



 **Opin vísindi**

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## **Even in Iceland? Exploring Mothers' Narratives on Neighbourhood choices in a perceived classless and feminist utopia**

Auður Magnús Auðardóttir (corresponding author)

[ama@hi.is](mailto:ama@hi.is)

University of Iceland

School of education

Faculty of Education and Diversity

Berglind Rós Magnúsdóttir

[brm@hi.is](mailto:brm@hi.is)

University of Iceland

School of education

Faculty of Education and Diversity

### Abstract

The study explores how mothers in Iceland, a relatively new nation state, and one that is perceived as gender equal, classless and homogeneous, adapt and respond to international trends of consumer cultures. Building on studies about neighbourhood choices of parents, parental practices and reproduction of social class the study's aim is to examine the local manifestations of those in an international context. To reach this aim, nine interviews with middle-class mothers who live in either disadvantaged or privileged neighbourhoods in terms of income, education level and ethnicity were analysed.

Our findings on middle-class anxiety over class-reproduction that is mediated by neighbourhood and school choice are in coherence to the vast international literature. Our findings part with those internationally documented in the way social capital reproduction plays out in the most affluent neighbourhood and the importance the most affluent middle class mothers put on closeness to their extended families.

This article explores how white middle-class mothers of compulsory school aged children in Iceland navigate residential choices and within neighbourhood interactions. Drawing on nine interviews with mothers that reside in either privileged or disadvantaged neighbourhoods with regard to education level, income and ethnicity, we explore their constructions of the neighbourhood and how their residency interacts with their strategies for social class reproduction. As is evident by the mothers' narratives the social composition of the neighbourhood is paramount to their strategies of parenting. Exploring those narratives contributes to our understanding of complex dynamics among school, catchment zones and choices of residency that internationally are not thoroughly understood (Bernelius & Vilkama, 2019; Owens, 2017).

Vast literature exists on the effects of consumer cultures on parental roles in Scandinavia, Europe and in the US (Ball, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Kosunen & Carrasco, 2014; Kosunen & Rivière, 2018; Oría et al., 2007; Perrier, 2013; Reay, 2005a; Vincent, 2017). These scholars document how parents have been summoned by governments to exercise school and neighbourhood choice as to be "effective" as parents (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016). It is of importance to analyse if and how those international trends, that seem to be quite homogenous in the western world, manifest in a country as unique as Iceland. The defining factors of Iceland, described below, could be expected to influence the trends of consumer cultures when mothers of compulsory school-aged children navigate neighbourhood choices. The study will give us valuable insights into how parents in a new nation state that is perceived to be gender equal, classless and homogeneous, adapt and respond to international trends of consumer cultures.

#### *The unique case of Iceland*

This article will explore the case of Iceland, which, for numerous reasons, presents an interesting field to study.

1. *The micro-size of the nation.* Iceland had 364.000 inhabitants as of December 2019, of which around 2/3<sup>rd</sup> live in the Reykjavik metropolitan area.
2. *Very young nation state with collective history of poverty and homogeneity.* The history of Iceland as a modern, Western, independent state is very short as Iceland got its independence from Danish rule as late as 1944. Björnsson and Edelstein (1977) noted in

1977 that almost all Icelanders had working-class parents<sup>1</sup> and the fact that the entire population had a collective experience of living in or coming from poverty functioned as a solidarity producer. They conclude that Iceland is so to say “a single socio-ecological unit with equality as a dominant socio-cultural characteristic” (p. 4). As a result, Iceland has long been seen as a classless society (Oddsson, 2011) despite growing economic inequality in the past decades (Ólafsson & Kristjánsson, 2017).

3. *Historically homogeneous neighbourhoods.* Björnsson and Edelstein (1977) note that in 1977 typical residential differences in school districts (“inner city versus suburban school”), so salient in both the literature and the policy debate abroad, was hardly in evidence in Reykjavik. There are cues that this is now somewhat changed and that neighbourhood distinctions are on the rise, although still relatively subtle (Torfason, Einarsdóttir, Rafnsdóttir, & Sigurðardóttir, 2017)
4. *Strong family ties.* The importance of family ties have been, and still are, strong (Björnsson & Edelstein, 1977; Ólafsson, 2011), and there is some evidence it is on the rise (Growiec, Vilhelmsdóttir, & Cairns, 2012), in Iceland which might affect the ways social capital plays out.
5. *Perceived feminist utopia.* Iceland ranks as n°1 in gender equality in the world every year from 2009-2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020) although this measurement has been contested by Icelandic feminist scholars (Einarsdóttir, 2020). Consumer culture has been found to be intimately connected to the social construction of motherhood which might play out differently in a country that emphasises gender equality in public discourse and branding.

