

Availability and Actualisation – Social and Emotional Learning Processes in Transitions to ‘Behind and Around the Scenes’ Performing Arts Education



COLLECTION:
FINDING PATHS
THROUGH FUTURE
CHALLENGES

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This study examines artistic career decision processes and aspiratory narratives of art students who are studying for a future working life ‘behind and around the scenes’ (BAS). The analyses are based on data from 17 biographical interviews. The study found that the BAS programmes were ‘hidden’ in the context of the performing arts, where pre-education work engagements and networking were critical for making them available as a career choice. In the processes of actualising educational aspirations, the emotion of self-confidence was found to be central, due to the challenges involved in getting accepted and the risks and insecurities involved in aspiring to a career in the arts. Three sources of self-confidence are analysed: pursuing a meaningful (working) life; coping with rejection; and acknowledgement from significant others. Drawing on careership theory and sociology of emotions, the study interprets the students’ aspiratory trajectories as social and emotional learning processes in which the individual acted with bounded agency. Through the non-linear and processual character of the students’ transitions to artistic education, the study challenges understandings of artistic careers as predetermined by social structures, ‘talent’ or an inner ‘calling’. Furthermore, by emphasising emotions as critical for action and agency, the study offers resistance to a dominant position in critical research in which emotions are negatively interpreted as complicit in precarisation and self-exploitation in the world of art.

ABSTRAKT

Studiet undersøger kunstneriske karrierevalg og aspirant narrativer blandt scenekunststuderende der uddanner sig til et fremtidigt arbejdsliv ‘bag- og rundt om scenen’. Analyserne er baseret på data fra 17 biografiske interviews. Studiet fandt at uddannelserne var ‘skjulte’ i den scenekunstneriske kontekst, hvor praktisk arbejdslivserfaring og netværksdannelse inden uddannelsen spillede en væsentlig rolle i at gøre uddannelserne tilgængelige som mulige studie- og karrierevalg. I processen mod at aktualisere uddannelsesaspirationerne var følelsen af selvtillid central, grundet konkurrencen om uddannelsespladserne, samt mere overordnede usikkerheder forbundet med at aspirere til en karriere som kunstner. Tre kilder til selvtillid analyseres: at efterstræbe et meningsfuldt (arbejds)liv; at håndtere afvisning; samt anerkendelse fra signifikante andre. Baseret på careership teori og emotions sociologi, fortolker

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studiet de studerendes veje til uddannelse som sociale og emotionelle læreprocesser i hvilke individet handlede med begrænset aktørfrihed. Herigennem udfordrer studiet udbredte forståelser af kunstneriske karrierer som værende forudbestemt af sociale strukturer, 'talent' eller et indre 'kald'. Ved at fremhæve følelser som væsentlige komponenter i individets mulighed for handling, yder studiet desuden modstand til en dominerende position i forskningen om kunstnerisk arbejde, hvor følelser ofte fortolkes negativt, som medvirkende til prekarisering og selvudnyttelse i den kreative sektor.

'You know, it's a... a vulnerable time. The thing about saying you want to go to a school that very, very few people get into... to devote all your time to that...'

(Olga, student in playwriting)

In the Scandinavian countries, being admitted to studies in a higher artistic education institution involves passing demanding practical entrance exams in competition for a restricted number of places. It is not unusual for aspirants to apply for several years before being admitted, while engaging in preparatory education and unpaid internships with the aim of gaining experience, skills and a network that they hope will bring them closer to making it into the programme. Regardless of the difficulty involved in being accepted, an arts degree holds no guarantee of a sustainable career as an artist. As the cultural economy has been termed a winner-takes-all market in which few players dominate in terms of remuneration and prestige (Fürst & Aspers, 2023; Menger, 1999), most art alumni face precarious working lives characterised by competition for jobs and unstable income flows in a project-by-project economy (Bain & McLean, 2013; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Flisbäck, 2006; Haukka, 2011; Kunst, 2015; Lindström, 2016; McRobbie, 2018). Despite the challenges involved with getting accepted for studies, as well as compounding evidence of precarity in the professional field, creative education continuously attracts many young people. As explanations for this puzzle, scholars have pointed to the non-monetary rewards of artistic work, such as meaningfulness and psychological gratification (McRobbie, 2018; Sefton-Green et al., 2019; Taylor & Littleton, 2012), as well as a reversed economic logic in the art field whereby symbolic recognition trumps economic success (Bourdieu, 1983; Gustavsson et al., 2012).

