

224 Interrogating the representation efficacy of low socioeconomic status as an equity category in Australian higher education

Matthew Bunn

University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Connected to an ongoing discursive analysis, this paper explores how the reification of the formal equity group of low socioeconomic status is connected to the persistence of higher educational inequity. It explores how the 'field of equity' has been established in Australia that requires researchers, practitioners and administrators to presuppose the representational efficacy of low-socioeconomic status for understanding inequity and stratification. The concept of low-ses becomes decoupled from its use as a quantitative measurement and is subsequently produced as a political discourse that hegemonically fixes the possible interpretations, relevant questions and salient characteristics as they pertain to the problem of equity. This displaces the possibility of alternative, pluralistic or antagonistic accounts of inequality and stratification. The paper provides a theoretical provocation on how the lack of interrogation of the representation efficacy of the equity group of 'low-ses' contributes to maintaining entrenched inequities in Australian higher education.

Full paper

For over 30 years widening participation in Australian higher education has relied on six categories to make sense of who is 'underrepresented' in higher education. Yet despite these ambitious equity targets and accompanying funding systems, measurements and evaluations aimed at changing the composition of university enrolments, key equity 'groups' show little change in their participation. This paper centres on one of these groups or categories – that of 'low socioeconomic status' (low-ses). Drawing from an ongoing discursive analysis of Australian research and policy pertaining to the production of higher education equity, this paper contributes to the building of a 'theory of the theory effect' (Bourdieu, 1991: 105) in the construction of low-ses as an equity category. I argue drawing from this discursive analysis that low-ses is overwhelmingly used in research and policy to understand and explain the 'problem' of equity because of its political legitimisation rather than through a rigorous and empirical engagement with the problem of representation. It is an initial step in providing a theoretical account of the emergence of 'low-ses' – distinct from its broader SES conceptual framework – as a real group.

Australian equity policy in particular assumes the efficacy of its own conceptualisation of the problem – despite the limited success of producing even proportional parity through its use. Indeed, this has been a problem in equity initiatives globally (see Burke et. Al 2023). This has led to an industry of equity explanations largely locked to preestablished categories and elaborations enshrined in HE policy. Despite socioeconomic status being a relative and abstract statistical measurement developed to understand the breadth of social positions as they pertain to generalised indicators (albeit sterilised from political realities of inequality), political discourse continually repeats and reasserts generalised accounts of 'the low-ses'. This discourse has gained its pertinence not through rigorous critical examination of how higher education and broader social groups interact, but through various policy and funding mechanisms that reify officially sanctioned categories. Not only does this continue to displace alternative or pluralistic accounts of 'the problem' (meant here in the vein of Bacchi, 2009) through formal systems of reporting and measurement, it suggests that researchers are adopting a preestablished conceptualisation of equity, despite the need to bring these categories into question (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Wacquant, 2022).

It should be stressed that the political performativity of low-ses becomes decoupled from its use as a statistical measurement. The performativity of low-ses in political discourse relies on a scientific legitimisation while performing as a sterilised and 'depoliticised' category. This invokes low-ses without acting as an interpellation of the group in question (unlike many other forms of symbolic violence toward marginalised groups and classes – see Tyler, 2013; Shildrick, 2018 Threadgold, 2018). Low-ses can thus perform as an act of group making intended as a technology of governance (as in a form of representation that cannot be taken as a basis for mobilisation or identity by those within

the group). Low-ses enacts a symbolic or 'representational' violence (Bunn, 2021) through its displacement of those named within the group from the means to interact with the act of naming and constitution. The representational power of low-ses is aimed at interpellating positions within the field of power (i.e. the professional class, bureaucrats, politicians).

The need to take up this official construction of an equity group is elicited through short term 'soft funding'. This produces a precarity for researchers and practitioners working in the field of equity, and subsequently means that in order to continue to receive funding, the conceptual parameters and sanctioned 'groups' must be utilised in research grants and outputs. The effect is the production of a research field that cannot interrogate the salience of the formalised categories, as in most cases research is called on to presuppose the validity of the formally sanctioned equity categorisations.

This paper takes seriously the need for higher educational researchers to 'take as their object of study the social operations of naming and the rites of institution through which they are accomplished' (Bourdieu, 1991: 105). It points towards a 'lemming effect' (Wacquant, 2022), whereby the field enacts the performative low-ses without conceptual interrogation or participatory means for establishing its efficacy. This research is offered as a potentially fruitful approach to understanding the persistence of higher education inequity despite the vast resources aimed at its ostensible amelioration. Through interrogating the representation efficacy of low ses as a political discourse this research hopes to shed greater light on how concepts and representations are produced and restrict possible courses of action in equity initiatives.

References

- Bacchi, C. (2009) *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Frenchs Forest: Pearson education.
- Bourdieu, P (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard: Harvard University press.
- Bourdieu P and Wacquant L (1992) *Invitation to a Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bunn, M (2021). *Writing representations to life: higher education and the production of equity realities*. *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*. 9 (1): 10-21.
- Burke PJ, Bunn M, Lumb M, Parker J, Mellor K, Brown A, Locke W, Shaw J, Webb S, Howley P. (2023) *International review of literature of equity in higher education: Towards a multidimensional framework for equity*. Report prepared for Australian Government Department of Education, skills and employment national priority pool program.
- Shildrick T (2018) *Poverty propaganda. Exploring the myths*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Threadgold S (2018) *Youth, Class and Everyday Struggles*. Routledge: New York.
- Tyler I (2013) *Revolting subjects: social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed books.
- Wacquant, L. (2022). *The invention of the 'underclass': a study in the politics of knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity.