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The Purpose of a College Education: Getting a Job: Narrations of First-Generation College Students

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The Purpose of a College Education: Getting a Job.

Narrations of First-Generation College Students

Introduction

The purpose of this research focuses a specific group of first-generation college students: a group of white, working-class, undergraduate students who attend a large northeastern research university. This study focuses on how these students narrate their educational and social experiences in both their home culture and within the college setting.

Research regarding first-generation college students has shown that this group has a unique set of circumstances and difficulties which influence their performance at the college level and their social lives within the college environment (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Strage, 1999; Naumann, Bandalos & Gutkin, 2003; Khanh, 2002). The majority of the research on first-generation college students has overlooked the white, working-class sector of this population. This study addresses this gap by examining the self-narrated life histories of this group as a means to better understand their college experiences.

There has been very little qualitative research conducted with first-generation college students and even less with white students belonging to this group. Much of the research focuses on ethnic minorities or first-generation Americans and their experiences in college (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Strage, 1999; Naumann, Bandalos & Gutkin, 2003; Khanh, 2002). The quantitative nature of these studies limits their ability to draw a more personal type of information from these students, such as how they narrate their lived experiences as first-generation college students and how they relate to their families. Previous research with first-generation college students has been almost exclusively survey based and does not allow the students to self narrate their educational experience. Reissman's (1993) suggestion (as cited in Johnson, 2002), is to see the participant's narratives as windows into the participants' self-

representations (p.157). The participants in this study were open with their stories and often seemed glad to have someone listen to their unique experience.

Theoretical Framework

While there is a body of literature which focuses on the white working class, there are no ethnographic studies which directly address the self-narrated life stories of white, working-class, first-generation college students. The majority of the literature concerning the white working class is focused on high school students or adults who are not currently or never have attended college (Willis, 1977; Weis, 1990; 2004; 2008).

The economy of the United States has changed due to the forces of globalization. The white working class, which at one time was all but promised secure labor jobs, is presently being forced to seek alternatives to labor jobs. Higher education is an increasingly popular route these people are taking in the hope of securing better, more stable employment (Weis, 1990, 2004; Aronowitz, 2001). The last several years have been witness to increasing numbers of first-generation college students entering the college environment, many of whom are white (NCES, 2005, p. 7). Higher educational attainment for students who come from the white working class can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schooling prepares students to reproduce the social status of their parents, to perpetuate and reinforce class structures. Because many working-class students attend working-class elementary and high schools, they learn the skills deemed appropriate for their social class (Anyon, 1980). These students must translate the working-class skills that they have been taught into the skills which are required by the more intellectual college environment. The working-class lens though which this group views the world can and often does influence how they understand their surroundings

(McRobbie, 1978; Willis, 1977; Weis, 1990). How a student performs within the school environment is influenced by their place within the social hierarchy, and their linguistic patterns along with several other socioeconomic factors (Bourdieu, 1977). This phenomenon, commonly known as social reproduction theory of education, states that social classes tend to be reproduced through the educational system in order to maintain social hierarchy. The higher layers of the stratified American educational system are, however, currently being penetrated by a group of people who have historically not participated in higher education, white, working class, first-generation college students, and others. Due to the societal and economic changes that the United States has gone through, and continues to go through, more people from lower social classes are entering college. Increasing numbers of first-generation college students hope to use their college education as a way out of their working-class background and in an effort to find financial security (Weis, 1990). The study seeks to learn more about the experiences of these students who have chosen to attend college, despite the fact that they come from a community that has little to no experience with higher education.

Methods

The students were asked questions pertaining to how education is viewed and valued within their home community compared to what they have encountered in college. They were asked to narrate their educational experiences throughout elementary, middle, and high school, and how these histories relate to their college experience. The main focus of this study is a quasi-life history of their formal education and how and why these students transitioned into college, specifically into college at a large Research I University. This quasi-life history, ethnographic interview study, (Hammersley & Atkinson, pp. 131-132; Reissman, 1993;

Seidman, 1998; Fine & Weis, 1998, p.292) is based on data derived from a series of in depth interviews with each subject. It was conducted over a six-month period of time, from September 2006 to February 2006.

