"I just didn't feel like I fit in": The role of habitus in university drop-out decisions[1]

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increasingly pervasive discourse regarding the need for high levels of post-secondary education for life course success in a knowledge economy. Correspondingly, most Western industrialized nations have seen a drastic increase in university enrolment. Although we do know that access to university continues to be constrained by social class, we know little about factors contributing to dropping out of university. Using qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews, in this paper I investigate whether first-generation student status and social class affect individuals' university experiences and decisions to drop out. Key findings suggest that first-generation students are more likely to leave university early – often despite solid academic performance. Reasons for leaving university without graduating are centred around class-cultural discontinuities, such as not fitting in, not "feeling university," and not being able to relate to other students. These discontinuities are interpreted as a clash between an old and a newly developing habitus.

RÉSUMÉ

Un discours de plus en plus dominant souligne l'importance de poursuivre des études post-secondaires pour réussir dans une économie basée sur le savoir. On note également une croissance drastique des

inscriptions universitaires dans la plupart des pays occidentaux in-
dustrialisés. Nous avons déjà que l'accès aux études universitaires est
contraint par la classe sociale, mais les facteurs contribuant au décro-
chage sont moins connus. Sur la base de données qualitatives obtenues
par le biais d'entretiens semi-directifs, j'examine dans cet article le lien
entre le fait d'être le premier ou la première de sa famille à accéder à
l'université (« première génération »), la classe sociale et la décision de
quitter l'université. Les principaux résultats de la recherche suggèrent
que les étudiants dits de première génération sont plus susceptibles
d'abandonner l'université de manière prématurée, souvent malgré une
bonne performance universitaire. Les raisons expliquant leur départ
se centrent sur des discontinuités de classe et de culture, par exem-
ple le sentiment de ne pas être à sa place ou de ne pas appartenir à
l'université, ainsi que des difficultés à entrer en relation avec les autres
étudiantes et étudiants. Ces discontinuités sont interprétées comme un
conflit entre un ancien habitus et un habitus en développement.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have witnessed an increasingly pervasive discourse re-
garding the need for high levels of formal, post-secondary education for oc-
cupational and life course success in a post-industrial or knowledge economy.
Correspondingly, in most Western industrialized nations we have seen a drastic
increase in both educational aspirations and actual post-secondary enrolment,
particularly at the university level (OECD, 2000). This suggests that students
and their parents have picked up on human capital debates and believe that in-
creasing their education is the necessary prerequisite to achieving a successful
career. By the late 1990s, 57% of Canadian parents expected their offspring to
attend university and only 12% did not foresee any post-secondary education
in their children's future (Davies, 2005, p. 151). Although not entirely approach-
ing such high levels of parental expectations, post-secondary enrolment data
follow suit. In 1998, 65% of all Canadians aged 18 to 21 who were no longer
in high school had enrolled in post-secondary education at some point during
the previous five years. Of them, 43% were at university (Knighton & Mirza,
2002, p. 27).

Despite this massive expansion of the Canadian post-secondary education
system in the past decades, recent stratification research has found that social
class – particularly when measured as parents' level of education – is still the
strongest determinant of educational and occupational expectations and attain-
ment (Andres et al., 1999; Andres & Krahn, 1999; Anisef et al., 2000; Krahn,
2004b; Wanner, 2005). This persistent form of social class-based inequality,
even in a mass system of higher education, has meant that policy and scholarly
concerns have been largely focused on university-access barriers for working-
class youth. Social class is rarely a variable that enters research on university

experiences and completion. Given the increasing importance of university credentials, however, it seems a crucial task to ask whether those – such as working-class young people – who have been traditionally excluded from university also face greater challenges in completing higher education once they have entered it.

Social Class and Dropping out of University

The small amount of research on social class and university experiences suggests that working-class students at university may be perceived as having already undergone selection processes that make them different from their non-university, working-class peers and more like their middle-class fellow students. In fact, the few Canadian studies that have included social class in their investigation of the phenomenon of university drop-out have found little evidence of class differences (Butlin, 2000, Grayson, 1997; Krahn, 2004a). Instead, dropout decisions were more likely to be related to the high school averages with which students entered university. However, in an analysis of Canada's Youth in Transition Survey, Lambert et al. (2004, p. 13) did find that youth who had dropped out from post-secondary education were more likely to come from families with lower levels of education.

Research in other countries provides more convincing evidence for a relationship between social class and the decision to leave university without graduating. Official UK data indicate that dropping out of university is more probable for students from lower class backgrounds (Quinn, 2004). Longitudinal studies carried out in the US, using both national data (Walpole, 2003) and institutional data (Berger & Milem, 1999) find differences in academic and social integration by social class, which ultimately resulted in different levels of institutional commitment and educational attainment.

