

**THE CONTEMPORARY MYTH OF THE DANISH '12-TALS PIGE':
'BEING SO AMBITIOUS, SHE MUST BE INSECURE'¹**

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In recent years, the egalitarian ethos in Denmark has been challenged by a range of talent development programmes that distinguish certain students as particularly able and skilled. The egalitarianism of Denmark is what makes me most fiercely proud to be Danish, but as several anthropologists have argued: sameness is imagined to be a necessary part of equality in Denmark (Gullstad 1992: 197, cited in Bruun *et al.* 2011: 1; Gopal 2000). In schools, this attitude manifests in levelling mechanisms to keep students in the same class at a similar level. This is done by making after-school tutoring available to all students, but also by keeping students who do well from advancing further. For the past three years, the figure of the '12-tals pige' has helped justify that good students should be held back for their own good. This term is comprised of '12-tal' which is the highest mark possible on the Danish grading scale and 'pige', which means 'girl'. The archetypical *12-tals pige* works hard in school because her self-worth is dependent upon achieving good grades (Torp-Pedersen 2014). According to Danish media, these girls are on the verge of stress-induced breakdowns (Hjortdal 2015; Alvi 2016). However, my informants struggled more with being insufficiently challenged in school than they did with being stressed. My primary source of data are eleven interviews that I conducted in January 2017, but I will also rely on conversations with acquaintances and reflections on my own experiences. It became clear to me, that whilst the issue described in the media is a very real one, it is often the case that the motivations and issues of the media's *12-tals pige* is projected onto healthy ambitious girls. In this essay, I will seek to deconstruct the category of the *12-tals pige* and expose how it is a contemporary myth that functions as a levelling mechanism in Danish secondary education. Furthermore, I will argue that the term emerged from two conflicting trends in the Danish society: one that seeks to mask intellect and another that celebrates it.

¹ This is a quote from a girl named Freja, whom I interviewed.

DECONSTRUCTING THE *12-TALS PIGE*

My interviewees distinguished between the two types of *12-tals piger*: The one described in the media and the girl who simply had an average around '12'. All but one of the girls I interviewed said that they did not identify with the media representation, as they did not feel unbearably stressed or insecure. Nonetheless, many of the girls experienced that their parents and teachers interpreted them to be the media's *12-tals pige*, which caused them expressed concern for the girls. Published accounts written by some *12-tals piger* show that the media narrative is representative of some high-achieving girls for whom stress is a problem (Biering 2015; Hesselund 2016). Equally so, one of the girls I interviewed found the media's *12-tals pige* to be her own mirror image, but all other interviewees were frustrated when people around them assumed them to be the media's *12-tals pige*. As my friend Camilla said, to most Danes '*the 12-tals pige is a real figure*'.² That is, whilst many *12-tals piger* protest against the way they are represented in the media, the general population takes the narrative of the *12-tals pige* for granted. This effect is why I call *12-tals piger* a contemporary myth; according to Roland Barthes, mythology often underpins everyday ideas and representations without people necessarily being aware of it (Allen 2003: 37). Barthes also writes that myth depoliticises and naturalises (ibid; Barthes 2000: 142-4). In this instance, the singular narrative of the *12-tals pige* depoliticises and naturalises the idea that girls need to be protected from their own high ambitions

METHODOLOGY

12-tals piger are united by an imagined perception of their character, but are not a community, so conducting participant observation in the classic anthropological sense was difficult. I found informants through the alumni network for the 'Academy for Talented Youth', which is a two-year talent development programme in which high school students attend academic events aside from their ordinary studies. I thought this would be an ideal place to look for young high-achieving Danish girls, but it must be noted that *12-tals piger* outside the academy might differ from those in it. To minimize this limitation, I read through all the accounts written by *12-tals piger* that I could find on the internet or in newspapers. I

² Names have been changed with the exception of Camilla, Nynne, Ditlev and Anna.

will refer to these accounts throughout the essay to support that the narratives of my interviewees can be reflective of *12-tals piger* outside the academy. I met with my interviewees in coffee shops in Copenhagen and interviewed those who lived too far away via Skype.³ To my surprise, some of the alumni that contacted me were boys, who wanted to share their perspectives. Unlike their female counterparts, they are not misrepresented, but rather unrepresented in the media. I will discuss the lacking representation of ambitious male students later in this essay.

