Received: 29 April 2024 | Revised: 8 June 2024 | Accepted: 17 June 2024

DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.13129

RESEARCH NOTE

From a national elite to the global elite: Possibilities and problems in scaling up

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Abstract

This research note highlights emerging findings that speak to the challenges of joining the transnational elite, particularly for those coming from the Global South. For a longitudinal study of wealth inheritors becoming more transnational via their educational paths, we spoke with 16 young people who were all in their early 20s and primarily from economic elite families in the Global South. Some participants had clear ambitions, while others were less sure about their future, wondering where they should move and what they should do when they got there. Their various narratives reveal that underlying the possibilities and problems of where to locate themselves was our participants' access to different constellations of economic, social and cultural capital, as well as their race, citizenship and 'home' country's geopolitical situation. Their parents' ambitions that they become part of a global elite remained in most cases largely unfulfilled—despite a significant economic investment in their secondary and university educations. Only a small minority of our participants aspired to and/or were able to secure such transnational futures.

KEYWORDS

elites, global elite, Global South, mobility, transnational, wealth

Article by an MPIfG researcher
Claire Maxwell, Karen Lillie: From a National Elite to the Global Elite: Possibilities and Problems in Scaling Up.
In: British Journal of Sociology (published online June 26, 2024). Wiley-Blackwell
The original publication is available at the publisher's web site: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13129

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1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a contemporary debate happening around who belongs to the so-called 'global elite', a term that captures those who are extremely wealthy, transnationally networked and globally mobile, and who share ways of being (Cousin & Chauvin, 2021). Exciting network analyses, for example, have mapped the 'core' and 'periphery' of this group, locating primarily whites and men in the former group, and primarily non-whites and women in the latter (Young et al., 2021). However, a critical question remains unanswered: What challenges arise when trying to transition from national economic elite to global elite?

More specifically, we seek to examine the potentialities for young people to move from inheriting a national economic elite position to becoming part of a global elite. We longitudinally followed a group of wealth inheritors (in national contexts) who were being propelled into a transnational trajectory via their educational paths abroad—first through one of the most expensive boarding schools in the world, in Switzerland, and then through higher education, often in the Anglophone world. Building on an initial study (Lillie, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2024), we spoke with 16 participants, seven young men and nine young women, all in their early 20s, 5 years after initial interviews with them. At the time of our follow-up interviews, some of these young people were still in university while others had already finished. More information on the methodology of this study, including a table of participants, is contained in Appendix A.

We chose to interview young people who are non-Western in national origin and, primarily, from the Global South. This group is highly underrepresented in English-language literature on elites in general—which has a strong focus on the US and UK—and, particularly, on global elites. We thus contribute, however modestly, to slowly shifting this body of literature in a more inclusive and decolonial direction. Additionally, doing so decentres the assumption that extensive economic resources, and the international and wealthy networks made at certain kinds of educational institutions, facilitate social (and physical) movement from a national to the global elite—an assumption seemingly shaped primarily by the experiences of white men from the Anglosphere (see Young et al., 2021).

From their starting point as inheritors of a nationally elite position, the young adults we interviewed were simultaneously navigating both possibilities and challenges as they sought entry into a global elite. Some participants had clear ambitions, like training to be an engineer, doctor or pharmaceutical executive; planning to 'return home' to take over a family business; or staying 'put' where they went to university to build their own business. Others were less sure, wondering if they should 'return home'; where they should go and what they should do when they got there; waiting until they finished their postgraduate education to figure out their next move. Some of these individuals were either unfazed by not having a longer-term plan or confident that the next stage of their lives would unfold itself; while others expressed a sense of anxiety over living in limbo—unsure about what would come next, and where. Importantly, these young people's narratives speak to critical contemporary questions around trajectories into the global elite, particularly for those coming from the Global South.

2 | FINDINGS

2.1 | The role of the family

Parents played a central role in these young adults' lives. According to our participants, their parents had often specifically chosen a transnational educational trajectory for them as a way of launching them outside their national system of education and social reproduction. Only one of our participants shared that his parents viewed an international education as a first step in acquiring the foreign educational credentials, international networks, language skills and global outlook that would benefit his taking over the family real estate business in China. According

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to the others, their parents launched their international mobility as a first step to remaining transnationally located. Parents were often said to have told their children that their home nations were 'going backwards' and 'really corrupt' (Arthit, as in the case of Thailand) or had become too politically unstable (for Russian participants, for example).

