"We are a family that works with our hands" or uterus: An exploration of first-generation female university students' academic journey

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Dedication

"Motherhood is about raising and celebrating the children you have, not the children you thought you would have. It's about understanding that they are exactly the persons they are supposed to be. And that, if you're lucky, they just might be the teachers who turn you into the person you are supposed to be." (plural modification)

-Joan Ryan
(first generation female student)

This one's for you - Alana, Chanel, and Madison.

My daughters.

My joy.

My motivation.

My greatest teachers.

You talk about making a difference in the world and don't even realize that you already have.

Forever your fiercest supporter

Mom

Abstract

Working-class children are not as likely to obtain higher education, and the preeminent factor is their parents' level of education. Thirty percent of all Canadian students are first-generation and are defined as students whose parents did not complete a four-year university degree. First-generation students (FGSs) who are female tend to be researched separately but with little focus on the intersections of class and gender, making this topic ripe for research. There is a gap in the literature regarding FGS's narratives from a class-based perspective that examines the connection between family history and academic decision-making. The barriers first-generation female students (FGFSs) face are unique, intersecting with low socioeconomic status, race and gender. To address these barriers is to alleviate economic inequality and interrupt intergenerational poverty. This qualitative study explored the academic journey of six FGFSs using focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews combined with an autoethnographic voice. This research addresses the following question: How do FGFSs experience their journey to and through higher education? Using critical feminist theory and Bourdieu's concept of habitus, I analyze the challenges, intersecting complexities, and achievements of FGFSs. This study aims to describe FGFS's academic journeys, generates and recounts their lived experiences and expand understanding and interpretation of this intersectional and heterogeneous population. This knowledge is valuable for childhood educators, teachers, guidance counsellors, professors, parents, and FGS programs to ensure equitable support and opportunities for all children. Unaddressed, girls from working-class homes can be set up for a future of precarious work, limiting personal potential and repeating a generational cycle of low socioeconomic status.

Keywords: first-generation student, Bourdieu, habitus, gender, class, social mobility

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Earning either degree was not done in isolation. The contributions span over my lifetime, sometimes involving only one conversation. The advice, encouragement and affirmations are too numerous to list. And yet, there were significant moments at poignant times that altered the trajectory of my academic journey. In the early days (1999), the voices of a few individuals prompted me to apply to Brock University as a mature student and pursue my interests.

Thank you, Melissa (my first TA), for encouraging me to stay enrolled, even after failing my first Psychology exam in (2000) and then 17 years later keeping me after class to persuade me to apply for a Master's degree. Thank you to my fan club (you know who you are) for cheering me on from the sidelines, pulling me away from my desk for brunch, coffee, wine tasting, or a hike, and inspiring me to just keep moving forward. Thank you, Agnes; what would I have done without your wisdom? Your ability to create a safe place to explore all the thoughts, questions and emotions has been sacred. You have taught, coached and challenged me to aspire for more, including this degree.

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Prologue: Welcome to My Story

"Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own."
-Michelle Obama
(first generation female student)

This was it…the time had finally arrived! I had just submitted my intent to graduate through the Brock University student portal. It was the final term of my four-year degree, taking 19 years (seven active) to complete. After more thought than necessary, I decided I should capture this once-in-a-lifetime moment with a graduate photo. With a booked appointment, I spent hours searching images online to know what collar was best suited for a female to wear under the graduate gown. Dressed for success, 'nails done, hair done, everything did;' I was feeling fancy as I made my way to the campus for my scheduled photo shoot.

I walked this same route in 1999 with a toddler in tow. The memories flashed in front of me like it was yesterday…the students, the buses, the massive tower in the centre of the campus. I was intimidated, nauseous and anxious as I faced my greatest fears - fear of failure, fear of embarrassment, fear that…what I had perceived my entire life might actually be true - that I did not belong here! Holding a little hand in mine brought some level of comfort and a feeling of hope that somewhere in the early recesses of my daughter's developing brain, she would catch an early glimpse into her future possibilities. We reached the third-floor registrar's office, and I picked up a hard copy of the course calendar and an application form. By this time, my sweaty hands, accelerated heartbeat and 'flight' response were activated, and all I could think about was getting out of there.

Years elapsed – twenty exactly. I have passed all my courses, making it on the Dean's honour list twice and reflecting on how I have overcome my fears. Arriving for my graduation 'shoot,' I am instructed to put on a gown. Immediately, overwhelming feelings of discomfort

arise, a mirage of emotions colliding. Excitement, pride…what?...here it is again - that voice! Feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment. It starts with a heavy rock in my gut; my face starts boiling, turning colour – bright tomato red. That's right, I am embarrassed. I am embarrassed of my excitement about something that seems so regular. Regular for other people that is - not regular for me. There go my thoughts…

racing

out of control

spiralling

discrediting

critical

reminding me that I do not belong! They are loud and harsh, pointing out all the reasons why I do not deserve this degree:

> Who do you think you are? Remember that 13% on your history test in grade 7? How about all those remedial classes and the summer of tutoring? You realize that you don't belong here, right? Who are you trying to kid? You are such a fraud! You think you are "all that" now that you have a degree? You are old - grow up! What are you trying to prove? Girls like you don't go to university. You are only college material. As a woman, you better not aspire to more than your husband. Motherhood is your highest calling and priority. Stop being selfish pursuing your own interests. AND by the way, that degree was earned through your charisma, not intellect.

The photographer's proofs arrived in my inbox several weeks later. I hesitated to look at them, hoping they would not reveal how I actually felt. I was not satisfied with them, but not for the usual reasons such as an unexpected pimple or partially closed eyes. It wasn't my hair, or that I didn't think I was attractive…it was something else - deeper. Ugh…I was reminded of my ambivalence towards getting a graduate photo in the first place and then the regret afterwards. I felt strange, out of sorts - my confidence had dissipated into thin air! Intrusive negative thoughts flooded my mind and stole the joy, excitement, and pride that one should feel for such an

accomplishment. I minimized telling myself that "this isn't even a big deal...thousands of students graduate every year. You are so juvenile! Is taking 19 years to complete your degree even an accomplishment?" My face 'flushed' just thinking about the experience. I felt ridiculous with that graduation cap on! I did not like the picture because I visibly looked uncomfortable. It did not look like me. It did not 'feel' like me. I looked awkward because I was awkward...and wondered if these feeling would ever go away.

Welcome to the internal workings of my habitus!

It had been a while since experiencing such strong emotions. Ironically, days after this took place I was preparing a presentation for my seminar on a reading that was randomly assigned to me by my professor, *Habitus transformation and hidden injuries: Successful working-class university students* by Lehmann (2014). I was unaware of the term habitus and, that there was a label for students like me, let alone an explanation for these sensitivities and scrutinizing thoughts. Bourdieu (1977) describes habitus as:

> a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class (p.86). These "internalised structures" and "schemes of perception" structure the subject's (shared) world-view and their "apperception" of the world in which they suppose they exist (p.86).

Habitus is initially formed and reproduced unconsciously. These learned dispositions are contingent on class and rooted in family socialization, shaping a child's worldview, including "what is possible and preferable for someone in their social position" (Edgerton et al., 2014, p. 184).

My relationship with education has been complicated, intersecting with my gender, religion, and working-class identities, characterized by feelings of not belonging. Wacquant (1989) explain:

> Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself "as a fish in water," it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted. (p. 43)

In reverse, engaging Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be likened to the working-class experience of feeling like a 'fish out of water' in environments wrought with middle and upper-class knowledge, rules, and language. Many adult turning points led me to this endeavour, however, habitus as a key component of this thesis is best understood when considered within a historical context. Therefore, I include a brief sketch of the familial background characteristics that shaped my parent's trajectories, which, in turn shaped mine.

Where did I Come From, you ask?

I come from a long line of farmers and one carpenter. Both sets of grandparents were farmers in Holland and continued when they immigrated to Canada. My mother has five sisters and two brothers – none attended university. My father had five sisters and two brothers – none attended university. Of my parents' combined fourteen siblings, three of my dad's sisters received diplomas in nursing, hairdressing and office administration.

My father was three years old when he immigrated from Holland, the third born and oldest son of eight children. Following elementary school at thirteen years old, he joined my grandfather, working full time on the family farm. Several years later, he left on an adventure to scope out California. After six months, a motorcycle and farming on the West coast, homesickness returned him home to marry the 'love of his life' - my mother. My mother immigrated from Holland at five as the second youngest child of eight. She, too, grew up on a dairy farm. She completed grade ten education at Norwood Public school and began cleaning houses to contribute to the family's finances. She met my father at the local Christian Reformed

Church youth group. She was nineteen and he was twenty-one when they walked the aisle towards marriage and quickly prepared a nursery for their first son's arrival ten months later. I am the firstborn female, the second oldest of seven, born in Peterborough, Ontario. I was raised on a dairy farm in rural Indian River during my infant and toddler years.

My first memory was of the old farmhouse we moved into in Bramalea, where my dad became a farm labourer, using skills he learned as a young boy from his father. Brampton was the next move and was the beginning of my father's driving career, starting with a taxi, then a dump truck and finally a transport truck. My mother worked from home as an Avon sales representative, where we lived in a diverse subdivision of Italian, Portuguese, and Irish immigrants. However, a few years later another move was on the horizon as my father purchased a transport truck to join the ranks of self-employment. We relocated to Grimsby, Ontario where my mother's older sister lived nearby and was also home full-time managing the household and raising seven children.

My father mainly transported shingles and lumber locally so he could be home each night - usually after dinner or when we were tucked in bed. He was home on weekends, usually 'slept in' Saturday mornings and took naps on Sunday afternoons between morning and afternoon church services. He would spend Saturdays doing yard work, rotter tilling the garden and cleaning the station wagon to his favourite singers, Alan Jackson, The Gatlin Brothers and Kenny Rogers. My father never took a vacation, except two weeks after my youngest brother was born one month premature. I later learned it was because of a nervous breakdown when my father pulled over on the road, believing he was experiencing a heart attack and leading him to the hospital.

Conversations were taking place about my grandparents retiring, opening an opportunity

for my parents to purchase their chicken farm as a way to generate more income. Plans moved forward, my parents sold our house, and we were two weeks from moving when the deal fell through. A last-minute move led to one of the only vacant affordable homes in the area, a brand new three-bedroom side split in Smithville.

Two years passed, and we moved again to a larger home in Beamsville. I was in grade eleven and finally had my own bedroom! My mother started to provide childcare for other families in our home once all my siblings were in school full time and later took several precarious service sector jobs at restaurants, house cleaning and home care for seniors. It was no secret that my parents lived pay check to pay check, re-mortgaged our house numerous times to make ends meet, and regularly borrowed money from my grandparents or aunt and uncle. Lehmann (2014) states that:

> Social class remains one of the most ‘reliable’ and persistent predictors of educational and labour market attainment. Any measure of parental social class position, be that income, occupation, or most importantly, level of education, can be shown to be related to the educational pathways and achievement of children and young people. (p. 1)

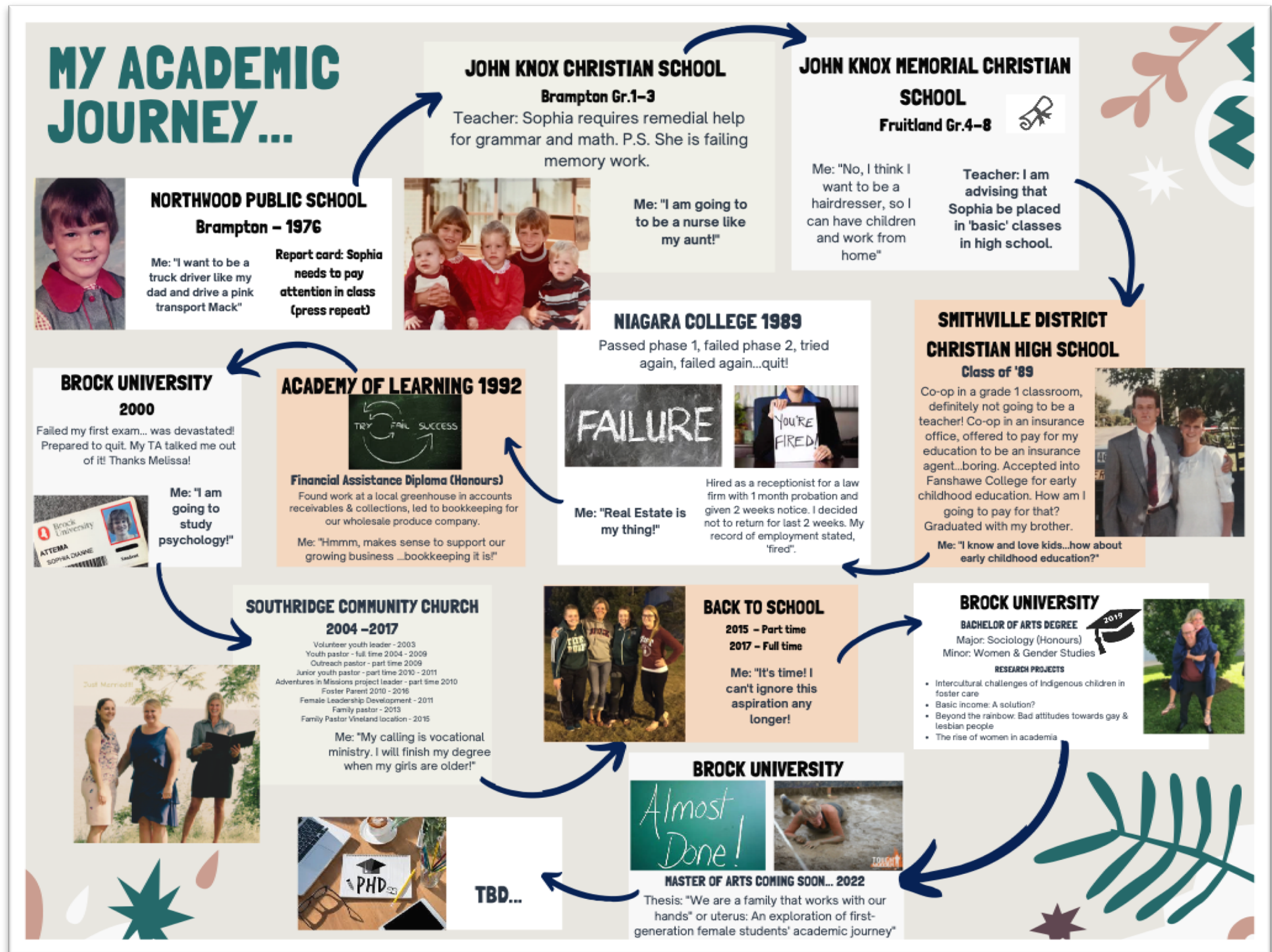
The significance of understanding family history concerning social class is particularly relevant to this research and profound to intergenerational mobility that shapes children’s academic trajectories.

My Academic Journey

Three words to describe my academic journey from childhood through university are resilience, perseverance, and unpredictable. My path to and through academia has been anything but linear. As Lehmann (2014) points out, many adults from working-class backgrounds who have achieved social mobility speak of “academic struggles, false starts and restarts, times of confusion, chance encounters with faculty and an often, circuitous trajectory toward academic

success" and often feelings of inferiority compared to their "better read, well-spoken, articulate and generally more privileged peers and faculty" (2014, p. 3).

Illustration 1. My Academic Journey



Note. (Attema, 2021).

I began kindergarten at the local public school (see illustration 1). I attended grade one at a private Christian school and switched schools in grade three, due to our move to Grimsby, which meant attending the nearest private Christian Elementary School, a one-hour bus ride away. In our family and community, the importance of religion was valued over educational

attainment, so my working-class grandparents paid the majority of the tuition costs that my parents were unable to afford. It was here that I was labelled below average with a cycle of underachievement where no one expected to see academic potential (Spiegler, 2018).

I have vivid memories of the internal 'I am stupid' mantra from as early as grade four. These messages were embedded in my mind from report card marks and comments, remedial classes and threats of summer school. What is important here is that my parents held a belief grounded in a biological perspective of intelligence where they explicitly told us, *"we are a family that works with our hands.* As a child, this message implied, 'you are not smart'. It was limiting and instilled feelings of stupidity and inferiority. Lareau (2011) speaks of social class having distinct attributes that define identity, whereby "parent's social location systematically shapes children's life experience and outcomes" (p. 235).

These messages were later reinforced by the recommendation of my grade 8 teacher who deemed that I should be streamed into the 'basic' level program in high school. Streaming practices are the intentional placement of students entering high school where the curriculum is adjusted and developed on "aptitude, ability or special needs" (Wotherspoon, 2014, p. 131). A student's categorization is based on the kinds of jobs teachers expect of their students by grade eight. At this time the program delineation was basic (work), general (college stream) or advanced (university stream).

There was one consequential night, with anticipation, I waited while my mom attended parent/teacher interviews, and I babysat my five younger siblings. Upon her return, the irritation was evident - not with me but with my teacher! My mom had been advocating on my behalf to be placed in the higher stream of 'general' courses for high school. It was one of the few

moments that I cling to where I felt school was important to my family, and my mom may have seen some potential in me.

Months later, at my grade 8 graduation, each student approached the stage to receive their diploma, and were greeted with a comment read by a staff member. Mine? “If there was an award for social butterfly, it would be given to Sophia Lubberts.” Disbelieving I could achieve academically, I learned to work on my social game, something that continued to be both an asset and a liability. A liability when I began to find academic success that led me to doubt it was intelligence, but charisma instead.

Although my parents were a significant constraint on my academic journey with low expectations, there were a few moments when I sensed that education was important to my father. It was the mornings when I would wake up, and the Encyclopedia Britannica was on the breakfast table. He had worked on my elementary school projects long after I had gone to bed and would later get mad at the teacher if HIS mark wasn’t an A-plus! In more recent years, my father told me that if he were not a truck driver, he would have liked to be a teacher. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for working-class children to have academic aspirations, and their goals not realized (Lareau, 2011).

I began to internalize the stigma and limitations of being categorized ‘general’ when I entered high school. Separated from friends, we were given a ‘dumbed down’ version of the curriculum and deemed unfit for university at the outset. The problem that Wotherspoon (2014) outlines is that students begin to assume labels and identities as they become “aware of their status in relation to others and alter their attitudes based on expectations” (p. 131). As such, streaming practices lead to implications of self-fulfilling prophecy. Inequalities within the labour market and family are linked to these internalized social constructs (Gazso, 2010).

During my last year of high school, I applied to colleges and was accepted to Fanshawe for the Early Childhood Education program, but did not have the financial resources to pay for it or the awareness that student loans could make it possible. My parents did not have the knowledge to guide or support my pursuit, and I quickly resigned from the idea and invested in the relationship with my boyfriend while working multiple part-time jobs for an insurance company, law office and real estate company as a receptionist. I later worked in restaurants to make enough money to attend Niagara College with the hope of receiving a real estate license. When I failed the second exam, it quickly reinforced negative messages from my childhood, and I quit.

At nineteen, I married. My twenty-one-year-old fiancé and I took a risk in launching a wholesale produce company four months before our wedding. We rented a migrant farm house in Jordan for four years, where I simultaneously worked at a restaurant and grocery store. Eleven months later, our first daughter made her entrance into the world. My aspirations to ‘do more’ continued to grow, and I decided to try another educational route and attended the Academy of Learning to complete a Financial Assistance diploma to provide practical support to our business. I graduated with 90s and the confidence to take a job at a local greenhouse doing accounts receivables and collections.

The cost of childcare consumed most of my earnings, making more financial sense for me to quit my job and clean houses several mornings a week (bringing my daughter with me), and cleaning offices at night when my spouse was home and using my home to provide childcare in the afternoon for a past co-worker. I maintained a working-class lifestyle, living pay check to pay check, managing our household and upholding the acceptable values of my family habitus.

Our produce business grew more successful each year with a second daughter on the

way, we were able to purchase our first home. Meanwhile, a friend was studying to be a teacher. Borrowing her first-year psychology textbook made it possible for me to read and learn while nursing. I was absorbing the importance of developing my children's educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling as a parent (Edgerton et al., 2014). As I began volunteering at their elementary school, a vulnerable place for me; I confronted feelings of inadequacy and memories of my negative school experiences. Prior to 'meet the teacher' events and parent-teacher interviews, my anxiousness (what I now know as part of my habitus) increased. I feared judgement and had irrational thoughts that everyone knew I was inadequate in school, bringing back feelings of stupidity. I began to fear my daughters might have inherited my inability to be academically successful and interfering with their dreams. My fears were unfounded.

After having my third daughter at twenty-five and a few years of navigating numerous personal and volunteer experiences, I was learning about myself, reflecting and dreaming about possible future careers with two friends who had gone to university. They encouraged me to go. Their belief in me made it possible to confront the fear rooted in self-consciousness from barely meeting the expectations in elementary school and a family habitus that limited me to "working with my hands".

University

Now twenty-nine, (albeit still nervous) I disclosed to my parents that I had been accepted as a mature student at Brock University. My heart sank as the words came out of my dad's mouth, "so how long will that last?" I perceived the lack of support as an attack on my character, ability and potential which was painful. My mother's only acknowledgment came months later when she told a family acquaintance that "I thought I was better than everyone, now that I was in

university”. The comments were not surprising, and I would be remiss to ignore them. Climbing up the social ladder includes struggle, questions about identity and feelings of ambiguity, and why successful upward mobility requires more than a university degree (Spiegler, 2018).

I started as a part-time student. Over time I built up a quiet resilience, pursuing my goals and adjusting to make night courses fit while raising three daughters (aged 8, 5 & 3) and managing a wholesale produce company with my spouse. I learned to share only with those who could celebrate my success and sit with me in my failures and doubts. I gradually began to view education different, as a way of thinking, part of life-long learning and moving away from the working-class notion that education is a “means to an end” or not for the “like of me”. My goal was to complete my undergraduate degree before my daughters’ began theirs - that did not happen.

I was offered a full-time youth pastor position at a local church. From childhood, I found myself in roles of advocacy or intervening in bullying situations which led to volunteer work in various areas, including homelessness, youth, sexual assault crisis, mental illness, migrant worker support and foster care. My work as a youth pastor opened up international opportunities such as relief work in New Orleans (hurricane Katina, 2005) and Haiti (earthquake, 2010), along with development in Guatemala and mission trips to Jamaica and Mexico. Baines (2011) states, “anyone who has immersed themselves in a culture other than their own will be confronted, at some point, with fundamental questions regarding their own identity” (p. 226). Significant moments of self-reflexivity began to unearth preconceptions of whiteness, privilege and bias as I came ‘face to face’ with my thoughts, feelings, and motives. Bourdieu proposes “a ‘reflexive sociology’- in which one recognises one’s biases, beliefs and assumptions....Self-critical knowledge that discloses the ‘sources of power’ and reveals ‘the reasons that explain social

asymmetries and hierarchies'" (Navarro, 2006, p. 15). This process of awareness can itself become "a powerful tool to enhance social emancipation (Navarro, 2006, p. 15).

Disillusioned by the androcentric culture of my work environment and oblivious to my gendered habitus as the only female pastor among eight men for a period of five years - a timely encounter ensued at a conference with a researcher focused on studying female leadership in churches. Our early morning breakfast influenced my decision to continue my work at the church and giving me meaning and purpose as we brainstormed, collaborated and negotiated to provide female leadership development initiatives in the church - including a targeted program for young girls and teens. During my years in 'limbo,' the desire to complete my degree remained but I began to doubt that the opportunity of time would present itself as my responsibility at the church grew.

I can recount clearly my daughters' walk across the stages for their elementary, high school, and university graduations receiving their diplomas and degrees with immense pride and joy. I embraced the Ontario university fairs with the enthusiasm of a high school graduate. I hopped on a free nine-hour bus ride to Algoma University in Sault St. Marie with my middle daughter for a weekend to scout out programs. My youngest was interested in Lakehead University, and it became an excuse to fly to Thunder Bay for the weekend. And move-in days? I was first on the scene to help my daughters organize and decorate their dorm and introduce them to their neighbours (of course). I was invested and lived vicariously through their academic journeys from 2010 to 2015 as I dreamed of my return.

Finally, in late 2014, I reapplied for my part-time return to Brock University. In 2015, I began accumulating credits through condensed spring courses and using vacation weeks to do summer intensive courses while maintaining my full-time job as a family pastor. By this time,

my oldest daughter had completed her first degree at Brock University in Child Health and had moved on to the University of Toronto to do a Master's degree in Social Work. My middle daughter was in her third year of Media Studies with a minor in Women & Gender Studies at Trent University. My youngest was starting her university career in Social Work at Trent University.

My 'watershed moment' took place in 2017. Part of my role as the family pastor included overseeing the marriage ministry. My core values and belief in marriage equality came into conflict with the church's policy of traditional marriage when I offered to perform a spiritual wedding ceremony for a same-sex couple involved in the church. That decision cost me my career of more than twelve years - a decision not without pain but one I do not regret. This turning point made way for the opportunity to increase my course load to full time and finally complete my degree.

Convocation

No one would have known how often I visualized walking across the Brock University stage to receive my degree. The mere thought of it elicited tears. They also would not have known the internal battles that needed to be tamed along the way. At one point, I contemplated NOT attending my convocation, mocking my own feelings of excitement regarding my accomplishment and partially as an attempt to not 'showboat'. The act of humility is an important aspect for the working-class identity a strategy to "maintain an 'anti-pretentiousness', a common characteristic of working-class cultures" (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004, p. 114). Tired from all the mixed emotions enacted by my habitus and fear of regretting my minimalization of this accomplishment, I made advanced reservations for a quiet winery lunch for my spouse and one friend, who asked if she could attend the ceremony. My daughters lived in Australia, Ottawa and

Vancouver, making it impractical to attend. However, unbeknownst to their dad and me, with over a year of scheming, all three arrived home just two days before convocation, turning my quiet festivities into a week-long party!

Following the processional, awaiting the anticipated ten-second walk across the stage in the Brock University Beddis gym, I was unprepared for the words of Dr. Robyn Bourgeouis:

> I want to say that the hard work of post-secondary education is amplified for marginalized students. And I want to give a special shout-out to them here. So, to all the *first generation*, BIPOC, 2SLGBTQQIA…the poor and *working-class*, immigrant and refugee students, as well as students with disabilities and mental health issues, I see you. I am so proud of you! This system of post-secondary education is not always kind to students on the margins - yet you strived, you thrived, and you are here earning recognition for all your brilliance and hard work today. Congratulations! (June, 11, 2019)

I felt seen and understood at that moment but more than that the words "recognized for all your brilliance" pierced the heart of the little girl in me, deprived of that message.

I was aware of my working-class background but achieved upward mobility with my partner through our wholesale produce business of twenty-three years, eventually moving to the suburbs, travelling, volunteering, and adopting many middle-class values. Through my travels to the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, and Haiti, my eyes were opened to extreme poverty, where others faced challenges far beyond what I ever endured. Yes, I worked hard to get here. I was delayed in my accomplishments for various reasons but in no way had I ever identified as marginalized. Yet, at that moment, I intuitively felt the weight of her words affirming the hardship I had denied, releasing a small portion of the meritocratic discourse that I had adopted. It was a defining moment that allowed me to acknowledge and accept that it wasn't THIS hard for everyone, and she made that 'ok'.

I have only recently understood the intersections of my first-generation status, gender, and working-class identities. This inquisition began in one of my last undergraduate classes,

where I was merely asked to reflect on factors that contributed to my educational path to higher education. There was an exhilaration as I began to find answers to questions about behaviours or feelings that, up until this point, I was oblivious to. I was also proud to have overcome the ‘odds’ stacked against me as a FGS.