This study contributes qualitative, individual-centred perspectives on the meaning-making processes involved in aspiring to higher artistic education. Through thematising educational *availability* and *actualisation* as important processes in art students' aspiratory narratives, I argue for understanding artistic career choices and aspiratory trajectories as being shaped by a bounded agency of the individual, whereby social and emotional learning processes prior to education are critical for successful admission. I make this argument in the context of the performing arts, where the empirical focus is on programmes offering education for a future working life 'behind and around the scenes' (BAS), including the subject areas in scenography, light design, sound design, playwriting, production and stage management, props and scenic construction, and theatre directing. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How did the BAS professions become available to the students as a possible career decision?
- How did emotions impact the students' processes of actualising their educational decisions?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Sociologists have identified the field of higher artistic education as one of the most difficult zones to enter in the Swedish educational system (Börjesson et al., 2008). Studies on recruitment patterns show a high degree of social reproduction, finding that art students generally come from uniform socioeconomic backgrounds characterised by high levels of educational and cultural capital. Furthermore, studies show an increased tendency of occupational following, meaning that an overrepresentation of art students' parents also work in the field of culture (Andersson, 2008; Börjesson et al., 2008; Fürst et al., 2018; Gustavsson et al., 2012; Laband & Lentz, 1983). The field of higher artistic education has therefore been described as a closed

field monopolised by the cultural elite and, as such, a class-stratified career option (Andersson, 2008; Edling, 2012; Gustavsson & Melldahl, 2020; Lundin, 2020; Palme et al., 2012).

The assumption that a career in the arts is an autonomous ‘decision’ or ‘choice’ made by individuals is challenged from different angles in the literature. Researchers have emphasised external selection and validation as critical dimensions in the process of becoming an artist, with children who show talent in artistic disciplines from a young age being labelled ‘wonder children’ by teachers and parents. In a study of classical musicians, Lundin (2020) describes this as a double-sided socialisation process which gives access to the art field while simultaneously impacting the habitus of the young person in a way that becoming a great artist becomes a real possibility to strive for. A similar challenge to the idea of the artistic career as an individual choice can be found in the common understanding of art as a ‘calling’, in which the artist’s creative talent is considered an innate birth gift, and as such a destiny the individual must adhere to rather than something they deliberately choose (Bain, 2005; Kris & Kurz, 1981; Røyseng et al., 2007).

Recent qualitative studies stress the need for a more fine-grained level of analysing art students’ educational meaning-making processes by exploring the multiple ways actors value and justify arts education (Fürst & Nylander, 2023). In their interview study with Swedish folk high school (FHS) students of visual and plastic arts, music and creative writing courses, Fürst and Nylander (2023) identified a plurality in participants’ modes of engaging and valuing arts education. Those who aspired to a professional career in the arts primarily valued the FHS as a ‘hot house’ that fostered skills, collaboration and a network for the present and future. Participants who did not aspire to becoming professional artists valued arts education as a site for physical and mental recovery, well-being and personal growth (Fürst & Nylander, 2023, pp. 67–86). One aspect which separated the group of FHS participants who had professional ambitions from those who did not was a future-oriented temporal engagement whereby the FHS was seen as a functional part of the individual’s career aspirations.

Looking at research on creative education and work more generally, the relationship between future temporality and creative work, highlighted in the study of Fürst and Nylander (2023), is central in critical studies on precarity on the creative labour markets (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Flisbäck, 2006; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008; Lindström, 2017; McRobbie, 2018; Preston, 2013; Schmidt, 2021; Van Assche, 2020). The general claim in these studies is that the aspirational dimension of creative work is what makes artists endure the precarity of the present and thus exposes them to precarious, and potentially exploitive, work conditions.

Related to the interest in temporality in creative work, some scholars include perspectives on affective and emotional components, arguing that emotional labour/work is an interrelated dimension in artists’ strategies for coping with precarious work conditions and career insecurity, while simultaneously being a dimension that exposes the artist to self-exploitation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008; Lindström, 2017; Preston, 2013). In a study of visual artists in Sweden, Lindström (2017) analyses the emotions of trust, hope and luck as aspects of coping with an insecure world of work which increasingly relies on the creativity, passion and subjectivity of the worker. Understanding emotions as social and performative practices with political implications rather than as psychological states, the study critically examines the social consequences of emotion work on individuals. The emotion of hope is also analysed by Alacovska (2019), in a study of artists working in highly precarious contexts in post-socialist countries in Southeast Europe. The study found that hope was part of an everyday praxis of creative work and, in relation to temporality, a powerful psychosocial resource oriented to the present. Without neglecting the importance of studying future-oriented temporality in creative work, the study is critical of what is expressed as a ‘compulsion in critical sociology’ for translating future-oriented temporality into an expression of masochistic optimism and self-exploitation by the individual (Alacovska, 2019, p. 1132). In contrast, the study emphasises the emotion of hope as a source of agency that allows creative workers to reorient, readjust and retune their self-image and construct a habitable, modest and ‘normal’ working life under conditions of chronic precarity.

As the BAS educations have been largely under-examined in previous research, the study contributes new empirical perspectives on research examining artistic education and careers. By analysing aspiratory narratives in a biographical perspective, the study responds to Fürst

and Nylander's (2023) call for a fine-grained, actor centred level of exploring meaning-making processes of aspiring artists. By emphasising the relationship between individual, social and contextual aspects of career choices and aspirations, the study contributes a middle-ground perspective which promotes individual agency without neglecting the structural influences. Finally, the study contributes new perspectives on emotions in relation to creative work by highlighting emotions as a central component of individual action and agency.

METHOD AND EMPIRICAL DATA

The data consists of 17 interviews with BAS bachelor's students conducted over a period of six months. The interviews lasted approximately 1–1.5 hours and the interview guide was semi-structured in a past-present-future format, inspired by biographical methods (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merrill & West, 2009). Only the first parts of the interviews, concerning the students' paths to their education, were used in this study.

Due to a restricted student intake, the sample included participants from both Sweden and Denmark. All relevant institutions in each country, three in total, were included. At the time of the interviews the students were enrolled in their second or third year of the bachelor's programme, and the author aims to re-interview the same students a year after graduation. Within these sampling criteria, a single-country study might have posed a challenge to the ethical conduct of safeguarding institutional discretion and the research participants' anonymity.

The decision of including all BAS educations was based on both academic and practical grounds, and brought both potentials and limitations to the study. As the educations have not previously been thoroughly empirically examined, the full inclusion aimed to fill a research gap. In practice, the full inclusion also served the purpose of recruiting a sufficient number of participants to the study, which a leaner empirical focus may have jeopardised due to the low student numbers. However, there are differences between the included programmes in terms of educational objectives and the media of expression as well as variations in creative, technical and managerial roles within productions. There are also differences in the application pressure, with the competition for being accepted to programmes in scenography, playwriting and theatre directing being generally higher than to programmes in light design, sound design, production and stage management, and props and scenic construction. This diversity limits the possibility to make general analytical claims. Additionally, by interviewing students who were successfully enrolled in education at the time of the interviews, the study is limited to exploring how the students retrospectively narrate about their educational decision processes and aspiratory experiences. In this way the sample does not include transitional variations in terms of including perspectives from aspirants who did not succeed in being admitted. Nonetheless, several of the students included in the study held experiences with failures as some of them needed to apply several years before finally being admitted. Although all included students were successfully enrolled in the end, the sample does in this way represent variations and complexity of experiences.

The interviews were conducted in Danish, Swedish and English, depending on the preference of the student being interviewed. All excerpts presented in the *Results* section were translated into English by the author. In order to safeguard the participants' anonymity, the names of persons, places and other aspects that could be connected to a specific participant were anonymised and the students were given pseudonyms. When presenting data through tables, each topic is presented without correspondence to the others, due to the risk of exposing individual participants. After quotations, the student's pseudonym and program are mentioned, unless there is contextual information that could lead to their identification. In such cases, only the pseudonym is used. All research participants gave informed consent to participate and prior to the data collection the study obtained ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, diary number 2022-04827-01.

INTERPRETATIONS AND USE OF THEORY

The results have been generated through iterations of coding and theme generations inspired by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). In line with biographical

methodology, the aim of the analysis is not to reach objective truths or generalisations but to gain meticulous insight into the meaning-making processes of individuals' life experiences (Merrill & West, 2009). In this way, the study seeks to expose the uniqueness of the individual narrative and the plurality within the sample, while tentatively locating broader common features (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000).

Availability and actualisation are empirically generated key themes that were developed inductively by following the 6 phases of thematic analysis: Familiarisation with data, generating of initial codes, searching for themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The initial reading and coding of data was conducted openly, without a theoretical filter in order to stay close to the narrations of the students. Examples of initial codes were: 'childhood interests influence careers', 'BAS as hidden educations and professions', 'practical work experience as critical for educational entrance', 'meaningfulness in art and life', 'aspirational struggles and emotional investment', 'network and significant others'.

These initial codes were then clustered into the two main themes of availability and actualisation by using abductive methodology (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). In this way, the thematic analysis was developed through an iterative process of approaching data openly while holding a plurality of possible conceptualisations available. The aim of this process was to find generative theoretical concepts for analysing prevailing themes in the data. As such, the process was one of shifting back and forth between theory and data, relating emerging themes to different theoretical perspectives (Reed, 2011). In relation to availability, when explaining their path to education, most of the interviewed students expressed that they had not been aware of their current programme until late in their youth. As such, early in the research process the notion of BAS educations as being 'hidden' was noted as a significant empirical characteristic. On this basis, the central concept in careership theory – 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) – was found to be generative for analysing this empirical observation because it resonates with this empirical observation as it is based on a metaphor of vision. In relation to the theme of actualisation, several of the students explicitly mentioned various emotional struggles related to their time as aspirants. Based on this empirical observation, Jack Barbalet's (2001) sociological conceptualisation of the emotion of self-confidence in relation to action and agency was found to be analytically generative for examining the emotional aspects of the processes of actualising the students' educational decisions. The two theoretical strands will be outlined in the following.

HORIZONS FOR ACTION – THE ARENA FOR CAREER DECISION-MAKING

Careership theory proposes an empirically grounded conceptual model for studying career decision processes which emphasises a complex blend of social, cultural, temporal and personal influences. The theory is commonly referenced in research on school choice, transitions and career guidance (e.g. Lundahl, 2010), but has not yet been applied in the empirical context of educational transitions to artistic education.

