

Understanding Bourdieusian Social Capital Perspective in Student Experience: A Critical Review

Md. Shahrier Haider¹

ABSTRACT

While much of the literature on higher education focuses on issues of teaching and learning, there is a growing interest in making sense of the everyday experiences of university students. This is what is often referred to as 'student experience'. Student experience is broadly concerned with the lives and lived experiences of university students. The aim of this paper is to discuss Bourdieusian social capital and how it is significant concept in the literature of higher education (HE) student experience. There are many approaches used in discussing student experience, but the ones reviewed in this paper are centred around Bourdieu's use of 'social capital'.

Keywords: Bourdieusian social capital perspective, student experience, higher education

Corresponding Author shahrier.haider@du.ac.bd



Article History

Received 13/09/2021

Revised 19/10/2023

Accepted 15/11/2023

Suggested Citation: Haider, M.S. (2023). Understanding Bourdieusian social capital perspective in student experience: A critical review. *Teacher's World: Journal of Education and Research*, 49(2): 99-107. <https://doi.org/10.3329/twjer.v49i2.71990>

Note: This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-SA 4.0) license. Published by the Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka

Setting the scene

Higher education is continuously evolving and has been experiencing dramatic changes over the past few decades. Students from broadening social, economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds are now entering higher education and therefore increasing the diversity of campuses. This diversity makes it challenging for universities to effectively address student matters (Morgan, 2012) and places increased emphasis on the quality of the student experience.

From an institutional point of view, the concept of 'student experience' covers not only students' experience of support services, but of almost (if not all) aspects of student life including (but not limited to) personal, social and academic welfare. From the perspective of institutionalized competitiveness, the provision of high-quality student experience has therefore become a vital component of higher education services (Morgan, 2012) as universities try to perform well in terms of student progression, withdrawal rates, and student satisfaction. As a result of this, the student experience is often categorized as part of the broader notion of student engagement

¹ Associate Professor, Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka

– and perceived as an important factor in the expected development of students in higher education. Kuh (2009) argues that engagement impacts students' learning and development in higher education and helps students to benefit from institutional support frameworks. This, in turn, promotes their continuation in education – a primary factor why higher education authorities may see student experience as a sub-group of student engagement.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) regards student engagement as “giving students an active role in the development, management, and governance of their institution, its academic programs and their own learning experience” (cited in Kleiman, 2015, p. 63). Similarly, The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA) (2012) addresses engagement as an effective tool for the empowerment and inclusion of students by considering them as *partners* and/or *co-producers* in all university activities (cited in Kleiman, 2015). Such definitions therefore tend to frame the notion of ‘student experience’ as embedded in (and very much influenced by) the wider, emerging concept of ‘student engagement’.

From a social science perspective, ‘student experience’ is more specifically understood to be an important aspect of making sense of the realities of higher education for students. However, Stokoe, Benwell, and Attenborough (2013, p. 76) argue against framing student experience as a subordinate domain of engagement. Instead, they suggest a wider approach to conceptualizing ‘student experience’ that includes, or relates to, “... teaching and learning issues (e.g., course structure, feedback, resources) as well as socially-oriented aspects of student life (e.g., accommodation, campus environment, student union, entertainment)”.

The leading focus of student experience literature is in how students ‘fit-in’ in higher education institutions, particularly in regard to external and internal issues such as students’ involvement, class and identity, social relationships in academia, institutional practice, and facilities. There are some indications in other studies that social class, parents’ education, family income, and social and cultural capital transferred from families are factors that have consequential outcomes for students’ higher education experiences. From the literature cited above it is apparent that both students’ socio-cultural and economic backgrounds play influential roles in their experience of HE. Therefore, in any discussion in this article regarding students’ experience in higher education, there should be a focus on these issues.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theories and concepts are powerful means of explaining inequalities in higher education systems that are, in many cases, not so visible at first view. His conceptual tools also help educational researchers to focus their attention on contemporary modern university issues, and to make sense of students’ – particularly underrepresented students’ – differentiated experiences of everyday higher education. His work is helpful in developing a working framework for the understanding of higher education (HE) students’ social contexts. For this current paper the author conforms to Chenoweth and Stehlik (2004) who refer ‘social capital’ as the capacity of strong communities and families to support weaker communities, individuals

and families. They define social capital as originally referring to and including the resources of wealth, property, equipment, knowledge and skills, and cultural values. Now, after the turn of the century, they see social capital more as the property of groups, as something of value to be used for “the exchange of resources or supports or services” (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2004, p. 62). They also state that social capital has various dimensions – that it involves participation, reciprocity, trust, social norms, common resources, pro-activity, and tolerance of diversity.