The majority of OECD countries have seen noteworthy increases in degree achievement by the younger population in the past decade (OECD, 2015). On average, 16% of 25-64-year-olds have earned a bachelor’s degree or equivalent, 11% have earned a master’s degree, and about 1% have earned a doctoral degree or equivalent (OECD 2011, p. 13). According to the OECD (2011), I am among 4% of individuals aged 45-54 to have post-secondary credentials that I did not have at age 35-44 (p. 13). In addition, I belong with the 3.7% of the women to obtain a bachelor’s degree more than 15 years after graduating from high school (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 122). Of that 3.7%, I belong to a group of 1% who continued to graduate studies (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 129). The trajectory for someone like me is not very promising based on choices at crucial transition points that are shaped mainly by external structures of social class and gender (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008).

These insights turned into a personal breakthrough and shifted my Master’s research topic. This thesis narrates THAT story, turning personal experience into scholarship. It is here that I invite you to join me on this ‘up close’ and personal journey to share in the victories and pain and to deepen your perception of the distinct obstacles encountered by not just one but seven first generation female students.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Keep a little space in your heart for the improbable. You won't regret it."
- Elizabeth Warren
(first generation female student)

Although scholarship is growing, the narrow representation of qualitative research and the lack of diversity in FGFS's lived experiences is timely, relevant, and generative for my Master's thesis. It is a privilege as a FGFS originating from a working-class family to be afforded the opportunity to broaden the understanding of this group within academia. This research project studies FGFSs within a Canadian context addressing the limited qualitative narratives representing the unique barriers FGFSs face, intersecting class and gender (Kim et al., 2021) - barriers that need to be addressed to "alleviate economic inequality and interrupt intergenerational poverty" (O'Hara, 2018). Reay (2017) states that "No child should be left in poverty, written off educationally, and viewed as having a lower value than other children whose main difference is that they have had the good fortune to be born into more privileged families (p.198). Higher levels of awareness make us better equipped to support the needs of FGFSs.

This research project uses autoethnography to describe FGFS's journeys to and through higher education. The word autoethnography broken down is auto (self) + ethno (culture) + graphy (scientific study of). This genre involves what Sparkes (2000) calls "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (p. 21). Typically writing in this way is communicating information or facts about oneself or the world however, "it can also be a method of discovery and analysis in which form and content are inseparable" (Richardson, 1994, p. 516).

I will analyse and describe FGFS's stories using Bourdieu's concept of habitus and critical feminist theory. Although differences occur in the lives of FGSs, Bourdieu's concept of

habitus is useful in understanding how upward mobility is experienced and influenced (Spiegler, 2018). Accompanying FGFS's climb up the social ladder is a unique set of cultural capitals and experiences that are not valued in academia, making their struggle to fit in more common (Holden, 2021; Spiegler, 2018). You will hear the participant's stories, including the layered costs of pursuing their academic dreams, which at times seems too hard to accomplish or far from their reach. You will see their resilience and perseverance as you encounter the intersecting barriers of their working-class gendered identities and counter-cultural attitudes. You will read about their resistance to messages that attempt to confine, shape, constrain and even condemn their aspirations.

This chapter features the purpose and research question, lays out the theoretical framework used to describe the experiences of FGFSs, and underscores the significance of this research. The subsequent chapters include a literature review, methods, findings, and discussion. On a final note, and as a caveat to the reader, this is not a traditional standard thesis. I provide personal commentary throughout as it relates. These pieces are woven throughout the text in their rightful place as equally important and relevant content, inviting the reader to join me in the conversation by reflecting, affirming, and confronting their own educational stories as they consider what is presented here.

What is the Purpose of This Research?

This qualitative, intersectional research helps fill the gap in FGFS's narratives from a class-based perspective that connects family history and prompts my research question: How do first-generation female students experience their journey to and through higher education? Answers to this question can best be understood through qualitative research methods that inquire about this group's experiences. This research aims to describe FGFS's academic journeys

by capturing and recounting their lived experiences and expanding understanding and interpretation of this intersectional and heterogeneous population.

Why Does This Even Matter?

There has been a steady increase in university enrolment of first-generation students (FGSs) over the past several decades (Statistics Canada, 2016). Thirty percent of all Canadian students are first generation and are defined as students whom "at least partial post-secondary completion by one parent" but did not complete a four-year university degree (Grayson, 2018, p. 513). According to English (2020), assuming a university identity often produces feelings of isolation at home and on campus, creating an identity crisis among FGSs and, in particular, low-income students (English, 2020). It is common for FGSs to fall behind their peers, attend graduate school less often, earn lower GPAs and work at a slower pace (O'Hara, 2018). Most FGSs are unaware that they are disadvantaged until graduate school and, even then, are unsure of what they need to be adequately supported (White, 2016).

Class

Although first-generation and low income are not synonymous, they often intersect (English, 2020). According to the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (USA), across all institution types, "only 11 percent of low-income (*below $25,000 per year*), irst-generation students had earned bachelor's degrees compared to 55 percent of their more advantaged peers" after six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p 2.).

Class is defined as a social construct that breaks society down into hierarchical categories such as upper, middle, working and lower (Veenstra, 2010). Class has been ascribed multiple meanings. Some scholars rely on hierarchies in occupations; others look at a combination of

educational attainment, employment and income defined as socioeconomic status. Fleras (2005) suggests that class can be distinguished by "persons with similar family backgrounds with respect to wealth, power, and prestige and share a common relationship to scarce and valued resources" (p .41).

Bourdieu builds off German philosopher Karl Marx's idea that economic capital determines individual position in society.

> Social class is not defined by a property (not even the most determinant one, such as the volume and composition of capital) nor by a collection of properties (of sex, age, social origin, ethnic origin - proportion of blacks and whites, for example, or natives and immigrants - income, educational level, etc.), nor even by a chain of properties strung out from a fundamental property (position in the relations of production) in a relation of cause and effect, conditioner and conditioned; but by the structure of relations between all of the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices. (Bourdieu 1984, p.106)

The French Elite's tastes and practices are discussed by Bourdieu (1984), stressing the 'aesthetic gaze' of high culture as a way to sustain class boundaries covertly by excluding those who are disinterested or do not have an appreciation for identified objects. For example, art does not serve a practical function for the poor or working class, and thus can be used to sustain class boundaries by excluding those who do not have an appreciation for it. Bourdieu further expands his class definition as a social and cultural phenomenon encompassing tastes, education, leisure activities, social networks, politics, and the type of media you consume (Veenstra, 2010). Class distinctions are no longer as straightforward and fixed as in the past but a changing blend of money, education, leisure activities, knowledge, connections and employment.

As financial inequality grows globally, class distinctions become more noticeable. Yet within Canadian culture, class is often discussed as part of the past or ignored entirely, with most Canadians labelling themselves as middle class (Veenstra, 2010). Veenstra (2010) lists several Canadian practices that are considered middle to upper class, such as visiting an art gallery,

historical site, museum or conservation area, attending dance classes, the opera, classical or theatre performances, playing a musical instrument, downhill skiing, golf, watching sports, listening to CBC radio, using a library and volunteerism. Although some of these have changed in the past decade, such as the use of the internet, volunteerism (required in high school), and certain sports, some activities remain out of reach for some working-class families due to cost.

Class distinctions are drawn from deeply ingrained societal narratives, ideologies, and dispositions contextualized within the societal hierarchy. People placed into social categories using negative stereotypes become the dominant discourse where being low income becomes an 'individual pathology of blame' (Rank, 2011). Emphasizing blame on individuals leaves a gap in the exploration of the structural and political forces that sabotage individual lives. The conceptualization of low-income people is relevant to class structure as they are often defined as lazy and unwilling to work and applies to far fewer than we may think.

Class distinctions can be revealed in defensiveness, and attitudes of superiority that are revealed in complex emotions around morality and ethics (Grabb & Gyppy, 2009; Reay, 2017). Class discourses perpetuate myths of personal deficiency, create distance and discord between people groups and lead to 'common sense' political solutions such as reducing social programs without understanding the cost or the benefits of how we conceptualize poor people. Domination is secured in this system as the focus shifts to regulating the poor and creating jobs where public investments to find solutions affecting the poor are not made by governments, and Canadians don't demand them either (Silver, 2014).

One of the detrimental consequences is that children growing up low income may internalize the belief that they are inferior, producing feelings of powerlessness, sadness, anger and lead to self-harm, alcoholism or drug abuse (Silver, 2014). The more internalized this belief

becomes, the more it reinforces the cycle of harmful actions and behaviours and provides affirmation of superiority and self-righteousness to those who are not poor. These messages, in turn, become internalized identity markers that serve as self-fulfilling prophecies and influence how a child grows up and perceives their capabilities. Social class is significant to analyzing FGFS's educational journeys as it is reproduced in priorities, behaviours and hegemonic class discourses, influencing 'who you are' and where you are going (Stahl, 2018).

Gender

The past three decades have seen a significant increase in women's education in Canada, from 14% aged 25-54 earning a university degree in 1990 compared to 28% in 2009 (Turcotte, 2011). More recently, 40.7% of women aged 25-34 have a bachelor's degree or higher, which has increased from 32.8% in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2016). More women than men enrol in and graduate from university (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2012). The majority of the growth has been in traditionally female fields such as education, nursing, arts, languages, sociology, and psychology instead of historically male fields such as mathematics, architecture, engineering, computers and information sciences and technologies (CAUT, 2012).

Women with bachelor's degrees have the lowest unemployment rates, earning approximately "40% more than women with a college diploma and around 60% more than women with a high school diploma" (Statistics Canada, 2016, para. 1). Women have much to gain from higher education, often enjoying a higher standard of living and haing better health and family stability (Hout, 2012). More women than men state that their education contributed to their personal and intellectual growth (Wang & Parker, 2011).

The Institute for Women's Policy Research also found that single mothers with a degree

are 69% less likely to live in poverty, earning 62% more than single mothers with a high school diploma. Degree attainment for single mothers inadvertently closes the post-secondary achievement gap that impacts future generations (Gault et al., 2018). Although, in general, women's participation in higher education has increased, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) point out that FGFSs were significantly less likely than first-generation males to persist, emphasizing the existence of gender-based inequalities.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was coined in 1989 by a legal scholar and civil rights advocate, Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) theorized intersectionality as multiple forms of inequality and disadvantage such as race, class, and gender that can be intensified when overlapped, shaping people's lives and options. She suggests that our lives cannot be explained by single categories but by experiences of multiple oppression and impacting experiences during school (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). "Intersectionality opens up conceptual spaces to identify the gaps and silences of single-category analyses and approaches, as well as the mutually constitutive relationships between categories" (Tefera et al., 2018, p. 15). Crenshaw (2018) explains, "identity isn't simply a self-contained unit. It is a relationship between people and history, people and communities, people and institutions, so schools do a good job when they understand that…you can't change outcomes without understanding how they come about" (Video, 0:01:10).

Using an intersectional approach to analyze FGFS's academic journeys provide an in-depth understanding of overlapping identities of race, class and gender.

Significance of the Research

Knowledge from this thesis is valuable for early childhood educators, teachers, guidance counsellors, youth workers and parents to ensure equitable support and opportunities for all children. Ideally, this research will give insight into the best point of early intervention. At a university level where habitus is felt most, this research can bolster meaningful programs for FGFSs. Finally, professors hold positions of power in spaces that have previously not welcomed the 'likes of me'. My habitus may be invisible to you. The climate of lecture halls, classrooms and departments can be a highly motivating experience for FGFSs when recognizing, encouraging mentoring, and taking a few extra minutes to draw out potential. Unaddressed, girls from working-class families can be set up for a future of precarious work, limiting personal potential and repeating a generational cycle of low socioeconomic status.

Theoretically Speaking: Pierre Bourdieu and Critical Feminism

While engaging a critical feminist analysis, I draw specifically on critical sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to help navigate the challenging terrain of working-class women's journeys to and through higher education. I argue that Bourdieu's concept of habitus, combined with the intersections of class and gender are essential frameworks for understanding their academic journeys. Combined, these theoretical approaches allow for an in-depth description of the complex lives of FGFSs.

Bourdieu's Theory of Habitus and Capitals

Bourdieu's theoretical framework of field, capital and habitus are widely used to discuss inequalities in education and help understand the reproduction of inequality through institutions, commonly used to help understand the experiences of marginalized groups within society.

Fields are defined as socially structured spaces, each encompassing its own rules and values (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Education is an example of one such field: religion, law, family, work, and art are a few others. Each field is connected and impacted by the power of *Doxa,* explained as unquestioned opinions, beliefs, and assumptions, also known as the 'rules of the game' (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Individuals attempt to learn the 'rules' in order to navigate a successful path. The structure and function of a field are determined by those who hold positions of power awarding specific capital while rejecting others (Bourdieu, 1986).
A field is where 'the game is played,' and different groups compete for power (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu conceptualizes capital into three forms - economic, social, and cultural. *Economic* capital refers to money and assets such as cash, inheritance, or property. Certain capitals are much harder to attain. For instance, for working-class children, economic capital is often a barrier to developing skills through extra-curricular activities. Finances for additional resources such as books, computers or tutoring are unavailable, limiting children from low-income families.

Social capital is defined as the accumulation of social connections and the ability to build quality relationships that lead to mutual networking (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital can be both actual and potential resources, including networks of institutional relationships, such as professors and acquaintances on social media accounts such as Linked In or Facebook. Although social capital is the most accessible, it is often impacted by working-class parenting. Working-class children tend to be less comfortable speaking to authority figures, therefore limiting their ability to build relationships, thus becoming another source of social inequality (Lareau, 2011; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Bourdieu (1986) defines *cultural capital* as "instruments for the appropriation of

symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (p. 488). Cultural capital includes non-economic sources, including knowledge, tastes, and skills reproduced by privileged groups that contribute to increased social status (Wallace, 2018). The current concept of cultural capital runs somewhere between the original narrow context of French high culture analyzed by Bourdieu with an emphasis on language, cognitive habits, knowledge and a broader view of Western cultural tastes prone to be more obscure and less fixed (Andersen & Hansen 2012; Lamont, 1992). These assets are a combination of preferences, education (titles, degrees), extra-curricular, possessions, behaviour, wealth, possession of diverse cultural genres (cultural competence), social connections and self-presentation, which constructs social status and provides social advantage (Erickson, 1996; Spiegler, 2018). Bourdieu (1986) states:

> The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me in the course of research as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (p. 243)

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital seeks to illustrate that people develop strategies to fit the structures of the society in which they live through the accumulation of cultural capital. So, to only discuss education as an economic investment with a 'social rate of return' ignores the impact of cultural reproduction (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Economic and social capital impact one another; however, the amount of individual cultural capital influences how much economic capital one can earn (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) summarizes:

> ...economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and social capital, made up of social obligations

> (‘connections’), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility. (p.16)

Capital produces unequal access to institutions as the amount and types of capital individuals accumulate determine where and how far they can go (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Habitus

While class, field, and capital are significant to education, the concept of *‘habitus’* provides an additional layer of depth to understanding and analyzing FGFS’s academic journeys. Habitus is ingrained habits, beliefs, skills, values, and dispositions that constitute an individual’s worldview, feeling and thinking (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Reay, 1995). It is an internalized cognitive structure of past experiences, opportunities and childhood socialization that structures one’s future in the way of thoughts that lead to actions (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Habitus is also embodied as a way of physically being in the world, determining how one’s body occupies and moves in space, across and within fields (Bourdieu, 2001; McLeod, 2005). It is expressed in how an individual walks or talks, the type of food eaten and clothing worn which is rooted in family upbringing and class (Reay, 1995). Those from similar educational backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, professions and social classes often have a corresponding habitus. Each social class has its own habitus that defines ‘who you are’ (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Gendered Habitus

The concept of habitus was originally developed concerning class; however, Bourdieu and others (Edgerton et al., 2014; Reay, 1995) have expanded its use to analyze gender disadvantage. McNay (2000) argues that the “habitus expresses the idea that bodily identity is not natural but involves the inscription of dominant social norms or the cultural arbitrary upon

the body" (p. 36). The body is an approach to social control, and the habitus explains the personification of societal norms (McNay, 2000). Bourdieu (2001) explains that:

> The biological appearances and the very real effects that have been produced in bodies and minds by a long collective labour of socialization for the biological and biologicization of the social combine to reverse the relationship between causes and effects and to make a naturalized social construction ('genders' as sexually characterized habitus) appear as the grounding in nature of the arbitrary decision which underlies both reality and the representation of reality. (p. 3)

A gendered habitus can explain both the cognitive internalization from socialization in early childhood and the habits of taste and distinction that shape differences in how girls and boys speak, stand, sit, and even choose clothing based on a gendered culture. Bourdieu holds to his final analysis that women's progress in some areas conceal the persistence of inequality in the positions of men and women. The use of Bourdieu's habitus addresses the state of eternal reproduction of inequality. Pointing to the gendered body to expose the power relations within the social world contributes to inequality and affects female students' decisions to pursue higher education.

Habitus Transformation

Bourdieu holds that the habitus is more than just the "norms inculcated upon the body" but also the act of living through these norms (McNay, 2000). In this manner, habitus may be transformed ". . . by the effect of social trajectory leading to conditions of living different from initial ones" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 116). Our choices and actions also shape our habitus, meaning we are not entirely bound by our past (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). It is not viewed as a "determining principle, but as a generative structure (McNay, 2000, p. 36). Bourdieu (1990a) states:

> Habitus is, in fact adaptive and incrementally modifiable in the face of variant circumstances. That is, the dispositions of habitus are enduring but not unchanging: habitus, as the product of social conditionings, and thus of history...is endlessly

> transformed, either in a direction that reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectation encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with these expectations, or in a direction that transforms it and, for instance, raises or lowers the level of expectations and aspirations. (p. 116)

Habitus can be modified, restructuring the habitus to appreciate new tastes and develop new habits (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). New tastes can develop from exposure to various cultural experiences, practises, and opportunities by entering a new social field (input). Transformation is possible if the habitus is open to change in the face of new environments and experiences (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). A person can adapt to the social structure by negotiating with their primary socialized self that encompasses ingrained habits, beliefs, skills, values, and dispositions as they choose to assume new tastes. The habitus shifts, transforming from its primary state and leading to new ways of thinking, decision making and actions.

For Bourdieu, the relationship between field and habitus links social structure with the individual mental structure to generate practice or behaviour (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). The habitus is temporal, expressing itself in practice based on the world's expectations (McNay, 2000). When the social and cognitive structures are aligned, they reinforce each other (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). However, when the field and habitus are at odds, new experiences and information can "gradually or radically transform habitus, which in turn creates the possibility for the formation of new and different dispositions" (Lehmann, 2009a, p. 139). Although difficult, "habitus is even subject to conscious change through 'socio-analysis', a sort of 'self-work' that involves processes of 'awareness and of pedagogic effort' (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 29; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). While habitus is ingrained from the past and carried in the body, it can continue to evolve, making it possible for individuals to match their aspirations,

independently and freely making personal choices in the present and future (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

"Bourdieu emphasizes that the frame of socialization, the kinds of cultural capital obtained, the developed habitus and the image of one's place in the world differs, depending on children's respective class backgrounds" (Spiegler, 2018, p. 861). Children from middle and upper-class families inherit success. Suppose we accept that the habitus can evolve and that it can also operate at a conscious, deliberate level; in that case, we can understand that social reproduction is not inevitable (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Considering the formation and transformation of habitus allows us to deepen our understanding and explanation of the barriers, resilience, aspirations, and successes of FGFSs.

Using the concept of habitus to discuss FGFSs highlights the dynamic interplay of internalizing a 'gendered' and 'classed' habitus. Career choices are formed based on experience, exposure to occupations and advice from social networks filtered through a class context (Lehman, 2009). The invisible and often unconscious process of 'family' habitus impacts working-class girls as they make decisions about the future, notably higher education.

Critiques of Bourdieu

To some, Bourdieu's theories and concepts are overly deterministic where individuals are "destined to recreate the conditions of their own disadvantage," leaving no room for "individual agency, innovation, and change" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 199). Bourdieu's over-focus on social reproduction has led his critics to produce interpretations that social change is impossible (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004). Arnot (2002) explains that "haunting his theory is the implication that

any planned programme for change . . . can have little impact against social determinism, whether it be class or sexual domination" (p. 49).

Bourdieu's focus was not on gender and he was unapologetic about his attention to class; thus, some feminist scholars have overtly dismissed his work (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004). Traditional feminists even argue that it is unnecessary to engage 'male high theory' written by Bourdieu or Foucault as this is a form of subordination in and of itself (McLeod, 2005). To confront his critics, Bourdieu wrote 'La Domination Masculine,' which draws on his research from the North African society of Kabyle.

Class is relevant to Bourdieu's analysis, but when understood through a critical feminist lens, class becomes more complicated by gender. Some feminists use Bourdieu, adding their own layers of gender and gendered oppression. Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been expanded on in gender and race research to understand the economic and social conditions that expose the reality of privilege, lack of equity and exploitation. Feminist writer McNay (2000) questions why more feminists have overlooked Bourdieu's work as he explicitly considers how masculine domination is reproduced in the habitus of women by focusing on the biological difference between males and females where unreasoned power relations have developed into naturalized ideologies.

Judith Butler argues that the concept of the habitus submits to domination and authority merely upon entering the field, as the field itself is the 'pre-condition for habitus.' The discrepancy - where Bourdieu states complicity, Butler, argues one-directional effects of the field influencing the habitus (McLeod, 2005). The habitus, Butler (1998) argues, is "a kind of regularized activity that conforms to the 'objective' demands of a given field" (p. 115). Nentwich et al. (2014) points out when:

> Looking at change, Bourdieu provides us a tool for investigating the symbolic power at work in a specific field and time, while Butler, with her notion of parody, explains how one can change what Bourdieu calls doxa. When people subvert the dominant understanding in place by displacing it, they can create new meanings. (p.15)

Bourdieu and Butler focus on different aspects of agency and change (Lovell, 2000).

Feminism

"Feminism begins with the premise that women's and men's positions in society are the result of social, not natural or biological factors" (Calixte et al., 2010, p. 1). People understand feminism in many ways, yet its' primary usage is to achieve equality in social, political, economic, religious, and cultural realms. Feminism explores stereotyping, discrimination, objectification, oppression, and patriarchy. Calixte et al. (2010) state that:

> The theory provides a framework for explaining the complex connections between peoples' everyday lives and larger social, political, and economic forces. Feminist theories typically offer an analysis of systems of power in society and indicate how the unequal distribution of this power shapes the lives of men and women. (p.1)

Smith (1987) argues that women had been excluded from research. She discovered that women's lived experiences at home were at odds with her working theories as an academic. She wrote:

> Sociology claims to speak of the same lived world I inhabited with my children, and yet somehow, I could not find the world I knew at home with my children in the texts of sociological discourse. The sociologies and psychologies I had learned were not capable of speaking of what I knew as a matter of my life. (p. 157)

Historically, women's experiences have been framed, interpreted, and understood in concepts and language developed by educated white men (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Feminists have taken issue with who holds knowledge, examining how gender positions 'knowing' (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

According to Calixte et al. (2010), "what remains fundamental to each feminist theory is

a commitment to social change through the eradication of women's oppression" (p. 1). Rhode (1990) argues that a framework sufficient for confronting female oppression must also reprehend other forms of injustice. "Focusing on women's actual circumstances helps reinforce the connection between feminist political and analytic agendas" but also raises its own set of difficulties, often neglecting other oppressions such as race and class (hooks, 2004; Rhode, 1990, p. 622).

Gender changes the way education is experienced as a learner, teacher, scholar, and leader (Eddy et al., 2017). For example, classroom settings can be analyzed for gender inequality by examining social role interactions and learning about students' experiences. Sexism, racism, and classism can be a means to perpetuate inequality and are often used to treat different groups of students as if they are not capable of learning and deemed to a specific social order. Lambert (1997) explains, "feminist theory offers the potential to challenge hidden assumptions and beliefs and thereby affect change in ways that can improve the lives of those who have been invisible, powerless, and disenfranchised" (p. 4). The main concern is that the difference in treatment produces discriminating life chances for marginalized individuals and unwarranted advantages for the dominant group (Marine, 2019).

Critical Feminism: What is it?

Critical feminism emerged from and is a form of critical theory. Critical theory is to represent multiple perspectives, not just the elite. It is interested in the relationship between culture, ideology, and power, mainly how they are produced, reproduced and changed.

> The basic approach is the same as critical theory except that critical feminist theory focuses on gender ideology. Critical feminists study the ways that gender ideology is produced, reproduced, resisted, and changed in and through the everyday experience of men and women. (Coakley, 2009, pp. 45-46)

Structural inequalities are pervasive, becoming ingrained in our thinking because of implicit gender biases. We are indoctrinated with subtle (or not so subtle) messages about gender and heteronormative gender roles within society from birth. Such gender bias impacts all areas of our lives, including how we see ourselves and others, thus influencing behaviour and decision making.

> Critical feminists focus on issues of power and seek to explain the origins and consequences of gender relations, especially those that privilege men. They view gender inequality as a result of exploitation of women in a male-dominated society. The goal of most critical feminist theories is to create "ideological and organization changes" that lead to gender equality. (Coakley, 2009, p. 46)

Critical feminist theory is sensitive to the shifts in power relations as culture, gender ideology, and power constantly change and impact each other. A critical feminist perspective focuses on issues of power and social justice, marginalization, and linking social, political, historical, and cultural contexts to explain the origins and consequences of gender relations, especially with those that privilege men (Collins, 1990; Lather, 1991). For example, critical feminism is set apart from other inquiries by focusing on gender equality and believing it cannot be achieved under the existing ideological and institutional structures (Rhode, 1990). Critical feminists' strength is building on similarities and differences - making it vital to have and use many theories instead of only one (Wigginton, & Lafrance, 2019, Rhode, 1990).

Using critical feminist theory as a theoretical framework allows for different ways of thinking about resistance and encourages questioning hegemonic understandings of oppression (de Saxe, 2012). It values the experience and interactions of individuals, critiques systems of power and examines power relations and discourses (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Critical theorists "mine the absence and presence of language and the impact of utterances as enhancing or attenuating dominance" (Marine, 2019, p. 32). Critical feminism challenges us to re-examine our existing

understandings of knowledge, power, and social spaces of liberation and draws upon other critical approaches, such as critical race theory, with the objective of both challenging distributions of power (de Saxe, 2012; Rhode, 1990).

Bourdieu acknowledges that change has occurred in the wake of feminism, exposing the 'taken for granted' hierarchy of men and women (Bourdieu, 2001). He argues that the most significant changes have been made in the education system and family structure. Bourdieu proposes that structures of social space shape individual dispositions impacting how individuals act and make decisions, thus reinforcing the gendered order (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004). Thus, ingrained gender assumptions and stereotypes within society contribute to the types of work performed by men and women (Gazso, 2010). "Hierarchical gender relations are embedded in bodily *hexis* (habitus), that is to say, arbitrary power relations are inculcated upon the body in the naturalized form of gender identity" (McNay, 2000, p. 37).

The strength of the masculine order is in the unquestioned male-centred worldview (Bourdieu, 2001). It is the worldview in which all things are measured and requires no legitimization (Bourdieu, 2001). Bourdieu (2001) writes:

> ...that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural. And I have also seen masculine domination, and the way it is imposed and suffered, as the prime example of this paradoxical submission and effect of what I call symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims. (pp.1-2)

Symbolic violence is exerted through communication, cognition, feeling, and mistaking a person's identity, which shapes the victim's way of thinking, speaking, and acting (Bourdieu, 2001). Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) describe symbolic violence as "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (p. 167) and denotes violence to people's perceptions and beliefs. McNay (2000) explains, "women become implicated within a

circular logic where the cultural arbitrary is imposed upon the body in a naturalized form whose cognitive effects (Doxa) result in the further naturalization of arbitrary social differences" (p. 37). In this way, individuals can become complicit in their own oppression, which differs considerably from gender oppression, where a conscious power or strategic performative activity exists (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004).