'Horizon for action' is a central concept in the theory, describing 'the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). From their horizon for action, each individual is able to see certain choice opportunities while leaving others out of sight. The horizon for action is influenced by interrelated aspects of the opportunity structures on the labour market as well as the person's habitus and biographical trajectories. These include experiences of routines and turning points that can be structural, self-initiated or imposed by others. Through integrating the concept of habitus, careership theory draws on the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu, which emphasises individual action and belief as always being culturally and socially situated (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 33). However, in response to criticism of structuralism in Bourdieu's work, the theory incorporates a learning dimension whereby new experiences modify the schemata through which the individual perceives their surrounding world. This learning process is considered a dialectic in which the life history of the individual shapes and is shaped by practice (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). As such, the horizon for action is not static but rather changes throughout the life course as a result of individual learning and contextual changes over time.

SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ACTION

Although careership theory mentions feelings and emotions as being influential in career decision processes (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 33), this dimension is not developed within the theory. In this perspective, Barbalet’s (2001) conceptualisation of the emotion of self-confidence can contribute with perspectives on the impact of emotions on individuals’ engagement with their horizons for action and their actualisation of career decisions.

Self-confidence is described as a social emotion as it is generated in a person by successfully being accepted into a social interaction. In this way, the theory highlights the interdependence between the individual and their social structure, in a way similar to that referred to in careership theory. Self-confidence is further described as an anticipatory emotion with the future as its object, an actor’s feeling about their own capacity to approximate what they set out to achieve, promoting a willingness to act. Based on substantial evidence from the past, the emotion of self-confidence gives the individual ‘assured expectations’ regarding future outcomes, different to related emotions such as trust and faith, which are based on little or no evidence. On this basis, the central claim in the theory is that the emotion of self-confidence is the foundation of all actions (Barbalet, 2001, p. 82). Through this claim, the theory argues against ‘rational choice theory’, in which actions are considered the cognitive results of calculations based on information about future events. This is simply not possible, because ‘[a]s the future is in principle unknowable, it is not possible for actors to operate in terms of calculations based on information about it’ (Barbalet, 2001, p. 88). In contrast to cognitive calculation, the emotion of self-confidence thus provides the individual with a much sounder ‘hypothesis about future behaviour’ (Barbalet, 2001, p. 82).

In this way, Barbalet’s conceptualisation of self-confidence introduces both emotion and temporality into the theory of action, in which the emotion of self-confidence is understood as a key faculty for the individual’s temporal mediation between past, present and future.

RESULTS

The 17 students were enrolled in seven different programmes/specialisations within the BAS area (Table 1).

Playwriting	(5)
Production and stage management	(3)
Scenography	(2)
Light design	(2)
Sound design	(2)
Theatre directing	(2)
Props and scenic construction	(1)

Table 1 Programme/ specialisation (number of students).

Twelve students identified as female, four as male and one as non-binary. With an average age of 30 years the students can be described as mature bachelor’s students, and they all had high levels of education and work experience prior to their enrolment (Table 2).

Completed formal higher education	(6)
Folk high school	(8)
Had begun other higher education but did not finish	(4)
Relevant work experience or internships	(16)

Table 2 Education and training prior to enrolling in current programme (number of students).

About half of the students were accepted the first time they applied, while the rest had applied to their current or other artistic education for 2 to 15 years (Table 3). Several of the students had applied to multiple art schools in Northern Europe to optimise their chances of being accepted. This included some of the students who were accepted the first time they applied.

Accepted 1 st time applying	(8)
Accepted 2 nd time applying	(1)
Accepted 3 rd time applying	(2)
Accepted 4 th time applying	(2)
Accepted 5 th time applying or later	(4)

Table 3 Application attempts (number of students).

None of the students had linear educational trajectories, and the paths to their current programmes had been characterised by several turning points and reconfigurations of their envisioned professional identities, in either artistic or non-artistic careers. Most students came from homes in which their parents had a high or mid-level education, but only one student had parents who worked in the field of culture. In this way, the study does not support previous research findings of a high degree of occupational following within the art sector (e.g. Gustavsson et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the majority of the students had been engaged in creative and artistic activities in one or several forms during their childhood and youth (Table 4). Through this, the world of art has been introduced early to most of them, not through family relations but through leisure-time interests, which many emphasised as the starting point for their creative career trajectories.

Music	(5)
Visual arts	(5)
Acting	(4)
Filmmaking	(4)
Dance	(2)
Elite sports	(2)
No clear creative interest during childhood/youth	(2)

Table 4 Initial creative interest(s) during childhood/youth (number of students).

