Class Dismissed?
On Habitus Transformation and Hidden Injuries of Successful Working-class University Students

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Outline

• Widening Participation in the Canadian Context
• Brief review of the literature
• Methodology
• Findings
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  – Transformation
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• Conclusion

Widening Participation in the Canadian Context I: Economy & LM
Labour demands in knowledge economy

Increase in jobs requiring university degree

• Labour market outcomes:
  • Lower levels of unemployment for uni grads
  • Income benefits over career

Source: AUCC, 2011, p. 33

Widening Participation in the Canadian Context III: Class and Access
Expansion of university sector has benefitted mostly middle and higher SES families

Source: Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, pp. 354
**Research Questions**

- What are working-class students' reasons for attending university?
- What are their expectations for university?
- What are their actual experiences?
- How do they interpret their experiences?
- Is a working-class background limiting or enabling?
- Does the influence of social class decline over time?

**Methodology**

- Four-year qualitative study funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)
- Three waves of data collection
  - First wave:
    - 75 newly enrolled first-generation students (i.e., first in family to attend university) from working-class families
    - September/October 2005
  - Second wave:
    - Follow up with 85 participants
    - November 2006 to April 2007
  - Third wave:
    - Final follow up with 37 participants
    - Spring 2009

**Participant Profiles**

- Parental education
  - 80% high-school (Grade 12) or below
- Parental occupations
  - Fathers: mostly factory and construction/trades; a few foreman/supervisors; 25% white collar
  - Mothers: mostly lower-level service (beauty, call centre; 50%); factory; some stay-at-home
- 75% women
- 36% visible minority
- Career plans
  - First interview: 75% want traditional professional career (law, med, teaching)
  - Last interview: 35% want careers in same areas (significant drop in law and med; teaching same)
Why University

Hopes for social mobility
- My parents do factory work. [They always said] “you’re going to university and get a good job.” (Agnes, first wave)
- I always wanted one of the prestigious jobs. I got to see [my parents] working and it’s not something that they love to do. (Ed, first wave)
- I know when I worked at the hotel as a housekeeper, I cannot imagine myself being in that position for the rest of my life. (Liz, first wave)

Knowledge economy
- I know that you basically have to go to university nowadays if you want a good job. … To me it looked like my only option. (Mike, first wave)

Class and Disadvantage

Social capital
- [Dental schools] look at volunteer hours and I would love to get into a dental office and volunteer. Just be in the back cleaning tools, I’ll clean toilets. I just want to be in the building. My one friend he works with his Dad’s best friend in the summer. And he sees every procedure and gets to do everything like that. And that looks really good on a resume, right? And I can’t see me get that opportunity, and I’ve been hounding dentists all over. (Ian, second wave)

Access to ‘enriching’ opportunities
- I was going to [volunteer in a clinic in Nepal] in second year, and then I ended up not having enough money to go. Which is alright, but when I’m applying to med school or grad school, it gives those people who were able to do those things in the summer a leg up, so when I’m writing my med school application, I don’t look as good. (Alison, third wave)

Academic success
- It did exceed my expectations in the terms of what it’s had to offer me. I’ve had jobs while I’ve been here, and opportunities to expand my academic learning while I was here, and these things that I didn’t know when I was first coming. (Monica, third wave)

I was always under the impression in first and second year that I would just get my degree and go straight into work. And then in third year I started thinking about doing a Master’s and I started taking my schoolwork more seriously and interacting with professors and TAs more. (Britney, third wave)

Social integration
- First year wasn’t very fun, just focusing on academics and living at home. I think that applying for that job [campus tour guide] in second year was a turning point for me. It was the first time that I really made an effort to put myself out there, I guess to get involved. I don’t think I would have done as well academically. I think I would have burned out. I wouldn’t have met nearly as many people, I wouldn’t be leaving with such strong friendships and I don’t think I would be as happy if I hadn’t gotten involved. (Kristen, third wave)
Explaining Success: Class and Advantage

Work ethic and class pride
I have a bit of pride in being working class. I’m proud of the fact that my family has, like, really worked and…. I mean, not to say that being a financial analyst isn’t work, but I’ve certainly gotten a different work ethic because of the way I was brought up. You know, I’m used to doing hard physical labour for eight hours a day, which most people aren’t. (Brian, first wave)