Having been perceived to be a *12-tals pige* myself, I was aware that I should be careful not to impose my own ideas onto the people I interviewed. Considering how often they expressed views contrary to my own, I think I was successful in this endeavour. In my interviews, I would sometimes share my own experiences in exchange for my interviewees' stories. Berger argued that this helped her attain more complex narratives and build trust with her informants (2016: 504). I experienced that sharing my stories exposed interviewees to different perspectives, which enabled them to speculate with me about why people reacted as they did to *12-tals piger*. I had expected, that my status as an academy alumna would have made my interviewees more comfortable speaking about things that are taboo outside the academy. Taboo topics would be anything that could imply that we feel superior to others. This happened to some extent: for example, people were not hesitant to speak about feeling insufficiently challenged in school. Yet, one interviewee profusely apologised whenever she had to use the full name of the academy. I have heard many others say they are uncomfortable with the name of the academy outside of the interviews. We normally avoid using the name 'Academy for Talented Youth' and instead abbreviate it to avoid explicitly referring to ourselves as talented.

³ I had expected that the three interviews I conducted via skype would have been of lower quality since I did not meet with people in person. In fact, I found interviewing via skype to be advantageous; it was far easier to take good notes without distracting the interviewee.

TWO COMPETING IDEOLOGIES: THE JANTELOV VERSUS TALENT DEVELOPMENT

In a novel from 1933, Aksel Sandemose authored the ten commandments of the so-called '*Jantelov*'. The *Jantelov* is a satirical work of fiction that adeptly depicts our previously unwritten social rules (Gopal 2000: 24). These rules all pertain to remaining modest and not thinking highly of oneself. Nowadays, all Danes grow up knowing these social rules under the name Sandemose gave them in his novel, without being aware that this is where the name comes from (*ibid.*). The *Jantelov* is part of a larger framework of levelling mechanisms, which function to maintain Danish egalitarianism. Gopal (2000) and Gullestad (1992) both argue that the Scandinavian region reinforces egalitarianism by pressuring its citizens to conform (*cf.* Bruun *et al.* 2011). In relation to education, this levelling mechanism for example manifests through an insistence that all students follow the same curriculum at the same pace. Several of my teachers would refuse to tell me how I could learn and develop further once they felt I had learned what I was supposed to.

For the purposes of this essay, the most relevant commandment of the *Jantelov* is the third '*You must not think that you are cleverer than us*' (Gopal 2000: 24). Being cleverer than others is exactly what a *12-tals pige* is perceived as working towards. Likewise, an institution called the 'Academy for Talented Youth' quite clearly is not in accordance with the *Jantelov*'s commandments. This explains why its participants, myself included, feel compelled to defend their membership of the academy to non-members. In my interviews, people did this by explaining that talent development programmes are necessary, because the ordinary school system does not challenge good students. An interviewee named Anna said that her teachers in high school knew that she was insufficiently challenged and thus immensely bored in class, but as one of them told her: that was not an actual problem. Therefore, she turned to talent development programmes to find challenges. Throughout her two years in the academy, she attended more than 150 events. I have spoken to and interviewed many others who started requesting more challenging material from their teachers in secondary school. Some teachers agreed, and others expressed opinions such as the one Anna was faced with. To the perceived '*12-tals piger*' I interviewed, these kinds of practices were more of an issue than stress.⁴

⁴ I did speak with a girl named Christine, who said she felt severely stressed over school. Though, I was also told about one girl who broke down with stress, because she felt that school was eternally pointless if she would never be challenged.