AVAILABILITY – LEARNING TO SEE BAS PROFESSIONS

Compared with artistic disciplines such as acting, dance, music, film and visual arts, which the students were familiar with from leisure-time interests during their childhood and youth (Table 4), the BAS professions generally appeared to have long been ‘hidden’, or at best peripheral, in their horizons for action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Hannah, a student of production and stage management who had been passionately engaged with acting since childhood, explains how the function of a production and stage manager had been invisible to her for years, despite her devoted interest in theatre:

‘Yes, there wasn’t really... At least not at the youth school... there was nothing called a stage manager or a production manager. I didn’t see that function there. It wasn’t until... I encountered this function when I worked on a musical in [city name], where there was a stage manager and a production manager. But my collaboration with them... I was just a student, an actor on stage... yes, I was on stage... So, I didn’t have that much contact with them. So, I think they were quite invisible to me. So, it wasn’t until I was engaged in a professional theatre and saw them work, and I was like “Oh my god, you do so much, you’re really cool! This is exciting, can you really do that, are you really allowed to be an ordered person who likes lists when you do theatre?” [laughs] I mean, it was also nice to discover... Yes, well, that there was a space for that kind of person’. (Hannah, production and stage management)

The function of a production and stage manager only entered Hannah’s horizon for action when she was voluntarily employed as an assistant at a professional theatre. This discovery challenged her preconceptions about what types of persons are able to engage in a theatre collaboration. In realising that ‘ordered persons’ have a place in the theatre, Hannah now envisions a new role for herself which better matches her personality, and sense of being an ‘ordered person’, than her initial dreams of becoming an actor did.

Several of the students shared similar stories of having obtained their knowledge about the BAS programmes through practical engagement within the field of work. Meeting significant others such as teachers and other gatekeepers in the cultural field played an important role in supporting their path to education through information, role modelling and encouragement. Camilla – who, like Hannah, was studying to become a production and stage manager – had been struggling to find her role in the context of the performing arts after having been dancing on an ambitious level for many years. After finishing a performing arts-oriented folk high school (FHS), she was still struggling to find her place. However, through her FHS network she became engaged in ad hoc assistant jobs within the professional field. Through these jobs, she explains how she:

‘(...) all of a sudden became aware of all the functions which exist, which you aren’t introduced to if you’re just sitting in a theatre. You know that there’s a director and that there are obviously actors. Then you probably don’t consider other functions... and then I just went all in to figure out where I thought I belonged. I tried to be a choreography assistant and a director assistant and a producer assistant’. (Camilla, production and stage management)

Both Hannah and Camilla became aware of their professions through engaging in the occupational contexts and building networks within the field. In this way, the stories of these two can be considered cases in which educational and occupational knowledge is communicated in the form of ‘hot knowledge’, which refers to a type of knowledge that is socially embedded in networks and localities and is distributed unevenly across social-class groups (Ball & Vincent, 1998).

In some cases, the ‘hidden’ character of the education was related to gendered cultures and assumptions within certain domains of work. In particular, this was expressed by some of the female students in light and sound design:

‘The things I got offered in [country of birth] was that if you want to do anything with sound, you’re a sound technician. You’re, like, throwing big speakers into a truck. You’re sweating your ass off for 15 hours a day. You’re the first one to show up, you’re the last one to leave. Like, it’s so male-oriented and such a boys’ club that I had no visions of other ways of doing sound until I moved to [European capital]. And then I... Yeah, it was a really big eye-opener. So, it was always about expressing myself. But I had... I didn’t realise, like, how to do it until many years later in this specific field’. (Iris, sound design)

The excerpt shows how sound design as an occupation to strive for appeared within Iris’s horizon for action through a process of changing cultural context and practical work engagement that modified gendered assumptions about the world of sound design as a labour-intensive, technical ‘boys’ club’. Encountering the European performing arts scene and the approach to sound as an art form within a new cultural context was eye-opening, and presented Iris with a field of work in which she could identify and express herself as a female sound artist.

As the excerpts above testify, ‘seeing’ the hidden BAS educations and meeting role models and significant others was not effortless, but was often rather the result of proactive engagement and positioning oneself in the field through taking chances and reaching out to people. Following description of theatre directing becoming available as a career aspiration is illustrative of this proactive behaviour:

‘I didn’t know that much about theatre directing, because it was nothing we had talked a lot about at the folk high school I went to. I didn’t know that much; I knew that it existed and that there were people working as theatre directors, but it was kind of not... I didn’t have that much knowledge about what it was. Then I saw a performance that I loved. And then I asked the director – it was a Swedish director – if she wanted to meet with me and have lunch. And it was really sweet of her because she said yes, and she was really like a... a very established theatre director who didn’t even... I mean it wasn’t a given that she would have said yes, but she did’. (Karin, theatre directing)

Karin's approach to the theatre director exemplifies how the BAS professions' appearance in the students' horizons for action was often due to their curiosity and courage in proactively initiating situations which provided important information and fostered valuable contacts.

In different ways, the excerpts presented here evidence the active role of the individual in making the educations available within their horizons for action. This was evoked by moving country (Iris), engaging in relevant work contexts (Camilla and Hannah) and boldly approaching gatekeepers (Karin). Careership theory emphasises that career decision processes are influenced by a 'dialectic of constraints' between agents and structures, which simultaneously limits and enables what we as individuals can see (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 35). In the excerpts presented here, there seems to be an intimate connection between the processes of becoming aware of the BAS programmes and identity-related experiences of occupational 'matching' and sense of belonging. In this context, the dialectic of constraints could be translated as a dialectic between individual awareness and structural availability, which seem completely entangled and interdependent. In this perspective, the structural aspects of the students' educational trajectories should not be neglected. Like three other students in the sample, Hannah had applied to the acting programme several times without being accepted. In this light, her reorientation towards a career as a production and stage manager can be considered a result of structural limitations on the market of artistic education, as much as an inner sense of occupational 'matching' and belonging. This reflects the central point of careership theory, which is the acknowledgement of the entangled relations between the standpoint and habitus of the individual and the opportunity structures within the external education and labour markets in career decision processes. Hannah's confirmation later in the interview, with no doubt in her voice, that her current education was right for her and that looking back she is happy she wasn't admitted to the acting programme can be considered an example of how structural boundaries can result in a learning process for the individual which reorients their sense of purpose and meaning and, through this, opens new horizons for action.

