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Bridging socio-cultural incongruity: conceptualising the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in Australian higher education

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This article examines the conceptual frames that might be used to consider the success and achievement of students from low socio-economic status in Australian higher education. Based on an examination of key literature from Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and North America, it is argued that Australia should avoid adopting either a deficit conception of students from low socio-economic backgrounds or a deficit conception of the institutions into which they will move. Further, rather than it being the primary responsibility of the student or of the institution to change to ensure the success of these students, it is argued that the adjustments necessary to ensure achievement for students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian higher education would be most usefully conceptualised as a 'joint venture' toward bridging socio-cultural incongruity.

Keywords: low socio-economic status; socio-cultural incongruity; cultural capital; student success

Introduction

Students from low socio-economic status backgrounds are under-represented in Australian higher education. As Devlin (2008) has noted, the representation of low socio-economic status background students in higher education has remained at around 15% for more than 15 years. The Australian federal government has recently set an ambitious target in an attempt to address this under-representation: that, by the year 2020, 20% of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level should be from students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Commenting on the federal policy changes to come in Australia, Devlin (2010) argues that it is appropriate to work toward successful experiences for all students in an increasingly massified system, including the greater number and proportion of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds who will now study alongside conventional students. She further argues that this necessitates a focus not only on access to university, but also on success and achievement for all students once they have gained access, pointing to the International Association of Universities (2008) who have adopted the principle that 'access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase' (1).

This article considers the conceptual frames that might be used to consider the success and achievement of students from low socio-economic status in Australian higher education. In particular, the notion of socio-cultural incongruence is explored

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as a way of conceptualising the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and the high socio-economic status of the institutions in which they study.

The socio-economic status of Australian higher education students is currently measured using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Education and Occupation. One of four indexes developed to measure and rank geographical areas according to socio-economic status, this index includes census variables relating to educational attainment, employment and vocational skills (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). These geographical areas are identified by the postcode of students' home address. As Devlin and O'Shea (under review) note, there are widespread concerns about the effectiveness of this metric in identifying low socio-economic status. Discussions about the refinement of the definition and measurement of low socio-economic status have begun in Australia, but a new measure has not yet been finalised. Further, there are challenges in relation to identifying individual students from low socio-economic status, and questions about whether such identification is desirable. In addition, an overlap between low socio-economic status and other categories of disadvantage, such as being the first in family to attend university, is common (Zacharias 2010).

University-specific socio-cultural capability

Cultural capital

Cultural capital is a notion that is critical to understanding the experiences of student from low socio-economic status in higher education. Cultural capital has been defined as 'proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices' (Aschaffenburg and Mass 1997, 573). Bourdieu (1977, 1984) suggests that the primary vehicle for the transmission of the 'ruling class' culture is the education system, although the influence of the home is also key. He suggests further that teachers and other staff, arguably those representing the ruling class, have the authority and the means to assess students and do so based on a set of assumptions, values and expectations that are not always made explicit.

Devlin (2010) argues that university students from higher socio-economic strata and more conventional backgrounds build familiarity with these assumptions, values and expectations over a lifetime. They have what Margolis et al. (2001) refer to as a reservoir of cultural and social resources, and familiarity with 'particular types of knowledge, ways of speaking, styles, meanings, dispositions and worldviews' (8) when they come to university, which helps them to feel comfortable at university. Devlin (2009a) has pointed out that some university students do not have such a reservoir. Many students from low socio-economic status fall into this second group. Contrary to feeling comfortable at university, many such students feel the way that those in the study by Christie et al. (2008) describe the experience of being at university:

I find it really hard to integrate with... middle class people... I feel quite intimidated by this university and I feel as if I'm working class and I shouldn't be here... I just feel I'm no' good enough. (576)

Australia-specific research

In Australia, the latest national federal government funded study of the first-year experience of 2422 students found that first-year students from low socio-economic status

backgrounds were more likely than their higher socio-economic peers to say they had difficulty comprehending material and adjusting to teaching styles within the university environment (James, Krause, and Jenkins 2010). Part of this difficulty in comprehension and adjustment may be due to what Lawrence (2005) refers to as the discourses of university. Based on research in the Australian university context, Lawrence (2005) points out that students are confronted with the following on entering university:

