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Flaunting one's academic pedigree? Self-presentation of students from elite French schools

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This article starts from the puzzle that although French elite institutions enjoy extremely positive and attractive images, students from these schools generally choose to conceal their academic pedigree in their daily interactions. We show that, in a context of growing inequalities of access to *grandes écoles*, the strategy of hiding one's student identity may be understood as the desire to avoid six core threats associated with declaring one's association with an elite school: not conforming to group norms, confirming a negative reputation, not living up to a positive reputation, reducing one's identity, losing control of one's identity, and threatening the identity of the other. The conclusions highlight the implications of this microsociological study on a host of much wider questions useful in better understanding the ambivalent relations that exist between French society and its elites issued from the *grandes écoles*.

Keywords: elites; elite education; France; *grandes écoles*; social identity; stereotypes; impression management; stigma

Introduction

The French system of elite education has the particularity of relying not on the university, as is the case in England or in the United States, but on the *grandes écoles*, which are separate institutions of higher education. In France, history and tradition have conferred on these schools a symbolic weight that remains very strong. Created to supply the country with scientific, economic, administrative or political elites with the goal to definitively put an end to the old regime social order where birth trumped merit, these schools have gradually gained legitimacy and prestige through a model of highly selective competitive examinations, a vast and ambitious program, organized around anonymous written examinations followed by an oral examination whose content and test-taking procedures were tightly regulated. The rigorous and intensive

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nature of the preparation of these examinations during the two or three years of *classe préparatoire aux grandes écoles* (CPGE), the consequence of success in terms of access to positions of power and social acknowledgment and approbation, have all contributed to reinforcing the prestige and desirability of these *grandes écoles* throughout France.

The sanctioning function exercised by the highly competitive entrance examinations for the French elite schools is well known. Once admitted, membership into the group becomes a part of the social identity for its newest members; it is a title of academic nobility that will follow them throughout their entire lives (Bourdieu 1989). The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship that exists between students from four of the most selective and prestigious French schools – *Ecole Polytechnique*, *Ecole Normale Supérieure de la rue d'Ulm* (ENS), *Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales* (HEC) and *Sciences Po* (also known as *Institut d'études politiques de Paris*) – known collectively as the *grandes écoles*, and the identities of students from these elite establishments. This question will be studied through an analysis of self-presentation strategies (Goffman 1959) describing why, and under what conditions, students from these French elite schools choose whether or not to display their academic pedigree.¹

It was not surprising to discover that, in a number of situations, students were able to display their academic pedigree to take advantage of the prestigious image of their *alma mater*. This instrumental relation to identity appears when the student finds it necessary to sell himself or herself, to impress, or reassure someone else. This is most often the case in the professional realm or in the context of interactions with a potential employer. The student identity as a *grande école* fellow is handed out somewhat like a business card or condensed *résumé*. The reputation of the school speaks for the student. Simply mentioning the name is enough to guarantee a potential and skill, and to attract the attention of the interlocutor.

If students are capable of disclosing their identity to profit from the prestigious image their institution enjoys, the norm in situations of daily life is for the most part to maintain one's educational identity discreet, or even secret. We will focus on the various reasons why students from French *grandes écoles* tend to hide their educational identity in daily interactions, because that behavior seems to us more surprising and it is therefore more important to understand the current relationship between French society and its elite, and elite students specifically.

The literature on social psychology and the theory of organizations highlights the phenomenon whereby the more the image of an organization is perceived as attractive (in so far as the organization is prestigious), the stronger the organizational identification for its members will be (Fuller et al. 2006; Mael and Ashforth 1992). This also means that they place the social identity associated with their membership of this organization far above alternative social identities (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). Viewed from this

angle, as will be shown below, one fact seemed surprising: these elite institutions – while enjoying in theory extremely positive and attractive identities – are not mentioned by their students in their daily interactions with respect to presentation of self.

The literature on role performance shows that people strategically play with their different identities to avoid stigmas and labels. The presentation of self or the impression management is in this regard a major mechanism. The literature on the identity of stigmatized or marginalized groups tends to show that self-presentation strategies dissociate the self from a negatively viewed ‘in-group’. The prestigious groups are seldom studied from that perspective. However, as the present investigation will show, the representations that elites produce of themselves are similar with those of other groups. Being part of a group that has either a negative or an excessively positive reputation exposes the member to the risk of social stigma and creates a sense of threat. To reveal one’s identity as a student from an elite school would thus lead to exposing oneself to the risk of an elite stigma, which must be understood in a context characterized by very contentious debates in France about the role of this system in the (re)production of social inequalities and in a form of social gatekeeping of these schools (van Zanten 2009).

Studying elites in a context of growing inequalities: methodological and theoretical implications

Conducting sociological research on elites is always methodologically delicate (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1991; Walford 1994). Dealing here with young people still in training – in other words, with budding social elites rather than elites in office as business leaders, government officials or politicians – mitigates some of the difficulties identified in the literature on studying the powerful. We notably avoided the risk of finding ourselves, the interviewer, in the awkward position of not being able to control the flow of the interview (Chamboredon et al. 1994). Yet, a few words are necessary to situate the particular context within which our study takes place and its methodological and theoretical implications.

The questioning of the Republican merit-based model is not new in French sociological literature (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964). However, meritocracy – the declared principle of selection and training of French elites – is increasingly subject to scrutiny.² The finding of growing inequalities of access to the *grandes écoles* in recent decades (see especially Euriat and Thélot 1995; Albouy and Waneck 2003) fuelled the public and political debates about the social closure of French elite schools. In response to these denunciations of elitism, some *grandes écoles* are currently experimenting with social outreach programs (Buisson-Fenet and Draelants 2010; Pasquali 2010). Recently, the French Government decided to increase the proportion of deserving students from disadvantaged backgrounds in elite education, through a requirement for

grandes écoles to admit 30% of students receiving a government grant (Beaud and Convert 2010). This issue being widely reported in the media, it is thus difficult for the students not to be aware of it.

This context of social debate about the meritocracy of the French system of elite education is of course likely to affect the way students present themselves to the researcher and produce a social desirability bias. In order to analyse the impact on their identity in relation to their school, and their potential feelings of belonging to an academic or social elite, while protecting ourselves from this bias, we asked students several questions. The first one was: ‘when you meet someone unconnected with your institution, do you voluntarily mention your affiliation with the school?’ We added several follow-up questions, such as: ‘To what kind of people, under what circumstances? What was the person’s reaction? When would you, or with whom would you, be likely to avoid mention of your affiliation?’ Moreover, we asked whenever possible to give an example of the respondent’s response by providing a specific anecdote from their own actual experience. This interview dynamic allowed us to overcome some conventional answers. Our presentation takes advantage of this dynamic, and should be read as a progressive deepening of the analysis. We first report the common reason given by the students (modesty), at least partly conventional, and then move on to reasons that are harder to admit, showing how they refract fundamental societal issues about the relationship between the educational elite and French society today. In other words, the context of wider inequalities not only raises methodological implications, it will also inform our conclusion. Indeed, our analysis can be read as an exploration of what it means to become a member of a social and academic elite and handling privilege within a society characterized by sharpened inequalities whilst claiming to be democratic.

The threat of not conforming to group norms

Among the reasons listed for avoiding the mention of, or even the hiding of, one’s affiliation to one of the four *grandes écoles* under study during daily interactions with people outside these institutions, the one that appears the most frequently and the most spontaneously to students during our interviews was, without question, the desire to avoid appearing pedantic. The specific organizational affiliation is generally replaced by generic and neutral identifiers. For example, students are more willing to introduce themselves as engineering students than students of the *Ecole Polytechnique*. Such speech is found in the four schools and is a recurring motif in the interviews.

When you meet someone new, is it or is it not easy for you to say that you attend the Polytechnique?

No. I find that it is not something that is easy to do. I say that I’m studying engineering, because when you say you go to the Polytechnique, it sounds as if

you're bragging a bit. It bothers me to say that I'm at the Polytechnique; it sounds like I'm the kind of guy who likes to show off. (Pierre, *Ecole polytechnique*)

When you encounter people unaffiliated to your school, do you let them know that you attend the ENS? Is that something you talk about?

Not spontaneously. In general I just say I'm studying German. It's just about saying what we do in life. It's easier for me to say I'm taking a degree in German than to say I'm at the ENS. I don't want to appear pretentious. (Etienne, ENS)

When a CPGE student passes the difficult entrance examinations that unlock the doors to one of these prestigious *grandes écoles*, his/her affiliation with the institution is usually perceived by others (especially relatives and close friends) as a transition into another world, far from the ordinary world where most people live, becoming inaccessible.³ Such a vision is loaded with images and negative, as well as positive, stereotypes.