ACTUALISATION – THREE SOURCES OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

What does it take to proactively engage in challenging career aspirations and expand one's horizon for action as exemplified above? Drawing on Barbalet's (2001) conceptualisation of self-confidence as a basis for action, the following analysis presents an argument that puts the emotion of self-confidence at the centre of the process of actualising educational aspirations in the arts. The analysis takes the sources of self-confidence as its points of investigation, analysing the following:

- Pursuing a meaningful (working) life
- Coping with rejection
- Acknowledgement from significant others

PURSUING A MEANINGFUL (WORKING) LIFE

A recurrent theme in the interviews is an insistence on living a meaningful life and engaging in meaningful education and work. The pursuit of meaningfulness was expressed in diverse and overlapping ways by the students, who related meaningfulness to experiences of art as an existential practice, to political and social values, and as a source of freedom and playfulness. The existential meaningfulness of art is exemplified in the following two excerpts:

'It's almost, like, existential. That's how it's felt: that if I don't do this, then why should I live, kind of.... Or what should I do?'. (Lukas, theatre directing)

'There are sides of myself which I can't show in the interaction with other people – either due to insecurity or low self-esteem. But expressing myself through art... there, a room is created where one can create some meeting places; where I can also feel a sense of belonging, which I have missed feeling in normal social interactions. So, for me it's a forceful medium'. (Ditte, light design)

Here we see how art is experienced as a whole 'way of being' that evokes a sense of connection and belonging to the world. Other students emphasised meaningfulness in relation to political and social values, which they could express through art:

'I recall it very clearly. I'd just gone through kind of like a feminist awakening and I could feel how amazing this was; I mean, theatre is something where everyone has to be in the same room and listen, kind of... and it was really amazing to experience this together with the audience'. (Karin, theatre directing)

The connection between art and social and political standpoints, such as Karin's connection between feminism and theatre, was also expressed by some of the students who had been enrolled in, or completed, other higher educational programmes prior to enrolling in the BAS programmes. Barbara, who had earned a bachelor's degree in fashion design before applying to her current programme, cherished the non-commercial perspectives in the performing arts which contrasted with the commercial logic of the fashion industry:

'Here we're talking about completely different things. What we do here is more artistic, whereas I feel with fashion design... in the end of it all, it's commercial. And I just believe... it made me so sad'. (Barbara)

Here, Barbara uses her discontinued career in fashion as a counter-image to highlight the values and meaningfulness she relates to performing arts education and work. In relation to the emotion of self-confidence, the uncompromising pursuit of meaningfulness across the interviews can be interpreted as a source of self-confidence in the way it gives the students a 'higher purpose'. Having meaningfulness as a 'higher purpose' provides resilience in relation to external challenges, and seems to serve as a strong 'backbone' for the students in calming their concerns about future insecurity and the risk of failing in their educational aspirations.

COPING WITH REJECTION

One way this 'backbone' of resilience had been put to the test was during the admission process, which entailed a high risk of being rejected. As presented in Table 3, about half of the students were admitted on their first application attempt while the other half had applied two or more times before being accepted. However, across these groups, the majority of students expressed that they had anticipated a rejection the first time they applied as they knew the competition was tough:

'Most students who are admitted have applied a couple of times. So, when I applied the first time I thought "If I'm lucky I'll be admitted next year"'. (Elise, light design)

Although the students associated experiences of rejection with feelings of disappointment and career doubt, in various ways they emphasised the audition process, including being rejected, as an important learning experience:

'The processes I've learned the most from are the auditions'. (Olga, playwriting)

'Looking in the rearview mirror, it's probably one of the times I've learned the most about myself'. (Frederikke, production and stage management)

For some of the students who had applied for several years before being admitted, the experience of coming close to being accepted on their first attempts was interpreted as an important sign of external validation that boosted their confidence to try again. This was the case for Lukas, who had applied to different art schools for several years before finally being accepted to the theatre directing programme:

Lukas: It was very close, entering the film school, and there were only... six of us got in and there were ten of us left, so I was like.... The chances of getting in were better than not getting in.

Marie: And it was really early in the process, you could say, that you were actually quite close?

Lukas: So, I'd been told, in a way, that "You can do something". So, "you have some kind of talent", but there was a huge... I struggled a lot with doubt when I began applying... When I began applying for the theatre director programme here.