This qualitative study was conducted through participant interviews using the Three-Interview Series. The "Three-Interview Series," as outlined by Seidman (1998), which was developed to contextualize the subject's narrative, was used to structure the interviews (p. 11). This study seeks to better understand the experience of these white, first-generation college students in the context of their working-class backgrounds and social networks. Seidman explains Dolbeare and Schman's (1982) justification for the three-interview process, which they developed:

> The first interview establishes the context of the participant's experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p.11)

Each of the three interviews was about 60 minutes in length and were all held in a private office on campus. The interviews focused on the personal narratives (Riessman, 1993) of each participant concerning their arrival to the college environment and how their earlier educational experiences and family backgrounds have influenced this journey.

The Perceived Value of a College Degree Within the New Economy

Globalization and its effects within the United States, specifically on the job market, have influenced these participants in a number of ways. In the face of the growing gap between the

rich and the poor (Devine, 2008; Reich, 2008), this group is participating in higher education in an effort to advance themselves both socially and financially. These participants are participating in higher education in hopes of attaining a credential that will help them gain desirable employment. They are aware of the fundamental shifts in the global economy, specifically off-shoring, which have resulted in the loss of the US labor jobs that once supported the white working class. These participants are working toward a credential that they hope will enable them to secure employment beyond the labor-oriented jobs that have historically been associated with the white, working-class. The participants in this study viewed their college education as a credential that will qualify them for a job. They were interested in the credentials provided by a college education, but did not narrate the importance of the types of learning and knowledge that college has exposed them to. Among this group of participants, there is a common understanding that they must earn a college degree if they intend to compete in today's global economy.

This paper will explore two main themes concerning the ways in which the participants understand the changing economy and how this is related to their race and educational goals: (1) these participants are attending college to earn a credential; (2) there was some uncertainty among this group concerning whether or not their college education would guarantee them future jobs..

Sixteen of the 18 participants were on the college prep track during high school. A number of these working-class participants attended middle-class schools where they were exposed to a college-prep curriculum. The other group of students who attended working class schools (with the exception of James and Scott) also belonged to the college prep track. The college-prep track that all but two of these participants belonged to provided these first-generation college students with the tools necessary to smoothly transition into college. In some

ways these white, working-class, first-generation college students are transgressors, penetrating the borders of higher education. In other ways they are privileged by their race and their ability to participate in college as members of the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1995).

College Education as a Credential

Previous studies of the white, working-class have shown men and women to value education differently (McRobbie, 1978; Weis, 1990, 2004; Willis, 1977) however, the men and women in this study, however, viewed education in nearly identical ways. Specifically, they viewed education as a means to an end to get a job, and as a credential which would allow them to better compete in the workforce. This differs from the value the white, working-class young men Willis (1977) studied placed on education. His research took place during a boom in labor-oriented heavy industry jobs in countries such as England and the United States. Because these young men in the late 1970s knew that there were labor jobs waiting for them they could reject their schoolwork without the fear of unemployment in the future. There were jobs waiting for them whether or not they performed well in school. As Willis (1977) explains, the young men assigned little value to theoretical school knowledge; but, they found value in practice-oriented knowledge which could easily translate to their futures on the shopfloor "The rejection of school work by 'the lads' and the omnipresent feeling that they know better is also paralleled by a massive feeling on the shopfloor, and in the working class generally, that practice is more important than theory" (p. 56).