Each subject has its specific prerequisites and/or assumed entry knowledge; subject matter (content or process orientated, text-bound, oral or computer-mediated); language; texts (study packages, lecture notes, PowerPoint notes, web CT documents, CD Rom); cultural practices (ways of dressing and showing respect – Professor, first names); attendance [mode] (lectures, tutorials, practical sessions, clinical sessions, external/internal/online); behaviours (rule-governed/flexible, compulsory/optional attendance, consultation times, electronic discussion groups); class participation (passive, interactive, experiential); rules (about extensions, participation, resubmissions, appeals); theoretical assumptions (scientific/sociological); research methodologies (positivist/interpretive/critical, quantitative/qualitative); ways of thinking (recall, reflective, analytical or critical, surface or deep); referencing systems (APA, Harvard, MLA); ways of writing (essays/reports/journals/orals); structure (particularly in relation to assessment); tone and style (word choice, active/passive voice, third/second/first person, sentence structure, paragraph structure); formatting (left/right justified, font, type, spacing, margins); assessment (exams, assignments, orals, formative/summative, individual/ group). (247)

Lawrence argues that, to pass a subject, students need to engage, master and demonstrate capacity in a range of university-specific discourses. This is a significant demand to place on all students, and may present some particular difficulties for students from low socio-economic status who may not have the relevant cultural capital or familial experience with universities on which to rely to help them decode discourses and respond to implicit expectations within them.

Understanding and mastering the student role

Collier and Morgan (2008) draw a distinction between two inter-related ideas relevant to the notion of first generation students *understanding* their role as students, and, separately, *mastering* that role. These researchers distinguish between a student's academic skills and *actual* capacity, on the one hand, and their cultural capital and *demonstrated* capacity on the other. They argue that, whatever a student's *actual* capacity, their background and cultural capital affect their ability to understand tacit requirements and appropriately perform a university student's role and thereby *demonstrate* their capacity. Collier and Morgan also point out that *demonstrated* capacity is what is examined and assessed at university.

It has been argued that, if a comparison were made between two students who had equivalent understanding of course material, the student who better understood the need to respond to the tacit expectations of university staff members would perform better. Collier and Morgan (2008) refer to the 'implicit expectations' and 'tacit understandings' (426) that permeate the university study experience. Success at tertiary level depends on understanding these unspoken requirements and being able to perform in ways that meet them. Many students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not know that these unspoken requirements exist, never mind that they must understand, and then respond appropriately, to them. This lack of tacit knowledge can hinder their success and achievement at university.

Collier and Morgan point out that how closely students can understand and relate to the tacit expectations of staff will have an impact on their performance, success and achievement at university. The following are examples of students from the study by Collier and Morgan, who were the first in their family to go to university, 'getting it wrong' because they did not understand tacit expectations:

The assignment we had said, 'write about some field experience' and I literally wrote the two page thing out. It said 'write' and I took it literally and wrote it out, and then I got a note back that said 'see me'. It was in red and everything, and I went and she was like 'you were supposed to type this up'. But the instructions were to 'write'. I wasn't sure what she wanted. (440)

I am taking biology... I do not have experience in writing, and the main thing is that they require writing for research papers, and I'm expecting doing a lot of work trying to figure out how to do that. I did two papers already and... He said, 'You have to go back and do it again, this is not scientific writing' ... I thought it was scientific because it was from a biology textbook, and I did study at [community college], and he said 'No, this is not scientific writing'. So it is really hard to see what they want because they already see it, they already know it, they see what I don't. (440)

Socio-cultural capabilities

According to Lawrence (2005), achievement at university relies on socio-cultural capabilities relevant to the specific context of university study. Some of the elements of university socio-cultural competency include, for example, appropriately seeking help and information, seeking and offering feedback, and expressing disagreement. Taking the example of seeking help, and based on her research on Australian students, Lawrence points out that the specific verbal and non-verbal means of asking for help can differ from subculture to subculture. She argues that seeking help may not be 'culturally valued', for example in 'individualist self-reliant sub-cultures' (250) in Australia.

