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Master Thesis Social Inequalities

'I want to do better': how students with low parental socioeconomic status succeed in university

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to shift the narrative regarding first-generation students with low parental socioeconomic status (SES) by scrutinizing their *success stories*. This in contrast to studies that particularly emphasize the *limited chances* of this group. By adopting a qualitative approach the following research question is answered: *What strategies do children with a low parental SES background use to successfully participate in university?* Results show that students with low parental SES form their motivation and ambition around the interplay between personal factors and the parental educational experience. By using self-regulated behaviours these students adjust their actions in the pursuit of academic success. Moreover, the different contexts students with low parental SES function in come with preferred social norms (Lubrano, 2004). By using shift strategies the distinct environments align more with each other. Lastly, by mobilizing cultural and social guides, students with low parental SES can navigate through university more smoothly. Fellow students are cultural guides and lead by example. First-generation students are less likely to mobilize the educational staff as cultural guides. The perceived distance between them is more considerable. Furthermore, parents are mobilized as social guides by providing emotional support. Previous literature failed to give considerable attention to parents' emotional support. The university should focus on creating policies that enable the creation of durable bonds between students and the educational staff. The focus of future research should be targeted towards expanding on the strategies and linking them to the success stories of other groups within higher education.

Key words: strategies, (parental) socioeconomic status, first-generation students, education, barriers.

1 . Introduction

The classroom is seen as the place where children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds meet each other. When considering education, we see that these cultural experiences are important in determining the level of success one has in these institutions (Lareau, 1987). Children from low socioeconomic status whose parents did not participate in higher education [i.e. first-generation students] experience more difficulties navigating through university (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; De Groene Amsterdammer, 2020). These difficulties can be rooted in the differences in cultural capital they derived from their home environment in comparison to students which grew up within an academic home environment. The cultural capital hypothesis states that the social origin of a family is important in determining the level of cultural capital someone encompasses and eventually demonstrates in school (Bourdieu, 1987). A specific set of codes and behaviours is preferred in higher education which will smoothen the mobility and functionality within the educational hierarchy. Some of what is required in terms of students' behaviour and codes is expressed and communicated explicitly, but some is also not. A relevant concept in this regard is '*the hidden curriculum*' which states that the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are also presented unconsciously. Devlin (2010) argues that students from a higher socioeconomic background have a better familiarity with these unconsciously presented norms. Margolis, Soldatenko, Ackter and Gair (2001) state that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not have this '*reservoir of cultural capital and resources*' to draw upon when wanting to succeed in higher education. First-generation students with low parental socioeconomic status (SES) then experience a cultural mismatch between the cultural capital they have derived from home and the one that is prevalent in universities (Stephens, Markus, Fryberg, Johnson & Covarrubias, 2012). These cultural obstacles form the basis of the achievement gap that is common in higher education between students that have high and low parental SES. The latter receive lower grades, have a higher chance to drop-out and eventually take longer to finish a degree (Stephens et al., 2012). This pattern is also seen in the Netherlands: children with low parental SES are more likely to occupy lower positions in the educational hierarchy even when their own academic attributes are taken into account (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2019).

The literature on first-generation students with low parental SES has focused on the transition from high school to higher education, and demographic factors that seem to explain the lack of persistence of this group (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Additionally, when focusing on first-generation students that were successful in education, scholars focused mainly on the labour market outcomes of this group. Less attention has been given to the specific strategies first-generation students with low parental SES use to be successful in university despite their higher risk for failure (Yeh, 2010). The aim of this research is to shift the narrative in regard to first-generation students by scrutinizing and understanding their success stories. Their limited chances, unequal upbringing and restricted financial resources have been widely debated and researched. Less attention has been given to a more reflective, qualitative analyses that shows the college experiences of master students in the Netherlands. This group, specifically, can reflect extensively on the complex academic, social and cultural sacrifices that they have made in order to succeed in university [i.e. they have already obtained a bachelor's degree]. They have learned to function in a system that, inherently, does not cater to them. This leads to formulating the following research question:

What strategies do children with a low parental SES background use to successfully participate in university?

The nature of the Dutch educational system reinforces the unequal chances to be successful in higher education – among first-generation students with low parental SES – by applying early tracking. The legitimacy of tracking is based on the notion that it creates homogenous groups in regard to the academic abilities of students (Hanushek & Wöbmann, 2006). Early tracking does not take into account the lack of resources or the cultural mismatch of first-generation students with low parental SES. Being able to fit in a homogenous group then is affected by the adaptation of cultural standards and not merely subjected to a student's academic capabilities. Reaching higher levels within the educational hierarchy becomes more demanding and time consuming for students with low parental SES and leads to discouragement (Bol & Van De Werfhorst, 2013). This makes the educational success of first-generation student with low parental SES even more significant.

Findings of this research may assist universities in creating more awareness about first-generation students with low parental SES. The reflective nature of this research can shed a light on a group that has the academic skills but not the (cultural) resources to fully integrate in university. Findings from this study may yield important suggestions for university programs and policies to (better) cater to this group. If the true aim of education is to create an inclusive institution despite students' social and cultural backgrounds (Bol & Van De Werfhorst, 2013) attention needs to be given to the functioning of first-generation students with low parental SES in higher education.

2. Theoretical foundation

The social origin of a student [i.e. indicated by the parental educational status] provides information about how well one might perform in university (Shavit, Arum & Gamoran, 2007; De Graaf, De Graaf & Kraaykamp, 2000). This parental characteristic is linked to the cultural resources that a student can draw upon. The university inherently caters to a group of students [i.e. with high parental SES] that is already socialized within the preferred culture. Education is tailored towards the social background of this group of students (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). As such, the university functions as an extension of the dominant class in society. Through specific behaviours and codes [i.e. linguistic and ways of interaction] students with high parental SES are able to (un)consciously maintain these conditions. Students with low parental SES in university may only be able to transcend the structured disadvantage that comes with their social origin by applying specific strategies. This would enable them to reproduce the university culture without being socialized in it (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). They make sense of their location and negotiate it within the educational institution. The following sections will elaborate on the specific strategies used, why they are valuable and how they are applied.

Strategy 1: motivation and ambition
Important concepts in relation to educational achievements are motivation and ambition. Sogunro (2015) states that ambition is the deep desire to achieve a specific goal. Motivation relates to the purposeful activities and behaviours that are undertaken by a student to reach that goal. The interplay between ambition and motivation ensure that goal-directed activities are activated and maintained overtime. Sogunro (2015) relates motivation and ambition to the proficiency theory which states that within educational institutions [e.g. in university] the difference between a student's actual and desired level of educational achievements guides them towards goal attainment. In this process determining needs, setting goals, and evaluating progress are important determinants to improve the educational performance. In this process, motivation and ambition are complementing for the distance to get to the desired goal. It

enables a student to perform given a specific opportunity and places their actions into a long-term perspective.

First-generation students with low parental SES in higher education show high levels of ambition and motivation in the pursuit of an academic degree (Van De Werfhorst & Anderson, 2005; Doyle, 2011). This is a possible explanation for why this group, despite the obstacles that come with having lower parental SES, seem to succeed in university. Having experienced the effects of low parental SES [e.g. financial strains] creates a desire to reach further than what seems possible (Mijs, 2018). The motivation behind this desire than activates the behaviour of first-generation students to be consistent in the effort, perseverance and focus into getting a degree. In essence, the goal in the long run for first-generation students with low parental SES is to work towards upward social mobility (Mijs, 2018). It is expected that their motivation and ambition play a crucial part in reaching this goal.

Strategy 2: self-regulating behaviour
The nature of higher education puts the responsibility of academic success on the student (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). This means that the university invokes students to use self-regulated behaviours. These behaviours encompass an active engagement in the own learning and allocating (academic) resources to complete a required task. An essential element for self-regulated behaviour is the persistence to fulfil a task when difficulties arise (Wiederkehr, Darnon, Chazal, Guimond & Martinot, 2015). Students are expected to constantly elaborate, review and try to adjust their learning to what is expected from them in university.

An important element of self-regulated behaviour is self-advocacy. This relates to the ability of a student to communicate one's desires and difficulties in order to succeed in university (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Self-advocacy is a crucial skill for first-generation students with low parental SES since they lack knowledge about the university experience. When this group of students is able to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, and communicate this effectively to others [e.g. professors], they increase their chances of success. This attribute asks of students to be proactive and involved in their academic progress (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). It is assumed that first-generation master students with low parental SES will gain more [i.e. academically] from practising self-advocacy in comparison to students with high parental SES. The former has the additional struggles of being outnumbered in the university context [i.e. by students with high parental SES], having less information about the social structures within the university environment and is more likely to see failures as a personal inadequacy (Mallman & Lee, 2016; Raver, 2012). The latter group is socialized within an academic nest in which self-advocacy may already be acquired. Practising self-advocacy increases the likelihood of academic success and is valuable in overcoming the struggles that students with low parental SES come across (Raver, 2012).

Strategy 3: shifting identities
Furthermore, first-generation students with low parental SES in higher education are participating in social contexts that seem to function on opposite sides (Lubrano, 2004). On one side, you have the primary group the student functions in which entails the home environment (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). As part of this group, the student shares personal and durable bonds with their family members, amongst which their parents. Bryan and Simmons (2009) show that first-generation students with low parental SES are hesitant to share their new views and the knowledge they have acquired with people in their primary group. On the other side, you have the university as a secondary group that students with low parental SES are a part of

(Macionis & Plummer, 2008). The members of this secondary group [e.g. educational staff, fellow students] work towards a specific goal. In higher education the goal is to achieve academic success [i.e. obtaining a diploma]. In the pursuit of this goal students come across the necessity of specific knowledge in regard to skills and behaviours that they didn't acquire in their home environments. As such, first-generation students with low parental SES need to make sense of social environments that satisfy different aspects of their identity (Archer, DeWitt, Osborne, Dillon, Willis, & Wong, 2012). Identity is a form of communication that needs to be understood as an activity where cultural norms and values are 'traded'. Knowledge, experience, and appreciation from a social group become a part of someone's identity (Tajfel, 1982). As a result of functioning in differing social groups, first-generation students with low parental SES need to shift between their identities. The students learn which behaviours are preferred in each setting.

