

**“Sometimes I'm amazed where I ended up”
Universitäts- und Arbeitserfahrungen
kanadischer Studierenden aus der
Arbeiterschicht**

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2021: being interviewed for the fifth time

Sometimes I'm amazed where I ended up. Who could have guessed that this is what I would be doing in 16 years. I don't think I would have guessed this, but I'm so happy. It feels like a good fit for me in terms of my values. And financially we're comfortable, right, which is nice. And that I'm fulfilled by my relationships and hobbies and work. So it's good. I'm happy. *(Alison, public health officer [Fachkraft für öffentliche Gesundheit])*

I can afford to live a comfortable life, and I kind of realized that what I care about is free time and it's family and friends. I guess I don't really have any desire to win capitalism. [...] You know that's a healthier place. *(Brian, public service analyst [Analyst für öffentliche Verwaltung])*

How did Alison and Brian get there?

Methodology

- Qualitative, semi-structured interviews
- Initial recruitment: posters, intro-classroom announcements, word-of-mouth/snowballing
- Five waves of data collection: 2005 - 2021
 - First wave:
 - 75 newly enrolled first-generation students (i.e., first in family to attend university) from working-class families
 - September/October 2005
 - Second wave:
 - Nov 2006 – April 2007, 55 participants
 - Third wave:
 - Spring 2009, 37 participants (last year of undergraduate program)
 - Fourth wave:
 - Fall 2014, 20 participants; focus on post-graduate education and work
 - Fifth wave:
 - Summer 2021, 23 participants; career and family

Phase 1, 2005: Moving In

Money (Economic Capital)

I think it's important for students not to work while they're in university. And I wish that my family was able to support me that way. I really think that it [working] affects my studies a lot and that it's going to cut into my social time. *(Martina, first wave)*

Not Knowing the "Rules of the Game" (Cultural Capital)

I didn't know about university. Now that I'm here, it's like "Holy Crap, that's a lot of work." [...] I guess I fear flunking out or just not being smart enough. [...] What if I'm really not university material? *(Abby, first wave)*

Being Different (Habitus Dislocation)

I was the last one in [residence lounge] to go through that, that conversation "what do your parents do?" And my parents definitely had like the lowest class jobs but I've never thought of that before. [...] They were all so surprised that I was the first [to go to university]. *(Maggie, first wave)*

Bourdieu was right: cultural reproduction

- **Habitus, cultural capital & field**
 - University is a middle-class field
 - Working-class students are cultural outsiders
 - Lack of cultural capital and habitus incompatibilities
 - Heightened sense of uncertainty and risk
- **Some examples**
 - Reay et al (various)
 - Bathmaker et al (2016; Paired Peers project)
 - US examples: Stuber (2006); Hurst (2010)

Phases 2&3, 2006 & 2009: Moving Through

Working-class as enabling

I feel like I've benefited from the fact that [my parents say] 'You gotta do it all on your own, we don't know anything about it'. I've become so independent, in a good way. (*Hilary, second wave*)

University as transformative experience

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

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

Bourdieu wasn't right

- Belief in meritocracy & widening participation
 - University for all
 - Create opportunities and they will come
 - Responsibility, resilience and self-realization
 - Reflects U.S. literature on success as the outcome of academic and social integration at university (e.g., Kuh et al, 2005; Tinto, 1987)

Phase 4; 2014: Moving Out

Difficult transitions: lack in capital

I just found it very difficult to get a job in [journalism] that was paid. I just realized a lot of people wanting you to work for free. So, it was just a lot of internships or volunteering, which I was okay with at the time, but obviously I needed an income. So, what did I do? I went and I got my bartending certification and three months after I graduated, I got a bartending job. (*Bella, public relations [Öffentlichkeitsarbeiterin]*)

Some friends were able to get in at companies that their family works at and have very high level jobs that nobody else would have. It's very frustrating. [laughing] [...]. I think that people who come from those kinds of families are better at asking for things. They're better at saying, "Hey, you know my dad." or whatever [laughing]. They're better at using their connections and um, not exploiting them, but...benefiting from them. (*Brenda, child support case worker [Sozialarbeiterin]*)

Social closure & social congestion

- Academic success recognized as not enough
 - Lack of network/social capital
 - Not understanding importance of networking
 - Lacking financial resources to engage in lengthy unpaid work
 - Not having the “right” cultural and personal capital
- Some examples
 - Brown (2013)
 - Macmillan et al (2015)
 - Tholen (2015)