#### *Neighbourhoods, Parental Choices and Reproduction of Class*

We borrow from Bourdieu's conceptual framework (1984, 1986), where class is not only perceived in economic terms, but also in a cultural and social sense. Moreover, we start from the notion that class is not static but rather a dynamic process in which practices and choices shape and reproduce class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 2004). Critical scholars of class and parental practices have noted that an important point of class reproduction happens not least with parental practices and choices that they make to transmit their social and cultural capital to their children. This is

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<sup>1</sup> With notable exceptions, see for example Ellenberger (2019)

done e.g. through school choice, choices of friends and extra-curricular activities (Ball, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Kosunen & Carrasco, 2014; Oría et al., 2007; Perrier, 2013; Reay, 2005a; Vincent, 2017) all of which intersect with their choice of neighbourhood (Kosunen & Rivière, 2018). It is important to bear in mind that neighbourhood choices is a complex research topic with numerous intersecting factors to consider. For example recent research has found that such different aspects as generational assets (Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2017), availability of public services (Boterman & Bridge, 2015), and spatial logistics of every day life (Lilius, 2019) influence neighbourhood choices. However, a reoccurring theme in many studies that examine the neighbourhood choices of parents is the explicit or implicit mentions of social reproduction (Lilius, 2019). In countries such as Norway, Finland and Iceland, where most children attend their neighbourhood compulsory school, educational distinctions find ways through the residential choices of parents. Parents with high economic capital have increasingly started to buy properties in school catchment zones perceived as good, resulting in increased spatial class divisions (Aarseth, 2015; Bernelius & Vilkama, 2019; Dovemark et al., 2018; Ljunggren & Andersen, 2015). Subsequently, living in a specific neighbourhood has become an important factor of class image and class distinction (Cunningham & Savage, 2015; Öhrn, 2012; Savage, 2015), which in turn creates hierarchies between schools and neighbourhoods (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Bernelius & Vilkama, 2019)<sup>2</sup>.

The focus on parental actions and residential choices of the middle- and upper-classes is fuelled by a need to understand the actions of those that have the means to make a choice and have the symbolic power to label schools and neighbourhoods (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016). The concept of choice is always questionable as people's actions are to lesser or more extent restrained by societal factors. Yet, the middle- and upper-classes are the groups that have the privileges necessary to make the most out of the emerging markets of schools and neighbourhoods. This they do by exercising their capability to choose (Ball et al., 1996). Therefore the actions of this group shape the demographic distribution throughout Nordic cities (Tunström & Wang, 2019) – yet those actions have not been studied in an Icelandic context before. This research builds on studies that look at the discourse of individual responsibilities where parents, most notably mothers, become

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<sup>2</sup> Optimally this paper would refer to Icelandic studies on urban class segregation, school choice and parental choices in terms of neighbourhoods. However, no such study exists. This study contributes to this gap of knowledge.

the subjects of consumer culture (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016; Vincent, 2017). As such subjects it is their motherly duty to seize every opportunity to reproduce their, and their child's, class status where the choice of neighbourhood, schools and extra-curricular activities is of importance (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016; Vincent, 2010). Studies show that middle-class anxiety over the future of their children has heightened and is the result of increased individualism and widening gap between the rich and the poor (Reay et al., 2008), raising the stakes for middle-class reproduction. While you can easily bequeath your economic wealth to your children, you need educational strategies to ensure the transmission of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). Given these circumstances it becomes of interest to examine the strategies of middle-class mothers, some of whom live in neighbourhoods seen by the middle-class as less fit for social reproduction. Dermott and Pomati (2015) argue that in an ever more unequal world, sociologists should focus more on the top of class hierarchies to understand and dismantle oppressive structures. This study will contribute to our understanding of the processes of social class reproduction and its connection to location of residency.