When I say that I'm at Sciences Po, I always see in their big eyes 'ohh, Sciences Po ... you're going to be a minister some day'. [...] To say that I am at Sciences Po has a lot of connotations, and I don't want to give this image of myself right away, as a first impression because it will change how they see me. And this bothers me a little. (Céline, *Sciences Po*)

If someone had told me that I'd end up at the HEC, I wouldn't have believed it because the HEC is ... oh, I don't know. I have friends who are in their second year in CPGE and when they call and I tell them that I'm at HEC, they look [sic] at me as if I were a space alien. (Delphine, HEC)

However, modesty is a convenient explanation. It is extremely difficult to untangle what is calculation or an agreed upon role in adopting this kind of attitude (what some might prefer to call false modesty). Indeed, ironically enough, assuming that others might be affected by the disclosure of organizational membership to the point that it is necessary to adopt a modest stance seems quite pretentious. On the other hand, this explanation is simplistic because it tends to mask the relativity of the self-presentation strategies, which depend on the situation and interlocutors and obscures the fundamental relational processes that result in identity games. In short, the issue of displaying or hiding credential deserves a sociological explanation.

The great similarity among these excerpts first demonstrates a highly normative mode of the presentation of one's self. What appears to be key in understanding this display of humility is that the acquisition of such a norm is suitable for the student's elite status. To put it in a different way, a humble attitude seems a necessary aspect of an elite's good manners (Trivelin 2003).

Bourdieu referred to modesty as 'a praiseworthy moderation in one's appreciation of one's own merit', which was an example of those positively sanctioned or of the distinguished manners of members of dominant social categories (Bourdieu 1974, 26, our translation).

The threat of confirming a negative reputation

Furthermore, it is sociologically interesting to observe that pronouncing the name of these schools engages a categorization on the basis of their reputation and that of their students. They consider this labeling process – whether negative or positive – as simplistic. The stereotypes may in fact distort the representation of others. Pedantry is certainly the most common negative attribute associated with students of the *grandes écoles* and the one against which they are particularly keen to protect themselves, hence its such frequent rejection during the interviews.

Beyond the stereotype of arrogance strongly associated with students of the elite schools under consideration, other negative stereotypes were sometimes evoked during our interviews to justify the hiding of their organizational affiliation. Another common stereotype, which invokes the strong *esprit de corps* that characterize these *grandes écoles*, underscores the idea of a network of alumni that favors or privileges graduates of these schools (like the *normaliens*, for example) in hiring practices at the university or the CNRS.

Sometimes it could turn against us [the fact of being a *normalien*] and could incite aggressiveness in people.

What do you mean?

Another normalien at the CNRS. Great. I could understand this. And then there's the idea that we're all trained in the same way. (Nathalie, ENS)

The idea that students from the *grandes écoles* are ‘formatted’, educated in a cookie-cutter mould, appears from time to time in our interview transcripts. This stereotype, however, could be used to characterize the kind of teaching that goes on in all of these *grandes écoles*. Yet another stereotype that appears in the research samples is that of the egghead (an asocial intellectual), as you will read in the excerpts below. The student is not necessarily at risk immediately of confirming this stereotype, but making mention of his or her organizational status may falsify the representation of the other and, in certain cases, give a negative first impression according to a process of categorization already evoked.

When you say ‘I am a *normalien*’, the people immediately think ‘he is probably like that, he’s a geek ...’ [...] They say that the people from the ENS are anti-social, autistic, four-eyes. It is the classic stereotype. (Lionel, ENS)

We’re expected to be pimple faced, glasses-wearing nerds. But [*sic*] we come out of prep classes, so if we start saying that we are going to Polytechnique, then it’s the cliché of the math nerd bent over his computer screen working all day long. I’d like to avoid such clichés. (Elodie, *Ecole polytechnique*)

The handing out of labels, whether positive or negative, is perceived as reductive. The reduction of the individual identity to a social identity is,

moreover, one of the specific reasons provided by several of the respondents for hiding their organizational affiliation. We will come back to this later.

The threat of not conforming to a positive stereotype

In addition to the identity threat associated with negative stereotypes applied to students from the *grandes écoles*, it is particularly interesting to note that it is just as possible to be threatened by a positive stereotype. ‘The risk is of not living up to the reputation of the subject’s group, the threat of being a poor representative of it’ (Désert, Croizet, and Leyens 2002, 564). In this case, when revealing your organizational identity, one is expected to demonstrate that he or she is deserving of the reputation that members of the group enjoy, or else be denied the identity that was implicitly claimed when the announcement was made. The powerful symbolic charge associated with the image of the elite *grandes écoles* places the bar very high. Among the positive stereotypes, we cite the one most commonly associated with *normaliens* or *polytechniciens* – that of being an incredibly brilliant genius, endowed with superior intelligence.