Bourdieu’s use of ‘social capital’

Bourdieu (1997, p.51) perceived social capital as the “aggregate of actual or potential resources” available in an individual’s social network created by his/her family, class, friends, school, tribe and so on. This social network is where a collection of individuals live and undertake their activities. The strength of this network, according to Botas and Huisman (2013), depends on “acquaintance, recognition, acceptance, obligation, and trust” (p. 744).

Bourdieu (1997), in his research, also focuses on how social networks are created in order to generate social capital for an individual. He argued that *conscious* or *unconscious* investment strategies an individual uses to establish or reproduce interpersonal relationships in society are contributing factors in creating such networks (p. 52). Thus, he points to each of us – both deliberately and unconsciously – having a significant role in our social networks.

Bourdieu’s research and theories are supported and extended by other theorists. For example, while reviewing social network theories, Morosanu, Handley and O’Donovan (2010) distinguish between a ‘constraining’ or ‘enabling’ effect of social network research. To Morosanu et al., the ‘social capital’ concept mostly represents the latter dimension of social network. However, Coleman (1997, cited in Morosanu et al. 2010) does not see social capital as the mere outcome of relations. In extending further the concept of social capital he differentiates the resources (the capital) from each other and sees this capital as a competence achieved through membership in a range of different networks.

Social capital as an important aspect of HE experiences and engagement

According to Bourdieu (1986) and his social capital theory, knowledge and information achieved through social networks is very important in higher education, as this knowledge can be used to assist students in making useful decisions during the university studies. Students do not all have a large amount of social capital, however. Many students who do not have sufficient social capital might even be unaware of how important social capital is and the possibilities which arise from it. In this case Bourdieu makes the point that students with limited social capital experience difficulties in many areas. They are more likely to be reticent in seeking help from their university professors, and they usually lack understanding of what is required in their university assignments. Generally, they are less capable of fulfilling college obligations, which can lead to positive impacts on their future lives.

Many researchers support Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital. Among these are Soria and Stebleton (2012) who describe it as an outcome of social networking that provides students with "privileged knowledge, resources, and information" (p. 675) to help them select from academic and social options available to them at university.

Based on the above, for any research on students' adjustment to their university life, it is therefore important to explore their social capital and the impact of this on their lives. Accepting the necessity for understanding social networks, Morosanu et al. (2010) perceive Bourdieu's social network approach as a suitable lens through which to understand how students in higher education use their self-constructed networks, combined with formally established networks offered by their university, to adjust to different challenges in academic and university life.

To understand the adjustments required of students during the transition into higher education, it is important to investigate the social relationships students are involved in, particularly their self-constructed ones (Morosanu et al., 2010). Morosanu et al. (2010) also detail another area deserving of research, and that is the students' perceptions of the educational supports available to them. For example, although the literature may claim that higher education networks are well stocked with effective resources such as 'advice and information, companionship and psychological support, academic knowledge and exchange' (p. 667), it is important to consider if students actually need these supports. In other words, how do they perceive the stock of support services impacting on their transition? Most importantly, how do they develop and use informal networks other than university initiated formal support services?

Considering this view, Morosanu et al. (2010) distinguish between 'naturally available' resources (for example, fellow students or roommates) and 'formal' resources (those arranged by university authorities) in stating their idea that "coping at university ultimately depends on students' own initiatives of seeking or using support from the pool of available choices" (p. 668).

Pascarella et al. (2004) also have much to say about social capital. They state that 'social capital' is a specific kind of asset which can be transacted and transferred from one person to another by means of mutual relations. Referring back to Bourdieu (1986) on this matter, they state that family can be considered as a repository for versatile non-economic resources. Adding to this, Pascarella et al. (2004) argue that through mutual relations among members of families, they transact and transfer their resources among themselves in order to create positions of greater influence, and acquire the necessary skills for adapting positively within their social structures. It should also be noted that friends and peer groups increase educational aspirations by providing information regarding the 'hierarchy' of institutions, and by helping each other to decide where they want to be enrolled (Brooks, 2003, 2005).

The impact of family support

Bourdieu (1986) argues that students gain social capital from families. Similarly, Morosanu et al. (2010) point out that in relation to social capital it must not be forgotten that family and friends provide significant informal supports, such as, “guidance and feedback, non-directive support, positive social interactions, and tangible assistance” (Barrera, Sandier, & Ramsay, 1981, in Morosanu et al., 2010, p. 667). Others also comment on the importance of family, with Pascarella et al. (2004) pointing out that educated parents are a significant influence on shaping the experience of their children’s education. Paralleling this, studies also indicate the plight of students who have only limited influence from their families. In this regard, Gofen (2009) considers the limited social capital of first-generation students with parents having no background in university education. He claims such students cannot achieve the required social capital from family and therefore struggle to find success in university.

Soria and Stebleton (2012), support Bourdieu’s notions about the transmission of social capital from family, more specifically pointing to the impact of university-educated parents on students’ abilities to acquire social capital and use this capital in developing personal skills and/or engagement in higher education. The authors claim that, although first generation students’ engagement can be enhanced by other factors, their parents’ level of academic qualification can play an important role in constructing their cognitive development as university graduates. As such, Soria and Stebleton’s study and others have found that first generation students, in comparison with non-first generation students, tend to have limited experience of academic engagement such as dialoguing with faculty members, participating in group discussions, generating new ideas, class participation and creating insightful examples or questions (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). It was also reported that first generation students lag behind in cognitive development and obtain lower scores in different competitive assessments (Pascarella et al., 2004; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Soria and Stebleton conclude that limited social capital and less supportive family sources of academic inspiration (Terenzini et al., 1996) can underpin inadequate academic engagement.

Higher education institutes and class inequality

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) criticise higher education institutes for fostering class-based inequalities. Keane (2011) supports this contention, stating that social class-based differences are evident in students’ higher education experiences, where participation, ‘survival’, achievement of desirable development, and the expectation of future employment of the students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have been massively affected.

Keane (2011) explored the differences between middle class and working-class students in an Irish University, focusing particularly on the pre-set views and behaviours of both. Keane (2011) states that students from both classes maintain their self-perceived social positions

by employing intentional ‘distancing’ behaviour. She describes two types of this distancing behaviour. First is “subservient distancing”, where students withdraw themselves from a position/situation that they perceive as ‘higher’ than their own social position. The second form of distancing behaviour she labels as “status-maintaining/raising”, and this occurs when students create distance in order to indicate a superior status (p.453). Keane (2011) states that both these distancing behaviours help students to protect their self-perception about social positioning: a working-class student does not want to reveal their fear of humiliation, while their counterparts seek to raise others’ perceptions of their ‘supremacy’.

Thus, working-class students, in the context of their socio-economic status, consider themselves to be more servile because of this inferiority complex. They do not intend to interact with middle or upper classes and are reluctant to take part in diversified activities in the university. Among these learners, another trend appears to be prominent – they feel comfortable in mixing only with the students in their classroom who belong to an equivalent or similar class.

This practice is a reflection of their thoughts. Students tend to think – both consciously and unconsciously – that others with a similar socio-economic status are more accepting (Keane, 2011). As a consequence of this thinking, student groups form on the basis of social class and financial capacity, and students feel comfortable keeping themselves confined to these groups. Students thus start to consider themselves as members of an isolated social class. They are not eager to build social relationships outside their ‘self-perceived’ social class, as they think that interaction with students from higher classes might result in negative outcomes. Keane is of the opinion that these students deprive themselves of the benefits of a wide variety of activities in their universities due to their ‘sticking to their own’ attitude, which results in unvarnished university experience from their perspective.

Furthermore, social connection with one’s classmates is an essential element of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and it has been claimed in some studies that there is a nexus between social capital and future employment. Criticizing this concept of retraction, Keane (2011) suggests that cutting ties with middle-class students leads to significant loss for students belonging to the lower socio-economic classes, especially after their graduation when they seek to enter into professional careers, but find themselves incapable of transforming their academic credentials into economic capital due to their insufficient social connections. Thus, it is posited that Bourdieu’s concept of social capital may largely influence a student’s progression to, within and beyond higher education.

In exploring this same situation, Devine (2004) describes two mechanisms through which social capital operates to influence students’ progression to higher education. One is the network built consciously by middle-class families with other middle-class families to ensure their children share in groups with children of other educated and ‘solvent’ parents (those in a financially positive situation). This networking is done in order for these students to feel both pressure

to perform better in educational institutions (and the expectation that they will) and therefore become eligible to enrol in top ranked HE institutions. The second mechanism Devine (2004) describes refers to middle-class parents receiving information about HE institutions through these networks. Both the parents and students receive the privilege of obtaining information and advice about the quality of various HE institutions, and consequently they are well equipped to make decisions based on relevant information and recommendations. Devine (2004) also observes that these two mechanisms are largely unavailable to the parents of lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Therefore, privileged students receive information about HE institutions from multiple sources due to their social networks familiar with HE. On the other hand, underprivileged students do not have this facility (Brooks, 2008). Based on this, Brooks (2008) established her argument that social capital plays a significant role in students' progression to higher education. Brooks also focuses on the fact that the existing system of compulsory and non-compulsory forms of education create inequalities on the basis of social and cultural capital.