### *The Research*

The data consists of nine interviews with university educated and/or financially affluent, white, native Icelandic mothers of compulsory school aged children. They are labelled here as middle-class although two or three of them might fit better into the category of elite, considering their wealth and their or their husband's position in society. They live in or at the margins of school catchment zones in the Reykjavik metropolitan area<sup>3</sup> that can be considered either disadvantaged (one of three most disadvantaged zones in terms of income and education level) or one of three most economically privileged zones (see table 1). Data from Statistics Iceland is used to shed light on the social composition of the school catchment zones where the mothers live. All municipalities have defined school catchment zones, but parents can apply for other schools. In Reykjavik, parents can apply for other schools in the municipality but the enrolment of students from outside the school catchment zone is dependent upon space available. Principals can also reject students from other catchment zone because of 'special circumstances' (Reykjavik Municipality, 2017). One of the municipalities within the Reykjavik metropolitan area, however, has no catchment

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<sup>3</sup> The Reykjavik metropolitan area includes six municipalities: Reykjavik, Seltjarnarnes, Mosfellsbær, Kópavogur, Garðabær and Hafnarfjörður.

zones. Families can choose any of the eight compulsory schools located in the municipality. Exploring both interviews where the mothers' residency is in line with their social class and interviews where their residential neighbourhood in one way or another clash with their social class allows for a more nuanced and rich exploration on the connections between residency and social class reproduction. Our research question are: How do middle class mothers, living in disadvantage neighbourhood make sense of their locality? What strategies do they apply to navigate their situation? What connections do mothers who live in privileged neighbourhoods make between generational capital and their locality?

The sample was self-selected as advertisements were put in Facebook groups for neighbourhoods and towns belonging to the Reykjavik metropolitan area<sup>4</sup>. Snowballing was also used where the parents suggested fellow parents to be interviewed. Since most of the interviews are also a part of dataset for another project, where the choice of private schooling is a central topic, all but two of the mothers had children who attended, or had previously attended, a private school<sup>5</sup>. These parents thus belong to the 4-5% of parents in Reykjavik who send their child to a private school (Borgarfulltrúar Sjálfstæðisflokksins [City council members for the Independence party], 2018). By that they already show signs of being conscious consumers in the educational market making them prime participants to explore the emergence of these trends in Iceland. The interviews were carried out in the year 2017. Participation was self-selected and only mothers volunteered to take part. One father was interviewed but he took part because his wife wanted him to as she was abroad at the time of data collection. The interview with the father did not provide much information and we thus decided to focus on mothers. This focus provides an interesting topic on its own as international literature suggests that constructions of motherhood is intimately linked with consumer cultures in parental practices (Reay, 2005a).

We analysed the data using thematic analysis and applied a critical approach to the data by looking at the way the mothers construct their experiences and contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 25). For selected interviews a vertical analysis was carried out contextualizing the codes and themes with information on past circumstances. This was done when the participants gave a rich

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<sup>4</sup> Icelanders are very active on social media, 92% of Icelanders over 18 years of age use Facebook (Gallup, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Private schools refers to schools that are run by the private or the voluntary sector and mostly, but not totally, run with public funding. They receive 75% of the medium cost for each student. Most of them charge additional tuition.

description of their past and when those added value to the thematic analysis. The Atlas.ti programme was used to organize the coding and themes but no automatic coding or processing was carried out by the programme.

As researchers of a psychosocial subject we are committed to honesty, sympathy and respect for our participants and their complex stories (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). All participants have been given pseudonyms and sometimes insignificant details of their circumstances have been changed to conceal their identity. We strive to analyse their stories and life choices with respect and sympathy and yet at the same time to stay true to our aim as critical scholars to uncover hierarchies (Burr, 2015). It is a narrow path to follow but not impossible (Perrier, 2013).

#### *Overview of Participants' and Catchment Zone's Background*

The classification of the participants class status and catchment zones is informed by Bourdieu's notions of class fractions (Weininger, 2005; Zanten, 2009) where the dominant class is divided into an economic fraction (holding primarily economic capital) and an intellectual fraction (holding primarily institutionalised and presumably embodied cultural capital). The economic fraction is disproportionately represented in three of the catchment zones included in this study. Table 1 gives an overview of the catchment zones and, for comparison, the average catchment zone in Reykjavik metropolitan area.