It really impresses people, and they immediately look at you differently. As if you were a brain. I’m not saying that I’m not. But I don’t necessarily want to be presented as such right off the bat. I don’t want it because it pigeon holes me. If you meet someone, you will learn about that person, and obviously this kind of information will come out because it is an important piece of information. But when you meet someone, you don’t necessarily want to be identified with the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. And for me, I’m not sure it is an identification that corresponds to me. It is not something I want to stress. When you meet people you are not going to tell them right off the bat, ‘I’m Jewish, I’m a lesbian, I’m ...’ (Chloé, ENS)

These exceptional characteristics attributed to the *grandes écoles* students, according to our interviews, set up unrealistic expectations for them. Indeed, the norms and values of a group imply on the part of its members the adherence to certain behaviors. Thus the student that mentions his or her affiliation must then appear brilliant. That is, one has then to ‘wear the mask’, one’s behavior has to conform with the stereotype applied to the group to which one belongs (Aebischer and Oberlé 1990). This results in a strong social pressure on the student, who is expected because of this representation to submit to the demands of the situation and prove himself/herself worthy of these public expectations. This is the famous ‘*noblesse oblige*’. The degree of personal independence is thus reduced as a consequence. This pressure on the part of students attending *grandes écoles*, the putting on of the actor’s mask, the playing of a role all implicitly demonstrate the value granted to the schools they attend. This is because, in the end, they each feel in some way the need to represent the institution.

The powerful symbolic charge associated with the image of these elite *grandes écoles* thus compels students who succumb to the pressure to fully

embrace their role; this includes all those situations that take place outside the social life of the school. This is, moreover, what these institutions expect of their students, constantly reminding them, some schools more than others, of their duty to faithfully represent the school. This is obviously a heavy burden, especially for young students in their early twenties. Managing the transition between the seriousness associated with their image of the brilliant student and the relaxed atmosphere of their daily student life, for example, could prove trying.

It's an engineering school. We want to have fun; we want to make the most of it. We just finished CPGE. While from the outside it must look like an elite school. That is where the disparity can sometimes be problematic.

How so?

For example, during the X traditional annual ball where we had to wear our uniforms.⁴ In the beginning we behaved ourselves and everything. It was filmed on television: 'the elite *grande école* blah blah blah.' By the end of it, everyone was smashed and a few were making out while they were still in uniform, etc. Well, that kind of thing doesn't look good on TV. Of course, they show this to make us look bad, as if to say 'you see how things turn out with our French elites.' But obviously, we're students and all students do things like that. So yes, it's the case that there is a disparity between the way things look from the inside and how they look from the outside. We always have to give a good image of the school. Tonight, for example, we have the 'ceremony of the bicorn'. Afterwards, we're going to a night club and the [organizers of the event] have warned us 'to be careful, you're wearing uniform; don't come back completely trashed on the train.' And you can be sure that there will be some who will anyway. This is the kind of thing that can cause us trouble. (Elodie, *Ecole polytechnique*)

In order to avoid being confronted by role conflicts (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000), one of the ways to manage this delicate transition between roles is to keep their school identity confidential – as this student explains.

[Publicizing one's identity as a student of the ENS] could easily influence relationships. You notice right away that someone sees the difference. There are days when I feel like saying, we're tired of being brilliant. When you say to someone that you are a *normalien*, immediately that person expects each word you say to be totally profound! And sometimes, I just want to be a young twenty-two year old woman who says the same stupidities as others of the same age. Sometimes I just wanna relax. (Camille, ENS)

The strategy of hiding one's identity is in this sense a way for students from these schools to create a distance between them and the prescribed character of their role in order to gain a greater degree of freedom in their daily life by escaping the social control that exercises on their behavior, or at least what they imagine this control to be, since the nature of this control is first and

foremost self-control in the form of an internalization of the prestige of their organizational identity.

To sum up, the students from elite schools also seek to protect themselves from positive stereotypes, at least as much as they do from negative ones, when these positive stereotypes contribute to a reverse stigma that confers on them additional dignity and transforms the view of the other with respect to them, and in so doing places the significant weight of social expectation on their shoulders. When this happens one can say that these elite schools project on to their students identities that, in certain situations, are difficult to bear and become too distinctive (Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001).

