslutsprocessen. Många unga vuxna föredrar den närmaste regionala högskolan i Gävle, medan andra är villiga att flytta längre bort från

Söderhamn. De flesta resonerar dock om platser som upplevs och känns bekanta på något sätt. Detta analyseras i kapitlet som ett försök att hålla fast vid något välkänt i en övergång som för de flesta upplevs som ett avgörande steg i livet. De unga vuxnas kännedom om landets lärosäten inbegriper knappt alls de äldre forskningsuniversiteten, utan de resonerar nästan uteslutande om de nya universiteten och de regionala högskolorna som tänkbara alternativ.

När det gäller vad de unga vuxna vill studera tänker de unga vuxna främst på utbildningar som leder till arbete inom nya professioner eller välfärdsyrken. De navigerar valet av en universitetsexamen med avsikten att hitta ett ”bra jobb” och högre utbildning uppfattas som en garanti för en trygg anställning och en stabil ekonomisk position på arbetsmarknaden. Deras strävan efter högre utbildning kan förstås som ett sätt att uppnå anställningsbarhet och därigenom undvika arbetslöshet.

Tidpunkten för högre utbildning, när man vill studera, analyseras som ett sätt att hantera risk. De flesta unga vuxna uppger att de vill studera vidare direkt efter gymnasiet eftersom de vill komma ut i arbetslivet så snabbt som möjligt. En typisk arbetarklassövergång från skola till arbete är vad de flesta unga vuxna ser framför sig. För att bli anställningsbar uppfattar man dock att det krävs en omväg genom högskolestudier – ett slags ”nödvändigt ont” för att nå den typ av arbete och position man föreställer sig senare i livet.

Beslutsprocessen hos de unga som gick ett högskoleförberedande program speglar de resurser som finns i de enskilda familjerna. Samtidigt är besluts-processen en återspegling av det större sociala rummet och de låga volymer av kapital som familjerna kollektivt besitter. Hur de unga vuxna navigerar i det högre utbildningssystemet kan ibland snarare kopplas till de sociala normer och praktiker som existerar i Söderhamn i allmänhet, än till de enskilda familjernas utbildningsnivå och position i det sociala rummet. Trots att unga vuxna i Söderhamn har som ambition att studera vidare begränsas deras perspektiv av ortens dominerade position och de lärosäten som upplevs som tillgängliga är de som i sin tur är dominerade inom det högre utbildningslandskapet.

I kapitel 9 sammanfattas avhandlingens viktigaste slutsatser. Högre utbildning har idag utvecklats till en norm i Söderhamn. Denna norm verkar ha vuxit fram eftersom högre utbildning numera betraktas av många som något nödvändigt för att kunna få ett välavlönat arbete, och därmed kunna etablera sig som en ansvarstagande, skötsam, vuxen. Det senare är en sedan länge etablerad social norm i denna, till övervägande del, arbetarklassdominerade, miljö. Sammanfattningsvis belyser avhandlingen samstämmigheten i värderingar och normer på den specifika ort som har studerats. Även om normerna kring högre utbildning är nya, är motiven för att eventuellt ge sig in i högre utbildning kopplade till historiska sociala normer och praktiker, såsom värdet och idealet av skötsamhet.

Både unga vuxna och föräldrar betonar värdet av självständighet och att bli vuxen, vilket ofta förkroppsligas genom tanken på ett arbete och ibland genom tanken på att bli förälder. Högre utbildning har blivit en del av föreställningen om hur man blir anställningsbar och värderas därför i kraft av dess förmåga att leda till

en position på arbetsmarknaden. Universitetsstudier uppfattas därför som en garanti för anställning snarare än en (ut)bildningsresa med okänd destination.

Expansionen av antalet lärosäten, program och kurser har skapat ett system som är svårt att överblicka och hantera för presumtiva studenter från utbildningsfattiga områden. Istället för att välja mellan en handfull universitet kan unga vuxna idag välja mellan 50 lärosäten, och i den utbildningsfattiga kontext som studeras här gör de ofta det i tron att det inte finns några hierarkier mellan dessa lärosäten och att alla examina är likvärdiga. Denna syn på och sätt att navigera högre utbildning förstärker de ojämlikheter som fortfarande finns inom det svenska högre utbildningssystemet. Sammantaget ger denna avhandling en fördjupad förståelse för hur unga vuxna från utbildningsfattiga miljöer uppfattar, förhåller sig till och navigerar möjligheten att ge sig in i högre studier, samt hur detta samspelar med den specifika kontext som deras uppväxtort utgör.

SUMMARY:

The Higher Education Norm

Rethinking Paths to Independence and Adulthood in a Former Industrial Community

The expansion of the Swedish higher education system and the decline of manufacturing industry are societal processes that have greatly affected places where industry previously flourished. This single-case study focuses on Söderhamn, a former industrial community with relatively low levels of education. In particular, the thesis examines how young adults from this education-scarce part of the country reason and view a potential entry into higher education, impacted by the comparative lack of educational resources and industrial legacy. Their perceptions and navigations of higher education are interpreted as being related to their parents' levels of education and occupations, the process of de-industrialisation of the local area, and the subsequent requirement for tertiary qualifications in the labour market.

The thesis investigates a locality where the concentration of educational resources is – and has long been – low, and how young adults manage the increased need for higher education. A main result of the study is that higher education has become a norm within the context of this former industrial community. Most young adults perceive higher education as necessary to future employment. Those who do not intend to pursue higher education are still obliged to relate to the idea of tertiary education, even if they do not want to attend university. This result is in contrast to older generations, represented by the parents in the study, where higher education attainment was relatively unusual. The norm of higher education also means that some individuals choose a different path. The thesis also sheds light on how young adults who do not plan to enter higher education reason about their future.

Through 52 in-depth interviews, the thesis investigates how young adults in Söderhamn reason about and motivate a potential entry into higher education and how higher education is incorporated into the idea of how to become an independent adult. A main finding of the study is that most of the interviewees perceive higher education as necessary to finding employment, which in turn is seen as a significant part of becoming a responsible adult. The thesis contrasts and relates this result to the parents' experiences of education. Thereby, this study provides an understanding of how de-industrialisation and the coinciding expansion of higher education have created new conditions and requirements for young adults in these types of places today.

The study contributes to several existing fields of research. These fields include research on educational decision-making and the stratification of the higher education system in Sweden, as well as research on former industrial communities and research on motivations for staying or leaving rural and de-industrialised areas. Moreover, it contributes to an understanding of how higher education affects and delays the transition into adulthood, in contrast to former practices and norms related to the entry into the labour market and early family formation.

Chapter 1 introduces previous research as well as the aim; case selection; methods; and the general structure of the thesis. Furthermore, Chapter 1 presents the thesis' three research questions:

I. How do young adults in an education-scarce context view continued education in general and how is this perception reflected in the various ways in which they navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education?

II. What is the relation between parents' experiences of education and young adults' perception of higher education?

III. How do young adults in higher education preparatory programmes in upper-secondary school navigate a possible pursuit of higher education and what considerations become evident in this process?

The study builds upon and makes contributions to the prior research presented in Chapter 2. In relation to the case study carried out in this thesis, relevant research can be divided into two main strands – studies on localities similar to the one studied here, and studies on social groups' perceptions, navigations, and choice behaviours related to education.

Typically, research on former industrial communities in Sweden primarily focuses either on the history of localities if this kind, or on the more recent demographic developments of towns of this type – predominantly the out-mobility of young people, or their willingness to stay in these regions.

Previous Swedish research shows that different social groups navigate the education system in different ways and parents' levels of education have a significant impact on entry into university. While prior Swedish research has predominantly paid attention to the middle and upper-middle classes' perceptions and navigations of educational pursuits, fewer studies have engaged with how groups without an abundance of educational resources view and manage these decisions. Cases where these groups' relationships to education are investigated primarily focus on urban settings.

This study bridges several research domains by studying a former industrial community and the educational levels and the labour market structure connected to that history. While prior research has focused on the out-mobility of youth from these localities, this study investigates one of the main drivers behind this out-mobility – higher education. Furthermore, the thesis examines social groups within a town of this type that have rarely been studied within the sociology of education

in Sweden. Namely, those who reside in an area where higher education is comparatively unusual and where parents are less likely to have attended university. While working-class dispositions to and perceptions and navigations of higher education have been researched extensively in countries such as the United Kingdom, they have been infrequently studied in previous Swedish research.

Theoretically, the thesis employs the concept of *the social space* to position Söderhamn in relation to the overall Swedish society. This relational approach highlights Söderhamn's dominated position, especially in regards to educational resources, where Söderhamn stands out as positioned within the county with the lowest levels of education within Sweden. The relational approach of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the social space is also used as a tool to analyse the interviewees' social backgrounds and positions within Söderhamn. The main categories used to analyse their positions relative each other are their social class, gender, and dispositions.

In addition, the concept of *social norm* is used to analyse the perception and navigation of higher education as an adjustment to the expectations of others. A social norm is defined as consisting of normative principles, general requirements, and normative attitudes among a significant proportion of members of a group. In this view, social norms can exist even if they are not accompanied by the social practice linked to the norm. By employing the concept of social norms, the study is able to interpret the interviews with young adults in Söderhamn as indicative of the existence of a norm of higher education.

The study is designed as a single-case qualitative study that primarily uses in-depth interviews as a method. The sample consists of interviews with 52 individuals, 40 young adults and 12 parents. Most of the young adults attended upper-secondary school, an optional part of the education system that almost all young adults in Sweden choose to attend. The majority of the sample attended a higher education preparatory programme, a smaller number attended a vocational programme. Apart from the 27 interviewees in upper-secondary school, 13 young adults had – for various reasons – left school. The sample consists of 12 parents, eight mothers and four fathers. At the time of the interviews, the parents were aged between 45 and 57.

