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***The Power of 'Unrecognizable Habitus': Inclusion and Exclusion among 10 British Low-Socio-Economic Status Students Abroad (0150)***

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Introduction

Privileged students have better access to family and friend support and financial resources to access international educational opportunities (British Council 2015, 18–19). International mobility thus correlates with privileged social background (Finn and Darmody 2017) and therefore largely reinforces class distinctions and social advantages (Findlay et al. 2012). With middle and upper-class families possessing the cultural and financial capital needed to take advantage of globalized higher education, low-income students across the world are less able to obtain socially valued international experiences and qualifications (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2010; Gerhards and Hans 2013). But what happens when a charitable policy intervention allows low-socio-economic status (SES) students to study abroad for their entire degrees? Specifically, what happens when low-SES British students are enabled to study at elite US universities? Will they face the same adjustment struggles as domestic low-SES students who transition into elite higher education (Aries and Seider 2007; Reay et al. 2001)? These are the key questions this article addresses. The findings suggest that international mobility among low-SES students can alleviate feelings of not belonging.

Literature review

There are well-documented differences by SES in accessing elite higher education in both the United Kingdom and the United States (e.g. Croxford and Raffe 2014; Jerrim 2013; Karabel 2005;). Social stratification is effectively maintained (Lucas 2001) through university hierarchies and the qualitative differences in the higher education experience, although postgraduate study as a frontier of access to professions has also led to the re-emergence of maximally maintained inequality through differences in the length of education (Raftery and Hout 1993). There are, however, exceptions to this general pattern, with some select low-income students applying, enrolling and progressing within elite higher education institutions (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009).

When students enter elite higher education, an individual's position within the social class structure of their context will influence aspirations and expectations, or in Bourdieusian terminology the 'field of the possibles' (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, 110). Differences in wealth can directly create different opportunities to participate in extra-curricular and other higher education experiences and the ability to 'fit in' (Aries and Seider 2005). Non-privileged students in elite higher education may feel their social and cultural identities are less valued within the higher education environment, thus leading to 'social identity threat' (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008;).

International experiences and prestigious degrees from specific countries have become a prized commodity, often enhancing a student's standing in the international job market. Privileged students have better access to socially valued study abroad experiences, enhancing their human capital (Gerhards and Hans 2013). Internationally mobile low-SES students then provide a unique way of studying the extent to which these students experience the same difficulties in navigating identity and belonging as domestic low-SES students.

In this project, we are studying the impact of international mobility is possible using a unique scheme developed by a UK-based charity. The charity scheme provides information, a summer school and application support to low-income British students to pursue free study at US universities. Eligibility for the scheme requires residence in the United Kingdom, usually a household income below £25,000, enrolment at a state school and academic attainment of at least eight or more A grades or A\* grades at GCSE or the equivalent (this is the equivalent of an A or A+ in the United States), and is thus targeted at low-income, high-achieving students without previous educational advantages. Does studying outside of one's own national and cultural context mute feelings of exclusion and isolation, as British cues of socio-economic and regional difference (Addison and Victoria 2015) cannot be easily observable by American peers?

## Methodology

All UK participants in the charity mobility scheme currently studying at US universities were invited to participate in the study. Ten students volunteered, mirroring the numbers achieved in Reay et al.'s (2009) study of working-class students at an elite university in England. They each subsequently participated in a semi-structured Skype interview in spring 2015. Interviews ranged from 25 to 55 minutes and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews examined students' self-concepts, feelings towards their peers at university, relationship with their home community and outlook on the future. Students' 'feelings of belonging' were thus established both in relation to their university and hometown communities, mapping potential shifts in social, cultural and national fields and habitus.

## Findings

When moving across transcontinental fields, socially valued cultural capital and cues of socio-economic difference are less recognizable, complicating Bourdieu's field theory. This 'unrecognizable habitus' means that individuals within that field, in this case the often somewhat more affluent US students, cannot effectively evaluate a low-SES individual's 'legitimate position' within the field. A working-class student may thus no longer feel uncomfortable about cultural cues of socio-economic difference which are identifiable in their own country.

By eliminating cost as a barrier, the participants were able to participate in the same or similar extra-curricular activities compared with their affluent peers, thus helping the formation of friendships, social capital and shared experiences. At a policy level, the study suggests that cross-cultural exchange might indeed be the step in social mobility initiatives, allowing students to have a college experience where class no longer plays a prevalent a role in their social experiences at university.

## Indicative References

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