The threat of reducing one's identity

To speak of the collective identity of a group is to imply in the end that individuals from the same group are more alike than others who do not possess this characteristic. Such a proposition does not necessarily receive the assent of those involved. In fact, a common reason offered by some of the respondents for not mentioning their affiliation to one of the four schools under consideration is their refusal to allow the reduction of their individual identity to their social identity.

We don't want people to see us like that [as a polytechnicien]. I don't want to introduce myself as such. There are those who show off. But there are those who won't admit it. I prefer to be Maxime J. [mentioning his last name] before being a 'polytechnicien'. (Maxime, *Ecole polytechnique*)

What we have observed here is reminiscent of what Heinich described in her work on writers, and especially well-known writers and winners of literary prizes, in her discussion of the relationship of 'modesty effects' on self-categorization. The fame that accompanied the awarding of a prize, she claims, is a challenging experience for some writers because of the 'great gulf' created between the author and others. It raises the question of remaining true to oneself, to one's origins and to the identity that existed prior to the achievement of fame. The challenge of greatness takes a particularly intense form in the case of students and persons who experience a sharp rise in social mobility (Naudet 2007).

Sometimes I suffer a little from this. I feel like I'm being perceived like that, like a Parisian *normalienne* and everything. I don't like that. I don't like it because I feel as if I was not really who I am, that is somebody else. I realize that this is what I've also become. But at the same time I feel different. I feel like I'm made of a different stuff. So, I really don't like it when they put that on me. (Nathalie, ENS)

You don't feel a sense of social belonging?

No, and I don't want to have any. I like to float in and out ... I am very happy when, one day, I am at a party with people from Sciences Po, at a party that is

fairly swanky and the next day go to a country cookout at some friend's house in the country ... I'm happy to be able to do both. I would hate to be trapped in one category. I may be against my will, but I like having one foot in each world. (Frédéric, *Sciences Po*)

Here we find a typical intellectual attitude that partly explains the hiding of institutional belonging. The illusion of the 'intellectual without attachment or roots' makes up, to some extent, the professional ideology of the intellectual and puts a disproportionate emphasis on one's bibliographic singularity (Bourdieu 1981).

There is a reductive aspect to every label. People don't really like it ..., in sociology – maybe it's because of this – the idea that you can be put in a box, that one doesn't completely feel at ease in this box, even if they admit that they fit in it, that the box doesn't explain everything there is to know about social identity [sic], not the identity alone, but our social identity as well. Therefore actually ... I think that compared to other *normaliens*, other *normaliennes*, I don't feel the same. (Nathalie, ENS)

Furthermore, elite institutions belong to these contexts or groups that facilitate in particular this awareness and entail a certain indifference *vis-à-vis* one's own world. It seems that if these members do not wish to contradict the group's values, they will avoid endorsing the depersonalized characteristics of the collective, and will tend to perceive themselves as hardly resembling each other (Lorenzi-Cioldi and Daflon 1999). Bellier observed similar reactions among students of the *École Nationale d'Administration*: 'No énarque [*École Nationale d'Administration* student]', she notes, 'thinks he/she resembles another; each one sees him/herself as "atypical"' (Bellier 1997, 53; our translation).

The fact that these individuals would not allow themselves to be easily reduced to a single facet of their identity is, to our mind, one of the defining characteristics of the individuals that make up dominant groups. To be able to endorse different identities and to decide during their interactions which ones they wish to activate probably signifies in part what it means to belong to the elite today. Being part of the elite implies being conscious and attentive to the image that one promotes and becoming an expert in controlling the impressions that one makes on others.

The threat of social control

The different reasons so far evoked not to reveal the student's affiliation to the *grande école* all betray a desire to maintain control over the presentation of one's self, a need to keep a check on the way others view him or her and over the definition of his or her identity. One is able to free oneself from prescribed, arbitrary roles and from the potentially threatening, conventional aspects of these roles through a partition of these identities. To publicize one's *grandes*

écoles student identity, therefore, is to expose oneself to the risk of being perceived as an elite to be. But to self-identify as an ‘elite’ is to voluntarily place oneself in an uncomfortable position because:

it means recognizing that one possesses certain extraordinary capacities for action, that one is recognized to be in that position. It also means recognizing a specific duty and role to play locally. In a nutshell it means recognizing that one must live up to expectations. (Trivelin 2003, 34; our translation)

By adopting these various modes of presentation of one’s self depending on different contexts and situations, these students are able to take advantage of the validating image associated with their organizational identity and demonstrate their distance the rest of the time from the role dictated by this elite image. In and of itself, this ability to manage one’s identity is a skill not given to everyone. The ability to control one’s communication is a well-known characteristic of elite discourse (Chamboredon et al. 1994). Today, elites and leaders need these skills more than ever, in a society where the power of the image and reputational capital have become fundamental (Alvesson 1990). Seen from this angle, one consequence of the transformation in the expectations and views of others is that students learn how to manage strategically their presentation of self. Moreover, this skill is considered a constitutive element in the education of elites.