Apart from using in-depth interviews, the study also uses publicly available and anonymised individual-level registry data from Statistics Sweden (SCB) to depict the demographic, employment, and educational patterns in Söderhamn. In the thesis' first empirical chapter, Chapter 5, these are presented and analysed. The chapter shows the considerable population decline in Söderhamn following the de-industrialisation that began in the 1970s. Despite the economic restructuring of the economy, the occupational structure in Söderhamn is still dominated by working-class occupations and the local labour market is gender-segregated. Moreover, the local levels of education lag behind the national average and women are much more likely to have attended university than men.

Building upon the demographic, employment, and educational structures in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 is the first empirical chapter analysing the interview material.

In this chapter, interviews with seven young adults are presented as being representative of recurring themes and perceptions of higher education throughout all of the interviews with young adults. Values like independence and adulthood are recurring throughout. The interviewees imagine achieving these values in different ways that are dependent on their social positions, backgrounds and outlooks. However, higher education appears as one of the main paths to reaching a desired state of adulthood. Among the young adults there is a distinct tendency to value and relate to higher education, regardless of whether they are planning to go to university or not.

Chapter 6 shows how the young adults manage the social norm of higher education. However, this norm is sometimes in conflict with other norms that exist in the local social space. This is especially prevalent among young women. Traditional paths to adulthood like having children are in conflict with their perception of higher education as being necessary for employment. These norms appear to be 'incompatible'.

Having work and being financially independent are highly valued by the young adults in the type of community studied here. While pursuing higher education is a relatively new practice in this context, valuing work and employment is not. Higher education has become incorporated into what young adults perceive as necessary for finding work and thereby upholding the value and social norm of 'conscientiousness', or '*skötsamhet*'.

In the subsequent Chapter 7, interviews with the parents of young adults are analysed. This chapter focuses on the parents' perceptions and reasoning about their own and their children's educational trajectories to understand the relation between them. In contrast to how they perceive their own need for higher education, the parents now view higher education as necessary for their children to reach a stable position in the labour market. Irrespective of their own educational backgrounds, the parents see higher education as a necessity or at least view it in a positive light, when it comes to their children's trajectories and the choices that follow after finishing upper-secondary school.

Regardless of the parents' respective social positions, the extent of parental involvement in children's educational choices reveal working-class dispositions to the upbringing of children. There is a strong sense that parents ought not to get involved in their children's schoolwork or educational decisions. Instead, the parents demonstrate trust in the professional authority of the school and in the children themselves. In line with the young adults' reasoning, the parents want their children to become independent and to various degrees allow them to make their own decisions, and sometimes mistakes, when it comes to educational endeavours.

The final empirical chapter focuses specifically on the young adults who attend a higher education preparatory programme in upper-secondary school. Chapter 8 investigates their higher education decision-making process and how they reason about options for *where*, *what*, and *when* to study at university. What emerges is a navigation of higher education that is rooted in the former industrial community where the young adults live.

Most prevalent is the significance of where to study in young adults' reasoning about higher education choices. The location of the higher education institution appears as a tangible 'variable' in the decision-making process. Many young adults prefer the closest university college in Gävle, while others are prepared to venture further. However, most opt for places that feel 'familiar' in some way. This is analysed as an attempt to hold on to something familiar in a transition that is, for most, described as a big leap. Young adults' horizons of higher education institutions almost completely exclude the old research universities. Instead, the young adults commonly mention the young universities and regional university colleges.

When considering continued education, the young adults were mostly interested in programs that would lead to work in clearly defined professions, primarily within new professions or established welfare professions. They navigate the choice of a university degree with the intention of finding a 'good job.' Higher education is perceived as a guarantee for a stable financial position. Young adults' intention to pursue higher education is analysed as a way to achieve *employability* and thus, a way of avoiding unemployment.

When to study, the timing of entry into university, is interpreted as a way to manage risk. Since their aim is to enter working life, most young adults want to apply to university immediately after having finished upper-secondary school. A typical working-class transition from school to work is what most young adults want. However, becoming employable is seen as requiring a detour through university studies.

The decision-making process reflects the resources, or lack thereof, available in individual families. At the same time, it is a reflection of the larger social space and the low volumes of capital that families collectively possess. The navigation of higher education is sometimes more connected to the general social norms and practices that exist in Söderhamn, rather than individual families' levels of education and positions in the social space. Young adults in Söderhamn want to pursue higher education, but *where* they prefer to study is impacted by the dominated position that Söderhamn has within the Swedish social space. Thus, young adults prefer higher education institutions that are themselves dominated within the space of higher education.

In conclusion, the thesis sheds light upon the consistency in values and norms in the specific locality studied. Motivations for pursuing the newer norm of higher education are connected to historic social norms and practices, such as the value and ideal of conscientiousness.

Young adults and parents alike emphasise the value of independence and adulthood, which are often embodied by the idea of paid work, and other times by the idea of becoming a parent. Higher education has become incorporated into the notion of how to become employable and therefore valued because of its ability to lead to a position in the labour market. Therefore, university studies are perceived as a guarantee for employment rather than an educational journey with an unknown destination.

The expansion of the number of higher education institutions, programmes, and courses, has created a system that is difficult to navigate for prospective students from education-scarce contexts. Instead of navigating a handful of universities, young adults may choose between 50 higher education institutions. Given the education-scarce context, these young adults believe to a large degree that there are no hierarchies between these institutions and that all degrees are equal. This perception and navigation of higher education contributes to the persisting inequalities seen in the Swedish higher education system on a larger scale. Overall, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how young adults from education-scarce backgrounds perceive and navigate the possibility of pursuing higher education and how this is connected to the specific place where they grew up.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide for young adults

School. (Accomplishments and setbacks in school, now and before, interaction with and the relationship with school.)

a) Current upper-secondary school programme – what is studied, why was a particular upper-secondary school/programme chosen, positive/negative experiences of school, the significance of school, the experience of school ending.

b) Previous schooling – how have previous schools been, have there been any choices of schools, what are the school results like? What subjects are seen as important/unimportant, what has the person been good at/had a harder time with?

c) The school environment – what is the school environment like? Is school important? Has the person 'fitted in'? Are there classmates that are better/worse at fitting in?

d) Teachers – Has the person had good/bad teachers? What were they like? What was good/bad? What is a good teacher like? What does/did that teacher do?

e) Experience and attitude toward school – too much/too little of something, does the person see the educational system as working for/against him/her?

Work/education. (Does the person have one/several/no alternatives, is there a clear, well-informed plan or no plan at all, does the person have opportunities and confidence or not, does the person seem to think that the choices ahead are important or not.)

a) What will happen after school finishes – work, studied, travel, other, what options exist/do not exist, what is seen as good/bad alternatives.

   i. Higher education – which university/university college, what type of education (does the person aim for a certain place or a certain education), why choose this programme and how does the person perceive the chances of getting in, get a job, etc.

   ii. Study abroad?

   iii. Other education, folk high school, adult education, vocational school, etc.?

   iv. Work – what occupation/s are being chosen between and where does this job exist (in the hometown or elsewhere), how does the person perceive the chances of getting a job after upper-secondary school.

b) What is important in a future occupation, how does the person perceive the chances of getting a job perceived as 'good'. What is valued in a future occupation?

Living somewhere. (Is this perceived as an active choice or something that just happens.)

a) How does the person perceive/characterise the place? How would he/she describe the place? Is there any connection to other places (family, extended family, travel, geographical movements during childhood).

b) (Based on the answers about work/education) Move or stay? What are the positives/negatives in relation to this? What does the person think others around him/her will do and what is his/her perception of this?

c) How does the person imagine he/she will live? (At home, with friends, with partner, alone, etc.) Are there several options here or only one possible solution (in relation to housing market, in Sweden/abroad etc.).

d) In the long-term: is the image different than right after upper-secondary school? Is the person planning to move back after studies, for example? What is seen as important to have access to where one chooses to live. Can the person imagine living abroad?

Family. (Try and form an idea of the family situation and the ties within the family/extended family.)

a) Parents – education, work, where they grew up, married/divorced, etc.

b) Siblings – potential education, work, place of residence.

c) Grandparents – education, work, where they grew up, married/divorced, etc.

d) Other important members of the 'family network'.

e) How the family lives – potential mobility, how and where they live now, general opinion on the town where the person lives (positive/negative, possibilities/obstacles).

f) Create your own family – soon or in the future, central or less important, what does the person think others will do? Does the person have friends the same age who have children?

Friendship and other relationships.

a) Except for family, are there other important relationships (friends, partner, etc.).

   i. If they are older, what have they done after upper-secondary school?

   ii. If they are the same age, what are they going to do after upper-secondary school? How are their choices/plans perceived? (Does there seem to exist ideas of what one 'should' do or are there examples of different paths after upper-secondary school).

b) Do friends/partner have any opinions about one's own plans? Are their opinions important, have they affected the plans?

c) Do persons within the family have any opinions about one's own plans? Are their opinions important, have they affected the plans? Have the parents expressed opinions/expectations about the future? What do the parents value?

Life and future in the long-term.

a) What does the person hope the future will be like? This in relation to work, studies, place of residence, family and friends. What is important and what is not important in life? Is this a likely scenario or is it difficult to achieve?

b) What does the person hope to avoid in the future? What would he/she not want it to be like? This in relation to work, studies, place of residence, family and friends. Is there still a risk that might happen?

c) How would he/she feel if life became approximately like his/her parents' life?

d) What traits/personality does the person think is important in order to have a good future/life? Are there any people around him/her that will do well? If so, why?