Despite not being admitted, meeting the jury was self-confidence-building, as the experience of 'going far' signalled an initial acknowledgment from important gatekeepers. Lukas's interpretation of the experience of coming close to being accepted as a sign of external validation of his talent resonates well with the conceptualisation of self-confidence as 'assured expectation' (Barbalet, 2001, p. 83), whereby positive past experiences promote a willingness for future action. However, we also see that the external validation from making it far in an audition process is only partial, as he was ultimately not admitted. This leaves him with ambivalent feelings of being at once confident and doubtful of his ability to become an artist.

Matti – a playwright student who, like Lukas, had applied for several years prior to being admitted – recalls the cycles of facing rejection and deciding to reapply as a 'schizophrenic' struggle:

'There's kind of a schizophrenic mindset around that. When you don't get in; I believe I thought, like... Then you became... Or I was very, like "It's just as well, because these schools will just brainwash you and make you into one kind of performing artist or whatever we can call it. Into one type of playwright. I want to make it on my own, because it's only then that you're free. No one should kind of... no one should mould me into a shape or something". And then, after a while you realise how difficult it is to make it on your own. Then you apply... then you crawl back and apply again! And you think "Now I'm applying; I can apply again even if it's just for the fun of it", kind of'. (Matti, playwriting)

The central struggle here was one of maintaining a sense of personal integrity and freedom while staying in the game of aspiring to the art schools, whose credentials Matti knew were critical for making a career as a playwright. The recurrent experiences of rejection fed his strategies for downplaying the seriousness of the process, and challenging the institutional exclusivity of the art schools, which was critical for sustaining his energy to keep trying.

In different ways, the excerpts presented here show that rejection is 'part of the game', something to be expected when applying to artistic education and something to learn from. However, the actual experience of the processes of being rejected and reapplying is simultaneously a source of self-confidence and a trigger of uncertainty and self-doubt. This ambiguity made strategies for coping with rejection critical in the process of finally making it into education. In this way, the ability to cope with rejection can be understood as a source of self-confidence in the way the experience of being rejected and yet regaining one's self-confidence for reapplying provides a training ground for restoring one's self-confidence.

Previous studies have emphasised the capacity for managing failure and rejection as important dimensions in the occupational socialisation of artists, because facing rejection from gatekeepers is something most artists are exposed to throughout their careers (Fürst, 2016; Skaggs, 2019). In line with these studies, the ability to cope with rejection in the admission process can be considered an important learning experience which tacitly prepares aspirants for a future in the insecure field of creative work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FROM SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

As argued in the first part of the analysis, interactions with gatekeepers and role models in the cultural field were important for the BAS educations' becoming available as an educational possibility. The argument presented here is that being acknowledged by significant others involved far more than gaining knowledge and a network. It was also a critical source of self-confidence as it gave the students social assurance about their abilities and confirmed that their career decision was one to strive for. Several of the students emphasised the impact of early encouragement from their parents. For instance:

'I've really gained an artistic, creative confidence from home. There's no doubt at all that my parents always looked at me and thought I was a little wonder. And it's given me so much. I mean, when I got those rejections from those schools, then it Then there was just some basic... basic... that is, a creative basic self-esteem that I have, which has carried me through all this, and I'm very conscious of that and very grateful that I, that I'm very, what can you say... privileged in that I have a rather large ego in fact, in some strange way (laughs)'. (Olga, playwriting)

Olga stresses a connection between the 'creative confidence' she obtained from her parents' admiration of her as a child and her resilience when confronted with adversity during her years as an aspirant. However, not all the students had received support and acknowledgement from home. In the following excerpt, Lukas describes how the pedagogues at a filmmaking workshop he had attended for many years had provided him with help and emotional support, which had been absent in his home:

'I believe they saw me as a spunky person... they helped me and were very encouraging concerning the problems I had. I also moved away from home during high school; I mean, there was a big break-up and conflict with my mother and I wasn't allowed to see my siblings for that period. So, it was like, identity-wise very painful but also very difficult to be in. But there were really some rocks there who helped me a lot'. (Lukas, theatre directing)

In this quote, the relational acknowledgement doesn't concern Lukas's artistic abilities but rather the acknowledgement of him as a person and of the personal problems he faced. The staff members at the film workshop became the 'rocks' of support and encouragement he did not have at home. Lukas's biography stands out, as he had had considerably fewer socioeconomic resources in his upbringing compared with the other students, and because he had the longest aspiratory trajectory in the sample (+10 years of applying to different art schools). In all phases of narrating about his creative interests during his childhood and youth, he emphasises key persons who had supported and encouraged him along the way, making him believe not only in his creative talent but in himself as a person. Despite widely different social upbringings and privileges, the critical role of acknowledgment from role models outside one's family sphere that Lukas stresses was emphasised across all interviews. These include primary school and high school teachers, culture school pedagogues, FHS teachers and peer groups, as well as professional artists who had assumed mentoring roles for the aspirants. Being acknowledged by significant adults early in life seems to provide important grounds for the interrelational development of the emotion of self-confidence. Reflecting on his own biography, one student captured the importance of childhood experiences in a life history perspective through the metaphors of seeds and mirrors: 'I really believe that seeds are planted very early in one way or another, and you mirror yourself in your own history' (Rolf, playwriting). The case of Lukas shows that those who plant the seeds and hold up the mirror do not necessarily need to be one's parents but can also be engaged and attentive adults in other contexts.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to contribute insights about the meaning-making processes involved in choosing and aspiring to artistic educations within the BAS area. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How did the BAS professions become available to the students as a possible career decision?
- How did emotions impact the students' processes of actualising their educational decisions?