Yet, many of the young people in our study found that securing the necessary psychological anchor (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016) to thrive in such a mobile and nationally dislocated trajectory was challenging. After moving to Switzerland and then Canada, for example, Vera said the most important thing she learned is that 'life is lonely. … I think it's just about being understood. I think it's very possible to be like, surrounded with people all the time and like, still feel lonely'. As a result, these young people were often keen to return home—to be close to family and friends, many of whom had also been abroad for education but since returned home. These friends not only had similar international experiences but were also culturally closer to them than some of the acquaintances our participants had met while living abroad.

At the same time, the three participants who were second-generation globally mobile, those whose parents had already made the decision to be mobile for business and residence, appeared most knowledgeable about what a similar future logistically required of them. The parents in those families had emigrated from Russia and now had several homes in different countries (Nina); had moved between multiple residences straddling Latin and North America (Rafaela); and had been mobile for work with a multi-national corporation (Shu-fen). One of these young adults, for example, discussed learning from her parents that mobility can be used to avoid particular forms of taxation ('you can always make a tax residence wherever you want … it really is not rocket science', Nina). The experiences of these participants' parents thus helped them plan a transnational future—and be more comfortable with it: 'In fact, I think, changing environments, I thrive off of that, I think it's like a stimulation that really motivates me, pushes me, challenges me. So I do enjoy that. … I think I feel very comfortable just relocating anytime' (Shu-fen).

2.2 | Constellations of capital

Underlying the possibilities and problems of where to locate themselves in the immediate and longer-term future was our participants' access to different constellations of Bourdieusian capital. In terms of economic capital, most of the young adults we spoke with had matured in their attitudes towards conspicuous consumption (Lillie & Maxwell, 2024). They wanted to live comfortably but also often expressed a desire to be financially independent; although, some parents were, in fact, still economically supporting them. This support was usually focused on contributions towards living costs, such as financing an apartment, but also sometimes financed a particular lifestyle: 'I think I do like the finer things in life. So I like going out to more expensive restaurants. I like travelling. I am very lucky and very blessed that I have like a father that provides for me' (Rafaela).

In most cases, however, these inheritors of wealth were keen to, or understood from their parents that they should, aim to learn to financially provide for themselves and live within their means (a sentiment also noted by Higgins, 2022 in her work on the wealthy in Northern England). These young people had started to earn their own modest income—working, for example, at an economic development organisation (Dmitri), a new business venture (Kira), an arts organisation (Ivan), a political consultancy firm (Shu-fen), or a luxury brand marketplace (Nina). These forays into financial independence, however, usually took place against their parents' economic safety net, which would catch them, if needed, both in the present and in the future. For example, although Dmitri told us that 'at a certain point, if you have enough self respect, it just becomes embarrassing to live off someone else's work. … I would rather live modestly but by my own means' he also admitted to the comfort of 'having in the back of my mind' that 1 day he would take over the family business.

We had assumed that many of these young adults would have had parental financial investments to support their new business ventures, but in almost all cases they had either secured investment grants from venture capitalist firms (Vera) or were working to put aside money to start their businesses. This lack of financial investment

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from parents (and parents' social contacts) was usually linked to the principle that their children should build their own success from scratch. At the same time, Vera mentioned being 'mentored' by her mother, also an entrepreneur, and others discussed learning how they did (and did not) want to approach their working lives from watching their parents.

Social capital was also noted to be a way to pull in business partners or investors. Participants described their access to social capital as concentrated among those with similar backgrounds—those from the same national elite and/or those who had also attended the same international boarding school—but were often primarily back home: 'I'm pretty sure I will go back to Taiwan because there's more resources and more support over there. Yeah—family and also friends and also because my dad knows some connections' (Chia-hao). It was these social connections that were seen as valuable for developing new businesses—especially in China but also in Taiwan and Russia. 'I'm still keeping in contact with many of my friends from [the boarding school], and many of them are also like, thinking about having their own business… we discuss each other's ideas, or like, how to find potential investors' (Kira).