Appendix B: Interview guide for parents

Work/education.

a) What does the person work with – for how long, is it a good job? Has the person had/applied for other jobs previously? Does the person want to work with something else?

   i. Higher education – which university/university college, what type of education, why was this chosen and how were the studies and to get a job etc.

   ii. Other education, folk high school, adult education, vocational school, etc?

   iii. Work – did the person choose between different jobs (in the place where he/she grew up or elsewhere), what were the chances of getting a job after upper-secondary school?

b) What was/is important in an occupation, what are the chances of getting a job that is seen as 'good'? What is valued in an occupation? What is good about the job he/she has? What would be the ideal situation?

Family. (Try and form an idea of the family situation and the ties within the family/extended family.)

a) Children – age, education, work.

b) Partner/the child's other parent – education, work, where they grew up, married/divorced etc.

c) Parents – education, work, where they grew up, married/divorced etc.

d) Siblings – potential education, work, place of residence.

e) Grandparents – education, work, where they grew up, married/divorced, etc.

f) How the family lives – potential mobility.

g) The family ties: when do they see each other? Are the grandparents part of family life?

Growing up and school. (Did the person have one/several/no alternatives, was is there a clear, well-informed plan or no plan at all, did the person have opportunities and confidence or not, did the person seem to think that the choices ahead were important or not.)

a) Where did the person grow up? What was it like growing up there?

b) Where did the person go to school? What was school like? What was valued? Did the person do well in school? Was school important?

c) How did the person experience when school ended? What did the person do then and what were the alternatives and options? (Conscription for men!).

d) Does the person remember what plans/hopes he/she had about the future around the age of 18? Did it turn out the way he/she thought?

Living somewhere. (Was this an active choice or something that just happened.)

a) What is it like living in Söderhamn? Pros/cons? The town's development over time. Is there any connection to other places (family, extended family, travel, geographical movements during childhood).

b) (Based on the answers about work/education) Did the person move/stay? What were the positives/negatives in relation to this? What did others do and how did he/she feel about that?

c) What were the person's thoughts on moving/staying? And what were the reasons for that?

The child's schooling. (Accomplishments and setbacks in school, now and before, interaction with and the relationship with school.)

a) Current upper-secondary school programme – why was a particular upper-secondary school/programme chosen, positive/negative experiences of school, the significance of school, the experience of school ending. What alternatives were there?

b) Previous schooling – how have previous schools been, have there been any choices of schools, what are the school results like? Subjects that the child has liked/disliked?

c) Experience and attitude toward school – what is the school environment like? Differences/similarities to when the person went to school? (E.g. grading system).

The child's future plans.

a) What does the child want to do after upper-secondary school? What does the person think of these plans, is something perceived as good/bad (especially when it comes to education, work, and moving/staying).

b) How does the person view the child's opportunities? (In relation to education, work, where to live and starting a family, etc.).

c) Does the person have any opinions on the child/children's plans? Are his/her opinions important to the child, have they tried to influence the plans? What do the person value when it comes to the child's plans/future?

d) Does the person think there is a difference between his/her own childhood and the child/children's childhood and the choices that the child will have to make?

The child´s life and future in the long-term.

a) What does the person hope the child's future will be like? (This in relation to work, studies, place of residence, family and friends.) What is important and what is not important in life? Is this a likely scenario or is it difficult to achieve?

b) What does the person hope the child can avoid in the future? What would he/she not want to happen? (This in relation to work, studies, place of residence, family and friends.) Is there still a risk that might happen?

c) How would the person feel if the child's life became approximately like his/her parents' life?

d) Are there traits or a way of being that has felt important to communicate to the child?

e) What dreams did you have when you were the same age as the child?

Appendix C: Young adults' parents' occupations and level of education

No.	Education	Father, occupation	Father HE	Mother, occupation	Mother HE
1	Dropped out	N/A	N/A	Adult education, unemployed	No
2	Dropped out	Employed, industry	No	Home care	No
3	Dropped out	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
4	Dropped out	N/A	N/A	Parental leave, Unemployed	Maybe
5	Dropped out	Deceased		Elderly care	No
6	Dropped out	Bus driver	No	Elderly care	No
7	Dropped out	Public services	No	Not in Sweden	No
8	Dropped out	Unemployed	Maybe	Early retirement	No
9	Dropped out	Employed, industry	No	Unemployed	No
10	Dropped out	Employed, industry	No	Unemployed	No
11	Preparatory	Electrician	Yes	Employed, government agency	Yes
12	Preparatory	Employed, insurance company	No	Employed, retail	No
13	Preparatory	Employed, industry	Maybe	Employed, government agency	Yes
14	Preparatory	N/A	N/A	Teacher	N/A
15	Preparatory	Self-employed	No	Employed, government agency	N/A
16	Preparatory	Teacher, upper-secondary school	Yes	Teacher, compulsory school	Yes
17	Preparatory	Painter	No	Nurse	Yes
18	Preparatory	Cook, public sector	No	Nurse	Yes
19	Preparatory	Plumber	No	Employed, private company	Yes
20	Preparatory	Self-employed	Maybe	Self-employed	Yes
21	Preparatory	Self-employed	No	Employed, government agency	No
22	Preparatory	Unemployed	No	Parental leave, unemployed	No
23	Preparatory	Self-employed	No	Assistant nurse	No
24	Preparatory	Deceased		Assistant nurse	No
25	Preparatory	Restaurant owner	No	Employed, government agency	Yes
26	Preparatory	Management, industry	No	Employed, government agency	No
27	Preparatory	Retired, electrician	No	Employed, government agency	No
28	Preparatory	Assistant nurse	Yes	Cook	No
29	Preparatory	Electrician	No	Care assistant	No
30	Preparatory	Baker	No	Unemployed, Adult education	Yes
31	Preparatory	Self-employed	Maybe	Employed, government agency	Yes
32	Preparatory	Electrician	No	Employed, public sector	No
33	Preparatory	Self-employed	No	Self-employed	No
34	Preparatory	Carpenter	No	Care assistant	No
35	Preparatory	Sheet metal worker	No	Preschool personnel and adult education	No
36	Vocational	Public services	No	Preschool personnel	No
37	Vocational	Lorry driver	No	Employed, retail	No
38	Vocational	Retired, assistant nurse	No	Assistant nurse	No
39	Vocational	Teacher, adult education	No	Employed, hospitality	No
40	Vocational	Adult education, unemployed	No	Adult education, unemployed	No

The information in the table comes from the interviews with young adults. The interviewees' pseudonyms have been replaced with numbers, this is to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. *N/A* means that the parent is absent from the interviewee's life. *Maybe* means that the interviewee is not certain about the parent's level of education and that I have not been able to determine the level of education based on other information in the interview.

Appendix D: Young adults' grandparents' occupations

Grandmothers	Grandfathers
Bank clerk	Businessman
Cleaner	Carpenter
Dental nurse	Carpenter
Dinner lady	Carpenter, raftsman
Dinner lady	City planner
Dinner lady	Cleaning
Elderly care	Electrician
Elderly care	Employed - industry, early retirement
Elderly care	Employed, industry
Employed, government agency	Employed, industry
Employed, health care	Employed, industry
Employed, industry	Employed, industry
Employed, mental health	Estate agent
Employed, municipality	Farmer
Employed, small business	Farmer
Farmer	Farmer
Farmer	Farmer
Health and care work	Fire brigade, employed - industry
Leisure centre	Floor layer
Librarian	Football coach
Manager, municipality	Headmaster
Nurse	Manager, industry
Nurse, sick leave	Manager, transportation
Physician	Postman
Postwoman	Restaurant manager
Shop assistant	Sick leave, early retirement
Shop assistant	Small business owner
Sick leave	Small business owner
Stay-at-home mum	Small business owner
Stay-at-home mum	Small business owner
Stay-at-home mum	Small business owner
Stay-at-home mum	Small business owner
Stay-at-home mum	
Stay-at-home mum, cleaner	
Teacher	
Waitress	
Worked in schools, cleaner	

The information in the table comes from the interviews with young adults. The table lists the occupations in an alphabetical order and there is no connection between the male and female columns. In order to preserve the confidentiality of the interviewees, the grandparents are not connected to their children or grandchildren, and they are not divided into maternal and paternal grandparents.

Appendix E: Participants

Young Adults

Aida, 28-11-2018.
Amir, 29-11-2018.
Anton, 21-02-2019.
Aron, 21-05-2019.
August, 29-11-2018.
Bianca, 21-02-2019.
Daniel, 28-11-2018.
Denise, 26-11-2018.
Fredrik, 21-02-2019.
Gabriel, 23-05-2019.
Hedda, 19-02-2019.
Helena, 19-02-2019.
Josef, 29-11-2018.
Jessica, 26-11-2018.
Jonathan, 26-11-2018.
Johnny, 26-11-2018.
Julia, 24-11-2022.
Jenny, 18-02-2019.
Kira, 18-02-2019.
Linus, 21-02-2019.
Marcus, 21-05-2019.
Mahmoud, 24-11-2022.
Maryam, 24-06-2019.
Max, 30-11-2018.
Mikaela, 11-02-2020.
Moa, 24-11-2022.
Nour, 26-11-2018.
Oscar, 20-02-2019.
Patrik, 21-02-2019.
Rafael, 29-11-2018.
Raoul, 18-02-2019.
Ruben, 21-02-2019.
Samir, 23-05-2019.
Samira, 26-11-2018.
Sara, 23-05-2019.
Tess, 27-11-2018.
Ville, 27-11-2018
Walter, 25-11-2022.
Winston, 19-02-2019.
Zoey, 26-06-2019.

