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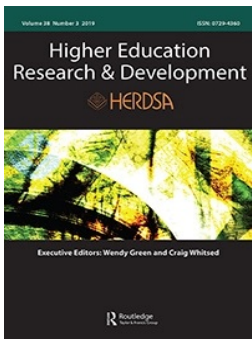
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## Widening the lens on capital: conceptualising the university experiences of non-traditional women nurse students

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### ABSTRACT

This article argues the insufficiency of the traditional application of cultural, social and economic capital in conceptualising the non-traditional student experience. Built on the thematic analysis of 52 in-depth interviews with 28 mature-age women nursing undergraduates with family responsibilities in Australia, an alternative, expanded model of capital is proposed.

The qualitative study, underpinned by Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy, revealed multiple threats and enablers to progression throughout the degree. Dimensions of capital previously unacknowledged in the nursing literature were necessary to fully conceptualise these rich and complex findings, including important student strengths. These dimensions: aspirational, navigational, resistant, familial and experiential capital, compensated when traditional dimensions were lacking, or incongruent with university expectations. This longitudinal study further revealed how the availability and importance of capital altered with the changing curriculum and participants' personal growth.

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### KEYWORDS

Capital; non-traditional; women students; mature-age; nurse education; intimate relationship

## Introduction

In Australia, mature-age students, defined as aged 20 years or over on commencement (Bradley et al., 2008), now represent more than half of all nursing degree undergraduates (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2018). As 90% of undergraduate nursing students are female (DET, 2018), the vast majority of these older students are women. Although arguably, being mature-age is a non-traditional (NT) category in its own right, mature-age women commonly fit into further NT categories associated with disadvantage at university, including low socio-economic (James et al., 2010) and first-in-family student status (FIF) (Baik et al., 2015). Compared to school leavers, mature-age women are also more likely to reside with partners and children and to have responsibilities associated with these roles.

The student university experience is typically interpreted through Bourdieu's (1986) ideas of cultural, social and economic capital. This approach finds NT students

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deficient in these capitals in the form expected by higher education (HE) (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). While these ideas of capital are useful in identifying student vulnerabilities, they position NT students as less capable than traditional students (Devlin, 2013; O'Shea et al., 2016). Contrasting evidence that describes mature-age women as diligent, dedicated and capable students (Kenny et al., 2011; Meachin & Webb, 1996) indicates a more balanced application of capital is required if the NT student experience is to be fully understood. This study investigated the university experiences of NT nurse students, through the perspective of mature-age women who live with a male partner, and in most cases, with dependent children. Taken from wider PhD research into the university experiences of women students in intimate relationships (Andrew, 2019), the experiences of 28 mature-age women students were explored and the factors influencing commencement and progression interpreted through a multi-dimensional lens of capital that extends the traditional approach.

## Background

### *Dimensions of capital and the university student experience*

Bourdieu's idea of capital is an important concept guiding educational policy. Viewed through the lens of cultural, social and economic capital, this approach considers how individual qualities such as self-efficacy combined with wider structural factors, influence student participation and success (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital refers to an individual's knowledge, attitude and behaviour that promotes their social mobility. The domestic sphere is seen as the primary environment through which the embodied state of cultural capital (a person's intrinsic knowledge, attitude and behaviour) is acquired; parents without university experience are unable to support their children's development of embodied cultural capital. FIF students' cultural capital is therefore viewed as insufficient or different to the dominant cultural capital within academia (Devlin, 2013; Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

Social capital is 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248–249). Social capital offers 'insider knowledge' of institutions that can guide and support the student. Economic capital is defined as a monetary or financial resource (Bourdieu). Sufficient economic capital is crucial for fee paying university students' access to HE. An insufficiency or dissonance in cultural, social and economic capital among NT students is associated with lower levels of engagement and higher rates of attrition (McKay & Devlin, 2014; Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

As university student diversity increases, criticism has been directed at Bourdieu's ideas, which problematise the NT student and ignores their strengths and qualities, thereby promulgating their inequity in HE (Devlin, 2013; Yosso, 2005). A new strengths-based approach to capital is required that understands the NT student experience and enables success. Informed by her work with students of colour in the US, Yosso developed a 'Community Cultural Wealth Model'. This strengths-based model is informed by a range of theories pertaining to marginalised groups, including women. It introduces new dimensions of capital, termed aspirational, navigational, familial, resistant

and linguistic. Aspirational capital is described as ‘the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers’ (2005, p. 77). For Yosso, the possession of this capital engenders a ‘culture of possibility’ (p. 78), where students from underprivileged backgrounds can strive to achieve and break the family cycle of educational and occupational disadvantage.

Yosso refers to navigational capital as a set of skills that enable an individual to manoeuvre through social institutions not originally established for them. From Yosso’s perspective, this includes students of colour within educational institutions originally devised for white students. This article describes an approach that adapts and extends Yosso’s perspective to consider mature-aged women, who are married or cohabiting, and who manoeuvre through a HE system designed for young single men and a nursing profession originally intended for young single women.

Yosso describes familial capital as the family support that helps the student cope during difficult times. Distinct from social and cultural capital, familial capital includes emotional and practical support, irrespective of insider knowledge of systems such as HE. For older students, the immediate family is likely to be the partner and children, rather than parents and siblings.

Resistant capital is the knowledge and skills required to overcome inequitable situations arising from prejudice directed at certain groups in HE, while linguistic capital refers to the communication and social skills developed through multi-lingual interaction with family and the wider community. Yosso’s final dimension, social capital, concurs with Bourdieu’s definition of social networks of knowledge and belonging (1986).

This broader approach to capital offers the possibility of an inclusive, balanced interpretation of NT student experience. Despite the high number of NT students who choose nursing, these additional dimensions are missing from the nursing literature. This study addresses this omission through the exploration of the university experiences of a group of NT women nurse students across their degree journey, asking ‘What supports and hinders the progression of mature-age women in intimate relationships in their nursing degree, and how can this be conceptualised through the idea of capital?’

## Methodology

The study design was qualitative, guided by Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy (Gadamer, 1989). This philosophy fits within the social constructivist paradigm as an interpretive approach to understanding lived experience. The research was carried out between 2015 and 2016 across two campuses of a single university in Western Australia. A longitudinal design explored the influences on the whole student journey. The sample was purposive; all participants were mature-age women. To understand the factors that supported student success, only participants who completed their degree were included. The full-time degree duration was three years. Twenty-eight participants completed an initial in-depth interview during their second year of study; 24 of these women completed a second interview in their final semester. The study was approved by the University Research Ethics board. The use of pseudonyms and removal of identifying participant information protected confidentiality.

In keeping with Gadamer's philosophy, which stresses the importance of the hermeneutic circle and the development of a shared consensus of understanding between the participant and researcher (Gadamer, 1989), interviews were conducted and analysed by a single researcher. Three main questions explored the influences within and outside the university on participants' decisions to go to university, their degree progression (their ability to continue and achieve academically) and their overall university experience. Interviews were transcribed verbatim with member checking undertaken to support data credibility prior to coding. Reflective analysis took place through the interplay of participant voices, pertinent theory and the researcher's perspective within the Gadamerian hermeneutic circle, from which a 'fusion of horizons' or 'consensus of understanding' was achieved. The sub-themes and themes developed from this process were conceptualised within a framework of capital.

## Findings

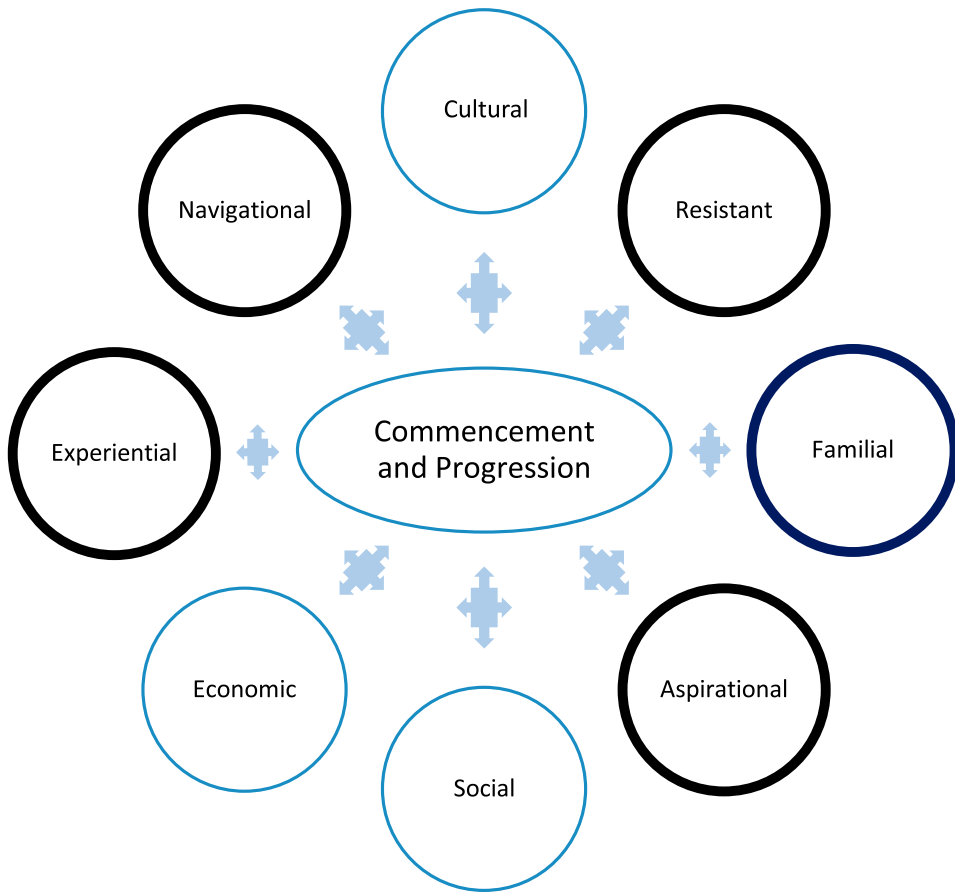
Awareness of a student's social reality is key to understanding their access to the capital important to HE equity of opportunity. Therefore, the findings start with a description of the participants' sociodemographic and NT student status. A discussion of the framework of capital important to commencement and progression follows. This begins with an interpretation of the detrimental influence of the dissonance in the participants' 'traditional' capitals with that expected by the university. The findings continue with an interpretation of five further dimensions of capital that together conceptualise the strengths and attributes that enabled participants' degree progression in the face of disadvantage and adversity.

### *Non-traditional participant characteristics*

All participants were NT students, most belonging to more than one category known to experience difficulties in HE (Devlin, 2013; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). All were mature-age, the average age on commencement being 34 years. Residential postcode information classified all participants as mid to high socioeconomic status; however, a thorough and arguably more reliable analysis of educational and occupational data (Dockery et al., 2015) using post-school education (that is education after compulsory schooling is completed, usually at the age of 17 years in Australia) and occupational skill level prior to commencement, categorised most as mid to low SES. Twenty-seven participants were the first generation of their family of origin to go to university. Eighteen were the first person in their current family to go to university.

All the participants began university in a heterosexual intimate relationship (married or cohabiting): the average length of these relationships was nine years at commencement. Twenty-one participants worked for an average of 23 h a week, 22 couples had children, and eight women separated from their partners during their degree.

Note that participant quotes are arranged as: pseudonym, age, FIF status family of origin where parents did not go to university before them (FIFo), FIF status current family – where partners and children did not go before them (FIFc), number of dependent children living at home (CH 'n'), engagement in full-time paid work (FTW – 35 h a week or over) or part-time paid work (PTW – under 35 h per week) during university.



**Figure 1.** Non-traditional women nurse student dimensions of capital framework.

### *Dimensions of capital*

Figure 1 demonstrates the dimensions of capital important to the commencement and progression of the women in this study. The framework includes Bourdieu's (1986) and Yosso's (2005) dimensions except for Yosso's linguistic capital, which was not relevant to the participants' experiences, as all spoke English only. Experiential capital was also important to commencement and continuation. This capital, not recognised by Yosso, was introduced by O'Shea (2016) in her research with FIF and mature-age students in Australia. Experiential capital describes knowledge and qualities derived from life experience. In Figure 1 dimensions introduced by Yosso (2005) and O'Shea (2016) are distinguished by bold outline. The multidirectional arrows represent the dynamic and non-discreet nature of the dimensions of capital, and their capacity to influence and convert into other dimensions across the student journey.

A discussion of each dimension of capital follows, beginning with the 'traditional' capitals: cultural, social and economic and the detrimental influence of the dissonance between participants' resources and university expectations. The discussion then introduces five

further dimensions of capital, which offer a conceptual understanding of the strengths and attributes important to participants' success.

### *Cultural capital*

Twenty-seven participants had grown up in a family where neither parent had gone to university (FIFo). A lack of embodied cultural capital within these families was evident. Participants recalled their parents' disinterest or ambivalence towards HE during their childhood:

Dad didn't get it, dad was kind of 'don't do it'. No-one's educated in my family (Keturah, 20, FIFo, FIFc, CH 0, PTW).

As young adults, participants' ideas of HE often reflected their parents', in that they neither valued its potential benefits, nor believed they had the aptitude to succeed. Participants also questioned their belonging at university:

People like me, a daughter of a post lady and market worker, don't go to uni (Maggie, 44, FIFo, CH 2).

These perspectives played an important part in participants' rejection of the possibility of HE as the next step after high school. Once participants did decide to pursue a nursing degree, the dissonance in cultural capital between themselves and the university made their transition into university highly challenging, its processes and expectations described as 'foreign' and 'alien':

I felt like I'd stepped into another planet (Anne, 38, FIFo, CH 3, FTW).

A lack of the academic skills required by HE presented further early challenges, with written assignments especially difficult. Most women had left school many years ago, and the majority had not studied since. As one participant who had left school 30 years ago explained:

I didn't know what academic writing was all about ... Oh, the first assignment I wrote was just dreadful ... I hadn't written an assignment in so many years, so it was a bit 'what the hell?' (Sherry, 47, FIFo, CH 2, PTW).

Students who needed academic skills support were expected to attend extracurricular classes, which required additional time investment. While valued, participants' capacity to attend sessions impeded by employment, domestic responsibilities and lack of partner and parental support (familial capital):

I would like to go to the workshops but I don't have the time (Paige, 24, FIFo, FIFc, CH 0, FTW).

Few participants began university with a sound understanding of computer technology. The university's reliance on online communication and virtual assessment platforms challenged early progression. Student encounters with staff with similar computer literacy limitations caused frustration:

They gave us one [assignment] 'design a Wiki page'. Well I've never designed a Wiki page before. So I would ask the lecturer and they hadn't done a Wiki page before and so it was 'the blind leading the blind' (Lauren, 32, FIFo, FIFc, CH 2, FTW).



As with academic literacy, computer literacy support was extracurricular, reducing accessibility. Participants recounted how these early difficulties had led them and their peers to consider leaving university:

For me and for many of my friends around that time, they were like ‘no I’ve had enough’ ... it was pretty much touch and go ... I think it’s a bit of a reality shock going back to university (Candice, 40, FIFo, FIFc, CH 3, PTW).

### *Social capital*

Before commencement, a lack of available ‘insider’ HE knowledge among participants, their families of origin and current families, resulted in the idea that university was inaccessible. As women with multiple responsibilities, the perception that university only offered full-time courses was a deterrent, as was the belief that they were ‘too old’ to belong. Older children with university experience were influential alternative sources of information. University open day attendance with these family members offered a vicarious insight into HE that dispelled these assumptions and supported commencement:

Coming up here and seeing they weren’t all young kids that gave me confidence (Julie 48, FIFo, CH 2, PTW).

An important source of social capital following commencement was the student peer-network. Participants tended to seek the company of similarly aged women with comparable family experiences outside university. These relationships facilitated a sense of belonging in the early weeks:

They were an absolute godsend ... You don’t feel you’re alone out there ... you feel you’re normal ... it makes it easier, you don’t feel like you’re an old codger (Candice, 40, FIFo FIFc, CH 3, PTW).

As students with few other sources of social capital, these networks also offered a much needed way to interpret the university environment.

### *Economic capital*

As students lived with partners, and in most cases, dependent children, each began university with household responsibilities. Clinical practice periods caused financial stress among participants who needed to engage in paid work during the degree:

You’ve got four weeks of no work and you have to pay for parking, lunches, childcare and day-care, before and after school care. Anyone I know that’s working while studying has said that they are the biggest thing that they struggle with, those four weeks without pay (Frankie, 32, FIFo, FIFc, CH 3).

To limit this financial stress, participants often accepted additional paid work before and after periods of clinical practice. This limited their capacity to engage and achieve in university study. Participants who separated from partners during their degree described parents and friends as essential alternative sources of economic capital.

### *Aspirational capital*

Further dimensions of capital acted as compensatory resources during the degree. Chief among these was aspirational capital, a dimension that encapsulates student ambitions.

Some sources of aspirational capital were present from commencement, while others developed during the degree. Together, these sustained the participants across their degree journey.

Early sources of aspirational capital included family members who had worked in nursing. A participant whose mother was a nurse reflected:

I remember as a child my mother had nursing books at home she had when she was studying, and I just loved looking through it at all (Rebecca, 43, FIFo, FIFc, CH 4, PTW).

Over half the participants had worked in auxiliary health and caring roles prior to university. Aspirational capital was also derived from these experiences:

I was always looking at the nurses thinking ‘Oh I really want to be them, how am I going to get that?’ (Michelle, 40, FIFo, FIFc, CH 2, PTW).

These personal or vicariously informed understandings of nursing planted a ‘seed’ of interest and fostered the early development of their nurse identity. A growing dissatisfaction with these auxiliary roles, which participants described as ‘unchallenging’ and ‘unstimulating’ motivated decisions to apply to study nursing, which offered a structured career pathway:

It’s about the career now, it’s about not just being stuck in a job ... nursing is somewhere to go, out of a dead end situation (Sharon, 32, FIFo, FIFc, CH 3, PTW).

From commencement, a clearly established ambition to become a nurse, often described by participants as a ‘passion’, became crucial during challenging times. One participant, a mother of three dependent children and part-time worker, described how a family crisis had threatened her continuation. Her aspiration to be a nurse was the reason she stayed:

I think the biggest thing that’s kept me here is knowing that this [becoming a nurse] is what you want (Sharon, 32, FIFo, FIFc, CH3, PTW).

Although participants began their degree with an established nurse identity, their student identity was not well developed. Over time, however, this grew and became a further aspiration. One participant’s reflections illustrate her satisfaction with this new identity:

I really enjoyed it, I got this new lease of life. All these new people and they see you as someone completely different, and I just really loved it (Brenda, 46, FIFo, CH2).

A further source of aspirational capital that developed over time was the participants’ realisation that their education could benefit their children. This prompted some to reframe themselves as an inspirational role model:

I am doing this for me, and obviously so my girls can see that you can have a career (Frankie, 32, FIFo, FIFc, CH 3).

### *Navigational capital*

Navigational capital encapsulates the skills and attributes necessary for an individual’s negotiation of social institutions not originally intended for them. Finding themselves in a HE system designed for young students without family responsibilities, participants drew on a number of personal attributes to succeed. Navigation of the transition period was enabled, in part, by participants’ high personal expectations:

Academically I would say grade-wise I would be wanting an 80 (Michelle, 40, FIFo, FIFc, CH 2, PTW).

Personal drive and competitiveness also helped them persevere:

I think the biggest thing that's kept me here ... is the self-drive and knowing that this is what you want (Sharon, 32, FIFo, FIFc, CH3, PTW).

As participants progressed, the needs of family and the university required ongoing personal compromise. While online study enabled continued access to university study, the poor sound quality of some recorded lectures and the teacher's use of brief online materials left participants struggling:

You just have to sort of work out [the meaning of some information] (Marla, 21, FIFo, FIFc, CH 0, PTW).

Time with peers on campus was also limited, reducing access to the social capital networks so important to participants' early acculturation and sense of belonging. Some described how these cumulative compromises took a toll on their wellbeing. Others described how they ultimately affected their academic achievement:

No doubt I could do better ... far better but ... normal life doesn't allow you to do that (Sherry, 47, FIFo, CH 2, PTW).

I'm sure I could do much better if I didn't have so many distractions. But that's just part of being a mum of two teenage daughters (Maggie, 44, FIFo, CH 2).

These findings highlight a sense of resignation that such compromise was unavoidable.

### *Experiential capital*

Experiential capital could be considered a form of acquired wisdom and personal attributes accrued through life experience. For most participants, years of juggling family and work meant this capital was plentiful. Well-honed organisational skills were drawn on to manage multiple responsibilities:

I have this huge bloody wall chart ... you know [husband's] work roster, my work roster. When the kids are on holiday, when I'm on prac, when assignments are due (Lauren, 32, FIFo, FIFc, CH 2, FTW).

Participants recognised their life experience as an important asset, particularly during difficult clinical practice experiences, where well-developed communication and empathy skills were required. Many described how younger students often lacked these qualities:

I've seen it out on prac, when you go 'oh my God, what did she [younger student] just say?' I was with one of the other nurses and we just looked at each other, because you just can't believe that someone would have come out with that in front of a patient ... you hope they mature with time (Brenda, 46, FIFo, CH2).

The contrast in participants' feelings of competence as a nursing student in the university and practice setting is evident here, with experiential capital playing an important part.

### *Familial capital*

Although parents and partners were unable to offer HE insider knowledge (social capital), some did provide emotional and practical support. Partners were occasionally described as initially highly emotionally supportive of participants' decisions to go to university:

If [my partner] didn't push me to do it, I would never have done it (Leah, 20, FIFo, CH 0, FTW).

Over time, however, partners began to resent the time participants devoted to university. This was markedly so among partners with no personal experience of university, and no frame of reference to guide their expectations:

He didn't understand what it meant ... probably because he's only had the short courses (Chantelle, 38, FIFo, FIFc, CH 3).

While partners' emotional support was somewhat influenced by personal HE experience, their domestic support was almost universally unforthcoming. All participants described a traditionally gendered arrangement in their intimate relationship, with most women continuing to carry the main burden of domestic responsibility as they began their degree. As the time demands of university increased, participants began to request a reallocation of domestic roles. Many described how their partners' resistance and reluctance to these requests affected their achievement (navigational capital).

The familial capital available from participants' children mirrored the partner situation. Here again, emotional support was sometimes initially forthcoming, but faltered when participants became more preoccupied with university, and less able to meet their children's needs. Furthermore, children with personal experience of university were more likely to offer emotional support. One participant explained how her daughter, a current honours student, regularly 'checked-in' in her progression:

Like my daughter has just rung to see how I did in my last exam (Sherry, 47, FIFo, CH 2, PTW).

Like partners, children were unreliable sources of domestic help. Interestingly, daughters were described as more willing to assist, reflecting the traditional male/female divisions of tasks within the intimate relationship. Although parents had sometimes discouraged participants from considering HE when they left high school (cultural capital), they were often emotionally supportive following commencement. Most parents' living and working arrangements restricted their capacity to provide domestic support. However, when participants separated from partners, some stepped in, offering a home and childcare.

My parents said 'right we're making a commitment to you'. My mum and dad sat down and said ... 'you need to go and do prac, you need to do what you need to do, we will look after the kids' (Chantelle, 38, FIFo, FIFc, CH 3).

For these women, parents became a crucial compensatory source of familial capital.

### *Resistant capital*

Like navigational capital, resistant capital describes the challenges that threaten the success of minority student groups. While navigational capital describes the barriers within

institutions intended for the mainstream or dominant group, resistant capital refers to a dynamic where individuals overcome adversity and challenges originating from attitudes and perceptions of individuals and society (Yosso, 2005). In this study, these challenges came from participants, their family of origin and current family, and concerned traditional ideas of gender and perceptions of LSES women in HE.

Resistant capital was evident in situations where participants described confronting and re-evaluating internalised and family perspectives that had previously hindered their decisions to go to university. Some even described how their parents' lack of confidence in their ability became a source of motivation to achieve at university:

They'd be like 'oh no, of course she wouldn't finish it'. That pushed me (Kylie, 20, FIFo, FIFc, FTW).

These women expressed a desire to overcome their own uncertainty in their capacity to succeed and belong at university:

I think that I've got to prove to myself that I can do this. I can be the first in this family and in my mum and dad's (Ros, 40, FIFo, FIFc, CH 2, PTW).

Engagement in different cultural and social environments across the degree experience supported student growth, which prompted a wider and more questioning worldview. For some, this facilitated a profound change in perspective:

I am learning and progressing and thinking about things in a much different perspective (Keturah, 20, FIFo, FIFc, CH 0, PTW).

Personal growth supported a reevaluation of participants' priorities and enabled them to resist emotional pressure from partners and children (familial capital). Michelle, for example, explained how she had begun to realise her family 'would not die' if she did not step in on every occasion to help.

Resistant capital was also evident among participants who separated from their partners during the degree. Significantly, 7 of these 8 women had been the FIFc to go to university. Most revealed they had initiated the separation to escape their partner's lack of emotional support and obstructive behaviour that had impacted their capacity to study. These women described how their university experience had provided the strength to do this:

You know what, it's made me really strong, if I can bring anything home from this degree and going through this and pushing through it, you know what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, that really does apply to me (Judy, 43, FIFc, CH 2, PTW).

These comments suggest that women's personal growth during their degree journey was intimately linked to the development of resistant capital; in turn, a dimension that was instrumental in their ongoing pursuit of their nursing goal.

## Discussion and recommendations

This study offers an evolving view of NT student strengths and vulnerabilities, as well as the external challenges and mechanisms of support that influenced their degree experience. This is presented through a framework of traditional capital described by Bourdieu (1986), and further dimensions described by previous studies with NT students –

primarily Yosso (2005) from her work with US students of colour – and also O’Shea (2016) in her study of mature age FIF students in Australia. The findings identify differences and similarities in the availability and importance of these resources for mature-age women nursing undergraduates.

Despite pleas from Nora and Crisp (2012) and Tinto (2017), research into the university experience continues to focus on the early stage of the degree, with national Australian studies dedicated to the transition phase (Baik et al., 2015; James et al., 2010). The longitudinal approach taken in this study is unusual and is also a departure from the approach taken by O’Shea (2016) who explores the students’ transition into university. It also expands on the work of Yosso (2005) who limited her research to the capital students bring to university from their parental home and community. This whole-of-journey approach demonstrates for the first time how the availability and influence of capital alters across the university journey. Perhaps more importantly, it also demonstrates how capital resources essential to progression can develop during the degree.

The participants’ strengths and attributes were successfully conceptualised within the widened capital framework. These women commonly began university with a strongly defined nursing career goal; termed ‘occupational goal commitment’ (Tinto, 1993), this attribute facilitates student success. The almost ubiquitous presence of occupational goal commitment contrasts favourably with the reported figure of 20% to 30% among Australian undergraduates in general (Cherastidtham et al., 2018). New sources of aspirational capital that developed over time were associated with a growing student identity, separate from the women’s identity as partner and for most, mother. Mothers also became inspired by the potential benefit of HE for their children. In this way, participants were creating what Yosso refers to as a ‘culture of possibility’ for their children (2005, p. 78). These findings give credence to the importance of student identity as a prerequisite of NT student success (Lockett & Lockett, 2009), and to strategies that support its development at university.

Yosso (2005) describes navigational capital as a resource that helps individuals manoeuvre through institutions not created for them. In contrast to Yosso, who studied the navigation of students of colour through a university system devised for white students, this study considered the navigation of mature-age women with family responsibilities within an educational system originally intended for young men and a nursing profession devised for young single women. These participants drew on their drive and commitment to navigate this environment. To appease family in an increasingly stressful environment, these women also limited their social and academic engagement. Navigational capital was therefore a ‘double-edged sword’ that supported participants’ continuation while compromising wellbeing and academic achievement. Proactive changes in the curriculum may reduce the negative impact of these compromises. Embedded academic and computer skills services can improve their accessibility and prevent further alienation of NT students who doubt their belonging at university (O’Shea et al., 2016). Online student engagement could be enhanced by tutors with adequate computer literacy, a strong virtual presence and online pedagogy skills that facilitate social and academic engagement (Andrew et al., 2015; Stone & O’Shea, 2019),

While not identified by Yosso (2005), the importance of experiential capital to the women in this study cannot be overestimated. Well-developed organisational skills were crucial in the management of numerous competing responsibilities. Highly developed

communication skills gave these students a much-needed advantage during clinical practice and with it a sense of self-efficacy and belonging that was less available to them in the early academic environment and is strongly associated with university success (Tinto, 2017).

Resistant capital and navigational capital describe the students' ability to progress in foreign or unwelcoming situations. While navigational capital refers to the wider environment such as HE, resistant capital refers to individual attitudes and perspectives. For Yosso's (2005) students of colour, these were often racist attitudes. For the 27 FIF women students in this study, several individual and family perspectives were influential. To commence university, participants first drew on resistant capital to overcome personal and family doubts about their capacity to belong and succeed. During the degree, participants were immersed in diverse social and cultural environments. Their resultant personal growth was a crucial prerequisite to the availability of further resistant capital. Widening perspectives precipitated a re-evaluation of internalised and external assumptions that had challenged participants' commencement and progression; most notably the traditional gender norms that expect women to prioritise family requirements over personal ambitions. This profound re-evaluation influenced some participants' decisions to leave partners described as obstructive to their university progression. However, in separating, new challenges emerged through the loss of economic and familial capital.

To support the study's authenticity and relevance, its strengths-based approach was balanced by an exploration of the difficulties associated with NT student experiences and their traditional capital reserves (McKay & Devlin, 2014; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). In doing so, the study revealed how insufficient social capital – ascribed to a lack of personal and family knowledge networks of HE – hindered commencement. These findings suggest the effective recruitment of mature-age students requires clear messages about the flexibility of study options and the diversity of student ages in HE.

The FIFo status of (all but one) participants meant the embodied cultural capital associated with success at university was poorly available, leaving them unprepared for the university's academic expectations (Bourdieu, 1986; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). A limited availability of familial capital exacerbated the students' early difficulties. Although a lack of domestic partner support was common across all relationships, FIFc participants also lacked partners' emotional support. While it is important to note that children with university experience did offer emotional support, these family situations were uncommon. Although parents offered emotional encouragement during the degree, they were often unable to offer domestic help. This general dearth of familial capital contributed to a highly stressful home environment that was not conducive to study and reduced participants' capacity to engage with university extra-curricular support services. This finding further reinforces the importance of embedded support and quality online teaching across the curriculum.

Throughout the degree, periods of clinical practice placed participants under financial stress. This issue appears to be largely overlooked in the nursing research, which restricts its focus to the influence of a quality of the clinical environment on student success (Royal, 2012). This is a significant omission, considering the growing number of mature-age nurse students with family and financial commitments. The challenges caused by the loss of economic capital when women separate from their partners is a further issue that requires acknowledgement. The comparatively high proportion of FIFc participants who separated during this study, combined with the difficulties they faced in accessing familial and social

capital, highlights the importance of considering the current family as a resource of capital in future studies of the FIF student experience.

The findings offer an important insight into the compensatory nature of dimensions of capital previously ignored in the nursing literature. Aspirational and experiential capital helped participants overcome the challenges associated with a dissonance of cultural and social capital and a deficiency of familial capital. Other examples include resistant and navigational capital, which strengthened participants' ability to overcome barriers created by inaccessible and bewildering university processes and services, and unhelpful societal and internalised attitudes.

The study also identifies previously unconsidered sources of capital such as social and familial capital from older children with personal HE experiences, this finding again emphasising the key role of the current family for FIF students. Following commencement, networks of other mature-age student peers with family responsibilities were revealed as a further source of social capital. These relationships guided participants through an initially foreign environment and helped them develop a sense of belonging, a factor strongly associated with successful transition into university (Krause & Armitage, 2014) and with student wellbeing and satisfaction (Bye et al., 2019).

The study's longitudinal approach presented a view of HE as a process, and revealed how this process influenced the dynamic availability of capital, associated with a growing student identity and interpersonal relationships, and the fluctuating demands of the nursing curriculum. The ideas that traditional capital resources can alter across the student journey has been previously described by Bye et al. (2019) in their study of first-year Australian university students. The present study demonstrates other dimensions of capital can alter across the whole degree journey. Examples include aspirational capital, which developed with participants' growing student identity during the degree, and resistant capital, which strengthened as participants experienced personal growth.

### **Strengths and limitations**

This study depended, in part, on participants' memories of past events. Member checking, however, offered an opportunity to re-examine and revise information shared during interviews.

The findings were highly contextualised to the experiences of women within Western Australia, and to undergraduate nurse education. The social reality and university experiences of these women may differ significantly to those in different settings, limiting the transferability of some findings. What can be transferred with some confidence are the key findings that the women's lived reality outside the university, the social determinant of gender and the dynamic nature of the student experience itself act as crucial influences on women's university experiences, and degree progression. It can also be argued that the study's extended framework of capital can be transferred to other researchers interested in understanding the NT student experience in a holistic and authentic manner.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study offers a meaningful and balanced conceptual interpretation of factors that influence NT student commencement and progression. It presents a range of capital



pivotal to university success and describes their inter-dependent and compensatory nature across the university journey. The dynamic nature of these capital dimensions and the university's capacity to support their development, have important implications for educators and university administrators intent on supporting the retention and success of today's NT students within nursing and other disciplines in HE.

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