Additionally, first-generation students may experience moments where parts of their low parental SES is 'expressed' in higher education. They might come across events that show their lack of a specific level of cultural capital that is needed to 'fully function' within higher education. Lareau (2003) states that parents with a high SES [actively] engage in their children's education by participating in 'managed' activities [i.e. concerted cultivation]. For example, by discussing topics where critical thinking is encouraged. Students with low parental SES do not necessarily participate in such activities at home while the university does value discussions and critical thinking (Lareau, 2003). Educational institutions then unconsciously emphasize the social distance that first-generation students with low parental SES experience (Bol & Van De Werfhorst, 2013). Moreover, such an event shows the necessity for first-generation students to shift between different identities. Matthys and Thijssen (2013) argue that the level of resiliency a student shows in such moments compensates for their lack of cultural knowledge. Resiliency encompasses the ability of a student to overcome barriers and uncomfortable conditions [e.g. the feeling of not fitting in] in the pursuit of growth and development (Connor & Davidson, 2003). First-generation students with low parental SES then evaluate barriers and uncomfortable situations as points where the shift between identities could be better. Thus, it is expected that functioning in different social environments simultaneously asks of first-generation students with low parental SES to master their shift strategy.

Strategy 4: mobilizing cultural and social guides
To be successful in higher education requires adaptation of all students, but especially first-generation students with low parental SES. They need to get familiar with a field that holds (in)formal rules that they have not internalized (Bourdieu, 2002; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). These are referred to as 'the rules of the game' and determine the placement of student within a field [i.e. in university]. Lareau (2015) argues that cultural guides within the university can play an important role in directing first-generation students with low parental SES and make them able to navigate more smoothly through the educational hierarchy. Even though first-generation students with low parental SES haven't learned 'the rules of the game' from their parents, they are still able to learn it from others. Yosso (2005) argues that first-generation students with low parental SES mobilize guides to maximize their academic achievements. This can be done in three ways.

Firstly, Lareau (2015) argues that fellow students – with high parental SES – function as cultural guides for students from less advantaged backgrounds. First-generation students with low parental SES transcend the biased and limited beliefs about themselves by employing the overall shared university experience they have with fellow students (Lareau, 2003). Instead of

functioning from a place of limited resources they mobilize these cultural guides to direct them through university. Encounters at university with others provides them with information about the structural forces they need to combat. Engle, Bermeo and O'Brien (2006) argue that the trust first-generation students with low parental SES place in fellow students functions in a way to let them 'lead by example'. This enables them to learn the rules of the game even without having the experience with playing the game.

Secondly, the staff within educational institutions can also function as cultural guides for first-generation students with low parental SES (Lareau, 2003). The relationship that these students have with the staff can develop trust and allow them to be more receptive to the services and support provided by the university (Engle et al., 2006). The development of such relationship can be difficult because first-generation students with low parental SES need to uncover elements that make them vulnerable. They need to acknowledge the fact that they lack knowledge in certain areas (Engle et al., 2006). When first-generation students with low parental SES overcome this barrier and receive support – and realize that the staff is available for them – they will mobilize the staff in a way that they cater in their advantage (Engle et al., 2006).

Lastly, instead of perceiving the parents of first-generation students as lacking in providing cultural guidance they can be seen as facilitators of 'social guidance' (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, 2005). Students who have trouble navigating through university go to their parents for emotional support and discuss their experiences. This provides a 'safety net' for students as they have someone to turn to when issues arise. Thus, first-generation students with low parental SES learn to transcend the elements of their upbringing that doesn't provide them with information about the university experience and mobilize those elements that can provide them with support (Dennis et al., 2005). Therefore, first-generation students with low parental SES that succeed in university are able to mobilize fellow students and staff as cultural guides and their parents as social guides in their university experience.

3. Research design
The aim of this research is to investigate the strategies first-generation students use to transcend their low parental SES. In this part I will elaborate on the research strategy and why certain choices were made concerning the sample. Also, the way the data is analysed and how the privacy of the respondents is ensured are considered.

Research strategy
This research takes a qualitative approach by conducting eight in-depth interviews with women that are all first-generation students with low parental SES. A phenomenological approach is used to get to the core of the experiences of the respondents (Creswell & Poth, 2013). This approach helps with creating an understanding regarding the nature of the experience of first-generation students with low parental SES. The sensitizing concepts for this research [i.e. motivation and ambition, self-regulating behaviour, shifting identities, mobilizing social and cultural guides] are used as guiding forces (Bryman, 2016). By approaching the interviews in this manner, the researcher leaves room for the way respondents might perceive certain strategies.

Sample
The sample of this research consists of master students of the Erasmus University in Rotterdam and Leiden University. The students are part of the social and behavioural sciences department of each university. The students included in the sample do not have a migration background. I chose to restrict my sample to students without a migration background, to rule out the possibility that our findings would mainly tap into strategies used to overcome ethnic differences. Keister and Southgate (2012) state that educational attainment is a reliable indicator of one's socio-economic status. Low parental SES in this research is conceptualized as having obtained at max MBO [i.e. vocational education in the Netherlands]. Students with parents who have obtained any degree higher than MBO is excluded. To ensure that the students fall within the sample criteria they were asked to fill out a short [online] questionnaire before the actual interview took place.