The discretion that one applies to one’s identity is, as we have already suggested, associated with the notion of power, but it is also associated with that of trust as well (Simmel 1991). Hiding one’s identity is not the appropriate strategy in every situation. An analysis of peer-group socializing of students from the *grandes écoles*, based on the interviews we have collected, reveals three subdivisions: students in higher education who are completely unfamiliar with the CPGE/*grandes écoles* system (i.e. students participating exclusively in the university system), students who participated in preparatory classes (regardless of their situation once they entered the higher education system) and students enrolled in other elite schools (*Ecole Polytechnique*, HEC, *Sciences Po*, Mines, Ponts, etc.). While it is common to hide one’s school identity when meeting normal university students for fear of the kind of reaction it might elicit, it turns out that it is easier and more natural to disclose it with students from either prep classes or attending *grandes écoles*.

Do you feel more comfortable disclosing this affiliation around certain people?

I won’t emphasize it, but it is easier to talk about it, to feel natural talking about it when the person I’m talking to also attended a *grande école*. This is because he knows what you’re doing. So you don’t have to bother explaining what the ENS is because it is not always so easy with people who don’t know. If I meet someone who’s been through CPGE and knows what I do, then I will find it easier to talk about it. (Chloé, ENS)

When *grandes écoles* students are confronted with students with a similar educational track (and who shared similar training experiences, like the CPGE rite of passage), the interaction is facilitated and they feel a higher degree of confidence. They can freely disclose their membership to one of the four *grandes écoles* in question without fear. In this sense, when they are together, they are no longer exposed to the threat of social control regarding their school identity and may reveal their true ‘school self’, because they are facing interlocutors similar to themselves who understand what being a student from one of the *grandes écoles* means.

This harmony of being among ‘ourselves’ could nonetheless be disrupted when these interactions take place with former schoolmates from the CPGE who failed to enter their intended *grandes écoles*. When confronted with students who failed to make the grade during their competitive examination, a tacit norm imposes upon the student who succeeded a discretion in concealing his or her organizational affiliation. Practices of mutual avoidance result in particular in the most prestigious preparatory classes.

Once you’re accepted there are several reciprocal understandings between those who were accepted and those who were rejected which says, ‘I will not snub those who didn’t make it.’ There is, therefore, a reciprocal sense of propriety that encourages people to avoid each other. At Janson, since only one or two were accepted it was normal to be a lot of rejects and few accepted. At Henri IV there are many selected and few who are rejected. And so it was really heartbreaking for those who didn’t make it. (David, ENS)

The play of masks and avoidance techniques also testify to the degree to which elites try to preserve the other’s dignity.

Threatening the identity of the other

Another reason advanced by students of the *grandes écoles* for concealing their organizational affiliation has to do with the ethical concern that consists of wanting to help the other save face, or at least in avoiding a threat to the social identity of others who occupy socially inferior positions. This behavior is a necessary condition in establishing a communicative relationship that is attentive and respectful of the interlocutor’s equal dignity or, to put it another way, that averts symbolic violence.

To sum up, when students disclose their organizational affiliation they are confronted with an elite stigma or an inverted social stigma. The stigma as Goffman (1963) defined it is fundamentally a question of one’s relation to the norm and the difference felt between the identity of the self and the identity of the other. As is the case with stigma, the disclosure of a sign proper to the personal identity of an individual creates a disparity between one’s virtual and real social identities. The difference here is that in an exchange between the individual experiencing a disparity between real and virtual social identities

and a ‘normal’ individual, it is the ‘normal’ person that grants to the other interlocutor a supplement of dignity (Vienne 2004). This inverted stigma results then in a rupture in the relationship between equals.

Relationships are biased in part because of the other, whose perspective changes (as a consequence of this disclosure) and who tends to idealize the intellectual capacities of the *grandes écoles* student compared with his or her own and to place himself or herself in the inferior position.

And how are relations between you and normal university students?