The white, working-class participants in this study, on the surface, seem to lean toward what Willis (1977) described as a middle-class understanding of the value of an education, but revert back to the working-class need for their education to be practical. They value higher

education because of the credential it will provide them. They seem to disvalue any knowledge they gain during their college education that will not directly translate into their future jobs. Terenzini, Pascarella and Blimling (1996) concur, explaining that first-generation college students were more interested in focusing on applied, rather than theoretical majors, because earning a degree for career purposes was the main objective of a college education. The participants see their education as a tool which will help them gain middle class status both through the kind of employment they hope to attain and the salaries that they hope to earn—they do not value the college-knowledge which will not directly translate to their career path. These students understand that the economy has changed, and if they intend to compete they need to earn a college degree. Bloom (2005) explains how the economy has changed and today a college degree is essential to gaining access to the jobs of today:

> In the last thirty years, as the American economy has been transformed by technology and globalization, a college education has become more than just a 'door to the middle class.' Whereas before the 1970s a high school degree was sufficient to provide access to stable working-class jobs, today, 'a college education is fast becoming indispensable to an individual's economic self-sufficiency.' (p. 63)

These students are in college to earn a degree; they see their college education as a credential or a "piece of paper" that will grant them access to better employment opportunities. This understanding and value of education is quite different from that which Aronowitz (2008) discusses of his mother who attended college after retirement. He explains the motivations that brought his mother to enter higher education: "She had always been a voracious reader, musician, and painter throughout her life but…never had the chance to share her literary insights

with others. That, rather than career preparation, was the main value of school" (p. 78). Education, for these participants, was valued almost exclusively as job preparation. Mike seemed to understand college as a hoop through which to jump to gain the credential he needs to secure the job of his choice. Mike and Tim share the notion that their degree is "a piece of paper" that will grant them employment:

Angela: You have worked hard…realistically what do you think you're going to get out of it? You're doing all this work, what is the return from your investment.

Mike: I put all this work in… And then in the end, I'm going to get a grade, I'm going to get a piece of paper and then I'm going to go teach Physics. So I think the return for me is being able to say okay I did it. Now let's go back and let me do what I want to do. I'll do what you want me to do. You give me a piece of paper and a certification for education. I'll go back and do what I want to do…

But basically you do it, take as much as you can out of it. And then at the end you get a piece of paper and you go do whatever it is you want to do, hopefully. I mean that's the idea.

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Angela: And he (father) would like work nine to five at one place (interrupts)

Tim: Yeah, he'd work like nine to five. He'd come home from like five to eight, then he'd go and work, you know, nine to two at the other job – the bar.

Tim: I want the degree to say I have it, as dumb as that sounds, so I just – I want – it's a piece of paper but I want that piece of paper.

Angela: Okay.

Tim: And then like, I'm just hoping to get a good job outside of that.

Both Mike and Tim compare their futures to the lives of their non-college educated parents. These young men credit the job troubles experienced by their parents exclusively to their lack of degree. Because their parents lacked the credential of a college degree they were not able to compete for a number of jobs, and were therefore "stuck," not because they were unqualified to do the work, but because they lacked the "piece of paper" that would get their foot in the door.

Mike's understanding of the value of a college education is similar to that of his mother, but differs in a meaningful way. While he does state that some courses have material that "is interesting and you get a lot out of it," he defaults back to describing his college education as doing what others want him to do in order to earn a "piece of paper." He seems to value his college education more for the credential he will earn than what he has learned or will learn in college. His interest in a college degree lies mostly in the practicality of gaining the credentials required to secure a teaching position. His interest in getting a college degree is fueled by his mother's assertion that she has been unable to secure desirable employment because she lacks the credential of a college education—to be clear, his mother feels she has the skills she needs for a number of jobs, but because she does not have the college credential to back these skills her job prospects are limited. Mike explains that his mother has been unable to secure a stable and well paying job because she does not have "that piece of paper." Because Mike's mother feels

