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Aspiration, Achievement and Abandonment in ‘The World’s Best Country’: Merit and Equity or Smoke and Mirrors? (0097)

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Finland is valorized for its education system, quality of life and high-tech achievements. However, a critical focus on trajectories, within higher education careers, illuminates reproduction of global inequities, rather than the society-wide-transformation the Nordic nations were once noted for. This multi-method study focuses on a self-ethnography of career trajectories within Finnish higher education. The results of the study illuminate emergent stratification, in a country previously characterized by the absence of stratification and the ways in which this reinforces - and is reinforced by - transnational academic capitalism and a global division of academic labor that cuts across societies, manifesting within higher education institutions. Our self-ethnography is designed to empirically ground a social network analysis aimed at the challenges of emergent stratification and the way in which current policy discourse studiously avoids the tension between selection and social influence inside the one institution Finnish society trusts to explain stratification.

**Key Words:** Academic Mobility; Higher Education; Migration; Stratification; Self-Ethnography

#### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of our paper is to contribute to a meta-analysis of mobility of highly skilled persons (OECD 2001) in the Nordic region, in general and the relationship between mobility, broadly conceived, connected to education in particular. The meta-analysis will be the result of the symposium titled:

**Global relations re-cast in the Nordic context: Academic mobility and career development of academic staff Ph.D. graduates and students in Sweden, Norway and Finland (SRHE Symposium #3830).**

Our study problematizes and focuses on explaining academic career trajectories and key career stage transitions experienced by academics with a migrant background, who aspire to both remain in higher education, as a career choice and Finland, as their new home (Bourdieu 1988; Baldwin & Blackburn 1981).

#### **BACKGROUND**

From the outside-looking-in, Finland is frequently valorized for the strength of its education system, quality of life and innovative, forward-looking artistic and high-tech achievements. However, from the inside-looking-around, a critical focus on mobility, broadly conceptualized, reveals key thresholds which have yet to be crossed by all population groups who can be located in Finnish society (Forsander 2004; REFERENCE DELETED FOR REVIEW [RDFR]; RDFR). In particular, a focus on key education career trajectories and transitions reveals the double-edged nature of mobility dynamics within one of the few remaining models of the strong, universal, Nordic welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1998). With regard to this year’s conference theme, it is our observation that higher education systems, around the world, are increasingly falling into step with the normative, international agenda-setting efforts of agencies like the OECD and UNESCO (Currie and Newson 1998; Kallo 2009; Shahjahan & Kezar 2013; Marginson 2006), the cumulative result of which is an

uncritical adoption of an emergent form of transnational academic capitalism springing up in all major higher education systems, as well as any organization that – literally – wants to ‘do business’ with them (Kauppinen 2012; Rhoades & Slaughter; Slaughter & Cantwell 2012; Slaughter & Leslie 1997).

Set against the clear trends in which an emerging global division of scholarly labor now manifests, both across and within higher education institutions of all types, it becomes a fair question, following Pusser et al. (2012) to problematize whether or not the public good higher education could offer all in society actually exists? Or are some groups ‘outside’ the working range of our higher education institutions? Are there groups in society that will not be found at certain strata of higher education systems? (Cantwell & Lee 2010) Where are there aspiration gaps (Bowden & Doughney 2010) and if so, how do we explain them? Or are these types of questions, which once formed the bedrock of the Finnish policy of educational equality, any longer of interest to policy makers and the strategic management of higher education institutions in Finland? (Bowden & Doughney 2010; RDFR; RDFR)

### **GOALS**

The goal of this presentation is to firstly present the results of a self-ethnography (Alvesson 2003) carried out by the authors designed to critically address and problematize the uneasy coexistence of working conditions and career systems which are on the surface defined in terms of by collegial equality and merit, yet have never been seriously considered with respect to robust, conceptually-driven and empirically grounded examination as to whether claims to equity or merit can be sustained (RDFR ; RDFR). Secondly, we demonstrate how the results of our self-ethnography will be used to conceptually ground and empirically illuminate the social dynamics linked to the relationship between selection and social influence (Easley & Kleinberg 2010) with regard to a follow-on social network analysis, analytically framed to illuminate the key transitions which define a scholar’s trajectory, over time (Bourdieu 1988; Baldwin & Blackburn 1981; RDFR; Välimaa 2001). We thirdly contextualize our focus on mobility and higher education career trajectories higher within a larger study (RDFR) on persons with an immigrant background in the Finnish labor market. Our key concern within the sub-study presented in this symposium is the relationship between higher education institutions, the societies in which they are embedded and the implications of our analysis in the Nordic context, in general and Finland in particular.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The primary analysis we will present is of our self-ethnography, as the initial step in a sequential mixed-methods study. The aim of self-ethnography are analytical generalizations, to theory of the middle range (Merton 1968; Yin 2003), which then will serve as relational propositions, to social networks (Scott 1991). As a sub-study of ISIS, the findings of both phases of this study inform a wider, life course approach to a critical reconceptualization of migration-related phenomena in the Finnish labour market. While self-ethnography in higher education studies is not popular on mainland Europe, the approach has shown great potential in the last few years, especially in regard to the illumination of power dynamics in higher education institutions (Alvesson 2003; RDFR; RDFR).

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

While the emergent stratification our study focuses of is subtle, nuanced and occurring over uneven periods of time, emergent mobility patterns carry profound implications if not addressed in robust studies designed, ultimately, to inform policy analysis and public debate (Archer 1995; Wildavsky 1987). We argue that mobility dynamics involving university trajectories are complex, multifaceted and, if understood, hold the potential to leverage many facets of higher education’s missions. That said, this is only true if the most profound challenges are analyzed alongside the normally valorized aspects of mobility-related potential in higher education.

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