It’s a bit complicated. What’s more, I’m shy and I don’t easily make new friends. I find myself quickly receding into the background. There are some who know each other. I don’t know anyone as you could imagine. And whether we admit it or not, we stand with our profound certainty of our intellectual superiority over them. And then knowing that, we listen to their presentations and think, ‘my God, that sucks.’ After that we put a distance between us and that, so of course we feel a bit set apart because we feel that we’re the only ones who know how to analyze documents; we feel that we’re the only ones to have any real broad based knowledge [general culture]. In short, we feel head and shoulders above the whole lot of them. And it’s not entirely wrong, but it’s not completely true either. In either case, we feel different and it’s not easy to build ties with people like that. Between the contempt they feel for themselves—which is up to them—and the fact that they look at us as if we were a bit weird.

You mean that they know that you are normaliens?

When they find out—in general they ask us where we come from and they end up finding out. And for those who don’t really know what it means, you have to explain it. And we usually find it weird to have to explain what we are and why it is special, and [put up with] their, ‘ah, so you’re *normalien*; you went to CPGE; you must be mad smart.’ It’s not the kind of thing that makes it easier to get closer. These are the kinds of reactions that kind of scare me a little because every now and then I have to say, ‘no, it’s not like that.’ But at the same time I know that in the back of my mind I’m thinking, ‘well, yes, it’s a little like that.’ It’s weird. Relations with the college kids [*les faqueux*] (a rather pejorative term to begin with) are not easy, because whether we make an effort or not, it seems we can’t build a friendship on an equal footing. (Grégoire, ENS)

Students attending *grandes écoles* thus often prefer not to mention their organizational affiliation to prevent distortions in the relationship with normal college students and allow genuine communication to take place. It is known that having good relations with others is an important criterion and matters a great deal in identity dynamics (Dubar 2002).

The concealment of titles of academic nobility during interactions among peers expresses a major concern on the part of students: seeing the possibilities of interaction limited by the revelation of their institutional affiliation. Nonetheless, students may also want to close opportunities for interaction and establish a hierarchical relationship abruptly; for example, when the implicit

communicative pact of non-aggression is broken by one of the interlocutors who sought to assert oneself in front of the other. Under such circumstances, these elite students consider themselves justified in revealing their elite school affiliation in order to put their aggressor back in his place.

With whom are you most likely to stress your affiliation?

Usually in order to defend myself when someone else is trying to show off because he is in a department he thinks is elitist and wants to look down upon me. At that moment, I let him know that I'm doing something even more elitist than him. (Alexandra, ENS)

Sometimes we let ourselves go a little. If someone tells us 'I'm in my 5th year at Sciences Po,' we respond 'I'm at the ENS'. (Etienne, ENS)

If students are generally careful not to threaten the identity of others by taking advantage of their organizational affiliation, they also know how to make use of symbolic violence since the representation – conscious or not – they have about their elite status seems at stake.

Conclusion

In this article, it has been our aim to answer the question of why and under what conditions students of French *grandes écoles* choose whether or not to display their academic titles of nobility. Identifying the different motives for students to either disclose or conceal their school affiliation enables us to understand better and explain how academic elites manage the organizational identification that derives from their membership of a school, and declare or conceal their relationship with their prestigious institution depending on the situation.

What is going on when these prestige links are made is to exclude opportunities of interaction, at least in the minds of the *grande école* students. They face the same dilemma that others face because of racial, sexual or various other biographical features; that the other will respond to stereotypes and not to the emergent particulars of the immediate interaction. That is eventually the fundamental contrast between announcing or not announcing the academic pedigree. Where the other shares the background, there is no exclusion of opportunities via evoking (or thinking that you will evoke) stereotyping.

The propensity to obscure one's acknowledged organizational identity for this academic elite resonates with the debate surrounding meritocracy and illustrates in the final analysis the paradox of the French republican meritocracy, torn between a model praised as being democratic while recent developments in its functioning make it look rather aristocratic (Goldring 2000). The French school system is indeed increasingly un-meritocratic in the sense that the socio-economic inequalities of access to the *grandes écoles* have

dramatically increased in the past 20 years, so that the *grandes écoles* now mostly recruit sons and daughters of the high-income and high-cultural-capital classes (Albouy and Wanecq 2003).

The imperative of discretion that led the majority of students to hide their academic pedigree in most situations of daily life is old.⁵ However, today this requirement seems exacerbated by the debate surrounding the recruitment of elite schools. This is particularly noticeable in the fact that students revealing their titles are criticized and not just envied. Moreover, even positive stereotypes can be seen as threatening because they produce symbolic violence. A symbolic violence worsened in a context where the legitimacy of the *grandes écoles* and the privileges their members enjoy are publicly questioned.