It has been claimed that highly educated parents can assist their offspring in selecting suitable education options and conceptualizing them (Pascarella et al., 2004), and that these parents can also motivate their student children to participate actively in various activities at the university. In a different way, it can be said that parents can inculcate their acquired social capital into their children. These children enter their educational institutions after gaining a well-stocked knowledge of relevant resources from their families. As educational institutions are responsive to the values, attitudes and disposition of the dominant class, at school these children tend to observe and carry on the practices of the same social and cultural resources they have known within their families (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007). As a result, they experience less difficulty surviving in their HE institutions and participating in a variety of activities there.

A child of these better educated parents "encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a 'fish in the water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127, cited in Thomas, 2002, p. 423). Opposite to this, 'first-generation students' attend institutions having few preconceptions, thus experiencing difficulty in adapting to the morals and practices existing within their university. As the universities are administered in accordance with the needs and dispositions of the dominant class, first-generation and under-represented students have less confidence. As a consequence, they retract themselves, feel reluctant to participate, and are more likely to leave before completion (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Thomas, 2002). Those who somehow manage to survive their HE experience and complete their studies come out with lower levels of intellectual competence (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). They also remain unsuccessful in reaching the expected level of psycho-social development.

Conclusion

This paper connects student experience to social context, and makes the point that student experience is very dependent on social capital – one’s actual and potential resources – and that this social capital is very much influenced by class. It also makes the point that although they do not correlate directly with each other, class and social capital are very much connected. For example, students from middle- or upper-class families are more likely to have parents or siblings that are familiar with HE and university life, and it is these family members which may be a useful influence on students entering HE. Consequently, students from such a background – of having educated family members – are likely to have greater social capital: they are likely to have a greater collection of both actual and potential resources in their social capital and therefore more likely to have a more enjoyable and successful student experience of higher education.

References

- Botas, P. C. P., & Huisman, J. (2013). A Bourdieusian analysis of the participation of Polish students in the ERASMUS programme: Cultural and social capital perspectives. *Higher Education*, 66(6), 741-754.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). The forms of capital. In A. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Eds.), *Education: Culture, economy, and society* (pp. 46-58). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: Sage.
- Brooks, R. (2003). Young people’s higher education choices: The role of family and friends. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(3), 283-297.
- Brooks, R. (2005). *Friendship and educational choice peer influence and planning for the future*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brooks, R. (2008). Accessing higher education: The influence of cultural and social capital on university choice. *Sociology Compass*, 2(4), 1355-1371.
- Chenoweth, L., & Stehlik, D. (2004). Implications of social capital for the inclusion of people with disabilities and families in community life. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8(1), 59-72.
- Devine, F. (2004). *Class practices: How parents help their children get good jobs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gofen, A. (2009). Family capital: How first-generation higher education students break the intergenerational cycle. *Family Relations*, 58(1), 104-120.

- Keane, E. (2011). Distancing to self-protect: The perpetuation of inequality in higher education through socio-relational dis/engagement. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(3), 449-466.
- Kleiman, P. (2015). Excellence in Diversity: A report celebrating the diversity of UK Higher education. Retrieved from <http://www.guildhe.ac.uk/blog/excellence-in-diversity-a-report-celebrating-the-diversity-of-uk-higher-education/>
- Kuh, G. D. (2009). The national survey of student engagement: Conceptual and empirical foundations. *New directions for institutional research*, 2009(141), 5-20.
- Morgan, M. (2012). The context of learning in higher education In M. Morgan (Ed.), *Improving the student experience: A practical guide for universities and colleges*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Morosanu, L., Handley, K., & O'Donovan, B. (2010). Seeking support: Researching first-year students' experiences of coping with academic life. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(6), 665-678.
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.
- Read, B., Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of 'belonging' and 'isolation' at a post-1992 university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(3), 261-277.
- Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., & Weber, Z. (2007). 'You don't have like an identity... you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *Journal of youth studies*, 10(2), 223-241.
- Soria, K., & Stebleton, M. (2012). First-generation students' academic engagement and retention. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(6), 673-685.
- Stokoe, E., Benwell, B., & Attenborough, F. (2013). University students managing engagement, preparation, knowledge and achievement: Interactional evidence from institutional, domestic and virtual settings. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 2(2), 75-90.
- Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher education*, 37(1), 1-22.
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.