

# THE HIGHWAY TO SUCCESS?

## HOW THE PRIVATE SPHERE INTERACTS WITH THE PROFESSIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF FRENCH EDUCATIONAL ELITES

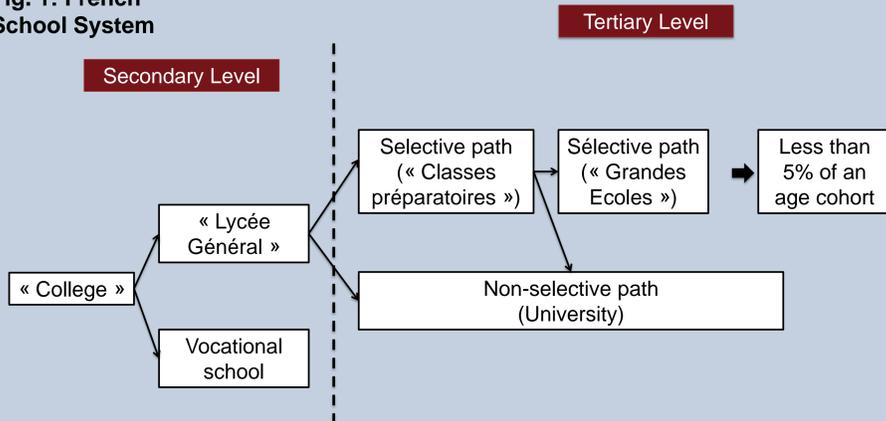
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### 1. Introduction & Objectives

- The French school system is a binary one. On the one hand, there is a selective "Grandes Ecoles" path, which a small group of students take. On the other hand, there is a less exclusive path, which most French students follow (see Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1: French School System**

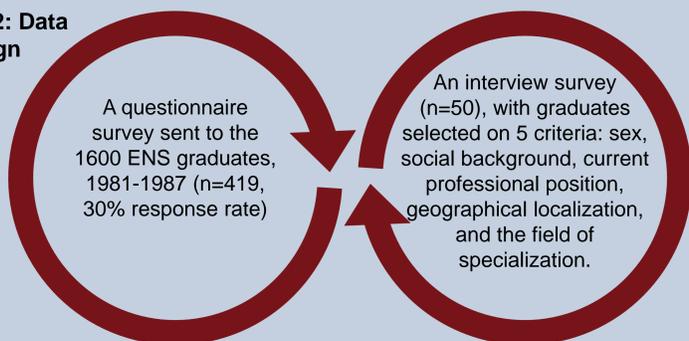


- Students who follow this highly selective path represent less than 5% of each generation. The future French elite from the academic, scientific, political and economic fields are mainly recruited within this small group (Bourdieu, 1989).
- The "Grandes écoles" supposedly open the door to the "highway" to social and professional success. But does this route always seem like a highway? How do life course events impact on these trajectories? More precisely, how do these trajectories interact with the transformation of the private sphere across the life course? Looking at the choice of partner within a small group of French educational elites, I investigated one aspect of this question.

### 2. Data & Methods

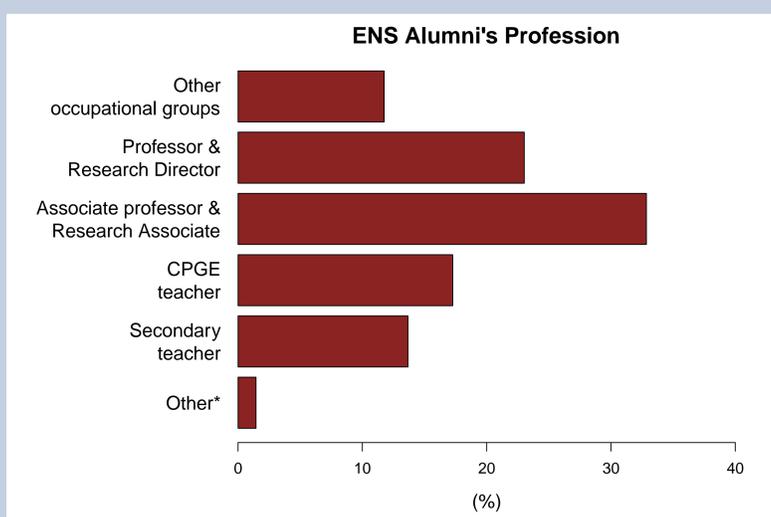
- The study focusses on an alumni's group from one of the most prestigious French « Grandes écoles », the « Ecoles Normales Supérieures » (ENS) of Fontenay aux roses and Saint-Cloud.
- I used a **mixed methods design** (Fig. 2). I collected the data myself, with the support of the director of the ENS and the Rhône-Alpes regional council.