If a student does choose to ask for help, s/he needs to consider the words to use, whether to ask directly or indirectly, whether to include explanations or reasons or not. As Lawrence explains, students may feel that they do not have the right to ask, or may equate seeking help as remedial. As one student in her study explained:

I don't feel confident enough to speak to my tutor about the essay question because they might think I am stupid or something. (Psychology student, 250)

Another student in Lawrence's study who had some experience of challenging feedback and who subsequently understood some of the tacit expectations, explains:

It's not a good idea to just walk in and say 'look this is crap'. You can't bulldoze your way through you have to be tactful about it... 'Look, I agree with this, but I think I've been hard done by with this bit for this reason'. (Nursing student, 250)

Socio-cultural incongruity

There is a culture of academia – ways of thinking and acting that are dominant (Read, Archer, and Leathwood, 2003). Without guidance in the ways of this culture, students from low socio-economic backgrounds may only learn that the sort of approach outlined above is 'not a good idea' through trial and error. This is not an ideal method of learning, especially given the significant risks involved for the students entering and attempting to navigate a new culture.

Based on a study of factors affecting the academic performance of Latino students in the US in particular disciplines, Cole and Espinoza (2008) raise the notion of cultural congruity and incongruity. This notion has resonance in relation to socio-economic status, and in particular to the level of socio-cultural congruence between students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the higher education institutions in which they study.

The first deficit conception: students are the problem

There has been much research conducted on elements of success at university within an individual's student sphere of influence. This includes research on resilience (see Morales 2000), self-efficacy (see Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tracz 2010) and motivation (see McKavanagh and Purnell 2007). While valuable, such research can be based on the assumption that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students, and can presuppose a level playing field in relation to socio-cultural and background characteristics.

Current policy research in Australian higher education appears to support a student deficit model conception in relation to students from low socio-economic status. The latest report on the national survey of first-year students commissioned by the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations in 2010 suggests that as Australia moves into widening participation 'attention might be given to ways in which students are informed of the kind of engagement that effective higher education requires', and that the sector explore 'more sophisticated strategies for making student responsibilities in the higher education partnership more explicit' (James, Krause, and Jenkins, 2010, 9).

It can be seductive to think that, if non-traditional students are clever enough, or try or persevere enough or believe enough in their own ability, they can succeed at university. It can be tempting to think that, with 'skill and will', university students from low socio-economic status will flourish. After all, many have done so. However, with such a limited line of thinking, it follows then that failure to succeed at university is the fault of the student. Such thinking is highly problematic. Greenbank (2006) argues that the absence of social class being considered as a key influence on the university experiences of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, and the assumption that individualised factors are the main reason for student disadvantage, can lead to 'victim blaming'. If the tacit expectations inherent in, and practices undertaken at, university are within a socio-cultural subset peculiar to the middle and upper socio-economic levels, this may facilitate the success of students familiar with the norms and discourses of these groups and exclude students from low socio-economic status. These latter students are then victims of a kind of discrimination that impedes their success.

New Zealand may have lessons for Australia in terms of approaches to conceptualising equity. As Devlin (2009b) reports, the literature has identified a range of sociological explanations for persistent Māori under-representation in higher education, but this 'deficit theorising', with a focus on negative, stereotyped characteristics such as a lack of family support for finance or study as the 'cause' of a lack of success, is now seen as unhelpful and possibly detrimental and has been largely abandoned (Gorinski and Abernethy 2005).

The second deficit conception: institutions are the problem

Many researchers question the tendency to problematise students from non-traditional backgrounds, rather than to problematise the institutions that are responsible for their

progress. Bowl's (2001) research on the experiences of mature age students in transition to higher education 'reveals the nontraditional student as a frustrated participant in an unresponsive institutional context' (141). Bowl's view is supported by later research. Summarising the most influential research in widening participation in the UK, Billingham (2009) suggests that the focus on barriers needs to expand from situational and dispositional barriers to those created by institutional inflexibility. Based on research undertaken in the UK, Tett (2004) argues that 'the role of the educational institution itself in creating and perpetuating inequalities' (252) should be taken into account. Bamber and Tett (2001) suggest that it is unfair to expect the burden of change to fall solely on the students and suggest that institutions should make changes.

The recent Australian report on the national survey of first year students (James, Krause, and Jenkins, 2010) suggests that universities make changes in terms of heralding the expectations they have of students. This suggestion is underpinned by an assumption that the significant deficit lies with the student, and that the only deficit for institutions is in not being clear enough about how they expect students to fit into existing structures and expectations. While explicitly informing students of their responsibilities is critical, this alone would constitute an inadequate response in terms of assisting them to meet these responsibilities and demonstrate their learning in a higher education culture. As Collier and Morgan (2008) point out, understanding and mastering the university student role are two different requirements. Devlin (2010) argues that to genuinely contribute to the success and achievement of non-traditional students, universities will need to do much more than to spell out their expectations for student involvement in learning. For example, several authors suggest the importance of teaching the discourse to students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Hutchings 2006; Kirk 2008; Lawrence 2005; Northedge 2003).

A third conception and discourse, which is not explored in this article in detail but which warrants consideration, is that schools and preparatory institutions are the problem and that they need to do more to prepare students to participate and succeed in higher education. While not examined here, this third conception would seem to fit with the idea of bridging outlined below. This is not to say that preparatory education is 'the solution' to socio-cultural incongruity, but it may be that it has an important role to play.

The socio-cultural conception: incongruence must be bridged

The New Zealand Ministry of Education commissioned a team of Massey University researchers to conduct a best evidence synthesis of literature on how institutions might improve student retention and other outcomes. Based on this research, Zepke and Leach (2005) identify two different discourses on this issue. One centres on what institutions do to fit students into their existing cultures and this discourse dominates. They suggest that the second discourse challenges the dominant one and is still emerging. Rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, it suggests that institutional cultures be adapted to better fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

Greenbank (2006) argues that there is evidence suggesting that students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds may have greater difficulty adapting to university life because of incongruence between their cultural capital and the middle class culture encountered in higher education. The current article specifically proposes the notion of 'socio-cultural incongruence' to describe the circumstances where students from low

socio-economic backgrounds engage with the discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education. Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) argue that 'Academic culture is not uniformly accessed or experienced' (261). Focussing on the learning experiences of a group of adult working-class students participating in higher education in an elite university in the UK, Bamber and Tett (2001), drawing on the work of Bourdieu, suggest that the university environment is alien to many such students. In other words, the culture of higher education is incongruous with the cultures with which they are familiar and comfortable.

Bamber and Tett propose that a two-way process of change and development is required if working-class students are to enjoy a successful experience that integrates their learning. Reforms in teaching and student support are recommended, with an emphasis on institutions thinking beyond the deficit model of supporting students. More specifically, Billingham (2009) proposes active engagement by institutions in a 'joint venture' with the new population of students.

Murphy's (2009) UK study of factors affecting the progress, achievement and outcomes of new students to a particular degree program found a number of characteristics specific to the institution and to individual students that promote progression and achievement. They refer to these factors as 'bridges'. The current article proposes adoption of the notion of a bridge in the conceptualisation of changes that could be made to lessen or ease socio-cultural incongruence for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds at university.

Both deficit conceptions outlined earlier negate the influence of student agency. Luckett and Luckett (2009) note that 'Traditions of learning theory are divided into those that prioritise individual cognition on one hand and those that prioritise the context in which learning occurs on the other... . In both of these traditions, the individual agent is dissolved' (469). The current article proposes, similarly, that ways of thinking about the facilitation of the success of students from low socio-economic backgrounds are divided into those that prioritise individual input to that process, on the one hand, and those that prioritise the role of the institution in which the process takes place on the other. In both of these conceptualisations of the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, the individual agent is considered less important. However, research by Luckett and Luckett (2009) indicates that 'the development of agency, as the student forges an identity and career path, is of critical importance in higher education' (476).

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are not necessarily passive recipients of the middle and upper class culture and discourse of university. Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) argue that, while students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged by institutional cultures that place them as 'other', individuals do not passively receive these cultural discourses, but instead actively engage with them and attempt to challenge them. There is also research to support the notion of non-traditional students participating knowingly in more than one culture concurrently. Priest (2009) refers to thinking in the US around 'code switching' – where black students are encouraged not to passively adopt an alternate discourse or code, but instead to understand the value of the discourse or code they already possess, as well as to understand the value of the alternate one associated with, for example, academic writing.

So, too, Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) refer to non-traditional students refusing to accept a position of marginality in the academy and instead, working 'to adopt the pragmatic practice of 'adapting' to this culture in order to achieve' (272). Alfred (1997) argues on the basis on her research that many African-American

women staff saw their marginal position as a positive attribute that allowed them ‘a special angle of vision from which to watch and learn the behaviour of the dominant group’ (4), while remaining unknown. Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) draw on their own research with non-traditional students to argue that these students understand the need to act in certain ways in order to be successful, and give the example of a young, black, Caribbean university student in a UK institution deliberately acting confidently in the context of an “intimidating” competitive atmosphere’ (273) of a seminar, and advising a fellow student to do the same. Grant (1997) describes other examples of students challenging the discourse of ‘the independent learner’ by deliberately studying with someone else as an ‘interdependent learner’ (112).

In contrast to the rather simplistic approach of advocating that either students try harder or institutions make expectations more explicit, the bridges and joint venture proposed in the current article may be more complex and nuanced. Northedge (2003) argues that the teaching challenges related to an increasingly diverse student body in higher education ‘call for a more radical shift in teaching than simply incorporating remedial support within existing teaching programs’ (17). He proposes an emphasis on the socio-cultural nature of learning and teaching. This would include ‘modelling learning as acquiring the capacity to participate in the discourses of an unfamiliar knowledge community, and teaching as supporting that participation’ (17). Based on her Australian research, Lawrence (2005) proposes the active facilitation of students’ use of reflective, socio-cultural and critical practice to assist them to become enculturated into the ways of the university, while being cognisant of both the presence of more than one set of cultural assumptions, and of the potential incongruence of these assumptions. In both cases, students would need to be prepared to take the risks and opportunities inherent in joining a new community, and to persevere in order to ensure the learning required to function effectively in that community.

But the joint venture does not stop at just students and institutions. The role of schools, and prior education in general, in the preparation of increasing numbers and proportions of students for higher education demands consideration. It is difficult to imagine the agenda of greater participation and success in higher education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds succeeding without the active support of schools. The Australian federal government has recognised this and committed significant funding to the facilitation of partnerships between schools and universities. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program ‘provides funding to eligible universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low SES backgrounds, as well as improving the retention and completion rates of those students’ (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011, paragraph 2) through its two components. These are a participation component that aims to increase the participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and support their retention and success, and a partnership component aimed at ‘building the aspiration and capacity’ (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011) of people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Joint ventures can have many partners, and these are two most likely to play a role in bridging socio-cultural incongruity.

Conclusion

As the Australian federal government agenda in relation to widening participation is implemented, an increasing number and proportion of higher education students in the Australian sector will be from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Devlin (2010) has noted that institutions within the sector in Australia may not be ready to respond *en masse* to ensuring the success of all students in the future, and that significant change in policy and practice is needed.

This article argues that both students and institutions should contribute to making the adjustments necessary to ensure success and achievement for students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian higher education. Rather than adopting a deficit conception in relation to either students or to institutions, this article instead proposes that this endeavour would be most usefully conceptualised as a 'joint venture' toward bridging socio-cultural incongruity.

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