Table 1. Characteristics of the catchment zones where the participants live.

	Economically privileged zones	Disadvantaged zones	Average catchment zone
Number of participants	6	3	
Number of catchment zones	3	3	53
Homes with a university educated parent	78-84%	27-41%	62%
Highest quintile of income	31-51%	2-6%	20%
Homes with native Icelandic parents	89-94%	40-71%	86%



Homes with a parent with a degree in humanities, arts or social sciences <sup>6</sup>	8-12%	4-7%	10%
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To identify the characteristics of the catchment zones we used information from Statistics Iceland on homes with at least one compulsory school aged child in the year 2016. This data was processed specifically for this study. The variables are four: quintiles of income<sup>7</sup>, familial connection to Iceland<sup>8</sup>, education level and field of education<sup>9</sup>, more specifically degrees in social sciences, humanities and arts. Although the economically privileged catchment zones have an above average of homes with a university educated parent, the number of degrees that can indicate an embodied cultural capital, that is humanities, arts or social sciences, is average (10%). There are catchment zones in Reykjavik metropolitan area where up to 1/3 of homes have a parent with such a degree, which can indicate that the intellectual fraction is disproportionately represented in these zones. For the sake of keeping this article within due length we focus on economically privileged areas and contrast them with the disadvantaged area.

Information on participants background was gathered both by directly asking about education, occupation, income of their families etc. but also in an observational way, by making informed assumptions based on i.e. their housing, their occupation, their family history and their husbands' occupation. Class has not been defined in a quantitative manner for Icelandic society has been done in for example the UK (NS-NEC). We therefore rely on a rudimentary, qualitative categorisation taking the household as a whole into consideration. It can be stated with certainty that none of the participants are working-class but differentiation between middle-class, upper-middle-class or elite will not be given an attempt here, as this is not the aim of this study. A more detailed information on each participant's background will not be given in order to conceal their identity.

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<sup>6</sup> This category involves 'abstract' degrees, that is all humanities, all arts and abstract social sciences (rather than applied) such as political sciences, sociology and anthropology.

<sup>7</sup> The quintiles are calculated based on all families with school-aged children in the Reykjavik metropolitan area and Akureyri using the OECD modified equivalence scale. Statistics Iceland collected this data from annual tax reports.

<sup>8</sup> The familial connection to Iceland is measured by using the country of birth of both parents and of grandparents. A person is considered to have a familial connection to Iceland if they are born in Iceland or if at least one of their parents is born in Iceland.

<sup>9</sup> Information on the parents' education level is derived from Statistics Iceland's census.

**Participants living in economically privileged areas:** Agnes, Rósa Jóhanna, Karólína, Tinna. Their income and assets average or well above average and they all have a university degree or secondary education. Two are elite; Husbands hold top positions within political or financial sphere.

**Participants living adjacent to an economically privileged area:** Karen. Her income and assets is average, and she has a university degree. She sends her child to school in the adjacent economically privileged zone.

**Participants living in disadvantaged areas:** Jenný, Íris and Theódóra. Their income and assets is average or well above average and they all have a university degree.

The subsequent sections are organised around central themes that were developed in the analytical process. First, we will explore the accounts of the mothers who live in disadvantaged neighbourhood their sense of being somewhat misplaced (theme: being out of the box), and their responses to this situation (theme: strategies for navigating a disadvantaged neighbourhood). Second, we will explore connections between generational capital and locality through interviews with middle-class mothers in the privileged area.

#### *'We Are Out of the Box'*

Íris, Theodóra and Jenný live in three adjacent school catchment zones that together form the disadvantaged area. This area has seen a steep decline in the proportion of native Icelandic residents residing there and an increase in poverty over the past 20 years.<sup>10</sup>

Íris and her husband came to live in the disadvantaged area when they moved from the countryside to pursue a university education before they had children:

*We were young and looking for our first apartment, just 22 years old or something. This was a cheap neighbourhood, the cheapest at the time and we found a good apartment for little money. That was that. We didn't have children and we weren't really thinking about different types of neighbourhoods or schools or anything really, so we just bought it and moved in. Then later we started to think, you know (laughs) (Íris)*

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<sup>10</sup> Data from Statistics Iceland, processed for this study.

Theodóra had a similar story, she and her husband had never lived in Reykjavík when they bought a house in the disadvantaged area and their primary reason was the cheap price of their spacious house.

*T: We had very firm ideas, you know, I wanted to have certain number of bedrooms and I wanted a yard. So, then you can't really find anything in [mentions two centrally located areas].*

*R: So here you found a spacious house for a good price?*

*T: Yes, exactly, yes. (Theodóra)*

*R: Before you moved, did you have any information on the neighbourhood school?*

*T: No, actually not. And for sure, in retrospect, I should have gathered this information first. Then I would probably have chosen another neighbourhood. (Theodóra)*

Theodóra, Íris and their husbands grew up in the countryside (where salaries and property value is lower than in the capital area) and were raised in working-class families. They both explain their choice with the cheap pricing of the houses in the disadvantaged area. Their background means that they were economically disadvantaged when they bought their first property (similar patterns have been noted in Norway (Galster & Wessel, 2019)). Their priority was value for money. The cheap prices of the houses in the disadvantaged area allowed them to make the transition to the capital and this transition is a part of the social mobility they are working towards. At the same time both Íris and Theodóra explain that they did not have knowledge of the image of the neighbourhood and the neighbourhood schools when they moved. We see in their accounts that they feel it is their responsibility as good mothers to live in the 'right' neighbourhood. Íris highlights how she was *not thinking* implying that her choice of neighbourhood was an act of thoughtlessness. Theodóra blames herself for not gathering more knowledge on the neighbourhood school before they bought the house. They are acutely aware of the fact that they made 'the wrong choice' and did not have the information they now feel a middle-class native Icelandic parent should have. Their stories points to their recognition of themselves as subjects of consumerism (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016; Vincent, 2010).

Jenný is also aware of her choice of neighbourhood being 'the wrong one' although she feels somewhat more comfortable with her choice. She takes pride in being 'out of the box' in several ways:

*We are this kind of people, you know. Many people ask us: 'So do you live in [mentions two economically privileged catchment zones]?' And we just: 'No, we live in [name of disadvantaged area] (laughs). They ask like: 'what kind of cars do you have?' And we just, you know for a long time we only had one car 'No, we just have one car'. [mimics a response by putting up a surprised look] (laughs). We are you know ... many people just think we are like everybody else who works at this firm [...] But we recycle our garbage a lot and we are out of the box. (Jenný)*

Jenný's account shows that her lifestyle choices interrupt the normativity: Her residency in the disadvantaged area and lifestyle choice in terms of cars and garbage disposal is not compatible with her class-status. She mentions that most people think that she lives in one of the catchment zones that are in this study labelled as economically privileged, further underscoring her social and occupational status within with the economic fraction. Like Íris and Theodóra, Jenný feels that her choice of neighbourhood needs explaining:

*R: You said everybody thought you lived in either [names of two economically privileged areas], so why did you choose ...*

*J: That was of course you know, 2003, you know. (pause)*

*R: Yes?*

*J: A lot has changed since then. (pause). We bought the house in 2002 and moved in 2003.*

*R: So the neighbourhood was different back then?*

*J: The neighbourhood was a lot different. There were foreigners, but a lot fewer. (Jenný)*

Jenný's explanation for her choice is that it was made at a different time. In the year 2002, when the choice was made, the neighbourhood was neither as diverse in terms of ethnicity nor as marginalised in terms of economic capital. She is hinting at the fact that her choice was made in a different social context, at a time when perhaps it was not as 'out of the box' as it is now.

All of the mothers thus feel the need to justify their choice. They state that it was made at a different time and they have now learned/adopted the 'right' middle-class values. Some would have chosen differently coming into the present situation of their neighbourhood. They are all in dialogue with a consumerist culture that highlights individual responsibility to make the right choices as to reproduce their and their child's class status (Byrne, 2006; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hutchison, 2011; Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016; Reay, 1998, 2005b; Vincent, 2017).