Sampling techniques
First, purposive sampling is used by considering students in the network of the researcher that fall within the sample criteria (Babbi, 2013). The judgment of the researcher is used to choose participant among the population of study. This way of sampling is especially helpful since the researcher already has access to the research field [i.e. is a student at Erasmus University Rotterdam, department ESSB]. Secondly, snowball sampling is used since it was anticipated that purposive sampling alone will not yield eight participants. Snowball sampling technique uses the network of respondents, who were recruited through purposive sampling, to yield other respondents who are willing to participate (Babbi, 2013). Simultaneously, a call on the social media channels of the researcher provided master students from Leiden University, department Societal and Behavioural Sciences.

Data analysis
To analyse the data that is derived from the interviews the qualitative analysis tool Atlas.ti is used. After transcribing the interviews, different elements were labelled and coded according to the research question and strategies that were stated in the theoretical foundation. By doing this, a quick overview and access to specific elements in the interviews was created. During the interviews some topics couldn't be labelled according to the strategies. These elements have been coded accordingly to still include them in the data analysis.

Ethics and privacy
This research has common ground with the researcher's own experiences. Being a student with low parental SES also came with challenges and questions about achieving educational success for the researcher herself. The own position needed to be considered when starting the interviews. The researcher has aimed to remain objective and neutral during the interview and refrained from sharing her own personal experiences with the respondents. This has enabled the respondents to fully reflect on the events they have encountered.

Furthermore, the privacy of the respondents needed to be taken in high regard. Therefore, the researcher went through the privacy statement [Appendix A; also see Appendix B: ethics and privacy checklist] together with the respondent before conducting the interview. Respondents were asked whether they understood what was stated before they signed the form.

4. Results

The research question of this study focused on the strategies used by first-generation students with low parental SES to succeed in university. Literature on this group of students mostly explains the lack of persistence *in* university and fall short in pointing out *how* some of them actually do manage to persist. The results of this research will be categorized into emerging themes according to the strategies set down in the theoretical foundation.

Personal goals and parental experiences
Strategy 1: motivation and ambition

There is consensus among the respondents that their motivation and ambition was formed by the interplay between personal factors and the educational experience of their parents. This shows a twofold in the motive to pursue a master's degree. Stephanie, for example, explained that her desire to help children that are hindered in their development sparked her interest in pedagogical science. By acquiring knowledge about cognitive, emotional and social risk factors in a child's development she aimed to create a change. It gave her a sense of fulfilment to dedicate her time and energy for this cause. In addition, the experience of her parents served as a motivation to keep on performing goal-directed activities:

'My parents don't have spectacular educational attainments. (…) My father always reminds me to not make the same mistakes he made [i.e. in regard to educational attainment]. He didn't finish his HAVO. He stopped very early on with studying. This experience has formed a central element in our household. (…) It is about maximizing what you have. This has formed my motivation and ambition. Sometimes it comes with a pressure but my parents are also supportive. (…) I don't want to fail and that keeps me going.'

Stephanie mentioned that her father would emphasize the difficulties that came with not finishing his HAVO. He wasn't able to find and keep a job in the long run. This has put a financial and intellectual strain on the household. Her father couldn't provide her with financial resources to pay for her education or help her with her university work [i.e. checking her essays]. These experiences formed the basis for Stephanie to reach further than what seemed possible for her father. In line with the proficiency theory, parental experiences induce the student to mobilize behaviour towards goal attainment.

Additionally, the parental experience may have also triggered the ambition of Stephanie, and also that of Fleur, Lieke, and Rachel, to acquire knowledge in pedagogical science. They all have experienced a hinderance in their development to some extent which may have inspired them to help others. Fleur said the following about her parental experience:

'I think that my parents wanted to reach further than they actually did. They didn't have the money or the chances to do that at the time. (…) Why wouldn't I reach further than they did? I am convinced that I can do better.'

All respondents mentioned that their parental experience functioned as a source of motivation. Fleur stated that the financial burden her parents experienced made them not pursue higher education. Even though, according to Fleur, her parents would be perfectly capable to do so in terms of intellectual capacities. Since her parents weren't capable to financially support her in her education, like Stephanie, Fleur then found other ways to pursue her academic career.

Acknowledging the financial needs and finding solutions for them by taking up student loans was a way for her to still get her master's degree. Furthermore, her parents lacking knowledge regarding the 'cognitive demands' [i.e. time and energy you need to invest in order to be successful] to get a master's degree made Fleur more active in seeking information about this element of the university experience herself. She mentioned that she had put a lot of time and effort in reading and watching videos about what it meant to actually do a master.

Fleur's parental experience activated the behaviour to determine what her specific needs were. The ambition to actually obtain a master's degree evolved around the attractiveness it had on future possibilities [i.e. social mobility] and the perceived importance that was experienced in the students' home environment. This is a shared feeling among all respondents. The motivation and ambition of the students paired with their parental experience served as a way to 'reduce' the distance between what they have seen as a possibility and the desired level they wanted to reach. The low parental SES is used as a force of motivation and ambition and not seen as a hinderance to what this group of students could accomplish.

Keeping yourself in check
Strategy 2: self-regulating behaviour

The university puts the responsibility of academic success on the student. This asks of students with low parental SES to be reflective about the behaviours they show in university. Self-regulated behaviours are seen as a mediating force between the students' home environment and their educational achievements (Schunk, 2005). Through these behaviours an explanation can be given for why students with low parental SES are successful in university. Active engagement is a form of self-regulated behaviour and was considered as a strategy by all the respondents. It enabled the students to complete a required task [i.e. handing in an essay or exam preparation] more successfully. Lotte said the following about it:

'I always go to the lectures. Even if they are not mandatory. I feel like I can't afford to not go. I think that going to every lecture made a huge difference for me. You are present and even if you pick up some little piece of knowledge it could be very valuable.'