Endowing the students with an academic title of nobility does establish between them and the rest of their peers a difference in their essence that complicates their relationship with the other. The powerful trend to stick to one's own kind that these students demonstrate is most certainly explained, at least in part,⁶ by the well-known fact that the individuals choose to interact with those who reinforce their self-image (Lieberman 1956). Maybe we should look into this academic system as one of the causes of this remoteness. The present context also deepens among French elite students the logic of secrecy and the tendency to live with one's own kind, a typical reaction of any minority that has the feeling of being stigmatized (Goffman 1963; Lamont and Bail 2005).

The resentment against broadly speaking 'elites' is a historical constant (Ferro 2007); observers of French politics, however, consider it particularly strong in France at the moment.⁷ As a founding character of French social imagination, the meritocratic ideal would lead to guilty conscience in these elites, considering the aristocratic background associated with the status of this 'State nobility' (Bourdieu 1989). The annual opinion surveys have shown an ever increasing gap in the past 20 years between French society and its elites who are perceived as being cut-off from the people (Leridon 2006). The meritocracy that characterizes French society is a meritocracy based on titles, ranks and prestige that confers a status which give strong privileges. The strategy of hiding one's student identity may thus be seen as a form of managing and thus containing the resentment against – social, economic, mediatic, intellectual – elites.

Our findings also question the capacity of interaction and integration of national students coming from *grandes écoles* abroad and that of international students in the French *grandes écoles*. The quasi-exclusive status placed on ranking and academic titles in representations of merit and the logics of identity that these representations create remain characteristic of the French educational system. The propensity of French academic elites to be perceived or to think of themselves as possessing a highly distinctive essence could constitute an obstacle to their integration in systems where academic titles

have only a relative significance. Indeed, the purely academic skills through which the students build their ‘identity of excellence’ cannot have the same effects in countries where human capital encompasses a more comprehensive definition.

Some analyses of political elite distinction processes stress the strong incidence of national and cultural frameworks on the behavior, self-consciousness and self-presentation of oneself (Daloz 2008, 2009). Testing this for elite students would require further cross-cultural research. We could hypothesize that, depending on the level of stratification of educational systems – for example, in highly differentiated or integrated systems – being an elite is either taken for granted or irrelevant. In between these two ideal types, students may allow themselves more or less easily to flaunt their academic pedigree. Denial of elitism, through this reluctance of elite students to show their institutional belonging, may find in the French meritocracy a particularly favourable breeding ground, considering the historical legacy and the persistence of the revolutionary utopia in France.

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Notes

1. Our results are based on the analysis of 140 semidirective interviews conducted with former and present students of *Ecole Polytechnique*, ENS, HEC and *Sciences Po* (35 interviews per institution), between February 2007 and April 2008. Our study was part of a larger research ('Educ-Elites') underwritten by the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* for a period of three years (January 2006–January 2009).
2. Similarly, in a context of internationalization of higher education, the confrontation of the French model with other models of selection and training questions its validity and universality.
3. As Heinich explains, the acknowledgment of the elite as such is not only reserved to its members, but is also present among those excluded from membership. ‘That which we understand by “prestige” is perhaps precisely the effect that is produced by belonging to the elite class not only internally but outside its ranks as well’ (Heinich 2004, 323).
4. The *Ecole Polytechnique* is a state-supported civilian institution, under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense. Every student of the *Ecole Polytechnique* receives a ceremonial uniform that they have to wear during highly symbolic rituals and ceremonies.

5. Suleiman (1979, 194; our translation) quotes, for example, this advice already given to the Polytechnicians in 1945: ‘Remember that, from the day when you forced the somewhat closed door of the Ecole Polytechnique, you may be subjected to jealousy [...]. Of course, it is better to be envied than pitied, but it is unnecessary to excite the envy [...]. Therefore speak only of the Ecole Polytechnique between you or within a small family circle’ (General Maurin, speaking to students at the Ecole Polytechnique, *La Jaune et la Rouge* no. 2: 79).
6. This phenomenon is reinforced by the characteristics of elite institutions often described as total institutions (Faguer 1991), where students live in boarding schools and on campuses relatively isolated from the outside world.
7. For a recent example, see the interview with the philosopher and historian Marcel Gauchet in the newspaper *Le Monde* (18–19 July 2010) entitled ‘L’affaire Woerth reactive le contentieux entre le people et les élites’ [‘The Woerth’s Case Reactivates the Disagreement between the People and the Elites’].

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