Parents

Camilla, 18-06-2019.
Irene, 19-06-2019.
Katarina, 25-06-2019.
Laura, 28-05-2019.
Mattias, 26-02-2020.
Marie & Karl, 29-05-2019.
Rasha & Isak, 27-02-2020.
Sara & Johan, 19-06-2019.
Ulrika, 18-06-2019.

References

Literature

Ahrne, Göran & Stöber, Niels & Thaning, Max (2018), *Klasstrukturen i Sverige. Struktur, klass och inkomster: Kontinuitet och förändring 1985–2015,* Stockholm: Katalys.

Ambjörnsson, Fanny (2010), *I en klass för sig: Genus, klass och sexualitet bland gymnasietjejer*, Stockholm: Ordfront.

Ambjörnsson, Ronny (1988), *Den skötsamme arbetaren: Idéer och ideal i ett norrländskt sågverkssamhälle 1880–1930*, Malmö: Carlssons Bokförlag.

Ambrose, Anna (2016), *Att navigera på en skolmarknad: En studie av valfrihetens geografi i tre skolor* (Diss.), Stockholm: Universitetsservice US-AB.

Amcoff, Jan & Nauwerck, Gerolf (1993), *Övergångsställen: Högskolerekryteringens geografi*, Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet.

Areschoug, Susanna (2022), *I den moraliska periferin: Ungdomskultur, värden och politisk subjektivitet i rurala rumsligheter* (Diss.), Stockholm: Universitetsservice US-AB.

Atkinson, Paul (2015), *For Ethnography*, London: SAGE Publications.

Ayalon, Hanna & Abraham, Yogev (2005), 'Field of Study and Students' Stratification in an Expanded System of Higher Education: The Case of Israel', *European Sociological Review* 21, no. 3: 227–241.

Backius, Stefan (2024), "Den mångfacetterade avindustrialiseringen", *Historisk tidskrift* 144, no. 3: 525–534.

Ball, Stephen J. & Davies, Jackie & David, Miriam & Reay, Diane (2002), ''Classification' and 'Judgement': Social Class and the 'Cognitive Structures' of Choice of Higher Education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23, no. 1: 51–72.

Ball, Stephen J. & Reay, Diane & David, Miriam (2002), ''Ethnic Choosing': Minority Ethnic Students, Social Class and Higher Education Choice', *Race Ethnicity and Education* 5, no. 4: 333–357.

Beach, Dennis & Puaca, Goran (2014), 'Changing Higher Education by Converging Policy-Packages: Education Choices and Student Identities', *European Journal of Higher Education* 4, no. 1: 67–79.

Beach, Dennis & Öhrn, Elisabet (2021), "Arbetsmarknad, utbildningsval och möjligheter på landsbygden: Den lokala kontextens relationer till metrocentrisk skolpolitik", *Utbildning och demokrati* 30, no. 3: 57–70.

Beaud, Stéphane (2014), 'The Three Sisters and the Sociologist', *Idées economiques et sociales*, no. 1: I–XIV.

Bell, Simon & Montarzino, Alicia & Aspinall, Peter & Penèze, Zanda & Olgerts, Nikodemus (2009), 'Rural Society, Social Inclusion and Landscape Change in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case Study of Latvia', *Sociologia Ruralis* 49, no. 3: 295–326.

Bengtsson, Mattias (2010), "Olika sidor av klass". In *En fråga om klass: Levnadsförhållanden, livsstil, politik*, edited by Maria Oskarson, Mattias Bengtsson & Tomas Berglund (1st ed.), Malmö: Liber:12–21.

Bengtsson, Mattias & Berglund, Tomas (2010), "Social rörlighet och klassidentifikation". In *En fråga om klass: Levnadsförhållanden, livsstil, politik*, edited by Maria Oskarson, Mattias Bengtsson & Tomas Berglund (1st ed.), Malmö: Liber: 30–41.

Berggren, Caroline (2008), 'Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation within Higher Education: Gender and Class Perspectives', *Higher Education Quarterly* 62, no. 1–2: 20–39.

Bergh, Andreas & Nordin, Martin (2022), "Inkomstutveckling för människor från glesbygd och storstad", *Ekonomisk debatt* 50, no. 1: 23-33.

Bergström, Ylva (2015), *Unga och politik: Utbildning, plats, klass och kön*, Stockholm: Premiss.

Bergström, Ylva (2017), 'Preparing for Higher Education, Navigating in a Polarised Landscape: Upper Secondary Students Transnational Strategies and Outlooks on Higher Education in Sweden', *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, no. 2: 353–380.

Berntson, Erik (2015), 'Market-Oriented Relationships in Working Life: On the Perception of Being Employable'. In *Makeshift Work in a Changing Labour Market*, edited by Erik Berntson, Jessica Lindvert, Renita Thedvall & Christina Garsten, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing: 121–137.

Bicchieri, Cristina, Muldoon, Ryan, & Sontuoso, Alessandro (2023), 'Social Norms'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Accessed, April 18, 2024. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/social-norms/.

Bjarnason, T. & Thorlindsson, T. (2006), 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Migration Expectations among Youth in Icelandic Fishing and Farming Communities', *Journal of Rural Studies* 22, no. 3: 290–300.

Bjerén, Gunilla (1989), *Kvinnor i Värmlands glesbygd: Försörjningsstrategier för skogsbygdens kvinnfolk*, Glesbygdsdelegationens skriftserie 13. Stockholm: Glesbygdsdelegationen.

Bjerke, Lina & Mellander, Charlotta (2017), 'Moving Home Again? Never! The Locational Choices of Graduates in Sweden', *The Annals of Regional Science* 59, no. 3: 707–729.

Blomqvist, Paula (2016), "NPM i välfärdsstaten: Hotas universalismen?" *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 118, no. 1: 39–67.

Boden, Rebecca & Nedeva, Maria (2010), 'Employing Discourse: Universities and Graduate 'Employability'', *Journal of Education Policy* 25, no. 1: 37–54.

Boudon, Raymond (1974[1973]), *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality: Changing Prospects in Western Society* (2nd ed.), New York: Wiley.

Bourdieu, Pierre & Nice, Richard (1977[1972]), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (2010[1979]), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1983), 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed', *Poetics* 12, no. 4: 311–356.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1989), 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1: 14–25.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1996[1989]), *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991), *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1999[1993]), 'Site Effects'. In *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, edited by Pierre Bourdieu et al., Cambridge: Polity Press: 123–129.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1999[1993]), 'Understanding'. In *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, edited by Pierre Bourdieu et al., Cambridge: Polity Press: 607–626.

Bourdieu, Pierre (2004[2001]), *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre & Passeron, Jean-Claude (1979[1964]), *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre & de Saint Martin, Monique (1976), 'Anatomie du goût', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 2, no. 5: 2–81.

Bourdieu, Pierre & Chamboredon, Jean-Claude & Passeron, Jean-Claude (2011[1991]), *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*, Berlin: De Gruyter.

Bourdieu, Pierre ed. (1999[1993]), *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre & Nice, Richard (2008), *The Bachelor's Ball: The Crisis of Peasant Society in Béarn*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brante, Thomas & Svensson, Kerstin & Svensson, Lennart G. (2019), "Inledning". In *Det professionella landskapets framväxt*, edited by Thomas Brante, Kerstin Svensson & Lennart G. Svensson (1st ed.), Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Brembeck, Helene (1992), *Efter Spock: Uppfostringsmönster idag* (Diss.), Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet.

Brennan, Geoffrey & Eriksson, Lina & Goodin, Robert E. & Southwood, Nicholas (2013), *Explaining Norms* (1st ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bright, Geoffrey N. (2016), ''The Lady Is Not Returning!': Educational Precarity and a Social Haunting in the UK Coalfields', *Ethnography and Education* 11, no. 2: 142–157.

Brismark, Anna (2006), "Bruksandan och utbildningsmotståndet". In *Bergslagsidentitet i förändring: En forskningsresa i tid och rum*, edited by Sune Berger, Mats Lundmark & Thord Strömberg, Örebro: Penta Plus: 91–103.

Broady, Donald (1991), *Sociologi och epistemologi: Om Pierre Bourdieus författarskap och den historiska epistemologin* (2nd ed.), Stockholm: HLS: Högskolan för lärarutbildning.

Broady, Donald (1998), "Kapitalbegreppet som utbildningssociologiskt verktyg", *Skeptron Occasional Papers* 15, Uppsala: Forskningsgruppen för utbildnings- och kultursociologi.

Brooks, Rachel (2002), ''Edinburgh, Exeter, East London – or Employment?' A Review of Research on Young People's Higher Education Choices', *Educational Research* 44, no. 2: 217–227.

Brooks, Rachel (2003), 'Young People's Higher Education Choices: The Role of Family and Friends', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 24, no. 3: 283–297.

Brooks, Rachel (2004), ''My Mum Would Be as Pleased as Punch If I Actually Went, but My Dad Seems a Bit More Particular about It': Paternal Involvement in Young People's Higher Education Choices', *British Educational Research Journal* 30, no. 4: 495–514.

Bynner, John & Elias, Peter & McKnight, Abigail & Pan, Huiqi & Pierre, Gaëlle (2002), *Young People's Changing Routes to Independence*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Bäckström, Pontus (2015), "Hur påverkar förändrad elevsammansättning skolors resultat?", *Utbildning och demokrati* 24, no. 2: 55–72.