By going to all lectures Lotte was able to allocate an academic resource [i.e. the professor providing knowledge] to complete a specific task [i.e. passing an exam]. The elaboration, adjustment and review on her own behaviours made her more inclined to act upon the expectations of the university. The link with the low parental SES is situated in the subtle comments all the respondents made when considering their self-regulated behaviours. Lotte said that she felt like she couldn't afford not to go. Similarly, Tess mentioned in the interview that she felt like she needed to be extra prepared for lectures and tutorials. Linda and Fleur mentioned that they felt like they put in more time and effort than their fellow students. All the respondents mentioned that they didn't felt entitled to academic success. This resulted in the feeling of needing to go the extra mile to reach the preferred [i.e. by the university] intellectual level.

The above mentioned can also be considered regarding perseverance and reflection as a form of self-regulated behaviour. Lotte said the following about it:

'Over the years I have realised that I just need more time than a 'normal student' [i.e. one that is socialized within an academic nest] to really understand a subject. That piece of self-reflection is so important and something I have just learned to use in my education. It is about trial and error. That's it. You need to learn what works for you and just try.'

Lotte came to the conclusion that she just needed more time for a given task. This feeling was shared by Sophie, Linda, Lieke and Tess. Needing more time to fulfil a task doesn't show the absence of intellectual capabilities. It emphasized the importance of perseverance that is needed for students with low parental SES to fulfil an educational task. It also reflected the level of resiliency this group of students possess to overcome obstacles that are related to what they are able to do given their background.

Interestingly, Tess mentioned that acquiring such perseverance actually came from her home environment:

'My parents started with giving me household tasks to do very early on. I started working when I was relatively young [i.e. 13 years]. It wasn't like heavy work or something, but they made me aware that if you want things you actually have to work for it. This is something what I later also used in my education. I think that this is something that is very valuable and students that come from an academic environment don't necessarily experience.'

Such feeling also surfaced during the interview with Linda but didn't reflect an overall shared experience among all respondents. Tess and Linda learned the value of hard work through the tasks they have been given in their home environment. This contrasts with what Lotte mentioned in her interview when considering not really having learned the perseverance she needed in university from her home environment. The difference between Tess and Linda when comparing them to Lotte could be that former are better in reframing a situation from the home environment into a university setting. Comparable situations regarding for example perseverance are dealt with in university with the same skills as Tess and Linda would handle them in their home environments.

Furthermore, the expectation was that first-generation students with low parental SES would show high levels of self-advocacy as a form of self-regulated behaviour. This group of students lacked knowledge about the university experience and therefore would be more inclined to communicate difficulties they would come across. It appears that this expectation is not met since all the respondents indicated that they found it difficult to practice self-advocacy. Communicating difficulties comes with the vulnerability of showing others, in this case the educational staff, that you might not have mastered a specific skill or topic. Fleur said the following about it:

'I am somewhat scared to communicate to a professor that I don't understand something. I don't want to come across as dumb or not paying attention to what is said during the lectures.'

Linda, Rachel, Stephanie, Tess and Sophie also mentioned in their interviews something of the same nature about not practising self-advocacy. With not practicing self-advocacy this group of students doesn't admit to the reality of actually not knowing something or coming across difficulties. Throughout the interviews with Fleur, Linda, Rachel, Stephanie, Tess and Sophie the

feeling came to surface that admitting to 'ignorance' said something about their worthiness of being in university.

Between two worlds
Strategy 3: shifting identities

Students in general seem to function within two different contexts (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). On one side there is the home environment [i.e. primary group] and on the other side there is the university environment [i.e. secondary group]. The contrast in functioning within different social environments is stronger for students with low parental SES than for students with high parental SES. The latter enjoys a greater alignment between the primary and secondary groups they function in. This is the result of being raised within an academic nest. This implicates that students with low parental SES are more in need of shifting strategies to make their social contexts align. All respondents seem to have experienced a distance between both environments to some extent. Fleur stated the following about the way she perceived the distance:

'Many of my fellow students come from an academic environment. They have parents that have studied at university. They have told me that they discuss certain topics that we have learned about at home. My parents can't even grasp the essence of what I am studying. Let alone discuss the knowledge I have acquired.'

Fleur, as the other respondents, displayed a level of consciousness regarding what she is able to share with her parents. She emphasized that subject wise she is not really able to share her knowledge. This implicated that there is a limit experienced to what she is able to share at home. Rachel described this as an obstacle in her education. She experienced feelings of being misunderstood by her parents.

In these different settings different cultural norms are valued which results in the home and university environment colliding. In this instance shifting strategies are needed to minimize the distance between both environments. Rachel, as do Fleur, Sophie and Linda, mentioned language as a useful tool to do so:

'I sense that at times I 'talk' different at university then I would do at home. (…) In a way that feels like living in two different worlds. There is some kind of adjustment that I make when I consider who I am talking to [i.e. parents or professors].'