Feminists took up Bourdieu's work, and their revisioning of his work offers this study a way to analyze FGFSs using the concept of habitus and conceptualizing power relations within the social world that impact female students' decisions to pursue higher education.

Summary

A gendered and working-class habitus contributes to a girl's sense of belonging in different fields and has severe implications on young girls' perception of self, impacting decisions for higher education and social mobility. Critical feminist theory and Bourdieu's concept of habitus have been adopted to describe the FGFS's journey because, when combined, these theoretical approaches produce rich descriptions of the intersectional lived experiences of FGFSs. In the next chapter, I will provide a review of existing literature pertaining to this study's topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Mainstream media has heightened awareness around the steady increase of FGSs university enrolment over the past several decades. Elevated expectations accompany being the 'first in the family' as students forge new paths, set an example for siblings, make parents proud, and embrace opportunities to follow dreams their parents never could (Lesavage, 2018). Efforts to understand FGSs as a homogeneous group leave out the complexity that the intersections of race, class, and gender highlight. Examining these intersections can provide a more holistic view of the barriers faced by FGFSs and help us understand their decisions to attend higher education. Professors, teachers, counsellors, guidance counsellors, and parents will benefit from increased knowledge when supporting and encouraging students' aspirations and academic decisions.

This literature review provides an overview of FGFS's obstacles associated with social, political, and cultural factors and their role in social mobility. In pursuing gender equality, it is vital to understand the distinct barriers girls and women face when coming from working-class homes. Exploring the academic journey of FGFSs provides a deeper understanding of how habitus can impact present and future decision-making. We can also look to the past to understand historical or cultural assumptions, socially constructed ideas, and expectations unique to women's role in the family that compete with their desire to study (Brooks, 2015; Hughes, 2002; Webber, 2017). I provide existing literature in this chapter concerning FGS statistics and characteristics overlapping race, class, and gender and setting the context for analysis of the FGFS's narratives in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

First-Generation Students

There are many similarities among FGSs, such as coming from lower-income households, a tendency to be older, a disproportionate number of ethnic minorities, lower test

grades, lower grade point averages and less orientation toward advanced degrees (Spiegler, 2018). In addition, Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) note that FGSs tend to be less confident, less likely to ask for help, enrol in college preparatory classes, self-report weak math skills, are less engaged in university life, seldom interact with faculty, rely on peers for academic advice, feel torn between family culture and university culture, experience less family support, are more overwhelmed by course load, work longer hours and often hold both work and family responsibilities, in comparison to those who had at least one parent who attended university. Aside from being an ethnic minority or enrolling in college preparatory classes, this accurately describes my FGS experience.

The ‘label’ of FGS does not come without confusion. The definitions vary widely within the literature. For example, they can be defined as children of parents who have not completed a four-year degree but have university experience, students with only one parent having attended university, the first in the family to attend, or students whose parents and siblings have not attended college or university (Bach, 2017; Child et al., 2015; Grayson, 2018; Hébert, 2017; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; O’Shea, 2016). Some authors combine first-generation college and first-generation university students in their research (Rascon, 2012). There is a distinction between college and university, especially in Canada. For instance, college typically refers to a two-year program that grants a diploma, although, in recent years, some community colleges now offer four-year degrees. These programs usually focus on a specific vocation, whereas in the United States, college is a term used to refer to the equivalent of a four-year university program in Canada.

Children of parents who finished high school attend two-year college programs at the same rate as children of parents who attended university (Childs et al., 2015). Combining these

groups complicates FGS data. For this reason, it is essential to clearly define the term to accurately represent the group researched in this study. I used Ishitani (2006) and Pascarella et al.'s (2004) definition of FGS is a student whose parents never attended college or university. This study does not include students whose parents began and did not complete a degree or certification. The focus is solely on students whose parent's highest level of education is a high school diploma or less, as this group is seriously under-represented (Childs et al., 2015).

The first-generation status is a construct that intersects with race, class and gender. Finnie et al. (2011) found that "being a first-generation PSE (Post-secondary education) student is larger than the effects for any of the other under-represented groups" (p. 22) and lists eight conditions that are not conducive to an environment where higher education is discussed, planned for, or encouraged:

1. Those from low-income families;
2. Those from families with no history of attending PSE (i.e., "first-generation" students);
3. Those living in rural and isolated areas that are far from PSE institutions;
4. First-and second-generation immigrants;
5. Those whose mother tongue is French *(unless from Quebec – italics added)*
6. Single-parent (or other "non-traditional") families;
7. Indigenous or First Nations ancestry; and
8. Those with disabilities. (Finnie et al., 2011, p. 3)

The label of FGS is further complicated by race, class and gender, external structures and family habitus.

With more FGSs prevalent in universities, discourses often portray them as academically and culturally deficient (Wildhagen, 2015). Wildhagen (2015) questions whether labelling

students as first generation is beneficial, suggesting that the category serves institutional interests by creating a powerful sense of institutional identity while simultaneously thrusting them into individualistic achievement immersed in meritocratic beliefs. Meritocracy is a dominant discourse woven through society's fabric, reinforcing the idea that everyone has equal opportunity (Sears & Cairns, 2015). Meritocracy is reinforced by the ideology that if individuals demonstrate hard work, effort and talent, they can achieve upward mobility (Lareau, 2011). It is a myth to believe that everyone has equal opportunity to achieve status and wealth based on merit as this "rejects the notion that parents social location systematically shapes children's life experiences and outcomes" (Lareau, 2011, p. 235). It negates the reality that systemic barriers such as race, class and gender can discount an individual from entering higher education in the first place, preventing the accumulation of institutional capital.

Wildhagen (2015) argues that FGSs are constructed as a population who have overcome 'class' barriers, noting:

> In this way, first generation comes to stand as a hybrid class identity for students who are in the process of gaining upward social mobility, allowing them to continue thinking about themselves in individualistic and autonomous terms while obliquely acknowledging their social class of origin. (p. 290)

Education often strongly influences social mobility and improves more for those at the bottom of the income spectrum than for those further up. Race, class, gender, income, family background and disabilities are among the most significant barriers to social mobility. Langman (2012) suggests "the first-generation category may help to preserve power relations by offering students "emotional gratifications" (e.g., "I have merit and deserve to be here") that help them to avoid anxiety about their subordinate status while obfuscating antagonistic class relations" (p. 144).

Gaps in Literature

There is a substantial body of literature on FGS; however, many studies are from American large-scale data sets using quantitative research designs that focus primarily on the challenges of transitioning to university (Buddel, 2018; Lehmann, 2007). Lehmann (2009b) suggests using different methodological approaches to explore the lived experiences of FGS. Although some of the present quantitative studies include authors' experiences as secondary, Lehmann (2007) notes that there is a gap in the literature regarding the narratives of FGS from a class-based perspective that examines the connection between family history and academic behaviour and decisions (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Buddel, 2018). Female FGS tend to be researched separately, with little focus on the intersections of class and gender identities, making this topic ripe for research (Rascon, 2012).

Working Class Students

Although scholars have documented differences between social classes in university attendance and attainment, very few have addressed working-class students' experiences in higher education (Walpole, 2003). Walpole (2003) found that low-SES students studied less, spent more time working off-campus, and had lower levels of involvement and achievement. Eitel and Martin (2009) report that working-class students prioritized work over studying due to financial burdens. They are also less likely to apply to prestigious universities, receive less financial support, receive less encouragement and struggle with feelings of belonging (Kim et al., 2021).

It is not all doom and gloom for working-class students as they pride themselves on time management which is crucial for balancing school and work (Wilson & Kittleson, 2013). Neumeister and Rinker (2006) also note that working-class students see their background as an asset, having developed the characteristics and ingenuity to figure out university with little

support. Working-class FGSs are also motivated by a unique set of values. Manstead (2018) found that working-class individuals had higher levels of empathy than middle-class individuals and were more likely to help others in distress. They are portrayed as motivated to pursue higher education to make a difference for others, whether that be their children or a marginalized group, instead of social mobility, some of which is rooted in their own personal challenges (Bhatti, 2003). 69% of FGS say they want to help their families, compared to 39% of non-FGS (Stephens et al., 2012).

Reardon (2012) found that "the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is roughly 40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier," and as the income gap widens, the achievement gap follows (p. 19). *Brown vs. Board of Education* left a legacy where the gaps in racial achievement decreased; however, income-based gaps in test scores have risen, and the income achievement gap is now nearly twice as large as the black-white achievement gap (Erikson, 2015). More profoundly than ever, the role of class has a powerful outcome in determining the life paths open to a child (Lareau, 2011). Each class has distinct attributes or stereotypes that define identity, whereby "parent's social location systematically shapes children's life experience and outcomes" (Lareau, 2011, p. 235).

Classed Parenting

A dominant theme in research has indicated that parents' educational attainment has the most influence on outcomes and children. Buddel (2018) found a 30% less likelihood of a child attaining a degree compared to children where neither parent has earned a degree. Many factors impact an FGS's academic journey, but "it turns out that the family into which we are born, an

event over which we have no control matters quite a lot" (Lareau, 2011, p. 256). Lareau (2011) identifies two types of unconscious childrearing practices, 'concerted cultivation' and 'accomplishment of natural growth,' emphasizing that both are rooted in love. The concerted cultivation approach includes actively micro-managing extra-curricular activities to foster "talents, opinions and skills" and reasoning, negotiating and intervention on behalf of a child in school, and teaching children to advocate for themselves (Lareau, 2011). In contrast, the accomplishment of natural growth is more hands-off parenting giving the child space to grow independently. Children often spend more time with family, siblings and cousins. Parents use more directives where the child generally does not question or challenge. Regarding school, Lareau (2011) found that frustration, conflict and feelings of powerlessness arose between home and school as a result of childrearing practices.

While each parenting approach has advantages and disadvantages, one notably provides more privileges for children within society, particularly in the education field. The 'concerted cultivation' develops a sense of entitlement that prepares children for success, social acceptance, and social mobility. The 'accomplishment of natural growth' creates a sense of constraint, leaving children unprepared for navigating future expectations, reproducing class inequality, and limiting upward mobility. In some working-class homes, parents tend to stress a 'no-excuses', problem-solving ethos that encourages respect for teachers' authority through obedience and not being a 'burden' by seeking help (Calarco, 2014). Thus, it is more common for working-class children to grow up lacking the assertiveness to advocate for their needs and the skills to address authority - all of which are required for higher education and the labour market (Lareau, 2011).

Parents are "unaware that they are orienting their children in a specific way", behaviour that disadvantages children who sometimes become complacent early in their education (Lareau,

2011, p. 239). Although these generalizations are dichotomous, there is some overlap as Childs et al. (2015) found that some working-class parents instil in their young children a sense of possibility, that prepares and orients their children towards higher education and shows the importance of parental attitudes toward educational aspirations. Childs et al. (2015) found that communication, encouraging learning and nutrition were important but the two most influential are reading and participating in cultural activities and have been significantly connected to access to higher education (Childs et al., 2015). The point that Childs et al. (2015) makes is that "it matters more what a family does than what it has" (p. 13).

Recent Canadian research has indicated that a mother's education is an especially powerful predictor of educational attainment (Michalski et al., 2017). Mothers increasingly pass on the importance of education to daughters, and more so if she is the primary provider or has a university education (Minello & Blossfield, 2016). Poorly educated mothers might invest more in their daughters because they do not want them to have the same experience in life (Minello & Blossfield, 2016). These findings highlight the importance of conducting further research that focuses on female students and studying the barriers to higher education specific to women. It remains crucial to maintain government incentives and infrastructure to support the pursuit of higher education as it grants higher earnings over the course of a lifetime (OECD, 2015-16). The benefits of higher education for women go beyond economic capital. The social returns reported are better health, participation in volunteerism, increased trust and feeling empowered to be more engaged in society, mainly using their voice in government (OECD, 2011).

Intergenerational Transmission

Cultural capital (knowledge, tastes, and skills) impacts access to institutions as the amount and as stated in Chapter one the types of capital determine where and how far an

individual can go (Wallace, 2018; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Throughout the life course, parents play a role in motivating, guiding and acting as role models and setting expectations for achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979, Bourdieu 2000). The transmission of cultural and social capital focuses not only on values, goals, and dispositions but also on strategies to reach these goals (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). “The result is ‘planful competence’ that is uniquely concerned with the capacity to select social settings that best match an individual’s goals, values, and strengths” (Clausen 1991, p. 676).

Cultural capital is transmitted intergenerationally through the exposure and knowledge of a culture. It is the most complex capital as it is subconsciously taught in early childhood through a hidden form of hereditary transmission directing a child towards a specific position in life (Bourdieu, 1986). Most importantly, “the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family” and the ‘kind’ of cultural capital the family embodies (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). The main differences in transmission and accumulation are the age at which it begins, the amount of cultural capital available, and the length of time a family can support a child or young adult with the free time to pursue cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

It has been found that middle-class children know more words per child before elementary school than working-class children, thus producing a gap from the start (Reay, 2018). Becker’s (1964) findings show that academic ability and talent are the by-product of devoted time and cultural capital. Bourdieu states, “the point of my work is to show that culture and education aren’t simply hobbies or minor influences. They are hugely important in the affirmation of differences between groups and social classes and in the reproduction of those differences” (Eakin, 2001, para. 6). Society rewards cultural capital with money – more cultural

capital equals more rewards, making it easier for children born into middle and upper-class families.

The Complex Working Class ‘Other’

Middle-class norms position all working-class individuals as ‘other’ (Reay et al., 2007). By pathologizing individuals as ‘other’, practices of inclusion and exclusion take place, which also works to position oneself within the context of the social order desired (Reay, 2007). ‘Othering’ impacts working-class students, who have been known to approach university with apprehension and higher levels of uncertainty (Lehmann, 2007) while they step out of their comfort zone into a ‘foreign’ environment in which they feel like cultural outsiders. The assumption is always that it is “the working-class individual who must adapt and change, in order to fit into, and participate in, the (unchanged) higher education institutional culture” (Archer & Leathwood, 2003, p. 176).

One way that exclusion is felt is through language. Language symbolizes dominance in social spaces where working-class students are expected to adopt the unfamiliar dominant language of academia (Bourdieu, 1989). For me, it resembled what Bourdieu shares with Wacquant (1989) as speaking a ‘broken language’ in an environment where working-class “linguistic capital is more or less completely devalued” (p. 46). Oh, I felt this so many times, especially in seminar discussions! My self-consciousness would increase and restrict my participation, fearing I might say the wrong thing.

In many areas of my life, I have felt confident and successful. When I did not, I would ‘fake it till you make it’ to manifest certain behaviours until they became natural. For some reason, that did not work the same way for me in university. Bourdieu (1989) explains that

"social space tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of lifestyles and status groups characterized by different lifestyles" (p. 20). What I did not know was that our dispositions are shaped in significant ways by our social background, priming us for a social environment within which we are automatically comfortable and entering a new field could cause confusion, conflict, and struggle (Lehmann, 2012).

According to Archer and Hutchings (2000), my habitus constructed a working-class identity that is generally incompatible with an academic one. I was experiencing what Stahl (2018) defines as the aspiration paradox, whereby the working-class values of 'fitting in' and 'no one is better than anyone else' conflicted with my aspirations. It was an internal emotional pull from my ingrained habitus that included my working-class disposition of being average and ordinary (Stahl, 2018). Through new experiences, numerous interpersonal relationships, challenges, and university education, my potential was 'called out', and my habitus began to shift to match my aspirations. This did not eliminate these habitus invasions; in fact, they intensified when I became a full-time student and when I thought it could not get any worse - I entered graduate school.

Reflecting on my interactions between fields while accruing capital, I became increasingly aware of different fields' values, beliefs, and norms (Doxa). For example, the family and church Doxa emphasized in my childhood were around marriage, motherhood, family, collaboration, service and sacrifice, particularly for women. In contrast, the academic world emphasizes knowledge, degrees, scholarships, competition, rights, independence and individual success. Studying the concept of habitus allowed me to delve deeper into understanding the unusual degree of cognitive dissonance I was experiencing.

As I gradually found success in university work, I began attributing it to emotional

intelligence, charisma, social skills, pity and otherwise a mistake on the professor's. Negotiating the balance of a torn habitus where a student is between academic success and a working-class position can cause feelings of 'being stuck in the middle', 'a stranger' or 'a straddler' (Lehmann, 2014). This is one of the 'hidden injuries of class' as defined by Sennett and Cobb (1972) and impacts ontological security, which refers to "the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time, as 'being' rather than constantly changing, in order to realize a sense of agency" (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 1969, p. 41).

'The Stranger' concept, originally described in 1908 by Georg Simmel, is described as a person who is physically present and participates in a group but has not been there from the beginning. Simmel (1950) describes this person as the one "who comes today and stays tomorrow and "(s)he imports qualities into it (the group), which do not and cannot stem from the group itself" (p. 402). FGS or working-class students represent '*The Stranger'* prototype. The external messages FGSs receive about their social position within society are one of inequality.

Internalization

Not only do ideas and attitudes of 'othering' develop through dominant society and institutions, but the internal stigmatization and inferiority students experience leads to their own perceptions of self as 'other'? Thus, reinforcing perspectives of exclusion, placing certain groups at a higher risk of social, emotional, psychological and behavioural problems. This can cause anxiety, loneliness, disorientation, and a decrease in confidence, making it difficult for students to fully embrace a 'new culture' in an unfamiliar context (Pomson & Gillis, 2010). There are further concerns that this could lead to students' silence and feelings of powerlessness, as their perception as an outsider continues to deepen, while externally, they may have the appearance of integration (Pomson & Gillis, 2010).

Coffey (2013) suggests that how global diversity and the acceptance of the social type 'stranger' intersects with the development of internal strangeness is a part of our self-concept. How we internalize others' thoughts of us determines whether we feel the negative side of *'The Stranger'* concept or cultural stereotypes and prejudices. Individuals produce internal narratives that construct 'otherness', affecting one's view of belonging or alienation and is significant to perception (Coffey, 2013). A key overlooked aspect is understanding our own predispositions and how these mediate our sense of belonging or alienation, a common narrative of mobility (Coffey, 2013). This connects to habitus as one must live with the ambivalence of different positions while carrying 'strangerhood' within.

There is a positive side to *'The Stranger'* role, as it is "a chance to learn about others and also (though sometimes painfully) about oneself" (Pomson & Gillis, 2010, p. 48). Deeper learning through engagement with diverse people can lead to innovation and a deeper understanding of society. The unique perspective of the outsider can make sense of experience and give insight as long as they continue to maintain conscious engagement in inquiry that challenge their perceptions (Pomson & Gillis, 2010). In this vein, FGFS's stories have immense power in articulating how they perceive their reality and process the world while creating a teaching framework. In this way a student's negative self-perceptions can be identified, understood, and reframed in a way that has the potential for change and growth (Pomson & Gillis, 2010). This disruption of self can have a reverse effect on original perceptions and make a rich experience out of education for both FGFSs, advocates, teachers and professors.

Classed Education

School environments adhere to middle-class attitudes, values, behaviours, and norms (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Because Middle-class norms have become the standard "class differences in children's behaviours have real consequences for their opportunities and outcomes" (Calarco, 2014, p. 1035). Stebbins (1999) found:

> A cyclical pattern occurs in education where schools reward certain behaviors, attitudes, and language use, which is usually reflective of middle-class backgrounds. Students who do not exhibit expected cultural capital (behaviors, attitudes, and language) do not receive the same quality or level of education as those students who do. This may lead to the expectation that a particular student will not succeed academically. Students who see no reward for academic success may maintain attitudes, behaviors, and language that, in fact, limits their success, thus, affirming the expectation that they will not succeed. (p. 4).

Teachers make conscious and unconscious judgments early in children's education, assessing disproportionately through a hidden curriculum (Wotherspoon, 2014). A hidden curriculum teaches implicit lessons in the classroom that include norms, values, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and expectations of the dominant middle-class culture. For example, sitting still, raising your hand to participate, punctuality, homework, respect for authority, work ethic and aspirations to achieve are encouraged. General compliance is expected, and specific behaviours are academically rewarded. Social and cultural unwritten rules and expectations are premised on assumptions of future success based on what a child wears, the food they eat and how they talk. These biases "gain institutional advantages and lead to transmission of differential advantages" among children starting early (Lareau, 2011, p. 3).

The hidden curriculum is also rooted in a Marxist perspective where capitalist societies are the reproduction of labour-power, and education is part of ideological control to prepare the masses for exploitation through work (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Through informal teaching, children learn their place in the world. They learn to accept authority where schools indoctrinate children into the norms and values of society. Children learn to suffer through repetitive lessons

and are rewarded with high grades, which parallels adults who suffer repetitive work and rewarded by wages. In addition, children learn through schooling to accept hierarchy, producing a subservient workforce of uncritical, passive, and docile workers motivated by external awards. Inevitably, children are also recognized and favoured based on whether they know 'the rules of the game', making schools sites of discrimination by favouring middle-class behaviours (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Young adults from middle-class families are more likely to graduate high school, apply to four-year colleges, gain admission and enrol. Edgerton et al. (2014) suggest that middle-class families tend to prepare their children to perform in the expected ways of the school system because they buy into the payoffs of higher education more so than working-class families. Nash (2002) defines the educated habitus as a set of dispositions most associated with academic success in high school. They include a high level of self-discipline, attentiveness, diligence, and self-control and requires a willingness to be educated. Many working-class students are less willing to adhere to such notions and practices, not because they want to fail, but because they have a different idea about what is worth knowing (Nash, 2002).

Class Values

Social change has become more normative than social stability while shifting from collective to more individualized societies (Greenfield, 2016). This shift has produced positive societal changes such as equal rights, uniqueness, self-esteem, individual development, parental warmth, and innovation. Greenfield (2016) states that "unlike classical modernization theory, we must not see the effects of the dominant direction of social change as pure progress", but instead recognize that each shift in one direction brings loss to the "opposing values, learning environments and behaviours" (p. 86). FGS students are exceeding their parent's expectations

which may be threatening their worldview. Students may experience resistance from family as a result of grief regarding losses, such as the "loss of traditional values, social guidance, family obligation, and respect" (Greenfield, 2016, p. 89). It is important to be cognizant and empathetic to the cultural gains and losses of traditional educational values.

Integrating alternative values within education settings that align with the working class is cause for serious consideration. Dittmann et al. (2020) found that "assessing achievement individually is not class neutral" and that working-class students commonly engage better in group processes, improving their performance as it focuses on interdependence. Dittmann et al. (2020) suggest that working-class underperformance is due to measuring achievement individually, such as students working independently, self-directedly or displaying autonomy. Most classrooms emphasize individual achievement and individual work assignments expecting individuals to answer questions. The middle class often display behaviours "such as engaging in actions to benefit the individual self, influencing the social context according to personal preferences, and being self-directed and autonomous" (Dittmann et al., 2020, p. 519). Behaviours associated with independent models of self are common in middle-class contexts.

Assessing achievement on behaviour that reflects working-class interdependence, such as how well a work group performs, collective assignments, social responsiveness and understanding of the connection between self and others. Effective group processes instil behaviours that focus on the task, information sharing and taking more turns in conversation. The working class will often engage because the behaviours of effective group processes are identified as interdependent. These findings show that when placed in groups for problem-solving, working-class students outperform higher-class advantaged students, challenging the idea that working-class academic performance is low in university due to individual academic

measurements (Dittmann et al., 2020). Changes to the classroom environment that support working-class students' achievements would significantly impact their educational experiences. It would also affect the middle class less as they tend to feel more comfortable in higher education settings and are less likely to be underrepresented. Promoting community efforts and working together improves the fit and performance of working-class students.

Racialized Students

Race and ethnicity have an impact on educational experiences and opportunities and cannot be understood without the intersections of class and gender. FGFSs tend to be minorities, females, older, and immigrants (Kim et al., 2021; O'Shea, 2011, Rascon, 2012). Aboriginal peoples have significantly lower rates of educational attainment and are much less likely to attend and complete post-secondary than other Canadians (Wotherspoon, 2014). Aboriginal youth attend university less due to lower grades and less academic engagement, support and self-efficacy (McMullen, 2011).

Marginalized groups often face stereotypes of intellectual incompetence, inducing pressure to represent their group well (Holden 2021). These feelings are heightened for visible minorities and first-generation students; due to their social location and attempts to "fit" in unfamiliar environments (Holden, 2021). In addition, middle-class norms position ethno-racial individuals as 'other' (Reay et al., 2007). "For black students, low expectations and assumptions about their academic ability and potential, direct them away from 'academic' programs which often lead to university" (James, 2020, para. 3). As such, there is a 15%-24% higher unemployment rate for racialized youth (Taylor & Krahn, 2013). High proportions of southeast Asian and south Asian students have less than high school.

Jewish and Chinese people are more likely to have a degree (Wotherspoon, 2014).

Chinese-Americans, on average have high levels of educational attainment resulting in more upward mobility compared to other groups (Yiu, 2013). There is often an optimistic picture of Chinese youth aspirations and attainment; however, life course highlights inequalities faced by youth including gender, race and social class disadvantages that are passed through generations. Credentials are less transferable in the labour market and they experience discrimination, lack network recruitment, have less local integration and interpersonal interactions (Taylor & Krahn, 2013). Youth also respond different to the high expectations of parents, discrimination in schools, colour code streaming, euro-centric curriculum and teacher absence of colour. Furthermore, in spite of immigrant's higher education it is more difficult gaining access to work compared to Canadian born youth. There is a 15%-24% higher unemployment rate for racialized youth and immigrant youth have higher aspirations 79% compared to 57% (Taylor, & Krahn, 2013).

First and Second-Generation Immigrant Students

Global migration is not new and is central to human social relations and cultures. Approximately 3.3 percent of the worldwide population in 2015 were immigrants, defined as residing outside their birth country (Mavroudi & Nagel, 2016). Facts from the 2011 National Household Survey state that 20.6% of people were born outside of Canada compared to 22% in 1931. The highest spike in Canadian migration history occurred in 1910, reducing during the depression following WWI and increased post-WWII due to economic growth and labour demands.

Many FGS are first- or second-generation immigrants (McMullen, 2011). Immigrant youth have higher aspirations 79% compared to 57% Canadian born (Taylor and Krahn, 2013).

Immigrants tend to orient their children towards higher education because they want them to have better life (Spiegler, 2018). According to McMullen (2011), first- or second-generation students go to university because many immigrant families place high values and expectations on education. Finnie et al. (2011) found that visible minority immigrants have much higher rates of access to PSE (84.2 percent versus 59.1 percent) for Canadian born non-visible minorities. This is not the case for non-visible minority immigrants (46.6 versus 59.1 percent). The authors also found that "Canadian born visible minorities have a substantially higher rate of 79.3 percent" access to PSE (Finnie et al., 2011, p. 7). Recent immigrants are more highly educated than the average Canadian due to implementing a point system for entry. 25 percent of Canadian born have higher education compared to 28 percent having high school or less (Taylor and Krahn, 2013).

Current research does not adequately consider the overlapping identities of FGFSs. For instance, when grouping FGS statistics, research mentions that FGSs, in general, are more likely to be married or have children, but it does not consider specifically how these other roles may affect them (Kim et al., 2021).

FGFS - She's the First

FGFSs are viewed as even more likely to fail in higher education as they are not as likely to persist compared to males (Ishitani, 2003; Jenkin et al., 2013, Lohfink & Pualsen, 2005; Nuñez Cuccaro-Almin, 1998). Wilson and Kittleson (2013) found that FGFSs states that "gender made weighing the importance of academic and personal goals more complex (p. 817). Kim et al. (2021) point to the importance of FGFS targeted research where there is currently little to highlight their distinctive needs. The relationship between postsecondary attainment, work, and life course impacts timing. Andres and Adamuti-Trache (2008) states that "the ongoing

challenge for educators and policy-makers to empower those without the requisite cultural, social, and economic capital to have equitable opportunities to participate in post-secondary studies remains" (p. 141). As a result of the present trends of increased women in higher education, studying FGFSs is of rising importance to adequately meet the needs of this population (Kim et al., 2021).

Research shows that FGFSs tend to be less engaged on campus and work more, leaving less time to pursue extracurricular activities (Mitchell, 1997; Petty, 2014;). Katrevich and Arguete (2017) found that the social and academic disadvantages compounded by work and family responsibilities lead to an achievement gap between FGS and non-FGS students. Many FGFSs bear considerable family responsibilities and tend to be older, married, enrolled part-time, have lower SES backgrounds and are more likely to have dependents, thus simultaneously balancing childcare, employment, and household duties (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margett, 2018; Lim et al., 2016; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Petty, 2014; Reay, 2003; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). There are often setbacks when social, financial, and domestic tasks prioritize studying (Reay, 2018).

FGFS Identity

Identity formation begins in early childhood through family, society, ethnicity, appearance, interests, culture, friends, environment, opportunities, self-expression, and media, and it evolves and changes over time. Nieuwenhuis et al. (2019) found that "the ease with which one can construct a positive new identity as a university student is likely to depend on existing identities, such as one's social background" (p. 373). Identifying as a university student is a vital part of a student's sense of belonging; however, it appears different among FGFSs (Kim et al.,

2021; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2011, 2015). Younger FGFSs found it less challenging to see themselves as university students (O'Shea, 2011). For some, being labelled a mature student by the university created feelings of exclusion (O'Shea, 2011).

Most FGFSs talked about how exploring their identity as university students helped them appreciate their lives and recognize their values (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006, O'Shea, (2011, 2015). This seemed more predominant among younger FGFSs who went straight from high school to university, compared to those who delayed university (O'Shea, 2015). Some FGFSs struggled to call themselves university students due to feeling like an imposter (O'Shea, 2015). Older FGFSs often hesitated to tell others they were students fearing the judgement of grandstanding (Kim et al., 2021). Older FGFSs also found it difficult to adjust to their identity, given their various roles (O'Shea, 2011).

Growing up Girl

Values, beliefs and gender expectations are derived from home and are often exaggerated (Kimmel & Holler, 2017). Leinbach and Fagot (1993) suggest that the development of gender schemas can begin as early as one year old. Children able to recognize their sex, allows them to develop an early awareness of the gender stereotypes in their surroundings. Gender meaning is created through internalizing gender images in early socialization within families and subsequently in formal education settings (Wells, 2015). How gender is done depends on how it is perceived by those who influence and nurture children's development in the world (Lynch, 2015). Thus, each child is taught a particular gender script that reifies their sex. Bem (1983) claims that children of two to three years old will start to relate to binary categorizations of male and female. Martin and Halverson (1981) suggest that children organize and attach meaning to

the information observed. This gendering process is assumed to start when the child can classify themselves as one of the binary categories.

Tobin et al. (2010) claim that learning gender is complex. Gender is acquired through social interaction where there is a combination of the internalization of gender identity and the assimilation of gender stereotypes. This informs the child about gender expectations but is also a unique experience for each child making gender acquisition both an individual and a societal experience. The data suggest that gendered expectations can limit what children can become based on beliefs about the nature of boys and girls. Andres and Adamuti-Trache (2008) states "the extent to which the life courses of young women and men are experienced differently and if and how their 'choices' at key transition points are to large extent gendered and shaped by external structures" (p. 115).

Gender role socialization begins in childhood, where the communication and behaviour of parents play a significant role in the internalization of stereotypes (Witt, 1997). I grew up surrounded by women who stayed home full time, raised children, and cared for the household. Responsibilities included laundry, cooking, bathing younger siblings, and waking in the middle of the night with my one-year-old sister, who shared a room with my nine-year-old sister and me. There were clearly defined chores for girls and boys – significantly more indoor work for girls and outdoor physical labour for boys. I remember expressing interest in being a nurse but was steered towards hairdressing because I was told it would accommodate motherhood which was to be my priority. As a young girl and teenager, family members, friends, and teachers often asked if I would also have seven children like my mother. I always gave an emphatic "NO," which would invite laughter. Although I had always loved working with children, there was an underlying assumption that being a mother was my only aspiration, and to want more felt like a

betrayal of what was valued most – having children. Being socialized by specific gender stereotypes burdens individuals to maintain the status quo. Repression leads to fear of rejection in sharing aspirations knowing that there are consequences for those who deviate from the norm.

Girls in School

Schools reproduce hegemonic femininity and masculinity and regulate normative constructions associated with gender discourse. They are powerful in normalizing societal values attached to sex and gender, producing inequality through distinct educational paths or careers for males and females (Reay, 2017). Webber (2010) found that teachers would accept an answer from a boy without raising his hand, whereas a girl is likely to be corrected for the same behaviour. Boys are often applauded for accomplishing tasks, intellect, independence, and being good thinkers (Webber, 2010). On the contrary, girls tend to be praised for attractiveness, neat work, good manners, and a quiet personality, promoting docile femininity, with a general focus on girls' etiquette, over academics (Webber, 2010). Webber (2010) and Wotherspoon (2014) point to significant differences in the way boys and girls interact with teachers, where it is common for boys to receive more direct interaction and attention from teachers, unconsciously communicating that boys are more important.

These social practices limit possibilities but even more concerning is "that children invest in themselves as gendered people" with an over focus on ascribing to be "a particular kind of girl" (Wells, 2015, p. 49). Assumptions based on stereotypes widen existing gender gaps and shape perceptions of belonging for girls (Master et al., 2021). They also contribute to the types of work performed by men and women (Gazso, 2010). For example, women are often in elementary

school teaching roles with direct control of children while playing a supportive role to men who are the supervisors (Webber, 2010; Wells, 2015).

Schools are sites of compliance that reify societal norms and values concerning morals, behaviour, language and gender expectations (Wotherspoon, 2014). Lynch, (2015) found that Kindergarten teacher's gendered expectations about children's conduct influenced pre-school children (Lynch, 2015). Bian et al.(2017) conducted a study and found that by age six, girls already think boys are smarter than girls. Schools control through sexist curriculum, differential treatment of boys and the underrepresentation of women in positions of authority and power influence gender role construction and maintain dominant masculine and essentialist feminine ideology (Webber, 2010). Cerbara et al. (2022) found that the internalization of gender stereotypes is already traceable by age 8-11, and children adapt their gender identity to social expectations. For example, Master et al. (2021) found that girls as early as six bought into stereotypes that boys are more interested in computer science and engineering. The authors highlight that academic choices are driven more by beliefs about interests than beliefs about abilities, limiting choices guided by stereotypes and profoundly influencing academic and career choices.

I attended high school from 1985 to 1989. I completed two years of mandatory home economics classes where I was implicitly being taught gender roles and the importance of domesticity for girls. During the same scheduled class time, the boys were across the hall taking an industrial arts class, upholding their masculinity through working with machinery, building a shed, making clocks or creating architect drawings. I was interested in learning something new beyond home economics, as I already had extensive training from home. I inquired with the principal, explaining my interest and reasons for girls to be equally permitted to participate in

industrial arts. The following year it was opened to female students, of which I was among the first to enrol. Although these classes are not harmful in and of themselves, the mandatory assigning of them based on gender exaggerates difference and reproduces inequality for girls limiting their academic opportunities.

High school is related to life goals and expectations.. As mentioned in the prologue, streaming practices can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies as inequalities are internalized. Gaskell's (1984) study found that most research on streaming is focused on class and ignores gender. Lehmann (2009a) writes:

> Streaming and tracking processes in secondary schooling are also strongly involved in socializing students toward certain transition pathways and create powerful dispositions regarding educational and career goals. This is rooted in what students learn in different streams, but also how they are treated and mentored by their teachers. (p. 142)

The author found that women are steered towards soft subjects such as English. Schools reinforce traditional ideas of working-class women's work secondary to domestic and husband's work through course selection (Gaskell, 1984). Many young women know they want to be mothers, so the choice of careers and future plans are limited by gender constraints. Academics in high school can create apparent gender differences because as girls begin to recognize challenges between the demands of work and family, they opt out of trying as hard (Wells, 2015). The intersections of class and gender further complicate academic decisions for girls.

Working Class FGFSs & Motherhood

"Working-class women are more likely to be mature students than their middle-class counterparts" (Shields, 2018, para. 1). These women often face challenges entering university as they have to make constrained decisions about which university they could attend based on location. Many working-class women must stop everything including self-care, to go to

university while also risking economic loss from the cost of education (Reay, 2003). It also usually takes longer to complete their degree due to prioritizing others and placing their children's education first (Reay, 2003). Working-class women students expressed "guilt entwined with a sense that the desire to move beyond one's place is somehow illegitimate" (Reay, 2003, p. 306).

Cohen (1998) highlights three distinct stages of working-class women's educational experience:

> *Self-depreciation and role confusion.* The women internalized the belief that they were subpar and their acceptance was a mistake. Their primary goal during this stage was to conform to the academic environment.
>
> *Class consciousness.* As the women settled into the university culture, they noticed classism in and out of the classroom and began viewing their classmates as uninformed and naive.
>
> *Power of service.* During this final stage, the women chose to define success in the form of serving others as opposed to social mobility for self.

Walkerdine's (1991a) film "*Didn't She Do Well*" is a ground-breaking study of working-class women exploring their shifting class identities. Walkerdine et al. (2001) discusses the psychosocial explorations of gender and class, revealing how the practices of self-invention are regulated by unconscious processes. The authors highlight how the expectations of working-class and middle-class women are different regarding education, work, and family. The small minority of working-class women who finally got to university "were treading 'a hard and painful route', partly a consequence of their difficult past experiences, but also partly due to their current material circumstances" (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 4).

Reay (2003) writes about working class FGFSs saying:

> The hardship which all these women to varying degrees experienced meant that the efforts required to develop personalised educational projects for self-improvement were

> of a totally different order and scale from those demanded of their middle-class counterparts. (p. 308)

In addition, upper-and middle-class women are afforded the luxury of delaying childbirth for educational pursuits because of family support, while some cultural and class-based backgrounds expect women to get married and have children earlier. Educated parents tend to guide their daughters “by teaching them how to play the ‘cards at hand’ to delay marriage and parenthood in order to ensure successful completion of their studies” (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 140).

Marriage and motherhood can be complicated for some FGFSs. While it is now increasingly acceptable for women to demand space and time for themselves in some demographics, cultures, and class-based backgrounds, such demands and desires are still measured against their ability to fulfil and prioritize the role of ‘good mother’ first (Burke, 2002). FGFSs who were older and married with children experienced a lack of understanding from families who expressed they should be prioritizing their children and managing the household (Leyva, 2011). However, for many FGFSs having the space to explore their individual identity apart from their identity as mothers or wives led to feelings of belonging and academic success (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O’Shea, 2011).

When interviewed, Reay (2003) found that FGFSs articulate that mothers’ aspirations are for their children, positioning themselves as role models with the desire to ‘give back’ to their communities. It was found that these motivations provided relief from feelings of selfishness, shame or guilt for pursuing personal dreams and, in turn, reconciled expectations of what it means to be a ‘good parent’ and beliefs of femininity (Reay, 2003). Reay (2017) points out that the students who were mothers were not selfish at all; in fact, they were concerned with how their engagement in learning could help their children achieve educationally.

Summary

This chapter featured studies related to FGFSs and barriers associated with the social and cultural factors that play a role in their social mobility. Based on the results of this literature review FGFSs are more likely to struggle academically, financially, and socially in higher education compared to students with one or more parents with post-secondary experience. In general, the predominant theory is that FGSs are incapable of adapting to a culture starkly different from their upbringing, with parents unequipped to help them adapt. Research that assists in understanding the complexities of this group will have widespread effects on future FGFSs. The next chapter will focus on the research design and methods used to collect data, including the research question, positionality, setting, sampling, data collection methods, analysis and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

"I'm a very strong believer in listening and learning from others."
- Ruth Bader Ginsburg
(first generation female student)

This qualitative study allowed participants to share their perceptions and provided stories with rich narratives for analysis. "Qualitative research truly is a holistic activity where the varied layers of research, as well as the varied phases, interact with each other" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 60). The combination of using an explanatory (theory) approach as it relates to descriptive (autoethnography) research allowed for a rich, in-depth contextual analysis of the journeys of six FGFSs (Ellis et al., 2011). This primary research drew heavily on theory, particularly critical feminism, and Bourdieu's concept of habitus. This chapter further outlines the use of autoethnography, reflexivity and positionality, the research setting, data sampling strategies, participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis and ethical considerations used in this project.

Autoethnography

This study was conducted to describe the complex academic journeys of FGFSs. Personal narratives give insight into students' private life providing rich data for analysis. To accomplish this, an analytic autoethnographic methodology was used. It is traditionally known for bringing "together the study of people from one social group and biography" (Roger et al., 2018, p. 535). The researcher writes a narrative about themselves as a study subject while also including additional participants and their lived experiences.

Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (p. 19). As a methodology, my own voice, experiences, thoughts, feelings, and emotions became data

generated from my academic journey to be examined within a broader societal context. Mills (1959) writes that personal troubles are often symptomatic of public issues.

> Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (Mills, 1959, p. 226)

Autoethnography emerges from postmodern philosophy, where approaches to inquiry reject dominant positivistic understandings that maintain legitimate research as neutral and free of bias (Wall, 2008).

Scientists tend to depersonalize their connection to the field of study and in the tradition of objectivity, representation, data quality, legitimacy, ethics - the worst sin is to be 'too personal' (Behar, 1996). However, Behar (1996) explains:

> Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake. It has to move us beyond that eclipse into inertia. (p. 14)

Autoethnography allows me to analyze and make my classed and gendered experiences of education accessible to others. It is a radical approach to inquiry that gives voice to seldom-heard perspectives, and the only way I know how to analyze my educational history and shifting identity (Wall, 2006). As a participant, I resonate with Wall's (2006) reflection, "I find that the relentless nudging of autoethnography against the world of traditional science holds wonderful, symbolic, emancipatory promise. It says that what I know matters. How much more promise could it hold for people far more marginalized than I?" (p. 148).

Lived experience was not always respected as legitimate knowledge in higher education. However, much of what I have learned about social issues have come through family, work, travel, events, circumstances, and unexpected encounters. Autoethnography's transformative

research method "changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honours subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits" (Cluster, 2014, p. 1). The stakes are high when writing autoethnography. To produce an engaging self-revelation that touches the reader makes it "one of the most challenging qualitative approaches to attempt" - to fail would be the ultimate embarrassment and humiliation (Behar, 1996; Wall, 2008, p. 39).

Although subjectivity has become a pillar in qualitative research because of the critiques of objectivity, lack of representation and situated knowledges, I continued to contend with subjective research in methodology classes where strong opinions consistently discredited qualitative research. Of course, my work is coloured by my emotions and experiences, similar to that of all researchers as our work is born out of our interests and who we are. In an interview, Bourdieu explains habitus as "practical knowledge that has its own logic, which cannot be reduced to that of theoretical knowledge; that in a sense, agents know the social world better than the theoreticians" (Reay, 2004, p. 438). And there it was! The affirmation that I needed to move forward with autoethnography and Bourdieu.

The grappling did not end there. Incorporating my story permitted my habitus to take me down more dark paths of self-judgement than I expected. Throughout the entire process I could relate to Behar (1996) where "I distrusted my own authority. I saw it as being constantly in question, constantly on the point of breaking down" (p. 21). Four points of contention followed me to the bitter end:

1. Fear: Of my own bias and my attempt to confirm it.
2. Pain: Someone might be hurt by what is written.
3. Inadequacy: I don't know enough about this topic. The more I learn, the less I know.
4. Failure: Being proven wrong by those far more intelligent than me.

University education exposed me to broader ways of thinking using multiple theories, research and teaching that assisted in constructing deeper meaning from my experiences and practice on how to articulate them. I am inclined to live, speak, and write through experiences and stories and Autoethnography grants modern researchers like me "the opportunity to communicate multiple world views without compromising the need to be scientific" (Cluster, 2014, p. 7).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity is the practice of examining one's feelings, beliefs, reactions, judgements, motives, patterns and questioning assumptions. Reflexivity is essential throughout the social research process while acknowledging how it influences research. Bourdieu defines reflexivity as "an interrogation of the three types of limitations (of social position, of field, and of the scholastic point of view) that are constitutive of knowledge itself" (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 539). Practising reflexivity has taught me that my experiences cannot be separated from my identity as a researcher and further contribute to my research decisions, actions, and interpretations. My core values, personality traits, and worldview influence how I interact with others, consciously and unconsciously, and predispose me to embrace different epistemologies, theories, approaches, and strategies for research. Reflexivity provides integrity to the process through accountability, transparency, and trustworthiness and highlights the ethical treatment of participants and the researcher's personal development to produce quality work.

As a second-generation Dutch settler and citizen of one of the most affluent countries in the world - a country founded on colonizing Native communities and enslaving Black people to dominate and prosper; I am a beneficiary of colonization and not immune from perpetuating the systemic injustices of my ancestors. I am also white, able-bodied, educated, middle class,

heterosexual and a cis-gendered female, all dimensions of my identity with advantages and immunity attached to them. I acknowledge and articulate my social location because this positions me as a researcher who sees the world through various lenses. These lenses necessitate revisiting through reflexivity for self-awareness and sensitivity of recognizing one's power. Intersectionality addresses all my privileged identities and marginalization of class and gender and religion.

As a FGFS, I am specifically located within the study's narrative, which uniquely positions me as an insider in which "social interviews are conducted between researchers and participants who share similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national, or religious heritage" (Ganga & Scott, 2006, p. 3). Being a FGFS, I have embodied many of the same disadvantages identified and attributed to FGFSs. Similar to most of the study participants, I was unaware that I was part of a sub-class of students until the end of my undergraduate degree. My increasing curiosity led me down a path of incessant study, maybe even slightly obsessive in my pursuit of understanding other FGFS's experiences.

"Who am I?" …as a Researcher

My answer here is nuanced and complex, as I now find myself in the preliminary stages of adopting the aspect of 'researcher' as part of my identity. Identity merges experiences, relationships, memories, and values that construct a steady sense of self (Burke, 2006). How each aspect lines up at any given moment influences how people form their identities, interact with one another, transform their cultures, and make meaning of the world around them (London, 1989). Identity is considered a dynamic process whereby an individual continually evaluates one's self-image in relation to others (Roger et al., 2018). I embody many aspects of

my identity that have been modified over time, each one often producing unwanted feelings related to belonging, connection and self-confidence. I once again find myself in this place of self-transformation and dissonance as I begin to identify as a researcher.

As a sociology scholar, my training is in the study of society, social groups, and institutions such as education, government, law, economy, politics, media, religion, and family, where I am engrossed in the work of questioning everything. My research has led me down many rabbit trails, so to speak, where something new in the data would surprise me and connect with something old. At times I questioned whether this was all meaningless. Were these years of hyper-focus worth two years of my life? Maybe I was better off not knowing what I now knew. I even sometimes wondered if I am just a pawn in a system that wants to promote successful first-generation students. Oh my gosh…what a horrible thought! I question what it is to be a FGS and how I am perceived either accurately or inaccurately. This has not given me relief from my habitus, where the subtext of complex loss and change are thoughts that crept in periodically. The identification with FGFSs highlights what has always remained essential to me - standing with the powerless, the marginalized – with those whose voices are not being heard so here; I add mine.

I resonate with Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2006) 'bricoleur' metaphor of a researcher, described as one who mixes and matches multiple logics and tools to produce "a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings, and interpretation of the world or phenomenon under analysis" (p. 25). In this way, "analytic generalizations in qualitative research are a form of validity finding patterns that prompt the participant to say, 'you captured my experience, and your analysis works,' which is the power of sociological work" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 61).

Research Setting

This study was conducted in Niagara and included participants from different universities across Ontario, Canada. Focus group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews took place online through zoom meetings. Using online communication allowed for an extended reach to collect more diverse lived experiences of FGFSs.

Data Sampling Strategies and Participant Selection

A purposeful criterion sampling was used to select participants. Purposeful criterion sampling carefully selects participants based on predetermined criteria (Patton, 2001). Six participants were selected based on the following criterion:

-identified as female

-parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma

-attend/attended a four-year accredited Canadian University

-first child in family to attend university

Participants were initially recruited through the researcher's personal networks using Facebook messenger, word of mouth and email to invite known FGFSs. The 'First Generation Network' requested a copy of the research invitation to post on their Instagram page following contact with an active board member and friend of the researcher.

Data Collection Methods

The data generated for this project came from a total of six participants, four of which participated in a focus group and photo elicitation, and two of which only participated in photo elicitation.

Focus Groups

This study began with one focus group in a collective time of sharing and gathering preliminary data to learn more about FGFS's academic journeys. Focus groups are a practice that has grown in education and feminist research since the 1940s (Flores & Alonso, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998, 1999). It is used to generate participants' individual experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes through facilitated dialogue. Although methods are not necessarily feminist in and of themselves, procedures can be done in a feminist way that produces feminist work (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). For example, focus groups allow all participants' voices to be maximized and invite a knowledge exchange from distinctive groups of people, extending the capacity for research across sectors and equalizing the contribution of diverse kinds of knowledge (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this case, FGFSs have a personal stake in what is being researched and bring certain perceptions, intuition, and expertise.

Standpoint theorists facilitate research that places marginalized groups' experiences and voices at the forefront, intending to reveal new ways of understanding (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). For this study, although the women did not necessarily perceive themselves as marginalized, each participant voiced their academic storyline. Harding (1996) explains, "that discourses oppositional to the dominant ones can arise as marginalized groups begin to articulate their histories, needs, and desires for themselves instead of only in the ways encouraged by their 'masters' favoured conceptual frameworks" (pp. 445-446).

Photo Elicitation

Photo elicitation is a technique that incorporates photos in the interview process. It is widely known and used in social sciences because it has the capacity to "evoke feelings, memories, and information, where different layers of meaning can be discovered" (Glaw et al.,

2017, p.1; Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation invites participants to go more in-depth into their own story, extracting rich data for analysis. Participants were asked to produce five photos to represent how they felt throughout their educational journey from childhood through university.

The photos themselves were not necessarily the focus. They are a means to generate discussion and direct the conversation beyond personal narrative and conscious perceptions (Thomas, 2009). Photos have the potential to create implicit knowledge that a participant may otherwise find difficult to verbalize because brains process visual images and verbal communication differently (Harper, 2002). “Words use less of the brain’s capacity, thus making photo-elicitation interviews an approach to collect more information than a traditional interview”, especially in the case of lived experience, which can be difficult to communicate (Harper, 2002; Hatten et al., 2013, p. 3).

When participants take their photos, they choose what they want to talk about with the researcher, which centres FGFS’s voices within the research project (Noland, 2006). This creates a more relaxed environment, where participants know in advance what will be discussed in the interview (Noland, 2006). The collaboration between the participants and researcher allows participants to clarify the meaning, consequently increasing trustworthiness through member checking. The photo-elicitation interviews followed a semi-structured format and were conducted by the researcher. The focus group audio and visual recordings and six photo-elicitation interviews were produced on Zoom. In addition, they were audio recorded on an iPhone as a backup. All recordings were then transcribed.

Focus Groups and Photo Elicitation Interview Protocol

There were several steps taken in the research process. All documents can be found in the Appendices. A Network Screening Invitation was sent to potential participants individually using Facebook Messenger (Appendix A). Email addresses were collected, and a Formal Letter of Invitation (Appendix B) was sent after receiving confirmation of participation along with a Consent Form (Appendix C) and Photo-elicitation instructions (Appendix E). The focus group met for the first time on Zoom. The study was explained along with the participants' rights (Appendix C). Participants were told of the video recording and backup audio recording and asked for verbal consent. The Focus Group Interview Guide (Appendix D) was followed to ask various open-ended questions related to the study's theoretical perspective. After the focus group, instructions for the photo-elicitation interview were explained, and participants were briefed on how the interview data would be used. They were asked to confirm their agreement and thanked for participating. Finally, photo-elicitation interviews were scheduled via email, and a copy of the photo-elicitation instructions was attached again for reference.

At the start of the photo-elicitation interview, the study and rights were one again reviewed, reminding the participants that their participation was voluntary and they could leave at any time. They were told of the video recording and backup audio recording, and were asked for consent. The photo-elicitation interview guide was followed (Appendix F). The interview participants were briefed on how this interview data would be used and were thanked for participating.

Let me Introduce you to…

Gabrielle, Ali, Parker, Clara, Carol, and Nicole. The participants in this study were all women ranging in age from 25 to 60 with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Most of the women were Euro-Canadian; however, one participant was Chinese Canadian, and another

immigrated from India two years ago. Three of the participants spoke another language besides English, such as French, Arabic and Cantonese.

For most participants, the pathway toward university was circuitous and prolonged. Of the six participants four took a direct route from high school propelled by a clear goal to get a university degree. Two of those four continued to pursue additional degrees; one completed part-time over ten years. Four of the six participants lived on campus during their first year. One participant took a 'gap' year following high school, while another entered university more than two decades after graduating. Two participants have multiple degrees. One participant has acquired a master's degree and another is currently in graduate school.

Table 1. Summary of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Career	Children	Relational Status	Ethnicity	Mother's Employment	Father's Employment	Siblings
Gabrielle	55-60	BA: Theology BA: Environmental Studies MA: Leadership in Management	Leadership Facilitator, Writer	2	Married	Welsh Canadian	Homemaker	Factory Worker	Brother: University
Parker	25-30	BA: Criminology	Police Officer	0	Single	Chinese	Banking	Restaurant Manager, Self Employed Restaurants, Airport Driver	Sister: Full-Time Student
Ali	25-30	BA: Sociology Political Science	Full Time Post Graduate Student: Sports Marketing & Events	0	Single	French Canadian	Server, Bartender, Work for Husband	Professional Hockey Player, Self Employed Roofing Co. (seasonal)	Sister: Dropped out of college, Traveller
Clara	40-45	College Certificate: Floral Design College Diploma: Art & Design Fundamentals and Graphic Design Production	Full-Time Undergraduate Student: 3rd-year History of Art Culture & Studio Art	3	Married	Dutch Canadian	Homemaker, Grocery Store Deli worker, Home Day Care	Brick Layer	Sister: Homemaker Sister: College ECE Brother: Self-Employed Bricklayer Brother: Self-Employed Bricklayer Brother: Self-Employed Bricklayer

Carol	30-35	BA: Engineering BA: Law	Full-Time MA Student: International Business Law	1	Married	Indian	Homemaker, Storefront rental business	Farmer, Military Canteen Food Supervisor (Kuwait)	Brother: Ph.D. Student Sister: MA student
Nicole	55-60	BA: Political Science	College Instructor, Self-Employed Business: Marketing	3	Divorced	Italian Canadian	Business Administration	Entrepreneur	Sister: Self-Employed
Sophia	45-50	College Diploma: Financial Assistance BA: Sociology & Women & Gender Studies	Full-Time MA Student: Child & Youth Studies	3	Married	Dutch Canadian	Homemaker Home Day Care Server House Cleaner Home Care for Seniors	Dairy Farmer, Taxi Driver, Dump Truck Driver, Self Employed Truck Driver	Brother: Truck Driver, Self-Employed Truck Cleaning & Detailing Sister: Photographer Brother: Welding Store Manager Brother: Self-Employed Construction Brother: College Business, Internet Sales & Service Sister: Homemaker

Note. This table includes details pertaining to all participants, including the author.