*Strategies for navigating a disadvantaged area*

Jenný is the only one of the middle-class mothers in the disadvantaged area who embraces her situation. She repeatedly states how important it is to her that her children learn to live in a multicultural society:

*Thinking about the mix, I just think it is much more important that my children get to know Sayid, Nariman and Natali rather than ... children that are just like themselves or you know ... have a narrower view you know. (Jenný)*

This emphasis on the importance of 'exposing' the children to children of different nationalities or ethnicity can be read as a part of middle-class strategy for ensuring multicultural or (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011). When white, middle-class parents choose diverse schools this choice is dependent upon the children's success (Crozier et al., 2008). Similarly, Jenný points out that 'my children, really, are doing well and they don't need, they don't have any special needs in the school so this [neighbourhood] is fine, you know' – adding that if they did have such needs she would move an economically privileged area. The parents in Crozier et al. (2008) study used various capitals to ensure success as Jenný had done, including reinforcing her bond with the children's teachers and classmates; 'it strengthens my children's position at the school, the fact that I am in this position [of social power within the school]'. This strategy perhaps allows her to make a compromise between 'desirous openness and sublimated elitism' (Reay, 2008). Jenný is 'open' to the ethnically and classed other in the school but at the same time uses her capital to advance her children's social and cultural capital through parental involvement at the school. Crozier et al. (2008) conclude, 'If worse comes to the worse, they [white, middle-class parents] always have the economic resources to bail out' – and this Jenný had also done by sending one of her children to a private school approximately 7 km away from the area where they live. This child had started out in the neighbourhood school but was struggling just a bit socially ('not the most popular one') and wanted more challenging material academically.

Theodóra and Íris chose to send their children to private schools, located in more privileged areas, at the start of their compulsory schooling. Being brought up working-class makes their position 'not secured from past generations'. Therefore, ensuring capital transmission through education becomes of paramount importance (Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn, 2012). By the time that their children were starting first grade, the mothers had gained the knowledge on the

neighbourhood school that they did not have when they moved to the neighbourhood. By making this choice they were able to diminish the effect of living in the 'wrong' neighbourhood on their children. Theodóra's children were still enrolled in the private school at the time of the interview and she showed high aversion to ever sending her children to their neighbourhood school - 'not a chance' she stated. Íris's oldest child was attending their neighbourhood school at the time because the private school only operated at a primary school level. Íris describes how they had planned to move to one of the more privileged neighbourhoods of Reykjavik when her son had to change schools, but this plan had not been successful when the time came. She therefore tried to enrol him in a neighbourhood school in their desired and more privileged catchment zone but was declined because she did not have domicile in that neighbourhood. Reluctantly, she enrolled him in their neighbourhood school and became a volunteer for the school as a strategy for class reproduction:

*I had very weird feelings when it came time for him to change schools. I thought that all other schools were just horrible. [...] I was really afraid I was just going to ruin him by sending him to another school – silly me (scoffs). But he enrolled in the neighbourhood school and I volunteered for the PTO. [...] I wanted to get to know the management of the school and you know to be alert, to see, you know that everything was OK and that he was really being taught something. (Íris)*

In the end the child excelled both academically and socially – as is often with middle-class children in disadvantaged schools (Crozier et al., 2008). The family cancelled their plans of moving to another neighbourhood because of the child's happiness at the neighbourhood school. Her acceptance for the neighbourhood thus comes only after she sees that the social reproduction is not at risk with the child entering the neighbourhood school. Íris now scoffs at the fact that she was anxious about the change of schools because it turned out fine in the end.

All in all, Theodóra, Íris and Jenný are acutely aware of the stigmatisation their neighbourhood is facing and know that many middle-class parents in Iceland reflect on their choice of residency as the 'the wrong one'. Íris found peace with her choice once she saw her child blossom in the neighbourhood school. Private schools at some point served as tools for all three, to ensure their children's academic and or social success. Additionally, Jenný and Íris, who both had their children at least partially attend a neighbourhood school had used parent-teacher relations as means to strengthen their children's social and or academic standing within the school.