These quantitative findings are reflective of other evidence that has shown that working-class youth choose, enter, and experience university in unique ways. For instance, in more highly stratified university systems, like the ones found in the UK and US, social class has been shown to affect choice of the university (Reay et al., 2001; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). An immediate lack of role models or reference points also leads prospective working-class students to anticipate university to be difficult, risky, grueling, and fraught with uncertainty (Lehmann, 2004). The trepidations and concerns that mark expectations for university tend to be perpetuated into actual experiences at university. Working-class background has been shown to force students into positions of cultural outsiders with problems connecting to their wealthy peers and integrating into university life, which ultimately leads to crises in competency and fears of academic inadequacy (Granfield, 1991; Aries & Seider, 2005).

Rather than discussing dropouts, Granfield (1991) has applied Goffman's (1963) notion of stigma management to explain how some working-class students succeed in an elite academic environment. The successful students in his study overcame fears of academic inadequacy and their cultural outsider status

by mimicking their middle-class peers' dress, manners of speech, and career ambitions, while downplaying their social class backgrounds. The idea of stigma and its management, made explicit in Granfield's study, has been implicit in other works. In a classic UK study pre-dating Goffman's work, Jackson and Marsden (1962) concluded that attaining higher levels of education required working-class students to completely reorient how they viewed the world and in many cases reject and devalue their working-class background. Working-class university students thus appear to face unique challenges of reconciling the conflict between social mobility, class loyalty, and class dislocation, a problem to which Sennett and Cobb (1972) have referred as *hidden injuries of class*. This, of course, raises the question whether students who are less successful at reconciling these fundamental conflicts, or to use Goffman's terminology, managing the stigma of being working class, are at greater risk of dropping out of university.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus provides the perhaps most salient concept for addressing this question (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Habitus ensures the active presence of past experiences within individuals in the forms of schemes of perception, thought and action (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Put simply, habitus creates dispositions to act, interpret experiences, and think in certain ways. Bourdieu's concept of habitus goes beyond a simple formulation of biographical determinism as it is actualized through individuals, both consciously and unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1990b; Grenfell & James 1998). Applied to the problem of university dropout, it could be theorized that working-class students experience a fundamental discontinuity between the values of their working-class habitus and their middle-class goals and destinations. This should not simply be understood as working-class students having had less access to highbrow aesthetic culture, as has often been the case in educational research using a narrow interpretation of Bourdieu's sister concept cultural capital (cf. Kingston, 2001; Lareau & Weininger, 2003), but more importantly, as not possessing the "right" middle-class attitudes, linguistic skills, attire, networks, and social skills (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 439). For instance, in a study employing Canada's Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) data (Lambert et al., 2004, p. 17), "lack of fit" is identified as the most important reason why students left postsecondary education prior to completion. For working-class students at university, this may well indicate a mix of perceived cultural capital deficiency and habitus discontinuity. Offering largely anecdotal evidence, the *New York Times* recently published an article called "The Dropout Boom," which claims that almost one in three Americans in their mid- 20s is a college dropout and that most of them come from poor and working-class families (Leonhardt, 2005). Working-class students' decisions to drop out of college are described as rooted in a working-class culture and identity: university feels alien, while hard labour and its associated immediate gratification feel "normal" and "right."

In this study, former students who left university without graduating were invited to reflect on their experiences and decisions to drop out. At the broadest level, I investigate whether dropout decisions are rooted in academic or non-ac-

ademic problems. More specifically, university attrition models (e.g., Tinto, 1987) stress the importance of social integration and the above reviewed literature has identified unique integration challenges for first-generation and working-class students. These challenges were identified as particularly acute for first-generation and working-class students in elite universities. Although nowhere near the exclusive status of the elite institutions investigated by Granfield (1991) and Aries and Seider (2005), the students interviewed for this study were enrolled at a large, research-intensive Canadian university with a reputation for attracting a rather affluent student body. In the remainder of the paper, I analyze university dropouts' narratives for experiences and processes that are rooted in their social class background. In particular, I investigate if first-generation students describe their decisions to leave without graduating as based on alienation from university, its culture, and its expectations. If so, can this alienation or misfit be interpreted as a passive form of intimidation and inferiority, or as a more active form of resistance, based on reaffirmations of a different habitus?

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on 25 qualitative, semi-structured one-on-one interviews. These interviews, conducted between 2001 and 2003, were with individuals who were enrolled but who subsequently left a large, research-intensive university with a relatively affluent student population in Southwestern Ontario without having graduated. Upon departing, these students had spent at least one year away from university, either traveling, working, or taking part in other non-university forms of post-secondary education (e.g., community college, technical schools, or apprenticeship training). This means that the term dropout in this study also refers to students who eventually returned to university (in fact, two participants had done so) and may more accurately be described as stopouts.