One of the participants' parents was divorced, and one participant lived in a joint family with her father and stepmother during childhood. Half of the participants were married, and four had children. Five of the six participants were the oldest in their families. One participant identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Three were full-time students, and three had full-time careers at the time of this study. All the participants lived in Ontario and all the participants had parents who did not attend college or university.

Two participants received a Facebook message about this study directly from the researcher. One heard about it from a friend, one heard through a classmate, one heard from a student in her class, and one saw an Instagram post by the First Generation Network. The research findings do not include participants' given names except for one who wanted her name used. Pseudonyms are used to provide reasonable confidentiality.

The Experience

Overall, the focus group participants showed a high level of enthusiasm to participate. They were vulnerable, sharing stories of pain, adversity, optimism, growth, learning and pride, having challenged themselves to attend university despite minimal expectations, insurmountable debt, and limited support. There was an abundance of conversation with a continuous flow of building off each other's stories and our time was approaching the 90 minute mark. I was conscious of the time each participant allocated for the focus group and did not want to take advantage of their commitment. I suggested we move the remaining three questions about their university experience and two reflection questions to the photo-elicitation interview so we would finish on time. Those questions tied in well with the photo-elicitation, adding rich data through the one-on-one conversations.

In closing, the participants shared one or two things they 'took away' from the discussion. Overwhelmingly the participants agreed that there was solidarity in finding points of connection in their academic journeys and felt reassured in hearing about others' successes. One participant explains how they assumed the group was going to be homogenous and was surprised by the diversity of people and experiences while showing great appreciation and empathy for the successes and challenges of each participant. Another said, "It makes the world not feel so big." Impromptu, they began to take turns personally addressing, encouraging, and celebrating the success of each participant before signing off.

The photo-elicitation questions and photos primed participants. The intentional practice of taking and collecting pictures gave them time to think about their feelings as a student in childhood, messages received about university, and experiences and feelings of belonging in university. The pictures led to conversations about their successes, failures, and hardships,

preparing them in advance to talk about themselves comfortably. Most of the participants commented on the process as a positive experience of pause and reflection. One included her partner in reminiscing as she chose photos that prompted memories she had temporarily forgotten.

All participants joined the Zoom call, eager to tell me about their pictures. Some provided photos with layers of meaning; others took pictures of carefully displayed artifacts. Another, beaming with pride shared past photos of ceremonies where she received significant awards for her achievements. One participant selected powerful photographs found online, while another took pictures of herself gesturing to represent the answer to each question. Participants added their creativity to the assignment as they individually reflected on their academic journey.

Data Analysis

The transcribed focus group and photo-elicitation interviews were printed and reviewed in their entirety allowing for a holistic picture of each participant's experience to emerge. In the first analytical step, I read the transcript, took notes, and highlighted common elements, looking for accounts explaining and describing each journey. The second step was open coding to examine the data, line by line, looking for themes, patterns, ideas, and concepts. Questions that arose were written in memos and led to a deeper dive into the literature review. I was able to identify similarities between the literature review and the raw data. For the final step, I used Quirkos Software moving to focused coding, shifting the process from literal to a conceptual level of analysis, and looking for thematic categories to emerge and interpret. Quirkos was used to categorize themes related to family structure, barriers, habitus, class, and gender. I highlighted classed and gendered habitus examples as a core theme. The dynamic

coding and memo-writing process highlighted the notable quotes and links to theory related to the study's larger purpose.

Ethical Considerations

Before the focus group and each photo-elicitation interview, participants were asked to sign a consent form, which included all pertinent information of the study such as purpose, description of procedures, protocol, potential benefits/risks, contact information, confidentiality, and voluntary participation statements. Physical materials are kept in a secure filing cabinet, and electronic data is in a locked safe. Data will be saved for a maximum of two years following completion of the research project. After that time, all information will be permanently destroyed (shredded or erased, pending the nature of the data).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

This study used triangulation to increase credibility and trustworthiness. Triangulation is the use of several research methods to study the same topic. I compared and checked multiple sources and methods to compare participants' realities using focus group transcripts, memos, numerous sources of literature, and individual photo-elicitation data. Before contacting participants, interview questions and procedures were provided to Brock University Review Board for approval.

Member Checking

A copy of the transcript was emailed to each participant for member checking. It ensured confirmation of conversation accuracy and to add or clarify any points. Participants were given a week from the time they received the transcript to confirm the accuracy of the conversation. If

participants did not respond, I followed up one more time, after which time it was assumed that the transcript was accurate.

Summary

This holistic research design was developed to allow participants to share their perceptions for in-depth analysis. This chapter shows how the study was carried out using autoethnography, focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews. The chapter further outlined all the elements for conducting the study. The following chapter introduces the initial findings of the journey to and through university, including details about family backgrounds as well as elementary, high school, and university experiences.

Chapter 4: Initial Findings

"When you educate a girl, you begin to change the face of a nation."
-Oprah Winfrey
(first generation female student)

The gap in qualitative, intersectional research, coupled with the lack of FGS narratives from a class-based perspective connecting family history with academic behaviour and decisions, prompted my research question: How do first-generation female students experience their journey to and through higher education? Answers to this question can best be understood through qualitative research methods that inquire about their experiences from childhood. This research aims to generate and recount the lived experiences of FGFSs. It also intends to describe their academic journeys in such a way as to expand understanding and interpretation of this intersectional and heterogeneous population. This chapter focuses on the journey to and through university, including details about the family background as well as elementary, high school, and university reflections. My hope is that the reader will recognize and possess a holistic understanding of the reproduction of class and gender in unequal childhoods within complex social structures.

Journey *to* University

Family background counts most in terms of aspirations, practice, diligence, ability, motivation and opportunity in education (Spiegler, 2018). As discussed early class conditions human interactions and behaviour and determines access to resources. There is much evidence from around the world showing the impact of social backgrounds on educational success. The 1966 landmark study 'Equity of Education Opportunity' showed that family life was the most significant predictor of a child's performance and when upper and lower-class students were placed together, they performed better in school. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) studies about

the reproduction of culture through education highlight the connection to class structures. More recently, the international assessments of privileged and underprivileged students give insight into how well a country provides an inclusive education by looking at academic performance (PISA, 2015). PISA has played a significant role in policy discussions about the inequality of streaming students into vocational or academic pathways from an early age (Breakspear, 2012).

Family Life and Social Reproduction

Our social relationships are organized around beliefs and norms about roles and status, shaping a person's worldview individually and collectively. Bourdieu discusses social reproduction as the process by which society reproduces itself from one generation to another. His concern was with how class inequality permeates the fabric of our culture and is perpetuated through social reproduction. Bourdieu's theory of reproduction is the most noted sociological rationale for intergenerational disadvantages in educational outcomes for working-class children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Family is the first and most fundamental agent of socialization in childhood. Parents instil values, norms and beliefs and are the primary influence in transmitting culture. The participants gave me a glimpse into family experiences, parents' past, family values and cultural practices. Half of the participant's mothers were immigrants, and half grew up post-war era (1945-1950), at a time when the 'male breadwinner model' was still regarded as the ideal structure for family life. The women share about their mother's role within their families and the prioritization of work for survival, limiting any opportunity to attend higher education.

Clara came from a large Dutch family where both parents were immigrants. She explains, "My dad was a bit older than my mom, and it was the expectation at the time because they were

living post-war era, World War Two, the expectation was, you had to just help your family and work on the farm." Carol, Gabrielle, and Nicole's parents had similar experiences of not completing high school, and prioritizing work to help provide for basic needs of the family. The participants also spoke extensively about other specific barriers that prevented their mothers from attending university, from sexism to family responsibilities and lack of finances. As one participant states, her mother was 'a product of her time' where the culture of sexism and androcentrism limited working-class women from fulfilling their educational aspirations due to the structural inequality of gender roles. Three of the participants were aware of their mothers' desires to attend school:

> She always says that you know, if I were a bit more educated, I would have probably achieved more…My mom was the eldest, and she had a lot of siblings. Her father was a drunk, so she had to like step up. Yeah, I think she regrets it to this day. (Carol)

> I would say, my dad, I don't think ever regretted not getting a post-secondary education. My mom for sure did...my mom is very intelligent and easily picks up management skills and business skills and accounting skills. So, had she truly progressed in a profession, she would have done very, very well. My dad was, I'm gonna say, honestly, yeah, like, I think he's, he is chauvinistic. And so, that would have been challenging even at the time. (Nicole)

Parker shares the prioritization of educating boys in the Chinese culture that her mother was raised in. The oldest brother didn't want to go to school. Parker's mom was skipped over, and the option was offered to the younger brother. Parker hesitates to say that she is bitter, "but I know that she would have done well in university, and she would have loved to go do more, to have opportunities with higher education. She just wasn't afforded that opportunity."

Unmet educational desires of the working-class is not uncommon as mention in the prologue but the overlap of gender is also at play. Symbolic violence explains in part the complexity of hierarchies where those deemed lower status accept certain beliefs and ways of living as though they are natural. Bourdieu (2001) describes it as not the same as physical

violence, but power that imposes meaning, such as androcentrism, where men are centred in society and women are relegated to the periphery and concealing power relations. Wyn et al. (2017) writes that consciously and unconsciously, women centre around men's work, partially because women rarely make a higher income than their male counterparts. "The impact of widespread precarious work, employment insecurity, the culture of long hours of work for full-time workers and extensive part-time work" often impacts women's career choices (Wyn et al., 2017, p. 500). Ali shares:

> My dad was a professional hockey player. He ended up moving to the US, and my mom went with him. The dream was always hockey, and he ended up getting cut, and he went to play in Europe. So, my mom was a waitress, a bartender most of the time...ended up moving back to the states, where I was born.

Ali's mother did not have caregiving responsibilities, yet worked in the service industry where part-time, irregular hours are often toted as good for women, reinforcing "the dominance of the male breadwinner/part-time carer dichotomy in household types (and the assumption that families are by definition heterosexual)" (Wyn et al., 2017, p. 500).

Society continues to change, the typical family represented in the 1950's commercials, magazines, and television shows continues to be "the cultural ideal against which contemporary family compositions are measured" (Kinnel et al., 2015, p. 189). The example of the father as breadwinner and mother as a homemaker with 2.5 happy children in a pretty neighbourhood and the picket-fenced yard was less than 10 percent of families (Kinnel et al., 2015). Although the traditional 'male breadwinner model' is declining and working motherhood is now the norm, women's wages continue to be considerably lower. Currently, many women are required to work to maintain a middle-class status.

There is reason to be cautious about the "limitations of gender as a single analytical category" (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Race, class, gender and sexuality are not individual

attributes to be measured and assessed for their separate contribution to explain social outcomes (Zinn & Dill, 1996). Gender is experienced differently depending on social location. For example, a working-class woman has a unique set of social experiences and structural constraints than middle-class women. Gabrielle explains the rationale for her androcentric family structure:

> My mom, in many ways, was a strong woman. But in many ways, she was also a product of her time period. And so, it was like, "this is your father's chair, and you don't sit in it, and at dinner." My father would get served first…honestly, my mom made all the decisions in our family…especially keeping my dad healthy and happy because the idea was, if he didn't work, then we're in trouble. So, we have to take care of him first, and then he'll take care of us idea.

In this way, social class has "a powerful impact in shaping the daily rhythms of family life" (Lareau, 2011, p. 8). Gender dependence is perpetuated in a system where the male breadwinner is required for survival and positions lower-class women with restricted options.

Collecting these childhood memories of family life calls attention to interactions that influence early childhood socialization and habitus that are essential aspects of child development, shaping thoughts, worldview, and future possibilities.

Extracurricular Activities

The role and kinds of extra-curricular activities are class markers indicative of the cultural capital that a family holds. As discussed in Chapter 1, accumulating assets such as extra-curricular activities build cultural and social capital that constructs status and provides a social advantage. Extracurricular activities are characteristic of a middle-class lifestyle where parents prioritize opportunities for leisure activities that give children the skills to navigate different fields (Lareau, 2011).

Extracurricular activities were a part of all the participants' childhood and teen years; and for most of them, they ended at the start of university. Some of the women participated in numerous clubs and activities during their childhood, while most were involved in one program.

Two participants took dance classes and one had a significant injury impacting her ability to continue. One participant spoke several times about competitive soccer team experiences. Another had many interests and took part in art classes, vocal lessons, basketball, piano and drum lessons. One participant talked about her involvement in a 'Junior Achievement' group where the business community came together one night a week to help them create their own product, manufacture, market and sell it. Some of the women were active in general church activities and summer camps. Three participants attended weekly programs explicitly targeted at girls, such as Girl Guides, Brownies and Calvinettes (a Christian Reformed girls club to meet spiritual needs, mould lives, and study the Bible). When asked about extra-curricular activities, Clara shares that she only participated in things her parents did not have to pay for saying:

> So, in church, we had girls' group, we had Calvinettes for the girls, and we had Cadets for the boys, and the boys got to do things like woodworking and wood burning and going camping and girls did things like flower arranging and folk-art painting, and baking where you would earn badges for your little scarf...Oh my gosh, it was so, it was so…so, gender role stereotype like, Ahhhh. I wanted to go camping and do woodworking and build things and "please give me a paintbrush and a hammer.

Religion

Before 1750, theologians were the primary authority on gender difference, reproduction and gender roles which remained well into the nineteenth century (Kimmel & Holler, 2017). Early diagrams by male anatomists "exaggerated the pelvises of women and the crania of men" and were used to argue the sexes' "natural" suitedness to specific social roles" (Kimmel & Holler, 2017, p. 5). Once the biological differences had been established as scientific fact, many argued that women's aspirations for employment, education or the right to vote were violations of 'the laws of nature' (Kimmel & Holler, 2017).

Critical sociology and feminist theories critique biologically determined patterns of development, and focus on society and environments (Kimmel & Holler, 2017). It does not

ignore biology but views it as the 'raw material', whereby "society and history provide the context, the instruction manual that we follow to construct our identities" (Kimmel & Holler, 2017, p. 60). Individuals' lives are shaped within historical and social structures where dominant norms and values are reflected formally and informally in institutions. The institution of education is connected to economy, politics, legal, family, religion, and media, thus contributing to shape, modify, and construct our identities.

Religion is often a significant part of identity and belonging, influencing the cultural values of individuals and families. It is a core part of the primary habitus, preconditioning the body and mind by the rules of the field. The church offers a particular form of habitus, "for some, it is from infancy and others, it is newly formed and primarily compels individuals' to think, act, and live a certain way" (Grusendorf, 2016, p. 7). How we conceptualize gender matters within these contexts as it influences our ability to deal with reality and navigate a complex world.

Four of the participants spoke explicitly about religion. Two grew up Roman Catholic with one describing it as conservative catholic. One participant was raised in a very traditional Christian Reformed denomination, and another had no religious connection. Gabrielle shares:

> I had been planning on going to university and do an urban planning degree. It had taken a while, but I kind of talked my parents around to that idea. But then, after this faith encounter, I came and told them I was going to seminary instead…and they lost it. They just thought that was horrific and stupid, and a waste of money and a waste of my life. My mom especially had what she called a 'fire and brimstone' grandmother, which is an 'uber', conservative grandmother. And so, anything to do with faith, or the church or anything like that was completely taboo in our family. And so, they were really, really opposed to that in so many ways. So, there was the fact that I was doing education was one thing, but that the fact that I was doing a theological degree was a huge thing. And then, later on, I did an environmental studies degree; there's like, almost no mention of it. You know, it's like, kind of like, good for you, pat on the back.

We can identify the compounded intersections of working-class attitudes, gender and religion in educational decision making. Habitus begins as pre-reflexive, whereby one unconsciously reacts to the world around them. When confronted with something contrary to the initial family habitus an individual may question or engage in reflection as Gabrielle did, thus making a rationally conscious decision to take on a religious habitus contrary to her primary habitus (Grusendorf, 2016).

Historically, girls have been excluded from higher education and leadership roles in certain religions. Urban (2003) notes that Bourdieu believed the church's predominant function is to "legitimize, reinforce, and reproduce a given social hierarchy" (p. 363). Clara's shifting habitus gives us insight into the intersection and complexity of religion and gender when sharing about her mom's response to the decision to pursue university:

> "So, wow, you're actually doing it" (Clara's mom). But I don't think that was pride in the 'oh my gosh, you're gonna have this amazing career' because, of course, my career that I'm going towards is actually a creative arts pastor…which girls can't be pastors (sarcasm). I have a vagina; therefore, I cannot be a pastor. I cannot be in ministry because that's not what women do...she knew full well; I was going into this because I'm getting my art stuff now. But then I'm going to go for my Masters of theological studies, which is kind of where she went, "Whoa, what? You're gonna do what now?" And I'm like, "yeah, I'm gonna be a pastor" - "but, you're, you're a woman". I'm like, "last time I checked." So, there's that, that played into it, where I think she was really hesitant to support something that she theologically felt was wrong.

We see the impact of symbolic violence on Clara's mother as the power structure resulted in the internalization of legitimations of hierarchy, where symbolic violence is upheld by those who accept the status quo. I also get a sense that Clara's habitus was not only reacting to a gendered habitus developed in childhood but also a family habitus that included a different religious habitus than she currently had adopted.

Grusendorf (2016) suggests religious capital "can at times subvert the tyranny of power" and go beyond perpetuating the social status quo by reacting against it in hopes of change (p. 5).

Clara’s career choice is disrupting the status quo in her family and challenging social norms in church. These quotes help us consider how gender and religion overlap with identity, impacting higher educational aspirations and decisions including the lack of encouragement and discord in some FGFS’s family relationships, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Elementary School Experiences

School is a place of socialization where early childhood experiences lay the foundation for academic aspirations and play an instrumental role in shaping their future. The focal point of this section is to share the data collected from participants’ elementary school experiences and make connections to class and early habitus transformation.

Most of the participants had fond memories of elementary school and overall described it as a positive experience. During the photo-elicitation interviews, participants expressed more in-depth challenges and feelings about elementary school using their photographs. Many spoke highly of their elementary school teachers, some attributing them as the reason for their pursuit of higher education. Parker expressed, “I loved school. I always had fun in school…I think my teachers always liked me. It was generally a very, very positive experience growing up. Carol says, “I literally couldn’t wait to get up the next day to do things, you know, and I really enjoyed it…I loved school. Oh my god, I never missed a day of school.”

Gabrielle talked about a particular teacher who was foundational in her learning development:

> I loved school, too, especially at elementary level. I had an amazing teacher; I still remember her name. They had this program where you could do three years in two, like an acceleration program....She had a really profound impact on me. And I think, in many ways, she’s the one that gave me a real curiosity for learning.

Gabrielle's experience supports the research of Lehmann (2009a), where working-class students' habitus transformation can begin with the encouragement of a teacher.

In addition to the focus group discussion, participants were asked to take a photo that represented *how they felt as a student in childhood.* Nicole took a picture of herself with her glasses on, saying, "so, I kept my glasses on because I was a nerd. I was a nerd in school. I was an A-plus student in school." The literature regarding FGSs often outlines achievement gaps such as lower test scores and grade point averages and weak math skills (Finnie et al., 2010; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Spiegler, 2018), but Nicole, Carol, Gabrielle and Parker were all above average students which contradicts what is outlined in the literature. Parker states, "Grades were never really an issue. I wouldn't say I was like 99% and 100% and everything. But I'd say like; I was pretty much a mid 80, high 80, 90's student. I did well."

Ali was also a good student, enjoyed school and performed well in all of her classes – except math. Although FGSs tend to have weak math skills, her perception of the lack of support stood out. Ali uses this internet photo (see picture 1) to illustrate her experience in elementary school:

> I always felt like I didn't have the support to like push myself toward being better at it. It was always kind of like, whenever a math class came, I would just like completely shut down….It was always more of like, figure it out. You know? Like, study harder, look over it again…it was always up to me to figure it out.

Lack of Support

Picture 1. Discouraged girl with forehead on math chalkboard

Although some FGFSs feel supported, many have reported feeling a lack of support early in their education as parents without higher education sometimes view it as something to just ‘get through’ regardless of a child’s giftedness and grades (Spiegler, 2018). In addition, there is a stereotype that men are better at mathematics than women and the assumption that higher-level cognitive ability is more present in boys, which can hinder girls’ performance and erode their interest in mathematics (Bian et al., 2017).

Clara captured similar feelings of inadequacy using an internet photo (see picture 2):

> I just didn’t feel smart. I didn’t feel capable or like I was good enough. I wasn’t failing, but I wasn’t succeeding either…I just felt like everyone knew I wasn’t the superstar student. I wasn’t good enough to be a good student...I was just wasn’t enough of anything. I was, so, ‘just throw the dunce cap on me and throw me in the corner’. Just that was my comfort zone because that was where I felt I belonged.

Not Good Enough

Picture 2. Man facing corner with a dunce cap

As highlighted in the literature review, recent research has shown that by the age of six, girls believe that boys are the smarter sex (Bian et al., 2017). The study showed that at age five, similarly, boys and girls each equate brilliance to their own gender. However, there was a shift by age six and seven where girls "were significantly less likely than boys to associate brilliance with their own gender" (Bian et al., 2017, p. 389). This reflects an internal process that begins at an early age. Although girls are achieving higher rates of success academically at all ages, is it possible that old stereotypes are still lingering? This can be internalized early for some girls, shaping their educational habitus. Furthermore, an analysis of Clara's working-class childhood habitus (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6) may have been at play already.

On the contrary, Raby & Pomeranz (2015) conducted interviews of high school aged

girls that identified themselves as smart girls, "for many girls, their smart identity was a source of validation and status within their family, with their teachers, and sometimes with their peers" (p. 517). Their identity as smart girls was complex in that peer acceptance and the pursuit of cultural capital were a balancing act causing some to dumb down and conceal their smartness while carefully maintaining their academic success. This practice of trying to fit in with girls and be viewed as attractive to boys is a traditionally feminine behavior of trying to manage the perceptions of others.

By contrast, Gabrielle tells a story where she was recognized for being intelligent but not simultaneously seen as nice:

> When I was in public school…my older brother and myself both won the Citizenship Award, which is, you know, you're contributing to the school and whatever, you're a nice person. And my younger brother did not, which was just because he was very quiet and shy but he is a really nice person. Anyways, my mother, for the rest of our lives, was convinced that my two brothers won the Citizenship Award, and I didn't, and she used to always tell the story, "Well, you're the smart one, but your brothers are the nice ones." So, it was kind of like you had to be one or the other. And I wasn't nice because I was a little bit too pushy or a little bit too persistent or whatever.

Gender stereotypes come from subconscious thinking, often based on personal experience and without considering differences. It appears that Gabrielle's mother's recollection of events may have been impacted by her daughter's more masculine attributes of pushiness and persistence, dismissing the possibility that she could have earned an award for being nice. There is a distinction made about Gabrielle that does not align with the expectations of being a girl.

Elementary school for girls is when new pressures and expectations for how they look and changes to their body bring about changes in their identity. Puberty entered the conversation where four participants shared about feeling a distinct shift in their relationships with teachers, peers, and self in the upper grades of elementary school, describing puberty as weird. The participant's elementary years were not absent of personal pain, disappointment or trauma. They

each shared different stories such as breaking a femur bone, bullying, permanent knee problems, changing schools, parents fighting, and for Ali and Carol, the difficulty of immigrating to another country.

High School Experiences

The participants reminisced about many facets of high school, sharing memories of friends, sports, boyfriends, surgery, science competitions, teachers, and grade expectations for post-secondary applications. Many students decide to attend university in early high school as their course selection often demands it. However, Finnie et al. (2010) found that FGSs are more likely to make their decision during their last years of high school.

The influence of teachers was at the forefront when discussing participants' high school experiences. Teachers or guidance counsellors can sometimes become informal mentors to students giving information, encouragement or recommending an academic path, thus instilling the confidence required for upward mobility (Spiegler, 2018). Carol talked about a teacher who instilled the confidence she needed to pursue her academic aspirations:

> My teacher actually got me interested in science…she would say, first go do your homework, then come and ask. I never went back to her because I always found answers. So, that is how I started reading and rereading…and that is when I realized that I'm going to study until I have a Ph.D.

Studies consistently find that same gender or race teachers are role models and increase the chances of female and minority students pursuing a given field (Langan, 2018). For example, Parker spoke of a teacher who she admired and identified with in significant ways:

> I had one teacher who was also my coach, and she was also Asian female…She was a science teacher, and I just realized, through doing years and years of math and science, I'm good at it…I played for her softball team...We just kind of got along...I kind of saw myself in her - like her. She was definitely steadfast and headstrong. I like that. I think

> she was pretty tough. That's kind of how I see myself...generally, my teachers have been white, so I'm not used to having a teacher that looked like me.

Parker is referring to the importance of representation. In this case, she is highlighting both racial representation and possibly gender. Being exposed to same race or gendered teachers as role models significantly influences course of study and career choices of marginalized and female students (Egalite et al., 2015; Porter & Serra, 2020).

Clara felt that she did not receive guidance or adequate direction for making educational decisions from teachers:

> the only teacher who really did say, you know, you could really do something with this, was my art teacher. And it was just at that point because I was not an academic; I was like, "oh, you're just being nice. Thank you. You know, that's very nice of you. But I'm not smart enough to go to post-secondary education, so let's not even talk about it." That's how I felt going out of grade 12. It was you're not smart enough. You don't have the grades. And what are you going to go for?

Bourdieu (1999) discusses the working-class habitus that holds an attitude of 'not for the likes of me,' which is a vigorous process of self-selecting out of university in advance or within months of attending perpetuated by middle-class exclusions. As discussed in Chapter 2, class dispositions are shaped by our social backgrounds, priming us for environments that we are automatically comfortable in (Lehmann, 2012). Sadly, Clara's working-class habitus was primed to dismiss her art teacher's encouragement.

Unfortunately, while it is common for teachers to lead their classroom with embedded stereotypes or dismissive behaviour at times, overt acts can cause serious harm and have consequential effects on a student's confidence and choices. Gabrielle shares in the focus group:

> My experience was kind of different in that I think high school almost talked me out of going to university. I always did fairly well, like many of you have said, in school until I got to…I think it was probably grade twelve. And I can't remember if it was physics or calculus, but it was one of those two courses. I just did not connect with my teacher, and I was not doing well. And actually, probably looking back, should have dropped out of the class. But, there is this kind of belief that you wanted to leave all your options open, so

> you needed to have all your math and sciences in case you wanted to go in that direction. So, I was kind of encouraged to stay in it, and I did but, that so undermined my confidence in my ability. I went from thinking I was, you know, relatively smart to thinking I was a complete idiot. I think it was just the way the teacher taught. I went for every tutorial, and he would say exactly the same thing over again and then get so exasperated at me for not understanding it. I always felt like I was the one that was the idiot, not that he wasn't a good teacher and looking back, he wasn't a good teacher. That hugely undermined my confidence in my ability to go on and almost stopped me.

We all took a deep breath after Ali vulnerably spoke during the focus group about her high school experience with an English teacher that led to taking a year off before applying to university:

> I had an English teacher in my grade 12 year, and I always thought of myself as being very good at English. I was good at writing. I love to read. I don't know, if there was like a vendetta, maybe she didn't like me. For some reason, in her class, I just, I could never do anything, right. I never did well I was always doing something wrong. When I tore my ACL, unfortunately, I had to have surgery, which led me out of school for almost over a month. There was a really big project that was due. I had to do it from home but at that time I was on morphine. I was on hard drugs for like maybe about two weeks trying to rehab from the surgery. When I came back to school, I had done it, but not up to her liking. She still made me stand in front of the class with crutches and present. At the end of the exam, and after everything that happened, the mark that I got was not enough for the program that I wanted to apply for university. She was the only teacher that I needed this mark from. So, I actually went and spoke to her in grade 12, "and as you know", I was like, "is there any way that I can like 'up that? I can do some extra work. I was just in an unfortunate position during this exam time, I just had a massive knee surgery. I was really not in my right mindset to be taking an exam." And she goes, "it's gonna be okay, Ali, at least you're pretty."

Gendered comments focusing on a girl's physical appearance at a crucial time in development are damaging and impact self-confidence, potentially impacting a girl's choice to pursue higher education or, in the case of Ali, forcing her to delay admission for a year and second guess attending university at all. Farley and Garlen (2016) found that when race, class and gender were mentioned, it was around challenging circumstances where schools were not accommodating.

Other challenges in high school, such as gendered classes, home life, and bullying, entered the conversations with participants. The bullying continued in secondary school for

Clara, "I was not an academic in high school; my grades nine and ten were just as bad (bullying) as my elementary experience because it was the same people. I just went from the, you know, elementary Christian school to the high school Christian school." Clara took things into her own hands and independently registered at a new school for grade eleven and later told her mom of the change.

The journey to higher education is a critical time of decision making and is impacted by multiple variables. Student support from home and school, encouraging environments with diverse teachers and eliminating stereotypes, sexism, and prejudice are all vital for working-class females to have an equal playing field and reach their full potential.

Journey *Through* Higher Education

This section concentrates on the journey *through* higher education, exploring the university experiences of FGFSs, citing first impressions and expressions of belonging. Participants talked about their first impressions of university, which they described as cold, terrifying, and impersonal, with massive campuses, huge classes, and outdated buildings unlike those shown in the movies. They had different expectations about university based on the stories they were told from family, friends, or society. Each participant was asked to provide a picture that represented these messages. Ali used this stock photo (see picture 3):

> The dream was always to be in a sorority. That was always what it looked like to me when I pictured college and I was younger, I guess. In the states, they call it college, but we call it university…so it was definitely looking at college from the standpoint of society. It was all the friends and all the girlfriends and the boyfriends and sorority and all that, the football games. That is totally not what I ended up getting.

What I Thought

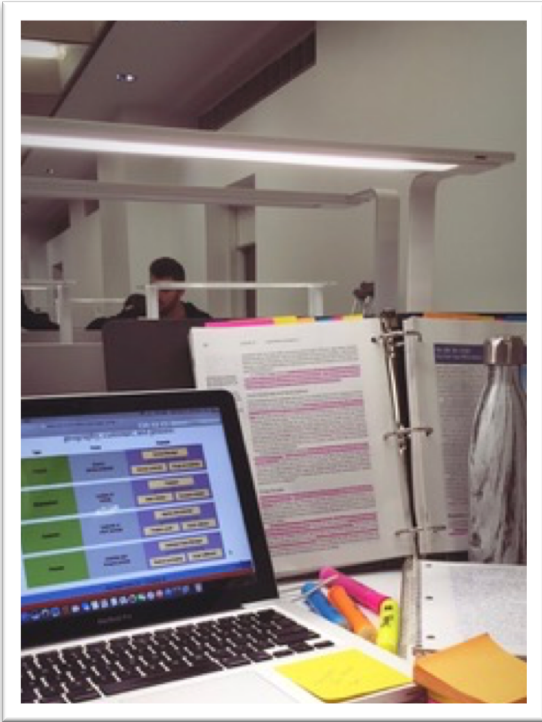
Picture 3. Students in front of a sorority house

Parker used a photo of Heineken beer to represent the university party culture she was told about, saying, “you’re going into it thinking that it’s party all the time. And honestly, it could have been.” She further explains the influence of media on her early perceptions of university, “I remember hearing that a lot, you’re gonna meet so many new people. It’s gonna be so much fun. It’s gonna be the best four years of your life.”

It is common for FGSs to be blindsided by expectations versus the reality of university. Somewhat disillusioned initially, Ali explains her experience using a photo (see picture 4) from one of her many nights studying in the library:

> Yeah, it’s not at all what I thought it was. It’s literally a photo of me in the library at like, midnight in second year. I remember thinking...“Oh, it’s gonna be like parties and frats and stuff.” Like, no, I was in the library all the time. I lived there. It was crazy…it’s not as glamorous as you might think. It’s a lot more hard work if you actually want to succeed because otherwise, I feel like you’re not going to get the college experience if you don’t do well in college or university, right? You need to do well to keep going. It was a lot of studying, and honestly like, all my memories from every year of university are surrounded by the library.

Disillusioned: What it was



Picture 4. Studying in the library

A strong work ethic is required to maintain good grades, something (Lehmann, 2009b) found that is valued by working-class students and leads to gaining cultural capital and social mobility (Buddel, 2018).

Belonging

Research has shown that students engaged on campus are more likely to report feelings of belonging. Canadian FGSs have the lowest engagement in university events declining further as they progress towards graduation (Grayson, 2011). Participants were asked to provide a picture that reflected how they *'felt a part' of the university experience'.* Parker photographed (see picture 5) some of her meaningful university artifacts:

> So, I think the best way to feel part of something is to be connected through other people. I didn't really know how to get involved. I think I was definitely intimidated in the beginning because of how many people there were. It as an LGBTQ group, and I think,

> for me, university is kind of like finding yourself and who you are....I came from a Catholic High School, relatively conservative city town, right?…It was a really, really good time to just kind of meet some people, meet like-minded individuals, and to feel safe was a really big thing, to feel part of something and to feel like you can be who you are without being judged. A big part of school for me was coming into myself in that way.

Connecting to Others

Picture 5. University Artifacts

Most university students are navigating their identity and learning to ‘be themselves’ outside of their family structure. Understanding, accepting, and valuing individual sexual identity is part of that process. Universities are often more tolerant spaces where groups can provide support and belonging.

It is not characteristic of working-class FGSs to seek help in university or interact with professors. However, Ali’s interactions with staff, professors and teaching assistants are evidence of her feelings of belonging:

> I was always going to the office hours for help. I was always friends with the staff, ‘cause I was there like every day....TA’s as well…were like a huge help. I really utilized the help that the university offered in terms of office hours, study sessions, free tutoring and all that stuff, especially for those classes that I wasn’t sure of, like stats, obviously. My program had a lot of writing in it, and luckily, writing papers was one of my strong

> suits. I never really struggled with that. Overall, I think I definitely fit into the university experience. I definitely felt accepted.

Bourdieu would say that Ali intuitively learned the ‘rules of the game’, which contributed to her success in university. As discussed in Chapter 1, Bourdieu (1989) explains that individual fields have rules which define the ordinary functioning of the field (e.g. university). In this case, “the agent has the propensity to act which is born out of the relation between a field and a system of dispositions adjusted to the game it proposes, a sense of the game and of its stakes which implies both an inclination and an ability to play the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1989, p. 42).

Gabrielle talked about her connection to school and belonging during multiple degrees and across her life course:

> When I graduated from my first degree, I was on the student council, and because this was pre-kids I felt much more connected to the school. I lived in dorm the first year, although I got married right after first year and I didn’t live in dorm. But I definitely felt more part of the community of the school....So, I went to my first graduation, and I went to my Master’s graduation, but I didn’t go to that middle one.

Two participants in this study discussed their passion for learning when asked about their feelings of belonging and connection to university. Gabrielle says:

> That whole idea of being in my study and being surrounded by books was really important to me and that’s where I felt very connected to academia. It wasn’t the other students. Although I had some great experiences, especially in my Masters, I had some great experiences with other students because there were other people more, closer to my age or just more mature than the first couple of rounds of people....But it wasn’t so much that, as professors, libraries, access to, online articles, and all of that kind of stuff that just intellectually I craved and really connected to.

Reay (2003) found that mature women students were especially motivated by a love for learning and knowledge and was a primary reason for their studying.

Clara’s used a photo (see picture 6) she found on her university website that summoned her passion for art and learning, saying:

> It's the university library...and ironically enough those are Gauguin books, which is an artist....I think the studying, being in the library, going into the stacks, I think was probably the most university I felt, when for me - I have art books. You're walking around with arms full of books and lugging them around...Sitting down at one of those tables and siphoning through them and trying to find what I'm finding...where you get to immerse yourself in knowledge and books and the smell of books. I think that enlightening experience, those moments...when you kick into research mode, that's university to me because I love it...with so many pieces of paper with things written everywhere.

Immersed in Books

Picture 6. Woman surrounded by art books in library

For these women, it would appear that "prioritizing the process rather than the outcome highlights a distinction between the mature students and their younger female counterparts" (Reay, 2003, p. 304).

Summary

This chapter captures a glimpse *to* and *through* FGFS's academic journeys as participants narrated their family history and stories. Evidence of working-class and gendered habitus development from family life was analyzed. Feelings of inferiority and 'lack of support' was felt early on in the participants' education. There are signs of resistance to gender norms and

family social structure as habitus transformation began to shift. And finally, the women recalled the positive experiences of belonging and having 'felt a part' of the university in their own ways.

Although the above data suggest that the journey through university was relatively successful, further investigation of the data show otherwise. These findings unfold further in the five major themes that emerged throughout this study: working-class attitudes, lack of parents' expectations, imposter syndrome, belonging and gratitude for education. The impact that the reproduction of class and gender transmit to unequal childhoods is increasingly evident as we move into the next chapter to discuss other barriers faced by FGFSs.

Chapter 5 FGFS Barriers

"I don't know how to university."

-Clara
(first generation female student)

Barriers prevent movement or access and keep people apart, preventing communication or progress (Kipfer, 2013). As outlined in the introduction and literature review, FGFSs face many barriers in their pursuit of higher education. This chapter delves into those disadvantages, namely lack of cultural capital, lack of encouragement, financial challenges and various gender issues. This chapter lays the groundwork to deepen the reader's understanding of FGFS's barriers and displays the initial observations of transforming habitus weaved throughout their stories.

Lack of Cultural Capital

Cultural capital refers to knowledge, intellect, and skills that produce higher social status. We all have cultural capital and use it daily to navigate the world around us. However, not all are equally valued within social institutions, which has serious economic and political repercussions for some groups. As referenced in the literature review, FGSs lack practical and experiential knowledge about university as parents are unable to help guide them *to* and *through* their university experience. It is common for FGSs to be blindsided by expectations versus the reality of university due to unpreparedness by no fault of their own as seen in the previous chapter.

FGSs often feel they have shortcomings, are unable to 'fit in', or lack the practical information of navigating university and yet, the FGFSs in this study met the requirements of acceptance into university, proving their competence. "Social mobility through higher education is as much the process of learning elite mannerisms, behaviors, and ''rules of the game'' as it is the process of gaining credentials, knowledge, or wealth" (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 18). In

Clara's first year, she shares conversations she had with her partner articulating not knowing the 'the rules of the game':

> …the one phrase I think I said the most was, "I don't know how to university". University became a verb. I know how to college. I know how to entrepreneur. I know how to parent. I know how to do all these things. I hadn't figured out the language or the methodology of 'universitying'…It was something I had to learn how to do and believe that I could do. I still don't know if I believe it.

Even though Clara did not have the necessary tools, she had the grit to figure it out.

Independence was a personality trait referenced and often evidenced in the participants throughout the focus group and photo-elicitation. The participants described themselves as persistent, stubborn, steadfast, headstrong, optimistic, curious, tough, positive, and responsible in this study. They recalled having obtained information from sources other than their parents as they worked through their decision to attend university. Ali mentions the phone calls and google searches to figure out the application process stating, "I did it myself. I did my applications on my own for university."

Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) also found that FGSs are less likely to ask for help or interact with faculty and more likely to ask peers for academic advice. In particular, Parker talks about never going to office hours, not asking for help and being a "figure it out on my own" type. She did mention that on occasion, she would ask a friend. Gabrielle talked about the importance of having a friend help her through the nuances of higher education:

> The good news was I had a friend was a couple years ahead of me. He wasn't in my program....He really helped me to navigate things. He would tell me like, "don't take this class, cause this prof is really hard." Or "don't do this or go to this part of the library or whatever. If it wasn't for him, I would have been lost. But I would say he was my primary point of connection with the university.

Gabrielle's experience of leaning on other students for help is consistent with the literature on FGSs.

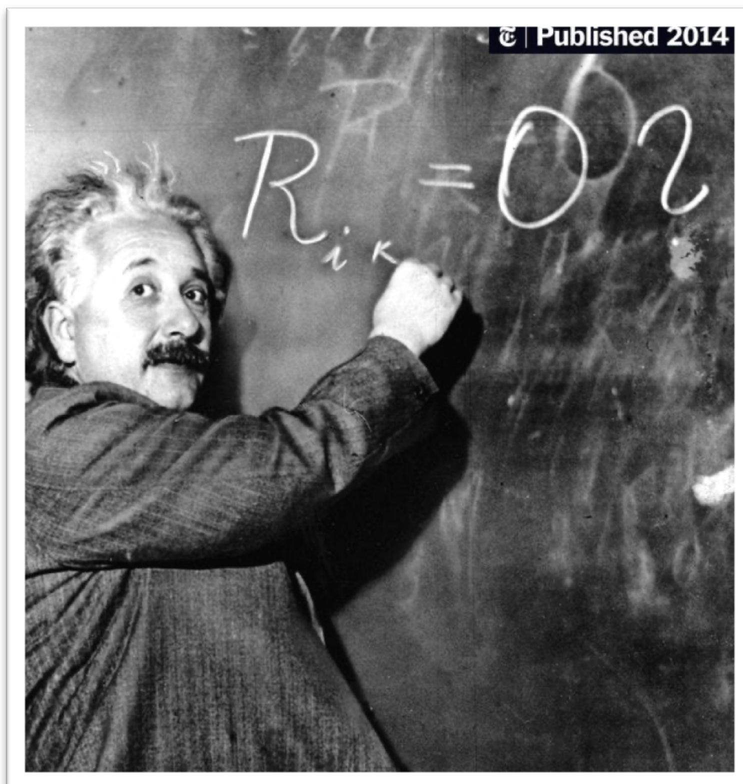
Two participants said it was important that they finish what they started, which became their motivation at times. Overall, there was a strong sense of determination, tenacity and work ethic felt when talking to each participant - possibly a feature of FGFSs success.

Hmmm…What do I Know About University?

Clara articulated the stories she was told about university using a photo (see picture 7) of Einstein. She says:

> You went to university if you were smart, if you were a brain. You went to college if you were normal. But if you were super smart, like if you want to be a doctor or a lawyer, that's who went to university…I didn't consider university. If you're something special, you go to university and so, I was like, well, "I'm not something special". I can barely get past my high school classes.

Special People go to University



Picture 7. Physicist, Albert Einstein writing on a blackboard

This quote highlights the self-selection process and self-fulfilling prophecy that Bourdieu (1984) explains where individuals see what is possible or impossible for 'their kind' - a sense of limitation. "The relation to what is possible is a relation to power" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 4). Bourdieu further explains that historically higher education opportunities for the working class were limited. Now with educational expansion for FGFSs, internalization of those limits is part of the working-class habitus and unconscious calculator. Power is implicated in how Clara states she was never really taught about the differences between university and college. She says, "It was just colleges for normal people, and university for smart people….It was people who took all the advanced classes and wanted some big highfalutin jobs….You know, if you want to be a normal person, a blue-collar worker, in the trades, you go to college."

The reality is that secure, well-paid employment for uneducated individuals tends to be in manual labour such as trades or construction - fields dominated by men. In comparison, higher-paying job availability for women tends to be in non-manual labour such as finance and teaching - which requires higher education (Edgerton et al., 2014). Edgerton et al. (2014) point out that there are limited well-paying jobs for women without formal education which disadvantages women more than men in the labour market. They also need to consider the added burden of the cost of education that men in high paying manual labour jobs do not have to carry.

Lehmann (2009a) notes that working-class students who consider university tend to have a practical and vocational perspective on pursuing careers that would lead to a job. They tend to approach higher education for vocational degrees (medicine, law, teaching) instead of non-vocational degrees like history or sociology (Lehmann, 2009a). The participants talked about childhood dreams such as being a ballet dancer, a teacher, a nurse, a dentist, an orthodontist, and a lawyer. While many are not encouraged towards university, those that are tend to be steered

towards ‘practical’ degrees that lead to a professional career. Nicole explains, “I would say she (mom) pushed my sister and I to get an education. She really wanted me to go to law school and was very disappointed that I didn’t.”

Lehmann (2009a) explains this as partly due to media, limited access to educated adult role models, and titles (nurse, doctor, lawyer) that represent achievement and success. Nicole and Parker, both second-generation immigrants, were the only two in the study who felt a parental ‘push’ towards higher education – just from their mothers. This supports previous research, as discussed in Chapter 2, where mothers pass on the importance of education to their daughters.

Gibbons and Woodside (2014) discussed one study participant who revealed girls from her family were not expected to go to university, and alternatively, the boys were forced. Parker explains where ‘the push’ she received from her mom came from. “She came from a family two boys, two girls. It was always the boys that got the opportunities to go to school because they didn’t come from an affluent family…I think it was a big push for her to want us both to do school.” In this case, it seems that Parker’s mother was orienting her daughters towards higher education because of her own missed opportunities and desire to provide a superior life for her children (Spiegler, 2018), which also coincides with the second-generation immigrant student experience.

Lack of Encouragement: “You Don’t Need to go to University”

The majority of the participants in this study were not encouraged, expected, and at times even discouraged from pursuing higher education. According to Terenzini et al. (1996), it is common for FGSs to disclose receiving less encouragement from their parents to attend university. Gabrielle used this photo (see picture 7) to talk about the stories she was told about university:

> I heard you don't need to go to university; you can self-educate yourself. And so, that was because my father was one that only had grade nine education, but he loved to read... He could have been a historian working in a museum or something like that, because he knew so much, but it was all self-taught….There was always books around our house so, it wasn't an 'anti-learning' message, but it was, 'you don't need school to learn' message. It wasn't really encouraged; it was kind of like universities not necessary. It's expensive. It's elitist. It's not necessary.

University is not Necessary

Picture 8. Office bookshelf

Kim et al. (2021) found twelve studies that revealed FGFSs reported limited support from family. In particular, they reported receiving notably lower emotional support levels from their parents than non-FGFSs (Sy et al., 2011). Some FGFS's family members made hurtful comments criticizing them for making a different choice of not buying a house, getting married, or starting a family. Some say that their choice to pursue education was an attempt to avoid work (Leyva, 2011).

Carol received the message from her parents that higher education was not valued, stating, “where we come from, it’s better to make a livelihood sooner than study. They think it’s more a waste of time and energy than you would actually make money out of that time.” Likewise, Ali’s parents told her she would get by without education, encouraging her to start her own business as they did. These attitudes are common among working-class families, whereas middle-class families tend to be more optimistic about the return on investment of higher education as outlined in the literature review.

During the focus group discussion, Clara shares that she did not feel any pressure or expectation to attend higher education, “I don’t know if it was the fact that I was a girl, a woman? I don’t. I don’t know if it was parental?” In response, Gabrielle empathized saying:

> Yeah, I totally agree with you, Clara. So, in fact, just the opposite in some cases, it was almost discouraged. Yeah. So, my parents didn’t encourage me to go on in school at all. In fact, even in high school, they would come and knock on my door and go, “hey, you’re studying too much, you know, what are you studying for kind of thing, come out and play a game with the family.” And they didn’t really understand or push education in any way.

My Family Just Doesn’t Understand

Sy et al. (2011) found that FGSs received less emotional and informational support from parents than non-FGSs. The majority of the women in this study say their families do not understand what university is like for them. Ali explains that for her parents, “They half the time had no idea what I was going to school for.” It is common for FGFSs’ choice of academic majors to cause confusion when family members do not see how courses relate to ‘real’ work (Olson, 2016). Ali shares this conversation exchange with her parents, explaining what discipline her degree was in:

> I was like; it’s sociology. “What’s that?” I’m like, okay, it’s the study of this. “So, what do you do with that?” I’m like, well, you can do a lot of things. It’s just knowledge. “So, what are you going to do with it, though? Like, really? What’s your plan? What’s going to make you money?”

Ali stresses, "It was just hard to have that relationship, like for her to relate to that, because she didn't totally understand what I was going through." Rascon (2012) explains that limited support often has more to do with the family's lack of university knowledge than not supporting the decision to participate in higher education.

Some participants expressed complex and mixed feelings of support, 'hands off' parenting, and feeling misunderstood by family members. Clara explains, "I think when I talk about the idea…they're like, "what? you're done in a year, right?" I'm like, no, and I'm gonna go for my masters. And they're like, well, what does that do? Why would you do that?" FGFSs found it challenging to share their experiences as students and what university meant to them with their families who had no university background (Sy et al., 2011). Ali explains, "It's the disconnect, they're trying to be supportive…but it was super hard for them to connect to why I was so happy about certain parts of it (university) and why I wanted this so bad."

Kim et al. (2021) found that FGFSs face complicated family dynamics, especially parental lack of understanding when it came to their daughter's desire to attend higher education. Unfortunately, they often encounter family members who do not value their aspirations for education (Mitchell, 1997; Terenzini et al., 1996). Conflicts between family and university habitus are most recognizable in conversation "because habitus is cultural in nature, it encompasses even the most mundane aspects of life, meaning that even a seemingly safe conversational topic or style itself can become an area for contention or misunderstanding across two incompatible habitus" (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 26). When asked how Clara's siblings responded, she says:

> Um, you hear that? It's crickets. No one cares. I don't get asked how things are going… I'm convinced that my family just literally thinks I'm nuts. So, I don't think anyone really cares. I think they got sick and tired of me talking about it for sure. We'll get

> together… I'll ask, "how are things going with work?" And you know, "are you still working with COVID", and "how are things going" and blah, blah, blah. Nothing. Nobody cares.

I Think They're Proud?

While participants tell stories about their parents being 'proud', the main emphasis in these narratives is more about parents being happy that they completed, rather than the accrual of academic accomplishment or status. Ali says her parents are thrilled that she finished university; for them, it was that fact that she was able to do it. Gabrielle expresses that her mom was very proud that she completed it after ten years with young children. She says, "I think it was more that she was celebrating an accomplishment. Not necessarily that it was university, but she had definitely come around."

Overall, there is a real sense of ambiguity and even conditions to the support felt by FGFSs. This lack of understanding undergirds not only the working-class habitus but also the gendered habitus, as we will see in the next section.

Because I am a Girl

The literature shows that inequality and social structure are not only rooted in class but also in biological gender differences. Kimmel and Holler (2017) state that "men may be oppressed by race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, physical ability, but men are not oppressed as men" (p. 723). Just as class can influence students' thoughts about which educational pathway is practical and attainable, so too can gender (Edgerton et al., 2014). The gendered habitus "is a consequence of the different possibilities that women and men perceive are available to them" (Mickelson, 2003, p. 374). This section focuses on the aspects of being female that create additional barriers for FGSs from childhood. There was no shortage of data relating to gender

that surfaced throughout the interviews and has been weaved throughout the findings. However, this section is explicitly designated to gender roles, marriage and motherhood in connection to education.

Gender Roles

Gender divisions are often taken for granted in different fields, starting at home. Clara tells us how family gender divisions have shaped her gendered habitus:

> I was raised in a big family where girls became parents and mothers, and the boys worked with the family job…when dad comes home, he does what he needs to do, dinners on the table, we eat dinner, dad goes back into the living room while the boys go off the table and the girls stay back and do the dishes. There was definitely those gender roles of the girls do the household chores, the dishes, the dusting and the vacuuming. I had to clean my brother's room. I am not even kidding you. My two older brothers shared a room and that is the most disgusting job I've ever had to do in my life….I resented it so hard….We were raised in a very traditional Christian Reformed faith, we're talking like the old school, like, men go out and make the money, the women pop out the babies and raise them.

Early gender disparities are internalized by girls and inform their habitus, complicating opportunities and future decisions about career and education.

Historically, the suggestion that women have formal education beyond elementary or high school was preposterous. According to Webber (2017), "consequences of HE (higher education) are also seen as unique to female students as they are competing with historical or cultural assumptions and socially constructed ideas regarding their position in the family" (p. 410). Clara shares:

> I think my mom was just like, well, she needs to get this out of her system and then she'll get married and have babies and raise a family, which in essence is kind of what happened because we couldn't afford day care for two kids. So, I stopped doing my career to raise a family.

Similarly, expectations of marriage and motherhood based on family values were also prevalent for Carol. Her parents wanted her to get married, and she shares how grateful she was to have a supportive partner that continues to encourage her in her education.

Uneducated women fall prey to low-paying, precarious service sector jobs such as retail or childcare. In some families the type of education a women pursues is more acceptable than others. Clara explains:

> My sister had gone to school. She had gone to college for ECE, which made sense because she's a woman … and then, once she started having kids, she had a day care in her home. My oldest sister, I think she may have gone and taken a typing course at a college, and she was like a secretary, which are very stereotypical gendered, and you know, female job. All my brothers went into the family business of masonry, which didn't need school…that left me with either to go into a gendered female job or just start popping out kids. So, when I got older, and I was trying to figure out what I was doing with my job, she (mom) said, "why don't you just watch kids in the house?"

Lareau (2011) found that siblings tend to follow similar paths yet Clara explains her academic decision-making process:

> But for me, I had a bigger plan for myself. I recognized that I wasn't content with what I had, and I had to figure out what I could possibly do to ease that discontent. For me, it was education because without education, I couldn't move forward. I couldn't go anywhere else. I would have been stuck doing what I was doing, and it would have slowly, slowly killed me.

Edgerton et al. (2014) explain that women may express more favourable attitudes toward formal education, conforming to its practices out of fear because women feel the risk of not acquiring credentials more acutely than men.

For educated women, there is a double-bind - a dilemma of discourse where women are caught between conflicting messages and neither is desirable. Carol made several interesting points that convey this double bind:

> The minute you're educated, you're already on a different rainbow of stereotyping, you know? There's a lot of prejudice and stereotype that comes, especially if you're a girl who is educated and who's bringing money home. That is more negatively activated to

> the person because if I say something that is not conforming to the standard, it means that my education did that to me. That is a weight all girls, especially from where I come from…but from all society. It would be like, "Oh, she's an engineer; oh, that means that she must be making a lot of money." That means you're rich, you know? It is a very funny concept…but then society also saw it very negatively, "oh, my god, she's an engineer, she's a graduate, so she must have a mind of her own." That means she's never gonna listen.

Socio-cultural factors within society and education play a significant role in influencing the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that conform to stereotypes. Emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity are exaggerated idealized standards that influence the behaviour and interactions of men and women. Carol is articulating a consequence of challenging masculine domination by not conforming to standards of social hierarchy. Women are "penalized for violating prescriptive aspects of stereotypes and often disliked and considered unfeminine" because they risk threatening the social order (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021, p. 201).

In addition, Leyva (2011) found that older, married FGFSs with children struggle with family members who do not understand their student life, holding expectations of them to be at home with their children and prioritize household tasks. The demands of family life also often interrupt career and school goals causing uncertainty and limited capacity for negotiating multiple roles (Covey, 2013). Clara shares the persistence of her gendered habitus:

> I think most gender barriers that I experience come from inside my head somewhere, this expectation that I, as a woman, my foremost responsibility needs to be my kids and the house. And if the kids or the house are unkept or not taken care of, that falls on me as my responsibility. Um, just because of the way I was raised, that is something that I will always struggle with.

Women frequently feel tension, guilt and selfishness while balancing studying and family, perceiving they are inadequate and deprived of time (Webber, 2017, Brooks, 2015; Edwards, 1993; Hughes, 2002; Merrill, 1999).

Bourdieu's scrutiny of symbolic domination in educational processes informs the reproduction of masculine privilege central to many feminists' concerns in education. Dillabough (2006) questions:

> "To what degree does education function as a cultural system which deploys symbolic and historically inherited forms of masculine domination and privilege and thus continues to shape the social conditions and opportunities for boys and girls in school?" (In Edgerton et al., 2014, p. 188).

A gendered habitus can explain the cognitive internalization from socialization in early childhood and the dynamics of deeply embedded ways of thinking that impacts decision-making and the pursuit of higher education.

Complex Maternal Relationships

Mothers received a lot of attention during the interviews and were important in the academic and social lives of the women. Observing their mother's lives motivated some to make different choices for themselves. Clara shares her reflections:

> You know, she never complained about doing what she did. She never said she wanted more out of her life…I would make myself feel better by saying, "maybe she's just jealous that you're actually able to do what you like"…because she was never able to do that. She never had the bravery, the courage, the gumption...It's not that she settled but she fell into line with what was expected of her and she could never have said that she didn't get everything out of life that she wanted; she would have never ever said that, ever, because she would have felt like that was somehow a betrayal of her family. That was her life, her family was her life. So, you know, that's who she was…I didn't want to become my mother. I saw what she had. You know? She was just a housewife; she, you know, just babysat kids in her house and that may have been fine for her, but it wasn't fine for me.

Most of the participants' mothers did not work outside the home, and the participants talked about their moms not having a choice. They seemed to represent people who had been 'clearly and graphically oppressed' referring to them as a 'product of her time' (Walkerdine,1994).

Like Clara, Carol's mother saw her daughter's talents and had gendered expectations of her to marry, stay home and use her skills to advance her mother's business of storefront rentals. Carol was the oldest, and her father made sure that all his children had at least a basic education. There was an expectation to support her parents and siblings similar to what they had previously done – a sacrifice Carol was not prepared to make. Instead, she pursued higher education, a decision that impacted her mother's life and their relationship:

> My Mum, I think she was kind of expecting, because I was the oldest of the siblings that I would be responsible and probably sacrifice. But having looked at her experience, I chose not to go that way and she wasn't very happy because she kept saying, "you have enough talents that probably we could prosper sooner"….I'm like, "no", if I do that, then I'll be the only one who's at loss. I'm not saying that it's not very selfish. I chose to be selfish at that point because if I wouldn't, then I would be stuck at the same place my mom was. I kept telling her that, and she did not like it very much.

Carol's habitus shift came in part from conscious observations and reflections of her mother's gendered life, leading to a markedly different decision from her primary family habitus, where she was the first in her immediate family and among her cousins to attend university.

For two participants, their relationships were further complicated by their brother's education. They spoke of the disproportionate number of accolades their mothers gave their brothers for obtaining a university degree and a college diploma over their university successes. For example, Gabrielle shares:

> And then my brother, who had been working in downtown Toronto, he's my older brother, he hadn't done any university, and then he decided to go and do a business degree. And it was like, banners and balloons and big excitement and whatever. I think he did a three; I guess he did a four-year degree. And I have like, eight years of post-high school education. Whenever they would mention something, it was always mentioning my brother because he did his business degree. So, it was partially what I chose and then partially the fact that I think that I was female, and partially the fact that I didn't consult them.

In this way, Gabrielle violated familial norms, values, and beliefs concerning gender and education. Also, as noted earlier, working-class students tend to be directed towards and select

more 'practical' degrees making her brother's degree justifiable. Gabrielle's choice led to not being taken seriously and having her education dismissed for choosing a different path. Similarly, Clara recalls:

> I had one brother who went to George Brown College for construction and masonry. He actually did two years of an apprenticeship, and my mom would talk about how well my brother did…I literally am standing right in front of you with a 92% on this exam right here. Like, can you stop talking about the fact that my brother, 30 years ago, did really well at George Brown College? Can we just like, for a second, like, please validate me?

Kim et al. (2021) found gender role expectations and stereotypes raise tension between parents and FGFSs when deciding to go to university. These quotes also present parents' unconscious response to the disruption of 'intergenerational continuity' in families where role assignments about work, family, religion and community are passed down through the generations (London, 1989).

The reality here is that men and women are impacted disproportionately by family expectations, gender roles, and labour market expectations that require women to have higher education to match their male counterparts' wages (Mickelson, 2003). All of this - 'because I am a girl'.

Show me the Money: Tuition, OSAP and Work

Economic capital is one of the most evident barriers for FGFSs, adding to their disadvantage. Money for tuition requires them to work more than non-FGSs, figure out Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and a government program developed to provide support for low-income students. Graduates with just one parent who finished university were shown to have less debt than those with no parents with a degree (Galarneau & Gibson, 2020). The majority of participants in this study had to independently fund their entire university education and worked part-time to cover tuition. For example, Ali states, "I paid my way through

university like my parents really didn't, and it wasn't because they didn't want to…It was definitely a huge barrier. There were times that I was like, "I don't think I can continue to pay for this". It was something that almost made me drop out."

OSAP was a source of frustration for a few participants. Interestingly, in our study, two of the participants did not receive the support they needed, which led to increased student bank loans, stress, work, and, in one case, a deterrence from pursuing higher education until middle age. Clara gives voice to her financial barrier:

> After I graduated, I was like, I want to go to university. I want to be a teacher. That was actually my goal. I applied for OSAP, and OSAP told me they were gonna give me 700 dollars, and I was like, "That's not gonna work". They were like, "well, you live with your parents." And I'm like, "Yeah, my dad owns his own business, which is seasonal." He was a bricklayer…like, there was no money to be had. So that's where my education stopped…So, I didn't even apply because it costs money to apply. And I was like, "I'm not going to pay money to apply to a school if I'm not going to go."

Ali affirmed Clara's experience, sharing an OSAP story of her own:

> My dad, like your dad, is self-employed. He owns his own roofing company. And so, when it came time to apply for OSAP for my first three years I was denied all three times because, according to my parent's income tax, they make enough money to be able to pay for me. OSAP kind of assumes that your parents will do that for you and then they screw you over, which made me have to go to the bank to take out a student line of credit, which raised my interest rates like through the roof. And I'm still $40,000 in debt now because of it.

Work was an essential part of the participants' journey through university. Like Ali, many learned to balance both work and school:

> First and second years, I focused on school; it was definitely a big adjustment just to start working because now you're kind of balancing two responsibilities at once. Yeah, I worked third and fourth-year university. I had a job at a restaurant, but fourth-year was definitely the year that I was pushing hard financially, and I wanted to make as much money as I could. I definitely think it sometimes affected school.

The participants also talked about their financial situation in comparison to their peers. Ali expressed the difference in lifestyle and the choices she had to make compared to her peers.

She says, "when they were going to shop, I was like, well, I either have to buy this textbook for school or go shopping with you." Carol explains that it was challenging because she had to pay her tuition and living expenses, unlike her peers whose parents covered the costs and sent them money regularly.

Although Parker worked during university, it was more for the experience, unlike the others. She had additional financial support from her mom and was fortunate enough to graduate without student debt. Parker's experience was a bit more similar to that of a middle-class family, whereby financial support, guidance from parents and time to build a resume with volunteer opportunities were provided. "This could be representative of generational habitus shifts where there is increased acceptance of HE (higher education) participation amongst families without a previous history of education at that level" (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012, p. 132).

As shown in these quotes, working-class students are positioned in a way that create multiple barriers to university participation. Assumptions about student choices, student loans and inattention to student poverty suggest a mainstream belief that meritocracy exists. Recruiting working-class students to university without acknowledging and addressing inequalities will perpetuate cycles of exclusion (Archer & Hutchings, 2000).

Summary

This chapter highlights the compounded barriers and challenges that FGFSs have and continue to face. Participants have successfully overcome these barriers in their pursuit of higher education; even so, they do not remain untouched by their experiences. This chapter also displayed observations of the transforming habitus, which will guide the readers' thinking throughout the next chapter which is focused on FGFS's habitus.

Chapter 6: Habitus: A Fish or a Duck?

"It's just like, a duck. Right? You're so peaceful on the top, but you're waddling so badly at the bottom."

-Carol
(first generation female student)

Habitus is deeply engrained but Bourdieu deviates from dualistic thinking by stressing that the habitus needs to be understood as both determined and free. "At the time [when I introduced it] the notion of habitus allowed me to break away from the structuralist paradigm" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 22). At the root of social mobility is the transformation of habitus. The mere fact that working-class students have already embarked on an academic pathway suggests a shift from their social background (Lehmann, 2009b). Sayer (2005) notes "that habitus "can be changed deliberately, at least in part, by repeated practice aimed at the embodiment of new dispositions" (p. 30.) Transformation then leads to new ways of thinking, decision making and actions.

This chapter will present theoretical interpretations of habitus transformation found within the participant's narratives. It aims to help the reader identify the links between belonging and habitus and its impact on transformation, social mobility and intergenerational mobility (change in social status within the same family) through FGFS's stories.

FGS Identity

Identity is the merging of experiences, relationships, memories, and values that construct a steady sense of self (Burke, 2006). Developing a positive new university identity is contingent on one's social background (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019). Some FGFSs found it challenging to call themselves university students due to their intense imposter feelings, even waiting until they graduated to accept that identity (O'Shea, 2011). Nieuwenhuis et al. (2019) argue that, "the cultural mismatch experienced by students from low-SES backgrounds causes them to

experience university settings as relatively unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and difficult, leading to a reduced sense of "fit" or belonging" (p. 373).

Like me, most participants were unfamiliar with the term FGS but were aware that their parents did not go to university. Ali and Carol learned the term in university and realizing that it was rare for them to be there. Gabrielle spoke of having some emotion around it recently as a result of being introduced to this project, saying, "I didn't even think of it as a thing. I was aware that my parents hadn't gone on to school, but it didn't seem like a big thing that they hadn't, nor did it seem like a big thing that I had." Carol struggled to put her feelings into words saying she felt like a duck, "You're so peaceful on the top, but you're waddling so badly at the bottom…there was a woman where I literally cried because I knew how hard I worked to be there." In this way, Carol captures the experience of her transforming habitus where there is a lack of "the comfortable natural feel associated with those learned in childhood" and disrupts the primary family habitus (Lareau, 2011, p. 363). Whether we are conscious of our habitus or not, the primary habitus remains in constant flux within different fields impacting identity and belonging (Friedman, 2016; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006).

Do I Belong Here?

Belonging is an inherent human desire and has significant effects on our emotions, cognition, and motivation - linking an individual to social experiences (Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). "The feeling of not belonging often corresponds to the feeling of being an outsider, of not fitting in" (May, 2011, p. 368). It is common for FGSs to feel like they do not belong in university. Students, especially those with a strong sense of their social location, are more vulnerable to feeling like an outsider in university, which amplifies their fear of failure

(Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017). Belonging can be reflected in the ease with which students' progress through university.

The family habitus is confronted in university, where social class, cultural capital, age, sexuality, and season of life (marriage, motherhood) can impose 'fish out of water' feelings. FGFSs can be in a constant state of trying to make sense of ideas by assimilating them into the ideas she already holds. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus are useful to further theorize dispositions, practices, and worldviews as individual qualities and processes in cognitive transformation occurring inside an individual (Bourdieu, 1977).

Participants were asked to take a photo representing the idea of belonging. In contrast they were also asked, to take a photo representing how they did not *'feel a part'* of the university experience. Parker took a photograph (see picture. 9) of a fraternity house to talk about how sororities and fraternities was the only thing that made her think about not feeling part of university, saying:

> I never really felt like I didn't belong…But this was probably the biggest thing that I felt like I didn't really understand…It came across as just obnoxious, and again, it just was elitist because you have to pay to get in, and you have to do certain things so that they accept you into the group…I can't see myself as a sorority girl. If I had to pick one, I'd probably be more of a frat boy type than sorority…I just didn't get it. It came across as pretentious. Sorry.

Pretentious Groups

Picture 9. Fraternity House in Toronto, Ontario

Fraternities and sororities are intended to be a place to cultivate friendships, become charitable, and gain leadership skills. However, they are also known for intense social pressure, exclusivity, and discrimination. They are spaces used to increase social and cultural capital while perpetuating classism. Fraternities and sororities not only centre around class but intersect with gender and sexuality, reinforcing a heteronormative culture within university. Although they are no longer recognized on most campuses in Canada, it was interesting that both Parker and Ali mentioned fraternities and sororities.

Nicole did not submit a photo for this question and when asked why here is what she said:

> I thought about actually just sending you a blank, right? But I was like, I don't want to send you a black picture, and I didn't want to add colour because I just felt like it was nothing. I never was part of the university experience. I didn't join any clubs. I literally went there, had my class, if I had two classes in one day, I went and found a place to sit and eat and work, and then I would go to that class, and then I would go home, or I'd go to work…I didn't do so well in university. I didn't really fit in. I'm always a bit of a geek, and so I didn't love it. I would just do what I needed to do and get out…just wanted to get it over with and get into the working world.

Bourdieu used the concept of social distance to understand the process of people's diverse social positions comparatively. The terms space and place are used literally and metaphorically in his work to discuss social spaces and individuals' status, class and social position within them. Nicole may have subconsciously identified a theoretical distance between herself and her peers within this social space, which prevented Nicole from reconciling the differences she may have felt between herself and other students. In doing this, she removed the potential discomfort of habitus transformation and questioning the family-based habitus.

Gabrielle also felt disconnected from the students she went to school with and took this photo (see picture 10) to express how she did not *'feel a part'* of the university experience:

> I didn't even go to my graduation because I felt so disconnected from my class. And because I did it over such a long period of time, students came and went, right? My mom thought that was horrible. She got my kids to create a graduation ceremony for me.

Part-Time Student

Picture 10. Photo of participant with her children displayed on desk chair

Clara explains why she chose an online photo (see picture 11) to represent how being a mom can affect feelings of belonging in university:

> Being the mom, you know, hearing people talk about their plans for the weekend...I went in knowing I was 'mom', I went in knowing I was kind of going to be the 'odd duck'. But I think hearing people complain that they don't have enough time...

Mom - the Non-Traditional Student

Picture 11. Woman wearing a mom mode sweatshirt

Comments such as, “I didn’t fit in, I felt disconnected, I knew going in I was kind of going to be the odd duck” all relate to a lack of belonging - something that can derail FGSs from completing their degree.

More than half of the participants referenced age during their interview or focus group. Identifying as a mature student, the oldest in class, a parent, or feeling like they were ‘racing against time’ exposed thoughts about age and their place in university. As mentioned in the literature review, it is common for mature students to be FGFSs and age is connected to ‘mature student status’ where an individual qualifies after the age of twenty-one and is usually the time traditional students are nearing the end of their degree. O’Shea (2011) suggests that the label itself is a factor in producing feelings of ‘not belonging’. Clara says, “I think the thing that hit me the most was hearing people talk, you know, they’re 26, and they’re like, “oh, I feel so old,” and I’m like, you need to stop.”

Carol talked about not having the luxury of time on her side for academic decision making which also intersects with her gender:

> I still remember I was, 25, or something…so I knew by the time I'm done, I'm going to be like, 29. So, then my parents are not going to wait, and I'm like, they want me to get married. And I'm like, Ugh…how do I figure out where do I want to end up? So, I had different worries altogether, and most of the kids that came were 21, 22, so they had that luxury of time.

For some, the life course of a woman did not align with cultural expectations. Clara shares, "when I decided to go back to school, I think it was a shock to my mom. She kept saying, 'you're but, you're like, 40'."

Gabrielle talked about age as one consideration for not pursuing her Ph.D. :

> I had wanted to do a PhD and I just had a bachelor's at that, well, two, I had two bachelor's degrees at that point…I was hoping that I could go right into a Ph.D. like you can in Europe, but it's much harder to do that in North America. And so, I decided to go back to school and do a master's…But as I was debating whether or not I should do it, you know some things, decisions, a lot of money, I'm 50 years old, all that kind of stuff.

Age complicates the decision and choices for the non- traditional students in this study.

This section shows several contributions to FGFS's 'feelings of belonging' based on class, gender, life stage, and age. What is significant here is that the participants continued to 'push on' (surgite) through mounting self-doubt and cultural mismatches of class and gender.

Imposter or Habitus?

"The term 'impostor phenomenon" is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phoniness that appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 241). It can be defined as chronic self-doubt and persistent feelings of inadequacy, despite success and proof of competence (Weir, 2013).

The imposter syndrome is often dealt with in silence, and girls, as early as age ten, interpret their success and failure differently from boys (Clance & Imes, 1978). Walkerdine (1994) explains:

> This produces great pain and anxiety, the main one being the fear that their intelligence is a chimera, a fraud, which will be discovered soon enough and they will be 'unmasked', as one woman puts it, exposed and the basis of their life, which is the life they have gained through their intellectual labour, challenged. (p. 72).

Clance and Imes (1978) found that imposter syndrome develops from initial family influences and societal sex-role stereotypes that send messages that women are less intelligent than men. The imposter phenomenon tends to be more common among minorities where differing in any way from the majority, whether by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or age, can lead to individuals thinking they progressed due to sympathy, not merit (Cokley et al., 2013). Orbe (2008) found that FGSs are susceptible to imposter syndrome.

During the photo-elicitation interview process, more than half of the participants referred to the phenomenon of imposter syndrome. For example, when asked about Clara's first impression of university, she said, "other than sheer terror?…I was excited. I still felt like it didn't fit…I have imposter syndrome. I feel like one day someone's just gonna figure me out and be like, you don't belong here." Although, "not an official diagnosis listed in the DSM, psychologists and others acknowledge that it is a very real and specific form of intellectual self-doubt" (Weir, 2013, p. 1).

Gabrielle shares her experience with imposter syndrome:

> I definitely felt like I needed to prove myself, that I probably shouldn't be, especially at Queens, because Queens is a pretty difficult university to get into. And so, I felt like I kind of wangled my way in there. Like, I went into a backdoor. I started as a part- time student rather than a full-time student in order to get in. So, I always felt like I didn't really deserve to be there and they had just kind of like, let me in, even though I got really good marks and really good feedback and stuff. But you still have that, you know, imposter syndrome going on for sure.

Imposters suffer from a sense of intellectual fraudulence, attributing their success to luck rather than competence (Clance & Imes, 1978). During Ali's gap year, she questioned herself, saying, "I don't know who I think I am going to university like there's no way that I can do this." She acknowledged her lack of confidence and struggled doubting that she would be accepted even though she had good grades.

As discussed earlier, imposter syndrome causes a heightened fear of exposure and can be accompanied by anxiety and frequent depression (Clance & Imes, 1978). Clara was able to give a detailed description of the kind of anxiety that is caused by imposter syndrome:

> I so badly have imposter syndrome and I still struggle with that a lot. Especially walking through the halls or…when you're on campus and I'm sitting down at one of the tables, and I've got my books out, and there's people passing by, and I'm just like, who's gonna figure it out? Who's gonna be like, "you don't belong here? What are you doing?"

Habitus

The majority of FGFSs question regularly question 'who they are' or experience feelings of the 'imposter syndrome'. Internal emotions are also understood in Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, where one internalizes a "sense of one's place" related to class. Tsao et al. (2018) conclude that habitus is in the conditions of 'thought' and as an internal battle, "habitus generates perceptions, expectations and practices that correspond to the structuring properties of earlier socialization" (Swartz, 2002, p. 635). FGFSs live with many fears, such as fear of the unknown and anxieties of potential failure. Working-class women feel 'most fraudulent' in the university environment and live in terror of being discovered, but they also fight against a fear of falling apart (Walkerdine, 1994). Clara talks about this fear:

> There was one girl at church…she may have been a part of the reason why I had the bravery to do this….She started going the year before I applied. Just knowing that she could do it with her kids and make it work, gave me the hope of maybe I could do

> this too. So, seeing that absolutely did influence even a small part of what I decided I was capable of doing. I needed that. I needed to see someone else succeeding at it and not have their life fall apart. To know, okay...maybe my life won't fall apart.

Clara gave a further detailed picture of what habitus is like in practice:

> It's...you know...make sure you look like you belong? Make sure you put your books in a certain way, you make sure that your table looks like...I don't know what it is that's in my head, there's this idea of how it should look, how I should look, and how I should talk to people, don't talk to people, and not sound smart.

Because the "individual habitus is an active residue of his or her past that functions within the present to shape his or her perceptions, thought and bodily comportment", Clara intuitively recognizes the unique differences of her embodied classed habitus, adapting to reflect her changing habitus through behaviour (Swartz, 2002, p. 635).

The fear of "not sounding smart" is also exclusionary and linked to language, "a practical and informal mastery of language and culture that can be acquired only in the dominant class family" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 128). Walkerdine et al.'s (2001) study of shifting class identities and the psychosocial explorations of gender and class reveal the hard and painful path of working-class women who attended university. The authors identify how the practices of self-invention are regulated by unconscious processes and that the lack of cultural capital in early childhood can breed insecurity and a belief of stupidity or inability later in life.

Walkerdine's (1994) research specifically speaks of working-class women's fears about stupidity in high school. Clara explains, "I think that was a big surprise for me that I wanted to go to school, especially since I wasn't very good at school when I was in, like elementary school and high school." No number of achievements derail the habitus for some, especially for those whose habitus shift took place later in life, as evidenced in the commentary outlined by Clara:

> I have the highest-grade point average of any third-year student going into this. I stopped, and I said, "there's not a lot of students, though, in this. So really, I'm probably the only candidate, I think, in the whole program there's like ten students". I was like, "I'm

> probably the only third-year"…I immediately just brought myself down. I was like, no, okay..."No, you be proud of this." You did good and you know, you're happy for a second and it's like, "you probably could have gotten, you know, 75%, and you still would have got it". It's like, "what's wrong with me?"

Similarly, one of Walkerdine's (1994) participants shares, "I think I try, but even if I try and think I've managed something, it's like disbelieving that it ever happened. I'm not sure how I get around that one really, knowing that it's very much part of my pattern. And then what, because I believe it, but that's quite an essential part of me really, an essential loss" (p. 72). These emotions and functions, in some cases can become self-imposed limits where one might exclude themselves from goods, people or places where one senses exclusion (Bourdieu, 1984).

It is common for FGFSs to feel they have not earned their place, grades or degrees. For example, Clara explains:

> I'm more friendly with the professors. I'm actually more friends with my professors, which again feeds into that belief that they're just being nice with their grades because they like me. I have this one professor, and she is just a gem. She's an amazing human being. We hit it off right out the gate. I did really well in her classes because I loved her classes...It's hard to be friends with the teachers and not believe that you're earning your grades.

This may be why they continuously feel they need to prove it to themselves or others.

Prove it

Internalized messages from family and society about gender or class imply inability and can cause one to feel the need to prove themselves. Half of the participants in this study mentioned an underlying need to prove to themselves that they were capable of earning a degree. For example, Gabrielle:

> I was working with a lot of teachers; I felt like it would give me some more credibility. I think it was a combination of persistence, and I didn't want to start something and not finish it. But also, I wanted to kind of model that to my kids, but also a genuine desire to get a degree in a particular area. So, there was a link between the desire for credibility,

> my own personal confidence, being successful at this, kind of proving to myself that I could do it. I didn't need to prove it to anyone else. But I think I wanted to prove it to myself. And so, quitting would kind of prove to me that I couldn't do it.

Some women have to combat multiple intersections of gender, class, and race prejudice daily and fight internalized messages of stupidity, not belonging and worthlessness as a result of symbolic violence.

Gender relations where men and women agree (even unconsciously) that women are less intelligent, weaker or justify 'natural' social hierarchies are examples of symbolic violence that perpetuate power and subordination. Walkerdine (1994) found that when women take on the discourse of working-class stupidity, despite being accepted to university or educated, they believe they are still 'a stupid woman' underneath. Clara continues to disbelieve her success despite receiving The Golden Key, which is access to the world's largest post-secondary honour society.

> You know, I have like a 98% in my arts management class at this point. And I'm like, she must have put something wrong. I can't believe that I actually earned it. Like, I am on the Dean's honour list. I'm a member of the golden key international thing...I joined it because it sounded fancy. They offered it to me, and I was like, I'm smart? This is another thing that tells me I'm smart.

Membership in the Society is by invitation only and applies to the top 15% of college and university students and top-performing graduate students in all fields of study, based solely on their academic achievements.

Intelligence is often portrayed as belonging to middle and upper class individuals (Walkerdine, 1994). The working class are regulated by the discourse of intelligence. The stereotype that accompanies low income is "slow and stupid" and the inability to pull up their bootstraps in a society that values meritocracy. Those with economic and cultural capital are often viewed as intelligent, equating it with class position. This means, then, that individuals are

born into intelligence. The privileged class is inflated while the working class is devalued (Busman, 1998). Ali explains:

> I honestly just wanted to have the feeling of knowing that I could do it like, that I wasn't stupid, I guess. It's like such a horrible word. Because I don't consider people that go, that don't go to school to be any less than I am because I went to school. It's just, there's that kind of unspoken barrier around university, that like, you know your shit because you went to school, but like, I'm just as clueless as ever. I think just because I can write a paper in APA format; I don't think it makes me any better. I just felt like doing this would prove to myself that I was good enough. That's kind of what it was…because I don't consider people that don't go to school to be any less than I am because I went to school.

Ali's attempt to reconcile her two clashing worlds hints at a level of conflict that reflects a habitus in transition. When working-class women achieve academic success, they are considered exceptions - "set apart from the majority of their class" and cause guilt (Walkerdine, 1994, p. 72). Intended or not, Sennett and Cobb (1972) explain that education is a form of power that has the potential to make others feel inadequate.

The challenge for many FGFSs is that their working-class and gendered selves have been demeaned. One of Walkerdine's (1994) participants explains it's, "not being good enough, but believing that, coupled with a sense of terror really of what I may or may not achieve, because I'm not sure what I can achieve" (p. 72). They not only seek self-approval but have an underlying motivation to prove their capability to others. Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) found that students put a lot of pressure on themselves to succeed to refute their disproving parents about their choice to attend university. Gabrielle explains:

> "You know, you have something to prove to yourself and to your parents. You don't want to fail yourself, you don't want to fail your parents, or you don't want your parents to go, "See, we told you that you know you couldn't do it, or you didn't need it" or "we told you that universities hard" or whatever. So, in a way, it probably motivated me to do better and to work harder.

The symbolic violence enacted on the working class suggests stupidity and low intelligence makes them ‘fit’ only for lower status work (Walkerdine, 1994).

Clara works to silence her inner habitus saying:

> I am working so hard and fighting so hard. And I think part of it is to show everyone that I can. All the people in my path, even though I don’t know them, and I don’t see them, and my parents are even gone, and they’re you know, it’s one of those things like I need to silence those voices in my head “that is not enough, you can’t do it, you’re not smart enough”. You know, “just take what you’re given in life and be happy with it”.

Working-class have been socialized to accept what is given to them and taught that no one is more special than another, leading to an internal battle for belonging in a world that has told them they are not enough and a family habitus that tells them to settle.

Habitus Transformation

Throughout the findings I have brought attention to habitus and signs of habitus transformation in the participants stories. University can bring about significant habitus transformation for the working class as a student begins to internalize what is possible for themselves (Horvat, 2003; Jin & Ball, 2019). Transformation is a process that disrupts present self-knowledge requiring individuals to balance new dimensions of identity and facilitates a change in habitus (Roger et al., 2018). Wacquant’s (2006) analysis is:

> Habitus is also a principle of both social continuity and discontinuity: continuity because it stores social forces into the individual organism and transports them across time and space; discontinuity because it can be modified through the acquisition of new dispositions and because it can trigger innovation whenever it encounters a social setting discrepant with the setting from which it issues. (in Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 268)

As the habitus shifts even for a moment, the possibilities for opportunity can be influenced by increasing potential for growth and upward mobility. Ali’s confidence increased when she faced her childhood fear of math with determination and successfully completed her stats class:

> Oh, God, in first and second year, I was like taking mandatory stats classes. And it was like my biggest fear. I was like, if I fail out of this class, I'm just gonna leave school and not come back. I ended up like doing decently well. I think that just kind of reinforced my confidence and being like, "Oh, I totally got this." Definitely, like first and second year, I always had my doubts if this was where I was supposed to be…It definitely makes you think that if I can get through this, which is the weakest part of myself, then I can like get through the rest of it, for sure.