that her lack of college-credential has kept her from securing desirable employment, she values the degree only for the job opportunities it may offer. This frame of mind reduces a college education to simply "going through the motions" to get a job credential, rather than acknowledging the learning and experiences that one goes through while becoming college educated. Mike devalues the knowledge he is gaining via his college education, the same knowledge that is preparing him to reach his goal to be a physics teacher. This can be compared to the "getting through" mentality of the white, working-class, high school students examined by Weis (1990) who also seemed to simply be "going through the motions" of school: "The point here is that the vast majority of students, at least in their discourse, are not overly concerned about anything more than passing. It is the expressed 'getting through' school that counts not doing even minimally well" (p. 28). The students in Weis' study were interested simply in passing their classes instead of actually learning from the courses they attended. They did not value the education that they were receiving, but only the diploma and credential this diploma would supply them. These students knew that they were required to perform on a minimum level to "pass" their classes and complete high school in turn earning the credential of a high school diploma—while the first-generation college student participants in this study were interested in earning strong grades, they viewed the grades as foundation for their credential—not a measurement of their learning.

Tim has lived through his father's and his family's struggles with money and feels that a college education could provide him with a way out of this lifestyle. In fact, his father has encouraged him to earn a college degree so that Tim will not have to experience the same constraints that he has had to live with within the job market. At the time of this interview Tim has not slept in nearly 24 hours—he came to the interview after working an overnight shift,

which followed a regular shift at another of this three jobs. Tim has adopted his father's strong working-class work ethic, but hopes in the future a college degree will grant him employment that will pay him enough so that he will not have to work three jobs to stay afloat.

The American white, working-class has been affected by the restructuring of the global economy in a number of ways and has looked to education to aid them in securing jobs within the new economy (Weis, 1990; 2004; 2008). Because the labor-oriented jobs that were once the backbone of the economic well-being of the white, working-class have all but left US soil, this group of participants is looking for employment in the form of professional jobs and other jobs outside the labor-sector which may be less likely to downsize or off-shore. These participants have been told since they were young that a high school diploma will not qualify them for today's jobs. Many have witnessed and lived through the job struggles that their parents have experienced because of limited employment options. Nearly all of the parents, high schools, and larger communities of these participants pushed them to pursue higher education as a means to get a job within today's economy. Aronowitz (2008) explains the current push for higher education:

> Ours is the era when 'higher education' credentials have become the new mantra of public schooling. The rationale for the need for credentials is the technological imperative, the material basis of which is deindustrialization. The days, it seems, are long gone when a teenager could drop out from high school and get a decent paying factory job or go into retailing or wholesaling with the prospect of eventually earning enough to support self and family with dignity. (p. 81)

Indeed, in an era where a significant proportion of the population can remember a time in their lives when "hard work" in the form of a manual labor job could support a family on one income (Weis, 1990; Willis, 1977) the American white, working-class has come to the understanding that this is no longer the case. The last few decades of the re-structuring of neoliberal ideology have brought fundamental change to the United States economy and that of the world. Harvey (2005) explains the monumental turn the world has taken toward neoliberalism:

> There has everywhere been an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s. Deregulation, privatization and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common. Almost all states…have embraced, sometimes voluntarily and in other instances in response to coercive pressures, some version of neoliberal theory and adjusted at least some policies and practices accordingly. (pp. 2-3)

Harvey (2005) goes on to explain the weight which President Reagan's policies served to "to curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage" (p. 1). Organized labor was, and continues to be, considerably damaged by the neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization, and the global free-market economy (i.e. globalization). A union card no longer provides a guaranteed job to members of the white, working class, and they are looking toward higher education for security (Weis, 1990; 2004; 2008). While Weis and Fine (2004) explain that their participants "rarely reference history or the global economy explicitly" (p. xvii) the participants in this study did just that. This group seems to have a constructed the framework through which they understand the connection between higher education and economic stability based on the

experiences that their white, working-class families have had within the neoliberal economy. While the participants did not explicitly use terms such as "neoliberalism" or "globalization," their narrations told the story of college-age Americans whose life-decisions have been structured and informed by the practical application of these theories. This group is interested in financial stability. When the participants were questioned as to how today's economy has influenced their decision to attend college; nearly each participant explained that they knew they needed to earn a degree if they expected to secure a desirable job. Financial security was the first thing on the mind of these participants, a priority which Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) explains is dominant among first-generation college students:

> Compared with other students, first-generation students more often reported that factors related to financial security were very important to them personally. In addition, they were more likely …to say that 'being very well off financially' was very important to them. (p. 21)

Rachel is particularly concerned with financial stability and wants her college education to help her fill her desire not to have to worry about money. She states that an individual must gain higher education of some sort to compete within today's economy. She even pushes on to say that these educational credential requirements are beyond the undergraduate degree today. Jamie views a college education as a necessity to secure any stable job under the new economy, even service-sector jobs that at one time may not even have required a high school diploma.

Angela: Can you think about the economy and reflect how the economy works right now and whether or not the economic situation in the U.S. has influenced your decision to go to college?

Rachel: I would definitely say that I know that I must get some type of

degree. I think it's past undergraduate now. I think graduate school is what everybody's like looking for. You have to do well to live comfortably now. You can't just get by 'cause it's so hard. I just feel like you don't have the option of just – you have to do what you love but you have to make sure that you're getting well paid. Everything is so expensive especially in my city. The price of living is just so much. I see that a lot just 'cause of the things I do need to do on my own now so I just have to do really well…

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Angela: So can you reflect on the economy and how maybe that has influenced you to want to do better in school or want to do school at all?

Jamie: I think it definitely does influence just because like you – I mean you basically have to have a degree to get a decent job. Like even some of these manager positions at just like a department store type of thing. You need a degree of some sort where as opposed to like, you know, five, ten years ago, you didn't—you kind of like worked your way up…So I think with a lot of jobs too, you might be able to get in, but you might not be able to advance if you don't have a degree kind of to back you up. And yeah, I think it's definitely the economy in general is just going more towards like service type jobs like – as opposed to, you know, manufacturing type jobs. And I think that's definitely where you kind of have to

> look for, you know, to get a degree and then to get a job.

So, both Rachel and Jamie confirmed Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin's (1998) finding which asserted that first-generation college students stressed financial security as a critical determinant in pursuing a college diploma. In this way, the economy impacts the way these students understand the value of their education. Rachel and Jamie have differing understandings of the financial opportunities that their college education will offer them. While Rachel plans on gaining access to high-level professional jobs through her college education, Jamie points out that under today's economy even service sector jobs require a postsecondary education. Aronowitz (2008) argues that the labor market has changed to require a college degree even for jobs that will not offer the opportunity to utilize this education:

> No doubt earning a post-secondary credential has become mandatory for the world of services and, in some cases, even for qualifications for apprenticeships in union-sponsored highly skilled manual trades such as electrician and plumber. But …the credential is incommensurate with the requirements of the job; its ubiquity is due, chiefly, to the widespread recognition that post-secondary credentials are absolutely necessary for qualification for the new world of work. And, except for the professions the credential does not signify necessary knowledge, but the willingness of the student to submit to the controls that have been imposed by the chronic shortage of good paying jobs. (p. 82)

The participants felt that their undergraduate education would be a step in the right direction to earn a credential that would grant them access to a stable, good-paying job. They did, however, narrate that in order to seriously compete for a job they felt they had to earn a master's degree. While the students had varying backgrounds and life-experiences their ultimate goal and means to attain their goals remained essentially the same—finish their undergraduate degrees, go on to

complete a master's degree and through the credentials this education will provide, secure a stable good-paying job for their futures. The participants frequently commented that they did not want the same types of jobs that their parents held—even though a number of their parents were able to make more than enough money to "get by" and some were even able to pay for their children's college education, vacations, etc. This is to say that despite the fact that these students did come from working class backgrounds, most participants did not grow up in poverty. The participants reflect on their parent's experiences and narrate that even if their parents were able to "climb the ladder" and earn a good salary they were "stuck" in jobs that they may not like. Because their parents did not hold a degree they had little option to find new jobs.