**Fig. 2: Data Design**



I decided to focus on the alumni of 1981-87, in order to analyze their life course paths up until 'occupational maturity' (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992).

### 3. Results



\* This subgroup mainly concerns retired women teachers and atypical professions for the ENS Alumni (e.g. priest).

Among ENS alumni, three main careers paths can be distinguished:

- The "deviated trajectories", where ENS graduates enter prestigious professional fields outside the higher education and research sector (eg. engineering, senior civil service, journalism or artistic occupations): 12%.
- The "mainstream trajectories", where ENS graduates enter higher education and academic research occupations: 73%.
- The "secondary roads", which lead ENS graduates to become secondary school teachers: 14%.

I use three general linear models to compare how graduates who follow three careers paths (M1, M2, M3) differ from the rest of the alumni's population on three points: (1) Social background and sex; (2) Educational trajectory and (3) Partnership patterns. The result of these models can be used to appreciate how career choices interact with partnership formation practices among ENS alumni.

		M1: Successful deviated trajectories	M2: Successful mainstream trajectories	M3: Secondary roads
	(Intercept)	-2.2***	-5.59***	1.05*
1. Social background & Sex	Sex (ref. Female) Males	0.37	0.49	-1.03**
	Social Origin (Family type) (ref. Poorly endowed) Upward Well endowed	0.38 1.8***	0.21 0.53	0.35 -0.94
	Parent's occupation (ref. No parents teacher) at least one teacher	-1.22**	-0.11	-1.16**
2. Educational trajectory	Last completed degree (ref. <Master) >Master	-1.91***	3.3***	-2.75***
	Other "Grandes Ecoles" title (ref. No) Yes	2.05***	1.39**	-2.37**
	Class (ref. Class of 81-82) Class of 83-84 Class of 85-87	-0.91 0.15	-0.14 -0.86**	-0.48 -1.09*
	Fields of specialization (ref. Humanities) Sciences	0.01	1.03***	-0.36
3. Partnership patterns	Relative socio-professional position into the couple (ref. Homogamous) Single Hypergamous Hypogamous	3.67*** -2.18** 0.01	-16.9 -16.05 1.63***	3.08** 0.52 -0.95*
	Partner's occupation (ref. Teacher) Not Teacher	0.44	-0.33	-0.29
	Pseudo R2	0.34	0.48	0.42
	Change in model Chi2 (d.f.)	69.63 13	120.49 13	90.5 13

With a statistical control for social background, sex and educational trajectories, conjugal configuration indicators significantly distinguish each sub group from the rest of the population, but in different ways:

- Reaching the most prestigious jobs on the mainstream path is correlated with having a partner who is less qualified and/or who occupies a less prestigious occupational position (i.e. being hypogamous). Thus, occupying a main breadwinner role would seem to be a major asset, enabling ENS graduates to reach this kind of prestigious professional position. This "couple effect" neutralizes any significant sex differences. In terms of career achievement, men gain from being in a traditional conjugal configuration, whereas women gain from living in an atypical (or "inverted breadwinner") configuration. This result confirms that one of the keys to understanding the occupational feminization process lies in the gender repartition of roles within the private sphere (Le Feuvre, 2005).
- Graduates who deviate from this "mainstream road" – either those in prestigious professional positions outside the HE & Research sector or those who follow a "secondary road" – are more often single. This result can be analyzed under a dynamic personal network perspective (Bidart & Pelissier, 2002). If the personal network - especially concerning friends (Heran, 1988) - decreases with age, a deviation outside the field of specialization and a lower level of professional achievement seem to increase this phenomenon and affect the stability of the personal network.

### 4. Conclusion

- As in the the American case (Goldin & Katz, 2008), within the French educational elite, the "highway to success" is highly gendered.
- Graduating from a prestigious elite school is an event that has to be studied in conjunction with other life course events. Understanding gender differences in the employment achievement of ENS graduates requires attention to their partnership formation patterns.

### References

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