For Rachel adjusting her language according to who she was talking to, was a strategy to shift between different social contexts. Almost all respondents were committed to doing so because their home environments also satisfied a part of their identity. Sharing knowledge and getting appreciation [e.g. from their parents] about what they have learned gave them the confirmation that they were doing something useful. The distinctive element is that they were able to share knowledge according to the social norms appreciated in a specific context. This led to some alignment between the primary and secondary group the students with low parental SES belong to.

Additionally, Rachel mentioned that communicating her grades also made her educational journey more seizable for her parents. This feeling was also shared by Stephanie:

'I can't really talk deeply about the topics I discuss at school, but I do share my grades. Especially, if they see the workload of something [i.e. the amount of time spent on studying] and then I receive a good grade they seem to understand the intensity of my degree more.'

Stephanie and Linda both used the quantification of knowledge as a strategy to connect the two environments they are a part of. Stephanie mentioned later on in the interview that her parents lack the skills to comprehend and discuss the knowledge she acquired in university. She then tried to involve them in the discussion by reflecting on her grades. She then continued to explain that discussing what her difficulties were and just having a place to express them, without feeling judged by others [e.g. for example her fellow students that did better], helped to create an understanding into what it actually takes to study in university.

Guidance through the university experience
Strategy 4: mobilizing cultural and social guides

Being successful in higher education is [partially] dependent on mastering 'the rules of the game' that are set. Students with low parental SES lack knowledge about the (in)formal rules of the university and need to get familiar with them. The home environment didn't provide them with this knowledge. Fleur said the following about her experience:

'The first few weeks of my master's degree felt odd. It felt like everybody knew what to do and what to say. I was just there figuring it all out. It felt like some fellow students were 10 steps ahead. Because of this it felt like I couldn't make any mistakes.

All respondents mentioned they have felt some level of unease. They all emphasized that to some extend they felt like they lagged behind. Throughout the interview Fleur reflected on the feelings of 'oddness' by discussing that she would constantly compare herself to others in her group. She, like all the other respondents, sensed that there was an unfamiliarity with the university context. This feeling is the result of not having internalized the informal rules of the university. The question then remains how they actually do overcome this oddness and which strategies are used to do so.

Cultural guides – fellow students
The first strategy students with low parental SES applied is 'using' fellow students with higher parental SES as an example for the (in)formal rules and skills they lacked. Sophie said the following about it:

'Sometimes I say really stupid things in class because I don't know how to formulate my message. When I hear my fellow students talk, I pick up some words or ways in which they formulate sentences that I might use next time.'

Further in the interview Sophie explained that she has also joined study groups with fellow students that seemed to do well in class. She then came across ways of learning and specific website to draw knowledge from that would later be very helpful. All respondents mentioned some level of mobilizing their fellow students in order to pick up skills to better their university experience. Lotte mentioned that when she had course-related questions, she would first ask her fellow students. They seemed more approachable than professors and tutors. The distance

in cultural knowledge seemed stronger between students with low parental SES and the educational staff than with their fellow students. All respondents mentioned to some extent that they relied on the shared experience with their fellow students when coming across elements of their study that they didn't understand. Lieke said the following about it:

'I have found it really helpful to work together with other students. Seeing how they would tackle a problem or how they would write a paper. It would give me ideas on how to do it myself.'

Lieke later in the interview emphasized on how valuable it was that her fellow students provided her with an example. This feeling is shared among all respondents and shows that students with low parental SES are able to employ the overall shared university experience to their advantage.

Cultural guides – educational staff
An important aspect of mobilizing the educational staff as cultural guides is constructing and maintaining a bond with them. Sophie stated the following about her experience:

'I find it difficult to maintain a bond with the educational staff [i.e. professors and tutors] because they get switched up very regularly. Even if I want to ask for help or ask a question on a course-related topic, I don't feel like I have a bond with them.'

Sophie perceived the absence of a bond as a reason to not initiate contact with the educational staff. This feeling is shared among all other respondents. Feeling less connected to the educational staff could be the result of not possessing the valued cultural capital. Which results in students with low parental SES being more likely to mobilize their fellow students as cultural guides. As mentioned earlier, the shared university experience with the fellow students contributed to the approachability of the former group. Evidently, students with low parental SES spend more time with their fellow students in class and lectures. The time spent together enabled them to create a (stronger) bond over time.

Social guides – parents
Parents with low SES are, in the literature, often depicted as a 'hinderance' in the educational success of their children; they are not able to provide financial help or assist with course-related work. However, my results show that this doesn't mean that they are not able to provide help at all. Support can be facilitated in different ways. Lieke stated the following about her experience:

'My parents have always been there at all important events at university. Even if they have felt out of their comfort zones.'

In this case, the parents of Lieke were able to provide emotional support by just 'being' there when she needed it. She also mentioned them feeling 'out of their comfort zones'. Later on in the interview she explained that it showed her their willingness to understand the social environment she needed to function in. Sophie, Lotte, Linda, Lieke and Fleur to some extent mentioned that the social support provided by their parents at times gave them a boost to go the extra mile. Lotte said the following about her experience:

'I think that it helps that at times my parents are more convinced about my capabilities to do good than I am about myself. This was especially the case during my master. I have had thoughts like why am I actually doing this? They have then provided me with comfort and said that it will all be all right. I can do this!'