Böhlmark, Anders & Holmlund, Helena & Lindahl, Mikael (2015), *Skolsegregation och skolval*, Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy.

Börjesson, Mikael (2004), *Gymnasieskolans sociala struktur och sociala gruppers utbildningsstrategier: Tendenser på nationell nivå 1997–2001*, *Skeptron Occasional Papers* 32, Uppsala: Forskningsgruppen för utbildnings- och kultursociologi.

Börjesson, Mikael (2016), "Sociala kartor över utbildningslandskapet", *Sociologisk forskning* 53, no 4: 421–436.

Börjesson, Mikael & Broady, Donald (2016), 'Elite Strategies in a Unified System of Higher Education: The Case of Sweden', *L'Année sociologique (1940/1948–)* 66, no. 1: 115–146.

Coleman, James S. (1994), *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap.

Cooley, Charles Horton (1983), *Human Nature and the Social Order,* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Corbett, Michael (2007), *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*, Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Corbett, Michael (2013), 'I'm Going to Make Sure I'm Ready before I Leave: The Complexity of Educational and Mobility Decision-Making in a Canadian Coastal Community', *Journal of Rural Studies* 32, 275–282.

Corbett, Michael & Forsey, Martin (2017), 'Rural Youth Out-Migration and Education: Challenges to Aspirations Discourse in Mobile Modernity', *Discourse (Abingdon, England)* 38, no. 3: 429–444.

Crivello, Gina (2011), '"Becoming Somebody": Youth Transitions through Education and Migration in Peru', *Journal of Youth Studies* 14, no. 4: 395–411.

Crompton, Rosemary (2008), *Class and Stratification* (3rd ed.), Cambridge: Polity Press.

Czaplicka, Magdalena (1998), "Vägen till självförsörjning: Om ungdomars skolgång och inträde i arbetslivet". In *Ungdomar i skilda sfärer*, edited by Johan Fornäs, Ulf Boëthius & Bo Reimer, Stockholm: Brutus Östlings förlag, Symposion:103–168.

Dahlström, Margareta (1996), 'Young Women in a Male Periphery: Experiences from the Scandinavian North', *Journal of Rural Studies* 12, no. 3: 259–271.

Davies, Charlotte Aull (2008), *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge.

Domina, Thurston (2006), 'What Clean Break?: Education and Nonmetropolitan Migration Patterns, 1989–2004', *Rural Sociology* 71, no. 3: 373–398.

Dorling, Danny (2018), 'Inequality in Advanced Economies'. In *The New Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography*, edited by Gordon L. Clark, Maryann P. Feldman, Meric S. Gertler, & Dariusz Wójcik, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 39–62.

Douven, Igor (2021), 'Abduction'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Accessed November 20, 2024. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/abduction/.

Drozdzewski, Danielle (2008), ''We're Moving out': Youth Out-Migration Intentions in Coastal Non-Metropolitan New South Wales', *Geographical Research* 46, no. 2: 153–161.

Dubois, Anna & Gadde, Lars-Erik (2002), 'Systematic Combining: An Abductive Approach to Case Research', *Journal of Business Research* 55, no. 7: 553–560.

Durkheim, Émile (1978[1895]), *Sociologins metodregler* (2nd ed.), Göteborg: Korpen.

Durkheim, Émile (1982[1895]), *The Rules of Sociological Method*, New York: Free Press.

Ekerwald, Hedvig (2002), *Varje mor är en dotter: Om kvinnors ungdomstid under 1900-talet*, Eslöv: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag.

Elias, Norbert (1956), 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment', *The British Journal of Sociology* 7, no. 3: 226–252.

Elias, Norbert & Scotson, John L. (2010[1965]), *Etablerade och outsiders* (2nd ed.), Lund: Arkiv förlag.

Ellingsæter, Anne Lise (1998), 'Dual Breadwinner Societies: Provider Models in the Scandinavian Welfare States', *Acta Sociologica* 41, no. 1: 59–73.

Elliott, Jane (1991), *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, London: SAGE Publications.

Elster, Jon (1991), 'Rationality and Social Norms.' *European Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 1: 109–129.

Eribon, Didier & Wollin, Johan (2018[2009]), *Tillbaka till Reims*, Stockholm: Verbal förlag.

Ericsson, Christer (1997), *"Vi är alla delar av samma familj": Patronen, makten och folket vid Nyby bruk 1880–1940* (Diss.), Stockholm: Carlsson.

Erikson, Robert (2020), 'Inequality of Educational Opportunity: The Role of Performance and Choice', *European Review (Chichester, England)* 28, no. S1: S44–S55.

Erikson, Robert & Rudolphi, Frida (2011), "Social snedrekrytering till teoretisk gymnasieutbildning". In *Utvärdering genom uppföljning: Longitudinell individforskning under ett halvsekel*, Göteborg: Acta universitatis Gothoburgensis.

Eriksson, Lina (2019), 'Social Norms as Signals', *Social Theory and Practice* 45, no. 4.

Eriksson, Rikard H. & Hansen, Høgni Kalsø (2013), 'Industries, Skills, and Human Capital: How Does Regional Size Affect Uneven Development?', *Environment and Planning A* 45, no. 3: 593–613.

Esping-Andersen, Gøsta (1990), *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Farrugia, David (2015), 'The Mobility Imperative for Rural Youth: The Structural, Symbolic and Non-Representational Dimensions Rural Youth Mobilities', *Journal of Youth Studies* 19, no. 6: 836–851.

Fetterman, David M. (2007), *Ethnography: Step-by-Step* (3rd ed.), London: SAGE Publications.

Finanspolitiska rådet (2024), *Ekonomisk ojämlikhet i Sverige: Översikt av fakta och framtidsutmaningar*, Särskilda studier från Finanspolitiska rådet 2024/1.

Fjellman, Anna-Maria (2019), *School Choice, Space and the Geography of Marketization: Analyses of Educational Restructuring in Upper Secondary Education in Sweden* (Diss.), Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.

Forsberg, Gunnel (1998), 'Regional Variations in the Gender Contract: Gendered Relations in Labour Markets, Local Politics and Everyday Life in Swedish Regions', *Innovation* 11, no. 2: 191–209.

Forsberg, Gunnel & Stenbacka, Susanne & Lundmark, Mats (2012), *Demografiska myter: Föreställningar om landsbygden – mer myter än faktiska fakta*. Öhrlings Pricewaterhouse Coopers AB.

Forsberg, Gunnel & Stenbacka, Susanne (2017), 'Creating and Challenging Gendered Spatialities: How Space Affects Gender Contracts', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 99, no. 3: 223–237.

Forsberg, Håkan (2015), *Kampen om eleverna: Gymnasiefältet och skolmarknadens framväxt i Stockholm, 1987–2011* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Forsberg, Håkan & Waddling, Jennifer & Alm Fjellborg, Andreas (2024), 'Class-Based Preschool Enrolment: Social Stratification and Quality Differences in the Swedish Preschool Market', *Education Inquiry* 15, no. 1: 104–125.

Forsberg, Sara (2017), ''The Right to Immobility' and the Uneven Distribution of Spatial Capital: Negotiating Youth Transitions in Northern Sweden', *Social & Cultural Geography* 20, no. 3: 1–21.

Forsberg, Sara (2018), *Going Places: Local Settings and Global Horizons in Young People's Education and Work Trajectories* (Diss.) Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Forsberg, Sara (2022), 'The Symbolic Gift of Education in Migrant Families and Compromises in School Choice', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 43, no. 5: 700–717.

Forsell, Tobias (2020), *"Man är ju typ elev, fast på avstånd": Problematisk skolfrånvaro ur elevers, föräldrars och skolpersonals perspektiv* (Diss.), Umeå: Umeå universitet.

Gabriel, Michelle (2006), 'Youth Migration & Social Advancement: How Young People Manage Emerging Differences between Themselves and Their Hometown', *Journal of Youth Studies* 9, no. 1: 33–46.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (2018), 'The Idea of the University, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow'. In *The Idea of the University*, edited by Michael A. Peters & Ronald Barnett (1st ed.), New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Garsten, Christina & Jacobsson, Kerstin (2004), 'Learning To Be Employable: An Introduction'. In *Learning to Be Employable: New Agendas on Work, Responsibility and Learning in a Globalizing World*, edited by Christina Garsten & Kerstin Jacobsson, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gerring, John (2007), *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Glasmeier, Amy K. (2018), 'Income Inequality and Growing Disparity: Spatial Patterns of Inequality and the case of the USA'. In *The New Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography*, edited by Clark, Gordon L., Feldman, Maryann P., Gertler, Meric S., & Wójcik, Dariusz, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Glesbygdsverket (2005), *Sveriges gles- och landsbygder,* Glesbygdsverkets årsbok 2005.

le Grand, Elias (2010), *Class, Place and Identity in a Satellite Town* (Diss.) Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis.

Gribbe, Johan (2022), *Förändring och kontinuitet: Reformer inom högre utbildning och forskning 1940–2020,* Universitetskanslersämbetets publikationer.

Gunnarsson, Yvonne (1994), "Livet på landet: Sett ur tonårsflickors perspektiv". In *Ungdomskultur i Sverige*, edited by Johan Fornäs, Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag: 103–124.

Halaby, Charles N. (2003), 'Where Job Values Come from: Family and Schooling Background, Cognitive Ability, and Gender', *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 2: 251–278.

Hansen, Kalle Emil Holst & Winther, Lars (2018), 'Employment Growth in Danish Towns and Regions since the Crisis: Industrial Structure, City Size and Location, 2008–2013', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 100, no. 3: 244–262.

Hartman, Laura (2011), *Konkurrensens konsekvenser: Vad händer med svensk välfärd?* (1st ed.), Stockholm: SNS förlag.

Henning, Martin (2009), *Industrial Dynamics and Regional Structural Change: Geographical Perspectives on Economic Evolution* (Diss.), Lund: Lunds universitet.

Henning, Martin & Enflo, Kerstin & Andersson, Fredrik N.G. (2011), 'Trends and Cycles in Regional Economic Growth', *Explorations in Economic History* 48, no. 4: 538–555.

Henning, Martin & Eriksson, Rikard H. (2021), 'Labour Market Polarisation as a Localised Process: Evidence from Sweden', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 14, no. 1: 69–91.

Hirdman, Yvonne (1987), *The Swedish Welfare State and the Gender System: A Theoretical and Empirical Sketch*, Uppsala: Maktutredningen.

Hjelm, Jonny (2020), "Historia i Umeå", *Historielärarnas årsbok* 2020, no. 1–2: 181–198.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell (2016), *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, New York: The New Press.

Holmdahl, Barbro (1994), *Sjuksköterskans historia: Från siukwakterska till omvårdnadsdoktor* (1st ed.), Stockholm: Liber utbildning.

Holmlund, Helena (2016), *Education and Equality of Opportunity: What Have We Learned from Educational Reforms?* Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy.

Holmlund, Helena & Häggblom, Josefin & Lindahl, Erica & Martinson, Sara & Sjögren, Anna & Vikman, Ulrika & Öckert, Björn (2014), *Decentralisering, skolval och fristående skolor: Resultat och likvärdighet i svensk skola*, Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy.

Holmlund, Helena & Sjögren, Anna & Öckert, Björn (2020), *Jämlikhet i möjligheter och utfall i den svenska skolan*, Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy.

Hällsten, Martin (2010), 'The Structure of Educational Decision Making and Consequences for Inequality: A Swedish Test Case', *American Journal of Sociology* 116, no. 3: 806–854.

Hällsten, Martin & Thaning, Max (2018), 'Multiple Dimensions of Social Background and Horizontal Educational Attainment in Sweden', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 56: 40–52.

Högskoleverket (2011), *Kartläggning av distansverksamheten vid universitet och högskolor*, Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2011:2R.

Isacson, Maths (2007), *Industrisamhället Sverige: Arbete, ideal och kulturarv* (1st ed.), Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Ivener, Ramona (2013), *Kunskapens händer: Kunskapstraditioner, maskulinitet och förändring i Lesjöfors 1940–2010* (Diss.), Karlstad: Karlstads universitet.

Jamieson, Lynn (2000), 'Migration, Place and Class: Youth in a Rural Area', *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 2: 203–223.

Jones, Gill (2002), *The Youth Divide: Diverging Paths to Adulthood*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Jones, Glenda W. (2006), 'A Risky Business: Experiences of Leaving Home among Young Rural Women', *Journal of Youth Studies* 7, no. 2: 209–220.

Jones, Owen (2011), *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class,* London: Verso.

Jonsson, Gunilla (2003), *Rotad, rotlös, rastlös: Ung mobilitet i tid och rum* (Diss.), Umeå: Umeå universitet.

Jonsson, Jan O. & Erikson, Robert (2000), 'Understanding Educational Inequality: The Swedish Experience', *L'Année sociologique (1940/1948–)* 50, no. 2: 345–382.

Jonsson, Jan O. & Grusky, David B. & Di Carlo, Matthew & Pollak, Reinhard & Brinton, Mary C. (2009), 'Microclass Mobility: Social Reproduction in Four Countries', *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 4: 977–1036.

Jonsson, Jan O. & Mood, Carina & Treuter, Georg (2022), *Integration bland unga: En mångkulturell generation växer upp*, Göteborg: Makadam.

Jämställdhetsmyndigheten (2023), *Analys av den könssegregerade arbetsmarknaden: Förutsättningar för en bredare rekryteringsbas till välfärden*, Underlagsrapport 2023:8, Göteborg.

Kallstenius, Jenny (2010), *De mångkulturella innerstadsskolorna: Om skolval, segregation och utbildningsstrategier i Stockholm* (Diss.), Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis.

Karlsohn, Thomas ed. (2016), *Universitetets idé: Sexton nyckeltexter*. Göteborg: Daidalos.

Kjellberg, Anders (2023), *Den svenska modellen ur ett nordiskt perspektiv: Facklig anslutning och nytt huvudavtal*, Stockholm: Arena Idé.

Krigh, Josefine (2019), *Språkstudier som utbildningsstrategi hos grundskoleelever och deras familjer* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Kåks, Helena (2007), *Mellan erfarenhet och förväntan: Betydelser av att bli vuxen i ungdomars livsberättelser* (1st ed.), Linköping: Filosofiska fakulteten, Linköpings universitet.

Kåks, Helena & Westholm, Erik (2006), *När långt borta blir nära: Om rörlighet och lokalsamhällets framtid*, Stockholm: Gidlund.

Lamaison, Pierre (1986), 'From Rules to Strategies: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu', *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no. 1: 110–120.

Lareau, Annette (2011), *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (2nd ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press.

Laurin, Emma (2021), *Barn med diagnoser: Mödrars och skolors strategier i Stockholm* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Lewis, Jane (1992), 'Gender & the Development of Welfare Regimes', *Journal of European Social Policy* 2, no. 3: 159–238.

Lidegran, Ida (2009), *Utbildningskapital: Om hur det alstras, fördelas och förmedlas* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Lindahl, Lena & Regnér, Håkan (2005), 'College Choice and Subsequent Earnings: Results Using Swedish Sibling Data', *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 107, no. 3: 437–457.

Lindberg, Henrik (2002), *Att möta krisen: Politikbyte på lokal nivå under industrikrisen i Söderhamn 1975–1985* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Lindgren, Joakim & Lundahl, Lisbeth (2010), 'Mobilities of Youth: Social and Spatial Trajectories in a Segregated Sweden', *European Educational Research Journal* 9, no. 2: 192–207.

Lindqvist, Moa (2025), *Striden om den högre utbildningen: En socioretorisk studie av remissyttranden inför svenska högskolereformer 1969–2007* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Lundahl, Lisbeth & Lindblad, Michael & Lovén, Anders & Måråld, Gunilla & Svedberg, Gudrun (2017), 'No Particular Way to Go: Careers of Young Adults Lacking Upper Secondary Qualifications', *Journal of Education and Work* 30, no. 1: 39–52.

Lundberg, Patrik (2020), *Fjärilsvägen*. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag.

Lundquist, Karl-Johan & Olander, Lars-Olof & Henning, Martin (2008), 'Producer Services: Growth and Roles in Long-Term Economic Development', *The Service Industries Journal* 28, no. 4: 463–477.

Lundqvist, Åsa (2001), *Bygden, bruket och samhället: Om människor och organisationer i brukssamhället Böksholm 1900–1979* (Diss.), Lund: Arkiv förlag.

Massey, Doreen (1994), *Space, Place and Gender*, Oxford: Polity Press.

Massey, Doreen (1995), *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (2nd ed.), London: Macmillan.

McDowell, Linda (2000), 'Learning to Serve? Employment Aspirations and Attitudes of Young Working-Class Men in an Era of Labour Market Restructuring', *Gender, Place & Culture* 7, no. 4: 389–416.

Melldahl, Andreas (2015), *Utbildningens värde: Fördelning, avkastning och social reproduktion under 1900-talet* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Melldahl, Andreas & Börjesson, Mikael (2014), 'Charting the Social Space: The Case of Sweden in 1990'. In *The Routledge Companion to Bourdieu's Distinction*, edited by Philippe Coulangeon & Julien Duval, New York: Routledge: 135–156.

Mellén, Johanna (2021), *Stability and Change* (Diss.), Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothenburgensis.

Mikkola, Mari (2024), 'Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Accessed October 25, 2024. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/feminism-gender/.

Miller, Daniel Robert (1958), *The Changing American Parent: A Study in the Detroit Area*, New York: Wiley.

Moi, Toril (1991), 'Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory & Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture', *New Literary History* 22, no. 4: 1017–1049.

Moqvist, Ingeborg (1990), "Familjen: Beständig och föränderlig". In *Industrisamhälle i omvandling: Människor, arbete och socialt liv i en svensk industristad från femtiotal till åttiotal*, edited by Rune Åberg, Stockholm: Carlsson, Maktutredningen: 115–162.

Morris, Edward W. (2012), *Learning the Hard Way: Masculinity, Place, and the Gender Gap in Education*, Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.

Nermo, Magnus (2000), "Hundra år av könssegregering på den svenska arbetsmarknaden", *Sociologisk forskning* 37, no. 2: 35–65.

Ní Laoire, Caitríona (2000), 'Conceptualising Irish Rural Youth Migration: A Biographical Approach', *International Journal of Population Geography* 6, no. 3: 229–243.

Nilsson, Lars & Båve, Eric (2016), *Krympande orter: Avesta och Söderhamn som postindustriella samhällen*, Stockholm: Stads- och kommunhistoriska institutet.

Olofsson, Gunnar (2013), "Vilket slags universitet finns i Växjö idag?". In *Studenterna och deras utbildningar vid ett nytt universitet*, edited by Eva Fasth & Gunnar Olofsson, Lund: Adriane: 273–292.

O'Reilly, Karen (2012), *Ethnographic Methods*, Florence: Taylor & Francis.

Palme, Mikael (2008), *Det kulturella kapitalet: Studier av symboliska tillgångar i det svenska utbildningssystemet 1988–2008* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Pateman, Carole (1988), 'The Patriarchal Welfare State'. In *Democracy and the Welfare State*, edited by Amy Gutmann (1st ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press: 231–260.

Pike, Andy (2022), 'Coping with Deindustrialization in the Global North and South', *International Journal of Urban Sciences*: 1–22.

Pérez Prieto, Héctor & Sahlström, Fritjof & Calander, Finn & Karlsson, Marie & Heikkilä, Mia (2003), 'Together? On Childcare as a Meeting Place in a Swedish City', *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 47, no. 1: 43–62.

Pugsley, Lesley (1998), 'Throwing Your Brains at It: Higher Education, Markets and Choice', *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 8, no. 1: 71–92.

Reay, Diane (1998), ''Always Knowing' and 'Never Being Sure': Familial and Institutional Habituses and Higher Education Choice', *Journal of Education Policy* 13, no. 4: 519–529.

Reay, Diane (2023), *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Reay, Diane & Davies, Jacqueline & David, Miriam & Ball, Stephen J. (2001), 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, 'Race' and the Higher Education Choice Process', *Sociology* 35, no. 4: 855–874.

Reed-Danahay, Deborah (2019), *Bourdieu and Social Space: Mobilities, Trajectories, Emplacements*, New York: Berghahn Books.

Region Gävleborg (2019), *Hållbar regional tillväxt och utveckling i Gävleborg*, Nulägesanalys och kunskapsunderlag.

Rider, Sharon (2009), 'The Future of the European University: Liberal Democracy or Authoritarian Capitalism?', *Culture Unbound* 1, no. 1: 83–104.

Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés (2018), 'The Revenge of the Places That Don't Matter (and What to Do about It)', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11, no. 1: 189–209.

Rosenblum, Marc R. & Tichenor, Daniel J. (2012), 'Introduction: Economic Geography in the Twenty-first Century'. In *Oxford Handbook of the Politics of International Migration*, edited by Marc R. Rosenblum & Daniel J. Tichenor (1st ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1–16.

Rosengren, Annette (1991), *Två barn och eget hus* (Diss.), Malmö: Carlssons Bokförlag.

Runesson, Per (2010), "Det röda Umeå", *Tidskriften Västerbotten*.

Rye, Johan Fredrik (2006), 'Leaving the Countryside: An Analysis of Rural-to-Urban Migration and Long-Term Capital Accumulation', *Acta Sociologica* 49, no. 1: 47–65.

Rye, Johan Fredrik (2011), 'Youth Migration, Rurality and Class: A Bourdieusian Approach' *European Urban and Regional Studies* 18, no. 2: 170–183.

Rönnlund, Maria (2019), 'Careers, Agency and Place: Rural Students Reflect on Their Future'. In *Young People's Life and Schooling in Rural Areas*, edited by Elisabet Öhrn & Dennis Beach: 65–82.

Rönnlund, Maria (2020), '"I Love This Place, but I Won't Stay": Identification with Place and Imagined Spatial Futures Among Youth Living in Rural Areas in Sweden', *Young (Stockholm, Sweden)* 28, no. 2: 123–137.

Rönnlund, Maria & Rosvall, Per-Åke & Johansson, Monica (2018), 'Vocational or Academic Track? Study and Career Plans among Swedish Students Living in Rural Areas', *Journal of Youth Studies* 21, no. 3: 360–375.

Rönnlund, Maria & Rosvall, Per-Åke (2019), 'Reproduction of Social Relations in Rural Schools and Communities'. In *Young People's Life and Schooling in Rural Areas,* edited by Elisabet Öhrn & Dennis Beach: 104–120.

Rönnlund, Maria & Tollefsen, Aina (2023), 'School-to-Work Transitions in Rural North Sweden: Staying on in a Reviving Local Labor Market', *Journal of Youth Studies*: 1–18.

Sandell, Anna (2007), *Utbildningssegregation och självsortering: Om gymnasieval, genus och lokala praktiker* (Diss.), Malmö: Malmö Högskola.

Schön, Lennart (2012), *En modern svensk ekonomisk historia: Tillväxt och omvandling under två sekel* (3rd ed.), Stockholm: SNS förlag.

Segerstedt, Torgny T. (1968), *Att studera sociologi: En inledning till sociologiens studium,* Stockholm: Norstedt.

Sharif, Hassan (2017), "*Här i Sverige måste man gå i skolan för att få respekt": Nyanlända ungdomar i den svenska gymnasieskolans introduktionsutbildning* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Shaw, Kathryn L. (1996), 'An Empirical Analysis of Risk Aversion and Income Growth', *Journal of Labor Economics* 14, no. 4: 626–653.

Shiner, Michael & Noden, Philip (2015), ''Why Are You Applying There?': 'Race', Class and the Construction of Higher Education 'Choice' in the United Kingdom', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36, no. 8: 1170–1191.

Shucksmith, Mark & Brown, David L., eds. (2016), *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies*, London: Routledge.
Sjöholm, Tommy (1983), 'Women in the Swedish Class Structure 1910–1975', *Acta Sociologica* 26, no. 3/4: 299–311.
Skawonius, Charlotte (2005), *Välja eller hamna: Det praktiska sinnet, familjers val och elevers spridning på grundskolor* (Diss.), Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet.
Skeggs, Beverley (2000[1997], *Att bli respektabel: Konstruktioner av klass och kön*, Göteborg: Daidalos.
Skolverket (2013), *Det svåra valet: Elevers val av utbildning på olika slags gymnasiemarknader*, Rapport 294, Stockholm.
Skolverket (2021), *Slutbetyg i grundskolan våren 2021*, Stockholm: Sveriges officiella statistik.
Small, Mario Luis (2009), '"How Many Cases Do I Need?": On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research', *Ethnography* 10, no. 1: 5–38.
Sommestad, Lena (1997), 'Welfare State Attitudes to the Male Breadwinning System: The United States and Sweden in Comparative Perspective', *International Review of Social History* 42: 153–174.
Stenbacka, Susanne (2011), 'Othering the Rural: About the Construction of Rural Masculinities and the Unspoken Urban Hegemonic Ideal in Swedish Media', *Journal of Rural Studies* 27, no. 3: 235–244.
Stockdale, Aileen (2002), 'Towards a Typology of Out-Migration from Peripheral Areas: A Scottish Case Study', *International Journal of Population Geography* 8, no. 5: 345–364.
Sunnerfjell, Jon (2023), *Un-Learning to Labour? Activating the Unemployed in a Former Industrial Community* (Diss.), Lund: Arkiv förlag.
Svenskt Näringsliv (2021), *Gymnasierapporten 2021: Attityder, antal och etablering*.
Svensson, Lotta (2006), *Vinna och försvinna? Drivkrafter bakom ungdomars utflyttning från mindre orter* (Diss.), Linköping: Linköpings universitet.
Svensson, Lotta, ed. (2017), *Lämna eller stanna? Valmöjligheter och stöd för unga i "resten av Sverige"*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
Sørensen, Niels Ulrik & Pless, Mette (2017), 'Living on the Periphery of Youth: Young People's Narratives of Youth Life in Rural Areas' *Young (Stockholm, Sweden)* 25, no. 4: 1S–17S.
Thomsen, Jens-Peter & Bertilsson, Emil & Dalberg, Tobias & Hedman, Juha & Helland, Håvard (2017), 'Higher Education Participation in the Nordic Countries 1985–2010: A Comparative Perspective', *European Sociological Review* 33, no. 1: 98–111.
Trondman, Mats (1994), *Bilden av en klassresa: Sexton arbetarklassbarn på väg till och i högskolan* (Diss.), Stockholm: Carlsson.
Trondman, Mats (2001), *Att flytta eller stanna? Om barns och ungdomars föreställningar om att vilja bo kvar i Hällefors kommun eller flytta därifrån*, Växjö: Centrum för kulturforskning.
Trow, Martin (1972), 'The Expansion and Transformation of Higher Education', *International Review of Education* 18, no. 1: 61–84.
Uddbäck, Hanna (2012), *Att stanna kvar: Arbete, plats och mobilitet i småstaden* (Diss.), Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet.
Universitets- och högskolerådet (2017), *Utbildning går i arv*, Rapport 2017:3.

Universitetskanslersämbetet & Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2022), *Higher Education. Level of Parental Education among University Entrants 2021/22 and New Doctoral Students 2020/21*.

Universitetskanslersämbetet (2023), *Universitet och högskolor. Årsrapport 2023*.

Urban, Susanne (2012), 'University Education as a Compensation Strategy Among Second-Generation Immigrants', *International Migration Review* 46, no. 4: 919–940.

Vallström, Mikael & Svensson, Lotta (2021), "Klassamhällets tystade röster och perifera platser". In *Klass i Sverige: Ojämlikheten, makten och politiken i det 21:a århundradet*, edited by Daniel Suhonen & Göran Therborn & Jesper Jesper, Lund: Katalys & Arkiv förlag.

Vesterberg, Viktor (2015), "Formandet av anställningsbara studenter: En reflektion kring karriärvägledning inom högre utbildning", *Högre utbildning* 5, no. 2: 99–105.

Waara, Peter (1996), *Ungdom i Gränsland* (Diss.), Umeå: Boréa.

Wacquant, Loïc (1996[1989]), 'Foreword'. In *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press: ix–xix.

Wacquant, Loïc (2022), 'Rethinking the City with Bourdieu's Trialectic', *City* 26, no. 5–6: 820–830.

Waddling, Jennifer (2024), "Främmande språk som pedagogisk profil: val av internationell friskola". In *Förskolans expansion och marknadisering*, edited by Håkan Forsberg & Esbjörn Larsson & Andreas Alm Fjellborg, Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Waddling, Jennifer (2024), *Playing with the Global: Family Dynamics and International Education in a Marketised Preschool Landscape* (Diss.), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Ward, Michael RM. (2015), *From Labouring to Learning Working-Class Masculinities, Education and De-Industrialization* (1st ed.), London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Weiss, Robert Stuart (1994), *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, New York: Free Press.

Wiborg, Agnete (2004), 'Place, Nature and Migration: Students' Attachment to Their Rural Home Places', *Sociologia Ruralis* 44, no. 4: 416–432.

Wiborg, Susanne (2015), 'Privatizing Education: Free School Policy in Sweden and England', *Comparative Education Review* 59, no. 3: 473–497.

Willis, Paul (1978), *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, New York: Routledge.

Yang Hansen, Kajsa & Gustafsson, Jan-Eric (2016), 'Causes of Educational Segregation in Sweden: School Choice or Residential Segregation', *Educational Research and Evaluation* 22, no. 1–2: 23–44.

van Zanten, Agnès (2005), 'New Modes of Reproducing Social Inequality in Education: The Changing Role of Parents, Teachers, Schools and Educational Policies', *European Educational Research Journal* 4, no. 3: 155–169.

Åström, Gertrud & Hirdman, Yvonne (1992), *Kontrakt i kris: Om kvinnors plats i välfärdsstaten*, Stockholm: Carlsson.

Other sources

Canoilas, Viviana (September 5, 2021), "I 'knarkstaden' har 34 mist livet av missbruk de senaste nio åren", *Dagens Nyheter*. Accessed November 22, 2024. https://www.dn.se/sverige/i-knarkstaden-har-34-mist-livet-av-missbruk-de-senaste-nio-aren/.

Ekonomifakta (2024), *Nyckeltal för alla regioner*. Accessed April 26, 2024. https://www.ekonomifakta.se/Fakta/Regional-statistik/Din-kommun-i-siffror/Nyckeltal-for-regioner/.

Etikprövningsmyndigheten, "Vem ska lämna samtycke till forskning på barn och unga?", Accessed May 20, 2024. https://etikprovningsmyndigheten.se/faq/vem-ska-lamna-samtycke-till-forskning-pa-barn-och-unga/.

Hanson, Melanie (2024), 'College Enrollment Statistics & Student Demographic Statistics', *Educationdata.Org*. Accessed September 2, 2024. https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics.

Larsson, Stefan (September 7, 2020), "Söderhamn värst drabbat av unga som dör i överdoser", *SVT Nyheter*. Accessed November 22, 2024. https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/gavleborg/soderhamn-varst-drabbade-av-unga-som-dor-i-overdoser.

SACO, *Civilekonom: Information om lön, arbetsmarknad, utbildning etc.*. Accessed November 15, 2024. https://www.saco.se/studier/studieval/yrken-a-o/civilekonomekonom/.

SOU 1993:85, *Ursprung och utbildning: Social snedrekrytering till högre studier: Huvudbetänkande*, Stockholm: Fritze.

SOU 2014:81, *Yrke, karriär och lön: Kvinnors och mäns olika villkor på den svenska arbetsmarknaden: Forskningsrapport till Delegationen för jämställdhet i arbetslivet*, Stockholm: Fritze.

SOU 2017:20, *Tillträde för nybörjare: Ett öppnare och enklare system för tillträde till högskoleutbildning: Betänkande*. Stockholm: Wolters Kluwer.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2012), *Standard för svensk yrkesklassificering (SSYK)*, MIS 2012:1. Accessed November 24, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2021), *Antal pendlare per län och kommun, 2020*. Accessed September 26, 2022. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2021), *Arbetslöshet efter region, kön, ålder, födelseregion och år*. Accessed November 24, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2022), *Befolkningens utbildning 2022*, Temarapport 2023:8. Accessed November 24, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2022), *Befolkningen 2021 fördelad efter utbildningsnivå, län och kön, 25–64 år*. Accessed November 24, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2022), *Flyttningar efter region, ålder och kön. År 1997–2021*. Accessed September 21, 2022. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Flyttningar efter födelseregion, region, ålder och kön. År 2002–2023*. Accessed July 10, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Folkmängd i riket, län och kommuner 31 december 2023 och befolkningsförändringar 2023*. Accessed October 7, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Föräldrars ålder i Sverige*. Accessed December 2, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Nyckeltal: Övergång till eftergymnasiala utbildningar inom 1 år. Fördelning på kön. Procent.* Accessed November 24, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Population in the Country, Counties and Municipalities on 31 December 2023 and Population Change in 2023*, Accessed Novembner 24, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Sveriges befolkning, kommunala jämförelsetal, 31 december 2023*. Accessed October 7, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Utbildningnivå efter kommun och kön 2023*. Accessed October 9, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Utbildningsnivån i Sverige 2023*. Accessed October 8, 2024. www.scb.se.

Statistics Sweden (SCB) (2024), *Utrikes födda efter län, kommun och födelseland 31 december 2023*. Accessed October 7, 2024. www.scb.se.

Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), *Öppna jämförelser, Kolada*. Accessed November 28, 2024. http://www.kolada.se/.

Söderhamns kommun (2020), *Användning av droger i Söderhamn: samma nivå som i övriga landet*. Accessed November 22, 2024. www.soderhamn.se

Söderhamns kommun (2024), *Grundskolor*, Accessed August 15, 2024. www.soderhamn.se

UNESCO World Heritage, *Decorated Farmhouses of Hälsingland*. Accessed May 16, 2024. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1282/.

Universitetskanslersämbetet (UKÄ) (2024), *Jämställdhet i statistiken*. Accessed November 22, 2024. https://www.uka.se/sa-fungerar-hogskolan/om-jamstalldhet-i-hogskolan/flikar/jamstalldhet-i-statistiken.

Universitetskanslersämbetet (UKÄ), *Rekryteringen till högskolestudier: regionala och sociala faktorer påverkar*. Accessed November 24, 2024. https://www.uka.se/download/18.3024c77018b37fb62411aa6d/1697549436854/Statistisk-analys-2019-01-10-Regional-rekrytering%202019.pdf

ACTA UNIVERSITATIS UPSALIENSIS
Studier i utbildnings- och kultursociologi

Editor: Jonas Almqvist

1. Palme, Mikael, 2008, *Det kulturella kapitalet. Studier av symboliska tillgångar i det svenska utbildningssystemet 1988–2009*.
2. Lundin, Sverker, 2008, *Skolans matematik. En kritisk analys av den svenska skolmatematikens förhistoria, uppkomst och utveckling*.
3. Lidegran, Ida, 2009, *Utbildningskapital. Om hur det alstras, fördelas och förmedlas*.
4. Bertilsson, Emil, 2014, *Skollärare. Rekrytering till utbildning och yrke 1977–2009*.
5. Backman Prytz, Sara, 2014, *Borgerlighetens döttrar och söner. Kvinnliga och manliga ideal bland läroverksungdomar, ca 1880–1930*.
6. Melldahl, Andreas, 2015, *Utbildningens värde. Fördelning, avkastning och social reproduktion under 1900-talet*.
7. Forsberg, Håkan, 2015, *Kampen om eleverna. Gymnasiefältet och skolmarknadens framväxt i Stockholm, 1987–2011*.
8. Michaëlsson, Madeleine, 2016, *Privata bidrag till folkskolan. Järnbruken och det svenska folkskoleväsendet 1850–1930*.
9. Bernhardsson, Peter, 2016, *I privat och offentligt. Undervisningen i moderna språk i Stockholm 1800–1880*.
10. Sharif, Hassan, 2017, *”Här i Sverige måste man gå i skolan för att få respekt”. Nyanlända ungdomar i den svenska gymnasieskolans introduktionsutbildning*.
11. Dalberg, Tobias, 2018, *Mot lärdomens topp. Svenska humanisters och samhällsvetares ursprung, utbildning och yrkesbana under 1900-talets första hälft*.
12. Larsson, Germund, 2018, *Förbrytelser och förvisningar. Bestraffningssystemet i de svenska läroverken 1905–1961*.
13. Krigh, Josefine, 2019, *Språkstudier som utbildningsstrategi hos grundskoleelever och deras familjer*.
14. Laurin, Emma, 2021, *Barn med diagnoser. Mödrars och skolors strategier i Stockholm*.
15. Lindberg, Sara, 2022, *Forming EU-professionals. Geopolitical and Symbolic Hierarchies at the College of Europe*.
16. Mays, Christin, 2022, *Have Money, Will Travel. Scholarships and Academic Exchange between Sweden and the United States, 1912–1980*.
17. Berry, Gustav, 2023, *Den självstyrda periferin. Lanthushållningsundervisningen och styrningen av den svenska landsbygden, 1890–1970*.
18. Nodeland, Tuva Skjelbred, 2023, *A Battle over Children. Nonformal Education in Norwegian Uniformed Children’s Organisations, 1910–1960*.
19. Lillo Cea, Pablo, 2024, *The World-Class Ordination. A Field Theory Approach to the Study of Global University Rankings*.
20. Waddling, Jennifer, 2024, *Playing with the Global. Family Dynamics and International Education in a Marketised Preschool Landscape*.
21. Ciziri, Nubin, 2024, *(Dis)integrating Families. Refugees’ Social Histories and their Encounters with Education in Sweden*.
22. Bennich-Björkman, Anna, 2025, *The Higher Education Norm. Rethinking Paths to Independence and Adulthood in a Former Industrial Community*.