We will now turn our analysis to the mothers who live in or adjacent to the economically privileged catchment zones where the economic fraction disproportionately lives (see table 1)

### *Connections between generational capital and locality*

One of the themes that we have constructed from the interviews with the mothers who live in the affluent neighbourhoods is the role of their, or their husbands' extended families in their choice of neighbourhood. In Jóhanna's case both she and her husband grew up in the affluent zone and both of their extended families live there now.

*R: Why did you choose to live in this neighbourhood?*

*J: Well my husband grew up in this neighbourhood, just next street [pause]. We chose it because we both grew up here and we have been happy here. [...] and we have our parents and siblings here (Jóhanna)*

Agnes comes from a wealthy family in the catchment zone where she and her husband now live. Her husband, Alex, has a less privileged background and did not grow up in the affluent area where they now live. Agnes and Alex have chosen to live in the affluent neighbourhood and thus in proximity to Agnes's extended family rather than Alex's extended family.

*R: Did you consider any other neighbourhoods or areas in the Reykjavik metropolitan area or Iceland generally [when buying the first property]?*

*A: No, this is, we are sort of [neighbourhood's name]'s you know ... all of my siblings live here, except those who live abroad and yes. We are just sort of a [neighbourhood's name]'s clan. (Agnes)*

It is important to bear in mind that in a Nordic context locality often serves as a signifier or code for socio-economic factors that are not directly addressed (Öhrn, 2011, 2012). Referring to one's family as a clan of a particularly privileged neighbourhood therefore has its classed undertones. The same story unfolds in the case of Rósa although in her case she is from a less privileged background than is her husband, Róbert, who grew up in the affluent area and whose extended family live there. Rósa and Róbert, like Agnes and Alex, have chosen to live in proximity to the more affluent extended family, in their case, Róbert's family.

*R: And why did you choose to live in this neighbourhood?*

*Rósa: My husband grew up here, in this very street and his parents live in the same street as us and his brother also (Rósa)*



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Rósa, Agnes and Jóhanna all describe the importance of closeness to their, or in Rosa's case their husbands' extended family. Those are all families that belong to the economic fraction of the upper classes of Iceland and some of them could be considered elite. Public information on their wealth and status in Icelandic society is available in all of those cases. None of them have lived anywhere else in Iceland after they had children. They all emphasize that this choice was deliberate rather than haphazard and linked to the location of their extended families. The fact that Rósa and Agnes both chose to live close to the half of their children's extended families that is more privileged suggests that their neighbourhood choice is important to the reproduction of social class.

The importance of generational capital and its link to locality is also evident from Karen's account. Karen is a single mother of three and according to herself "not exactly swimming in money" although she is not struggling either, financially. Karen wanted to buy a home in one of the affluent catchment zones but could not find one that she could afford. She therefore lives adjacent to her desired zone but sends her children to school in the affluent area. Karen was brought up by a single mother mostly in the countryside, but her father and his family is from the catchment zone where she now sends her children to school. Karen's father's family has social capital within this area, and this is the main reason for her choice of schooling.

*Everybody knows who their grandfather is and therefore everybody knows who I am and then everybody knows who [my children] are. That's just the way it is (laughs). [...] My father grew up in [name of catchment zone], all of his siblings live there, my grandfather and grandmother lived there and my great grandfather and great grandmother also. We are from this place, that's the way it is. We are [name of catchment zone]'s people. [...]*  
(Karen)

Karen described some cases where her father's social capital within the area had benefitted her children but to conceal their identity those will not be repeated here. She also explained that her children can really sense that they are different and less affluent than other children in their school. In most other schools they would not stand out in any way. She, however, feels that the social capital they gain by being members of a family that is well known in the area outweighs these shortcomings. By her choice of residency and school she capitalises on the generational class history of her father's family, a class status that is tightly tied to the locality.