Research ethics protocol dictated a passive form of participant recruitment. Hence, with the aid of the university's Office of the Registrar, invitations to participate in the study were sent out to all individuals in the Registrar's database who were enrolled at the university during the period specified above but were no longer active students and had not graduated. An initial mailing of approximately 1,400 invitations resulted in only 42 responses. This, of course, represents an extremely low response rate. As it was not the aim of this study to draw a representative sample to generalize findings to a larger population, no efforts were made to increase the sample size by following up on non-responses or invitations that were returned as undeliverable. Of the 42 potential participants, some eventually declined participation once the nature of the study was explained and others were unable to be interviewed during the period of data collection. Finally, a number of students who left university to immediately transfer to another university were excluded as well.

Data collection was carried out between November 2004 and January 2005. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, with an average length of approximately 80 minutes. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

Data analysis followed the coding process prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This involved moving from initial coding of interview data into relatively open categories to establishing more specific coding hierarchies and ultimately developing more selective empirical and theoretical categories. This process was aided by keeping extensive field notes and noting emerging themes throughout the data collection process as well as during the analysis. The data, including the field notes, were analyzed using QSR NVivo Version 2.0 software.

A few words are in order regarding the use of the terms working-class and first-generation throughout the analysis. First-generation student status simply implies that a student is the first in his or her family to attend university. Most importantly, this means that neither parent had ever attended university. Of the 25 participants, 15 were thus identified as first-generation students. The focus of the analysis will be on these students, although references will be made to observed differences to the non-first-generation students. Furthermore, 15 of the final 25 participants were women, with 10 of those 15 women being first-generation students. All of the respondents to the call for participation in the study were Caucasian and no further efforts were made to assure ethnic diversity, as the focus of the study was social class.

Parental educational attainment has been shown to be the most important factor determining university participation (e.g., Knighton & Mirza, 2002). Given the importance of the transmission of social advantages through the family, a range of Canadian studies of social reproduction within the education system have therefore relied on parental education as the main indicator of social class (e.g., Andres & Looker, 2001; Krahn, 2004b). The use of parental educational attainment as a measure of social class also makes sense if we consider that most young people have only a vague knowledge of their parents' occupational status or their families' income (see Andres & Krahn, 1999, p. 59).

In the following analysis, I also subscribe to the view that parental educational attainment serves as a useful proxy to help us interpret narratives of educational processes as situated in a context of social class. This interpretive strategy is aided by further information gathered on the occupational status of respondents' parents during the interviews (see Table 1). Of the 15 first-generation students, the majority have parents whose employment can be categorized as working class. Eight fathers were employed in blue collar, manual occupations (e.g., farmers, construction workers, and factory workers), one was unemployed (formerly factory work), and one in a lower level service occupation (security guard). Four fathers had moved out of earlier manual employment into either supervisory positions or self employment, and only one respondent had a father who, although already retired, had a career in banking (before a university education was required for such employment). Of the mothers, three were not employed (homemakers), seven were employed in lower level administrative positions (secretarial), two were nurses and one worked in teaching (all without university degrees). The employment status of two mothers was not provided.

Table 1: Participant Profiles; First Generation Students

Name[2]	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Educational Status at Interview
		Working class	
Tim	Not stated	Not stated, but manual	Full-time work (book binding)
Emma	Not stated	Not stated, but manual	Accounting (college degree)
Jodi	School bus driver	Electrician	Community College (engineering)
Chris	Farmer	Millwright/farmer	"In-between" (not working; not studying)
Charlene	Secretary	Carpet layer	Volunteering abroad
John	Homemaker	Electrician	Apprenticeship (electrician)
Ed	Nurse	Trades foreman (not specified)	Casual work (brewery)
Elizabeth	Secretary	Unemployed (factory worker)	Full-time work (call centre)
Sarah	Fast food server	Labourer	Full-time work (retail)
		Non-working Class	
Mike	Retail sales	Builder (architect)	College
Josh	Secretary (for husband)	Self-employed	Community College (culinary arts)
Cathy	Teacher (without university degree)	Real estate agent	Mother; Office work
Lynn	Secretary	Lay minister	Mother, homemaker
Sandra	Homemaker	Security manager	University (science)
Nancy	Banking	Banking	University (business)

As this background information reveals, there is not a perfect association between first-generation status and social class. Hence, I will comment initially on the importance of parental education (or first-generation student status) in terms of how respondents experienced university and its role in cultural reproduction. Nonetheless, the data did reveal processes that can be interpreted as being unique to the working-class, first-generation students and I will offer

some suggestions how the findings might be related the larger problem of university experience and social class.

Finally, a brief note regarding the data limitations caused by the recruitment method and small sample size is necessary. It has already been mentioned that the aim of this article is not to provide generalizable results. The sample size is far too small for generalizations, and the sample also suffers from a self-selection bias. Both limitations also raise issues regarding the reliability and trustworthiness of the data. Debates regarding reliability of qualitative research have become increasing complex (see Seale, 1999 for a useful review). The approach adopted in this paper is to convince the reader of the internal, theoretical validity of the findings. Bourdieu's theoretical construct of habitus provides a meta-theoretical basis for this validity. More importantly, it will be shown how the data and analysis presented in this paper is supported by (and supports) findings from similar studies. Finally, the aim of the paper is to offer productive insights and interpretations which will hopefully prove useful for further study and investigation.

FINDINGS

Discontinuities, First-generation Status and Habitus

As noted in other studies (e.g., Granfield, 1991; Aries & Seider, 2005), non-traditional university students – whether first-generation, working-class, or low-income students – often encounter an acute sense of discontinuity between their social origins and their anticipated educational destinations. For instance, Granfield (1991, p. 336) found that the class background of working-class students in an elite law school forced them into positions of being cultural outsiders and led to crises in competency and fears of academic inadequacy. Similarly, Aries and Seider (2005) noted that lower income students in a prestigious, private US university encountered problems connecting to their wealthy peers and becoming properly integrated into university life. The authors conclude that "the problem is particularly acute for first generation students, most lacking in cultural capital, who experience the greatest degree of inadequacy, inferiority and intimidation" (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 440). The first-generation students interviewed in this study were no exception, as the following comments, all from different interviews, demonstrate:

> Sandra: In comparison to the other kids on the floor, I was the only kid who was paying for school myself. I was the only one who just couldn't call home and say, "Hey, send me money," or I didn't have credit cards and stuff that other people had. …. I just felt very out of place. Almost all the kids on my [residence] floor went to private schools whereas I didn't. … I think I felt a little bit… I'm trying to think of the right word… but intimidated by a lot of the people's education… it is intimidating when you are surrounded by people like that all the time.

> Emma: I know there is really nothing that you can do about that but just to have more of an acceptance of people that maybe don't fit that stereotype of people that have left high school and are coming fresh out of high school and don't live on campus and maybe don't have rich parents or whatever.

> Cathy: There was definitely money there.... Seeing all the BMWs and ... yeah, these are student cars ... if I could afford a car. But you know, these were graduation gifts to people after high school and I did notice that.

Although these comments about differences in background, lifestyle and wealth evoke connotations of social class, only very few of the first-generation students in the study directly talked about money as a barrier or as a reason for dropping out. Elizabeth, who was perhaps financially the most disadvantaged participant in the study, was one of these exceptions who ended up failing her first year because she picked up too much work outside university to support her family:

> Elizabeth: Well, my dad was unemployed even when I was in first year.... I knew that my mom was struggling and I knew that if I didn't help them, I couldn't live with myself. So, I just started working and I started sending them money.

Less dramatically, Tim was frustrated by spending money on education rather than earning money in a job, as most of his non-university friends did. His desire to make money quickly superseded attendance at university and he eventually dropped out:

> Tim: That started weighing on my mind. I'm broke every weekend. All my friends have money to do whatever, I'm broke. It kind of started nagging at me.

Sandra, who in the first quote above expressed frustration with her more affluent peers' seemingly unlimited access to parental funds but also her intimidation vis-à-vis their perceived private school educational advantage, was the only first-generation participant who discussed her financial disadvantage as also being an educational disadvantage. The majority of the first-generation students described their decisions to leave university without graduating not as one of academic failure or financial necessity. As a matter of fact, some students felt that their financial disadvantage might actually constitute an educational advantage. Chris, who grew up on a farm and paid for university himself, had this to say about money and studying:

> Chris: If you have to pay for it yourself you'll take more responsibility and work harder.

The reasons for leaving university were discussed as rooted in a social or cultural clash with the institution of university and the "other" people within it. At first, these constructions can be interpreted as narratives of class-cultural alienation, as appears to be evident in the following two quotes by Sarah and Nancy:

> Sarah: I'm just as good as everyone else with their money.... I live in an apartment building and when we'd [talk about our lives, they would say] "Oh, you live in a penthouse?" and I'd be "No, I live in this apartment building, the 6th floor," or whatever, "no, I don't live in a penthouse." That was the atmosphere I got there.

> Nancy: If you weren't beautiful with lots of money and if you weren't that type of person, then you couldn't be part of their friends. ... I think I was trying, because I wanted to fit in. ... I just tried to be as nice and as cool as possible, I guess. ... [My family] had money... enough to pay for it. So that definitely makes us not so far off, but I just didn't feel like I fit in.