Independence and maturity
I like the struggle of it. I think it makes me a better person. (Lori, second wave)
I feel like I’ve benefited from the fact that [my parents say] ‘You gotta do it all on your own, we don’t know anything about it’. I’ve become so independent, in a good way. (Hilary, second wave)

Responsibility and motivation
I think it’s a lot easier for me to go and get stuff done because I’m paying for it. (Julia, second wave)

Habitus Transformation: Lifestyle

Appearance
Yeah. I think at first I felt that I didn’t really fit in, but then I tried to make an effort to…. to maybe sorta look the part to sorta fit in more with the [university] crowd…. Just like the clothes I would wear, the places I would go. (Alina, third wave)

Cultural capital
I’m starting to drink wine and things like that a lot more. I go to plays now with [boyfriend]. And I think because of being exposed to all this kind of stuff at university, that kinda shapes who I am now. (Alison, third wave)

Where do I picture myself in four years or something? It’s going to be living in the middle of the city. Going to work in, you know in a shirt and tie kinda thing and doing research and, you know, writing papers all day. I think we would have some asshole urbanite traits, like we will probably end up being like crazy foodies – well, we’re getting there already, like, we’ll be those people going to eight different farmers markets and stuff like that. So I mean it is quite a departure from what they’re [parents] doing. (Brian, third wave)

Habitus Transformation: World Views

Freedom to learn new ideas
We come from somewhere where everyone’s very the same, there’s not a lot of diversity in my town. […] But you’re so free at [university], you know, the freedom is amazing. […] I’ve learned about other cultures and diversity, and religions. My eyes have been opened to so much, and it makes me wonder how much more is out there. Culturally I think I’ve grown. (Monica, third wave)

In university, things we learned really helped us open our minds, in terms of politics and stuff; previously I would never even care about it. I don’t read about it, but now I do, I read about business, I read about culture stuff. Like, there’s a lot of different things out there. But it also shows that I have a lot of power to change. (Melissa, third wave)

New goals
[At university], my friends have similar goals as me, so it’s more, you know, a discussion on which med schools have called you for interviews, you know, ‘oh I went to visit this university for an interview, they offered me a position’. You know, that kind of talk. (Ranu, third wave)

Continued Potential Disadvantage

Habitus Confusion: Hidden Injuries of Class?

Declining relationships with parents
They [parents] can’t relate to university the way that sometimes I wish they could. Sometimes when I’m really upset it’s, you know, I don’t want to have to explain it all, you know, all the step by step how this works, and how that works in order for them to understand fully my frustration. […] And sometimes I’ve found myself afterwards, after getting into an argument with my parents thinking my patience is less for them because… it’s not that I think that I’m better than them, but… I have seen things that they haven’t, and I’ve learned so many things about different cultures and religions that they don’t know about – and that’s not their fault, like, I had no idea until I got here, so, you know, little comments will send me off the handle now. (Monica, second wave)

I feel like I can’t relate to my parents a lot. I mean, I love ‘em to death, but…. well, they’re both very close minded, not having an education or everything like that, and just working your whole life, I think that just happens, right? (Iwai, second wave)
Continued Potential Disadvantage

Habitus Confusion: Hidden Injuries of Class?

Declining relationships with old friends
I go home rarely now because my friends, they haven't changed at all, and I can't really explain that anymore than that, but I can't communicate to them and relate with them as well. [...] I guess, my friends here, like, they're very motivated, they're very ambitious, and they have big dreams, if you will, like, career oriented, I guess, and, like, that is something that is very important to me, so I think that my friends here I can relate more. [...] I get the feeling that they [high school friends] think that we, if you will, the university students are better than them. 'Cause they're constantly justifying their actions to me and I don't like that. ... I wish there wasn't that tension, but I don't know how to get that away. And it's the main reason why I don't go home. (Ian, third wave)

Implications

- Diversity within classes, not just between
- Working-class students need diverse support
  - Integration support for those who feel like fish-out-of-water (habitus dislocation)
  - Support for access to extra-curricular and other ‘enhancing’ experiences
  - Career support for academically successful students
- Better understanding of the consequences of mobility and habitus transformation
  - Research post-university
  - ‘Cost’ of mobility
  - More critically engage with our own perspectives on ‘class’ and ‘mobility’ as sociologists

Publications

  First access at: http://www.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/08/16/0038040713498777.full.pdf+html


Questions and Comments?

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