Our two remaining participants that live in an affluent neighbourhood also have parents that live in the same neighbourhoods although they did not mention these as their main reason for



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their choice of residency. Tinna's word, however, do shed a light on how the affluent neighbourhood that she lives in is inhabited by extended families:

*I know almost everybody in this neighbourhood, you know, because everybody's paths sort of cross with mine and then often the grandfathers and grandmothers live in the neighbourhood also and the siblings of the parents so I feel like it is just like living in a small town in the countryside. (Tinna)*

The generational class history that seems to cumulate within the affluent areas is worth noticing. This pattern might be less visible in larger, more anonymous cities and in countries where people can choose from many cities to live in. In the micro-city of Reykjavik metropolitan area the opportunities to capitalize on generational class history seems to be tightly connected to locality.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

There are clear distinctive processes in parental choices of neighbourhoods in Reykjavik metropolitan area and, as table 1 shows, different neighbourhoods are unevenly popular among the middle classes. This study shows that as a result of these processes, middle-class mothers experience anxiety over their class reproduction with their respective neighbourhoods as mediating factors. This is most notable with the mothers who do not have the class position secured from past generations and live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The mothers in this position have all taken measures to ensure a reproduction of their, in some cases newly established, middle-class position, be it by school and or neighbourhood choice. This anxiety is arguably a result of increased individualism and widening gap between the rich and the poor (Ólafsson & Kristjánsson, 2017; Reay, 2008; Reay et al., 2008) making the stakes for middle-class cultural reproduction higher.

Extended families and proximity to those play an important part in transmission of symbolic capital in Iceland. The group of mothers who have family ties in the affluent neighbourhoods choose to be in spatial proximity to their generational class privileges which again strengthens their possibilities of class reproduction. The locality of their generational class privileges is evident by the description of the mothers who repeatedly refer to their families by the name of the respective neighbourhood 'we are [name of neighbourhood]'s people'. This suggests that locality within the Reykjavik metropolitan area is an important factor of class distinction (Cunningham & Savage, 2015; Savage, 2015) which has generational aspect to it as well as being a factor of class

reproduction. These findings are in contrast to what some of the international scholars have found. Both Lareau (2002) and Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003), for example, found that maintaining strong family ties and proximity to extended family was a working-class pattern of family life whereas most of the middle-class families in their sample did not prioritise social or geographical connections to their extended families. In our findings the affluent mothers chose to live close to their extended families and family ties were presented as an important factor in neighbourhood choice. The connections between familial symbolic power and locality might be stronger in a micro community like Iceland than in larger cities. Sociologists have noted that family ties have historically been more important in Iceland than in many other economically advanced societies (Björnsson & Edelstein, 1977; Ólafsson, 2011). More recent studies show that the importance Icelanders put on family connections is on the rise (Growiec et al., 2012). This holds true even though the population in general has experienced considerable social upward mobility expanding the middle-classes.

Overall, we see that the mothers' accounts of being white, native, middle-class mothers in Iceland both in disadvantaged and privileged neighbourhoods point to consumer culture of mothering practices. Motherhood practices in Iceland, as in other affluent countries, have moved beyond 'providing food, shelter, and love' (Vincent, 2017, p. 543). These consumer cultures are gendered and intimately connected to the social construction of a responsible mother (Vincent, 2010, 2017) who makes the right choice of school and, as we see in this study, neighbourhood to raise her children. We know that parental work falls mainly on the shoulders of mothers. In Iceland today, this seems also involve making the right decision on neighbourhood to live in. Mothers living in the 'wrong' neighbourhood are acutely aware of their residency not aligning with their class-identity. Under consumer culture they become responsible for taking measures of balancing out the possible negative effects of this e.g. with parental involvement in the school community or with school choice.

To conclude, we do see similar patterns in Iceland as international literature notes, that is middle-class anxiety over class-reproduction and that these anxieties are mediated by neighbourhood and school choice. These findings surely put a dent into Iceland's image as a classless and feminist utopia. Our findings part with those internationally documented in the way social capital reproduction plays out in the most affluent neighbourhood and the importance the

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most affluent middle class (in some cases elite) mothers put on closeness to their extended families. We do not see a similar pattern in the international literature. Further research is necessary for us to be able to draw stronger conclusions on the reasons behind, and the nuances of, those findings. Our participants indirectly engage in discussions about the desirability of neighbourhoods for class reproduction. However, further research is needed for us to understand if Iceland is on a similar, yet less developed, path of class segregation as other Nordic countries or if it will carve out a way for classes to spatially co-exist. For now, our findings show that while international literature does seem to be somewhat coherent on the developments in Western countries, country-specific circumstances are important to note.

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