This 'home-court advantage' in terms of future economic capital generation was a strong pull factor and appeared to limit some participants' desire for a transnational future. Although all participants also had social connections in various parts of the world at the time of interviews, maintained through regular social media engagements ('as long as once in a while you send a text, you're basically maintaining a relationship', Nina) and occasional meet ups in global cities ('if I'm in Paris, and someone else is in Paris, like we'll meet up', Nina), the most common space in which these networks were cultivated was when they visited or returned 'home'.

While all participants had access to institutionalised forms of cultural capital, such as international educational credentials, it was their embodied cultural capital that enabled them to consider a transnational future—in particular, their acquisition of English and ease in navigating transnational spaces. An often-assumed outcome of developing a cosmopolitan orientation is that it leads to a more comfortable navigation of uncertainty (Maxwell & Yemini, 2019). However, most of these young people noted their *lack* of comfort in managing the significant uncertainty around their future prospects—where they might want to, and be able to, live; whether they wanted to remain away from home, friends and family; and concerns that their job prospects and business endeavours would give them enough income to live as comfortably as they wanted.

2.3 | Race, citizenship and political instability

These young people also faced various possibilities and problems of where to locate themselves in relation to their race and citizenship, as well as geopolitical factors. We have noted elsewhere that constructed global hierarchies of power (see Fanon, 1952; Said, 1978) contoured our participants' educational experiences: Their social interactions while in secondary school abroad were informed by their countries' imperial histories and relations (Lillie, 2021a), and many from non-Western backgrounds subsequently experienced marginalisation and discrimination in their transition to higher education in the Anglophone world (Lillie, 2021b). For some, and for reasons discussed below, these experiences of marginalisation were exacerbated 5 years later, at the time of our interviews for this study.

One reason was race. A participant in New York City, for example, explained that he was seriously considering returning to China against his parents' wishes, because there he could be 'the white person in the room' (Bai). In the US, where he had also attended university, he felt othered because of his Chinese ethnicity and stripped of the power and privileges that he might otherwise expect to enjoy, given his economic resources.

> [Authors: So you kind of think you might end up back in China?] Yeah, I think that's just, you know, the cultural aspect. … Like, there's a whole, this whole weird dynamic with like, the model minority, right? And it just, it just doesn't sound comfortable to me, you know, like, I don't want to… [trails off] And like the Harvard case, you know, someone's using Chi-, like Asian Americans to target, what is it called, affirmative action. … Basically, going back to China is effectively saying like, Oh, I could just be the

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> white person. I could be the white male in the room. And wouldn't that be nice? … I don't want to live in a place where people think I have no personality, or like, I don't want to live in a place where people tell me like, you know, honestly, you have a glass ceiling at the top.
>
> (Bai)

Another reason was visas. All participants' future plans were heavily shaped by whether they had access to a citizenship that would allow them some choice in where to be located. A number found themselves stuck in places like Switzerland (Dmitri, Mila), Canada (Lena, Vera) and the US (Bai, Kira, Haruto), as they worked to fulfil the extant criteria necessary to secure citizenship or permanent residency in those countries. Meanwhile, a Brazilian participant (Rafaela) had learnt from her parents' experiences that securing an investor green card in the US was extremely challenging, despite their significant wealth, and so had set her sights on remaining in Europe while maintaining homes in the US and Brazil as places to visit.

A third reason was political instability in the nation state they had come from. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and consequent political and economic upheaval affected Russian parents' ability to send money abroad and Ukrainian parents' resources. Olena, whose parents were still in Ukraine trying to keep their business alive ('there are so many people relying on them, the company's too huge to not be able to operate'), noted that when it came to financial support, there were 'more important things to consider than just like, whatever things I want at this point'. Meanwhile, for an Iranian participant, the authoritarian government and economic downturn meant neither she nor her parents could foresee her return there—so they did everything possible to secure a transnational future for her and her brother, despite losing their entire wealth due to the devaluation of the Iranian rial:

> Before I felt like I could just choose [to move] and go. But now it's like, well, will I have a job there? Or what is there for me to do? And how can I support myself? … It's definitely hard, because of having that privilege before and not having it now. And the transition was very tough for me personally. … It's [the money's] just gone. You just have to think of it as it's just gone.
>
> (Lena)

However, in both cases, these young women were proud of how they handled such difficult circumstances—noting 'I think I've grown so much from it' (Lena) and that it 'helped build character' (Olena).

3 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our sample of inheritors from various national economic elites across the Global South had been pushed into a transnational arena by their parents (via the educational choices made for them), in an attempt to secure their position as future members of a global elite. This move was perceived by parents as both a process of social mobility and an escape from the political and economic instability that structured many of their national contexts.

Yet, such parental ambitions remained in most cases largely unfulfilled—despite a significant economic investment in their children's secondary and university educations. Only a small minority of our participants aspired to and/or were able to secure such transnational futures at the time of interview. Those participants usually had some previous transnational mobility experiences through their parents. Although some other participants had wanted to remain located outside of their home nation—usually in the US or Europe—they were finding that this was not always easy to navigate. They faced difficulties around getting visas and new citizenships; they missed family, friends and a sense of familiarity with (and/or power within) the local culture; and they were drawn to taking over successful family businesses.

In other words, while not all young adults in our sample (who were either still in higher education or had recently finished) were very sure about what they wanted for their futures, the significant economic capital their

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families had, the cultural capital they had acquired through their transnational education journey and/or the social capital they had access to via their families and educational institutions, was not always enough to give them a real choice in the matter. They are, of course, still extremely privileged young people—privileged enough that trying to enter the ranks of the global elite can be framed in terms of 'choices'. Moreover, we interviewed them at a crucial transition point at the end of their university education. We plan to keep following them over the next years to see how their paths continue to unfold.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the participants for their time and for sharing their stories, as well as the editor and reviewers for their helpful comments on the previous version of this Research Note.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval is not a requirement at either of the author's instititions.

CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants have consented to participate in this study.

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How to cite this article: Maxwell, C., & Lillie, K. (2024). From a national elite to the global elite: Possibilities and problems in scaling up. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13129

APPENDIX A: A SHORT NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This study builds on an initial study of one of the most expensive boarding schools in the world (Lillie, 2021a, 2022, 2024). For the original study, we recruited a representative sample of the final year cohort in terms of national origin. For this follow-up study, we focused on young people with non-Western national origins. A table of our participants is below (Table A1).

TABLE A1 Participants.

Name	National origin	Current location
Rafaela	Brazil	UK
Bai	China	US
Fen	China	Canada
Zhi	China	UK
Lena	Iran	Canada
Haruto	Japan	US
Ivan	Russia	US
Kira	Russia	US
Mila	Russia	Switzerland
Vera	Russia	Canada
Dmitri	Russia	Switzerland
Nina	Russia/Spain	Spain
Chia-hao	Taiwan	UK
Shu-fen	Taiwan	US
Arthit	Thailand	Thailand
Olena	Ukraine	UK

We had two inclusion criteria. First, participants had to have either taken part in the original study or be recommended to us by other participants, but still have attended the case study school. Second, participants needed to come from wealthy backgrounds. As such, we excluded scholarship students. We confirmed their backgrounds by asking (directly or indirectly) about their parents' income and their own financial situation. This included questions about their living spaces, what they did in their free time and what their monthly budget looked like. We learned that some participants were used to spending USD5-6k per month on entertainment (food and shopping), many had apartments in expensive areas of global cities and one drove an Aston Martin. Almost all parents owned their own businesses.

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We thus label these students as 'wealth inheritors' because they, in vivo, receive financial gifts from their parents *and* expect to inherit financial assets, either in the form of cash or a stake in a family business. We also call them part of a national economic elite because their families can be considered part of the wealthiest social class in their 'home' nation contexts.

We approached 20 potential participants directly via email or LinkedIn. One actively turned us down and three did not respond to our messages. We told these young people that we were doing follow-up interviews from our initial study, to hear how their paths had unfolded since graduation. Interviews took place by Zoom in 2022. We followed a semi-structured interview guide and asked about their time after secondary school (graduate and post-graduate studies, jobs, etc.), friend groups and future plans and aspirations (and their parents' expectations for their futures). We audio recorded, transcribed and coded interviews.

The boarding school that all participants attended had agreed to having its name used in the original study (for a discussion of the ethics of this, please see Lillie & Ayling, 2021). Although we do not name the school here—because it is no longer as relevant which particular institution these young people attended—it would be easily identifiable by looking at previously published papers. With this in mind, we have sufficiently anonymised all information in this paper that might help identify a participant.

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