The recent emergence of talent development programmes challenges the assumption that keeping all students at a similar level is beneficial. The justification for preventing good students from advancing further used to be an explicit assumption that students should not be allowed to get ahead of their peers. It has also been argued to me that if students do get ahead, then they will be bored in class. On the other hand, denying students academic challenges tends to cause apathy. I spoke with one of the founders of the Academy for Talented Youth. Nynne argued that not challenging students will depress their work ethic and that it is therefore paramount that they are challenged. Additionally, the students I interviewed thrived far better when they were challenged. In short, not challenging good students is not only a waste of talent, it is also bad for the welfare of the students concerned. But as Nynne also made me aware, one of the only high schools in Copenhagen that has not elected to be part of the academy is one in which all decisions are made through direct student democracy. In my own high school student council we had a discussion over our school's membership of the academy. Opponents argued that an academy that separates 'talented' students from 'the rest' ought not exist in Denmark. It therefore appears that the general student population is reluctant to support talent development programmes.

Nynne was the first one to suggest to me that the media attention around *12-tals piger* was a reaction against talent development programmes. Seen in context of levelling mechanisms, the myth that ambitious girls will break down with stress now serves as a justification for holding good students back. I am not arguing that someone came up with the narrative of the *12-tals pige* to suppress good students; as earlier established, the issue described in the media is real. What I do argue is that the story has been overexposed in the media, because it satisfies those who are offended by the way in which academic skill and achievement are now celebrated. Anna suggested that the myth that good students are secretly insecure might function to comfort those who do not manage to get 12s, by exposing that it is not enviable to be one of those girls. Camilla, who said her own father believes in *12-tals piger*, instead suggested that the story sells well, because parents are over-protective and want to keep themselves informed of anything that may come to harm their children. Thus, articles about *12-tals piger* breaking down with stress receive far more attention than articles about *12-tals*

piger who are thriving. A friend of mine remarked that 'all is well' might be good news, but it does not sell well.

WHAT DETERMINES IF TEACHERS WORRY?

Already after my first interview I learned that not all those who achieved high marks caused concern amongst teachers and parents. I knew that I had caused much concern in high school. Not only did my parents continuously encourage me to study less, so did five of my teachers. Peculiarly, my teachers were primarily concerned for me when I was in my final year of high school, although I was far more stressed the year before, where I had more extracurricular activities. In my interviews, I discussed not only experiences but also theories related to *12-tals piger*. Most of my interviewees assumed that teachers reacted to stress signals from students, but some interviewees, who insisted that they were not stressed, experienced that their teachers would tell them to study less and ask them if they were certain that they could handle the pressure. The only interviewee who was severely stressed, Christine, said that no teacher had ever remarked on her behaviour.

By looking at every person I interviewed and every high-achieving Danish student I have known, I eventually realised one factor that separates those who cause concern from those who do not. That one factor is whether they are seen engaging with academic material at the expense of spending time on non-academic extracurricular activities. For example, of the two males I interviewed, Jakob who liked to read about nuclear physics caused concern, but Phillip who spent time with theatre production did not. Both did very well academically, both appeared confident to me and neither reported being stressed. This dividing factor only applies if it is obvious to a student's surroundings that they work very hard. This explains why no teacher expressed concern for Christine's welfare: she told me that she did not make much of an appearance in class discussions, because her classmates would bully her for being a 'try-hard'.

NO MALE EQUIVALENT OF *12-TALS PIGER*

Interestingly, there is no male equivalent for the term *12-tals pige*. A quick Google search reveals that the term '*12-tals dreng*' is only ever mentioned by people who remark that the term does not exist. Many bloggers and some of the girls I interviewed considered this to be sexist and oppressive towards women (Malmbæk 2014, Kryger 2015; Kristensen 2016). Many others defend that the difference in representation is reflective of the fact that girls have lower levels of wellbeing (Hessellund 2016, Biering 2015). Those who argue that girls thrive less have statistical evidence to support their claim (Sundhedsstyrelsen 2014: 18, Otteson 2010: 184-5). However, several interviewees argued that these reports largely rely on self-reported data and that it is less acceptable for males to admit that they are vulnerable. In either case, judging from my sample of informants, the difference in stress levels between genders is less significant than the media representation would suggest.