The moments that Lotte's parents were more determined about what she could accomplish than she was at the moment than fuelled her own belief. Students with low parental SES then use the emotional support provided by their parents as an extra persuasion. Only Rachel mentioned that the emotional support provided by her parents occasionally wasn't what she needed. She explained that at times her parents said: *'just work harder and deal with the situation [i.e. educational difficulty then experienced].'* Rachel found that these expressions at times downplayed her feelings [i.e. how difficult a task was] about a specific subject. This is the result of a perceived distance between the assessment of Rachel's parents about the difficulty of studying in university and the actual experience of Rachel.

5. Discussion & conclusion

The educational achievements of students that come from low parental SES backgrounds are in current literature often perceived as limited. Mostly defining them as having a higher risk for failure (Yeh, 2010) displays a narrative where there seems to be no room for the success stories of this group of students. By adopting a reflective and qualitative approach regarding the strategies students with low parental SES use to succeed in university this research applied a more boundless perspective. The central question for this research was: *What strategies do children with low parental SES backgrounds use to successfully participate in university?*

The results with respect to the first strategy [motivation and ambition] showed that, in line with the proficiency theory, parental experiences have played an important role in ensuring the goal-directed activities of first-generation students with low parental SES (Sogunro, 2015; Van De Werfhorst & Anderson, 2005). Within the home environments of the respondents the importance of a master's degree was seen in the light of the possibilities it could bring. The respondents have considered the educational level of their parents as an actual outcome for themselves, but have changed their narrative by having the ambition to reach further [i.e. desired outcome]. Motivation and ambition have been used to complement the distance to the desired goal [i.e. getting a master's degree – upward social mobility]. Instead of perceiving the position of the parents as their destiny, students with low parental SES use these experiences as stepping stones to transcend the barriers that their parents weren't able to combat.

Results pertaining to the self-regulated behaviours [strategy 2] showed that these behaviours worked as a mediating force between the home environment and the educational achievements of students with low parental SES. Active engagement [i.e. perseverance to fulfil a task, being present at lectures and tutorials] is an important aspect of this type of behaviour (Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Not being born in an academic nest came with the necessity to invest more time and energy into grasping an educational task. The respondents didn't feel entitled to academic success which made the necessity and practise of self-regulated behaviour more evident. Furthermore, the expectation was that first-generation students with low parental SES would show high levels of self-advocacy [i.e. communicating difficulties to the educational staff] (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). This research didn't meet this expectation. When connecting this finding with strategy 4 [mobilizing cultural and social guides] we see that students with low parental SES are more likely to practise self-advocacy when communicating with fellow students. The overall shared university experience served as a means for creating 'safety' to express and discuss difficulties among students. Not having a bond with the educational staff made students with low parental SES less likely practice self-advocacy with them. The results showed that there is a shared feeling among the students that admitting to 'ignorance' towards the educational staff said something about their worthiness regarding being in university.

The third strategy [shifting identities] focused on the alignment between the primary group [i.e. home environment] and the secondary group [i.e. university context] that students with low parental SES function in (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). This research showed that 'quantifying knowledge' and language use played an important role in making the two worlds more in alignment with each other. The social contexts that students with low parental SES are a part of functioned on opposite sides (Lubrano, 2004). When students wanted to share [course-related] knowledge that they have acquired in university, they adjusted their language according to the social norms appreciated in the home environment. Language then became a tool to shift between both social contexts. An additional finding of this research was that some students would also quantify knowledge when their parents weren't able to comprehend and discuss the [course-related] knowledge. Involving their parents then focused around reflecting

on the grades they obtained. Merging two social contexts enabled students with low parental SES to get the appreciation and confirmation they needed from their primary group. This helped in pursuing their educational goals.

Lastly, findings with respect to the fourth strategy [mobilizing cultural and social guides] showed that the creation and maintenance of meaningful bonds determined to what extent students with low parental SES were able to mobilize others to facilitate their success in university (Yosso, 2005). Approachability seemed to be an indicator in this regard. Employing the overall shared university experience with their fellow students enabled them to 'use' their cultural knowledge and capabilities in their advantage. This helped students with low parental SES to master 'the rules of the game' that are set in university (Lareau, 2015; Lareau, 2003). However, this group of students was less likely to mobilize the educational staff as cultural guides. The perceived distance between the students and the educational staff seemed to be more substantial than with their fellow students. This is in contrast with the literature that stated that students with low parental SES are more receptive of services and support from the educational staff (Lareau, 2003; Engle et al., 2006). In this research mobilizing cultural guides in the pursuit of educational success seemed [partially] dependent on the level of approachability of the other. Additionally, students with low parental SES employed the emotional support provided by their parents. The literature on parents with low SES backgrounds focuses on the deficits that come with such a background and how this might influence the educational achievements of their children (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012). This research showed a change in narrative where facilitating support isn't exclusively a matter of course-related activities but also a matter of providing social guidance [i.e. by parents] through the whole process of obtaining a degree.

This study comes with some limitations. The first limitation could be targeted towards the sample of this research. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic the sample size of this research, eight respondents, is small. Despite the efforts of the researcher, in combination with the fixed time period for data collection, it didn't seem achievable to carry out more interviews. Additionally, the sample of this research contains only women that are currently obtaining a master's degree in the social sciences. It is possible that women hold different views about the strategies to succeed in university then men do. For example, there might be differences in the way that men and women mobilize guides to achieve educational success.