College Credentials

These students are earning a degree in hopes of preventing themselves from entering the workforce through service sector or low-level jobs, but today's economy in the United States has been offering little more. Devine (2008) explains:

> This period has been noted for economic troughs and accompanying redundancy and unemployment, the growth of low-level jobs in the service sector such as in retail and personal services, growing income inequality between rich and poor, and commitment to the operation of a free market rather than alleviating inequalities. Thus, in a society where intergenerational upward social mobility may be halting, or even declining, the ways in which class inequalities are reproduced are crucial to understand. (p. 100)

In some ways these students are banking on their education paying off; in other ways, they narrated suspicion that their college education will, in fact, not guarantee them a job. Education, for this group of white, working- class, first-generation college students is a gamble—albeit an

educated one. They have seen others earn a college degree only to return to their hometown and work at a local grocery store or other job that they could have attained with only a high school education, perhaps less. This concern is well grounded. According to Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), over 50% of bachelor degree recipients, both of first-generation and non-first-generation status, report that they could have obtained their job without their college education (p. 46). With over half of the participants in Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin's (1998) study reporting that they have secured jobs that they feel could have been obtained without a college degree, the concerns of the participants who were not sure if their education would actually pay off financially are well founded. These participants are playing the odds of the global economy in an effort to gain social mobility through higher education. Because they have grown up with the economic realities that their non-college educated parents have had to face, they are willing to invest the time and money in higher education with the hope that it will pay off financially.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schooling prepares students to reproduce the social status of their parents to perpetuate and reinforce class structures. Anyon (1980, 1981) furthers this assertion by demonstrating that schools teach their students skill sets that are specific to their social class. While there is a body of research which has demonstrated that education functions to reproduce the social classes (Anyon, 1980; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), the participants in this study are attempting to use schooling and education at the post secondary level in hopes of a advancing their social status beyond that of their parents. While many first-generation college students do not complete even their undergraduate degrees (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003; 2006) this entire group of participants plans on continuing their education through the master's level. These undergraduate students are participating in higher education and succeeding—but the question of whether or not this education will translate

into job security remains unanswered. Their college education and degree(s) may afford them more access to desirable jobs, but cannot guarantee they get hired.

Conclusion

These participants have grown up under the influence of the neoliberal economy and have based their college decisions on globalization, the lack of availability of union jobs, etc. They have experienced, through their parents, the realities of what today's economy has to offer workers who do not hold college degrees. They are determined to earn a degree to ensure they will not reproduce these types of employment limitations. This group understands and values the importance of earning a college degree within today's economy, but may not fully understand a number of other factors which help individuals secure today's jobs. They are thinking they are competing with other Americans with degrees when they are actually competing with the world. They do not seem to be fully informed of what kind of competition they are in store for.

This group has decided make a number of financial sacrifices in order to take the plunge and work toward a college degree in a time of economic uncertainty. The majority of participants will graduate with thousands of dollars in student loan debt, loans borrowed in the good faith that after they complete college they will be able to secure desirable employment. Bloom (2005) explains the complicated nature of the risk students are taking by borrowing money to pay for college during a time of economic uncertainty in the US:

> The average debt of student borrowers for has grown from $16, 417 in 1991 to $27, 600 in 2003…Is it worth the risk? While they are convinced of the importance of college on one level, when students look around them, current economic signals send mixed

> messages. Even for those students who do succeed in finishing college, it is unclear if their earnings after college will justify the money that must borrow. (pp. 74-75)

The participant's understandings of the job opportunities open to their non-college educated parents have influenced how they understand their future college-educated job prospects. From a young age they have been told that a college education will provide financial stability by granting them access to good jobs. Globalization has forced the American white, working-class to view education differently in the last several years. As the students reflect on the economy they seem to feel optimistic that their degree will help them secure desirable employment, but they are reluctant to believe that a college degree will provide an easy life with unlimited employment options. At the same time that they seem sure that a college education is the best option for them, they are not convinced that a college education will guarantee them a more financially stable future. While they share the understanding that they cannot compete in today's economy without a college degree, they are not sure to what extent holding a degree will actually enable them to compete.

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