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Middle-class Students Studying in a Community College in Hong Kong: A Mismatch between High-status Habitus and Low-status Field?

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Abstract

This article is about twelve middle-class students, previously studying in elite primary and secondary schools, making another attempt at getting into university in Hong Kong. Despite their failure at a critical educational stage, which contradicts a general pattern of middle-class educational success, they decide to seek a second chance by reading an associate degree in community college, a perceived inferior educational option. Despite feeling determined, they are anxious and uneasy with taking up this option. How the middle class feel about their academic pursuits, especially after a critical failure, is under-researched. This article attempts to fill this gap by referring to Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field to make sense of the complex or contradictory feelings of 12 students with a self-conscious, high-status, middle-class habitus in encountering a perceived low-status community college. I shall conclude this article with the normative implication of our discussion in making sense of educational inequality.

Keywords : habitus, community college, cultural capital, educational failure, field, Hong Kong, middle class, second chance

Introduction

In spite of a continuous educational expansion, the education system in Hong Kong remains very selective (e.g., Sweeting). Since 1995, the Hong Kong government has set an annual quota of 14,500 first-year, first-degree, publicly funded places at university, which, despite variations across years, takes on about 16-18% of students of the relevant age group each year (Hong Kong Education Bureau). Under this highly selective system, over 80% of students of the relevant age group are doomed to fail to get a place in a local publicly funded university. Perhaps unsurprisingly, middle-class students are still more likely than working-class students to get straight into a local publicly funded university (e.g., Post). As stated clearly in a report published in 2000, without any intention to increase the annual set quota, in 1999 the government sought to increase the proportion of students of the relevant age group that received a post-secondary education to 60% and therefore announced the launch of the community college policy to award a new type of a sub-degree: an associate degree (Education Commission Report).

A sub-degree enjoys a lower status than a degree and is thus seen as inferior to the latter. However, an associate degree in Hong Kong follows the original design of its USA counterpart in retaining its transfer function, so that it can bridge students to university. Before the launch of the community college policy in 2000, there was only one route to university through sitting two public examinations, one after the other: the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) around the age of 16 for all students, and then the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) around the age of 18 for those who scored high enough in HKCEE. Because of the transfer function of an associate degree, the option of community college can be seen as providing students with an alternative route to university. Indeed, given their newness, many community colleges refer to the transfer function of an associate degree as a selling point for student recruitment; however, because of their self-financing nature, they usually charge very high tuition fees (much higher than those of reading a publicly funded degree programme). As a consequence, despite being uncertain about the successful rate of transferal and despite their high tuition fees, the majority of community-college students still read an associate degree not because they want a terminal sub-degree, but because they want to get transferred to university (Ng and Cheng). It remains to be seen if this new route is more likely employed by the middle class than the working class, and also if the middle class are more likely than the working class to eventually get

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successfully transferred (e.g., Dougherty; Alfonso; cf. Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, and Kienzi).

Against this backdrop, I began a longitudinal qualitative study having recruited 85 students in total from a community college where I was teaching the course 'Introduction to Sociology' in the academic year of 2005-2006. Community-college students recruited were mostly (all except 10) local-born Chinese, aged between 20 and 24 (when being interviewed). All 85 respondents – 66 recruited out of convenience in my classes after the end of each semester in the academic year of 2005-2006 and 19 referred to me by colleagues of that community college in the academic year of 2008-2009 – were interviewed for the first time between 2006 and 2009. They were asked to talk in a variety of domains relating to their college life and previous educational experiences. A follow-up interview was conducted in 2010 with 64 of those who were successfully traced. Most interviews lasted about an hour and were then transcribed and translated to English from Cantonese, the major local dialect in Hong Kong. Failing the public examination(s), these community-college students decided not to re-sit the examination(s) but chose to take up this newly available option of community college as their second chance. This longitudinal qualitative study seeks to make use of rich and detailed accounts from these community-college students, despite non-random selection, to address a number of theoretical and policy issues. However, in this article I shall focus on the experiences of 12 students of a middle-class origin (out of 30 in this study) in making this second attempt.

These twelve middle-class respondents – six males (with the fictitious names of Andy, Angus, Alan, Albert, Edward, and Gavin) and six females (with the fictitious names of Angela, Ann, Brenda, Clarence, Doris, and Julie) – were selected for discussion in this article because they pose a particular challenge to the commonly perceived inevitability of middle-class success (Power, Edwards, Whitty, and Wigfall), derived from the established statistical patterns on class differentials in educational attainment (e.g., Torres and Antikainen; Schofer and Meyer). Their parents received a secondary education but no degree, which was common in their time; however, they were already educationally advantaged in contrast to many of their contemporaries. The parents of most respondents are employed in a range of professional, administrative, and managerial positions such as engineer, bank manager, estate property manager, traffic controller, and inspector in the

civil service; some parents – usually mothers – are clerks or white-collar office workers; and, two fathers are small employers running a merchandising company and an accounting firm respectively. Having an advantaged middle-class occupation and making a steady and reasonably high income, the parents of respondents, as with other middle-class parents, have all been providing the respondents with an abundance of resources of various kinds throughout the course of their educational careers. However, in contrast with other middle-class parents of this study not discussed here, the parents decided to send the respondents to an elite primary school, from which they were allocated to an elite secondary school. Given their advantaged class background, together with their advantaged educational careers, the experiences of respondents pose a challenge to common applications of Bourdieu's explanatory account with reference to the notions of habitus and field when explaining how middle-class students are more advantaged (specifically in having an advantaged educational career) and are thus likely to achieve greater educational success than their working-class counterparts.

Despite such a challenge, it is demonstrated that Bourdieu's notions are still of relevance to making sense of complexities of identities. In the stimulating article *Strangers in Paradise* (2009), Reay and her associates refer to the cases of nine British working-class students studying in an elite university. The authors take advantage of Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field, together with cultural capital, to understand how the exceptionally educationally successful working class experience a mismatch between low-status social background and high-status university, because of an encounter of their working-class habitus with the field of higher education. Inspired by the insights of their stimulating article, in this article I decide to follow the lead of Reay and her associates taking advantage of Bourdieu's trio concepts to make sense of how twelve middle-class students – self-evaluated educationally unsuccessful middle class at this stage – experience a perceived mismatch between a self-conscious, high-status social background and a perceived low-status community college, because their middle-class habitus encounters the field of the sub-degree sector of higher education in their seeking a second chance in community college.

Middle-class Habitus in the Field of Sub-degree Sector of Higher Education

In Bourdieu and Passeron's rather ambitious account of class reproduction through education, they rely on cultural capital – of three states (i.e., embodied, objectified, and institutional states) – to link up the venues of the family and the education system, in which cultural capital flows from habitus nurtured at home to be rewarded in the field of educationin *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture* . In *Distinction* , Bourdieu argues that the educational success of the middle class is made possible not simply due to their greater possession of capital of all forms, but also as a result of a match between middle-class habitus and the field of education. This then explains why the middle class are more advantaged than the working class in the field of education. Nevertheless, a direct application of Bourdieu's account can then be challenged in view of a continuous expansion of education, especially in the sector of higher education. Educational expansion makes educational success more readily available to all, meaning that more of the working class can make it straight to university. Those of the middle class who fail at a critical educational stage, can then make it at a later stage. Certainly, educational expansion does not immediately close the class gap in educational attainment or change the fact that the middle class are still more advantaged than the working class; rather, a new pecking order of a bachelor's degree emerges in an expanding sector of higher education where the middle class usually obtain a more prestigious bachelor's degree than the working class. Yet, what is under-researched against such a new educational context is how middle-class and working-class students feel about making their educational pursuits. Bourdieu's notions could, perhaps, be of theoretical relevance to making sense of such class feelings. When habitus encounters an unfamiliar field, such a mismatch can generate not only change, but also the feelings of unease, ambivalence, uncertainty, and insecurity. Indeed, a number of studies have reported on the emotional struggles of the educationally successful working class: despite their academic gain, they feel emotionally challenged and experience contradictory feelings, particularly the feeling of being caught between their working-class origin and a new class destination that they are about to reach, promised by their qualification (e.g., Lawler; Leathwood and O'Connell; Kaufman and Feldman). And, the mixed feelings of pride, shame, guilt, and anxiety of the educationally successful working class about their educational success continue to attract a lot of scholarly attention (e.g., Reay; Aries and Seider, *The Role of Social Class in the Formation of Identity*). In particular, as Reay and her associates illustrate in *Strangers in Paradise* , the educationally successful working class studying in an elite university have to handle tension and

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unease generated by a mismatch between a low-status social background and a high-status university (cf. Granfield; Aries and Seider, *The Interactive Relationship between Class Identity and the College Experience*). Still in question is the perceived mismatch by the middle class, including the twelve respondents in this study. At a critical stage, the expected educational success predicted by general statistical patterns has not materialized in these twelve cases. Failing to achieve what is expected of them, although deciding to seek a second chance at community college, the twelve respondents consider such an educational option as second rate and also a mismatch for them. What, therefore, is the result of such a perceived mismatch between the supposedly high status of their middle-class background and the perceived low status of community college? Let us first take a look at their previous schooling experiences.

Previously studying in an elite school: a match between habitus and field?

The parents of the respondents, as with many middle-class parents, used an abundance of resources to promote their children's educational success (e.g., Wong). Against the context of Hong Kong, getting into an elite primary school is a head start in an educational career, because it is believed that an elite primary school is likely to feed pupils to an elite secondary school, which is eventually likely to get students straight into university. Indeed, the parents of all respondents did their best to give them a head start. However, the success of getting pupils into an elite secondary school does not merely depend on their academic performances but also involves a measure of indeterminacy (cf. Devine). In Hong Kong, all primary form-six students (at the age of eleven) are ranked by their academic performances and are supposedly allocated to secondary schools – of three academic bandings with band-one at the top and band-three at the bottom – that match students' academic standards, although principals' discretion in student admission is granted (Sweeting). This arrangement can be seen as masking the class nature of educational inequality by substituting it with a meritocratic discourse (cf. Clycq, Nouwen, and Vandenbroucke). It is believed that regardless of their class origins, academically capable students can get into a band-one secondary school by merit. However, it is observed that most students in band-one secondary schools come from middle-class families, and the majority of students in band-three secondary

schools are from working-class families, as suggested by the data of the Programme for International Student Assessment reported for Hong Kong for the year 2012 (OECD). Regardless of whether they did it by merit or by effect of their class origin, respondents were all allocated to band-one secondary schools, something the respondents and their parents were proud of.

Studying in band-one secondary schools, respondents, presumably equipped with the required cultural capital nurtured by middle-class habitus at home, should have felt like 'fish in the water,' as Bourdieu would have us believe. However, all respondents described their schooling experiences as a series of failures full of frustration with being continuously ranked low, semester after semester, year after year. This frustration was most clearly expressed when respondents were asked about their view on education, as Alan articulated:

Education is a means to order people: we are constantly ranked. Schools of different bandings are ranked in a league table; students in the same school are allocated to elite classes and non-elite classes; and students in the same class are still further ranked every semester.... It's so frustrating that however hard you try, some students still do better than you and are thus ranked higher than you.

(Alan)

What Alan raises is the fact that most secondary schools use normal referencing in assessing students and many also practise ability-grouping. That is why the ranking of even academically capable students within the school could be low in a band-one secondary school (especially in an elite class), and why the ranking of academically incapable students could be high in a band-three secondary school (especially in the least capable class). It became apparent, therefore, why respondents felt frustrated at school, as Ann described in detail:

My mum did all that she could to send me to an elite primary school. I did quite well.... And then, I successfully got into a band-one secondary school.... But I didn't do well from secondary form one onwards; I wasn't ranked high there, although I wasn't in an elite class.... However hard I tried, I just didn't do well.... Schooling is a series of non-stop ranking exercises.... My mum had been anxious about my academic performances and sent me to cram schools and employed personal tutors for

me…. But I didn't do any better; I was still ranked very low…. I just felt like shit…. And finally, I failed

HKCEE. (Ann)

In applying Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, it is argued that middle-class students are more advantaged than their working-class counterparts because school is biased to the middle class or because it is of a downright middle-class culture (e.g., Lynch and O'Neill; cf. Rata). Surely, it should be open to debate whether a competitive school culture is a middle-class culture, or whether it is only typical of elite secondary schools in that secondary schools of the three bandings could have their respective distinctive institutional habitus (cf. Reay, Crozier, and Clayton, *Fitting in or Standing out*), or whether competitiveness characterizes all schools in Hong Kong (cf. Sweeting). In brief, respondents, despite their middle-class habitus, were not academically rewarded at school, although they may have been advantaged with regard to their performances at the public examinations in comparison with other students, especially working-class students in band-three secondary schools. However, Alan's and Ann's schooling experiences suggested a point which is rarely mentioned in studies of middle-class educational success: a perceived mismatch of middle-class students between themselves and their elite schools and thus their frustration throughout the course of their educational pursuits (cf. Ball and Vincent).

Against such a competitive academic setup, the educational careers of respondents were full of educational failures. While proud of studying at elite schools, many respondents felt very bad about themselves for doing so poorly at school in comparison to their competitive classmates/schoolmates. A highly competitive schooling environment unavoidably makes even academically capable students 'losers,' and it is unsurprising for 'losers' to feel bad about themselves. As Ann put it, she felt like 'shit.' In other words, despite being more advantaged than most students in the education system, they were not necessarily recognised, academically or socially, in their immediate educational context. And, perhaps, their frustration somehow forced them to engage in processes of self-conscious reflexivity (cf. McNay). Indeed, some respondents felt that they were not appreciated for what they were good at, and thus questioned themselves if they were or could become an academic type as their parents would like or expect them to be, as in the case of Gavin:

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I think I am smart and good at handling people and tasks.... I am good with my heart and hands rather than my head.... [A]cademic work just isn't my cup of tea.... Studying in an elite secondary school, I was always ranked at the bottom.... It's just so frustrating, especially when I already tried very hard. (Gavin)

While the literature shows that working-class students are invariably described in contrast to their middle-class counterparts as culturally deprived and lacking the required cultural capital to succeed at school (cf. Willis), the contrast of working-class street smarts and middle-class academic successes is common place. However, the case of Gavin questions such a middle-class stereotype. Despite being equipped with the supposedly right habitus, Gavin did not feel he was an academic type and instead was frustrated with schoolwork. In other words, despite a supposed match between middle-class habitus and the field of elite secondary school, given the practice of normal referencing and thus a competitive learning environment, respondents were not evaluated as academically capable at school; some even perceived their elite schools as a mismatch for them. Subsequently, they also failed the public examinations and were forced to seek a second chance in community college.

Seeking a second chance in community college: a mismatch between habitus and field?

When making the decision to seek a second chance, respondents could have chosen to re-take HKCEE/HKALE. This option is inexpensive with some known probability of success. And yet, after discussing this with their parents, respondents were encouraged to take up the new expensive option of community college, despite the great measure of uncertainty. Judging from the comments that respondents received, while their parents encouraged community college, they privately saw it as an inferior option, as in the case of Doris:

I failed HKCEE.... Honestly, I didn't really want to try again.... It's my mum who said that I should enrol in community college.... She commented that I wouldn't make it to university even if I tried the

traditional route again.... So, she said, "Why don't you try your luck taking up something new?"

(Doris)

As mentioned above, the option of community college is regarded as an alternative route to university. However, it is an option that is only considered by those who fail the public examination(s): that is, this option is not chosen by those who are able to go straight to university. Despite the fact that over 80% of students are doomed to fail direct university entrance (although this is not usually acknowledged), and despite the high tuition fees of reading an associate degree that financially excludes many people, this new option is not seen as an equivalent alternative but an inferior one, only for "losers" in the education system (i.e., non-academic students), if not second-rate students, who seek a second chance. Doris's mother is one of the many who subtly hold the same negative view of the community college option. In short, community college is commonly perceived as an inferior institution. In fact, the twelve respondents themselves (as can be seen in the quotations below) also viewed community college in the same negative way. In particular, having attended an elite primary school and then an elite secondary school, some respondents – such as Brenda – perceived, albeit subtly, that a second chance in community college was a mismatch for them: it was of too low a status for them.

All my former classmates (from an elite school) have got into university.... All uncles and aunts from my mother's side and my mother graduated from the same secondary school as mine. My sister and I also studied there.... They all got into university. I am the only one who failed to do it.... Somehow, I feel ashamed whenever community-college students here ask me which secondary school I went to. I don't want to tell them. I don't want to see their surprised looks: how come students from my secondary school end up in this community college? (Brenda)

Three points can be inferred from Brenda's account. The first is her presumption about qualifications for the middle class. Given her habitus with reference to her upbringing, including her understanding of what qualifications should be obtained by people of her social circle, Brenda simply accepted that a degree is a normal/expected qualification for someone from a social background like hers (e.g., Ball, Davies, David, and Reay). The second point is her view of who

studies in community college. Given her unease or embarrassment about being asked why she ended up in community college, she subtly implied that community college is an inferior institution for second-rate students but not for someone coming from an elite secondary school like hers. And, the third point is her feelings of unease and insecurity about studying at community college, implying a perceived mismatch. Given her habitus with respect to her previous schooling experience, Brenda held the common view that students from an elite secondary school like hers are academically capable and deserve a promising educational future: they should go straight to university rather than ending up in community college. She would have liked to see herself as one of those academically capable and educationally successful students. The very fact that she ended up seeking a second chance in community college sat uncomfortably with her self-image, making her feel insecure about herself.

The respondents' feelings of unease and insecurity about studying at community college were manifested in at least three ways. First, some respondents made self-defeating comments about themselves. Their desire to see themselves as an academically capable and educationally successfully student was challenged by the very fact that they ended up reading an associate degree in community college with the strong likelihood of being regarded as second-rate students. Their feelings of insecurity about themselves were revealed by the fact that some respondents actually judged themselves from the perspective of the public (as Bourdieu would argue), and thus made self-defeating comments about themselves when asked if they considered themselves to be a successful student. Some common responses were, "If I were successful, I wouldn't be here,' and "Studying here means that I'm not successful."

For some respondents, it must have seemed easier to judge other community-college students from the stance of an uninvolved, neutral third-party. The second manifestation of unease and insecurity, therefore, was that some respondents made harsh comments on community-college students, as in the case of Galina:

All students here share the same goal: they all want to get transferred to university.... By definition, students here are not successful but "losers." ... They failed either HKALE or HKCEE and thus failed to

get into university.... Good students won't come here.... How can you be good or successful when you fail to get into university? (Galina)

The third way for respondents to express their feelings of unease and insecurity about studying at community college was to hide or even lie about their identity as a community-college student, as mentioned by Ann and Brenda who are quoted below. In addition, Ann's mother deliberately gave a misleading response whenever asked about what Ann was studying.

I feel so shameful about (studying here).... I know that my parents are ashamed of me. Whenever they are asked by their friends and relatives about what I'm doing now, they ... dare not tell them the truth that I'm reading an associate degree at community college. (Brenda)

I don't lie about studying here; but, I won't take the initiative to tell people that I'm studying here either.... I don't want to see people's looks!... The other day, I overheard my mum talking over the phone that I was studying at [the name of a local top university].... Actually, I am reading an associate degree in a community college run by an extension arm of [the local top university].... Then, it is clear to me that my mum is ashamed of me studying here. (Ann)

Seemingly, respondents' feelings of unease and insecurity were accompanied by a sense of shame. This sense of shame was not simply another expression of their perception that community college is an inferior institution, but also another way to express their feelings, albeit contradictory, about seeking a second chance in community college and their perceptions of this as being a mismatch. It was small wonder that respondents did not feel a sense of belonging to community college, and that nearly all respondents held a negative attitude towards their studies at community college. When asked about their college life, some expressed that their goal of studying at community college was, rather perversely, competing to leave it as quickly as they could, as articulated by Julie and Gavin:

What we all want is to leave community college – getting transferred – as soon as we can.... Who cares about how the college life is? I think, the high point of studying here is to be able to leave here. (Julie)

All of us have the same goal here – we want to get transferred…. No one cares about the college life here; all of us just take an associate degree as a stepping stone…. It's transitional to study here…. In a way, we're competing to leave here as soon as we can. (Gavin)

Perhaps, with such negative attitudes towards community college, respondents were able to distance themselves from community college and thus become more internally at ease. However, despite their perceived mismatch, community college is still part of an academic field that rewards middle-class cultural capital. So, unsurprisingly, academically speaking, respondents are actually advantaged within the academic setup of community college: its language of instruction is English and students are assessed by their participation in class discussion, by a group project presentation (and/or project report), by an individual essay, and also by a term-end examination. The language requirement and the academic setup are similar to those of elite secondary schools. Given their schooling experiences, respondents are proficient in English, experienced in doing group projects, and familiar with skills of information search and making oral and written presentations. In other words, their schooling experiences have already equipped respondents with the language and academic skills that give them an academic advantage at community college. Indeed, their advantages are revealed in the criticisms of Julie, Galina, and Brenda against their fellow college mates:

Nearly all classes here are taught in English…. I was shocked to find out that some students actually didn't understand what was taught in classes…. Many students didn't participate in class discussion; they just couldn't express themselves [in English]. (Julie)

Before coming here, I thought I was bad enough when compared with my former classmates; I didn't know students could be so bad…. Their English is so poor…. Well, they [community-college students] are from no-rank secondary schools. (Galina)

It's so frustrating to work with students here on group projects…. They are from low-banding schools…. They don't know how to do a project or how to search relevant information for a project…. I'm really surprised that the English of students here could be so bad…. They can't even write simple sentences or they don't know the basic grammar…. Students usually want to group with me to do a

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project presentation because my English is good.... No wonder, people comment that we students from my old school can't be too bad.... Coming here, I realise that after all I'm not so bad. (Brenda)

Such criticisms show the contempt of these respondents for community-college students. By being critical of community-college students and comparing them with her former classmates/schoolmates, Brenda was dis-identifying herself from community college and re-identifying with her former elite secondary school. This simultaneous dis-identification and re-identification enabled Brenda to distance herself from being identified as a second-rate student and to become closer to being rated as a competent student. This kind of self-positioning could perhaps be seen as a way for respondents to cope with their unease and insecurity on an emotional or psychosocial level (cf. Skeggs). What should also be noted is that normal referencing is practised in community college. Whereas many respondents had been used to being ranked very low, if not at the bottom, at secondary school, they then stood out and had a much higher Grade Point Average at community college than most other students. In fact, because of their language proficiency and academic skills, their college mates were desperate to have them work with them on group project assignments, as in the case of Brenda quoted above. Such new peer recognition could ease respondents' unease and give them more confidence to counteract their insecurity, as Angus expressed:

I know some people hide it deliberately; I don't.... I just don't tell people [that I study at community college] if I'm not asked.... I don't want to be looked down on.... [But] studying here, I'm surprised at my very high Grade Point Average – it makes me feel as if I were very smart!... I'm quite proud of my academic performances here. But, deep down, I know I wouldn't be seen as outstanding if students here weren't so bad.... Well, it's rather pathetic to feel happy about yourself simply because you are a big fish in a small pond. (Agnes)

In a way, despite this perceived mismatch between the high-status of respondents' middle-class habitus and the low-status of the field of community college, given the academic setup that rewards their cultural capital, respondents were not only academically outstanding but also gained

a sense of confidence and pride. Perhaps, we could say that it is their perceived inferiority of the field of community college that makes it possible for respondents to feel a sense of superiority.

In sum, the feelings of respondents accompanying their pursuit of education thus far illustrate the complexities of their identities. Despite being proud of studying in a competitive elite school, respondents were frustrated by their appalling academic rankings, which made them feel so "shitty" about themselves. However, such "shitty" feelings about themselves by no means stopped respondents from subsequently re-identifying themselves with their elite schools, even with their former competitive rivals at school. And, despite feeling ashamed about seeking a second chance in community college, respondents were encouraged by their remarkable performances, which rebuilt their confidence and gave them a sense of pride. And yet, such feelings of confidence and pride subsequently drew them even further away from the community college, if not dis-identifying themselves altogether with it, and created a sense of contempt for their fellow college mates. Perhaps, rather paradoxically, if not perversely, respondents re-identified themselves with an institution in which they had been looked down upon and admired competitive rivals who made them feel bad about themselves. At the same time, the respondents dis-identified themselves with an institution in which they were looked up to and felt contempt for fellow college mates who made them feel a sense of pride and superiority.

Conclusion

The educational experiences of twelve respondents – students coming from a privileged middle class background with an advantaged educational career – serve as cases, if not special cases, that pose a challenge to a general pattern that implies inevitable educational success for the middle class. Having received an abundance of parental resources and assistance at each educational stage and having followed an advantaged educational career very well planned by their parents, the twelve respondents still failed to get straight into university. It is not intended that these cases challenge Bourdieu's theoretical account of social reproduction through education; in fact, the respondents remain more advantaged than their working-class counterparts and stand a good chance of getting into university in their second attempt. What this article attempts to underscore is the relevance of Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field, together with cultural capital, when

attempting to make sense of the complexities of identities involved when seeking this specific second chance. Such an attempt was made by focusing on respondents' unease and insecurity, as well as other feelings, generated by their perceived mismatch of habitus and field. Interestingly, some respondents perceived their middle-class habitus and the field of an elite secondary school as a mismatch that produced a series of failure experiences and feelings of frustration. All respondents then perceived seeking a second chance in a low-status community college as a mismatch for them. Yet, perhaps rather paradoxically, despite the perceived mismatch between their middle-class habitus and the field of community college, this made it possible for them to have successful educational experiences and feelings of pride and superiority.

In summary, two points can be noted from the accounts of the twelve respondents. First, theoretical accounts, including Bourdieu's, that seek to explain a general pattern of middle-class advantages in educational pursuits do not explain each successful case whereby a middle-class student obtains an advantaged qualification, and nor do they explain each case of failure. Second, just as the educationally successful working class expressed mixed feelings about their educational success and felt they were caught between their humble class origin and a higher status class destination signified by an elite university in which they studied, so too did the respondents who evaluated themselves as educationally unsuccessful middle class also exhibit contradictory feelings in seeking a second chance in community college (Luttrell). The middle class are described as advantaged in their academic pursuits and their academic success is assumed in the literature; but, the feelings of frustration and anxiety involved in their pursuits are seldom discussed. In particular, in handling a critical educational failure, however temporary it may seem in their educational career, the middle class may suffer from a range of difficult, even contradictory, feelings. And, such feelings can sometimes be quite perverse. Such class feelings about suffering can be seen as a by-product of the very existence of an educational hierarchy in a class society. Having said this, I do not mean to disregard the advantages of the middle class or to even them up with difficulties facing their disadvantaged working-class counterparts in their educational pursuits. My point is that as long as an education system remains highly selective and/or hierarchical, even if its selection is indeed by merit rather than by class background, the members of the education system, even those relatively advantaged, could still suffer from contradictory, even perverse,

feelings. What emotions are generated for each advantaged and disadvantaged class based on their selection within such a hierarchy and how these emotions are generated calls for more empirical effort, with the roles such emotions play in educational inequality theorized further. However, what is most concerning about such empirical inquiry, I believe, is its normative implication for inequality: our judgement about educational inequality in particular and social inequality in general. Social selection is widely supported on an instrumental ground, in that the selection of the talented is believed to be ultimately beneficial to the economic and social progress of any society as a whole. But, clearly, not much attention has been directed to address the fact that such economic and social benefit is achieved at the expense of the psychosocial well-being of the majority of individuals. As the discussion here suggests, this could result in appalling or even perverse inter-personal relations, which come with great social cost. Therefore, is it really worth sacrificing the psychosocial well-being of so many individuals simply for the sake of making economic and social progress?

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