Phase 5, 2021: Moving Up

Starting at the bottom

I started in the call centre. I thought to myself, what am I doing? Like this is what some of my university classmates would never even dream of, like they would never “stoop to this level”. But that’s what I did, I worked in this centre, and I hated it. But I saw [telecommunications firm] as such an incredible opportunity and I saw that as a big golden door, and I thought, you know, if I play my cards right and I pay my dues and work my way up from the bottom, it’s going to be no time at all until [it] flourishes into an incredible opportunity. *(Karen, client support [Kundendienst])*

Revising original career goals

Coming from a first-generation family, I think that there isn’t as much awareness of a lot of the career options that are available. ... Like you kind of hold these really high-status careers in your head as the pinnacle of going to university and don't have a lot of awareness of the other careers that you could potentially obtain from getting to university. *(Alison, public health officer [Fachkraft für öffentliche Gesundheit])*

Phase 5, 2021: Moving Up

Social capital by developing more human capital

I've never actually looked to my parents for network and connections. [...] I had a placement and I was very good with my placement, had a very good work ethic, very professional, understood what our role was. As an employee, I think I stood out. [...] I think whoever I've met in my field, I've managed to leave a good impression, and because of that I haven't really had trouble networking or finding a job, really. (*Shirley, physiotherapist*)

Mentors

I actually have a mentor now who talks me up, to say like, "Melissa, you can do it." [...] She's a very vocal female about gender equality in our company. She's African Canadian, and she like just went through a lot to get where she is at work. (*Melissa, middle manager*)

Phase 5, 2021: Moving Up

Stability

I've struggled, like I've been poor, I've been well-off. I've been all sorts of different things in my life now. I think I'm comfortable in my life. I'm comfortable in my job. I think it's been very settled for the last five or six years and that's what I like. [...] I wanted a job that would challenge me, which it does. I wanted, you know, to be married and I am. I wanted a house; I have a house. (Becky, nurse [Krankenpflegerin])

Recognizing the value of their working-class origins

[Having grown up working class] helped me make it to where I am, because I feel like I'm well rounded, I feel like when I see those patients in my office that I can meet them where they're at. [...] So, I don't think it was a hindrance, like I'm surprised that I am where I'm at today, looking back at where I was, but yeah I guess I can appreciate how that kind of an upbringing [has helped me] understand the trials and tribulations of lower income families. (*Ed, doctor*)

How to make sense of all this data

- Most participants achieved social mobility
 - But: what constitutes mobility (considering revised aspirations)?
- Class origin remains important
 - But not as a determinant of experiences
 - Informing practice; or reflection
- Other factors
 - Gender and race/ethnicity: Importance of mentorship, especially for ethnic minority women in the study
 - One participant transitioned; did I misinterpret gender dysphoria as class challenges?
 - One participant disclosed mental health challenges in 2021

Time and analytical complexity

- Overarching explanatory framework?
 - E.g., Bourdieu much harder to apply in 2021
- Effects of time, period and context
 - Getting older = more reflective
 - “Chronological triangulation”: remarkable stability in many responses over time confirm analysis
 - Turbulent times
 - 2008 recession
 - COVID19
 - Long-term commitment creates benefits
 - For me: greater reflexivity, but also commitment to participants
 - For participants: being heard and validation of experiences

Questions and Comments?

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Participant Profiles : 2005 (Wave 1)

- 75 participants
- Parental education
 - 80% high-school (Grade 12) or below
- Parental occupations
 - Fathers: mostly factory and construction/trades; a few foreman/supervisors; 25% white collar
 - Mothers: mostly lower-level service (beauty, call centre; 50%); factory; some stay-at-home
- 75% women; 36% racialized
- Majority with occupational goals in high-status professions (doctors, lawyers, dentists; also teaching, especially as Plan B)
- Attrition over time: reduced sample still reflected original sample

Participant Profiles: 2021 (Wave 5)

- 23 participants
- 18 women (78%)
- 8 racialized (35%)
- Sexuality: all heterosexual except one (transitioned from man to woman during course of project)
- Postgraduate education
 - 14 graduate/professional degrees (61%)
 - 1 second undergraduate degree (nursing)
 - 2 post-university college diplomas
- 15 Married, in addition: 5 common law or long-term relationships
- 10 are parents (43%)
- 17 are homeowners (74%)
- Almost all (18; or 78%) working in their area of study: those who are not are graduates from humanities and social science programs
- 4 could be considered underemployed: all four are from Humanities/Social Sciences and none had post-graduate education