Both quotes contain underlying classed themes of relative differences in wealth and status. Sandra's earlier comments about being the only kid who paid for school herself is clearly a continuation of her intimidation vis-à-vis the elite education she believes her peers have received. Sarah and Nancy's quotes are somewhat more muted and are more concerned with their lack of recognizable status symbols. Although their concerns about fitting in could be interpreted as an expression of a class-cultural disadvantage and one of not understanding the cultural norms that define the status of the rich and beautiful students to whom they refer, they also hint at the fact that their disadvantage is not necessarily a financial one. Although Sarah is clearly from a working-class background, with her father employed in manual labour and her mother working at a national coffee shop chain, both Sandra and Nancy's families straddle class lines on the side of the middle class. This suggests that experiences of intimidation and inferiority cross traditional class distinctions and may indeed be related to being a first-generation student: the fear that one has entered a foreign institutional environment for which a frame of reference is missing and in which one does not rightly belong. Baxter and Britton (2001) have described this as "a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority" (p. 99).

This may also explain why the majority of first-generation students decided to drop out despite strong or at least solid academic performance. John is a first-generation student who earlier in the interview had talked about his expectations that university would be tough and grueling. Although he did well in his midterm exam, he was paranoid about falling behind and wasting his money. And although he observed (or at least perceived) his peers working less and not caring about their workload, for him this was not an option:

> John: I thought that was pretty good to have an over 80 average in engi-neering. My grades didn't drop. ... But, you know, I was working my tail off all the time. ... I don't think I could handle the stress of going to class and having virtually no social life. You want to make friends but you want to pass university too. ... It's costing me seven grand to go to school here. If I failed I was losing the money. ... It would have been easier if I kind of let myself slack off, but I didn't think that was an option.

It is not too far a stretch to interpret John's comments as a way to prove his right to be at university, to justify the expenses of being at university, and thus essentially to overcompensate for his perceived disadvantage as a first-genera-tion student. John's obsession with working hard, not falling behind and the in-strumental, utilitarian concerns about getting his money's worth stand in stark contrast to the focus on having fun and socializing that dominated the ways in which non-first-generation students described being at university. Similarly, Nancy's comments below poignantly reflect a mismatch between being a first-generation student and the expectations of what university is all about, which ultimately led her to reaffirm her identity outside the institution:

> Nancy: I think I had a 91 average, in my first year, so I did really well. But I think I concentrated too much on studying and not enough on the other stuff like hanging out and enjoying myself. It kind of made me more depressed because I wanted to have that university experience that everyone says. ... Like, I would always walk to classes and I would see people and I'd think "oh, they're not in university and they're doing well." And I kept thinking that maybe university is just not for me.

Most first-generation students in the study discussed rather similar strug-gles of not "feeling right" and not fitting in. This sense of dislocations did stand in marked contrast to the overall sense of belonging and integration evident in the interviews with students who were not the first in their families to go to university. These students neither spoke about social awkwardness, nor did they question the value of being at university. Even though the sample is too small to draw overly optimistic generalizations, the findings do suggest that unfamiliarity with the institutional culture and demands of university makes integration into and acceptance of university a far more challenging task for first-generation students.

Taking into consideration the occupational attainment of respondents' parents provided more nuanced insights into how we might understand the influence of class culture or habitus on first-generation students' university experiences. First-generation students who could be more accurately defined as being from working-class backgrounds and who actively identified with being working class showed some subtle and some not so subtle differences in how they discussed their university experiences, their decisions to leave, and the pathways the have followed since.

For the few first-generation students in the study who were not working class, the discontinuities and fears of intimidation and outsider status were discussed more in terms of relative status differences. They acknowledged, as did Nancy, that they were financially "not that far off" and still believed in a university degree as an essential symbol and prerequisite to social mobility. In contrast, many of the working-class, first-generation students expressed a more fundamental rejection of university: its values, what it stands for, the central role of its degrees for success, and its essential middle-class culture. These working-class students did not discuss discontinuities in terms of inadequacy, intimidation or fear, but as a profound misfit that was heightened by their more active identification with working-class culture, as the following quotes from four different interviews show:

> Sarah: It wasn't that the school was too hard, it's just I wasn't comfortable being here at the time.

> Tim: [Being] here, going to school with these people is what I didn't like. ... [It] was better outside the school. ... I can't relate to any of these people. ... I come from a very blue-collar background. So do all of my friends.

> John: Pretty much anybody in the workforce, like Dad is, is easier to get along with. Like blue-collar workers. ... It seems like people in trades are just more welcoming, I think.

> Josh: My dad had suggested that I go to college [before going to university]. I don't know ... he knew me better than I knew myself at the time. I am a hands-on learner, I like to do things with my hands a lot better, better than anything else. And I think I didn't really realize that at the time.