As an answer to the first research question, the analysis presented the BAS professions as 'hidden' in the context of the performing arts with indirect availability. Educational knowledge was obtained through communication of 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998), which the students obtained through pre-education engagement in the work field. Here, acting in a proactive and enterprising way while being pragmatically open to reorienting their imagined career options, was important for 'seeing' the BAS professions and developing a sense of occupational belonging. Drawing on conceptualisations from careership theory, the study emphasises the bounded agency of the individual in expanding their horizons for action and reorienting their sense of meaning and belonging according to their shifting contextual realities. In line with the learning perspectives in careership theory, the process of educational and professional availability can be interpreted as a social learning process whereby the horizon for action expands over time through social interactions and contextual changes. Through this perspective, the study challenges assumptions that artistic careers are predetermined by 'talent' (Lundin, 2020) or an inner 'calling' (Sapiro, 2008) by emphasising the non-linear and

processual character of professional and educational availability. Furthermore, the learning perspective offers resistance to accounts of access to artistic educations as being overly determined by social structures. Without neglecting the structural barriers guarding the field of art, the learning dimension contributes a middle-ground perspective that emphasises how individual and structural factors interact in complex ways in aspiratory processes related with artistic educations.

As an answer to the second research question, the emotion of self-confidence was found to be critical for the students' actualisation of their educational aspirations. Three sources of self-confidence were identified and analysed. Uncompromising ideals of pursuing meaningful education and work were foundational for the emotion of self-confidence as these provided a 'higher purpose' which trumped worries about monetary earnings and calmed anxieties concerning the risk involved with aspiring to a professional future in the arts. Secondly, as many aspirational trajectories involved the anticipation and experience of rejection, the study argues that a tacit part of the pre-education learning process is a cultivation of emotional strategies for coping with rejection through strategies of regaining one's self-confidence. Finally, acknowledgement from significant others was analysed as an important source of self-confidence. Being acknowledged early in life by family members or other significant adults had given the students the self-confidence to aspire to a career in the arts, while later acknowledgement from gatekeepers in the field provided the aspiring students with 'assured expectations' regarding their chances of being accepted.

Related to the interconnection between individual and contextual dimensions that is central in careership theory, the three sources of self-confidence accentuate different aspects of this relation. The pursuit of meaningfulness appears primarily to express an 'inner drive' in the individual, and as such is the least influenced by social and contextual constraints. In contrast, the self-confidence gained from being acknowledged by significant others seems to be heavily determined by the context and social relations during an individual's childhood and youth over which they have limited agency. Between these two poles, the ability to cope with rejection articulates the ongoing mediation between structure and agency in which the individual is continually responding to structural barriers and constraints.

Barbalet's (2001) conceptualisation of the emotion of self-confidence as the affective basis for human action is formulated as a general theory for all action. However, the empirical focus on BAS students' aspiratory experiences provides an illuminating case for examining the relation between the emotion of self-confidence and action when one is confronted with future uncertainty on various levels. Rooted in emotions of self-confidence, the students did not act blindly or naively regarding their future aspirations. On the contrary, the emotion of self-confidence was a critical interpreter of situations and past experiences that allowed a sense of expectancy concerning the future and created a readiness for action. As such, the emotion of self-confidence can be considered a key faculty for the individual's temporal mediation between past, present and future. By proposing that the emotion of self-confidence is critical for actualising aspirations for higher artistic education, this study contributes new perspectives to existing research on artistic careers in which future temporality and emotions, to a great extent, have been critically judged to be complicit in self-exploitation and precarity in the field of art (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008; McRobbie, 2003; Preston, 2013). By drawing on Barbalet's sociology of emotions, the study presents more optimistic perspectives on emotions as impactful, practical features in the normal operations of social life, a finding which resonates with the perspectives on emotions in Alacovska's (2019) study of hope in post-Soviet artistic communities.

By combining concepts from careership theory and the sociology of emotions, the study makes a theoretical contribution relevant to the research field in careers, transitions and guidance more broadly. While horizons for action and the question of educational availability are commonly examined concepts, this study contributes new insights on the impact of emotions in expanding and actualising horizons for action. The emotion of self-confidence seems to be firmly interwoven into the students' horizons for action, supporting them in manoeuvring the structural barriers that confronted them during the process of aspiring. Emphasising the students' self-confidence as having developed from various sources, through social interactions

and experiences of success and failure over time, emotions should be regarded as not static or eternally structured but rather as part of the ongoing learning process of individuals and as central in processes of career choice and development.

In this way, the study highlights social and emotional learning processes as critical for the BAS students' educational transitions. This theorisation developed through combining concepts from careership theory and sociology of emotions, could be of relevance to explore in future research about other artistic educational contexts, as well as in future studies about educational choice processes more generally.

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