What I was most curious to hear from my male informants was whether their teachers and parents were as worried about them as has been reported for ambitious girls. Like female high-achieving students, not all male high-achieving students cause concern, but some of them do. After having returned to St Andrews, I had an interesting conversation with a male Danish student named Ditlev whom I told about my ethnographic encounters project. Upon hearing what my topic was, his immediate reply was '*don't get me started!*'. Being an anthropology student, I enthusiastically encouraged him to start ranting as he pleased. He narrated to me a story about feedback he received after an oral examination. One of the examiners told him that it was obvious that he had prepared very well and that he had excelled in the exam, but ultimately she felt that he spent too little time partying and socialising with his classmates. As he spoke, I heard in his voice the same indignation that I feel about the issue. That made me think back to my interviews and realise that indignation had been behind the voices of many interviewees. Knowing Ditlev, I can say that he certainly is not asocial. Much to his credit, the second examiner interrupted to call the first examiner's remark 'rubbish'. As such, these two teachers seem to subscribe to two very different narratives about good students.

Some of my female interviewees claimed that high-achieving male students would be congratulated and praised, rather than discouraged as their female counterparts. One common claim is that *12-tals pigers'* male equivalents are called '*superstudenter*' instead, which is a term that celebrates achievement rather than problematising it (Kristiansen 2016). This term means 'elite graduate' and is used in newspaper articles that praise the highest achieving graduates. My informants consistently identified *12-tals pige* as a derogatory term, but the negative connotations of the *12-tals pige* are not also attached to *superstudenter*. I argue that the two terms belong to each of the competing trends: The myth of the *12-tals pige* justifies holding students back in accordance with the ideology that students in the same class should be at an equal level. In contrast, calling someone a *superstudent* contributes to the narrative that talent and achievement should be celebrated. Importantly, it is incorrect that only male students are referred to as *superstudenter*; the media is full of articles about female *superstudenter* too (see Ellesøe 2016, Christoffersen 2016; Nielsen 2016).

NEGATION OF 12-TALS PIGE IDENTITY

Summing up the narrative of the *12-tals pige*, Anna said 'they are insecure, have no social life and are not thriving'. To negate this image, Anna said that she deliberately exhibited her social life on Facebook more than she otherwise would have done. Similarly, I have previously let my teachers know about my social life in the hope that they would then cease to criticise the amount of time I spent studying. Many of us are indignant at the myth that we allegedly are unhealthily obsessed with school. Still, every girl I interviewed expressed that they were never in doubt that their teachers were acting out of genuine concern. Therefore, any negative reactions towards the myth of the *12-tals pige* is aimed at society more broadly. Those of my interviewees who had experienced teachers expressing concern explained to their teachers as well as they could that they were thriving with themselves and their studies.

CONCLUSION

As one interviewee remarked, it would be arrogant to dismiss the problems raised by the media narrative of the *12-tals pige*. Nonetheless, I am confident that the myth falsely causes certain personal characteristics to be assumed from academic eagerness. Firstly, only one of my eleven interviewees said she works hard because she feels her self-worth is defined by her grades. Secondly, for most of my interviewees, not being challenged has been a larger issue than stress. Finally, I have met quite a few high-achieving students who feel that teachers and peers assume that they have given up a social life to pursue good grades. This frustrates many, which is why displaying an active social life has been used to avoid being identified as *12-tals pige*. Levelling mechanisms to keep all students at a similar level are not new to the Danish educational system, but the justification that it is to prevent students from breaking down with stress is as recent as the contemporary myth of the *12-tals pige*. This new reasoning came after the emergence of talent development, which threatens the narrative that we are equal in Denmark. From a different perspective, talent development helps ensure that all students are equally challenged. For a significant proportion of my interviewees, it is very clear that talent development is the reason they thrive and have continued to learn and develop. The media brings attention to an important issue surrounding youth and stress, but the contemporary myth of the *12-tals pige* seems to do more harm than it does good.

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