To use Goffman's terminology, it appears that these young men and women managed their working-class stigma by retreating to a more intense identification with their working-class roots and rather than adapting to what they perceived to be the middle-class values and culture of university, they ultimately rejected it,. Yet, various university attrition models and empirical research have documented the importance of both social and academic integration at university, which eventually leads to a strong identification with the institution and, one would presume, the culture of university generally (Pascarella & Terenzin, 1991; Tinto, 1987). How this resistance to integration can be interpreted as being related to class is further illustrated by the reasons students discussed for having finally left university and by the paths they had taken since their exit.

Having to Leave, Dropping Out, and Stopping Out

Perhaps the most striking difference between the first-generation study participants and their peers with university-educated parents lies in the reasons for leaving university without graduating. Almost all of the study participants with university-educated parents were forced to leave university because of academic failure. This persistence to the bitter end is likely a reflection of habitus, parental pressures, and family resources. Leaving university was a last resort and, in many cases, the students talked about tremendous amounts of resources, such as tutors or the help of older, university-educated siblings, who were mobilized to turn around their situation.

In contrast, more than two-thirds of the first-generation students left voluntarily and for non-academic reasons. This can be interpreted as a way to reconcile the discontinuities experienced at university. Just as students from families with academic backgrounds experienced pressures to stick with university, many first-generation students actually received family support for leaving. Recall that Nancy did exceptionally well academically in her first year at university. Yet, the following quote suggests that her decision to leave was nonetheless accepted, if not welcomed, by her parents:

> Nancy: End of September I was contemplating [dropping out] and I called my parents crying and told them that I didn't want to do it anymore. And they said, "Well then come home." ... I felt so relieved, not having to worry about those courses anymore. Not having to worry, I knew I was coming home. I felt great.

Nancy's idea of coming home can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically, in the sense that she is coming home to both a physical place and state of habitus that are at once familiar and comfortable.

Although Nancy is one of the middle-class respondents, Bourdieu's concept of habitus still seems appropriate to discuss the discontinuities she experienced as a first generation student. Bourdieu uses the metaphor of "feeling like a fish in water" when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Similarly, one may feel like a fish *out* of water when encountering a social world of which the habitus is not the product. Sarah, one of the working-class first-generation students very poignantly sums up this Bourdieuan notion of a habitus and a social world being in tune:

> Sarah: [Dropping out] was like a big weight just off. And I was like, "I'm happy now. This feels good."

John's comments about his relief after having decided to leave university offer another example of the role of a working-class habitus in explaining dropout decisions. It is worth reiterating at this point that John, whose father is an electrician and mother a homemaker, did very well during his time at university:

> John: My dad was "Good for you. You're going to be an electrician now, right"? And my dad was more or less – you know, he kind of always wanted me to follow in his footsteps. He was just like, it didn't matter. It was great. I guess we can relate more. I have a better relationship with him now. ... [Before] it was a lot different; I was in engineering and he was an electrician.

John's rejection of university has thus not only resolved discontinuities, but reaffirmed his identification with his working-class roots. Ed is a working-class, first-generation student who, at the time of the interview, was employed in casual, manual labour, but with intentions of entering a trade, which we can understand as a way of reaffirming his working-class identity:

> Ed: I was kind of told just to go [to university] and if you just get a basic degree then that can open up doors for you and you can go into whatever you want. But still I just, with no focus in mind, it really seemed like a lost cause to me. ... The way I look at it [now], if you're going to do a trade then you are going to have a job for life.

Later in the interview, he also admitted that his decision to drop out was grounded in the post-university lifestyle of holding a job, making a salary and having time with "the guys:"

> Ed: Relieved that I didn't have to get up for class anymore, relieved that I didn't have to do assignments and that kind of opened up more of my social life agenda so that I could go out at night and party with the guys.

Although the comments and narratives of Nancy, Sarah, John, and Ed regarding their experiences of alienation are very similar, how they discuss their ultimate reasons for dropping out do show subtle differences that can be interpreted as being rooted in a class-based habitus. Similarly, the pathways followed by the first-generation students after leaving university offer further evidence of these differences.

Slightly less than half of the 15 first-generation participants had resumed further post-secondary studies at the time of the interviews. Two of those seven participants were back at university, five were at or had completed community college or apprenticeship training, five were engaged in full-time employment, without having received any further education, one woman was at home with a newborn child, and two were in what they considered "in-between" phases, considering further education. Of the five participants who were employed full-time at the time of the interview but had not continued their education, four worked in what could best be described casual employment, including retail work, call-centre work, and blue collar work. All of them talked about continuing their education, either at university or college. Only one participant, who had had two children since dropping out and had secured more

steady employment in a law office, seemed content with her current employment and life.