The findings of this research show that by using different strategies master students with low parental SES are still able to succeed in university. This sheds another light on this group of students than the narrative of having high dropout rates, an unequal upbringing and restricted financial resources. The creative ways in which students with low parental SES make sense of their realities and barriers are valuable for understanding how they do persist in university. Future research on this topic could expand on looking into different groups of students among the population. For example, if the low parental SES background is an important aspect in mobilizing different strategies it could be interesting to look into how this works for students with high parental SES. This could detect if the strategies set out in this research are exclusively reserved for first-generation students with low parental SES. Additionally, considering students with low parental SES that *simultaneously* have a migration background might shed a different light on how cultural capital is derived for this group. It shows to what elements of one's identity this might be related.

The aim of education is to create an inclusive institution where students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds meet each other (Bol & Van De Werfhorst, 2013). To reach this aim policies are needed that cater to first-generation students – or any group of

students that lack behind as a result of not mastering the university culture for that matter. The policy recommendations derived from this research are two-sided. Firstly, students with low parental SES share the feeling of not wanting to admit their 'ignorance' to the educational staff. This makes them not mobilize the help they need. If the university implements policies that focus the attention on them initiating the help, students then could be more comfortable to actually employ it. Initiating the help [i.e. by the university] gives the signal to students that they are safe in admitting to not knowing something. It doesn't downplay their worthiness or capability of being in university. Linked to the first recommendation universities should anticipated on this by not regularly switching up tutors during different courses. By providing a 'constant factor' within the educational journeys of students they could be more comfortable in practising self-advocacy in educational settings.

Since 'the hidden curriculum' is a deep rooted [i.e. institutionalized] concept in the university, it might not be directly subjected to change. Students that don't come from an academic nest than will endure the consequences of the social inequalities in education. This asks for a substantial amount of resiliency and creativity to still succeed in university. The low parental SES of students isn't solely a concept that comes with disadvantages. By viewing the success stories we shed a light on the innovative ways in which obtaining an academic degree is still feasible.

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APPENDIX A

Informatie- en toestemmingsformulier

Gegevens onderzoeker

Naam: Najoua Lazaar

E-mail: 427745nl@eur.nl

Contactgegevens functionaris gegevensbescherming EUR

E-mail: privacy@eur.nl

Toelichting onderzoeksproject

In het kader van de afronding van de master Social Inequalities worden onderzoeksgegevens verzameld. De verzamelde gegevens hebben betrekking op de onderwijsprestaties van masterstudenten.

Toestemming betrokkene

Hierbij geef ik, (naam betrokkene)

toestemming voor het verzamelen, bewaren en analyseren van de gegevens die op basis van het interview worden verzameld. Ik ben op de hoogte van het feit dat uitsluitend de student en de supervisor van de student toegang heeft tot de verzamelde gegevens. Deze gegevens worden maximaal 3 maanden bewaard. Ik geef de onderzoeker toestemming mij te vragen om gegevens met betrekking tot mijn gender en etniciteit, en deze gegevens geanonimiseerd te verwerken in het onderzoek.

Rechten betrokkene

Ik ben mij bewust dat ik inzage heb in mijn eigen gegevens en ik de verwerking van de persoonsgegevens kan laten rectificeren, wissen of beperken. De toestemming om mijn gegevens te gebruiken kan ik op ieder moment intrekken.

Door het ondertekenen van dit formulier geef ik aan dat goed is uitgelegd waar dit onderzoek over gaat, waar het toe dient en dat ik toestemming geef om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek.

Datum: Handtekening:

APPENDIX B

CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Intergenerational transmission of inequality

Name, email of student: Najoua Lazaar, 427745nl@student.eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Renske Keizer, keizer@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: February 2020 – June 2020

Is the research study conducted within DPAS   YES

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: TYPE OF RESEARCH STUDY

Please indicate the type of research study by circling the appropriate answer:

1. Research involving human participants. **YES**

   If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? **NO**
   Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).

2. Field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. **NO**

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). **NO**

PART III: PARTICIPANTS
(Complete this section only if your study involves human participants)

Where will you collect your data?

The data will be collected during interview settings that the participant and researcher agreed on (e.g. a meeting room where the interview will be conducted).
_____
_____
Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

10
_____
_____
Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

All the master students from the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences (N = 4547) that don't have a migrational background. That is approximately 3031 students.

_____
_____
Note: indicate for separate data sources.

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? **NO**

2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? **NO**

3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? **NO**

4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? **NO**
   Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).

5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? **NO**

6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? **YES**

7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? **NO**

8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? **NO**

9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? **NO**

10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? **NO**

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

Issue 6 is unavoidable because the social origin of the participants is important in determining the influence it has on the different concepts that are used – researched.

_____
_____
_____
_____

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

To maintain the anonymity of the respondents, fictive names will be used in the thesis. Also any information that can lead to tracing it back to a specific person will be edited (e.g. mentioning specific places in the interview) without removing the essence of what is said.

_____
_____
_____
_____

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.
No_____
_____
_____
_____

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Part IV: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

The data will be stored on my computer account that has a password that only I have access to. in a folder that also needs a password for access.

_____
_____
Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

The researcher.

_____
_____

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

Weekly.

_____
_____

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

The data will be anonymized by using fictive names.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Najoua Lazaar   Name (EUR) supervisor: Renske Keizer

Date: March 8, 2020   Date: