The Post-Secondary Decision-Making Process for At-Risk Students in Ontario

by

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Authors Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

An important body of research examines the role of student decision-making on stratification and post-secondary transitions. In an era of expanded options, students often have to draw on personal, family and institutional resources to make informed decisions that fit with their academic background and personal interests. For students from low income households and neighbourhoods, the difficulty of making sound decisions is compounded by their lack of access to high status ties and cultural capital which can help them capitalize on such interactions. This sandwich dissertation examines the role of social and cultural capital in the decision-making process for at-risk students, using alignment theory to help evaluate the types of decisions students make over time. Using a longitudinal qualitative framework, students are interviewed at three time points to explore how these various types of capital interact with their decision-making. The first chapter focuses on the role of social capital, particularly institutional agents in helping students align their decision-making, prior to the college and university application deadlines in Ontario. The second chapter focuses on interviews with students after they have made their decisions for the fall, examining how their individual habitus orientations interact with the institutional habitus of school personnel; changes to decisions from their first interviews are also explored. The last chapter explores the theoretical affinity between rational actor theory and habitus, using alignment as a bridging theory to assess student decision-making and transitions over a 15 month period. While institutional agents were found to help students make informed decisions at various time points, the quality and duration of those ties, as well students' early aspiration formation and academic background, were all critical for early alignment and successful post-secondary transitions.

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of the postsecondary sector in Canada has seen the number of university enrolments almost double in the last thirty years, rising from 550,000 students in 1980 to 994,000 in 2010 (AUCC 2011). The overall participation rates for university have increased significantly for students aged 18 to 20, from 54% in 1999 to 79% in 2005 (Shaienks et al. 2008). Recent national post-secondary enrolment figures, show a 3.04% increase from 2013-14 to 2017-18 (Statistics Canada). However, in 2010 there were about three percent fewer youth in the key 18-to-24 age range compared with 1980 (AUCC 2011). Thus, as the Canadian population continues to age, other explanations besides population growth should help to account for the rise in postsecondary enrolments over the past three decades. One possible explanation is understanding how students conceptualize success. Some scholars argue, that the increased rates of postsecondary enrolment have coincided with a cultural shift in thinking about the primacy of a university education for life-course success (Davies 2005; Lehmann 2012). Davies and Hammack (2005) argue that even without any clear links between education and defined pathways in the North-American labour market, parents and students continue to think that more education is required to access better jobs. However, despite any uncertainties of what a post-secondary credential can offer with regards to labour market outcomes, several Canadian studies have demonstrated the potential economic gains (Frank and Walters 2012; Walters 2002). However, researchers are still unsure about how much education, and in which academic programs and disciplines students are mostly likely to get the most immediate and sustainable labour market returns (Frenette and Frank 2016). As individual post-secondary choice is often conceptualized as separate from the effects of educational attainment (Coleman 1993), researchers continue to be fascinated with how choices are influenced by social class background (Gabay Egozi et al 2013; Goldthorpe 1998) as well as

the quality of information available to students at the time of decision-making.

Much of the research on educational decision-making focuses on cross-sectional data; there is a shortage of longitudinal and specifically, qualitative data that looks at the experience of student decision-making as it takes place within the context of the school, where many of the decisions are made (McDonough 1997). In addition, there is a shortage of research which focuses on students from the poorest neighbourhoods; rather, the focus has generally been on middle and working class black and white students (see Calarco 2014; Hardie 2015; Lareau 2000). Much of the existing research on student decision-making has not focused on the transition between the last year of high school and the first year of university. There is insufficient data to help us understand how high school decisions contribute to students' first year experiences. This is a critical time in an undergraduate career, where at-risk students have been argued to be less capable of coping with university pressures (Evans 2012). Student choice can be a stratifying mechanism, creating further differentiation between students from more privileged backgrounds and those more at-risk for poorer educational outcomes (Gabay-Egozi, Shavit and Yaish 2013; Goldthorpe 1998). This dissertation explores the decision-making processes of grade 12 students who plan to attend post-secondary, as well as their early experiences transitioning. My primary goal is to explore how decision-making processes are shaped by social stratification. Each chapter will explore different theoretical approaches integral to understanding how students learn about various post-secondary options, who they interact with, and how those interactions influence both the types and quality of decisions they make.

This constitutes the first Canadian qualitative study of educational decision-making that tracks students at multiple time points, to explore the processes leading up to postsecondary enrolment, and the influence of those decisions on students' post-graduation experiences. Unlike

previous studies of educational decision-making that have depended on rational-choice models (Gabay-Egozi et al. 2010; Breen, Van De Werfhorst, and Jaeger 2014; Bridge and Wilson 2015; Dollmann 2016), this study will conceptualize decision-making as an interactive process (Bridge and Wilson 2015), shaped in-part by the institutional context, the students' understanding of their available choices and their class-based access to resources.

This research makes valuable contributions to several existing literatures. First, it complements recent research which has explored the postsecondary experiences of working-class, and lower-SES students (Finnegan and Merrill 2017; Lehmann 2007, 2013). By conducting our research in a lower-SES neighbourhood, we interviewed students who are disadvantaged financially, and whose parents' occupational statuses make it difficult for them to be heavily involved in their children's lives (Hamilton 2016; Stephan 2013). While lower SES parents may make great efforts to support their children's educational dreams, Lareau and Cox (2011) argue that such efforts are not always successful. Second, it provides an additional study for the growing literature on the interaction between rational choice and habitus in student decision-making (Glaesser and Cooper 2014; Maier and Robson 2020). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it employs a qualitative longitudinal method to decision-making, allowing for richer student descriptions which permit greater examination of structure versus agency, and allows for a deeper and more nuanced exploration of social processes. (Hermanowicz 2013; Saldaña 2015). The following literature review will highlight the major theoretical approaches central to this dissertation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research examining higher education has focused extensively on the influence of socioeconomic status on postsecondary success. Canadian research demonstrates the importance of providing

additional supports for lower SES students when they enter university (Lehmann 2012). Lower SES students entering university are less-endowed financially (Goldrick-Rab 2016), and are less likely to receive the same level of support from their parents as do students from higher SES backgrounds (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018) . Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) argue that having to work while studying can affect grades in college, but lower SES students can encounter other forms of 'struggle' besides poor academic performance. A lack of decision-making alignment, which consists of uncertainty about post-secondary pathways and their connection to labour market outcomes, has been shown to lead to negative educational and employment outcomes for students from lower SES backgrounds (Sabates, Harris and Staff 2011; Morgan et al. 2012). The concept of alignment is used throughout this dissertation as a tool to help track and evaluate changes in student decision-making over the fifteen month period under examination. Given the presence of this concept in each of the three chapters in this dissertation, I will now provide a brief overview of its use in the educational decision-making literature.

Decision-making alignment

Educational attainment literature has been dominated by both the socialization and choice perspectives (Morgan et al. 2012). The socialization perspective focuses on the interaction between social class origins and educational ability, whereas the choice perspective focuses on social class variation in how choices about schooling are made (see Boudon 1998). Researchers who work at the intersection of both primary and secondary effects, or push and pull factors (see Gambetta 1987) have begun to look at decision-making from the viewpoint of information processing and uncertainty (Grodsky and Jones 2007; Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010; Morgan 2005; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). The underlying assumptions informing much of this recent work is that students can be both purposive in their decision-making, but also uncertain,

and dependent on others, which can have different effects for students with less access to class-based resources. For example, in one of the most oft-cited works dealing with educational decision-making, Schneider and Stevenson (1999), argue that students who lack the ability to link their near-term educational plans with future labour market pathways, are at a higher risk for 'misalignment'. Decision-making alignment, or 'aligned ambition', occurs when students educational expectations satisfy the educational requirements of their future occupational aspirations. Whenever, the amount of education exceeds, or more importantly, is too little to satisfy the requirements of a future occupation, misalignment is present. Such incongruity in student decision-making, can be potentially assuaged by parents from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds, who through their own experiences with the PSE system, assist their children in filling in the gaps between their interests, goals and capabilities and potential PSE pathways (Hamilton, Roksa and Nielson 2018; Lareau and Cox 2011).

Recent quantitative studies have sought to understand the relationship between misalignment and uncertainty in secondary school, and its influence of future educational attainment and labour market outcomes. Sabates, Harris and Staff (2011) used adolescent longitudinal data from the British Cohort Study, which followed students graduating from high school all the way to age 34. They found that students from lower SES backgrounds were more likely to overpopulate the groups that possessed decision-making uncertainty and that students were more likely to not graduate, have issues with unemployment and lower salaries. Similarly, working with American data, Schmitt-Wilson and Fass (2016) found that misalignment in high school was a significant predictor of underemployment in adulthood, thus illustrating the importance of knowledge about educational and labour market pathways in high school.

The growing body of sociological literature surrounding student decision making, and its relationship to postsecondary pathways and outcomes, generally draws from three prevalent theoretical traditions: class and stratification, social and cultural capital, and rational choice theories. I draw from each of these traditions in my chapters and summarize some of the important literature from each in the sections below.

Social Class and Stratification

Social class is a key component in stratification research, and is often attributed to producing unequal educational outcomes for students from less advantaged backgrounds. Some stratification researchers, like Lareau (2011) approach the subject through the lens of parenting, and examine how social class influences parenting styles, which critically influence the types of interactions children have with adults outside the home. The results of these class differences produce children who are socialized to be assertive, and actively question adult authority, in the case of middle-class children. In contrast, working-class and poor children are raised to be passive and constrained when dealing with adults. Calarco (2011) expanded on this idea by assessing how these class-based dispositions actively play out in the classroom. Middle- class children seek out help from their teachers and ask questions, whereas working-class children tend to be more passive, thus producing inequalities in the way teachers respond to and perceive different students. The nature of parental involvement in their children's schooling can have profound implications for the types of decisions children eventually make regarding future pathways, and the level of information they possess while making them.

Lareau (2011) re-interviewed a group of students from her original study (see Lareau 2000), who are now all young adults. The follow-up interviews demonstrate the importance of having knowledgeable, informed and involved parents. Many of the middle-class children she

interviews treat the college application process like a major life event, meticulously making lists of available schools and programs and visiting the campuses. In many instances, their parents, whose own experiences are useful in helping them make choices, directly insert themselves in the process. Their involvement helps propel them to practical decisions that likely help them avoid future stress. For example, "Ms. Marshall", one of the mothers in the study, draws on her own experiences as a degree holder to object to her daughter attending an ivy-league school. Instead, she advises her daughter to accept a full scholarship at Maryland, where she will likely be challenged, but not incur unnecessary debt, as she is planning to be in school a long time to pursue a medical career (Lareau 2011: 309). These types of reasoned, strategic and informed interventions are arguably missing from the working-class and poor student accounts. These students are left to make their own decisions, as their parents trust in their maturity as adults to come to their own conclusions. Unfortunately, being treated as adults does not always help working-class students, as many of them drift further away from ambitions for college and find themselves working or attending vocational programs. Stephan and Rosenbaum (2013) argue that choosing a postsecondary pathway is rarely an activity made in isolation, and successful applicants generally receive mentorship from several sources including teachers, principals and guidance counselors. The most successful students, however, do not solely rely on the help of their school personnel. With the help of their parents (Lareau 2011) and networks (Carolan and Lardier 2017), higher SES students activate resources that can help them develop well-articulated aspirations and make better informed decisions regarding their educational futures.

The status attainment model, which has influenced a great deal of the stratification research on education, focuses on various factors, such as parental education levels that can influence educational attainment (Sirin 2005; Duncan and Murnane 2011). These models usually

hypothesize a strong relationship between SES and academic achievement. Some recent studies have investigated the relationship between SES and academic achievement by quantifying the investment patterns of parents over a period of time (Kornrich and Furstenberg 2013). They seek to understand how parental investment in education has influenced academic achievement. Rosenbaum et al. (2011) argue that the status attainment model relies on the key assumption that students' educational expectations are the driving force behind their educational decision-making. Notably, students with superior grades will also have more ambitious educational plans, as society will present realistic pathways based on current achievement levels. Conversely, guidance counselors and college advisors will help "cool out" unrealistic expectations of students without requisite achievement levels (Rosenbaum et al. 2011:182). However, 'cooling out' is now less prevalent, owing to the societal and political pressures placed on students to attend postsecondary (Davies and Hammack 2005). This in turn, has influenced the way that school officials treat disadvantaged populations when it comes to university enrolment; they are less likely to discourage university attendance, since it is now seen as a mandatory right that should be available to all.

While this new, less-biased approach to advising students can be seen as an improvement over previous practices, it can lead to "hidden stratification" by promoting unrealistic pathways to low-achieving students (Rosenbaum et al. 2011:183). For example, Rosenbaum et al. (2016) demonstrate that students from lower SES backgrounds with low test scores are far less likely to finish their BA and sub-BA (two-year college or certificate programs) credentials. Part of their reduced rates of completion for sub-BA programs has to do with the role of such credentials as 'stepping stones' towards acceptance into BA programs. Students without adequate academic preparation can get 'stuck' chasing a dream of a BA, without ever finishing either credential. The

authors argue that perhaps students with low test scores should focus exclusively on the sub-BA credential, as evidence shows these programs can provide similar economic remuneration as a BA. Thus, it becomes important to understand how the enrolment process is affected by contemporary guidance models.

Social and Cultural Capital

Sociologists of education have also depended heavily on the concepts of social and cultural capital. Everyone has social relationships, but the resources that we can extract for personal gain is the focus of social capital. For Lin (1999), individuals will benefit more from relationships with people who are in positions of advantage. Other theorists like Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2001) focus on the benefits obtained by being integrated in social groups that provide participants with important forms of social support, such as advice and emotional support. In the context of secondary education, Stephan (2013) looks at the role of counselors as an important source of social capital for students, particularly those from disadvantaged areas. Students in elite private schools receive more intense one-on-one interaction with their counselors, and usually seek out their help voluntarily, whereas students from disadvantaged communities have more difficulty reaching out to counselors, who often have less time for them because of intense workloads. Thus, the resources that lower SES students can activate from this important social relation are limited because of the model of counseling in these communities, which normally only helps higher SES students.

Lower SES students tend to rely on the advice of their family and friends, many of whom never attended college. Hardie (2015:256) describes the social capital of poor and working-class girls as "restricted", because their social ties are less likely to be high-status individuals. In contrast, Cherng et al. (2013:77) argue that adolescents that forge strong friendships with students

with middle-class resources, particularly those with a college-educated mother, are more likely to graduate from college. Having connections with students with educated mothers is a "cultural resource" that the authors find has a stronger relationship to college completion rates than material resources. Carolan and Lardier (2017) also find that students who can activate 'closed networks', or exclusive relationships with a tight-knit group of similarly advantaged (i.e. high grade point averages and educated parents) peers, have higher grades and completion rates. Horvat et al. (2003) use ethnographic data from working-class and middle-class schools, and find that each class of parents have homophilous, dense networks that consist of ties with one another. However, the ties that bind middle-class parents together are predicated on school-based associations, rather than the exclusively kin-based ties amongst working-class parents. This means that middle-class parents effectively use their connections with each other and other non-school professionals to advocate on behalf of their children, and to address any perceived problems. Higher SES students are also able to rely on their parents' experiences with the postsecondary system, as well as their network of contacts to access valuable career opportunities. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) provide multiple examples of middle to upper-class college girls who are able to access valuable internships that help them land jobs post-graduation. These studies all emphasize the importance of tightly-knit, 'norm-reinforcing' friendship networks. Of course, evidence on the efficacy of 'closed-networks' on school performance are not always favourable, leaving room for further research (Carolan 2010).

Cultural capital, like social capital, is a resource that can confer advantages onto students. But unlike social capital theory, which focuses on resources embedded in social relationships, the focus of cultural capital theorists has been institutionalized cultural signals, defined by Lamont and Lareau (1988:162) as "attitudes, preferences, and formal knowledge". These cultural signals

are used as evaluative standards by dominant institutions. Such standards, which are often reflective of middle-class culture, tend to exclude less dominant and privileged people. For example, Calarco (2014) argues that middle and working-class parents possess contrasting beliefs about appropriate classroom behavior. Middle class parents believe that children should diligently pursue their teachers to get the help they need in class, while working-class parents trust the teachers to help their children should they need assistance. These beliefs are connected to their overall approach to parenting, which are then passed down to their children and realized through differential behaviours in the classroom. She goes on to argue that middle-class students that are 'coached' by their parents end up receiving more timely assistance from teachers than lower SES students. These parental lessons represent a form of cultural capital that students from higher SES backgrounds activate through assertive behaviours, such as self-advocacy in the classroom. Self-advocacy can take the form of asking teachers questions (Calarco 2011), or actively seeking the advice of guidance counselors in the college enrolment process (Stephan and Rosenbaum 2013).

Cultural capital has often been depicted as "highbrow culture" in the literature (Lareau and Weininger 2003:575), reflective of things such as knowledge of art and literature. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), who first presented the term to describe processes of social reproduction, arguably pay little attention to cultural capital as a resource distinctive from technical skill (Kingston 2001). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) present cultural capital as a resource that is valuable to institutionalized evaluations of worth. Their book is extremely valuable to the sociology of education and researchers that seek to understand how the schooling system inherently disadvantages those from outside the middle class, who lack the dispositions and habits, what Bourdieu later called 'habitus' (Lehmann 2007:101) to blend in successfully into a culture that favors the advantaged. Lehmann (2013; 2007) writes about the challenges facing working-

class students in acclimatizing themselves to the tastes, conversations and dispositions of university life, much of which is new to them and requires, what he refers to as a 'consolidation' of their working-class 'habitus'. Such a shift in 'habitus' to successfully "fit in", as one student recounts, can involve changing the way one dresses, to seem more fashionable, or adopting more healthy eating habits by frequenting "farmer's markets", as another student describes (Lehmann 2013:7).

Rational Choice in Education

Unlike stratification and social/cultural capital theories, rational choice theory does not focus on the influence of social structure or context as sources of constraint on educational outcomes. Instead, rational choice focuses on the individual choices of students made in the interest of utility maximization (Glaesser and Cooper 2014). Although rational choice places primacy on the individual decision of rational actors, there are sociologically inspired versions of rational choice studies, that account for the situational features of resources and constraints facing students and their families (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). According to rational choice theories in education, student decision-making is influenced by often binary decisions to continue with a course of action, or to discontinue, if the risk of failure is greater than the short-term benefits of choosing a less risky pathway. Gabay-Egozi et al. (2010) analyze the curricular choices of grade 9 and 10 students in Tel-Aviv as they are about to move in to their curricular streams in the upper grades. They find that prior scholastic performance is the greatest determinant in the selection of the most difficult advanced math and English courses, but that social background also helps determine choices; those from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to choose the harder subjects, and those from the lower strata are more likely to 'hedge', and choose a mix of hard and soft subjects. Thus, like Gambetta (1987) finds in his study of Northern Italian students, decision-making is often

conditioned by past experiences with education, and an assessment of future benefits. It is also contingent on background features, such as class, as well as institutional influences, arising from the schooling system in which the decisions are embedded.

Gambetta's (1987), as well as other rational choice studies do not elaborate very much about the various mechanisms that contribute to influencing class-based knowledge, dispositions or behaviours, which habitus theory does quite well. According to Boudon (1998), rational choice theories are limited in accounting for cultural and normative orientations of belonging to a class. They place an unnecessary emphasis on individual decision-making as the primary cause of educational outcomes, without adequately accounting for the effect that class consciousness and location can play in shaping individual opinions. The concept of habitus, in contrast, considers the influence of belonging to a particular class on the ways that individuals adapt to a new educational environment (Lehmann 2007).

It is important to consider rational choice theories, as my dissertation focuses on decision-making processes. However, understanding processes entails more than simply conceptualizing decisions as binary, with short and long-term considerations. Class-based mechanisms also play an integral role in decision-making processes and help shape the interactions surrounding those decisions. While rational choice and cultural reproduction theories share similarities, in that actors within both frameworks make decisions from different positions of advantage, it is also important to account for the institutional structure of schools and the ongoing interactive relationship with its students (Bridge and Wilson 2015; Smyth and Banks 2012). For example, guidance counselors and university advisors take directives from school boards and university administrators regarding how to approach student advising. These wider organizational policies can influence how they approach their work and can affect their interactions with students (Kanno 2018; McDonough

1997). This dissertation captures the ongoing interactive relationship between educational decision-making and how it is influenced by institutional actors, within the context of the secondary school.

Qualitative Longitudinal Research

In order to contextualize the three articles that will be presented in this dissertation, I will briefly review my longitudinal qualitative design. The longitudinal qualitative approach serves as the backbone of the logic and cohesion of this sandwich dissertation. While each chapter is a standalone journal article, as I advanced in my interviews with students, new insights were gleaned which informed and strengthened each subsequent chapter. Chapter two and three serve as snapshots of student thinking in situ, but also have the benefit, unlike chapter one, of being informed by the previous work.

Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) is a real-time, interactive and retroactive process whereby researchers gain insight into the changing and sustained behaviour patterns of social actors. The ability of being able follow the same social actors through different spaces of time, combined with tools from qualitative methods can produce unique insights about social processes and behaviours. As part of a small, but important component of the 'longitudinal canon', QLR helps researchers actively engage with temporal facets of experience allowing them to think "dynamically" (Neale 2018: 2). I use QLR methodology for my study of at-risk students, focusing specifically on interviews as my primary data collection method. Interviews are also a powerful qualitative tool for helping understand human behaviours through individual narrative accounts. That these accounts are gathered through time, helps the researcher "expose process, evaluate causality, and substantiate micro-macro linkages" (Hermanowicz 2013: 190). My three articles all attempt to explore potential processes and how individual action is influenced by both personal

ties, but also institutional structures. In article two, I focus on the influence of the institutional habitus of Eastgate secondary on student decision-making. I examine the micro-meso relationship and how institutional norms and standards can shape decisions. In my third chapter, the decision-making process is studied across the entire 15 month period (see Table 1, chapter 3) and I discover how decision-making processes are influenced by both individual financial considerations, but also cultural meaning making structures. These cultural norms contribute to students' maintaining high aspirations, despite average grades and a lack of clarity about their futures.

One of the major goals of longitudinal qualitative interviews (LQI) is to biographically capture the turning points, and changes in an individual's life (Saldana 2003). My aim with conducting three interviews was to chart the course of decision-making in the pivotal grade 12 year, amongst a group of students that have very few external resources at their disposal. I wanted to understand how ties with various actors, particularly school personnel, would help shape and either benefit or distract students from their PSE ambitions. The third interview was added to understand how prior decisions influence the early transition experiences for students, many of whom were enrolled in post-secondary. Just as time is dependent on context, change is also dependent on individual perspective of movement (McCoy 2017). Because of this dependency, researchers like Saldana (2003) have argued that each QLR study should be guided by a flexible approach to the classification of change. The conceptual tools that I used to categorize change were the concepts of decision-making alignment and fit. My temporal approach allowed to me to notice patterns of consistency and change with respect to how students either stayed the course, or changed their minds with regards to their PSE plans. Alignment, or the extent to which students' educational expectations were in line with their future career aspirations (see Morgan et al. 2012) allowed me to capture patterns of change and consistency. However, the QLR design also

permitted the flexibility to reconceptualize change and understand inconsistencies. QLR combined with interviews can help alleviate some of the inherent problems with the interview method. According to Lamont and Swindler (2014), a common pitfall associated with the interview method is its tendency towards a 'methodological individualism', lacking the ability to connect individual attributes like race and class to more meso and macro level relational explanation. By combining this method with a longitudinal design, the hope is that individual level descriptions offered by participants can be more rigorously analyzed, by connecting them to enduring patterns, experienced within the context of both students' high school and post-secondary institutions.

The research presented in my three chapters is motivated by educational decision-making research in sociology, and the use of social and cultural capital theories, as well as rational actor theory within that sub-field. Despite the varying theoretical and methodological preferences associated with those three theoretical traditions, each deals with stratification patterns in educational outcomes based on decision-making behaviours. Consequently, the major overarching question driving this dissertation is: How is post-secondary decision-making connected to educational stratification? In each article/chapter in this dissertation, I focus on a different facet of student access and how students' use of social and cultural capital influence their decision-making rationales. I connect access to resources with both class-based and institutional processes within the context of decision-making. Through these connections, I consistently explore whether class-based resources and dispositions lead to circumvention of traditional educational inequalities, or help reproduce them.

Structure of Dissertation

Decision-making research has argued for the importance of high-status ties in helping guide students to decision-making alignment (Hardie 2015; Lareau and Cox 2011; Stephan 2013). The

presence of these ties has been agued to be particularly more important for students at-risk, as they lack informed parental guidance. Scholars argue that these ties can help students circumvent stratification processes, which disadvantage students who lack access to information from which to make informed decisions (Stanton-Salazar 2010). However, there is a shortage of research that attempts to capture student decision-making 'in situ' (Svendsen 2006) and which focuses on students from the poorest neighbourhoods. My first article attempts to address this gap by focusing on the role of social ties in decision-making, and examines the influence of various ties on decision-making alignment and institutional fit. I ask: What happens to decision-making when students rely more on certain types of ties over others? This is an important question because it aids in understanding how decisions can be influenced by different patterns in social interaction. Decision-making alignment and fit are two separate but interrelated concepts. Alignment refers to the extent to which a students' educational expectations, and postsecondary choices, satisfy the educational requirements of the occupation they aspire towards (Morgan et al. 2012; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). It helps researchers operationalize decision-making behaviours and measure outcomes. The concept of educational 'fit' that is explained in Lareau and Cox's (2011) work, similarly involves the potential for information deficits, as with aligned ambition, but focuses more on how decision-making aligns with the whole child; their academic ability, interests, dispositions and temperament. Part of finding the right institutional 'fit' for a college-bound student, within both perspectives, involves accessing information, and strategic planning, which Lareau and Cox (2011) argue benefits more affluent students. These students are more likely to have post-secondary educated parents with access to resources that can help kids plan ahead and choose the best post-secondary pathway.

Cultural capital researchers have grappled with understanding how class background and parental involvement intertwine. What seems clear, is that students from low-income families lack intensive parental involvement (Lareau 2000; Calarco 2014). However, what low-income parents may lack in experience with the PSE system they make up for in moral support and encouragement. Cultural capital scholars have examined the cultural schemas, dispositions or 'habitus' that low-income students bring to their decision-making, and how these contribute to the process of selecting post-secondary institutions. The second chapter of this dissertation looks at this dynamic and how the habitus orientations of students and school personnel interact. I find that unlike the short-term advantages in alignment gained from advice from institutional agents in the first article, many students ended up changing direction, or remaining uncertain. This uncertainty stemmed either from a lack of advice, or through the advice of institutional agents. Advice from institutional agents can help with alignment, but sometimes, also lead to educational choices that are not a good fit with a student's academic background and interests. School personnel at Eastgate seemed to have a cultural affinity towards university, and students with average grades were often encouraged to apply, when several had considered college at time one. While this might seem to contradict the findings of chapter one, it shows that alignment and fit is a long-term process that is dependent on more than just advice, but student preparation, reciprocal relationships and self-advocacy. This is an important finding for a growing body of literature that argues for the potential negative effects of school based interventions, and for students holding firm to aspirations in the face of uncertainty, and their own difficult personal circumstances (see Nielsen 2015; Rosenbaum 2011).

The third and final chapter in this dissertation engages rational actor theory by examining the presence of utility maximization amongst the 15 students who continued through all three

waves of interviews. This chapter also explores how rational actor theory can be used in combination with habitus theory to help explain student decision-making. This approach adds to existing research that has sought to explore how these two theoretical approaches can be used in tandem to understand student decision-making, albeit without the use of longitudinal methods. Thus, this chapter serves as an original contribution towards understanding the role of rational choice and habitus over an extended decision making timeframe. Using RRA (Relative Risk Aversion) as a theoretical tool from which to assess rational decision-making, I argue that while students are concerned with the financial cost of education, upward social mobility does not influence their decision-making. Their low-income background and parents' lack of post-secondary education, leaves them nothing but potential upward mobility by pursuing PSE. What is more prominent in their decision-making logics is 'survival habitus': a concept which captures the settlement struggles of their parents who all immigrated to Canada. Students at Eastgate often rationalized their PSE decisions as an homage to their parents sacrifices. However, what was missing from student rationales was the strategic decision making that students from more affluent backgrounds receive from post-secondary educated parents. Using alignment theory as a bridge between RAT and Habitus, I argue that students with lower grades and less decision-making alignment are more dependent upon institutional agents for advice.

Preface to the first paper

University dreams are made of these: social capital in the postsecondary decision-making process of at-risk students

How is post-secondary decision-making influenced by the types of social capital students access? This study draws from interviews with 30 at-risk students in a low-income neighborhood to examine who they turn to for post-secondary advice and how they rationalize their decisions. To assess decision-making logics, the categories of bonding and bridging social capital are combined with the concepts of 'aligned ambition' and institutional 'fit'. I explore how interactions with different ties can influence decision-making alignment, misalignment or uncertainty. I find that students who report relying more on family and friends (bonding) social capital over (bridging) ties with school personnel demonstrate more misalignment in decision-making; they have more ties without post-secondary education, and their lack of knowledge about the system leads to uncertainty about choices. In contrast, those who rely more on ties with school personnel exhibit more decision-making alignment. Many students, despite having alignment, lacked institutional fit and were uncertain about their choices, except for a select few who reported consistent relationships with institutional agents. These students chose programs and schools that were better suited to their interests and academic ability. These findings contribute to the social capital literature examining the potential of institutional agents to help at-risk students circumvent social stratification processes.

Introduction

The decision to attend college or university for youth transitioning directly from secondary school, is both weighty and risky, as choosing the right program or institution can mean the difference between successful completion or dropping out (Rosenbaum 2011). The potential risks of not completing post-secondary and the consequences of student loans are more pronounced for students with fewer social and economic resources (Goldrick-Rab 2016). Students who are ethnic and racial minorities, live in low-income households, and who attend school in lower SES, and inner-city neighbourhoods are often those who are the focus of the 'at-risk' label (Croninger and Lee 2001; Finn and Rock 1997; Galindo, Sanders, and Abel, 2017; Rush and Vitale 1994). The economic uncertainty and instability of living in low income homes, and the pressures associated with moving to a new country for new immigrants and refugees can also place added pressures which can place students at-risk (Hulchanski 2010).

A growing body of sociological research has examined the role that social capital, or social ties with influential adults plays in educational attainment (see Bryan et al. 2011; Erickson, McDonald and Elder 2009; Hardie 2015;). Research looking at how underrepresented students make decisions has demonstrated their reliance on certain types of network relationships. For example, some have found that they defer to close (bonding) ties within their own ethnic group (see Perez and McDonough 2008) to help guide their post-secondary decisions. Other researchers have noted that working-class and poor students have restricted networks, which cannot offer many resources to help with decision-making, while white middle-class students have more access to higher status ties outside of their families (bridging) (Hardie 2015) The existing research lacks a focus on the educational decision-making of students from the poorest neighbourhoods, as well as a framework to understand the influence of social capital on the quality of decision-making.

This article uses Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) concept of 'aligned ambition' to explore how ties with close family members (bonding) versus non-parental and school-based ties (bridging) can lead to different types of post-secondary decisions. Alignment of educational expectations occurs when they match students' occupational aspirations. An example of this type of alignment would be a student who wants to be a school counselor pursuing a degree in Social Work; the educational path is consistent with the requirements of the occupation. Implicit within the concept of 'alignment' is the role of social capital and institutional context in helping to shape decision-making behaviors. Some researchers have even used social capital theory to emphasize the important role that school personnel play in the decision-making processes of working-class and minority youth (Stanton-Salazar 2010). In this article I ask: What happens to decision-making when students rely more on certain types of ties over others? To answer this question I draw from 30 in-depth interviews with students at Eastgate Secondary (Pseudonym), a school located in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Ontario. I find that students benefit from ties that constitute both bonding and bridging social capital. However, students that rely more predominantly on bridging social capital exhibited more aligned decision-making. This is in contrast to the observed 'misalignment' in logics for students that rely more on friends and family for advice. However, I also find that while students that report both bonding and bridging social capital can possess alignment, they can do so while also demonstrating uncertainty and a lack of 'fit'. Thus, I theorize that alignment may only be useful when it is paired with consistent and close ties with institutional agents. I draw on the work of Stanton-Salazar (2010) and others (see Farmer-Hinton 2008; Stephan 2013; Schwartz et al., 2016) who stress the importance of mentoring relationships between at-risk students and school personnel.

Students from lower SES backgrounds, often only have access to 'higher-status ties' through their immediate school contexts. Their teachers, guidance counselors and principals- university educated adults, or 'institutional agents', that possess ties to other high-status individuals, are their best chance at circumventing educational stratification processes (Stanton-Salazar 2010). However, these ties are difficult to cultivate in education systems which are designed to serve the needs of privileged classes with the social 'toolkit' (see Calarco 2014) to develop closer relationships with teachers and other institutional agents. This article highlights the importance of ties to institutional agents for at-risk students in the search stage of the PSE decision-making process. I find that decision-making alignment is positively influenced when students report having a number institutional agents in their school that they can consult for advice about postsecondary. This article seeks to connect social capital with the concepts of aligned ambition and institutional fit. Through exploring the role that these ties play in influencing aligned decision-making, this article advances prior work by showing how these processes unfold at a critical stage in the decision-making process for at-risk youth.

Literature Review

The effect of social capital on various aspects of students' educational plans, such as aspiration forming (Cheng and Starks 2002), or selecting into various 2 and 4-year institutions (Kim and Schneider 2005), is well established in the sociological literature. However, there is a shortage of qualitative research that explores how social capital influences the process of choosing a postsecondary pathway, and the types of decisions that are formed based on interactions with different types of social ties. This article focuses in on the 'search' stage[1] of the decision-making

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[1] The 'search' stage refers to the period when students gather information and consult various sources to narrow down their PSE application set, whereas the choice stage involves making a final decision (see Hossler and Gallagher 1987 for information about this framework assessing)

life-course *in situ'* (Svendsen 2006), to explore how the process unfolds in real-time. By combining a social capital framework with the concept of alignment, it seeks to strengthen our understanding of decision-making rationales and their connection to the quantity and quality of advice students receive from adult ties. This framework for understanding decision-making can help in understanding the role that various types of social ties play in the decision-making process.

Decision-Making Alignment

Lareau and Cox (2011) use the concept of 'fit' to describe the efforts of invested middle and upper middle-class parents in helping their kids choose a PSE institution that aligns with their academic and social skillsets. These efforts concentrate on the adaptation of daily and cultural practices to align with schooling requirements (Lareau 2011; Davies and Rizk 2018; Aurini and Hillier 2018; Alon 2009). Implicit within their conceptualization of finding the right 'fit' for children, is that students without this type of direct intervention, can be forced to make decisions on their own, and often with limited information. Students from more privileged backgrounds can count on their parents having more intimate understandings of the inner-workings of the PSE system, and can thus intervene on their behalf when they feel decisions do not 'fit' well with their interests and capabilities. Where cultural capital theorists focus on the role of 'cultural toolkits' (Calarco 2014, p. 2.) in aligning students with schools, a number of other scholars have focused on the role that information deficits and uncertainty play in decision-making (see Goyette 2008; Morgan et al., 2012; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). The concept of 'aligned ambition', is the most well-known of these studies which focuses on the role of occupational plans on decision-making rationales.

Schneider and Stevenson (1999) warn that students can form unrealistic ambitions for postsecondary careers, based on limited information from their parents, as well as from a lack of

access to school personnel. Without an informed understanding of how certain educational pathways can match their occupational goals, students could be making decisions in suboptimal conditions that can compromise the consistency of their decision-making logic (Morgan et al., 2012). Furthermore, they may be unaware how degree pathways align with their grades, goals and available financial means, making investments in education which are not good for them long-term. The costs of such miscalculations are more dire for students from lower income backgrounds. Other scholars like Stanton-Salazar (2010), also illustrate the urgency of sound decision-making for low-SES students, by stressing the importance of forming strong ties with school personnel. The role of school personnel, or 'institutional agents' becomes extremely important for them, as they generally lack close ties with adults who can provide informed guidance about postsecondary pathways. Therefore, it is important to understand what kinds of ties students have within their networks, and their influence on the quality of decision-making.

Bonding and bridging social capital are two often cited categories in educational literature (Galindo, Sanders and Abel 2017), developed by Putnam (2001) to understand the different functions of social ties. Bonding social capital refers to ties formed with similar others, usually within close knit, and homogenous groups (Coleman 1988). Its function is to build cohesive ties, founded on trust and reciprocity. Bridging social capital, in contrast, moves the actor outside of their immediate networks, and is dependent on connections with people from different social circles; its function is to expand an individual's network, as well as access to resources. Thus, bridging, or 'weak' ties (see Granovetter 1995), can help individuals access novel information that can help them succeed. However, the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital have been critiqued for being "too instrumentalist about its effects" (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993:1346). Scholars have argued that the mechanisms and social structures that precede the emergence of

social capital, and help shape it, can lead to positive and negative effects. Others have expanded on this critical approach, suggesting low-SES and minority students are often prevented by the social structures (i.e. schools) they inhabit from activating available networks with teachers (Stanton-Salazar 1997).

Bonding Social Capital

Lower SES and first-generation PSE students tend to rely on the advice of their family and friends, many of whom never attended PSE. In a mixed methods study with a sample of 17 first year Latino/a college students, Person and Rosenbaum (2006) find that these students rely heavily on ties with their family and friends in their enrollment decisions. The authors also find that this leads to students forming ethnic enclaves, with many Latino/a attending the same schools and acting as sources of support and information for one another. While this apparent bonding social capital might seem advantageous for social support and assimilation purposes, it potentially limits the amount of information that students are exposed to. Hardie (2015: 256) describes the social capital of poor and working-class girls as "restricted", because their social ties are less likely to be high-status individuals.

Bonding social capital has been argued to be advantageous for students with networks comprised of friends with parents that have post-secondary educations (Carolan and Lardier 2017). However, less is known about the potential negative effects of bonding social capital, particularly for students from the poorest neighbourhoods. Navigating through postsecondary options without the proper guidance from schools and parental supports can often lead lower SES students into impractical choices which can increase their chances for dropping out (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lehmann 2007). While lower SES parents provide moral support and encouragement which

can lead to positive emotional outcomes for students, parents without post-secondary education are not able to provide informed, first-hand advice.

Bridging Social Capital

Bridging social capital connects us with ties outside our immediate social circles who can provide us with novel information and opportunities (Burt 2000). However, the influence of such ties for educational decision-making, is something that has been missing from the literature. According to Stanton-Salazar (2010), working-class and minority youth lack ties to high-status adults who can offer them advice. The teachers and other personnel that they encounter on a daily basis at school, thus present them with a potential source of 'high-status' network contact that can connect them with other influential adults. Given the lack of access to high-status ties for at-risk students in poor communities, institutional agents can wield tremendous influence over their lives and educational outcomes. The advice they offer can help empower low SES students to make effective decisions and counteract educational stratification (Stanton-Salazar 2010).

Several researchers have used these insights to demonstrate the importance of institutional agents in shaping the educational outcomes of students from at-risk communities. Stephan (2013) looks at the role of counselors as an important source of social capital for students, particularly from disadvantaged areas. She argues that low SES students can benefit immensely from one-on-one coaching from trained counselors, as they are less likely than their higher SES counterparts to seek out and receive such attention. Cates and Schaefle (2011) similarly find that targeted services for low SES college students, like mentoring, advising and summer programs improve outcomes. Ferguson (2018) finds that teachers who receive praise and gratitude from the low SES students they serve, are more likely to continue on mentoring students well after the initial relationship is formed. Thus, along with initiating contact with institutional agents, students are well-served when

they take steps to actively look for, and cultivate relationships with mentors who can help guide them (Holland 2010). Unfortunately, the literature is replete with evidence of lower SES students' lack of 'cultural capital' (Lareau and Cox 2011) and 'know-how' (Schwartz et al., 2016) required to form and develop their own social networks.

My main research question aims at understanding how social capital relationships can help shape decision-making at a critical decision point for high school students. I use the conceptual tools of 'aligned ambition' to help evaluate the quality of those decisions. I also use the concept of 'fit' to help complement 'aligned ambition' and suggest that decision-making is dependent on more than social ties, but also on students' ability to cultivate those ties. Students that reported meeting more regularly with their guidance counselors, or feeling closer with a teacher, were more likely to possess both alignment and choose programs and institutions that seemed to fit better with their overall profile. This profile, consists of both student self-reported academic achievement, but also their interests, goals and values. Addressing the relationship between social capital and decision-making in qualitative research can help us understand in real-time, the influence of various ties, and particularly that of institutional agents in helping at-risk students circumvent processes of social stratification.

Research Methods

The primary goal of this research is to explore how decisions made during a critical decision-making point are influenced by the social ties students can rely on for advice. It combines the concept of 'alignment' in decision-making with social capital theories that look at the various advantages and disadvantages derived from bonding and bridging ties. While combining such theories is not entirely novel (see Kim and Schneider 2005), the author is not aware of qualitative research that has attempted such an approach with at-risk students 'in-situ' (see Svendsen 2006).

Eastgate Secondary was chosen as the research site because of its location in an area of the city that has been labelled by municipal authorities as a 'priority neighbourhood'. This category was created by the city to help develop policies that address many of the social problems that are challenges for this community. For example, the median family income is 30% lower than the municipal average, while the percentage of adults with bachelor degrees is 75% lower. There is also a higher concentration of government subsidized housing, and the condition of many of these homes are poor, with vandalism and graffiti being consistent problems.

The school and area which it is located have been in the local news repeatedly over the past two decades for issues relating to gang violence, and the risks to children in the community growing up in an environment of urban "decay" and "disorder" (see Cyr 2014: 11). The neighbourhood's reputation along with Eastgate's number one ranking on the school boards' index of external challenges, both contribute to lowering educational outcomes (Vacha and McLaughlin 1992) . These factors made Eastgate an ideal or "information-rich" site, chosen specifically for the insights it would promise with regards to the postsecondary decision-making of at-risk students (Palinkas et al., 2013: 534).

My sample of interviewees can be classified on a continuum ranging from lower-class to working-class. Most of the students' parents work in either blue collar jobs, as labourers, or in poorly paid and insecure jobs in the food service industry (for an explanation of class categorization see Thompson, Hickey and Thompson 2016). Only two students fell outside the working class/lower-class category, as they have parents employed in professional or managerial roles (see Table A1 in appendix). Black students represent the third largest visible minority in the school board after South and East Asians, but at Eastgate, they are the overwhelming majority, with South and East Asians making up a majority of the remaining student body.

Participants

I interviewed grade 12 students who expected to graduate and enroll in postsecondary studies in the following year. I focused my recruitment efforts on students populating 4 sections of a grade 12 university level English course and 2 sections of a college level course. In Canada, for all students who wish to apply to a postsecondary institution, grade 12 English is mandatory. Students who wish to attend 4-year degree granting institutions must take a university level English course, while those wanting to attend 2- or 3-year diploma granting institutions, the equivalent to an American community college, must take college level English[2]. I made personal visits and announcements in these classes and distributed my information and consent packages to every student in attendance. During that process, I mentioned that I wanted to interview students who planned to attend college or university (see Table A2 in appendix), but those with alternative plans would be welcome to participate. I interviewed 30 students, 20 of whom were Black, but from a variety of ethnic ancestries; the remaining 10 were from various South, West and Southeast Asian countries (see Table A3 in appendix). All students were either first- or second-generation immigrants, while the great majority (26/30) were first-generation postsecondary students. Four students had parents with postsecondary education, but who received their degrees outside of Canada (e.g. the United States, and Europe), thus their knowledge of the Canadian PSE system is likely limited. More specifically, 65 percent of mothers and fathers have 'unknown' or less than high school education. The interviewees who answered 'other' or 'unknown' for parental education, are from impoverished or war-torn countries like Afghanistan or Somalia. When probed further during interviews about their parents education, these students admitted that their education

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[2] In Canada, university refers to 4-year degree granting institutions while community colleges, generally refer to institutions that offer 2 and 3 year diplomas. Some community colleges in Canada grant 4-year degrees.

was so low it was difficult to say when they ceased attending school. Some students have stay at home mothers (7), while others are unemployed, cannot work or are on social assistance (see Table A1 in appendix). Just over half of the students reported living in the same household with both their mother and father (see Table A3 in appendix).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 students at Eastgate Secondary between October and December in 2018, very close to the January 2019 college and university application deadlines. The collection of surveys prior to interviews further triangulated data collection, along with the presence of college and university enrollment data provided by the school's guidance counselors. On the surveys, students indicated their age, race, citizenship status, as well as the occupation and education levels obtained by their parents. I also asked students about their self-reported academic averages since grade 9, as well as whether the majority of their classes were in academic versus applied streams[3]. The modal grade averages amongst the 30 students was 70 to 80 percent, while the majority of students also reported taking academic and university stream classes (see Table A2 in appendix).

Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, averaging 35 minutes; students received a $15 gift card for participating. All interviews were audio recorded, and I took careful notes periodically throughout to complement transcription. All interviews were conducted by the author, a male of

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[3] In Ontario, streaming was introduced in 1999 with the intention of giving students choices between applied or academic courses; applied being more hands-on and practical, while academic consisting of more theoretical courses designed to prepare students for university. The practice is slowly being phased out, as of July 2020.

West Asian heritage. My personal attire resembled a middle ground between teacher and student attire. I introduced myself as a former teacher who had worked at Eastgate Secondary 5 years prior, as well as a graduate student.

I asked students about their aspirations and plans for postsecondary, adults they were close to or could turn to for advice, and what types of school resources they used to help them make decisions and why. This line of questioning is very similar to recent research that has sought to understand the role of social capital for low income student decision making (see Hardie 2015). I asked participants to describe a range of their adult ties outside of the school context, including potential ties to neighbors, community members, family members and adults in other settings. I asked questions about the frequency of contact with each tie, how long they have known them, as well as their educational background and current occupation. I asked participants to recall the nature of the conversations with their ties, specifically with respect to their upcoming applications to college and university. Not surprisingly, most students did not report having a lot of ties that could offer them advice. For the most part, the students talked about good advice they had received, close relationships they had formed with a mentor, which was usually a teacher, guidance counselor or other school personnel.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and imported into QSR NVivo. A two-phase coding strategy was used. The initial coding was organized around the thematic categories of the interview schedule (i.e. Aspirations, Social Capital and Decision-Making), and nodes that fell within those categories were created. During this stage, rich descriptions surrounding when and how students formed their postsecondary and career aspirations, and who was involved in those decisions, were coded into more distinct nodes. The node 'Aspirations' for example, focused on questions relating to students'

future plans, their selection of PSE choices, and parental influence in helping to shape them. I also coded student responses to questions pertaining to 'Social Capital', which consisted of questions about students' ties to adults. Ties with other students were gleaned through a separate question about what students' friends planned to do after postsecondary. When students mentioned their parents, siblings, relatives and close friends as sources of advice about PSE, these responses were coded as 'bonding' social capital. The other ties that students mentioned were mainly teachers, guidance counselors, principals and other personnel located in the school, or ties with adults in organizations that were established for them through participation in school programming. These ties were coded as 'bridging social capital' and ties with school agents were also coded under the node 'Institutional Agents'.

In the second phase of coding, initial codes were streamlined into theoretically informed nodes, using an in-depth reading of the prevalent theories that inform student decision-making and social capital. This captured the decision-making logics (how they rationalize their actions) and the ways in which ties to different adults in their lives helped shape student choices. It was also in this phase where certain disparate codes were aligned with new thematical categories such as 'Alignment' and 'Fit': two theoretical perspectives that emerged after individual interviews were re-read to glean new insights and to confirm and disconfirm initial coding choices. The process of using pre-established theories or concepts and allowing open coding and the emergence of new nodes was part of a simultaneous (deductive) and (inductive) strategy. Several of the findings sections focus on student accounts of their career aspirations and rationales for wanting to attend certain institutions. The sections draw from data coded under the master node of 'Alignment', its parent and grandchild nodes, to capture key aspects behind the role of social capital on decision-

making. Different ways in which students make "Certain" "Vague" "Aligned" and "Misaligned"

educational choices and their rationales behind decisions also became visible (for an excellent

overview of coding see Saldaña 2015).

Finally, I went back to individual interviews to draw simple counts of the average number

of ties, the percentage with PSE and whether students knew someone in their desired profession

(see Table A3 in appendix). Counts were produced by transferring answers from transcripts into

an excel file which kept track of quantifiable data. Once the total number of ties were counted, I

looked through transcripts for qualitative features of ties with adults, like how well they knew

individuals and why they felt comfortable relying on them. Responses and the counts allowed me

to consider how the amount, quality and nature of ties with adults helped shape student perceptions

about their enrollment process and impending decisions.

Findings

Interviews with students revealed patterns of alignment and misalignment in decision-making, and

were connected with the types of ties (bonding or bridging) they reported relying on for advice.

Overall, students at Eastgate reported very few ties on average (3.85), with some reporting as few

as a single individual that they could rely on for advice.[4] Students who reported half or more of

their ties as comprising bonding social capital, such as close relatives, friends or parents, tended

to exhibit misalignment in their decision-making logics. Students who reported more than half of

their ties as comprising bridging social capital, with institutional agents either in their school or in

other contexts, overwhelmingly exhibited alignment in decision-making (see Table 1). Alignment

was assessed by asking students what they wanted to study in post-secondary, as well as what

career they hoped to attain. If the amount of education required by the occupation exceeds the

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[4] One student, Karl, reported not consulting with anyone about his post-secondary choices

expected level of education reported, then the student was coded as 'undereducation' (or misaligned). However, the in-depth interviews revealed inconsistencies in student responses. While having ties with bridging social capital influenced alignment between educational and occupational aspirations, students also made comments which suggested their choices may not be a good fit with their academic performance and stated interests. For example, Nassar's university program choice (criminology) aligned well with his career aspiration of police officer; he also reported relying exclusively on bridging ties for advice (school librarian and guidance counselor). However, despite alignment with his stated intention, Nassar aspired to a competitive program with below average grades. In fact, he mentioned being in a credit-recovery program[5], which suggests he had academic struggles, and being interested in other careers like the military or 'business'. This inconsistency, or 'uncertainty', suggests that simply having alignment with stated preferences may not be conducive to future success. At-risk students may require help from institutional agents, but this research shows that the quality of those relationships requires further investigation.

In this section, I provide examples of how bonding and bridging social capital tended to produce different decision-making logics. Parents and close relatives offered advice without providing details about how a specific school and program would 'fit' with a student's goals and personality. Rather, the advice seemed superficial, lacking any criteria that could match student grades and interests with specific programs and/or institutions. In contrast, the advice from institutional agents helped students choose programs based on this type of information; when students relied more on these ties, they usually ended up with alignment (See Table 1). However,

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[5] Credit recovery programs allow students who complete a course but without a passing grade to repeat aspects of the course while simultaneously learning strategies for future curricular success.

even when students reported having bridging ties, they did not consult them frequently and this led to uncertainty and inconsistencies in decision-making logics.

Table 1. Type of Social Capital and Decision Making Alignment- Crosstabulation

	Alignment	Misalignment	Total
Bonding	2	5	7
	28.6%	71.4%	100%
Bonding/Bridging	2	4	6
	33.3%	66.6%	100%
Bridging	14	2	16
	87.5%	12.5%	100%
None		1	1
		100%	100%
Column Total	**18**	**12**	**30**
	60%	40%	100%

Bonding = students with more than ½ reported ties bonding
Bonding/Bridging = students with ½ reported ties bridging and ½ bonding
Bridging = students with more than ½ reported ties bridging
 A single student reported no ties

Bonding social capital

Students at Eastgate that relied more on bonding social capital for advice about post-secondary, generally had more misaligned decision-making. Of the 13 students that reported relying on bonding social capital (see Table 1), 9/13 (69%) of them demonstrated misaligned decision-making rationales. While the students at Eastgate had very close ties with their friends, both in the school, and former students who had gone on to postsecondary, these interactions did not yield useful information about prospective institutions and programs. The advice they received was normally encouragement, but lacked 'informed' details that could help students both align their

decisions with career aspirations, and choose a program and institution that 'fit' with their academic ability, personality and social goals.

Bonding social capital amongst students at Eastgate was represented by friends or family who were new post-secondary students, or adult family ties (usually parents) without any postsecondary experience. Along with lacking PSE experience, only 10/30 (33.3%) of the ties reported by students were with adults who were employed in the occupation that they aspired towards (see Table A3 in appendix). Interviews revealed that bonding social capital did not yield any novel information about the post-secondary system. Rather, the advice students received, particularly from their parents, consisted of pressure to attend university, particularly institutions with high prestige, even if the pressure was not accompanied with knowledge about the best fit for their child. For example, Robert who was applying for competitive engineering programs talked about the type of advice he received from his parents:

> I guess it's completely my choice, but the actual university, they do like kind of based on reputation, right? So no matter what I say, they always tell me that if I get accepted to City University, I should go there because it has the best reputation, right?

This type of 'generic' advice, that was based on perceptions but lacking in specific 'insider' information about specific programs and institutional features was common amongst the advice students received from family members. Students like Kendra, for example, would share that they heard about a community college from cousins, and that it was " a good college with lots of people there inspired to become a better person". However, when they were probed to share specific details about the strength of a program and its 'fit' with their education and career goals, their answers lacked these details. For some students, the language barrier and cultural divide between their parents' country of origin and Canada, posed barriers to advice giving. As Farzeen, a first-

generation student from Afghanistan shared: "They told me go for whatever you would like to do, we support you no matter what. If there is any kind of help I would need from my parents, although they're not really good with English." This type of 'generic' advice, or moral support to pursue their goals, while lacking in specific details, could nevertheless serve to motivate these students to apply. Recent research in the U.S. suggests that this type of moral encouragement can lift the post-secondary aspirations of lower-SES students (Roksa, Deutschlander and Whitley 2020). However, with regards to aiding students to gain information about their programs and institutions that move beyond status perceptions, and popular sentiments, advice from bonding social capital did not achieve this for students at Eastgate.

Not all students who reported bonding social capital had misalignment in their decision-making, yet they were still vulnerable to uncertainty or a lack of 'fit' in postsecondary choices. A high percentage (72.3%) of students that had alignment between their educational expectations and career aspirations also exhibited signs of 'uncertainty' when their decision-making was considered as a whole (see Table 2). Uncertainty, or 'lack of fit' was represented by explicit statements of being 'unsure' about a potential pathway, or when students demonstrated inconsistencies in decision-making logics. For example, Amina was a student who aspired towards a career as an editor, which was perfectly aligned with her educational expectations of a BA in English; two of her three reported advice ties were with family members. She reported relying on family and friends more than her guidance counselor to make a program choice that aligned with her career aspirations. However, her interview revealed information that suggested that a BA in English may not have been the best fit with her interests. Amina shared that English was mainly chosen, because she received high grades:

Uh, what inspired me was like, I like English and I always like kind of excelled well in it since like, I would say Grade 10. And um, I just assumed that was the way to go. But then I wondered, like would I want to be writing my own stuff or should I be editing other people's because I'm not very good at writing myself, to be honest.

Amina's choice was aligned with her career aspirations, yet she was still 'not sure', and felt that 'it seemed' like a good choice because she got a good mark in English that year. It seems inconsistent for a student who claims that 'creative' writing is not a strength to be pursuing a career in that area. Amina aspired to attend one of the most prestigious universities in the country, as well as pursuing a major that depends on superior writing skills for success. Had she began thinking about this earlier, and had more consistent advice from institutional agents, it is interesting to think about how her choices might have been influenced.

Sandra was one of two students who reported an equal amount of bonding and bridging ties, while demonstrating alignment and lack of fit (see Table 1). She wanted to be a doctor, and was planning to apply for general science programs, a common path towards medical school. She also added that she had chosen a potential career in medicine because "she had always wanted to help people." She went on to describe how in eighth grade she had thought about being a teacher but changed her mind "because I want to finish school and then go into a job where I know there's jobs." Interestingly enough, Sandra never indicated a genuine love for medicine as a reason for wanting to pursue the profession. At the time of the interview, Sandra had indicated receiving grades that ranged from the 60's all the way to the 80's (see Table A2 in appendix). In Canada, acceptance into a Science undergrad program is extremely competitive, with an overall average of 80 (A minus) generally being the bare minimum requirement, although there are some programs that accept students with a minimum of 70 (B minus). Sandra's borderline grades and her goal of

medicine, suggest that she was never "cooled off" by any institutional gatekeepers (see Clark 1960). Although she cited her guidance counselor as a tie, her interactions were reported as being infrequent. She reported only having a single appointment since school had begun, with applications due two months from when the interview took place: "I'm gonna try and book another appointment so I can talk to her and say, "Okay, am I at a point where I should take an emergency backup and go to college or should I continue?" Sandra was aware that her grades were not good enough for a career in medicine and she was already looking to 'hedge' (see Gabay-Egozi, Shavit and Yaish 2010), by sharing her openness to the possibility of attending community college. It seems that the teaching pathway fit more with Sandra's comments about wanting to help people, along with her overall academic preparation.

Choosing a postsecondary pathway is not an easy task, and as Taifa, a female student of Somali heritage explained, sometimes you go through "1000 careers" before deciding on which one to pursue: "I'm not joking. I thought of a speech pathologist, a pediatrician, a professor. I thought of 1000 different careers." Interestingly enough, Taifa, like others in this study who did not rely regularly on institutional agents for advice, seemed very confused about what path to pursue. Taifa expressed an interest in both a nursing career and one as a writer. Her justification for wanting to be a nurse was that she was "very interested in helping people and just having a career that's assisting people who are in need, who are sick, something like that." But in the same moment, she expressed an interest in "writing books" because she would not have to work as a "Doctor in an office all day…you're not on your feet, you're just in a small space." Taifa also mentioned not having met with her guidance counselor: "She's kind of busy right now. She's very busy. She's going on different college fairs, university fairs. All of this. I'm gonna eventually meet with her sometimes, but I'm not too sure when." It seems clear that had many of these students met

more frequently with their school guidance counselor, a key institutional agent in their lives, they would have more access to accurate information that would prevent them from misaligned and uncertain decision-making.

Table 2. Decision-Making Alignment and Uncertainty- Crosstabulation

	Uncertainty		
	No	Yes	Total
Alignment	5	13	18
	27.8%	72.3%	100%
Misalignment	3	9	12
	27.3%	81.8%	100%
Column Total	**8**	**22**	**30**
	26.7%	73.3%	100%

While bonding social capital from parents and close friends did not provide students with 'insider' information about the system, it did serve useful purposes for some students, particularly those with siblings in PSE. Students like Robert, for example, had siblings that acted as examples of what they could aspire towards. Robert's brother was a third-year engineering student at a prestigious university in the province. When asked about who he could turn to for advice he had this to say: "Probably the biggest one, my older brother... He's currently a computer engineering student himself. And that's probably the one I talk to the most in terms of my decision, and I guess advice in general, just because he's older than me." Not coincidentally, Robert had his brother's university as one of his top four choices. This is another example of the positive influence that bonding social capital can play in raising the aspirations of at-risk students. Close bonds allowed for students to receive advice about postsecondary, but that advice sometimes came from parents, relatives and friends without PSE (38%) (see Table A3 in appendix). Even when it came from

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those with some postsecondary background, like in Robert's case, student descriptions of the advice they received lacked any practical details about PSE, and was instead vague and general. However, for students like Robert with reported average grades in the 90's, their academic achievement would guarantee them a spot in a program of their choosing. Reliance on bonding social capital, without input from institutional agents, thus, posed a more serious risk to average students, who were not guaranteed spots in various programs and needed to be more strategic about their choices.

Bridging Social Capital: Ties to Institutional Agents

Access to ties that could provide accurate and reliable information about postsecondary choices were important to students who exhibited more 'aligned' decision-making logics. The networks of students at Eastgate were, on average, few in number and bridging ties normally constituted teachers and guidance counselors in the school. Unlike the students who reported infrequent contact with institutional agents, students with both aligned decision-making and 'fit' were characterized by closer and more frequent contact. However, there were only a handful of these students (5) that I interviewed, and three of them are featured in this section (see Table 2).

In contrast to the aforementioned Sandra, whose ambition for medical school was unrealistic, Cynthia, a recent immigrant from Jamaica, seemed more aware of her current academic abilities and set her sights on a more achievable goal. Cynthia planned to apply to a concurrent education program at a university that offered a dual degree in education, along with a certificate in early childhood education[6]. Cynthia described only needing "an average of like 70-75%" which was consistent with her current academic performance. She stated not being "good" at the sciences,

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[6] Concurrent education programs allow students to simultaneously get their degree and teacher certification within the same credential, without having to pursue an extra post-graduate degree in education.

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and felt more comfortable taking liberal arts classes and pursuing a career as a teacher. Cynthia was one of four students in my sample who belonged to an after-school program that was sponsored by a local not-for-profit, that aimed to help students from this community get private tutoring as well as one-on-one postsecondary counseling. Students in this program would regularly meet with a program counselor to discuss their postsecondary aspirations and plans. Cynthia discussed meeting regularly with the organizer of this program: "Yesterday, we were speaking to him about universities and colleges. There's this group in the school called Student Achievement, and he's the founder of it. I went to him for advice."

Unlike other students who were unclear about what programs and schools they would apply to, Cynthia seemed to have more clarity, as well as specific information about the programs that interested her. Cynthia attended a local university fair and acquired specific information from the recruiters about her program:

> There were people specialized in these booths, who were telling us, giving us more information about programs. It's like only five years I have to study, and I get a degree and teaching certificate. I wouldn't have to go to teacher's college.

Most students in this study did not possess specialized information about programs and which schools in the province offered various options. Cynthia's access to 'bridging' social capital in the form of this program coordinator linked her to private college counseling that she would otherwise have not received from her family and friends, even though her original aspiration was motivated by the example of her stepmother: "Because my step mom ... She does this ECE (Early Childhood Education) program at Forest College (Pseudonym)." However, when asked about how involved her parents were in her educational decision-making, Cynthia shared that they were "laid back",

"hands-off," and when it came to sit "down to view the different universities and see their programs and stuff like that, it's just me doing all the research."

Farzeen, a first-generation immigrant from Afghanistan, knew that relying on her parents could not get her the specialized information she needed. Her parents struggled with the English language and had received limited education from their birth country. For her parents to even become aware of what Farzeen had planned, she would have to go in depth and give a lot of background information: "I would have to explain the background, before I even explain what it is." Farzeen had a keen sense that in order for her to learn more about her future possibilities, she would have to reach out to an extended network:

> As I have left a lot of things behind, and what I've learned from my parents is that connection plays a big role in life, and learning from others, it's a really good thing, it's not a bad thing. There may be different aspects of it, different perspectives, different opinions, but you gain something from each experience.

Farzeen was one of a handful of students interviewed that relied exclusively on institutional agents for key advice about postsecondary decision-making. She had a total of 10 adults from whom she received advice, well above the reported average of 3.85, and had indicated receiving very close mentorship from several of them. The students, like Farzeen, who reported relying exclusively on institutional agents for advice, seemed to have a more unique pathway ahead of them. Farzeen was also the only student who planned to take a year off, and seemed acutely aware of what she was, and was not capable of academically:

> I know a lot of people are like, "You don't have to be sure and you change different paths," but for me, I haven't found something particular that I actually wanna say I'm interested in. Laws is just one of the options that I was provided with in high school. First, I was looking

to do medical field, but then I recognized that I'm really bad with sciences… so I dropped

the medical field and I pursued laws. So far, law is going well, I don't have any complaints

but it's not something that I'm like, "Okay, I love this. I wanna do this for the future."

Farzeen's level of self-awareness was rare amongst the students in this sample. Understanding her limitations, changing trajectories, and then having the courage to take a year off to volunteer and solidify her choices are things that can be attributed to her ties with a range of institutional agents.

Diana was another first-generation immigrant student in this cohort, who like Farzeen, reported relying on absolutely no family or friends as a source of advice about postsecondary planning. All of the contacts that she mentioned as sources of advice were comprised of institutional agents in the school: teachers, guidance counselors and the principal, along with other personnel outside the school who ran affiliated programs. Diana's prospective choice of universities was completely unique to those of other students at Eastgate. While most students chose local universities, Diana was one of five students who planned to apply to schools more than 2 hours driving distance away from her neighbourhood. Her top two school choices were smaller, less prestigious universities according to national rankings, but extremely highly rated for their undergraduate programs, and specifically their 'forensic psychology' programs which are unique amongst Canadian higher education institutions. Diana's choices were 'niche' when compared to the rest of her cohort, and it appears that her choices were informed by more research, personal exploration and guidance from institutional agents. Diana was enrolled in several school sponsored academic programs, one in particular, a dual-credit program with a local university. Diana describes a conversation with her guidance counselor who turned her on to the dual credit program:

When I wasn't sure about what exactly I wanted to take in terms of program, I just knew

my interests, so he just said, "There's a program that gets you into a university course, it

builds your knowledge and your skills, and you also get to choose a course that is in your

interests, to actually see if you're interested in it…"

Diana had consistent visits with her guidance counselor and claims to have "known his schedule"

which allowed her to have "more time to talk to him." Diana, unlike many of the other students,

seemed to have nuanced information about both her program of choice as well as other finer details

about program offerings. During her interview, I initially probed her to see if she understood the

difference between forensic psychology and criminology to which she replied: "It's more science

than social science but it has the psychology, as well. So, it's like both science and social science."

When asked about how her particular program will help her achieve her career ambitions, she

exhibited knowledge about specific features of the program:

Well, the specific schools that I'm going to apply to, if I get into it, they each have co-op

placement and ... What's the other word? Internships. So, that will allow me to actually be

on the job and get the on the job feel and see.

These examples are illustrative of both alignment, but also institutional 'fit', as students who

formed closer ties with institutional agents were better able to understand their prospective

programs and make more informed choices. I have argued that reported bridging ties produced

more decision-making alignment, but that interviews also revealed uncertainty and lack of fit.

When interviews were considered as a whole, I discovered that both the presence of bridging ties

and how students cultivated relationships with institutional agents contributed to the presence of

both decision-making alignment and fit. Why were certain students able to develop contacts with

institutional agents in their school? Did they possess certain help- seeking capacities? Future

research could perform longitudinal ethnographic research to learn more about how students

interact with institutional agents at schools like Eastgate. In the absence of observations and

interviews with the ties students reported, we can only speculate on what those capacities are. Certainly, from the interviews conducted here, we know that frequency of interaction influenced the presence of alignment and fit in decision-making.

Discussion

While we know that students from low SES backgrounds often lack high-status ties to adults that can help them navigate the postsecondary enrollment process (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995), existing research says little about how non-parental ties influence the choice process at pivotal time points. Instead, research has tended to focus on quantitative data looking at parent-child ties and their influence on alignment (Cheng and Starks 2002; Kim and Schneider 2005). There is still a dearth of qualitative research that looks at the decision-making process for low-income students, at the critical juncture prior to application deadlines. Existing qualitative work looks at the types of relational ties that low SES students (see Hardie 2015) and specific ethnic subgroups in the U.S. like Latina/o (see Pérez and Mcdonough 2008) and African Americans (see Farmer-Hinton and Adams 2006) depend on when making educational plans. However, most of the current literature on social capital and educational decision making lacks a concerted focus on the poorest neighbourhoods, instead focusing on middle and working-class neighbourhoods (see Hardie 2015; Lareau 2011).

This article focused on at-risk student decision-making in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Ontario. I found that bonding and bridging social capital had different influences on decision-making alignment and certainty, the latter being linked with institutional fit. Specifically, while 18/30 students I interviewed had alignment, through both bonding and bridging social capital ties, those who relied more exclusively on bridging ties with school agents had more decision-making alignment (see Table 1). While their stated educational expectations

met the minimal educational requirements of expected career choices, 'aligned ambition' was compromised when student interviews were probed more deeply for inconsistencies. Students exhibited alignment and uncertainty simultaneously (see Table 2); program and career expectations might match, but their personal preferences and academic preparation contradicted their decision-making alignment. These lessons have important consequences for the way at-risk students form ties with institutional agents. While many cited an institutional agent as one of the ties they could rely on for advice, their interviews suggested infrequent interaction. Scholars of cultural transmission of school-appropriate behaviours and interactions with teachers, suggest that low SES students have difficulty approaching teachers and making meaningful connections with them (Calarco 2014; Jack 2016; Yee 2016). While this was not the focus of this study, my interviews with students at Eastgate demonstrated that the quality of relationships with institutional agents was reflective of their own knowledge about the PSE system in Ontario. Those few students that demonstrated both alignment and fit (certainty), were students that I highlighted in my results section, as possessing multiple and close ties with institutional agents they reported seeing on a regular basis. Some students belonged to after-school programs where they received targeted help, and this helped them choose programs and institutions that were realistic with their academic performance and overall career goals (see Cynthia). These findings are important because they highlight the limitations of bonding and bridging social capital categories as interaction often happen on a continuum. They also highlight the enormous responsibility that institutional agents in low-income neighbourhoods possess to transmit timely and accurate information.

In their own households, at-risk students can receive motivation and support from their parents (Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco 2005), but often lack informed and 'strategic' involvement in their educational plans (Lareau and Cox 2011). Some of the consequences of no parental

involvement in schooling decisions include choosing pathways that do not align with career aspirations (Schneider and Stevenson 1999), and which might not match a student's academic performance, or personality (Hamilton, Roksa and Nielson 2018; Lareau and Cox 2011). The available literature on class-based differences in parenting styles has been critiqued for suggesting that parents from lower-income backgrounds possess a deficit with regards to helping their children (Goldrick-Rab 2016). The current study used interviews with at-risk students, focusing on the types of ties they depend on for advice. Many students cited either their mother, father or both parents, as sources of advice for post-secondary decision-making. However, the advice they reported receiving served a different, yet still valuable purpose; it mainly consisted of moral encouragement and emotional support. Recent research has shown that this type of support can positively serve the aspirations of low-income college students and increase their sense of belonging (Roksa, Deutschlander and Whitley 2020). However, this does not necessarily solve the issue of lower rates of PSE completion for lower-income students, both in the U.S. (Bowen, Chincos and McPherson 2009), and in Canada (Childs, Finnie and Martinello, 2017). Recent research has suggested that aligned ambition in high school increases educational attainment in post-secondary (Schmitt-Wilson and Faas 2016). This research contributes to the growing research base that examines the role of alignment in post-secondary outcomes by understanding how the process unfolds at a pivotal decision-making point. It adds a novel contribution by connecting student reported social capital with both aligned ambition and institutional fit. This framework assists in understanding the nuances in decision-making for low-income students whose parents have no experience with the post-secondary education system.

The students in this study lacked the intense, informed and strategic parental involvement associated with educated parents (Lareau 2000; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hamilton, Roksa

and Nielsen 2018). Thus, institutional agents became, for many students, the only link they had to social capital with PSE experience (Garcia and Ramirez 2018). This research has shown that forming ties with institutional agents can affect decision-making logics in various ways. For some students, reporting a tie with a school teacher, or guidance counselor can lead to decision-making alignment. However, I found that students that relied more exclusively on bonding social capital also possessed this type of alignment (see Table 2), although less frequently when compared with those who relied more on bridging social capital.

When my interviews were analyzed as a whole, I noticed inconsistencies with the way students framed their decision-making. Some students demonstrated aligned ambition as defined by Schneider and Stevenson (1999), however, they made contradictory statements which raised questions about institutional and program 'fit'. The concept of fit as described by Lareau and Cox (2011) is representative of the cultural 'know-how' of students, and is associated with middle and upper-class families knowledge of the PSE system. That students in this sample seemed uncertain, and lacked 'fit' while simultaneously seeming aligned in their decision-making is an interesting finding. It can point researchers interested in social capital and decision-making to understand more about the quality of the relationships that students form with institutional agents. Recent research by Ferguson (2018) found that students from low-income neighbourhoods need to take action in cultivating relationships with teachers in their school. Through interviews with teachers in these neighbourhoods, she discovered that enduring relationships were characterized by reciprocal, regular and friendly encounters. Student-teacher interactions have implications for at-risk student outcomes, which have been found to improve when students are given opportunities to improve their social capital through meaningful ties with institutional agents (Stephan 2013).

I discovered that while students could possess alignment, they may be lacking an awareness of institutional 'fit'. This awareness, or understanding, of the strategies involved in assessing whether choices match (fit) their academic, personal and social needs has been argued to be a characteristic of more affluent middle and upper-class families (Lareau and Cox 2011). The few students (5 in total) that possessed both alignment and fit, were those that reported meeting regularly with their guidance counselor (see Table 2). Future research should interview the institutional agents that students cite in their networks to understand their perspectives, and gain a deeper appreciation for how students form ties. In addition, longitudinal research that examines how these decisions impact later stages in the decision-making process would aid in understanding how short-term reported ties endure, and how they influence decision-making long-term.

Relationships to 'weak ties' has been argued to be a key factor in adults being able to access 'novel' information about labor market opportunities (Granovetter 1995). In this study, 'weak ties', which mainly consisted of relationships with school personnel (institutional agents) plays a similar role as 'weak ties' in adult job networks, providing students with information that their own networks cannot. However, unsurprisingly, these ties with school personnel did not always lead to alignment and decision-making certainty. Social capital theorists have been critical of the traditions lack of focus on the socio-structural limitations that can lead to restricted personal networks for underrepresented students (Portes 1998; Stanton-Salazar 2010). This research study points to Stanton-Salazar's (1997; 2010) work on low-income and minority youth social capital, and recommends that more work needs to be done to understand how "pivotal moments" (see Espinoza 2011: 2) can create enduring bonds between at-risk students and caring institutional agents. How initial ties with institutional agents are formed needs to be explored, but also tracked over time to understand their lasting effects. Thus, when at-risk students are able to identify and capitalize on opportunities with institutional agents they can "overcome the odds" (Stanton-Salazar, 2010,

p.40), by tapping into an important resource, helping them align decision-making and choose programs that best fit their overall needs. Future research could use the model I have proposed here, but combine it with interviews with the institutional agents students identify. The interview process would ideally be repeated over multiple time points to learn the influence of long-term engagement with ties and their effects on decision-making behaviors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Preface to the second paper

"She just told me, that's why." Survival habitus, institutional habitus and hidden stratification in the postsecondary choice process of at-risk students

Why are school interventions on behalf of students not always successful? Sociological research has argued for the positive role of institutional agents in developing positive educational outcomes for low-income students who are at-risk of not advancing to post-secondary. However, little research has examined the potential for negative outcomes of school interventions. This study uses longitudinal qualitative interview data with at-risk students and school personnel in a school in a low-income neighbourhood to study postsecondary decision-making in students' final year of high school. Student habitus is contrasted with institutional habitus to understand potential conflicts and how they might contribute to misaligned decision-making over the course of a year. School personnel promote a 'perfectionist model' ethos that encourages students with fringe grades to pursue university over college. I find a distinct 'survival habitus' amongst students which contrasts with this guidance ethos. This conflict can lead students to defer to institutional agents and change their postsecondary plans. These findings challenge social reproduction theories that argue that low-income students are 'cooled off' by biased gatekeepers who deflate their ambitions for postsecondary.

Introduction

For some, the final year of high school signals the triumphant culmination of a successful academic career and looking forward to future successes in postsecondary studies. For others, it can be a stressful time, characterized by last-minute decisions, confusion, second-guessing and the disappointment of failed expectations. The latter scenario is more common among students at-risk of poor academic outcomes; students from low SES backgrounds and first-generation postsecondary entrants (Aronson 2008; Missaghian 2019; Stephan and Rosenbaum 2013), particularly those who live in lower-income neighbourhoods (Croninger and Lee 2001). These student populations have difficulty interacting with teachers and other school personnel, as they lack the cultural 'know how' to optimize help-seeking behaviours (Calarco 2014; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). Part of knowing how to ask for help involves self-advocacy, including asking teachers questions (Calarco 2011), or actively seeking the advice of guidance counselors in the college enrolment process (Stephan and Rosenbaum 2013). Lacking such cultural capital can negatively affect these students' ability, or willingness, to seek help, learn how to 'align' with teacher and school expectations (Lareau and Cox 2011), develop mentorship ties (Ferguson 2018), and to make informed postsecondary decisions (Stephan 2013).

At-risk students often grow up in poor urban neighborhoods, and thus face several difficult challenges that can negatively influence their educational outcomes: the economic uncertainty and instability of living in low income homes, the stress associated with being dislocated from their country of origin (in the case of recent immigrants and refugees), and living in higher-crime neighbourhoods (Hulchanski 2010). They also lack ties to social capital that can supply timely, informed, and personalized information about postsecondary and the labour market. This lack of access to knowledgeable adults can negatively influence their ability to make 'aligned' decisions

(Hardie 2015; Holland 2010; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). They are more likely to choose postsecondary institutions and college and university majors that are misaligned with their interests, abilities or long-term career goals (Obermeier and Schneider 2015).

Educational researchers have long argued that low-SES students lack active parental involvement in their schooling (Calarco 2011; Hamilton, Roksa and Nielsen 2018; Lareau and Cox 2011; Milne and Wortherspoon 2019), and receive little to no help with postsecondary planning and decision-making. Consequently, often by default, they only have advice from institutional agents like guidance counselors (Stanton-Salazar 2010). However, these relationships, while potentially beneficial as sources of social capital, are often not activated because of insufficient human resources in low-SES schools (Stephan 2013). While much has been written about the positive value of various interventions by institutional agents into the lives of at-risk students (Garcia and Ramirez 2018; Galindo, Sanders and Abel 2017; Schwartz et al. 2016), little has been written about the possibilities of a reverse effect, or what some researchers have called 'hidden stratification' (see Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum and Stephan 2011). Hidden stratification is tied to new ways of guiding students that rely less on 'cooling out' and gatekeeping techniques and more on idealism, or a 'perfectionist model'. Such models encourage students to aim as high as possible, but have unintended consequences, such as poor 'alignment' between students and their choice of postsecondary program and institution. Understanding the potential negative effects of school interventions, the concepts of habitus, both individual and institutional, and their connection with hidden stratification, can help us comprehend potential sources of conflict. Student viewpoints towards post-secondary education (PSE) can clash with a given institutions norms, standards and practices, thus leading to unintended outcomes for students.

In this paper, the potential for such an effect is explored in the context of postsecondary decision-making amongst a group of students in a school located in a low-income, high-crime neighbourhood. Students are interviewed at two critical points in the decisive grade 12 year, corresponding with the search and choice stages of the process (see Hossler and Gallagher 1987). I explore how institutional postsecondary education norms and school agents' advice, contribute to an institutional habitus that interacts and often conflicts with at-risk student habitus. I theorize about the possibility of 'hidden stratification' resulting from these conflicts. I draw from 63 interviews with at-risk students and school personnel (teachers, guidance counselors and administrators) within an urban Ontario high school. I ask: how does institutional habitus influence at-risk students' postsecondary search and choice process? How well do students 'align' their postsecondary plans with school advice? Because student dispositions, worldviews, or ways of knowing (their habitus) can reflect the 'social context in which they are acquired' (Reay et al. 2001: 1), it is important to study how decisions are formed in schools. Equally important is an understanding of the ways that student habitus might conflict with institutional goals and counseling practices (Stephan and Rosenbaum 2012). Misalignment between students' aspirations and plans can result from school cultures, or an institutional habitus (see Reay 2004: Reay et al. 2005). This institutional habitus holds high aspirations for all students, asserting that they should be given opportunities to achieve their highest educational aspirations, even when university or college might not be the best 'fit' for a particular student.

The 'college for all' culture in the United States (Goyette 2008, Rosenbaum 2001;2011) and to a lesser extent in Canada (Davies 2005) has been well documented. With most students - even those with low grades – aspiring to higher education, the danger of 'college for all' culture lies in promoting high aspirations in students who may be ill-prepared for university. Few scholars

have studied how this culture, at the school level, interacts with and aligns with student 'habitus'. How might an institutional habitus that includes a guidance ethos that resembles a 'perfectionist model' (see Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum and Stephan 2011) influence decision-making alignment? Students are expected to align their plans with teachers' and school expectations, but what happens when these expectations are not always in students' best interests?

I find a distinct habitus orientation amongst the cohort of at-risk students, typified by high PSE aspirations, but also by haphazard decisions and uncertainty. Students who might benefit from non-university pathways, such as 2- year college or 1-year certificate programs are swayed by their own aspirations, and the advice of school personnel. Students' self-reliant habitus, typified by a hesitancy to seek help, fosters inconsistent relationships with institutional agents, and ultimately promotes poor PSE plan decision-making alignment. These findings help us understand that the 'BA for all' ethos (Davies 2005; Rosenbaum 2011) might be doing harm to students who lack alignment in their decision-making, thus suggesting that progressive school policies, that aim to improve educational outcomes, and expand possibilities, might be hindering, rather than helping some students.

Habitus and Decision-Making

Bourdieusian cultural capital theory is instructive for understanding the processes behind low-SES students' postsecondary decision-making. By focusing on class-based dispositions and interactional strategies, we can understand what values students place on education, how they go about pursuing various pathways, and under what conditions. Cultural capital has been conceptualized as the various skills, beliefs, approaches and mannerisms consistent with class-based social 'toolkits' (Lareau and Weininger 2003, Calarco 2014), whereas habitus is conceptualized as a 'worldview' (Griffin et al. 2012), or cognitive 'schemata'- a psycho-social

orientation to the world based on an individual's history of socialization (see Edgerton and Roberts 2014). Cultural capital has been conceptualized as Bourdieu's "fuller framework", while concepts like habitus, are related concepts, the understanding of which can give us a better understanding of the theory as a whole (Davies and Rizk: 347). Habitus has been used to understand low SES students' postsecondary experiences (Aronson 2008; Lehmann 2014; Walpole 2003), but has been used less frequently to study postsecondary decision-making (see Corbet 2009; Griffin et al. 2012 & Nora 2004 for exceptions). Most existing studies do not examine ways that student habitus interacts with 'institutional habitus'. Researchers have used prevailing definitions of institutional or organizational habitus to describe the influence of a cultural group or social class on student behaviour (McDonough 1997; Reay, David and Ball 2001). Institutional habitus is often framed as the social environment, through which students form relationships with teachers and other personnel that help shape their behaviours and decisions (Horvat and Davis 2011; Scherer 2020). Recent research looks at these interactions through the lens of high school personnel and the "nature of formal guidance" to understand how these structures and institutional values interact and potentially conflict with student dispositions and worldviews toward higher education (Smyth and Banks: 264) . Understanding this relationship can help us comprehend how students encounter, process, and access advice in the critical final year of high school. Such insights can help us understand why students choose certain institutions and programs over others, but more importantly, whether those decisions are the best 'fit', given students' expectations and academic background. Qualitative and longitudinal research are effective in answering questions regarding processes over time, in a way that statistical social science cannot (Stevens 2009). They allow sociologists to appreciate how schools can fundamentally shape society. At present, there is a lack of longitudinal qualitative data regarding student decision-making.

Social reproduction theorists argue that the "achievement ideology" (See Stevens 2008: 101) dominant in schooling systems, creates oppositional meaning-making habitus in lower-SES students, who may not see the value in higher education that other students take for granted. The vocational orientation in working class youth has also been regarded as a 'hedging' mechanism (see Gabay-Egozi, Shavit, and Yaish 2010), as students eschew lucrative fields like engineering with higher failure rates, in favour of disciplines like business and social sciences with less competitive admission standards. This vocational orientation is potentially problematic, as working class or low-SES students often have incomplete information about the postsecondary system, and are more prone to making decisions that lack 'alignment'. Sociologists have conceived of educational alignment in several ways. For some, educational alignment is the adaptation of daily practices, cognitive schemas and life course sequences to fit with schooling requirements (Lareau 2011; Davies and Rizk 2018; Aurini and Hillier 2018). Others focus less on the cultural 'toolkit', or dispositions required to make successful postsecondary transitions, and have focused on the formation of student aspirations. Early 'alignment' between students' educational interests and their desired future occupation has been found to improve students' postsecondary education outcomes (Schneider and Stevenson 1999). At-risk students might make decisions based on social circumstances and cultural worldviews that covet more immediate reward programs. If utility, expediency and tangible returns on investment are more appealing to lower-SES habitus, recent 'college for all' school expectations represented as part of the institutional habitus might conflict with student habitus.

The "college for all" ethos and hidden stratification

With an increasing number of underrepresented students accessing postsecondary education (Perna 2000, Goldrick-Rab 2006), researchers have focused on whether educational stratification

is playing out on an arguably more 'equal' postsecondary playing field. As the 'college for all' ethos becomes more prevalent both in the U.S. (see Rosenbaum 2011) and in Canada (Davies 2005), guidance counselors and other school-based personnel are also playing new roles. Post-secondary ambitions are now commonplace. When Rosenbaum (2011) wrote *Beyond College for All*, nearly 90% of high school graduates aspired towards Bachelor's degrees, yet only 50% achieve this (Rosenbaum et al. 2015). This is a sober reminder of persisting educational inequalities, and the ways that many students continue to make PSE decisions based on limited information. As integral gatekeepers for students' PSE access, guidance counselors have long been depicted in sociology in a negative light, as excluding low SES youth (e.g., Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Clark 1960), or as distrusted figures (e.g., Willis, Macleod). More recently, counselors have been accused of placating societal calls for equal access, and advising youth towards 4-year bachelors programs, when other options, like community college, certificate programs, or vocational school might be more suitable. At-risk student habitus and orientations towards schooling are colliding with a guidance model, which discourages 'cooling out' (see Clark 1960) in favour of more inclusive approaches (see Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum and Stephan 2011).

There is a lack of research on 'alignment' between at-risk student and institutional habitus. More importantly, the few studies that do examine cultural capital and decision-making are not guided by longitudinal designs that capture decisions over an extended time period. Thus, the current paper examines how at-risk student habitus interacts with institutional habitus. I interview a cohort of at-risk students attending school in a low-income Canadian neighbourhood; most interviewees are first-generation PSE entrants and first- and second-generation immigrants (see Table A4 in appendix). I explore how cultural values influence decision-making in the final year of high school. By looking at how student and institutional habitus align, I fill a gap in the decision-

making literature and provide much needed insight into the way students frame their relationships with key gatekeepers.

Research Methods

Research Site and Sample

The data were collected in a 9-month longitudinal study of grade 12 students, and school personnel in a high school located in a low-income neighbourhood in Ontario (see NHS 2011 for definition). Student interviews were conducted in two waves, the first taking place in the fall of 2018, in the months prior to provincial college and university application deadlines (January 2019). The search phase is the time when students search for, examine and process information about potential postsecondary choices. The second wave of interviews took place in the late spring of 2019, when students had accepted postsecondary offers or had arranged alternative plans. I also interviewed 6 school personnel in the months between the first and second student interview waves, including the school principal, the English department head, both guidance counselors, as well as two student advisors who ran an after-school outreach program. I designed this study to be both 'prospective' and 'retrospective'. In other words, the two waves of interview data are meant to capture student decision-making in real time, allowing students to glance forward at their impending decisions and discuss the choices they made. Qualitative longitudinal (QL) research also provides the opportunity for respondents and the researcher to "gaze backwards" in time, with the benefit of present knowledge to inform impending insights (for an excellent analysis of QL see Neale 2019).

Eastgate Secondary School[7] was an ideal research site because it is located in one of Ontario's poorest urban neighborhoods- an area designated by municipal authorities as a 'priority neighbourhood'. The median family income is 30% lower than the municipal average, while the

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[7] All individual and school names have been assigned a pseudonym for anonymity

percentage of adults with bachelor's degrees is 75% lower. The community is also home to a large population of recent immigrants, particularly those groups, such as Black Caribbean's who are recognized as being underrepresented in Canadian postsecondary entrance rates (Robson et al. 2019). Mainstream media sensationalizes the community for its notoriously high crime rate.

The city's school board consistently ranks Eastgate as their most needy school. The school's graduation rate is consistently lower than the school board's reported averages. Its students are exposed to environmental factors, such as a higher incidence of reported violent crimes, which feeds into the neighbourhood's long reputation as a problem area. The school itself is old, has a modest exterior, and needs an update. Students frequently congregate in school hallways, which are often littered with traces of food, instead of their classrooms. Classrooms are clean, but dated, with black chalkboards instead of modern white "wipeboards", and rarely feature computers or technological aids. The library is perhaps the school's most popular meeting place, mainly because it is well lit, clean, and possesses most of the school's technology. I previously volunteered in the school, and later was employed there to teach in an after-school tutoring program. My previous knowledge of Eastgate and its students' challenges with educational decision-making, prompted its selection as the site for this study. I submitted school board and institutional ethics applications and received approvals in April of 2018. With Eastgate's principal's consent, I started recruitment of students in September 2018.

I interviewed grade 12 students who expected to graduate and enroll in postsecondary studies in the following year. I recruited students in various mandatory grade 12 courses required for postsecondary entry. During that process, I mentioned that I wanted to interview students who planned to attend college or university, but those with alternative plans would be welcome to participate. I interviewed 30 students, 20 of whom were Black, but from a variety of ethnic

ancestries; the remaining 10 were from various South, West and Southeast Asian countries (see Table A4 in appendix). All students were either first- or second-generation immigrants, while the great majority (26/30) were first-generation postsecondary entrants. Four students had parents with postsecondary education, who received their degrees outside of Canada (e.g. the United States, and Europe).

Students were interviewed in the library at lunchtime, a convenient time for students. As I could only do one interview per day, I came for consecutive weeks until I had met with all 30 participants. I followed the same process during the second wave of interviews in May and June. I sent an email to my original respondents asking them to book a second interview. I asked students who were still waiting for university and college results to rebook once they had accepted offers. I interviewed 30 students in the first wave, and lost four students to attrition in the second wave.

All interviews were digitally recorded, uploaded, and transcribed using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Each wave underwent a two-phase coding strategy. The initial coding was organized around thematic categories prepared for the interview schedule - (i.e. Aspirations, Social Capital and Decision-Making) for the first wave, and other categories (Choice and Rationales) for the second. These themes were derived after an exhaustive overview of the literature relevant to student decision-making, as well as the availability of longitudinal data from the second-wave interviews. The second phase of coding added new nodes to the existing set as they emerged. I created short profiles of each student using survey data from intake questionnaires conducted at beginning of study. Profiles contained such information as students' reported grade averages, as well as parental education and occupation. Each wave of data analysis aided in the expansion and refinement of student profiles as the research focus shifted from one wave to the next. Revisiting data in wave one also allowed for 'emergent' and 'dynamic' nodes to appear in second wave

analyses (Neale 2019: 49). The second wave of interviews focused on comparing plans made in wave 1 with the decisions in wave two. The second wave interview schedule was informed by the first wave analysis and results, allowing for comparability, and a sharpening of the research foci (Smith 2003).

Findings

Many students changed their postsecondary plans over the course of their final year of high school. Of the 27 students who agreed to participate in a second interview in the spring (18/27), 67% of them reported changing direction only six months after their initial interview (see Table A5 in appendix)[8]. Overall, student interviews suggest a habitus characterized by high initial aspirations, self-reliance and expediency in decision-making. There was noticeable resignation amongst students when confronted with pursuing their second, or even third choices, as they refused to delay entry to postsecondary to upgrade credentials.

These patterns contribute to what I term a 'survival habitus'. Survival habitus is intimately connected with the lower income social class background of the students at Eastgate. That students expressed a concern over the financial returns to their education, yet in a quite contradictory way, were also willing to go into the unknown into pathways they were not sure about, is part of their reality growing up with parents without post-secondary education. Students shared their parents' wishes for them to go to university, and strive for the top programs and professional careers, yet parents aspirations were not accompanied by concrete advice about decision-making, particularly when student's failed to achieve their first choice programs. The implicit expressions of 'soldiering on' in the face of disappointment is a form of resiliency that students tapped into to

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[8] Of the 30 students I interviewed in the first wave, 26 participated in the second wave. Student 27 was difficult to locate, as she had enrolled in another school. Emails were exchanged with this student, and her path for the Fall was identified, but an interview did not take place.

help them move forward in their plans, however misaligned was their decision-making. Students at Eastgate often chose indiscriminate pathways, without systematically and soberly reflecting on their current grades and career aspirations. Consequently, their final choices were often prompted by fear or uncertainty: fear of the unknown, of failure, and a desire to simply choose 'something'. Decisions were either made independently, or were heavily influenced by an institutional agent who had absolute fiat over decision-making. The reluctance to seek teachers' help by lower income and working class students (see Calarco 2011), combined with the pivotal role of institutional agents in replacing parents as 'cultural guides' (Richards 2020), both contribute to at-risk student socialization. Their lack of access to high status ties, and struggles to activate those ties when available (Ferguson 2018), leave them vulnerable to a worldview in which higher education remains a next step in their journey to survive and find meaning; however, paradoxically, students seemed averse to 'figuring things out' in university and opted for more vocational pathways, that could lead to a job, like nursing and business, although many students were not successful at gaining acceptance into these programs.

For several students at Eastgate, their choice to apply for college in the fall was aligned with their career aspirations. However, when I interviewed them in the spring, several students had been advised by school staff to change their plans, and aim for university instead. Of the 27 students interviewed in wave two, 6/27 (22%) opted for university over college based solely on the advice of an institutional agent. My interviews with Eastgate's institutional agents, along with second-hand reports from students, reveal an 'idealistic' habitus orientation amongst staff. This idealism, or 'perfectionist advice' (Rosenbaum et al. 2011:182) arguably helped sway student decision-making towards more ambitious, but also 'riskier' pathways. I argue that survival habitus was misaligned with the institutional habitus of school personnel. This fracture can lead to

problematic relationships that compromise aligned decision-making, perhaps contributing to hidden stratification.

Haphazard decisions

Mike was one of several students who changed their plans. In the fall when I first interviewed him, he aspired to be a Pharmacist, but was unsure of how to accomplish this. He knew only that he needed to major in something in the sciences: "To be honest, I'm not really sure, because at first, I wanted to become a pharmacist, but then after I went to the university fair, and I realized I didn't have one of the classes." Lacking one prerequisite physics high school course needed to access science programs at university, Mike decided to apply instead to business programs because he wanted to work "in a big company." When I interviewed him again in the spring, he shared that he was mistaken and actually did not need physics to apply as a chemistry major. He failed to obtain this information through consultation with a guidance counselor, or any other adult; he found out haphazardly on the day applications were due. The guidance office at Eastgate has a program where all interested applicants apply together, and the school covers the cost. It was on this day that many students, including Mike, found out about prospective programs and any errors they had made in judgement. Mike was happy to be admitted into university. He had received a conditional acceptance to the university and program of his choice, but felt secure, having been accepted in his 'back-up' business programs. He had a genuine interest in business, but wanted to pursue pharmacy because of his parents' influence: "Because my parents, you know, they wanted me since I was a kid to become a doctor, but I don't wanna be a doctor. So, I looked into pharmacy, right?" Another student Fatima, also made a last-minute, slapdash decision about her choices:

I was going through applications. I was going through it, and saw, oh, Human Rights and Equity. Yeah, that seems kind of dope. Let me just do it, cause I care about people's human rights and I hate people who violate it.

Like Mike, Fatima obtained critical information at the last second, and was surprised that she was accepted into university: "I was so surprised. I thought it was gonna be like, okay, maybe one if I'm lucky, two and I can just pick between those two." There was no strategic planning in her decision-making process, rather a vague notion that an interest could lead her in some direction. Fatima had mediocre grades (see Table A6 in appendix), but she also had the loftiest of aspirations, to be a human rights lawyer: "If I get my degree in Human Rights then that means I can advocate for, for example, the people and the natives, how they don't have clean drinking water…So if I was a human rights lawyer, I can shed light on the situation." The guidance office at Eastgate does an excellent job providing information sessions to students, and informing them of postsecondary opportunities through email. Mike and Fatima did not take advantage of these opportunities. On several occasions, they indicated that they had not yet seen their guidance counselors but could not provide a viable explanation for this. Students were instructed in advance to have their postsecondary choices prepared for the group applications organized by the guidance office. Mike shared his experiences on that day:

But I had the paper, I just never took it out and actually like looked at it. So I think I forgot ... but I think I forgot that I had to do the thing, so when I came to school my friend told me, "We gotta go down to the library to do the thing." That's when it hit me, Oh, shoot, I didn't look into programs.

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These examples demonstrate the lack of help-seeking behaviours that form part of the survival habitus of students at Eastgate. Their situations are even more tenuous because they cannot even potentially benefit from decision-making alignment, as they did not consult with any institutional agents. They had lofty career aspirations which included professions like pharmacist, doctor, lawyer, engineer and nurse, but like many students at Eastgate, had mediocre grades (see Table A6 in appendix), poorly articulated goals, and failed to prepare in advance for their eventual decision.

The literature surrounding middle and upper-middle class student decision-making has revealed the importance of parental involvement to ensure students plan ahead and get the extra help they need (Anderson and Minke 2007, Lareau 2011, Milne and Wortherspoon 2019; Sheldon and Epstein 2005). Lower-class students often do not get any help with their schooling from parents, thus receiving advice from school personnel becomes crucial (Missaghian 2019; Stanton-Salazar 2010). But, in order to receive that advice, students need to take action to form ties with institutional agents. The above examples are illustrative of the troubles students can have when they have no guidance, but perhaps more importantly, when they do not seek any. Previous research into at-risk students, and adults from low income neighbourhoods suggests a general lack of social ties to educated adults with knowledge of the education system and labour markets (see Missaghian 2019; Smith 2005). Self-reliance and a lack of preparation often led these students to haphazard, last-minute decisions. Their resiliency however, as part of a habitus characterized by 'moving forward', was demonstrated by decision-making that did not need to be clear, but needed to be made. Many students seemed resigned to available choices, and accepted *any* favourable outcome, regardless of how it aligned with their occupational aspirations.

Survival habitus

Students' busy and financially constrained lives partly influenced survival habitus; work and family obligations left less time to contemplate the various directions available to them. The choice of last-minute pathways, was symptomatic of a lack of planning and practicality. Like Mike and Fatima, many students put off thoroughly investigating their programs, requirements, and understanding how programs might 'fit' with their current academic performance and future goals. The aforementioned Mike never explicitly gave a reason for wanting to pursue Chemistry, and pursue a potential career in Pharmacy. He indicated an interest in things like Drama and Pop Culture, but indicated that "struggling to get a job like it's just not something I don't wanna to do". Another student Gupal, similarly dismissed his interest in being a lawyer and switched to policing based on his assumption that "that job is gonna be in high demand". When probed further he shared his assessment of some of the high aspirations amongst his cohort:

> Like every student in Eastgate wants to be a lawyer or a doctor. No one will be a cop so in the future it will be a high paying job. There's a lot of possibility for a cop. He could run for mayor, or whatever.

Mike and Gupal both demonstrate the class-based orientations that form part of the survival habitus at Eastgate. These students wanted to choose pathways that would lead to jobs, given their own precarious financial situations, yet they demonstrated gaps in their knowledge about potential educational and career pathways, and both students depended heavily on themselves to make decisions.

Several of the students (10/30) reported being employed during school year, while others mentioned looking for work, or working in the summer. Those who reported working during the school year did so mainly out of financial need, and to help support parents. Kendra, a new

immigrant from Jamaica had trouble understanding how to transfer all of her credits from back home, and learn which she needs for college and university applications. When I first interviewed her in the Fall, she wanted to be a health and safety inspector, and planned to apply to a college program. When speaking to her again in the spring, I discovered she will be returning to Eastgate to complete another year of high school, but was also considering university. This was surprising, given her determination to go to college in our first interview. I learned that she experienced some issues with truancy that contributed to her grades declining:

> This term, I got lazy. I got lazy. I don't want to wake ... It's just my two first periods, not my last periods, because I could come to school for last period, but when I'm supposed to wake up to come to school in the morning it's so hard. (Kendra)

She also shared that she often works in the evenings and does not go to bed until 1am. When asked about her new plans, it seemed she was more focused on graduating and finding a place with one of her friends rather than going to university over college: "…..then we'd get a place together. She doesn't know which college she wants to go to yet, but we want to get an apartment together. We were talking about getting a job that pays more."

Kendra wanted to be a health inspector, because it was something her aunt did back home in Jamaica. She was unable to explain exactly what a health inspector does, nor did she articulate how studying health related fields in college or university might lead to different levels of employment within this field. Becoming a certified inspector in the province requires either a diploma or degree. Given the competitive nature of the job market, Eastgate school staff advised her to entertain completing a degree first. While her grades were below average she still thought university would be a viable option based on advice from guidance: "When I went to guidance, they helped me out and they were like, 'Ryerson is a good school.' It would be good for me because

I'm already taking university courses." Kendra, like many students I interviewed, seemed less interested in contemplating the advice she was given, but rather with moving forward in 'any' path. For example, when she explained going to guidance several times to ask if she was eligible to graduate, she recalled the following:

> When I keep going to guidance, I keep going there and asking questions. She keeps laughing at me. She keeps saying that, "Yes, you have to come back. I know you want to graduate with all your friends, but you have to come back."

Wanting to graduate, move forward and pursue an expedient pathway are all behaviours that were connected with the various class-based, economic, familial and environmental challenges students at Eastgate faced. Unfortunately, for many of the students I interviewed, the lack of advanced planning which is characteristic of students from lower income backgrounds left them vulnerable to changing plans, and accepting advice at the last minute.

Like Kendra, Sandra, a student of South Asian descent, had to change course close to the application deadline when she realized she would not be competitive for applications to her first choice program. When I first interviewed Sandra, she wanted to be a pediatric physician, a noble calling, but one that requires top grades for both admission into undergraduate science programs and later to medical school. Sandra was having trouble with her math and science classes early in the semester. She also shared that in previous years she considered pursuing a career as a teacher, but reconsidered because she was afraid of the lack of available jobs. Sandra admitted being advised by one of the guidance counselors Mr. Parks to pursue college, or even return for another year of high school to raise her grades:

> I feel like I'm gonna be embarrassed to come back because my brother goes here, and I don't want people to talk about me, "oh she failed"… because my mom knows a lot of

people in this neighborhood, so they're probably gonna be, "Oh your daughter failed, isn't that so embarrassing?"

This fear of failure, and of returning to Eastgate for a 'victory lap', prompted many students like Sandra to accept their second or third choices, rather than returning for one additional year to clarify their direction. Sandra eventually accepted an offer for an education program, and received assistance drafting her application materials from Ms. Davood, the school's English department head. Pursuing a degree in education is no easy feat. But, students like Sandra felt pursuing such degrees were 'second-rate'. This led to eventual misalignment in decision-making, as her reasons for pursuing medicine, like "helping children" could have been achieved with a more realistic pathway that was aligned with her academic performance. In this excerpt, Sandra, discusses revelations about courses and her performance that occurred after she submitted her applications:

> Yeah, I took it (social science). I enjoy it more than I enjoy the other sciences. I see myself doing well in it. In Chemistry, I got a 70 in it. I was talking to my teacher, and I was like, "I don't want to be struggling throughout my university doing something I don't enjoy."

Sandra does not necessarily need a university degree to pursue a career working with children. However, students are encouraged towards university pathways even when college is an equally viable, if not a more practical option. This push to promote university is something that can be attributed to the habitus of institutional actors at Eastgate. Such an institutional habitus is typified by norms that see university as the preferred pathway, and one that should be available to all students. Students did not seem to be 'cooled out' often by institutional agents, and if they were, they thought 'hedging' (see Gabay-Egozi et al. 2010) by applying to both college and university would guarantee them some direction. These norms also point to an 'idealism' which Rosenbaum et al. (2011:182) have referred to as a "perfectionist" model for guiding student decision-making.

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Institutional Habitus and Student Decision-Making

Eastgate guidance counselors, the principal and other staff I interviewed all acknowledged that their students face several challenges, like financial insecurity, a lack of direction, motivation and ability to make sound choices. Ms. Basak, one of two guidance counselors, argued that Eastgate students' lack of financial resources influences their PSE decision-making: "Money. That's the number one. Feeling secure. They're not secure, they're like, 'Oh.' They never think that university and college is for them sometimes." However, while staff acknowledged that financial survival was a key component of the student habitus, staff still held implicit preferences for university. While a university degree holds great promise for future earnings (Frenette 2019), attending university has been proven to be difficult for students without proper academic preparation (Rosenbaum et al. 2015), or social and economic supports (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). I have argued that these preferences, or norms towards university are part of Eastgate's institutional habitus. Institutional actors at Eastgate relied heavily on this habitus when advising students. They really believed in their students, and wanted to push them further. This school community faces many challenges, and has much lower PSE entrance rates than other municipalities in the surrounding area. Eastgate teachers felt a strong responsibility to lift the prospects of their students and give them the greatest opportunities for success. However, this 'success' was often couched in terms of university pathways, which some teachers implicitly favoured over other options.

Mr. Parks, the other guidance counselor at Eastgate was aware of these implicit institutional biases: "Commonly, they don't really know what they want to do, but everyone kind of nudges them towards university. Like, the system kind of, just the fact that all the teachers went to university. So, there's an inherent bias, here, towards university." Ms. Davood, the English

department head, described an encounter with a strong student who was only taking college courses, but who she thought was capable of university:

> I did mentor one boy last year, and again, it was because he was a strong student. I encouraged him to go to university, but he only had all college credits. But he was taking a (U) English because he likes English, and I felt he was very capable, so he should apply to university. But he really wanted to be a mechanic, so I said, "That's cool."

While the faith that many of the school staff had in the students was admirable, and represents a key reason why Eastgate is such a welcoming environment, the differing habitus perspectives often led to misalignment in student decision-making.

Martina is a 17-year-old Black student at Eastgate who dreamt of being an event planner. She loves watching reality TV shows like *Cake Boss*, and enjoys baking cakes. She was exploring a "fun job," and planned to apply to culinary and event-planning programs at a community college. She had a definite interest in her prospective pathway, unlike other students in her cohort who were more uncertain. Martina ended up accepting an offer at the local 'Urban University' (pseudonym), in the Business and Society program, which is surprising given her initial clear direction toward community college when I first interviewed her. During our second interview, she claimed Ms. Basak had dissuaded her from community college because she had good enough grades. Martina had fringe university grades, meaning she was just above many universities' bare minimum with a 73 average (B). According to Martina, it was after consulting with Ms. Basak that she decided to apply to Urban University: "my guidance counselor was like, I don't want to say like she was nagging me but, she was like on my case to apply to university because she was like, it's a better life, job-wise, when people look at you for a job, they look for the university degree."

Ms. Basak was an enthusiastic and committed guidance counselor, and did not exhibit much trepidation with allowing students to make mistakes, before they figure out their future pathway:

> You know where they figure it out? I'll tell you that. The kids in this community come back and tell us, we learn from them. After one year of university and they figure out, "Wow," they realize, "I'm gonna do this now….I've got a couple of kids that I can think of offhand, they're like, "No, I'm gonna do this right now. I'm gonna do the prosthetics over at John White Community College (pseudonym). One of my kids came and told me, and said, "Hey, I finished my thing, but I'm gonna do a two-year program on prosthetics."

This sentiment was part of an institutional habitus that saw university or college as a testing ground, where students could learn from mistakes and about themselves. Eastgate's institutional habitus was intimately connected with the perfectionist model of guidance. School personnel held out high hopes for their students, and evidence for cooling-out was scant. However, many students that I interviewed did not have the same appetite for risk, or self-exploration, as the school staff were willing to attribute to them. In fact, 5/26 (19%) of the students who completed a second interview indicated that they would be returning to Eastgate for another year, even though some had received acceptances to college programs, or could have been accepted had they submitted applications in the winter. One student, Gupal, had reported receiving similar grades to Martina, who was eventually accepted into Urban University. However, unlike her, he decided to return for a "leap year." When asked about his decision, Gupal shared his fear of failure: "my grades are not the average I want it to be. It's like 70, but I want my grades to be in the 80 or 90's." I further questioned Gupal to understand why he did not consider just applying, to see if he could get in, but he shared that he wanted to "100% know if I'm gonna be accepted". While his aversion to 'figuring it out' in university might not align with Ms. Basak's anecdotal evidence, his insistence

on university did align. Like Gupal, many students at Eastgate shied away from college, maintaining hope that University might be for them, even if it was unrealistic.

Hidden Stratification

Looking at the alignment between at-risk student habitus and institutional habitus in the context of decision-making can shed light on what Rosenbaum et al. (2016:182) call 'hidden stratification'. When school personnel steer students with average grades and limited financial means towards university, and discourage them from attending 2-3 year college programs, they may be setting them up for failure, and for future stratified educational outcomes. Sharon is a 17 year old Black girl of Jamaican descent, who for the last several years had the aspiration of pursuing a career as a border agent. Like Martina, who got career ideas from TV, Sharon, watched a lot of *Border Security: Canada's Front Line*, a reality show about Canadian customs officials. However, unlike Martina, who relied more on herself to make decisions, Sharon was more active in pursuing relationships with institutional agents who could help her 'align' her career aspirations with her postsecondary program choices. Sharon had completed a school-based dual credit program with a local college that also offered a 4 year degree program in criminal justice. Sharon felt comfortable with the idea of attending Forest College (pseudonym). She would get a degree and would be nested in a familiar environment. She felt college would present a more comfortable environment than a larger, higher prestige university: "I've been to a university setting, and the way they lecture and all that. It's more theory. I don't really learn like that. I need a more hands-on, smaller class, that I can't learn in big, big settings. I zone out."

It seemed like Sharon had it all figured out. During her first interview she discussed how she benefited from ties she had formed with institutional agents through her participation in a range of school programs. However, while this social capital helped align her decision-making, it was

the 'perfectionist' advice from a teacher-mentor, Mr. Douglas, who felt she should be going to university over college that helped sway her:

> He doesn't feel like I would be stimulated enough at college because he feels like college would be too easy for me. And although I do believe that college is kind of really easier for me, he said, "Maybe you should challenge yourself and it will look better when you're applying to border security."(Sharon)

Challenging students to achieve their best is praiseworthy, and on the surface seems harmless. However, at Eastgate institutional habitus seemed to impose, at times, on the survival habitus of students who thought about their futures differently. Sharon's initial plan was well thought out, and Forest College has an excellent reputation for producing very productive graduates. Frenette (2019) found that those who graduate with a four-year bachelor's degree at Canadian colleges earn 12% more each year, on average, two years after graduation, than students who graduate with a four-year degree from university. However, increased wages were likely caused by the higher number of CBD (College Bachelor Degree) graduates who studied in higher paying programs, like business, and health, over social sciences, like criminal justice. Nevertheless, Mr. Douglas' advice seems more closely tied to perceptions of institutional prestige, and perceived benefit rather than what 'fit' better with Sharon's interests, and her appetite for risk. Sharon had a well thought out plan that was greatly informed by her sister's difficulty navigating college, who not coincidentally, had better high school grades (see table A6 in appendix): "if college is hard for her, how am I supposed to do that and thrive. So, I really doubted myself."

While I did not interview Mr. Douglas, I did observe his personal interest and genuine care for Sharon's success, several times while I was preparing for interviews in the school library. Mr. Douglas' advice, as reported by Sharon, is consistent with the 'idealism' the other personnel I

interviewed shared towards the postsecondary prospects of the students they served. While several of the teachers in the school grew up in the area surrounding Eastgate, having obtained higher education contributes to a habitus that might not assess risk in the same manner as the students who are experiencing strained economic circumstances, or even poverty. Even the school principal, Mr. Ball, a Black male of Ghanaian descent understood the different institutional habitus that educated teachers might possess:

> I mean, if I am privileged as an educator in the sense that I grew up with a loving family, it's easy for me to think, or a family that is involved in my education, that had the luxury of time and resources, that they would support me as best as they possibly can, right? It's easy for me to expect that every kid would experience that kind of privilege, right? And so, then you end up with, instead of us supporting the kids, learning how to help kids deal with trauma, we end up blaming the kids.

Mr. Ball understood the difficulty in guiding students whose support is compromised by parents who are busy and lack knowledge of the PSE system. The teachers and staff I interviewed at Eastgate were all first-generation post-secondary students, and are thus in a unique position to offer advice to the student body at Eastgate. The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate their quality as educators or advice-givers, but rather to suggest that their own excellence at academics and habitus orientation might not align with average Eastgate students, whose academic, financial and social circumstance might not always align well with university. However, the example of Mr. Douglas and other teachers I have outlined here demonstrate the arguable presence of 'perfectionist' ideals. This institutional habitus can have unintended consequences, like encouraging students towards alternative paths, when such pathways may not be optimal, or desired, as observed in Sharon's and other students' cases.

Discussion

Educational decision-making has been conceptualized by many rational-choice sociologists as influenced by calculated cost-benefit analyses, but also accounting for the contextual features in which decisions are made (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Gabay-Egozi et al. 2010). Bourdieu's concept of habitus allows for a unified vision of agency and structure to gain strength from understanding decision-making as both a pragmatic choice, based on individual circumstances, but one also constrained by external forces. In this regard, Bourdieu's theory shares similarities with bounded rationality (Reay 1995), a concept behavioural economists' employ to explain educational decisions that take place under uncertainty- much like the students at Eastgate. However, what economists often ignore, and what Bourdieu's theory of habitus addresses, are the structural class-based factors that foster preference systems, sometimes in lieu of possessing various forms of capital. While there is a large body of qualitative work that uses cultural capital theory to understand student interactions with teachers and schools, the concept of institutional or organizational habitus is used less frequently (Byrd 2019). The concept has been used in the U.S. and U.K. and has been accused of logical inconsistencies (Atkinson 2011). The criticism against studies using habitus in education is that researchers tend to conflate habitus experienced at the individual level, with the various 'fields' of experience that Bourdieu theorized influence habitus (Byrd, 2019). However, given the importance of class-based factors in educational decision-making (Calarco 2011; Lehmann 2013; Walpole 2003), understanding the importance of potentially conflicting class-based norms between individuals and the institutions they inhabit deserves consideration.

Through a longitudinal exploration of the interaction between student and institutional habitus at Eastgate Secondary, I found that a lack of alignment between them often led to altered

postsecondary plans amongst at-risk students; these changed plans did not always seem clear, or even logical for certain students. I also found evidence for what I term a 'survival habitus' and evidence of a 'perfectionist' model of advice-giving amongst school personnel. Survival habitus was characterized by a predisposition towards self-reliance, a lack of help-seeking behaviours, and most importantly, a resignation to 'moving forward' in any direction, without careful consideration of available options and their consequences. Some students (10/30) at Eastgate planned for college over university; the rest gladly settled upon their second or third university options, when they did not get admission into their first choice even when it was in reach (e.g., taking one more high school course, going back to high school for one more term to boost their average). Many students who chose less 'risky' college pathways listened without hesitation when prompted by institutional agents to aim higher. Students reported getting last-minute advice from teachers, guidance counselors, and other mentors who urged them to consider university. Several of these students scored average to below average in their academic standing (see Table A6 in appendix). A noticeable institutional habitus that favoured university over community college became apparent through interviews with institutional agents at Eastgate.

This paper seeks to understand how student and institutional habitus can influence decision-making. By following a group of 30 students through the college and university application process, I have discovered that a lack of alignment between individual and institutional habitus can lead to 'hidden stratification'. In other words, when guidance counselors and other institutional agents advise students based on an idealized notion of university as a superior choice, many students can miss out on options, like college, that reduce financial risks, and can provide short-term gains (Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum 2013), important to students' survival habitus.

These findings suggest that at-risk student decision-making is both pragmatic, but non-rational, as it lacks much of the 'calculation' that has come to characterize Rational Action Theory in sociology (see Ayalon 2003; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Gabay-Egozi, Shavit and Yaish 2010). Surviving, just doing something, viewing themselves as 'lucky' to get in to university, were noticeable patterns of student decision-making at Eastgate. Even when students showed calculation through 'hedging' and choosing less risky pathways, they changed direction when encountering 'perfectionist' advice from institutional agents. They often made decisions without consulting any adults, relying on television and last minute 'Hail Mary' choices. I have attempted to demonstrate that this haphazard decision-making is part of a habitus at odds with idealistic sentiments of school personnel, who approach decision-making from the view that university is the penultimate goal. These findings can help expand the educational decision-making literature by using micro-level findings to explore the relationship between structure and agency. Habitus is a theoretical construct that can help us learn more about how social class barriers inform cultural dispositions towards non-strategic decision-making; strategy being a characteristic of middle and upper-middle class parents and their children (Ball 2003; Lareau 2011; Lehmann 2009).

Recent research examining the influence of institutional habitus on the post-secondary learning experiences of working-class students, has found that the "organizational culture and ethos" of an institution can noticeably influence the ways various working-class students experience postsecondary, and how PSE shapes their identities (see Reay 2010:111). Similar research has also highlighted the cultural importance of attending university in the habitus of Black immigrants, and how that helps shape postsecondary choices (Griffin et al. 2012). The postsecondary aspirations of Black students have been described as being influenced by various cultural stereotypes, according to ethnic and generational differences (Daoud et al., 2018). This

research finds that a majority of Black and Asian (south, east and west) students interviewed for this study experienced uncertainty with regards to their postsecondary futures (see Missaghian 2019). This uncertainty was part of an at-risk student habitus that is misaligned with Eastgate's institutional habitus.

These findings highlight the theoretical utility of understanding how students form decisions in specific institutional contexts. It was not surprising that these students were influenced by their own personal cultural norms, like Mike, whose parents wanted him to be a doctor, as well as the norms of the institution, which also praised high aspirations. I argue that this conflicted with a student habitus that was uncertain. This uncertainty is shaped by financial concerns, a lack of knowledge about the PSE system, and living in a neighbourhood where almost half the students do not end up attending postsecondary. Future research could focus more on neighbourhood stressors and their influence on decision making. This research demonstrates how habitus orientations at the individual and organizational level shape the postsecondary choice process. Like other studies that have found a 'hybridity' (see Crozier, Reay and Clayton 2019) of identities amongst working class students, this research shows how students can be both aligned and misaligned in their decision-making, but make drastically different decisions, based on the trust they placed in institutional agents. Future research might also look at how mentoring relationships and bonds of trust and reciprocity help shape decision-making.

Sentimentality towards university education, and its greater long-term gains inspired institutional agents' 'perfectionist' advice. Understanding this advice-giving ethos provides insight into ways that institutional habitus can complicate the decision-making process of at-risk students in the final year of high school. Since much as been written about the complicated assimilation process of working-class students in postsecondary(Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lehmann

2012, 2013;), it is important to understand how our most vulnerable students, those from lower income families, alter or conform their postsecondary aspirations to match the expectations of the institutions in which they inhabit. This could be especially prescient for students like those examined in this study, who have very limited social capital, particularly parental advice, and thus defer to institutional agents (Missaghian, 2020a). It is important for school staff and administrators to recognize their own class-based dispositions, even if they too were from low-income and first-generation postsecondary families. This study finds that the "false student consciousness" that classic social reproduction theorists argue is a corollary of a systemically biased education system (see Bowles and Gintis 2011, p. 9), may be working differently than once imagined. Instead of biased teachers 'cooling off' students, streaming them into lower prestige pathways, institutional agents at Eastgate actually participated in 'warming up' students to more ambitious middle-class pathways. Students who had very clear college goals at one point were encouraged to aim higher, towards university, when such advice might run counter to their goals, academic ability, or current financial situation.

This study captured decision-making at two critical points to occur in real time. The interviews with students, along with interviews of key institutional agents in the school, allowed for the tracing of patterns in student habitus, and its interaction with school personnel's institutional habitus. I interviewed a useful mix of guidance counselors, teachers, and the school principal and discovered a different cultural ethos towards university, in comparison with the 'survival habitus' of students. Students were consistent across ethnicity and gender lines, with regards to changing their plans from time A to time B. However, with a larger sample of students, it might have been interesting to examine how race and gender contributed to variations in decision-making. Future research might compare racial and ethnic differences in decision-making,

by comparing samples of Black students from communities like that surrounding Eastgate, and those from more middle-class neighbourhoods. This research can help educational policy professionals understand the importance of creating potentially easier pathways between college and university, if in fact, as has been shown recently in Canada, a greater proportion of college postsecondary entrants are from ethnic minority backgrounds (McCloy 2017). However, while I have found that some at-risk students see college as a potential stepping stone to university, this perception is often rooted in misperceptions. Students often form misaligned aspirations regarding their future pathways, and these can stem from a lack of parental advice; but, perhaps more importantly, from an institutional ethos that subjectively sees university as the most viable option, when for many it might not be.

Preface to the third paper

Habitus, rational choice and aligned ambition: A longitudinal qualitative study of at-risk student decision-making

What does rational educational decision-making look like for at-risk students? Sociologists that embrace rational actor theory (RAT) have faced challenges from cultural capital theorists that emphasize class background as a structural influence that influences at-risk student decision-making. While the two theories seem at odds, little research has examined them together using longitudinal data. This article draws from interviews gathered from a panel study with 15 at-risk students over a 15 month period. Three student typologies are identified (High Achievers, The Dreamers, Survivors) based on decision-making patterns that emerge over the three time points. I find evidence for both Habitus and RAT in the decision-making of at-risk students, but argue that Habitus played a more prominent role for students that were uncertain and lacked decision-making alignment. These students often drew from emotional and cultural sentiments about the importance of PSE and wished to honor their parents' sacrifices. Students without strongly formed aspirations and who were consistently misaligned in their decision-making struggled more with their early post-secondary transitions. This article proposes alignment theory as a useful bridge between RAT and Habitus, as both a tool to help evaluate decision-making and to consider the critical role that social capital, or institutional agents, play in the decision-making process.

Introduction

The status attainment tradition in sociology contains some of the discipline's most robust sociological findings (see Blau and Duncan 1967; Jenks 1972). Understanding the effects, over time, of socio-demographic characteristics, like parental education and income on labour market and educational attainment have been at the forefront of the sociology of education (Duncan and Murnane 2011). Other variables, for example, like parental involvement, which are often extensions of class background, are also important in helping researchers understand educational outcomes (Carolan and Wasserman 2015). Children with more involved parents, who actively assist them in cultivating skills (see Lareau 2000; 2011) that are coveted by teachers and educational institutions, are more likely to succeed academically (Carolan and Lardier 2017; Calarco 2014; Cheadle 2009). The interest in the role of class background on stratification has extended to consider the role that choice, or decision-making plays, as the decision to 'acquire additional education' is separate from the effects of education (Coleman 1993: 171).

Studies of student decision-making have used both Rational Action Theory (RAT) (see Breen and Yaish 2006; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Gabay-Egozi, Shavit, and Yaish 2010) and Bourdieu's habitus theory (see Griffin et al. 2012; Lehmann 2007; Nora 2004) as explanatory frameworks. Few studies have attempted to understand the interplay of both theories (for exceptions, see Glaesser and Cooper 2014; Morrison 2017) and none have examined their role in decision-making over an extended period of time. Drawing on a qualitative panel study of at-risk students, this paper examines the role that habitus and rational choice play in their decision-making over three critical time-periods. Rational Action Theory conceptualizes decision-making as a set of calculations that are made at critical moments in a student's educational trajectory; students are essentially forward thinking, and make decisions for their future in light of their present

circumstances. Habitus, in contrast, is far more retrospective; people come to be who they are based on class conditioning, or being socialized into the habits and dispositions consistent with their class background. Thus, when students come to make decisions, they do so not only 'rationally', but from the vantage point of their class perspectives, or cognitive schemas they have developed over a lifetime.

We continue to know very little about how students align themselves with the expectations of institutions 'in situ' (see Svendsen 2006) to understand the complexity of these processes in real time. Approaching decision-making longitudinally, as opposed to relying on statistical snapshots of student cohorts, allows sociologists to deepen their understanding of decision-making as a forward thinking, retroactive and responsive exercise (Neale 2019). How this unfolds for at-risk students, who are arguably faced with more structural, and individual constraints, can provide more insight into the non-rational components of decisions (see Boudon 1998) that derive from class-based dispositions. At-risk students normally live in low-income neighbourhoods, with a higher concentration of government housing, and face multiple challenges, like higher incidences of crime, police surveillance, and urban decay (i.e. graffiti, broken bottles, old buildings) (see Cyr 2014) that can negatively influence their educational outcomes. Economic instability is also compounded for refugee or immigrant populations that are coping with new transitions (Hulchanski 2010).

Unlike previous studies that have attempted to understand RAT and habitus together, this article argues for the efficacy of the concept of 'aligned ambition' as a potential bridging theory . Schneider and Stevenson first described this concept in (1999), and define it as the match between the educational plans of students and the educational requirements of their desired jobs. For example, a student may state a desire to be a bookkeeper, but plan to attend a 4-year university,

when a 2-year college program could yield the same occupational result. Aligned ambition also

implicitly accounts for the role of relational social capital, or lack thereof, and institutional context

in shaping decision-making behaviors. Understanding how 'aligned ambition' complements RAT

and Habitus, can help us understand the multifaceted nature of decision-making. The complexity

of decision-making is shaped by both individual effort and judgement, but also by the types of

social support and guidance, or lack thereof, that low-SES students receive from their families and

schools. RAT theory can help us understand that decision-making can be strategic and forward

thinking, when students have the requisite information. However, when the effects of class

conditioning are considered, we understand that the types of information students receive and from

whom, can often mix and superimpose upon any rational calculations.

The following paper examines the postsecondary decision-making process for at-risk

students in the search and choice phases (see Hossler and Gallagher 1996)[9], but also their

experiences transitioning into the first semester post-secondary. Qualitative research that follows

up with students after graduation, to explore transitions into postsecondary are rare for decision-

making studies. This article, based on the findings from a panel study with an original sample of

30 at-risk students, tracks their decision-making over a 15 month time period, and across three

critical time points (see Table 1). It draws from 45 interviews with a group of 15 students who

participated in all three rounds of interviews[10]. Students are grouped into three student categories

(High Achievers, The Dreamers, Survivors) and these typologies help organize the analysis of

findings. The High Achievers were the students who were both strong academically, and had

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[9] Search stage refers to the period when students gather information and consult various sources
to narrow down PSE choices, whereas Choice stage involves assessing options and making a
final decision when application results are available.
[10] 30 students participated in the first wave; 26 in the second, and 15 in the third.

consistent and aligned aspirations throughout the study. They were also the students who achieved their 'first-choice' postsecondary goals[11]. The Dreamers were a group of students who were above average or average academically, with high educational aspirations which were not always aligned with their academic performance and career expectations. They tended to rely a lot on institutional agents for advice and guidance. The Survivors were the group that most resembled a cultural habitus I call 'survival habitus'. These students were not aligned in their decision-making, but felt content with moving forward in any direction, without thinking too deeply about benefits and drawbacks. This lack of reflection is intimately related to the class-based lack of parental intervention, which precluded parents from offering first-hand information about the PSE system and potential pathways. What parents offered instead, and which students drew from more consistently to make choices, was an immigrant habitus that valorized their newcomer experiences and ability to survive through challenges. I focus on the following questions: what does rational decision-making look like for students in a low-income neighbourhood? How does individual and institutional habitus interact with rational decision-making? How might other factors, like decision-making alignment influence rational action? And what do these factors tell us about how students experience transitions in postsecondary?

Eastgate is located in one of Ontario's poorest urban neighborhoods- an area designated by municipal authorities as a 'priority neighbourhood'[12]. The neighbourhood is located on the northwest end of one of Canada's largest cities and is known for its high proportion of 'unsuitable'

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[11] Hani was an exception. She was admitted into her first choice program, with high grades. However, she had misalignment and a lack of fit between her interest in arts and a career aspiration of lawyer.

[12] This is a municipal category given to underserved neighbourhoods with less access to essential social services, lower median income and education levels.

housing and those living below the poverty line, compared with municipal averages. Eastgate has both a higher concentration of immigrants and almost 20% more visible minorities than the overall city average. Students often live in cramped quarters with parents whose primary language is not English, and who have not attended university, or any post-secondary. Students at Eastgate were aware of the potential financial risks of attending university or college and thought about them, to varying degrees. Several applied for scholarships made available to students in the community, to ease the financial strain. Almost a third of the students who participated in this study (10/30) maintained part-time employment throughout high school, and 8 of those (8/15) were included as cases in this article. These students continued to work in postsecondary due to additional costs that their loans, grants and parental support could not cover. However, despite these calculations about financial costs, the majority of students exhibited uncertain, and misaligned decision-making: they made last-minute decisions without adequate planning, and often lacked alignment with their occupational goals and ambitions[13].

In another paper focusing on the influence of individual and institutional habitus on decision-making at Eastgate (see Missaghian 2020b), I argued that student 'survival habitus' played a much larger role in their decision-making, and overshadowed any 'rational' concerns they had over PSE costs. [14] For these students, postsecondary represents a wonderful opportunity to achieve something their parents were unable to. For the students outside of the 'High Achiever's groups (see Table A7 in appendix), PSE transitions seemed more difficult, as many them had chosen their second program options. Students reported feelings of alienation, as well as being

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[13] In a previous study, looking at this group of students (Missaghian 2020b), 18/27 (67%) reported changing their PSE direction at time 2.
[14] Survival habitus refers to student decision-making accepts 'any' opportunity to pursue a postsecondary pathway, even if the student lacks alignment, or preparation.

overwhelmed by the workload. Some students 'missed high school', and continued to keep in contact with teachers at Eastgate for support. I argue that while RAT and Habitus can be used together, the latter provides the theoretical flexibility necessary in examinations of at-risk students. I propose that integrating theories like 'aligned ambition' (see Schneider and Stevenson 1999) are useful for decision-making studies of low income students, and can help reconcile some of the differences between RAT and Habitus. Alignment theories help account for both the calculation necessary in making important decisions, but also consider how decisions are often made in non-optimal social conditions. Non-optimal conditions exist as part of a potential lack of resources, information and support, which are often gained through social ties.

Table 1. Interview Schedule

	Grade 12		Post-graduation
	Interview 1 Fall 2018	Interview 2 Spring 2019	Interview 3 Fall 2019
Students who plan to apply PSE N=30	Before college and university applications	After results, for those who applied	Students interviewed about their early transition experiences
	N=30	N= 27	N=15

Bridging RAT and Habitus in Decision-making Studies

Recent decision-making research has sought to understand the complementary role of these seemingly competing perspectives (Glaesser and Cooper 2014; Maier and Robson 2020; Morrison 2017). This article explores their potential role in understanding at-risk student PSE decision-

making. I argue that Habitus helps complement RAT and shed light on the experiences of low-income students; RAT's strength has been as a predictor of 'central tendencies in action considered in aggregate'(Goldthorpe 2007: 285), but not in understanding the non-instrumentality of action (Boudon 1998; 2003), which is often shaped by class-based familial and institutional habitus. There are students in this study who are typical, when compared to the picture of middle-class students; they form early career aspirations, weigh the pros and cons of different PSE programs, and understand the financial costs associated with university. However, I found these students to be mostly contained within the 'High Achiever' group (see Table A7 in appendix). These students are quite atypical when compared to the rest of their cohort, who are characterized more by haphazard, uncertain and misaligned decision-making.

RAT in sociology is often attributed to Boudon (1974) and his writings on the primary versus secondary effects of social class background on educational outcomes. For him, the secondary effects of social class background influence decision-making over and above the effects of cognitive ability. Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) expand on this idea to examine why people from different social backgrounds, but similar cognitive ability, make different educational decisions. They explain these differences using the theoretical model of RRA (Relative Risk Aversion), which outlines the various thresholds of risk students are willing to undergo to maintain, and potentially surpass their parents' social class position. Students from advantaged social class backgrounds are likelier to pursue more competitive, and 'riskier' (Gabay-Egozi et al. 2010) levels of education, which take longer to complete and may not provide immediate economic returns. This differential is owing to the economic and social safety nets that advantaged students possess, that protect them, should they fail in their academic pursuits. Lower class students, conversely, require far less education to surpass their parents who have not attended PSE. Much of RAT is

rooted in economic cost-benefit analysis about the potential gains of education at various levels. Students rationalize their actions at critical decision-points and thus, decide to either continue or discontinue their education.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus, like RAT, attempts to connect individual subjectivity with objective social structural constraints. However, the micro-level realities of actors, unlike RAT theory, are manifested as a set of deep-rooted social class dispositions that are part of a "present-past" (Morrison 2017: 54). While RAT looks at educational decision-making at critical transition points in a student's educational career, Habitus considers individual decision-making as taking place within the complex 'fields', or social contexts which accord differential value to certain behaviours and norms (Bourdieu 1998). It is this dynamic between individual habitus and social context that the current study focuses on. Critical to Bourdieu's theory is understanding the role institutions play in shaping habitus, as their norms can come into conflict with individual habitus (Reay, David and Ball 2001); within institutions and other fields of experience, the relationships we form with other social actors (i.e. social capital) can also have a significant influence on the way we experience the world.

When comparing RAT and Habitus, it is easy to see how they complement one another; both approach the subjective nature of decision-making and account for context; however, Habitus also accounts for the role of social capital (Kim and Schneider 2005) and institutional culture (see Reay 2004) in shaping decision-making behaviours. The difficulty lies with reconciling the notion of 'calculation' in RAT, which seems an unshakeable foundation of the theory. What if a student can be both calculated and irrational? The example of at-risk students presents an interesting case study for understanding the complementarity of the two perspectives. At-risk students face a unique set of stressors that can push them in different directions, but also shape the way they

interact with and process information. The findings in this paper demonstrate that students at Eastgate, particularly the 'High Achievers', demonstrated the calculation representative of rational choice decision-making. However, the majority of the students demonstrated survival habitus, that often saw them making haphazard and uncertain decisions, with incomplete information, that overshadowed any thought they gave to the risks associated with pursuing PSE.

In this paper, I argue that the idea of 'aligned ambition' proposed by Schneider and Stevenson (1999a) might be a useful bridging theory between RAT and Habitus, as it accounts for decision-making processes, while also considering the influence of family background, resources (human, social, and cultural) and institutional context. Schneider and Stevenson's important 1999 book *America's Teenagers: Motivated but Directionless* examined data from 13 schools collected as part of the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth. This was a national longitudinal study tracking a large representative sample of students across various grades over a five year period. The authors started working from the premise that the educational expectations of America's youth had been inflated, with more students aspiring to professional degrees, like doctor and lawyer, while less students aspired to professions in the trades. The other troubling finding was the observed inflated PSE expectations amongst students from low-SES families, who also exhibited a lack of knowledge about how their expectations might translate into future careers. These students also did not have a lot of parental support or involvement in their decision-making. They were lacking this important form of social capital: "Strong relationships among family members form a source of social capital that the adolescent can draw from in planning the future" (Schneider and Stevenson 1999b: 137). The authors account for the importance of social capital, but also for the role that schools can play in helping shape the ambitions of students: "High Schools can influence the ambitions of their students through their messages about what is important and what students

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need to do" (p.139). Thus, we see the multifaceted toolkit 'aligned ambition' provides to assess decision-making as both an individual strategy, but also one conditioned by social supports, networks and institutional context.

Research Methods

The data for this article are drawn from 3 waves of interviews with a sample of grade 12 students at Eastgate Secondary School. Recruitment began in Fall and focused on students who expressed a desire to apply for postsecondary that year, although the invitation was open to those without post-secondary plans. The first two waves of interviews aimed to capture student decision-making at two critical times: 1) before the university and college application deadline in January and 2) when students received acceptance or rejection letters in the spring. A third wave followed up with students in the Fall semester (November and December) of their first year of postsecondary (see Table 1), although one student was completing an additional year of high school, and one was in limbo. The 15 students who are the focus of this paper, are part of the original cohort of 30 students selected for this study and were interviewed at all three time periods; 15 students were lost to attrition in the third wave and were non-responsive to calls to participate.

The students attended Eastgate Secondary, located in one of Ontario's poorest urban neighborhoods. The school is consistently ranked at the top of the school board's evaluation index, which ranks schools according to measures that account for 'external' challenges. These challenges comprise community level categories, which measure various socio-demographic indicators of well-being, such as median income, percentage of population with post-secondary education, and percentage of population living on social assistance. A higher ranking, thus points to a population with lower average rates of adults with higher education and lower average household incomes, amongst other challenges. These socio-economic challenges can place

children living in such households at a higher risk for lower educational outcomes themselves. Thus, Eastgate was chosen as an ideal case given its consistent rankings at the top of this index. I gained access to the school through submission of a detailed research proposal to the school boards ethics review committee. I had previously worked in the school for 6 months as a teacher in an after-school tutoring program, thus having met several teachers and the principal briefly during my time there. Those relationships helped build trust and familiarity and aided in the recruitment process, as I was able to more comfortably enter the school and introduce myself to prospective teachers and classrooms.

This panel study began with 30 students, 18 females and 12 males. Twenty of the students were Black, but representing various ethnicities from the Caribbean and African continent (See Smith, Schneider and Ruck 2005), while 10 comprised students of South, Southeast and Western Asian descent. The ages of respondents ranged from 16 to 18. Most of the students (26 of 30) were the first-generation to apply to postsecondary, as almost half (46%) of the parents were reported to have not completed high school. Almost all (29/30) of the students initially expressed a desire to attend postsecondary, with a lone student initially expressing a desire to pursue a career as a professional athlete. While it would have been interesting to have more than one student in the sample who did not have post-secondary aspirations, the almost unanimous aspirations of this sample are not a huge stretch, considering the 81% post-secondary attendance rate for the school board as a whole. The second wave of interviews revealed that 22/27 (81%) students that participated in interviews intended to accept offers to attend a community college or university in the province. While this is consistent with reported school board averages, this number is slightly inflated for Eastgate, as the school's postsecondary statistics for 2018 reveals a 72% acceptance rate for college and university enrolments. This discrepancy is a potential sampling frame bias

(Tuckett 2004), as the students who volunteered for this study could have been more academically inclined, and felt more comfortable participating in a study.

In the initial wave of interviews, 30 students from Eastgate Secondary School were recruited in the months preceding the college and university application deadlines. Students who expressed an interest in enrolling in postsecondary were strategically recruited in compulsory grade 12 English and Math courses, where many students with postsecondary ambitions were present. Students were recruited within these College and University level courses, along with a targeted sample of males from school athletic teams, to gain a more representative sample of males and females, and students interested in attending community college. Students volunteered for the study and the sample grew, through repetitive rounds of recruiting visits, until a representative sample of 30 was formed. Recruiting halted after first-level data analysis yielded "saturated" categories (nodes) after about 25 interviews. These nodes were hardly altered or expanded upon after 20 interviews (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014: 311). Saturation does not occur when a researcher does not hear anything "new", but rather involves the presence of consistent and cohesive patterns in the data (Morse 2015). The presence of consistent patterns in decision-making that allowed for typologies in student behaviours to emerge, suggests that this sample of students was empirically large enough to warrant the sample size.

Data analysis for this study is drawn from 45 interviews with a sample of (15 students) belonging to the original cohort, and occurred in stages. Each wave of interviews underwent its own rigorous coding strategy based on research questions that sought to capture different information for each wave. For example, the first wave interview questions sought to capture information about post-secondary aspirations as well as available social capital to aid with decisions. Second wave interview questions focused on student choices, rationales and

expectations about post-secondary. Short profiles of each student were created after the second wave of interviews. These were also augmented with survey data from questionnaires conducted at the beginning of study, which captured various demographic information about student backgrounds, such as self-reported grade averages, parental education and occupation. Each wave of data analysis aided in the creation, expansion and refinement of student profiles as the focus of the interview questions, as well as time period changed.

Revisiting data in wave 1 and 2 also allowed for 'emergent' and 'dynamic' nodes to appear in third wave analyses (Neale 2019: 49). The third wave interview questions were unique as they focused on post-secondary transitions, and were reflective, as they were informed by student experiences present in the data from previous waves. The fifteen students examined in this paper consistently exhibited decision-making patterns across all three interviews that allowed me to create student typologies. For example, the High Achievers were coded in Wave 1 as having formed 'early aspirations' as well as possessing 'knowledge' about their post-secondary pathway. In the second wave, after their university and college results were in and they had made a choice, they appeared under such nodes as "achieved first choice program" and "consistent decision-making". Prior to coding the third wave interviews, these nodes and patterns were revisited and many were collapsed into the larger student "types". The strength of qualitative longitudinal research is to observe changes in subject behavior over time. Often researchers can ask similar questions at each time period to study change, which is characteristic of quantitative longitudinal research, or ask different questions based on newly emergent themes (Hermanowicz 2013). I employed a hybrid approach, asking new questions as reflection on past waves of analysis necessitated, and maintaining some questions throughout the study. An example of a consistent question throughout the study is "who do/did you rely on for advice regarding your postsecondary

decisions?" Whereas an emerging question would be "now that you have begun postsecondary, who do you depend on for help and assistance with your coursework or program"?

The three student typologies (High Achievers, Dreamers, Survivors) all aspired to attend postsecondary and had made plans to apply to various programs. While only a few students achieved their first choice goals for programs and institutions, the remaining students had to settle for alternatives, while one student returned for an extra year of high school, and another was unsure, looking for employment while considering applying in January. This article focuses on providing a full picture of at-risk student decision-making through the use of these three typologies. Elsewhere, I have focused more on particular facets of that decision-making, like the role of social capital and habitus (see Missaghian 2020a and 2020b). Here, I use these typologies to understand more about how two prevalent theories in educational decision-making (RAT and Habitus) might be considered together. I have used "aligned ambition" elsewhere to evaluate student decision-making (see Missaghian 2020a) and I use it here as a potential bridging theory to help reconcile some of the respective strengths and weaknesses of RAT and Habitus.

Findings

The Students at Eastgate can be categorized into three groups (see Table A7 in appendix). The 'High Achievers' postsecondary decision-making was consistently aligned with career aspirations, and they pursued more lucrative postsecondary pathways.[15] These students knew what pathway they wanted to pursue from grade 9, and had close relationships with institutional agents[16], usually teachers. However, they did not depend on them for decision-making advice, instead relying more

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[15] See Frank and Walters (2012) for discussion of economic returns to graduates of various disciplines

[16] Stanton-Salazar (2010) describes the important role that these school personnel play in helping low-income students transition into post-secondary.

on themselves or close family members (see Missaghian 2020a). The 'Dreamers' were the most typical group of students. They had average to above average academic performance and showed some uncertainty about their future pathways. These students changed direction throughout the 15 month duration of this study, and often relied heavily on institutional agents to help them navigate their decisions. The 'Survivors' were the students with average to below average grades, and possessed very little knowledge about the education system and potential labour market outcomes of various programs; they have limited social networks from which to gain information about potential pathways. Institutional agents, if available, were relied on almost exclusively to help guide them, but some of these students also did not benefit from such guidance, as their relationships were sporadic.[17] These students 'drifted' to their destinations, having to alter plans as they went, but seem resigned to whatever path they took, as long as it led to somewhere.

While the students exhibited rational calculation in some of their decisions, this was often confined to thinking about the cost of education. Students outside of the 'High Achievers' group rarely exhibited any strategy with regard to choosing the best 'fit' or program that aligned with their expectations, ability and future career aspirations. The Dreamers and Survivors were more willing to settle for 'any' decision that put them in a position to go to postsecondary. For the Dreamers and Survivors, misalignment in post-secondary decision-making made transitions to PSE more difficult.

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[17] In an earlier study (Missaghian 2020a) found that students were more aligned in decision-making when they had cited consistent and close relationships to institutional agents. However, as the students were interviewed at times B and C, many of those relationship shifted to new ones, or were non-existent.

The 'Dreamers' and 'Survivors' are the two groups that most exhibited a habitus which I have referred to elsewhere as 'survival habitus.'[18]They often chose disciplines in the social sciences or humanities with uncertain career paths, and which lack built in social support that programs like Engineering have for new students. This uncertainty, along with the family and neighbourhood pressures associated with living in a low-income neighbourhood, creates contextual parameters that affect decision-making differently, than say, for middle and upper-class students. Where RAT theories might describe central tendencies in decision-making, the conditions of instability for low-SES students, make them more sensitive to 'satisficing' decisions (see Goldthorpe 1998).[19]

While the Dreamers and Survivors shared similar behavior, they differed with regards to two important characteristics: their academic performance and ties to institutional agents. The Survivors had both poorer self-reported academic performance, but also reported relying less on institutional agents for advice. The Dreamers all ended up in post-secondary, although three of them had to settle for their second choice programs (see Table 2). However, their connections with institutional agents helped them navigate uncertainty, either in choosing alternative degree programs, or being able to draw from former teachers' advice once in university. Their continued connection with teachers from Eastgate, even into their first semester of university provided them with extra social support. However, both these groups contained students with mostly misaligned

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[18] Missaghian (2020b) defines survival habitus as students' expressions of moving forward after original and secondary postsecondary plans failed. Students chose indiscriminate pathways, without much reflection on 'fit'.

[19] Goldthorpe (1998) considers satisficing decisions based on incomplete information rational. Students need to act as best they can, based on limited information. However, this study argues that students were not choosing their second option because they thought it was the best remaining available choice, but were drawing more from their survival habitus.

ambitions, and this I argue is one of the main reasons they had more difficult post-secondary transitions.

Rational Decision-Making

Students at Eastgate exhibited elements of calculation, consistent with RAT, when reflecting on the cost of education and future debt. For Adaeze, a female student of Nigerian decent, debt was something to fear, as she saw many people in the community struggle: "Yeah…sometimes I think about the living cost. I do not want to live that type of lifestyle…some of my friends, they have nothing." Seeing people in the community struggle financially, and make poor decisions, gave students extra pause to think about the risks associated with attending university, especially if they were going to make the extra financial commitment of moving away from home. In addition to community level stressors, students were also aware of broader economic constraints, like provincial policies on student loans. At the time of second interviews, the province of Ontario was close to passing legislation, which eliminated a number of grants, reducing the amount of OSAP students were eligible to receive, as well as removing the 6-month interest free grace period. The provincial changes lessened students' risk threshold, as the financial stakes were even higher. Farzeen was an above average student, but struggled with math and science and was hesitant to attend university without being sure:

> …but it freaks me out, especially with the fact that what's happening with Doug Ford, all the programs and all the ideas he has, it's making me more nervous about it. 'Cause right away after school I have to pay back the money. What's gonna happen if I change my plan? That's twice as much money. The financial problems makes me more nervous.

Farzeen had changed her plans from taking a year off to accepting an offer to attend a social work program at university. She was always concerned about making the 'right' choice because of the

financial implications. Other students like Sandra, were worried about their program choice. In Sandra's case, she struggled with her initial desire to go into teaching because of current labour disputes surrounding teachers. Cuts to the number of teachers in the province concerned Sandra and her mother, who advised her that "she thinks they always go on strikes and stuff so after that I decided to change because I want to finish school and then go into a job where I know there's jobs." She switched her potential career to medicine, but after later realizing that she could not be admitted into Science programs, she switched back to teaching.

Students at Eastgate assessed the potential financial risks of attending postsecondary, but did not demonstrate the type of 'calculation' that is characteristic of RAT theories in sociology. They never considered to what extent their postsecondary choices would produce upward social mobility; this is almost guaranteed for these students, as their parents had both little education and modest earnings. As Taifa explained:

> my parents, they fled my country because of civil war. They never really got the opportunity to go to school and have education. So, I feel like I'm ... I don't know how to say it. They're depending on me to go to university, do something for yourself, because I couldn't do something for myself. So, I feel like I have to go to university.

RAT theory is often criticized for not considering the cultural effects of social class on decision-making (Boudon 1998). Many studies that examine student decision-making do not consider students from low-income communities. Students at Eastgate all valued education, some having the most ambitious goals of doctor, lawyer and nurse. However, several students did not achieve their first, and in some cases, second choice for postsecondary. But this did not stop them from pursuing university, despite some students having average to below average grades and financial obstacles.

Students were aware of the financial risks associated with PSE, yet they were comfortable making last-minute decisions. One student, Sharon, chose to go to University days before the application deadlines, because of advice she received from a teacher with whom she was close. While she ended up pursuing an Arts degree at a local university, she could have received the same degree at a local college that offered degree programs. While the costs associated with the degrees are similar, the class sizes are much smaller at the college and they have a work placement program, a practical element that was very important to her. For students like Sharon, Amina and Taifa, the institutional prestige gleaned from teachers and other close ties factored into their decisions. The influence of habitus was present for all the students in this study. However, for those outside the High Achiever group, with less decision-making alignment, institutional habitus figured more prominently in their decision-making, and complicated their narrative.

Habitus and Decision-Making

Students from Eastgate live in a lower SES neighbourhood, with a large population of immigrants, many of whom have recently arrived in Canada. All of the students I interviewed were either born outside of Canada or have parents who are first generation immigrants. The overall lack of parental experience with the Canadian higher education system meant they generally provided moral support, but not practical advice to help guide their children. All of these factors helped contribute to the formation of a student habitus that challenges some RAT assumptions about decision-making. Making decisions based on a desire for upward social mobility was mostly absent. All the students I interviewed, saw attending post-secondary as a privilege, and a step above any education their parents attained. These students' decisions were more driven by their habitus, rather than calculations about social mobility. Their habitus included 'cultural schemas' (see Edgerton and Roberts 2014) that saw education as a way to honour their parents immigrant experiences of

moving to a new country and struggling financially to provide them with PSE opportunities. They saw PSE as a ticket to 'somewhere' better, even though these decisions were not always aligned, or well thought out.

Students at Eastgate saw University as an opportunity to validate their parents' struggles. Despite the fact that students like Taifa were uncertain about their PSE choices and future careers, others, like Amina, considered the opportunity to attend University an honour:

> It felt amazing that I got in because everybody I knew was always talking about how hard the school was getting in. My sister, every time, she goes, "Everybody who wanted U of T could not get into U of T."

Students were also willing to forgo alignment in their decision-making to have the opportunities their parents and community members do not. In this way, the cultural 'pull' of postsecondary overshadowed the calculations they made regarding cost. While some students' parents held high career expectations for them, like Doctor or Lawyer, when they eventually failed to get into their first choice university programs, parents were still happy. Their children were in positions to receive degrees, something the majority of them did not achieve. All of the students at Eastgate had parents who immigrated from other countries, and had not attended postsecondary in Canada. Thus, as Sharon describes, the expectations were simple:

> Both of my parents came here when they were in their teens from Jamaica. They always say education is the key, so from a young age it was built to, like, "Sharon, just do your school work, get a job, and you can be set for your life."

Students at Eastgate had a strong connection to their parents' immigrant habitus and felt they had to make good on their sacrifices. Part of that commitment involved attending postsecondary. While the various types of students had different aspirations, and capacities to achieve their goals, they

all shared sentiments about honouring their parents' sacrifices. Kyle's parents were immigrants from Jamaica, who tried to instill a good work ethic:

> I feel like my parents put a hefty investment into me, and my dad, when he came to Canada, he realized that his skills weren't as in high demand… So everyday when he sees me doing my homework he tells me: "You better be paying attention in class, you better be, you better not be goofing off." Stuff like that.

Kyle was an extremely driven student who knew for several years that he wanted to pursue Engineering. He was successful in gaining acceptance to one of the Engineering programs of his choice with a scholarship. His above quoted statement, taken at Time A, was consistent with other comments in subsequent interviews where he shared the sacrifices his parents made to make his attending post-secondary possible. Yet, it never seemed that he chose Engineering because it would produce some kind of long-term economic benefit. Kyle's father also encouraged him to choose 'some field' and to 'aim high', but he seemed to have chosen Engineering on his own through watching YouTube videos about building huge structures, which is a personal interest of his.

Similar to Kyle, another High Achiever, Christina, a second generation immigrant of south Asian descent, felt that attending postsecondary would validate her father's hard work: "I see the struggles he goes through. Cause for his job he wakes up, I would say, maybe 4 in the morning and he'll be back maybe 5 in the afternoon." Christina eventually chose a Commerce program, stating that she enjoyed "math" and "money". Christina was a unique case from all the other students, because her father owned his own trucking business and they lived in a detached home, unlike many students who lived in smaller spaces. There was also evidence that Christina wanted to surpass her father financially: "Yeah, I guess it's both, cause let's say he does make a good

amount for supporting us, but then when you want certain things too. You want your luxuries in life in the future." However, for students like Sharon, whose parents emigrated from Jamaica, education was a vehicle to fulfill the expectations her parents had for her when leaving their home country: .."Because when my mom came here she was by herself. She had an education in Jamaica but it wasn't the same….She's always like, "Sharon, I want you guys to have the opportunities and everything that I didn't have."

Parents at Eastgate could not help their children by giving advice about what kind of job to pursue, or how to get there. The students I interviewed all cited receiving moral support, rather than strategic advice from their parents. And unlike Christina whose father owned a business, the other parents at Eastgate, including Sharon's parents, were either unemployed or working in low paying jobs. For these students, attending college or university was never about surpassing their parents. Instead, post-secondary became culturally important, consistent with patterns demonstrative of an immigrant habitus that saw post-secondary as a ticket to a better future, even if that future was less than clear. While this habitus contributed to high ambitions, it often led to poor alignment and uncertainty about the future. For example, Taifa, a student in the Dreamer group, described her parent's struggles to flee their country from a civil war and added that she feels like "they're depending on me to go to university, and do something for yourself." Like Sharon, mentioned earlier, both students were unsure of their postsecondary paths, and depended heavily on institutional agents at their school for advice. Sharon, at the last minute, changed direction from college to university based on the advice of one of her teacher mentors. What all these students shared in common, was a habitus orientation to post-secondary that had less to do with upward social mobility, and more with a cultural commitment to succeed where their parents

could not. And this history of struggle on the part of their parents empowered them to push forward and persevere.

Not every student interviewed was successful at attaining their stated goals, or pushing forward. One student, Nassar, despite having seen his parents struggle, couldn't motivate himself to commit to an educational pathway. After having strong ambitions to pursue a criminology degree, he slowly ended up at wave 3 uncertain whether he would pursue post-secondary at all. He only thought about applying to one community college. When probed about why he did not look at multiple possibilities for postsecondary, like colleges that he could be accepted in he said: "You know, I just think like they're close. I'm a lazy type of guy, too. Right? I'm just choosing the closest one. I could go to Urban University, but my grades for that aren't very high for that." However, from a financial point of view, Nassar felt that hanging on to a job was also a viable option, as many of his friends in the community never end up going to postsecondary: "Yeah. So the people I hang out with now, like, they're in my neighborhood. They don't go to school. Right? After high school, they just started working.". Like Christina, Nassar wanted to earn a lot of money, but unlike Christina, he didn't possess the grades, nor did he have the same direction. He was not making strategic decisions for upward mobility as is described in RRA, rather Dreaming about large salaries, content with working in the short-term. For the Dreamers and Survivors they possessed a more conflicted habitus; postsecondary seemed desirable, but the lack of alignment in their decision-making made them more prone to indecisiveness. Acting strategically for the purposes of social mobility, was for Survivors like Kendra and Nassar, who had very little economically, less of an influence on decision-making than their cultural perceptions about success.

Table 2. Student Expectations and Outcomes

		Expectation Time A	Time C- Enrolment	Changed Plans
High Achievers	Farzeen	Year Off	BSW	Yes
	Kyle	BSc.	BSc.	No
	Robert	BSc.	BSc.	No
	Christine	BCom.	BCom.	No
Dreamers	Adaeze	BSc.	BA	Yes
	Sandra	BSc.	BA	Yes
	Taifa	BSc.	BA	Yes
	Amina	BA	BA	No
	Sharon	College BA	Univ BA	Yes
	Samantha	BCom	BCom	No
Survivors	Kendra	College Diploma	Extra Year	Yes
	Nassar	BA	Undecided	Yes
	Fatima	Undecided	BA	Yes
	Hani	BFA	BFA	No
	DeMarcus	College Diploma	College Diploma	No

Bridging RAT and Habitus: The role of Aligned Ambition

So far the qualitative data discussed has focused on showing the role that both economic calculation, and the influence of cultural frames of reference have on decision-making. However, what both RAT and Habitus lack is a framework from which to assess the *quality* of a decision, as well as a consideration of the *role social ties* play in shaping decision-making. Aligned ambition provides a conceptual tool for assessing decision-making; however, what a lot of the research that has used this framework has failed to do is explore how students follow through with the goals and directions they set for themselves. The following section will look at the role of alignment in the decision-making of all three groups, and its influence on their experiences transitioning to postsecondary. I argue that transitions were more difficult for those with less alignment. Alignment seems to be a function of a number of factors, of which academic achievement figures prominently. But, unlike RAT and Habitus, aligned ambition helps us also think about the role of social ties, particularly that of institutional agents, in helping provide critical information to students. I will

show examples that illustrate the influence that institutional agents play in both assisting and compromising decision-making alignment.

Of the three groups, the High Achievers had the easiest time transitioning to post-secondary. They all formed their post-secondary aspirations before grade 12, and possessed a deeper understanding of their programs of choice, thus leading to greater expectational alignment (Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Morgan et al. 2012). They knew what kind of jobs they were interested in and where they might work after graduation. For example, during our first interview, Robert, now a first-year Engineering student described his interest in Computer Engineering:

"Yeah. I guess it kind of stems from my own interests. I'm a big fan of building your own computer and whatnot, so I guess you'd call it a dream job, it would be working for a big CPU company like AMD or Intel, something like that."

When sharing his experiences with his first-semester in Engineering, Robert discussed the "heavier" workload in comparison to high school and the overall competitiveness of engineering students. However, when summarizing the sum of his experiences he seemed optimistic about things overall:

I guess I'm enjoying it. It's been a fun ride I guess. I definitely wish there was classes I didn't have to take that's not really relevant to my interests. Things like physics and chemistry and stuff. But I guess it's been fun.

Even though the transition to university is a potential challenge for all students, this group of students shared strategies that they had to deal with pressure. For example Farzeen, shared her strategy for dealing with a lot of tasks:

"Take one step out at a time. If there's a lot of assignments in one day, just finished the one that's due first, and then take your time and get started with the next. Don't let the assignment just stress you out."

The High Achievers grades were all in the 80's and 90's and they had chosen applied, competitive programs like Engineering, Business, and Social Work, which have well defined occupational pathways. Once in university, they exhibited resiliency and an ability to deal with pressure that stood apart from the rest of their cohort. Farzeen, a first-generation university student from Afghanistan, had both work and family commitments, which did not leave her much free time. But she had discovered early on in her school career how to manage her time and stay organized:

> To be honest, I have a time table, because as soon as I get an assignment I start working on it. And as far as my part-time job, that's another thing that's very easy because I'm used to it. I'm used to making plans, always having activities from high school. So that has prepared me with ... therefore it doesn't cause me any problem.

All of the High Achievers had to adjust to the different landscape of post-secondary, but were in competitive programs with limited enrolments, which provided for structured opportunities and direct mentorship. For example, Christine's commerce program had mandatory development courses, which she describes as providing opportunities to work closely with faculty in small settings:

> … we literally had to meet face to face, in person two times so far. And then, they made us stay. Saturday, they had a workshop the entire day; basically, we had to participate in that, or else we wouldn't pass the course. So, that's one participation mark…And then we have a quiz, we have certain things we have to do.

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These students are good examples of how decision-making alignment and access to social capital can facilitate easier transitions to post-secondary. Their success can be attributed to a combination of aligned decision-making, as well as accessing available supports both in high school and in their respective university programs. Even though they shared some of the typical struggles that first-year universities often experience, like a dip in their grades, they still felt good about their overall performance. Christine received some grades that were far lower than the 90's she was used to receiving but she still felt comfortable enough to tackle it on her own, without asking for help from advisors:

> So, there's that mentor program they have. So, for our program, because each program usually has a certain building, too; so they do group the School of Business. There's academic advisors I can go talk to, which I haven't gone to yet because I haven't really needed to talk to them.

The Dreamers are a highly ambitious group of female students, who exhibited some educational alignment, but also mixed with uncertainty and a lack of knowledge about the labour market. Two of the four students in this group, Taifa and Amina, chose to study English in university- a program with poorer labour market outcomes when compared to applied and STEM fields. Both students had received good grades in high school English and formed a close relationship with their grade 12 teacher. However, they did not seem entirely sure about labour market outcomes for English graduates, rather citing interest as the primary motivation. As Amina explained:

> My parents, when they said, "English, for real? Where's that going to take you? You should do something like business or something." I'm like, "This is not my jam. No thank you." I just stuck to what I wanted to do.

Curiously, neither Amina or Taifa wrote for fun, nor did they take the creative writing course offered by Eastgate, despite articulating an interest in being 'writers' as a career choice. They decided to pursue this pathway despite the uncertainty and the heightened financial risks. Taifa, a black female of Somali descent, thought about both a Nursing career and one as a writer, two very distinct pathways. When I interviewed her at Time One, she described wanting to help people, but also aspired towards a career as a professional writer who writes books. When I asked her if she currently writes anything, she replied "For fun? Not so much. I read books". Taifa seemed to be struggling with her post-secondary transition. She eventually did pursue English in a big city university, about an hour outside of the area surrounding her home and Eastgate. When I asked her why she wasn't "feeling" her program she discussed being surprised by the workload:

> I don't know. It's probably because it's so much writing. It's a lot of writing and a lot of assignments that I do. It's kind of overwhelming, because it's like you're doing everything on your own pace, and it's not like high school where you have teachers that are forcing the work down your throat, that are like, you have this due tomorrow, this due ... Everything, you're doing it on your own. It's a lot of writing.

Despite moments of clarity, both girls also exhibited uncertainty with regards to their career aspirations. For example, when asked what type of future job university might prepare her for, Amina was unable to articulate any specific career pathway beyond getting "a job": "Hopefully a job. A job that I'll be interested in and a job that I want. Nowadays, you sometimes have to go higher and get a Master's or a PhD, because that's what people want nowadays".

Amina seemed unaware of the array of jobs that provide good economic returns, and do not require a university degree, and definitely not a Master's or PhD (Rosenbaum, Ahearn and Rosenbaum 2016). Similarly, Taifa also overestimated how much education might be necessary

for a career as a journalist, which is actually a realistic option for an English BA. Taifa admitted that her knowledge of her preferred career pathway was limited, explaining, "I have no clue…..I could even go for a Master's if I want and do Journalism. At this point, I'm just open minded to anything regarding English." Several times throughout their three interviews both girls cited wanting to 'help people' as a prerequisite for any career they might want to pursue. Certainly, wanting to help people does not require a university degree, although Amina shared that getting a degree was her only option. As she explained, "Not to sound cocky or anything, but there's no other choice. What am I supposed to do if I don't get in"?

The Dreamers adjusted their post-secondary aspirations because they did not get in to their first choice programs (Taifa, Adaeze, Sandra) or because of advice they received from institutional agents (Sharon). These students were not 'cooled off' by their guidance counselors and teachers, but were rather encouraged to aim higher and pursue University pathways over college[20] (see Missaghian 2020b). Several of them reported having some difficulty adjusting to the ebbs and flows of university life. Some students experienced feelings of 'alienation,' which have become characteristic of working class student PSE transitions (see Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2019; Finnegan and Merrill 2017; Lehmann 2007). For example, Samantha shared some of her perceptions about her professor who she felt was a bit harsh in their tone with students: "He was like, "This is not how you're supposed to answer the question." He said that the exams were awful…I don't really like Urban University." When I asked her if she wanted to transfer, she was

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[20] In a previous paper based on interviews with students at Eastgate, Missaghian (2020b) found that several students who wished to attend diploma or degree programs at community colleges were encouraged by institutional agents to apply to University. These students all listened to the advice given to them and changed their plans accordingly.

not sure, and had not really planned to talk to anyone about it, despite expressing disappointment with her choice of institution.

In addition to thinking about transferring, the Dreamers generally remained uncertain with their choices, and students who ended up pursuing their backup could not help but feel nostalgic about what could have been. Adaeze, a female student of Nigerian descent, like several of the females in this study, wanted to be a nurse[21], but had to redirect her plans because she lacked certain science prerequisites. She was a good student in her non-STEM classes, so was encouraged by her English teacher to pursue an education degree. When asked whether she was happy with her postsecondary choices she had this to say:

> Me? I'm happy with it because I was having second doubts, second thoughts, about it. And then every time somebody would ask me what I'm enrolled in, what I'm doing, then I would be, "Oh actually what I'm doing is really good." …So yeah... I know, because I still think about nursing in the back of my head. But then becoming a professor is also a great career, I guess, too.

The Dreamers had very high career aspirations but lacked decision-making alignment that was characteristic of the High Achievers. Rational choice decision-making was observed with The Dreamers, as they understood the benefits of aspiring to professional careers in Nursing, a popular program with the female students at Eastgate. But, often these aspirations were part of poorly articulated plans that missed key information about the labour market and the postsecondary system. This group, as a consequence of not getting informed advice from their parents, tended to

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[21] The Nursing programs in Ontario are extremely competitive, and require grade 12 math and science classes. 3 of the 30 students that formed the original sample for this study reported wanting to become nurses. None ended up getting accepted. Only one student ended up applying, while the others recognized that they lacked prerequisites and applied to alternative programs.

rely more on school agents for guidance about next steps. Sandra was a student who had changed direction in her final year, abandoning her dream of medical school to become a teacher. She was eventually quite pleased with her decision, as teaching is a coveted profession in Ontario. Her resignation to accepting teaching as a second choice was interesting, considering she had average grades, and actually seemed more excited about a potential teaching career over medicine. Sandra reported receiving a very low grade for her first-year natural science course, an odd choice for an elective given her struggles with science. She did not have much experience with multiple choice exams, and reached out to her old English teacher for advice:

> We talked about it because I didn't get the exam back yet, but we talked about it and she's like, "Just work harder and go to study groups and keep on asking for help if you don't understand something."

Previous research has found that low-achieving, low-income, and ethnic minority students may not be getting cooled off, but rather 'warmed up' and encouraged to pursue PSE (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, and Stephan 2011). Such students may be lacking the necessary academic preparation and alignment to succeed in University. Other research has argued for the potential economic rewards available to students who choose college diploma and certificate programs instead of opting for university, where they may not finish in 4 years (see Rosenbaum et al 2015). Sandra, like several of the other girls in the Dreamer group expressed an interest in helping people. For her, a student with overall average grades, she could have fulfilled her aspiration to help people by enrolling in various social service college programs. However, through her close relationship to her English teacher, who "looked over" and "helped me write" her essay for teachers college, she was able to gain entry. Her ambition, coupled with her teacher's belief in her are admirable;

however, other options were available to Sandra, like many students at Eastgate that opted for university over college.

The Survivors were just as ambitious as the other groups of students, but there was noticeable decision-making misalignment, resulting from a mismatch between their grades, ability, knowledge of the PSE system, and their career expectations. Some had received good advice from institutional agents but their relationships lacked consistency.[22] One student Nassar, received no advice, because he did not ask for any.[23] They all had noticeable family-level challenges, stemming from either being children in large families[24] with little guidance from their parents, or financial constraints, which put pressure on them to work. Kendra, a recent immigrant from Jamaica, also faced the added the challenge of acclimatizing to a new country, and learning how to adjust to a new educational context.

These students had the hardest time transitioning out of high school, with 2 of the 4 students returning for an extra year. It was unclear at the time of their last interview if they would even apply to postsecondary. These students demonstrated very little calculation in their decision-making; rather made decisions haphazardly (see Missaghian 2020a; 2020b), and dealt with the consequences as they emerged. One student, Fatima, chose her university program on the deadline date, after being inspired that day by the words "human rights" in one of the program descriptions. During her last interview, I learned she had changed her mind regarding her career aspirations, shifting from law towards politics. When asked about how she might enter a career in politics she

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[22] This refers to students having reported meeting with a guidance counselor or other school agent for advice at Time 1. However, later at Time's 2 and 3, they lost contact with that agent, or reported receiving advice from a different agent, or no one at all.

[23] Recent sociological studies have shown lower-SES students noticeable lack of 'help-seeking' behaviours, preferring instead to solve problems on their own (see Calarco 2011; 2014 and Jack 2016)

[24] Nassar (7), Demarcus (1), Kendra and Fatima (5) siblings.

answered: "Maybe work with the MPP as an assistant or something. So once I get that, be in front of a mentor or something that can guide me and then just do my career from there." I also asked her if she had ever volunteered or had any experience with local politicians to which she answered "no." This was also the case with high-school extracurricular activities, which she did not participate in, stating that "I always tell myself, okay, I want to do it, I'm going to do it. But then I end up never doing it." Fatimah shared mixed experiences with her early transition, stating that she felt "more comfortable than she thought she would", but also expressed reservations about her choice of Urban University, and lamented that she had not instead chosen Forest College: "If I could actually do it again, I would have went to Forest….I thought college would be too easy for people …. Forest is more one on one and I learned better with my hands, instead of someone just standing in front of the class and talking all day." While her interview suggested things were going fine, comments like this indicated a real tension and regret with her decision. Fatima had chosen university even though she was strongly considering college. Previous research examining this cohort of students found many students at Eastgate opted for university when they had desired to attend college (see Missaghian 2020b). Fatima felt that there were too many readings in university and that she might have benefited from smaller class sizes at a local college:

> I did a test yesterday. I kind of think I did bad…if I could have done it again, I would have went to Forest College (Pseudonym)… Honestly with Forest the classes are a little smaller…and you can get more one on one, like higher training. I haven't been able to adjust to the amount of readings (Fatima).

Unfortunately, Fatima did not capitalize on the expertise of her guidance department. She showed promise as a student, but did not do the adequate planning necessary to make an informed choice, which she was forced to do on her own.

DeMarcus, on the other hand, had the benefit of participating in an after-school athletic program for the school's basketball team. While he had inflated aspirations of playing in the NBA, he still received some practical advice from the school's student success advisor. When I first interviewed DeMarcus at time A, he wanted to be a Kindergarten teacher, which was misaligned with his educational expectation of a college diploma. When I probed him about this during our second interview, he informed me that he had further discussed this with the student success advisor, and now understood the problem. For him, working with kids was the ultimate goal, and he understood that he could do that with a Child and Youth Worker diploma.[25] Even when he began college, he had the benefit of direct adult intervention through his coaches, and assigned community members that helped him with his transition to a new town.

Like Fatima, Nassar also had lofty aspirations when I first interviewed him. He had stated he was interested in a potential career in policing, but then gradually shifted towards wanting to be an independent entrepreneur. He seemed interested in a career in policing during our first interview, but did not seem to have a lot of knowledge about the profession: "Um I just like the whole idea of like, policing. The fact that they, you know, enforce the law and like, you know, they carry, you know, weapons too, that part's cool." When probed about policing he shared that he became interested in this career through watching television. Nassar exhibited a lack of knowledge about the labour market and the PSE system that is characteristic of youth who lack decision-making alignment (Schneider and Stevenson 1999). This was further reinforced in his final interview when he suggested that one hundred thousand dollars a year was not enough money to raise a family:

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[25] In Ontario, teachers need to receive a university degree before being accepted into Teacher's College.

Like I don't really want a simple job. Like the way I think about it, most of these jobs if you work like probably Monday to Friday, whatnot, then yearly I'll probably make $100K, probably roughly around there, like $100-thousand, and that's kind of like you think about $100-thousand, it isn't that much.

Nassar exhibited a desire to be successful, but demonstrated a lack of awareness about how difficult it is to make a lot of money in Ontario. Should he achieve a 100 thousand dollar salary, it would place him amongst the top 10% of earners in the country (NHS 2011). At the time of his last interview, he was still uncertain whether he would pursue PSE, and had yet to consult with a guidance counselor, or any adult for advice. Like many of the other students at Eastgate who were interviewed, Nassar had very little intervention in his schooling from his parents. When I interviewed him at time three, his mother was out of the country, and he had yet to meet with any school personnel or adult with post-secondary experience.

Kendra and Nassar were both unable to go directly to postsecondary after grade 12. However, unlike Nassar, Kendra sought the help of the school guidance counselor to help her understand more about her options and potential careers linked with her programs. Kendra started out wanting to be a health inspector, and had lots of contact with the guidance counselor, who she reported advised her that University would be a good option. But she experienced some difficulties managing school and work at Time B, and her grades dipped. She seemed to have very little knowledge about the differences between college and university programs, but this changed at Time C, where she seemed more knowledgeable about the differences. She had also reported talking to the student success teacher, because her grades had dropped in Chemistry class and she then later discussed these things with Guidance:

Well, so I went talking to Barbara (pseudonym); she's responsible for, if anyone is failing. And then she gave me some good advice. And then I went to talk to guidance, and she was telling me, "No," because I was struggling with chemistry, and for me to do the program I want to at university, I had to do a grade 12 Chemistry, grade 12 Bio, and grade 12 English. So I talked to her and she said she saw program, the same program that Ryerson is offering is the same one in Forest College.

Previous research with the students at Eastgate found that immigrants like Kendra benefitted from meeting with institutional agents, helping to align their initial postsecondary plans (Missaghian 2020a). However, a subsequent study showed that student choices altered with new advice from institutional agents, or when they failed to continue meeting with regularity (Missaghian 2020b). These findings show the importance of studying decision-making over time, using a longitudinal framework. The findings while seemingly contradictory, actually demonstrate the importance of consistent and enduring ties in the lives of at-risk youth. While students can be aided at a given point to choose a program that makes sense, the process of alignment is a lengthy one, which involves thinking about, consulting with others and following through with plans. Kendra, for example, went from planning for college, to university, then back to planning for college, and the advice she received from several different adults was sporadic and lacked consistency. But this was because the frequency and timing of her visits were infrequent and sporadic. However, her third and final interview suggested that she had met several times with the school guidance counselor, discussed options, investigated them, and had time to absorb all the information. The Survivors showed more haphazard, misaligned or 'irrational' decision-making as they did not have the class-based parental support to plan ahead and make calculated decisions with a view to the future. However, when they received necessary and timely support from adults with a post-

secondary education, like in Demarcus and Kendra's case, they were able to move forward with a plan.

Discussion

More than half (8/15) of the students interviewed for this article changed their plans during the 15 month period under investigation (see Table 2). Only High Achievers were consistent throughout their decision-making process. This consistency was attributable to early aspiration formation, high academic achievement, and close relationships with teachers. In addition, these students entered programs with built in social supports that helped make the transition to postsecondary smoother. The other two groups of students had more challenges adjusting to life after high school. This was attributable to a lack of decision-making alignment, and inconsistency in the relationships they formed with institutional agents. A student may have consulted an institutional agent at time A, but then not have followed up with repeated visits. Many of these students were academically average, so the intensity of the PSE workload, and the lack of structure in higher education was problematic for them.

When students were uncertain about their educational and career aspirations, they depended on their habitus to guide them. They made decisions based on emotional and cultural sentiments about the importance of post-secondary and honoring parental sacrifices. Thus, for students with average grades, they were satisfied with getting into general arts programs that had lower average admission requirements. This seemed to satisfy their need to please their parents, who did not have such opportunities. However, some of these students seemed to default to university, without adequate information about their career goals, or a personal understanding of what they hoped to achieve. This is similar to Goldthorpe's (2007) 'subjective rationality', which describes a mode of subjectivity which involves following courses of action based on incomplete

information. However, Goldthorpe's theory falls short of accounting for the role of institutional agents- social capital ties that shape the circumstances by which students receive information, and often the cultural frames through which that information is transferred (see Stanton-Salazar 2010). When decision-making scholars use either RAT or Habitus as their theoretical frameworks, they attempt to reconcile the debates between structure versus agency, 'were they pushed or were they pulled' (see Gambetta 1987). Recent research has attempted to combine the two perspectives and demonstrate how each can contribute to a fuller understanding of educational decision-making. However, much of this research lacks a longitudinal framework, and does not focus on low-income students.

Trying to reconcile the source of decision-making, whether it comes from individual calculation, or from the societal, neighbourhood or school pressures students face, has consumed sociologists since the early days of the discipline. Even more complicated is the notion of 'rationality' versus 'irrationality', and the psycho-social implications of understanding what constitutes 'sound-minded' judgement, versus so called 'irrational' thinking. This article has attempted to grapple with some of these difficult tasks, by understanding how a group of at-risk youth make decisions over time.

This article finds that educational decisions can be both rational and calculated, but like any behaviour, also contingent on social context and socialization practices. The group of students I examined, are low SES, first and/or second generation immigrants, and live in a low-income and distressed neighbourhood. These circumstances help shape the way they make decisions, so that upward mobility and assessing risks are not at the forefront of their individual mindsets, worldview, or habitus. While some of these students are quite typical, the majority of them struggled with finding their pathways, had inconsistent advice and relationships with school

personnel, and were willing to settle on pathways that were not always in alignment with their goals. Their habitus orientations seemed to trump any rational calculation, albeit still present in considerations of cost and various labour market risks.

This article argues that a well-known and often cited theoretical concept, that of decision-making alignment (see Schneider and Stevenson 1999) can be a useful mediator between Habitus and RAT. Habitus is more effective than RAT for understanding the influence of class-based behaviours on decision-making, as well as how they might conflict with institutional norms in a given context. RAT on the other hand, can more accurately model decision-making according to measurable criteria like RRA (Relative Risk Aversion). Alignment theory, when considered as a whole, points to aspects of both RAT and Habitus; what it adds is a recognition of the role social ties play in decision-making. It does so through a recognition of the importance of ties with parents and school personnel in shaping educational decision-making behaviours. By considering the interplay of Habitus and RAT in longitudinal studies, we can discern the social processes that contribute to decision-making in the long-term.

Students from low-income neighbourhoods are also vulnerable to certain ecological stressors, like living in high-crime, congested urban spaces, in cramped living conditions with large families, and who may have to work because parents are under or unemployed. Such stressors will create different environments through which to make decisions, and those students who lack support, and may struggle academically, may find the postsecondary decision-making process overwhelming. The long-term planning and vision for future opportunities and strategic decision-making that is often attributed to students from middle class backgrounds is unavailable to such students. Even working-class students may enjoy a stability that low-income students, whose parents may be unemployed do not. Thus, even when a high achieving low-income student is faced

with making post-secondary decisions, they may be more prone to errors in judgement that their higher SES counterpart is shielded from.

The low-income students at Eastgate experienced various external environmental stressors during their post-secondary decision-making process. Some of these had to do with provincial policies, like the decrease in student loan payments that prompted many students to think rationally about the risks and rewards of pursuing a post-secondary education. However, these calculations did not serve to 'cool' students off, even those with average to below average academic performance. Student habitus was inclined towards moving forward, and choosing any pathway, even when their original plans for programs failed. The relationship between Rational Action Theory and Habitus has been explored recently in the sociological literature on educational decision-making (Glaesser and Cooper 2014), some arguing that the efficacy of Bourdieuian concepts can be enhanced by combining them with other theoretical models (Morrison 2017). These articles have found that rational decision-making was present at the micro-level, even with students of working-class background; however, such behavior was grounded in a 'subjective' rationality (see Goldthorpe 2007) which is compatible with Bourdieu's habitus theory, which also considers the influence of 'fields' of experience on class-based dispositions.

Students at Eastgate had parents who worked in either blue collar jobs, as labourers, or in precarious positions in the food service industry. Only two students fell outside the working class/poor category, with parents employed in professional or managerial roles. As such, these parents could not provide 'insider' knowledge to help guide their children's postsecondary decision-making. This affected student decision-making over the 15 month period under investigation, as students relied on a variety of inconsistent advice from institutional agents- some students, relying on nothing but their own judgement. The incomplete nature of their available

information, led students to make decisions, that some have called "satisficing" (see Goldthorpe 2007), while others, using habitus as a theoretical orientation have called "survival habitus" (Missaghian 2020b). Thus, a key question emerging from this research for decision-making scholars becomes: what are the mechanisms and processes in decision-making that can lead to 'incompleteness'?

While this paper offers a very rare longitudinal look at such processes at the micro-level, it has a few notable limitations. In several instances, students highlighted various macro-level factors, such as provincial policy on student loans, that influence student decision-making. However, limiting my study to a group of student at a single-school limits the generalizability of such findings. Future research could compare students like those at Eastgate, with different communities of varying socio-economic affluence to understand the influence of macro policies on decision-making across different communities. Furthermore, while the focus of this study was on the decision-making and experiences of students, parental perspectives would have provided an added layer of insight. Given our claim that aligned ambition can help reconcile between RAT and Habitus, interviews with parents, a key agent in Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) framework for helping student alignment is missing from this study. Alignment theories are useful because they account for the role of social ties in helping students form decisions with more information at their disposal. Thus, they can help flesh out the mechanisms that contribute to solving the dilemma of information "incompleteness". Future research could seek to incorporate this useful concept into studies that also look at the role of RAT and Habitus.

Concluding Remarks

The focus of this dissertation has been to uncover the process behind at-risk student decision-making over time, to understand the potential mechanisms for stratification. I have illustrated the complexities inherent in the process, and the many different individual, organizational, and societal components which can influence student choices. My definition of 'at-risk' relies predominantly on an examination of disadvantage (see Croninger and Lee 2001) which centres on traditional measures of social class. I used measures of parental occupation and education (Mood 2017), two widely used social survey measures used to ascertain relative economic position (see Table A1 in appendix). I also considered neighbourhood factors, such as average median income, and adult education levels and compared those figures with student survey responses. Almost all of the students I interviewed for this study, had parents who had not completed any post-secondary studies. The four students who did report having parents who completed PSE, all obtained these credentials outside of North America. While I was not able to obtain parental income figures for my sample, over-estimation of income has been a reported problem in student surveys (see Gonyea 2005). The parental occupation and education levels of the students at Eastgate placed them on a continuum ranging from lower to working-class. Most of the students' parents work in either blue collar jobs, as labourers, or in poorly paid and insecure jobs in the food service industry (for an explanation of class categorization see Thomas and Hickey 2007). Only one student fell outside the working class/poor category, as they have one parent employed in a professional teaching occupation, while the other parent is a technician (see Adaeze Table A1 in appendix).

Students now have so many more PSE options to choose from, but the conventional pressures of university as the apex of attainment remain. The increase in for-profit colleges (see

Pizarro-Milian and Quirke 2017) for example, demonstrates new possibilities for student choice, yet these options, for students at Eastgate, seemed less prestigious and were rarely discussed. This could be because of prevailing perceptions that university is more lucrative for everyone, in comparison to one or two-year college or certificate programs (Rosenbaum 2011). Students now also have to consider the prestige and rankings of various institutions and assess the marketability of their major of choice (Davies and Hammack 2005). Navigating through these options without the proper guidance from schools and parental supports can often lead lower SES students into impractical choices which can increase their chances for dropping out (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lehmann 2007)[26]. Lareau and Cox (2011) argue that lower SES parents' lack of knowledge about the PSE system prevents them from assisting their children. For example, without help from knowledgeable parents, low-SES students may apply to schools that might be academically too difficult for them. In contrast, higher SES parents help their children weigh options, and find an institution that matches both their goals and academic abilities.

It will come as no surprise to the reader that students in this study benefited from exposure to high status social ties, which for them largely consisted of teachers and guidance counselors in their school. The research for the first chapter was conducted to explore these potential benefits for decision-making alignment and fit. What was surprising to discover however, was that students could possess decision-making 'alignment' yet remain uncertain, as their school and program choices were not a good fit when they were probed further. In other

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[26] Lareau and Cox (2011) found that working- class parents lacked institutional knowledge about the inner workings of higher education that could help them identify problems and guide their children down the most suitable pathways. Working-class parents also intervened less in the college application process, deferring to guidance counselors. In comparison, middle-class parents actively sought to learn about which programs and institutions would be the best 'fit' for their children.

words, their choices of university programs matched the required educational requirements of their expected occupation; however, beyond this immediate short-term alignment, students expressed uncertainty, made contradictory statements regarding their interests and values, and seemed to regard postsecondary as a logical and necessary step, without having consistent access to first-hand information. As they lacked parental guidance that was informed by first-hand experience, many students deferred to school agents for advice. However, as subsequent chapters in this dissertation revealed, if these interactions were not consistent and based on a mutual understanding between students and school personnel, students were vulnerable; students often changed course, forgot about advice, or haphazardly made decisions at the last minute.

The second chapter focused less on the amount and quality of ties that students relied on, but instead on how student habitus interacted with that of school personnel. Perhaps surprisingly, we find that several students were influenced to change their course based on advice from teachers and guidance counselors. I found evidence for the potential negative effects of school interventions on behalf of students, as students with clear plans for college at time A had decided to pursue university in time B. This was potentially problematic, as these students had average grades, and had expressed apprehension and fear regarding attending university. These findings while seeming contradictory, actually lend validity to the longitudinal design of this study, and what it demonstrates about decision-making. They show that while ties with institutional agents can yield benefits in the short-term, those relationships need to evolve from mere one-time advice giving, into more reciprocal mentoring relationships, where the students and school personnel get to know each other. I noted in my first chapter, that more work needs to be done on understanding 'pivotal moments' (see Espinoza 2011), where students meet potential mentors and understanding how those relationships evolve. Teachers at Eastgate secondary showed great

concern for students, and their advice came from a place of earnest care and desire to see students succeed. However, many of the students who changed course in Time B had formed their post-secondary and career aspirations in the final year; many of their problems stemmed from last-minute decision-making. I argued in the second paper that students at Eastgate had responsibilities, such as working part-time and helping out at home, which often decreased the time required to reflect on post-secondary choices. For many students, it was a gift to be able to even go to university, so if their first, or even second choices did not work out, students often resigned to choosing 'any' program that was available. I describe this habitus orientation as a 'survival' habitus, typified by a predisposition towards self-reliance, a lack of help-seeking behaviours, and most importantly, a resignation to 'moving forward' in any direction, without careful consideration of available options.

The third paper of this dissertation is the greatest endorsement for the longitudinal qualitative framework. This last chapter benefitted both methodologically and theoretically from the data that was gathered in the previous two time points and the analysis conducted on the interviews. I had the benefit of understanding the students' decision-making in the first two time points, as well as having gone through repetitive rounds of coding. This led to an intimate knowledge of their decision-making patterns, the ties they formed and how those evolved and changed through the first two time periods. This deep knowledge allowed for the creation of student profiles, that were a combination of multiple data points, from early surveys, to school and community data, and most importantly, the student interviews themselves. It also allowed for the testing of popular theoretical assumptions in the educational decision-making literature, which often employ Rational Actor Theory (RAT) and Habitus, usually in opposition to one another. The longitudinal data I gathered, and the timing of data collection allowed me a

privileged perspective on how these theories applied to student experiences at Eastgate. As such, I adopted a unique approach which other education scholars (see Glaesser and Cooper 2014; Maier and Robson 2020) have used, looking for potential affinities between RAT and Habitus. Having explored both Habitus and Alignment Theory throughout my previous chapters, I added the latter to the final analysis which allowed me to understand how both theories were present or absent in the decision-making of students at Eastgate.

In summary, my research of at-risk students in Ontario has yielded several novel contributions to the educational decision-making literature. While previous research has established the important role of institutional agents in the educational outcomes of low-income and at-risk students (Farmer-Hinton 2008; Ferguson 2018; Schwartz et al. 2016), it has not been able to evaluate the types of decisions that students make based on their available ties. My first chapter tackles this gap in the research and provides an interesting look at how alignment and fit can be products of the types of ties students report possessing. My research also illustrates how academic performance, while an important aspect of success for students in my High Achiever groups (see chapter 3) is not the only factor. Cultural dispositions or Habitus can help forge attitudes towards education and decision-making that led students to be accepting of their fate, a facet of what I term 'survival habitus'. Given the challenging circumstances that many students at Eastgate had to contend with, such as high numbers of occupants in their home, lack of both parents in the household (see table A3), as well as part-time work responsibilities, having the time to devote to relationship building and strategic decision-making was arguably lacking. This combined with many students' simple joy in being accepted into post-secondary, led them to accepting offers to university, even when the programs they chose were not a good fit, or were not

their initial choices. Several students were encouraged to aim high by teachers who formed close relationships with them that survived even after graduation and into their early PSE careers.

While there is a large body of research showing that 'cooling out' students is a widespread phenomenon, there have been recent studies that have suggested that many students are being 'warmed up' (Nielsen 2015). In other words, their own cultural aspirations combined with advice from counselors and other institutional agents serve to reinforce their resolve to continue on in post-secondary, even when things might not be going according to plan. There was certainly evidence of this, as demonstrated by my second chapter which focused on the misaligned habitus orientations between students and staff at Eastgate. In my last chapter, I explored rational choice theories in the sociological decision-making literature. I found that there was evidence of rational decision-making for the students at Eastgate, but that this was confined to considerations of cost for their post-secondary educations. When I looked at RAT along with Habitus, I found that the latter theory explained a lot more of the decision-making behaviour of students at Eastgate. Habitus accounted for their cultural backgrounds, which saw them less concerned with financial gain, but more with a desire to move forward and expose themselves to new experiences, which their parents were unable to achieve. I also embedded alignment theory into my analysis of RAT and Habitus, as I argue that an account of decision-making absent of recognizing the role of social capital in information processing is always limited.

Two future research agendas stand out as being necessary continuations of the research I have presented here. Firstly, an examination of the effects of prolonged social ties; comparing the effects of close, consistent and durable institutional ties, versus weak institutional ties, will add to understanding long-term behavioural effects of social capital. Social capital ties figured predominantly throughout my research, as the advice and information that students were exposed

to greatly influenced their decision-making and transitions in various ways. However, much of my research was informed by social capital research that examines the value of 'weak ties' (see Granovetter 1995) or rather, ties outside the immediate social circles of the students at Eastgate that could provide them with access to high-status ties (see Stanton-Salazar 2010). Social capital theorists have been critical of weak ties theory, for its instrumentality and lack of focus on the social context and structures which can lead to restricted personal networks for at-risk students (Portes 1998). Students may have access to such ties, but do they necessarily adopt the behaviours which their ties may endorse or try to convey to them? This dissertation has spoken at length about the importance of aligned decision-making, that is connected with strategic thinking that involves planning and reflecting on personal interests and goals (see Lareau and Cox 2011). This type of strategic thinking or 'behaviour' may also involve exposure to certain organizational structures (see Small 2009) which can cultivate these types of behaviours. Thus, the culture or institutional habitus of a school also figures prominently in how ties are formed and information is reinforced between students and teachers. Future research may want to more closely examine specific programs or extra-curricular activities within schools like Eastgate, over a prolonged period of time to understand their influence long-term.

The second area of future potential research involves combining longitudinal interviews of students, with parents and teachers as well. Due to access issues, I was not able to interview parents of the students, but this would have added an important layer of insight, given the critical role that parents play in both theories of educational alignment and fit. While I was able to understand the role of parents second-hand through student accounts, first-hand accounts from parents would have been an appropriate balance to student interviews. Furthermore, while I interviewed various school personnel at Eastgate, I did not interview them at multiple time points. It is possible that their

viewpoints and perceptions could also have shifted through time as the students' did. Thus, with more resources and other researchers, studies like mine could be conducted more comprehensively and include various other key interview participants.

There are several important policy implications stemming from the findings presented throughout this dissertation. In chapter one, I focused on the role of institutional agents as crucial brokers of college and university-relevant information. I found that many students at Eastgate had formed their post-secondary aspirations in their final year, and while meeting with guidance counselors helped them clarify their choices, there was still so much uncertainty around whether those choices fit with their personal interests and academic background. This suggests that early preparation for developing post-secondary plans is important. Students coming into high school with early thoughts about future educational and career pathways can help steer their conversations with guidance counselors in the right direction. Guidance counselors cannot help students if they do not know what they value and where they want to go. This finding can aid educational policy makers to assess the processes by which students come to form early educational aspirations. A few of the students I interviewed discussed using technologies like *myBlueprint*, which they were exposed to in elementary school. These online portfolio technologies help students store and catalog their thoughts, experiences and upload evidence of learning that can aid them in choosing potential career paths. Technologies like this, as well as other resources that aid in early aspiration formation are clear avenues for policy development.

In addition to forming early aspirations, and looking at tools that can facilitate that process, my research has shed light towards the importance of close and sustained mentorship relations between students and school personnel. In chapter one I suggested that an area of future study would be to delve further into 'how' relationships between students and school personnel

are initially formed. Educational policy makers would be wise in investing in understanding the processes by which students move from 'weak' ties that provide advice, to closer mentoring relationships- those defined by deep trust and which can elicit long-lasting change in decision-making behaviours. School policy makers can invest in understanding the impact of school-based activities or programs that have students and staff working together to improve student educational outcomes. Some of the students I interviewed discussed belonging to "Specialist High Skills Majors" which is an Ontario Ministry of Education funded program to help students work with school staff on creating a plan that can help them transition to college, university and other post-secondary options. While it was beyond the scope of this study to study these programs directly, they certainly provide students with a potential opportunity to work closely with teachers and staff, as well as other students to take courses and develop a plan to apply to programs within their particular speciality area.

     While looking at school sponsored programs that can help students develop post-secondary plans is of vital importance, policy makers can potentially miss the socio-demographic factors that can limit student participation in these programs. My third chapter touched on the economic considerations that students reflect upon when considering their post-secondary path. Many students I interviewed also had economic constraints which necessitated them working part-time in high school, and continuing on into post-secondary. Work obligations, in addition to family obligations can have a dramatic impact on the time and resources students have to devote to post-secondary planning. These constraints of time can have both implications for student decision-making but also influence the types of ways that students end up participating in post-secondary extra-curricular activities. Lack of participation in extra-curricular activities in post-secondary has been linked with the increased hours low income students often devote to working

part-time (Goldrick-Rab 2016). In high school, and in post-secondary this can limit the amount of time that students can devote to engaging with their peers and teachers. High achieving students at Eastgate that were either motivated, or received assistance from teachers, were able to win scholarships that were sponsored by community partners or available at local PSE institutions. Having targeted scholarships and available bursaries for at-risk students can help them focus on academics, and engage with post-secondary life, which is important to developing important sources of social capital and succeeding in school.

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Appendices- Paper 1

Table A1. Parental Education and Occupation

Student Name	Father's Education	Mother's Education	Father's Occupation	Mother's Occupation
Farzeen	Other	High School	Shipping	Stay At Home
Amina	High School	High School	Taxi Driver	Stay At Home
Maryam	Bachelors	High School	Truck Manager	Bus Driver
Hani	Vocational	High School	Truck Driver	Stay At Home
Mike	College	Don't Know	Cannot Work	Factory Worker
Nassar	Don't Know	Don't Know	N/A	N/A
Diana	Don't Know	Don't Know	Labourer	Small Business
Cynthia	Vocational	Vocational	Carpenter	N/A
Hallima	Don't Know	Don't know	Labourer	Food Service
Sharon	High School	High School	Unemployed	Factory Worker
Rose	Don't Know	High School	N/A	Waitress
Karl	N/A	High School	N/A	N/A
Adaeze	Don't Know	Masters	Technician	Elementary Teacher
Ivey	No Contact	Don't Know	Estranged	Unemployed
Kendra	Don't Know	College	Farmer	Packaging
Sandra	Don't Know	Don't Know	Factory Worker	Stay At Home
Taifa	High School	Don't Know	Packaging	Stay At Home
Christine	Don't know	High School	Truck Driver	Stay At Home
Samantha	High School	Don't Know	Don't Know	Unemployed
Ron	High School	High School	Mechanic	Unemployed
Steven	Deceased	High School	Deceased	Security Guard
Fatima	High School	High School	Truck Driver	Food Service
Martyna	Don't Know	Other	Unemployed	Factory Worker
DeMarcus	Don't Know	College	Small Business	Cashier
Kyle	Don't Know	High School	Security Guard	Airport Security
Saadi	Masters	Bachelors	Navy	Factory Worker
Soheil	Don't Know	Don't Know	Car Sales	Sales
Gupal	Deceased	Bachelors	N/A	Nurse
Robert	Other	Other	Driving Instructor	Factory Worker
Steven	College	College	Childcare	Small Business

1.N/A responses for parental occupation were later probed and a majority of them represented a parent/s that were on social assistance.

Table A2. Student Grades, Level of Study

Name	Average Report Card Grades	Level of Study Grade 11 & 12
Farzeen	80 to 90%	University Prep
Amina	70 to 80%	University Prep
Maryam	70 to 80%	University Prep
Hani	70 to 80%	University Prep
Mike	70 to 80%	University Prep
Nassar	70 to 80%	University Prep
Diana	80 to 90%	University Prep
Cynthia	70 to 80%	University Prep
Hallima	60 to 70%	College Prep
Sharon	70 to 80%	University Prep
Rose	80 to 90%	University Prep
Karl	60 to 70%	College Prep
Adaeze	70 to 80%	University Prep
Ivey	70 to 80%	College Prep
Kendra	N/A	University Prep
Sandra	60 to 70% 70 to 80%	University Prep
Taifa	70 to 80%	University Prep
Christine	80 to 90%	University Prep
Samantha	80 to 90%	University Prep
Ron	70 to 80%	College Prep
Steven	Other	College Prep
Fatima	70 to 80%	University Prep
Martyna	70 to 80%	University Prep
Demarcus	70 to 80%	College Prep
Kyle	70 to 80%	University Prep
Saadi	70 to 80%	University Prep
Soheil	60 to 70%	University Prep
Gupal	70 to 80%	University Prep
Robert	80 to 90%	University Prep
Steven	70 to 80%	University Prep

1. Only one student (i.e. Steven) did not have a plan to attend a postsecondary institution
2. N/A- recently arrived in Canada at time of interview
3. Grades are all self-reported

Table A3. Descriptive Statistics

Family Structure

    Living With Parent (s)

Yes	16
No	14

Student Born in Canada

Yes	21
No	9

Ethnic and Racial Background

Black (Caribbean)	10
Black (Africa)	10
South Asian	5
Southeast Asian	4
Central Asian	1

First Generation Postsecondary

Yes	26
No	4

Parents Born in Canada

Neither	30

Educational Aspiration

Graduate/Professional School	6
Four Year University	15
Two-Three-year college	8
Other	1

Occupational Aspiration

High Professional	11
Low Professional	13
Non-professional	1
Mixed/Unsure	5

Mean number of ties	3.85
% of ties with some PSE	62
Know someone in desired job %	33
Uncertain about PSE choice %	73
Chose local college or university %	80
N	30

High professional = Doctor, Engineer   Black (Caribbean)- Jamaica, Grenada
Low professional= Nurse, Police Officer   Black (Africa)- Somalia, Nigeria, Gambia
Mixed= Entrepreneur, IT   South Asian (i.e. Afghanistan, India, Pakistan)
     Southeast Asian (i.e. Cambodia, Vietnam)
     Central/West Asian- Tajikistan

Paper 2

Table A4. Descriptive Statistics[27]

Family Structure

    Parents in Same Household

        Yes   16

        No   14

Student Born in Canada

        Yes   21

        No[28]   9

Ethnic and Racial Background[29]

        Black (Caribbean)   10

        Black (Africa)   10

        South Asian   5

        Southeast Asian   4

        Central Asian   1

First Generation Postsecondary[30]

        Yes   26

        No   4

---

[27] Study started with N=30 Second Wave interviews
   included only 26 students

[28] All students were either born in Canada or had at least
  one parent born outside country

[29] Black (Caribbean)- Jamaica, Grenada
  Black (Africa)- Somalia, Nigeria, Gambia
  South Asian (i.e. Afghanistan, India, Pakistan)
  Southeast Asian (i.e. Cambodia, Vietnam)
  Central/West Asian- Tajikistan

[30] Figures are self-reported- of 4 parents
  2 went to community college, 1 university (in Canada)
  and the 4th parent a degree from Nigeria

Table A5. Eastgate Student Decision-Making Time A and B

	Time A Occupational Aspiration	Time B Occupational Aspiration	Time A Educational Expectation	Time B[31] Educational Decision	Changed[32] Plans
Farzeen	Lawyer	Family Lawyer	Take year off	BSW- Social Work	Yes
Amina	Editor	Editor	BA	BA- English	No
Maryam	Nurse	Physical Therapist	BSc. Nursing	BSc. Kinesiology	Yes
Hani	Lawyer	Undecided	BA- Fine Art	BA-Fine Art	No
Mike	Pharmacist	Pharmacist	BA- Business	BSc. Chemistry	Yes
Nassar	Police Officer	Undecided	BA-Criminology	Undecided	Yes
Diana[33]	Psychologist	?	BSc- Forensics	Extra Year[34]	Yes
Cynthia	Teacher	Teacher	BA- Education	BA-Education	No
Hallima	Social Work	Law	Diploma	Undecided	Yes
Sharon	Border Security	Border Security	BA-Criminal Justice- College[35]	BA- Humanities-University	Yes
Rose	Actuary	Actuary	BSc. Math	BSc. Financial Math	No
Karl	Firefighter	DNP[36]	Diploma	DNP	?
Adaeze	Nurse	Teacher	BSc. Nursing	BA- Education	Yes
Ivey	Social Worker	DNP	Diploma	DNP	?
Kendra	Health Inspector	Health Inspector	College Diploma	BA-Public Health	Yes
Sandra	Doctor	Teacher	BSc.	BA-Social Science	Yes
Taifa	Nurse/Editor	Undecided	BSc.	BA	Yes
Christine	Accountant	Accountant	BCom	BCom	No
Samantha	Accountant	Accountant	BCom`	BCom	No
Ron	Sports Manager	Sports Manager	College Diploma	College Diploma	No
Steven	Soccer Player	Banker	None	Diploma	Yes
Fatima	Social Worker	Lawyer	Undecided	BA	Yes
Martina	Party Planner	Event Management	College Diploma	BA-Social Science	Yes
DeMarcus	Kindergarten Teacher	Educational Assistant	College Diploma	College Diploma	Yes
Kyle	Engineer	Engineer	BSc.	BSc.	No
Saadi	IT	IT	BA	College Diploma	Yes
Soheil	Lawyer	DNP	BA	DNP	?
Gupal	Lawyer/Business	Police	BA	Extra Year	Yes
Robert	Engineer	Engineer	BSc	Bsc	No
Steven	Paramedic	Practical Nurse	College Dip	College Dip	Yes

[31] Unlike Occupational Aspiration and Educational Expectation, this refers to what students are doing in Fall

[32] Could be a change in either Career Aspiration or Educational Expectation/Decision

[33] Diana was unavailable for a second interview. Through email she shared that she would be going to an adult school to take more courses.

[34] Refers to an additional year of high school

[35] Community Colleges in Ontario offer Bachelor Degrees

[36] DNP- Did not participate in second wave interviews

BA-Bachelor of Arts / BSc. – Bachelor of Science

BCom- Bachelor of Commerce/ BSW- Bachelor of Social Work

Table A6. Student Grades, Level of Study

Name	Average Report Card Grades	Level of Study Grade 11 & 12
Farzeen	80 to 90%	University Prep
Amina	70 to 80%	University Prep
Maryam	70 to 80%	University Prep
Hani	70 to 80%	University Prep
Mike	70 to 80%	University Prep
Nassar	70 to 80%	University Prep
Diana	80 to 90%	University Prep
Cynthia	70 to 80%	University Prep
Hallima	60 to 70%	College Prep
Sharon	70 to 80%	University Prep
Rose	80 to 90%	University Prep
Karl	60 to 70%	College Prep
Adaeze	70 to 80%	University Prep
Ivey	70 to 80%	College Prep
Kendra	N/A	University Prep
Sandra	60 to 70% 70 to 80%	University Prep
Taifa	70 to 80%	University Prep
Christine	80 to 90%	University Prep
Samantha	80 to 90%	University Prep
Ron	70 to 80%	College Prep
Steven	Other	College Prep
Fatima	70 to 80%	University Prep
Martyna	70 to 80%	University Prep
Demarcus	70 to 80%	College Prep
Kyle	70 to 80%	University Prep
Saadi	70 to 80%	University Prep
Soheil	60 to 70%	University Prep
Gupal	70 to 80%	University Prep
Robert	80 to 90%	University Prep
Steven	70 to 80%	University Prep

1. Only one student (i.e. Steven) did not have a plan to attend a postsecondary institution
2. N/A- recently arrived in Canada at time of interview
3. Grades are all self-reported

Paper 3

Table A7. Typology of Different Students at Eastgate

Student category/characteristics   Student pathways at time 3

High Achievers	Students:
Above Average Performance	Kyle- Program, Engineering (UNI)
Aligned Ambition	Robert- Program, Engineering (UNI)
High Aspirations	Christine- Program, Commerce (UNI)
Strong ties with institutional agents	Farzeen- Program, Social Work (UNI)
Self-reliant	
Formed early educational and career aspirations	
Dreamers	**Students:**
Average to Above Average Performance.	Adaeze- Program, Education (UNI)
Some alignment but also decision-making uncertainty	Taifa- Program, English (UNI)
Lots of strong connections to institutional agents	Amina- Program, English (UNI)
High Aspirations	Sharon- Program, Humanities (UNI)
Agents give lots of advice- provide them with help	Sandra- Program, Education (UNI)
Rely on others for support and guidance	Samantha- Program, Commerce (UNI)
Formed aspirations in final year	
Survivors	**Students:**
Average to Below Average	Demarcus: Program, Child and Youth (College)
Misaligned decision-making	Fatima: Program, Equity Studies (UNI)
Survival Habitus	Nassar: Undecided- not enrolled in school
Large Families	Kendra: Extra year of high school
High Aspirations	Hani: Program, Fine Arts (UNI)
Inconsistent ties to institutional agents	

Appendix B   **Student Demographic Survey**

Please answer the questions below as honestly as possible. This information will be used to select students for 45 minute interviews about your postsecondary plans. If selected you will be able to participate in an after-school dinner planned by the researcher, as a thank you for your time.

<p align="center">QUESTIONS ABOUT YOU</p>

1. **Age:** _____

2. **Gender**: Please self-   [   ]   identify:

   (For example, male/female/trans/gender fluid)

3. **Are you a Canadian Citizen?**   O Yes   O No

4. **Which of the following best describes your racial/ethnic background?**

   o **Black** (Examples: Ethiopian, Jamaican, Kenyan, Nigerian, Somalian, Vincentian)
   o **East Asian** (Examples: Chinese, Japanese, Korean)
   o **First Nations, Metis, and/or Inuit**
   o **Latin American** (Examples: Colombian, Cuban, El Salvadorian, Mexican, Peruvian)
   o **Middle Eastern** (Examples: Afghani, Iranian, Lebanese, Saudi Arabian, Syrian)
   o **South Asian** (Examples: Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Indian-Caribbean such as Guyanese)
   o **Southeast Asian** (Examples: Filipino, Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai, Vietnamese)
   o **White** (Examples: British, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Slovakian)

<p align="center">QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR FAMILY</p>

5. Do both of your parents currently live in the same household as you? O Yes   O No

6. **Your Parents/Guardian gender identity**:

   Parent/guardian **1**: O Male O Female OTransgender   If not listed   [   ]
   write in box:

7. **A) What is the highest level of education completed by Parent 1/Guardian?**

   O High School Graduate or Equivalency   O Master's Degree

<p align="center">153</p>

○ Vocational/Technical School (2 years)　　　　○ Doctoral Degree

○ Community College　　　　　　　　　　　○ Professional Degree (MD, Law etc.)

○ Bachelor's Degree　　　　　　　　　　　　○ Other

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　○ Don't know/not applicable

B) What is Parent 1 /Guardian's [　　　　　　] **occupation?**

8. **Your Parents/Guardian gender identity**:

Parent/Guardian **2**: ○Male ○ Female ○ Transgender | If not [　　　　　　] listed write in box:

9. **A) What is the highest level of education completed by Parent 2/Guardian?**

○ High School Graduate or Equivalency　　　○ Master's Degree

○ Vocational/Technical School (2 years)　　　　○ Doctoral Degree

○ Community College　　　　　　　　　　　○ Professional Degree (MD, Law, etc.)

○ Bachelor's Degree　　　　　　　　　　　　○ Other

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　○ Don't know/not applicable

B) What is Parent 2 /Guardian's [　　　　　　] **occupation?**

10. Which of your parents are born in Canada?

○ Parent 1　　○ Parent 2　　○ Both　　○ Neither　○ Don't Know/not applicable

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR ACADEMICS

11. **What is the level of study for most of the courses you have taken in secondary school:**

    Grade 9 & 10

    ○ Applied ○ Academic ○ Locally developed compulsory

    Grade 11 & 12

    ○ College preparation ○ University preparation ○ Workplace preparation

12. **Which of the following report card marks best characterizes your overall academic performance**

    ○ > 90% ○ 80-90% ○ 70-80% ○ 60-70% ○ Other ○ Don't know

13. **If selected would you be willing to participate in two 45 minute interviews?**

    _____ **Yes**   _____ **No**

14. **If yes, please fill out the following. I will need this information to set up interviews for all selected participants:**

    Name: _____ Age: _____ Email: _____

     Cell phone (optional) : _____
    Appendix B   Student Interview Schedule 1 (35-60 mins)

Appendix C   **Interview Guides**

Student Interviews

Interview 1-- Before Applying- For those interested in university/college

Early-decision-making/ aspiration/ potential choices

1. What are your plans after high school? (Probe- what do they want to do?) **3 min**

2. What kind of job/career are you hoping to get into? (Probe here- how long have they aspired to do x? **5 mins**

i) where do these aspirations come from (have you always known this is what you wanted to do? Where did you hear about this kind of position?)
ii) Why do you want to do this? What makes you think it would be something you would want to pursue? (probe- how do you think x will help you accomplish your goals?)

3. Do you see yourself as doing better (financially) than your parents/guardian? (probe to redirect student if they are confused by question) **3 mins**

4. How would you describe your parent's/guardian role in your decision to do x? **1 min**

5. What have your parents/guardian done to help you prepare you for postsecondary? **3min**

a). Sometime parents take a more active role and help kids look at university materials- while others do other things like driving students to events or offering moral support. How would you characterize your parents' involvement?

Have they looked at college/university materials with you? Gone on visits? Attended meetings?

6. i) How do you plan to approach the university application process? **3min**

Clarifying question (if they didn't understand first):

ii) What will be your first few steps in applying to university?

7. i) Do you have an idea which universities and programs you will choose? **3min**

ii) If no, and they don't elaborate- ask: What do you plan to do to help you make choices?

iii) If yes, and they don't expand immediately on their own- ask: What influenced your choices?

8. What do you think the experience of college and postsecondary will be like? **2 mins**

Part 2- Social Capital/Network Related Questions

1. Please tell me the names of any adults that you know well and could turn to for advice if you needed it. [LIST] **2 mins**

Prompts: What is this person's relationship to you? How often have you seen him/her in the past year? How long have you known him/her? How close do you feel to him/her? What does s/he do for a living (what kind of job)? How much education did s/he get? **5 mins**

2. Are there any friends of your parents that you have not mentioned, that you know well and could turn to for advice?

3. Are there any neighbors that you have not mentioned, that you know well and could turn to for advice?

4. Are there any parents of your friends that you have not mentioned, that you know well and could turn to for advice?

5. Are there any leaders of organizations that you are a part of, such as a religious group, sports team, or other group that you have not mentioned, that you know well and could turn to for advice?

6. What are some of your friends doing after high school? What do you think about their choices?

15 mins approx

Part Three- Perception of school-based resources and other college planning resources

1. How do you feel about what your school is doing to help students make decisions about postsecondary?

If Time….

2. Who in your school can/do you talk to about postsecondary?

3. What resources do you use, or plan to use, in your school when it comes to postsecondary or life planning? Is there anything else you wish you had to help?

4. What other resources do you use not associated with school?

5. How do you determine what is and what isn't valuable information?

6. What type of support do you feel you could most benefit from in making your post-secondary decisions?

Other potential questions- Time permitting

Tell me about the colleges/universities you have visited, who did you go there with?
Tell me about any career/college fairs you have attended, anything stick with you from these trips?
Have you attended any summer programs or classes that helped shape your future interests?
Do you participate in any extracurricular activities? Tell me about them. How did you get involved?
Anything else I should know about that has shaped how you think about your future?
What does success mean to you?

Interview 2- Students- Post-application results- Plans for Fall

Catch Up-Progress Report

Why don't you tell me a bit about what has transpired since we last talked- applications, results etc.?

i)   Now that you have been accepted, what do you expect to get out of a university degree? (expectations)

ii)   If not accepted, what are your next steps? What do you think went wrong?

iii)   How did you come to this decision? Probe: what did you consider, options considered, strategy used for decision-making, resources, who did you rely on for advice?

Challenges

i)   What challenges, if any, did you face when applying?

ii)   Do you feel like you had enough information to make an informed decision?

If yes? What sources of information were the most important/influential?

If no? What sources of information do you wish you had available?

Parents, Extracurriculars,

i)   What do your parents think of your decision?

ii)   In what ways did they contribute to your decision?

Other people- social capital follow up

i)   Who was instrumental in helping you form a decision and how?

ii)   What did they do to help?

iii)   Were any clubs, organizations, after-school activities influential in helping your form a decision?

Process and Future

i)   What steps did you take to investigate the schools you were interested in attending? (i.e. visiting the campus, meeting with a representative, reading school materials).

ii)   Did you meet with any school personnel regarding your decision, or for advice? How often, frequently did you meet? What was discussed?

iii)   What school are you going to and why?
iv)   What do you feel were some reasons for wanted to attend this institution?
v)   Do you have any close friends/family attending this institution? Elaborate- who are they?

vi)   What is your program of study and why?
vii)   How did you arrive at these final decisions?

viii)   What do you think university/college will get you in long-term?
ix)   Are you nervous? Excited?

Interview 3 Post-secondary transitions

The interview started with asking students to describe in their own words what they experienced the first few months in their new transition

I used the data from the first two interviews to select the most relevant questions for each student from the list below.

How different has university/college been from high school?
How do you stay organized? What resources do you use to stay organized?
What challenges have you faced at this early stage in the transition?
Who has helped you/given you advice about how to deal with transition? What did they say?
Are you happy with your program? Why or why not?
Are you considering making any changes to your program/institution in the near future?

What has been your greatest challenge(s) so far?
What has gone particularly well for you?
What institutionally-based resources have you been using that you have found to be particularly helpful?
What other resources are you using that have been helpful?
Talk to me about applying for OSAP and other funding. What has been your experience so far?
Are you currently working? What has your experience been with juggling work and school?

Is there anything you think you could use or need that you do not have easy access to?
Has there been anything that has been particularly surprising to you?
Who has been important in your planning process? (i.e. choosing classes etc.)
Will you consult anyone regarding future decisions about your studies? Who? Why? Probe: peers, family, school personnel etc.
Is planning for the future important to you? What are your next steps in terms of planning for your next semester? Following school year? What will you consider?

Interview Guides for Eastgate School Personnel

School Principal

The emphasis of this study is on educational decision-making in lower SES neighbourhoods. I want to understand the decision-making process for such students, how they search for and decide on potential pathways. Who helps shape those decisions, how they use resources, and then understand how they transition into college and university. As a person who plays a key institutional role in helping students your perspective is key to helping understand this process for this group of students.

School Info

1. How many, or what percentage of students in this school would you say have aspirations for postsecondary?
2. How many are successful?
3. What accounts for their success or failure?
4. How does administration approach the postsecondary application process?
5. How does admin support teachers and guidance counselors in this process?

Questions about Students and Institutional Role

1. As Principal, tell me a bit about the students at Eastgate, what are their strengths, what are their weaknesses?
   Probe: What challenges might this student population face?

2. What do you see as barriers to the student's success?

3. How/what if anything are you doing to address these barriers?

4. Describe the postsecondary pathways you think are valued by the school? By you?
   Probe: What about the students? What about the other teachers in the school? The families?

5. How would you define success for a Eastgate student after completing high school?

6. What is your role in helping students prepare for the postsecondary application process?

7. What are some common challenges that students face when preparing to make such a decision?

8. What is your role?

9. What factors do you think influence the student's postsecondary plans?

10. What types of advice do you offer students?

11. What is important for them to consider in the process?

12. Do you ever encourage students to consider specific schools? If so, which ones. Why?

13. Have you ever helped a student make a decision as to which college or university to attend? If so, describe the conversation/process you went through with the student.

14. What universities/colleges do the students in this school typically attend? Are there certain schools' programs that stand out from the pack?

15. _____ student shared you have been very influential and helped him/her with postsecondary
planning. Tell me about that. Do you do the same thing for other students? Why this student? Are there any aspects of your curriculum that support postsecondary planning? Describe them.

Interview Guide for Teachers and Guidance Counselors

The emphasis of this study is on educational decision-making in lower SES neighbourhoods. I want to understand the decision-making process for such students, how they search and decide. Who helps shape those decisions, how they use resources, and then understand how they transition into college and university. As a person who plays a key institutional role in helping students your perspective is key to helping understand this process for this group of students.

1. Tell me a bit about the students at Eastgate, what are their strengths, what are their weaknesses?
   Probe: What challenges might this student population face?

2. What do you see as barriers to the student's success?

3. How/what if anything does the school do to address these barriers?

4. Describe the postsecondary pathways you think are valued by the school? By you?
   Probe: What about the students? What about the other teachers in the school? The families?

5. How would you define success for a Eastgate student after completing high school?

6. How do you help students prepare for the postsecondary application process?

7. What are some common challenges that students face when preparing to make such a decision?

8. What is your role?

9. Do your students come to see you voluntarily? Or are they encouraged?

10. How often do you they come? Do you wish they came more often?

11. What factors do you think influence the student's postsecondary plans?

12. What types of advice do you offer students?

13. What is important for them to consider in the process?

14. Do you ever encourage students to consider specific schools? If so, which ones. Why?

15. Have you ever helped a student make a decision as to which college or university to attend? If so, describe the conversation/process you went through with the student.

16. What universities/colleges do the students in this school typically attend? Are there certain schools' programs that stand out from the pack?

17. _____ student shared you have been very influential and helped him/her with postsecondary
planning. Tell me about that. Do you do the same thing for other students? Why this student? Are there any aspects of your curriculum that support postsecondary planning? Describe them.

Appendix D   **Consent and Assent Forms**

Students

**LETTER OF
INFORMATION/CONSENT
Grade 12 participants**

Title of the study: "Promising Students: An Investigation of Educational Decision-Making and Transitions into University in a Priority Neighbourhood"

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my Doctoral degree in the Department of ***Sociology and Legal Studies*** at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Professor ***Janice Aurini***. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Janice Aurini, PhD, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo. Phone: 1-519-888-4567, Email: jaurini@uwaterloo.ca

Student Investigator: Rod Missaghian, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Waterloo. Phone: 905-751-4662, Email: rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca

To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will explain what the study is about, the possible risks and benefits, and your rights as a research participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask one of the investigators prior to consenting to the study. You will be provided with a copy of the information and consent form if you choose to participate in the study.

What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a research study about educational decision-making, focused on students preparing to enter postsecondary, but also considering the experiences of students who may opt for alternative pathways. The purpose of the study is to find out more about the how students make choices about postsecondary, and how those choices help shape their first-year experiences. This study focuses on the experiences of those students who are either the first in their family to attend university, ethnic minorities and those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Research in sociology has demonstrated that these students may be at a greater risk for encountering various challenges in postsecondary.

This study is being undertaken as part of my (Rod Missaghian's) PhD research. I plan to combine my interviews of students with interviews with teachers, guidance counselors and principals to understand how decision-making is also possibly shaped by the context of the school.

I. Your responsibilities as a participant

What does participation involve?

For Grade 12 Students: If you are enrolled in grade 12 and expecting to attend postsecondary in the Fall of 2019, then your participation would involve being interviewed twice; once in the months preceding your postsecondary applications, and once after you have received your results. You will first be asked to fill out a short demographic survey that will include questions about your age, ethnicity, and your parents' occupation and education. I will then guide a discussion on your experiences surrounding educational decision-making. Interviews will last between 30-45 mins (approx.). The interviews will be held in the school library, or a location agreed upon in advance between the researcher and participant. Refreshments and a light snack will be provided. The types of questions that I will ask include: What motivated you to apply to university? Do you have an idea which universities and programs you will choose? With your permission, the interview sessions will be audio-recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of the interview. Also with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used in the dissertation, publications and/or presentations resulting from this research.

Because this study is longitudinal in nature, I would appreciate the opportunity to also conduct follow-up interviews with you during your first year post-graduation. With your permission, I will re-contact you at a later date for the purposes of receiving additional information about participating in these interviews. Agreeing to be re-contacted does not obligate you to participate and you are free to decide at that time if you would like to participate in the follow-up interviews.

Who may participate in the study?

In order to participate in the study, you should be planning to apply for postsecondary for the following school year. However, I am also interested in speaking to students who are not planning on attending postsecondary, although this is not my focus. I am also looking for students who would be/or are the first in their families to attend university. However, if you do not meet this specific criteria and would like to participate, I am still interested in speaking with you.

II. Your rights as a participant

Is participation in the study voluntary?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question(s) you do not wish to answer by requesting to skip the question. Further, you may decide to end the interviews at any time by communicating this to me. You can withdraw your consent to participate and have your data destroyed by contacting me before my dissertation is submitted (approx. May 2020). After this time it will not be possible to withdraw your data.

Will I receive anything for participating in the study?

Grade 12 students who decide to participate will receive snacks and refreshments during interviews and a 15$ gift card.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

Participation in this study may not provide any personal benefit to you. I hope the data from my interviews will aid Educational professionals, and policy makers to design the highest quality programs and provide the necessary resources so that all students are able to make informed decisions regarding university, and be in the best position possible to make a successful transition.

What are the risks associated with the study?

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. If a question, or the discussion, makes you uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer. See above for more details on voluntary participation.

Will my identity be known to others?

Nobody other than myself will know that you participated, unless you wish to personally share this information with your peers in order to help me recruit more participants. If I have your permission to quote you in the dissertation and publications resulting from this research, I will use pseudonyms in place of your real name and school.

Will my information be kept confidential?

As noted above, your participation in this study will be considered confidential. Your name will not appear in the dissertation or any publications resulting from this research. All information that could identify you will be removed from the data that is collected within 1 month of the initial interview and will be stored separately. Study records will be retained for a minimum of 7 years. Only the researcher will have access to these records which will be stored on a password protected computer and in a locked office. All records will be destroyed according to University of Waterloo policy.

III. Questions, comments, or concerns. Who is sponsoring/funding this study? This study is currently not funded by any external agency. All expenses are coming out of my graduate-student funding.

Has the study received ethics clearance?

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#22804). If you have questions for the committee, contact the Chief Ethics Officer, Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding my participation in the study?

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact Rod Missaghian by email at rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca. You may also wish to contact my research supervisor Dr. Janice Aurini at jaurini@uwaterloo.ca.

Consent Form

By providing your consent, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

Title of the study: "Promising Students: An Investigation of Educational Decision-Making and Transitions into University in a Priority Neighbourhood"

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study conducted by Rod Missaghian, under the supervision of Dr. Janice Aurini, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the dissertation and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous (e.g. a pseudonym will be used in place of my real name

I was informed that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw this consent by informing the researcher before the dissertation is submitted (e.g. approx. May 2020).

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#22804). If you have questions for the committee, contact the Chief Ethics Officer, Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca.

For all other questions contact Rod Missaghian at rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca

 a. With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.
    YES   NO

b.   I agree to have my interview audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.
    YES   NO

c. I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in the dissertation and/or any publications that result from this research. YES   NO

d. I agree to be re-contacted by the researcher in the Summer of 2019 for the purposes of being informed about participating in follow-up interviews associated with this study, that will take

place in the fall of 2019. I agree to provide the researcher with an email and contact number in the Spring of 2019 for the purposes of being re-contacted. I understand that by agreeing to be re-contacted I am not obligated to participate and I am free to decide at that time.   YES NO

I agree of my own free will to participate in the study.

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date:_____

Researcher's/Witness' signature_____ Date:_____

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

PERMISSION FORM: PARTICIPATION IN UWATERLOO STUDY

Rod Missaghian

Contact: rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca

Where: [Destination]

When: [Date]

Please sign and return this permission form by October 1.

☐ I give permission for my child _____ to participate
in the UWaterloo study on "Educational Decision-Making"
☐ I give permission for my child to provide the researcher with their contact details if they wish
to do so
☐ I do not give permission for my child to participate in the UWaterloo study

Special instructions for my child:

Parent/Guardian signature   Date

LETTER OF
INFORMATION/CONSENT
School Principal

Title of the study: At Risk Youth: Educational Decision-Making and Transitions into University

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my Doctoral degree in the Department of *Sociology and Legal Studies* at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Professor *Janice Aurini*. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Janice Aurini, PhD, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo. Phone: 1-519-888-4567, Email: jaurini@uwaterloo.ca

Student Investigator: Rod Missaghian, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Waterloo. Phone: 905-751-4662, Email: rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca

To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will explain what the study is about, the possible risks and benefits, and your rights as a research participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask one of the investigators prior to consenting to the study. You will be provided with a copy of the information and consent form if you choose to participate in the study.

What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a research study about educational decision-making, focused on students preparing to enter postsecondary, but also considering the experiences of students who may opt for alternative pathways. The purpose of the study is to find out more about the how students make choices about postsecondary, and how those choices help shape their first-year experiences. **An important** part of this research is to understand how these decisions are shaped by the institutional context in which they take place. Thus, this research also aims to capture the viewpoints of institutional stakeholders in the school, like teachers, guidance counselors and the principal. This study is being undertaken as part of my (Rod Missaghian's) PhD research.

I. Your responsibilities as a participant

What does participation involve?

For the principal

You will be asked to participate in a single semi-structured interview that will last between 30-45 mins (approx.). The interviews will be held in a location agreed upon in advance between the researcher and participant. The types of questions that I will ask include: How does administration approach the postsecondary application process? How does administration support teachers and guidance counselors in this process? With your permission, the interview sessions will be audio-recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of the interview. Also with your

permission, anonymous quotations may be used in the dissertation, publications and/or presentations resulting from this research.

Who may participate in the study?

As long as you are the principal of the school in the year 2018-19, your participation will be welcomed and appreciated.

II. Your rights as a participant

Is participation in the study voluntary?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question(s) you do not wish to answer by requesting to skip the question. Further, you may decide to end the interviews at any time by communicating this to me. You can withdraw your consent to participate and have your data destroyed by contacting me before my dissertation is submitted (approx. May 2020). After this time it will not be possible to withdraw your data.

Will I receive anything for participating in the study?

The researcher will contribute a school honorarium in the amount of $50 to be used at the Principal's discretion for a school-related purpose.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

Participation in this study may not provide any personal benefit to you. I hope the data from my interviews will aid Educational professionals, and policy makers to design the highest quality programs and provide the necessary resources so that all students are able to make informed decisions regarding university, and be in the best position possible to make a successful transition.

What are the risks associated with the study?

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. If a question, or the discussion, makes you uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer. See above for more details on voluntary participation.

Will my identity be known to others?

Nobody other than myself will know that you participated, unless you wish to personally share this information with your peers in order to help me recruit more participants. If I have your permission to quote you in the dissertation and publications resulting from this research, I will use pseudonyms in place of your real name and school.

Will my information be kept confidential?

As noted above, your participation in this study will be considered confidential. Your name will not appear in the dissertation or any publications resulting from this research. All information that could identify you will be removed from the data that is collected within 1 month of the initial interview and will be stored separately. Study records will be retained for a minimum of 7 years. Only the researcher will have access to these records which will be stored on a password protected computer and in a locked office. All records will be destroyed according to University of Waterloo policy.

III. Questions, comments, or concerns. Who is sponsoring/funding this study? This study is currently not funded by any external agency. All expenses are coming out of my graduate-student funding.

Has the study received ethics clearance?

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#22804). If you have questions for the committee, contact the Chief Ethics Officer, Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding my participation in the study?

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact Rod Missaghian by email at rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca. You may also wish to contact my research supervisor Dr. Janice Aurini at jaurini@uwaterloo.ca.

**LETTER OF
INFORMATION/CONSENT
Guidance Counselors/Teachers**

Title of the study: Promising Students: An Investigation into Educational Decision-Making and Transitions into University in a 'Priority Neighbourhood'

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my Doctoral degree in the Department of *Sociology and Legal Studies* at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Professor *Janice Aurini*. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Janice Aurini, PhD, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo. Phone: 1-519-888-4567, Email: jaurini@uwaterloo.ca

Student Investigator: Rod Missaghian, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Waterloo. Phone: 905-751-4662, Email: rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca

To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, this letter will explain what the study is about, the possible risks and benefits, and your rights as a research participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask one of the investigators prior to consenting to the study. You will be provided with a copy of the information and consent form if you choose to participate in the study.

What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a research study about educational decision-making, focused on students preparing to enter postsecondary, but also considering the experiences of students who may opt for alternative pathways. The purpose of the study is to find out more about the how students make choices about postsecondary, and how those choices help shape their first-year experiences. **An important** part of this research is to understand how these decisions are shaped by the institutional context in which they take place. Thus, this research also aims to capture the viewpoints of institutional stakeholders in the school, like teachers, guidance counselors and the principal. This study is being undertaken as part of my (Rod Missaghian's) PhD research.

I. Your responsibilities as a participant

What does participation involve?

For Guidance Counselors

You will be asked to participate in a single semi-structured interview that will last between 30-45 mins (approx.). The interviews will be held in a location agreed upon in advance between the researcher and participant. The types of questions that I will ask include: How do you help students prepare for the postsecondary application process? What are some common challenges that students face when preparing to make such a decision? What is your role?

With your permission, the interview sessions will be audio-recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of the interview. Also with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used in the dissertation, publications and/or presentations resulting from this research.

Who may participate in the study?

Guidance counselors and Teachers who are employed by (Enter School Name) and will be working with grade 12 students in the 2018-19 school year.

II. Your rights as a participant

Is participation in the study voluntary?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question(s) you do not wish to answer by requesting to skip the question. Further, you may decide to end the interviews at any time by communicating this to me. You can withdraw your consent to participate and have your data destroyed by contacting me before my dissertation is submitted (approx. May 2020). After this time it will not be possible to withdraw your data.

Will I receive anything for participating in the study?

The researcher will contribute a school honorarium in the amount of $50 to be used at the Principal's discretion for a school-related purpose.

What are the possible benefits of the study?

Participation in this study may not provide any personal benefit to you. I hope the data from my interviews will aid Educational professionals, and policy makers to design the highest quality programs and provide the necessary resources so that all students are able to make informed decisions regarding university, and be in the best position possible to make a successful transition.

What are the risks associated with the study?

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. If a question, or the discussion, makes you uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer. See above for more details on voluntary participation.

Will my identity be known to others?

Nobody other than myself will know that you participated, unless you wish to personally share this information with your peers in order to help me recruit more participants. If I have your permission to quote you in the dissertation and publications resulting from this research, I will use pseudonyms in place of your real name and school.

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III. Questions, comments, or concerns. Who is sponsoring/funding this study? This study is currently not funded by any external agency. All expenses are coming out of my graduate-student funding.

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Consent Form

By providing your consent, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

Title of the study: At Risk Youth: Educational Decision-Making and Transitions into Postsecondary

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study conducted by Rod Missaghian, under the supervision of Dr. Janice Aurini, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the dissertation and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous (e.g. a pseudonym will be used in place of my real name

I was informed that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw this consent by informing the researcher before the dissertation is submitted (e.g. approx. May 2020).

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#22804). If you have questions for the committee, contact the Chief Ethics Officer, Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca.

For all other questions contact Rod Missaghian at rod.missaghian@uwaterloo.ca

 a. With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.
   YES   NO

b.   I agree to have my interview audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.
    YES   NO

c. I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in the dissertation and/or any publications that result from this research. YES   NO

I agree of my own free will to participate in the study.

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date:_____

Researcher's/Witness' signature_____ Date:_____