It can be assumed that the high ambitions that led first generation students to university in the first place continue to be alive for many. In addition, lacking the social capital that can still open doors into professional-type employment for less successful students with university-educated parents, first-generation students may well recognize the importance of formal credentials for career success, as the comments by Sarah, one of the working-class, first-generation participants who worked full time during the interview, show:

> Sarah: I can see the value of education in and of itself. It's just to know that I have a student loan hovering over me that could potentially be $40,000, I want to know that when I'm done I'm not going to go back to the [current retail job] for a year or two and then go get a job. I want to know that I'm done and I have a job so I can pay off that. But I definitely see the value of education. I can see myself in the future going back for more.

It is therefore important to reconceptualize at least a few of the decisions to leave university as stopouts, rather than dropouts. Focusing on the six students who had returned to post-secondary education, the stopout decision nevertheless can be interpreted from a perspective of habitus and class discontinuities.

The two students who returned to university are, in fact, Nancy and Sandra, the two middle-class, first-generation students. Nancy talked earlier about her relief of "com[ing] home" after dropping out in the first month of her second year. She eventually enrolled at a different university with a more diverse, less affluent student body. So far, her experiences have been very positive and stand in marked contrast to how she felt about her first experience at university. Partly, this can be explained by having matured and gained more confidence in the intervening years, but institutional differences also played an important role in her subsequent experiences. It is notable that Nancy had talked about her problems of fitting in with the rich and beautiful students during her first time at university. Here is how she herself describes the difference between the two universities:

> Nancy: [The students here are] so nice. They really accept you. I've made a ton of friends already and I was only there for one semester. ... [Most of them] come from rural [areas], they are having to take out student loans. All of them are pretty much on student loans. But they've just... they've grown up differently.

Very similarly, Sandra had earlier talked about her intimidation vis-à-vis private-school educated students and the affluence she saw all around her during her first time at university. Here she describes her feelings about now studying at an urban commuter campus with a diverse student population:

> Sandra: A lot more people have part time jobs and not everybody is wealthy and waspy [like before]. I think my attitude changed [as well]. I am more comfortable with myself and that school and everything ...

In both Nancy and Sandra's cases, the change in institutional context from a fairly affluent, middle-class, residential university to more diverse and commuter campuses signals a resolution of habitus-based discontinuities that does not presuppose a rejection of a university education per se. It also highlights the importance of institutional context. Even though Canada does not (yet) have a university system that is as highly stratified as those in the UK (Reay et al., 2001) or the US (Goldrick-Rab, 2006), even relatively subtle differences in the student population seemed to have rather profound effects on these first-generation students. Goldrick-Rab's (2006) analysis of US national longitudinal data found that student mobility between institutions was highly associated with social class. Reay et al. (2001, p. 864) speaks of a Bourdieuian sense of place expressed in the higher education choices of non-traditional students who were choosing institutions at which they expected to feel at home and that they deemed acceptable for "people like themselves."

The working-class respondents who continued their formal education in colleges and apprenticeships moved into programs and institutions that are more obviously congruent or at least less discontinuous with their class backgrounds. John talked about his relief after having dropped out and how he felt more comfortable in a blue collar apprenticeship he started almost immediately after leaving university:

> John: You know, it sucked. University was your life and I didn't enjoy it... it sucked altogether really, so when I dropped out it was like – it was a great relief. ... I didn't really want to be a pencil pusher. If I didn't have a toolbox at the end of the day, it wasn't worth it really to me.

While not forsaking formal post-secondary education, John nonetheless rejected the notion that a university degree is essential as a pathway to a successful life and fulfilling career.

Josh left university to take up a program in culinary arts at the local community college. Here is how he explains his decision in ways that are linked to class-cultural issues of pride in "real" manual work and the value of an applied education:

> Josh: With history or whatever I didn't really have a set career path. I didn't have, "Oh, once I graduate I can do that." I don't think you're really learning any working skills [at university]. ... I actually have a lot of pride in myself and when I say to people that I'm more or less a chef I have pride in that because whether they believe me or not, there's a lot of work that goes into it. It requires a lot of discipline and a lot of knowledge and I think there is... I think that it combines my interests even more so than university did.

Similarly, Jodi and Emma, in different interviews, defend their transfers from university to community college as positive, habitus-confirming move that will not diminish their career and life goals:

> Jodi: Well, in the end I discovered that [university] wasn't for me. That's not the kind of person I am. ... I'm a more hands-on type of person, not one to sit down and think about things.

> Emma: I don't know, I still think [dropping out] was for the best. I have no regrets about it, even though I'm still disappointed about it and I probably always will be. I don't regret it. ... Yeah, because I think it was necessary for me to do that in order for me to get to where I am now. And I'm happy where I am now. So yeah, it was necessary.

Emma and Jodi are representative of the majority of first-generation participants who perceived of their time at university as a useful learning experience, a time to grow personally, and a way to confirm alternative vocational interests.

DISCUSSION

Although there may indeed be little evidence for a statistical relationship between social class background and dropping out of university (see e.g., Grayson, 1997; Butlin, 2000), the narratives provided by the young people interviewed for this paper suggest that we need to interpret social background as playing an important role in how students experience university and ultimately how they form dispositions to either persist or drop out. The limited sample on which this study is based makes it impossible to claim that these findings apply to first-generation or working-class students generally. Nonetheless, they support other research showing that integration at university is bound by sociocultural variables. The first-generation students were more likely to leave university very early, in some cases within the first two months of enrollment. They were also more likely to leave university despite solid academic performance. In contrast, non first-generation students tended to "stick around" until they were forced to leave because of academic achievement problems. For first-generation students, not "fitting in," not "feeling university," and not being able to "relate to these people" were key reasons for eventually withdrawing from university. In addition, many of the working-class, first-generation students spoke about the fact that being at university actually confirmed that they needed more hands-on, applied post-secondary education, which they sought and found at community colleges or in apprenticeships.

The experiences of most first-generation students in this study, particularly those from a working-class background, lend support to the notion of habitus as an open system of dispositions, but also one that tends to ultimately reinforce itself (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). Hence, there are young people whose decisions to study at university represent (at least initially) a break with

the social-structural confines created by their habitus. Yet, they interpret their experiences and circumstances at university through the lens of their specific class habitus. Their ultimate decision to drop out because they do not feel they fit in or because they discover their true vocational nature ("hands-on," applied learning) can thus be interpreted as reinforcing their habitus. If we consider that for many first-generation students this happens despite strong or at least solid academic performance, we can interpret these decisions to drop out as ways to resolve and reconcile fundamental discontinuities between the habitus of their social roots and the need to acquire a new habitus for success at university. Quinn (2004, p. 70) described the dropout decisions of UK working-class students as "a form of loyalty to working-class culture," but also quickly points out that these accounts of working-class pride should not be taken too far. Instead, she proposes that "young people must be seen in serious search of meaningful lives, with drop-out sometimes a valid part of that search" (Quinn, 2004, p. 71). This notion of university dropout as part of a search for a personal and vocational identity can certainly be applied to this study. The first-generation participants who redirected their educational efforts into other forms of post-secondary education such as community college or apprenticeships nonetheless perceived of their time at university as a useful learning experience, a time to grow personally, and a way to confirm alternative vocational interests.

These findings approach only part of an important story: how first-generation students who left university without graduating discuss experiences of cultural dislocation to explain their drop-out decisions. The interpretations offered here rest on the assumption of a relatively static habitus, or at least a habitus that ultimately reasserts itself. The other part of the story is about the experiences of those first-generation students who persist and successfully complete university. Is their story one of habitus transformation? Do their university experiences reshape how they conceive of themselves, their dispositions, and ultimately their habitus? Are these students "making it by faking it," as Granfield (1991) has found? Or can first-generation students, in particular those from working-class backgrounds, affirm their working-class identities with pride and use them as a source of strength, as Aries and Seider (2005) observed in a study of low-income students at an elite university?

The findings of this study suggest that further research investigating the relationships among first-generation Canadian student status, social class, and higher education is necessary. A larger-scale study linking education pathways with socio-economic variables as well as students' perceptions of their fit or misfit with the culture and expectations of university would help determine the salience of the interpretations offered in this article. Given the generally high aspirations of young people across social strata, such a study might also offer the opportunity to reconsider and reconceptualise the reproductive nature of habitus.

Finally, the findings have policy implications for those concerned with attrition of individuals previously excluded from university. As life course success is increasingly tied to high levels of formal education and as universities are com-

mitted to recruiting students from a diversity of backgrounds, attention should be paid to the ways in which university experiences of first-generation and working-class students may be overshadowed by feelings of inferiority and intimidation.[3] Aries and Seider (2005) have noted how working-class students are one of the few groups whose collective interests do not have a base of organized support for their identities. Establishing such forms of organized support may be rather difficult. Unlike race or sexual orientations, for example, working-class status, at least in North America, is not a category around which strong social identities are being formed and such students may not identify their concerns as being related to their class background. Nonetheless, the findings in this and other research suggest that first-generation and working-class students do assert a context of social class when discussing their university experiences and that they could benefit from programs and support groups that recognize their differences and from universities with a true commitment to diversity. ❧

NOTES

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2   All names used throughout are pseudonyms.
3   Andres (1993) identified similar class-based feelings of inferiority and intimidation at the high school level.

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