The more a student believes she can achieve in her academic studies, the more likely she will succeed academically, which may prove to be a cycle of ever-improving performance (Turner et al., 2009). As the habitus transforms and the student embodies new ways of thinking, being and moving in the world and increases the likelihood of success and growth in confidence that she will succeed in the future (Turner et al., 2009). Personal proficiency and overcoming negative self-talk lead to self-efficacy – "defined as the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Turner et al., 2009, p. 339).

This is not the case for all FGFSs. As the habitus transforms, previous research shows that this is not a comfortable, painless process and is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Hysteresis

The habitus is constantly affected by experiences in ways that either reinforce or change it. Hysteresis is the gap or lag time temporarily felt as the habitus adjusts to the field (Friedman, 2016). In terms of physics, if you put pressure on something, it will bend; however, when you release it, if it does not spring back completely it demonstrates hysteresis. 'Hysteresis' in humans can occur when attitudes, beliefs, or instincts in a particular field are not congruent with one's own. It is temporary and field-specific (Friedman, 2016). In line with Bourdieu's framework, when an individual experiences the incongruence between habitus and field, they reflexively evaluate their beliefs and practices. For example, Carol explains the self-doubt and disorientation

of her decision settled over time, “I think I felt that to the end of my first year because I was like, what am I doing? I’m like, was this the smartest option. I could have done something closer home. You know, I doubted myself every second day, but it took some time. It took some time.” Hysteresis is a position of uncertainty, while Carol’s habitus is ingrained from the past, it continues to evolve as she enters and adapts to different fields.

Bourdieu (1990a) states that “through the systematic ‘choices’ it makes, the habitus tends to protect itself from crises by providing itself with a milieu to which it as pre-adapted as possible” (p. 61). Resistance to adapt or confront primary habitus (dispositions) quickly resolves hysteresis and incongruence demanded by the field (Friedman, 2016). Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) explains, “as a result of the hysteresis effect…practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are objectively confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted” (p. 78).

When FGSs confront challenges to their comfortable, primary habitus and common-sense worldview, they may not be able to unlearn some of their previous dispositions (Lee & Kramer, 2013). One does not necessarily lose their original classed background but instead adds another identity, even if they do not see themselves changed. “Late acquired dispositions lack the comfortable natural feel associated with those learned in childhood” (Lareau, 2011, p. 363) and may lead to further challenges.

Cleft Habitus and Identity

Bourdieu (2004) describes the “experience of transitioning and holding two habitus at one time as a cleft habitus” (p. 111). Cleft habitus results from a failed process where a person is both congruent and not simultaneously (Friedman, 2016). Bourdieu explains that this can happen

when individuals change dramatically throughout their life and begin to feel their dispositions becoming self-contradictory, disrupting 'who they are' (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). This can produce feeling like a 'fish out of water' but more profound psychological effects that he refers to as 'splitting of the self' or cleft habitus caused by long-range upward mobility (Bourdieu, 2004).

It is not working-class or middle-class but identifying with both and fitting in neither comfortably (Lee & Kramer, 2013). Some shifts involve an identity change, not fully internalized or all-embracing but rather, what Lee and Kramer (2013) suggest as more complicated and hybridized. Bourdieu (1999) suggests that, "the product of such a contradictory injunction is doomed to be ambivalent about himself to produce a habitus divided against itself, and doomed to a kind of double perception of self, successive allegiances and multiple identities" (p. 511). FGSs are constructed in this way, as a group who have overcome 'class' barriers encouraged to think individualistically and autonomously while acknowledging their working-class background and creating a sort of hybrid class identity (Wildhagen, 2015). Internally torn by disconnection to previous dispositions, the new, mobile hybrid habitus requires resolving what a working-class identity means.

Social Mobility

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) claim that a cleft habitus is formed naturally during upward mobility through the accumulation of many changing experiences - one being university. Lehmann (2014) discusses 'habitus dislocation' as "a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority" (p. 2). Social Mobility brings about hidden emotional injuries that Lehmann (2014) calls the hidden injury of class, which positions working-class students as 'other' both

within academia and their own families or community as displayed in detail in Chapter 5. Working-class children's aspirations often conflict with family values, and the outcome often leads to children giving up family values (Lehmann, 2014). The loss that accompanies this reflexive process can cause many FGSs to develop two identities, and this split habitus remains for some (Orbe, 2008).

Walkerdine (1994) found that educated working-class women had difficulty defining their identity. The women felt working class but were professionals and assumed they would have smoothly transitioned into the middle class, instead, they felt they did not belong anywhere. Walkerdine (1994) explains, "she really has no sense of who she is, but only who she is and is supposed to be in different places (p. 72). Attending university places FGFSs in an environment unfamiliar with their family habitus, thus challenging their self-concept. FGSs may create a separate home and school identity due to their shifting identity (London, 1989). Therefore, we cannot assume that achieving higher social mobility removes 'habitus dislocation' feelings. It may even exacerbate it, leaving students feeling caught between two opposing worlds (Lehmann, 2014).

The choice to attend university disrupts intergenerational continuity and shifts identity (London, 1989). Talking about her siblings, Clara explains:

> And I think, I still don't think they get that I'm capable. Because they remember little Clara, they remember young Clara, they remember the girl who hated school, and who wasn't good at anything, and who had no plans for anything and who just was a drama queen, and that's all they remember, is that I'm this emotional, kind of mess of a human being? And how can an emotional mess of a human being actually succeed at something that takes so much focus and energy and effort? I was always talking about something but not do it. Because I didn't believe that I was capable. I didn't believe I was worthy.

FGSs can find themselves managing conflicting family expectations about work, family, religion, community, and educational mobility (London, 1989). The "invisibility of habitus

complicates efforts to sustain relationships that had previously been intraclass but are now cross-class relationships" (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 30).

Of the participants, Clara was the most explicit in articulating the self-doubt caused by her cleft habitus:

> But you know, things in my life that have caused me to believe that I'm not worth success or happiness, or all of the good things in life. Anything that's bad happens to me, I'm like, "yep, makes sense." Things that are good. I'm like, "What? Wait, how is this going to get messed up? How is this going to be ruined? How is this going to be taken away?" So, it's the whole idea of I'm going to get my BA; maybe I'll even get my master's, and I will not get a job. That's my thought process, "I'm not going to get a job, all for nothing. No one's interested in me. I'm going to be found out to be a fraud."

Some FGFSs students like Clara articulate the fact that a cleft habitus is both an external and internalized problem that is shaped by the interactions with working-class family members and also "within their own minds, by their own assessments of their social positions, and by how those positions are interpreted by others" (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 29).

FGFSs with cleft habitus live in this perpetual world of unresolved habitus dislocation that Lehmann (2014) fears as the most detrimental cost to FGSs, causing hierarchical feelings of superiority and inferiority. Walkerdine (1994) explains:

> Everything seems frightening but, more than that, to succeed in an alien world, the intellectual world of the bourgeoisie, represents a sentiment of disloyalty. To feel in control is to feel as though one has abandoned the oppressed, the world where one does not control. Yet, not to feel in control is at least not to have joined the other side: them. (p. 75)

Clara states, "I'm kind of done questioning why they (my family) think what they do, and now I think it 'lights a fire under me' to be like, watch me! Lehmann (2014) attributes some of this dislocation to academia:

> In the middle-class hegemony that defines university, we as academics do, of course, contribute to such views of success and failure, by elevating certain forms of cultural capital over others. Thus, rather than finishing university with a more critical understanding of the structural and cultural conditions of their former lives or those of

> their parents and old friends, the students have joined a middle-class chorus that renders working-class knowledge and experience deficient if not pathological. (p.13)

The complexity of change and transformation bears significant weight on FGFSs. They learn to overcome negative self-talk, find joy in discovering their capabilities yet for some are left with a torn sense of self.

Summary

When I began this project, I did not realize was, how much it would encompass making meaning out of FGFS's struggle for identity and belonging (Bochner, 2013). This chapter presented theoretical interpretations of habitus identifying the links between belonging and habitus and the impact on transformation, social mobility on the everyday lives of FGFSs. The concluding chapter will provide final reflections along with some advice to FGFSs and parents of FGFSs. The limitations of this study will be outlined, recommendations proposed for future research and practical suggestions for educators at each stage of education.

Chapter 7: The End

"So, it's not just about the degree; it's not just about the actual education itself."
-Gabrielle
(first generation female student)

My original goal when starting a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2000 was to begin acquiring credentials for a future career in psychology. An anomaly in my family and community, where there were very few university-educated women, female students or mature female students; I was theoretically underprepared lacking cultural capital and knowledge of university and paving my own way. In 2017, following an eleven-year hiatus from university, with an incomplete degree, I needed credentials for the practical knowledge gained from life experiences, self-employment and a profession in pastoral ministry to pursue a new career. Even after completing one degree, I barely had the conceptual tools to analyze my experience and still felt incompetent for what was next, yet here I am.

The concept of habitus and critical feminism provided the analytic tools to describe and explain aspects of my own and others' upward mobility to and through education. This final chapter starts with a brief summary, discussion, reflections and advice from the participants, recommendations, future research, limitations and delimitations, followed by my final thoughts. The focus is to engage with the participant's overall reflections as they put their nuanced and complex academic journeys into words.

Generally speaking, the participants' academic journeys have been complicated by various barriers and lacked the simplicity of a linear route to and through academia. FGFSs in this study have successfully overcome many (not all) obstacles in their pursuit of higher education. Notably, the participants valued education and pursued it regardless of their parents' approval or beliefs about the university's usefulness or benefit. The participants' stories are

filtered through social class and gendered messages. What remains most compelling is that the participants persist despite imposter syndrome, complex family relationships and cultural mismatches of class and gender.

I have addressed several research gaps, such as the need for more qualitative designs, different methods, and focus on areas other than the transitions to university, such as class-based family history, academic behaviour and decisions, intersections of class and gender identities and the qualitative aspect of habitus (Buddel, 2018; Lehmann, 2007; Rascon, 2012; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). I sought and found connections between participants' backgrounds and academic experiences consistent with the literature and identified similarities concerning habitus, class, and gender. This research highlighted barriers related to the lack of support, capital, gender, and class and gauged FGFS's habitus to understand the motives and rationale of students in their decision to pursue higher education. Overall, I argue that Bourdieu's concept of habitus, combined with the intersections of class and gender, are essential frameworks for deep analysis and understanding of FGFS's academic journeys.

Are FGFSs Advantaged or Disadvantaged?

As noted in the literature, being a FGFS is often only perceived as a disadvantage. I was curious how the participants perceived being FGSs. At the beginning of data collection, I asked each woman to provide three words to describe their academic journey from childhood?

Illustration 2. Three Words to Describe the Academic Journey

Note. (Attema, 2021)

These words are indicative of the nuance and complexity experienced by FGFSs.

Benoit et al. (2018) and Lubrano (2004) found that a working-class background not only shaped FGFS's identities and navigation through university but it contributed to their success because many share in the knowledge of financial struggles and contribution. To Gabrielle the financial burden made her value her education more than she might have otherwise. Although the lack of parental expectations was presented as a barrier earlier to Ali it was also described as advantageous, relieving pressure she may have otherwise felt.

For Nicole, there wasn't a disadvantage:

> I can't really see the disadvantage because I think I'm just not wired to think about it that way. So, I would say the advantage was that it just causes this resilience and relentlessness that you're going to figure it out…I've seen it as an advantage because it's taught me to fight through challenges and be okay in uncharted territory.

Lack of understanding by parents of the university experience continued to be a disadvantage for FGFSs throughout the research.

Motivation, Resilience and Agency

Although the best predictor “of whether a child will one day graduate from college is whether his or her parents are college graduates” (Lareau, 2011, p. 8), there are exceptions. This research shows multiple external factors that influenced their habitus from early encounters with teachers, peers, cultural or community expectations, and mothers’ encouragement - all confirmed in the existing literature. According to Clance & Imes (1978) “The fact that these women continue to succeed in spite of antithetical societal expectations implies strong early instilment of achievement motivation” (p. 243). Achievement motivation stems from two different needs – the desire to achieve goals and failure avoidance (Hsieh, 2011). This involves a ‘drivenness’ to succeed, perform well, overcome obstacles and master challenges despite the reward following the accomplishment (Hsieh, 2011).

Braswell (2010), Neumeister and Rinker (2006) and Olson (2010) state that many FGFSs attribute the characteristics of a strong work ethic and independence to their persistence in university. This was evident in the participants in this study. In particular, Ali states that she “never let my parent’s views on university, whether it was good or bad,” affect what she wanted to do, saying, “I know myself, and I probably never would have gone had I not wanted to”.

Lehmann (2014) found that the structural disadvantages that working-class students experience can foster resilience and determination and attending university motivates them. They see their class as a challenge, not a barrier, drawing on their background to succeed. They attend university “not only for gaining new knowledge, but also about growing personally, changing

their outlooks on life, growing their repertoire of cultural capital, and developing new dispositions and tastes" (Lehmann, 2014, p. 11).

> While the habitus allows for individual agency it also predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving: The habitus, as a system of dispositions to a certain practice, is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour, and thus for the regularity of modes of practice, and if practices can be predicted....This is because the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 77)

We see individual agency in the decision-making of FGFSs in this study as they either intuitively or consciously chose a path that is markedly different from their parents and family members. Gabrielle had made up her mind when approaching her parents, "so, it was more just kind of this is what I'm going to do as opposed to go get a job". For Clara, it was more of an intuitive process, knowing that running day care "was not the path I should have, I needed to take, or I had to take, or I wanted to take".

The women recognized they were different from their families. Clara explains, "I always had this backward mentality from them. And I mean, I guess that's part of who I am, I bucked the trend.". The participants were also very self-determined. Carol states:

> I literally had to fight back home because I wanted to write my Civil Services exams, and that was absolutely not known to girls over there (India). There were a lot of glass ceilings I had to break…for me; it was harder than my brothers because I had to be in top of the class all the time so I could learn ahead, so I had to fight for that…I am the first engineer and the first graduate, you know, when it comes, on the women's side …we were in a very male-dominated college, and we were always doubted, but you know…every girl in the class made it a point that we were equally better…and all the girls were the first ones to get placed, so we kind of made a point.

Overall, although the women experienced agency, for most of them there were elements of loneliness, disappointment, and feelings of being misunderstood on their journey to and through higher education.

No Regrets

One of the most inspiring parts of this research is listening to the stories of FGFSs "beating the odds" and overcoming barriers related to the low statistical success rates experienced by FGSs. That is not to say that this experience has no residual effects. Habitus transformation does not necessarily alleviate feelings of disconnection from individuals' working-class and gendered habitus. Walkerdine et al. (2003) reminds me that "it is not the working-class girls' destiny (higher education), the motivation to remain on that path must be generated from within. There are no structural reasons why they should succeed and therefore they have to rely on their own inner resources" (p. 297).

When the participants discussed their overall higher education experience, they did not regret their decision, despite the various costs, barriers, and challenges. When probed, they humbly admitted how proud they were of their academic accomplishments and spoke of their education as a privilege - not to be taken for granted. Pam Trevithick says, "It's important to remember that within class life, anything in excess of nothing seems too much, and we do measure what we've got against nothing, not against something" (Walkerdine, 1991b, p. 29). In this sense, when you have no educational background, no expectation of education, no feelings of entitlement - any amount feels like a privilege and produces immense gratitude. This may be what leads to the attitudes of FGFSs in this study, where they unconsciously remember where they come from.

All participants agreed that they had benefited significantly from pursuing higher education. With vulnerability, each woman shared their reflections and advice. Gabrielle says:

> For me, university was about helping me find my voice and have the confidence to put my voice out there because my mother and my grandmother both wrote, but they never published anything that they wrote…University was a really important part...it gave me the confidence and the network, to research and to learn and to write nonfiction.

Although Nicole did not love her experience as a university student, her submission of a photo (see picture 12) tells us more:

> I firmly believe in continuous education, but do it for yourself and what truly inspires you because that's where it's going to lead you to be the happiest and make the greatest contribution. One definitely is connected to the other and gives you a fulfilling life. It will lead to sustainability and abundance, but that'll define itself as it goes on over time.

Do it for Yourself

Picture 12. Participants hand placed over her heart

Shortly after her interview, she reached out because she had been considering pursuing a Master's degree and was interested in finding out how to navigate graduate school admission. Similarly, Ali advised about internal motivation "Do it for you. Don't do it for anybody else. If it's not something that you want to do. Don't do it. My biggest thing – it's always been what I wanted to do."

Using a picture of her degree (see picture 13), Parker sums up her academic experience saying, "that's the last thing you kind of got…when I got that, I was like, WOW! Like, this is...this is real!...It just tied up my whole journey."

Symbol of Whole Academic Journey

Picture 13. Participant's degree in frame

Although few of the participants had identified with the label of FGFS, there was an array of advice provided. Maybe these valuable words will fall into the hands of someone who will either be the recipient or imparter of them. Gabrielle says, "There's something in knowing that other people have had similar journeys and have been successful…and so, I think I would say find other people who have gone ahead of you."

Initially hesitant, Parker opens up at the end and humbly encourages others:

> Be proud...Be proud. I used to be like, "that's just a BA, everyone's got one". But, you know what? I am proud to have gone. I am proud to be able to call myself a university graduate. Don't take it for granted and don't take it lightly because a lot of people want to go and can't. Don't swindle the opportunities that are given to you….Be proud of what you've accomplished. It isn't just a $20,000 piece of paper - you worked hard. You got there. It helps you be where you are now. For me, it still remains definitely, a very prominent part of my life....I'll always look back with fondness to those days like, and time flies - don't forget that.

Clara addresses the inner critic, imposter and hostile thoughts, saying:

> What you're telling yourself isn't true. What you're hearing in your head and what people are telling you, what you've heard in the past, the reason you haven't considered school, those reasons – they're not true. You have to find if there's even a glimmer of, "maybe I should do this". You have to pull on that thread...and maybe it'll lead somewhere you didn't expect. Just don't believe what you've made yourself believe in the past, that you're not worth it or that you're not capable or that it's not something that's for you - it's not true.

Carol's resilience came through in her message to other FGFSs:

> It's never going to be easy, to be honest. People are always going to question your choices, especially when you're going to a niche field of expertise, which are not a nurturing or caring (field), because you know, if you're doing teaching, you'll have more encouragement over there. But if you're going to be an engineer, or you're going to be a mathematician, or you're going to do something that is not easily conformed to societal standards, then you are going to have a lot of friction. But, if your heart is set on it, then the mind will find a way. Good or bad - just give it a try.

Dear FGFS Parents

I asked participants if they had a chance to talk to parents of FGFSs, what would they say? Of which they responded:

> They'll figure it out. We have to give them the opportunity. We have their backs, and then let them take it from there. (Nicole)

> You need to support them; I think that's the biggest thing. My parents just didn't. Try and do some research on the program that your kids are taking because it will definitely be hard to come home. I felt like I explained myself every single time....Educate yourself on what your kid is doing because....to know that your parents know what you're doing and at least try and relate...even though they've never been there, I think would have helped out a lot for me. (Ali)

> I'd be like, yeah, be proud of your kid and lay off – it's a lot. (Parker)

> Just because you didn't go doesn't mean that just because you made your life successful, in your own way without school does not mean that that is success for everybody. If they choose that, with the opportunity to go to school, then that's their choice. But if you give them the opportunity and the encouragement, and they choose it, what's the harm? Right? I heard a phrase one time, "no education is ever wasted." I think that parents have to stop saying, well, I did it like this. It's good enough for me; it's good enough for you. (Clara)

And finally, Gabrielle:

> A university education is, in many ways, purported to be a pipeline to a job. But we know that that's not true. And certainly, in the original days, it wasn't intended to be that. It was intended to be a place to teach you to think, and so, in a day and age where critical thinking is so important for men and women, but I would say, perhaps even more important for women because of all the mixed messages that we receive, you know, just anything, like a university degree that teaches you to think, that teaches you that you can think, that teaches you to think critically, that gives you confidence, you know, creates networks for you, all of those kinds of things, those are invaluable. So, it's not just about the degree; it's not just about the actual education itself. It's all the extra stuff that comes with it. In my opinion, that makes a university degree so important.

This research has explored and interpreted data to tell a meaningful story of the lives narrated by FGFSs. The data was filtered through my experience to produce an analytic account. As a result, I do not make claims to singular meaning. "Interpreting qualitative data is a craft that needs practice; it is not just a technique to be mastered" (James, 2013, p. 575). I worked through the process of data analysis, coding, and systematizing, but this project shows "reflexive and creative crafting" and "has been an opportunity for me to practice 'imagination in analysis' allowing me to integrate three methods to describe the unique and complex academic journeys of FGFSs (James, 2013, p. 575)

Recommendations

The implications for understanding FGFS's academic journeys through class, gender, and habitus are essential for FGSs support staff and policy development, teacher training, workplace culture, early childhood education, elementary classroom environments, and parenting to provide equitable opportunities for all and maximize the full potential of every child. Furthermore, this study can provide professors with an extensive understanding of FGFSs and the role they can play in recognizing, encouraging, mentoring, and drawing out the potential in their students.

I acknowledge there is no one solution adequate for everyone. Complex problems require complex solutions. However, I am of the mindset that in presenting issues, I must, at the very

least, attempt to provide some practical suggestions. I also acknowledge that others may have provided some of these solutions without my knowledge.

Early Intervention

Findings from this study point to the importance of prioritizing and advocating for early childhood education to create an equal playing field where no child is left behind. The fact that five of six participants had already decided to pursue higher education in elementary school (Toutkoushian et al., 2018) suggests the importance of creating a positive learning environment and discussing higher education in elementary school. Plenty of research suggests that economic, social, and cultural capital disadvantage working-class students in school. The importance of teachers' social awareness of class discourse and working-class students' lack of cultural capital is paramount in preventing social reproduction, class divisions and inequality.

Teachers can begin with self-reflection of their own path to education and reflexivity of their bias toward class and gender. They have the potential to be influential voices that change the trajectory of a child's life. This personal work prevents 'writing off' students early, which contributes to self-fulfilling prophecies. It is important not to limit a child's potential based on their parent's education while also rejecting streaming practices that limit potential. Reay (2017) found that students of different abilities perform better when placed together repeat, yet policymakers continuously ignore this research. Educators can encourage and value cultural capital from working-class homes in the classroom, such as promoting interdependent behaviours and group assessments (Dittmann et al., 2020). This may pave the way for a future where barriers to success for working-class students can be lifted, and middle-class students can

benefit from learning skills and knowledge that are beneficial to collaborating beyond the classroom.

It is vital to identify working-class children early. Young children have the ability to see themselves in a larger socio-cultural framework (Vagle & Jones 2012). Helping students understand this can both create compassion within the classroom and prevent lower-class students from struggling alone, feeling stigmatized and internalizing negative feelings about themselves. In reflecting on her academic experience, Clara says, "the idea that you don't have to be super brilliant, smart. You don't have to be 19. You don't have to fit in a box to go to university. And I think that's what I've learned, is that there's lots of different boxes that people fit into, and it's all okay." Pam Trevithick adds:

> There's no activity that can't be working-class, or that's the monopoly of a class. Going to the pictures is not more middle class than fixing your worn shoes as a cobbler. And we need to debunk some of this, because what it is really saying is that it is not in our control…So my feeling is that the more of us that come back within this class and say "I am…a film-maker, writer, singer, social worker, photographer, teacher, mother, creator of whatever", the simplest or the most complicated – we enrich the class because we broaden it. (Walkerdine, 1991b, p. 29)

The limited support for working-class students within the school system to overcome obstacles that prevent them from achieving success is an issue that needs to be addressed (Walkerdine, 2011). We can no longer accept or allow the message that working-class students lack academic aspirations which influences our willingness to invest in their potential. Schools can work them mobilise their interest "into an imagination which can be acted upon" by creating an environment where working-class students can develop positive academic aspirations and self-perceptions (Walkerdine, 2011, p. 256).

High School

Schools often provide advice and guidance to high achieving university-bound students, those who need it the least (Cook, 2016). Access to educational advice at school that is not available to students at home can hugely benefit those with no post-secondary knowledge. Providing an accurate representation and understanding of university for working-class students, such as including additional support through guidance counsellors or workshops to assist with applications, OSAP, etc., could help limit barriers to success and retainment and reduce feelings of inadequacy.

If working-class students are identified early, open discussion about habitus, imposter syndrome, transformation and identity could be beneficial. Understanding the change process should include guiding parents along the way, and giving them tools to support their children while being sensitive to the classed and gendered habitus that they embody. It will be essential to help navigate the emotions of shame, embarrassment, inferiority and intimidation that society has contributed to their identity and place in the world. Being aware of the potential relational challenges of social mobility can help mediate the pain from a changing habitus and make it easier to adapt, alleviating social isolation and loneliness.

University

Universities are at the forefront of knowledge that can be used to create spaces that reduce discrimination, prejudice, and inequality. Cultural change is a long, arduous journey and requires many shifts and adjustments. Research is intended to produce new knowledge for dissemination with the hope that it leads to program development and policy adjustment. In the interim of pursuing the ideal learning environment for all students, some steps can be considered by the university and students.

Awareness is key. On February 13, 2018, an announcement was made that Brock University was celebrating first-generation students:

> As over 25% of our student population is first in their family to attend post-secondary, they are changing the course of their own lives and also the lives of generations to follow. In honour of these students, a new display in the Library and Learning Commons features the profiles of famous "First Gens." From Shaquille O'Neal and Michelle Obama to Roberta Jamieson and Mahatma Gandhi, there is a Trailblazer story to inspire you. (Smith, 2018, para. 1)

This is an exemplary way of expanding the visibility of FGSs.

What entices middle-class students trained to know the 'rules of the game' is a culture shock to working-class students. Acknowledge the good that marginalized individuals bring to the university's culture instead of expecting only them to adapt. Encouraging humility and adopting a "no one is better than others" attitude would be a neutralizing component in a highly competitive environment that deters working-class students. It would be beneficial to rethink the design of collaborative learning environments and provide opportunities for more capstone courses—creating fair and safe spaces for working-class students to climatize in the first two years of university, particularly within seminar groups. This can be done through various participation practices instead of the all-too-common highly competitive culture of granting marks to those who speak first or feel entitled to talk most. Round table discussions or smaller group discussions allow all students to speak and provide insights.

Many FGFSs are invisible to educators and their peers, especially in a university setting. Heller (2010) notes, that we need to address and acknowledge class more often, not only race and gender. "The use of intersectionality is essential for understanding how white privilege is experienced among whites of different classes and gender" (Heller, 2010, p. 113). Heller (2010) suggests to discuss only whiteness and not class dismisses marginalized white people who use

their personal experiences to form an opinion about the accuracy of academic claims of white privilege and the reality that all white privilege is not accessible to all white people.

FGFSs

FGFSs face multiple barriers, as shown throughout this research. They need to know that they are not alone. One of the ways to do that is to connect with others through programs like First Generation Trailblazers (https://brocku.ca/student-life-success/learning-services/#1604509484274-b6bd591b-7e90). Also, learning from other groups, such as The First Generation Network (https://firstgenerationnetwork.ca) can initiate the design of new groups or chapters.

Future Research

In the process of this research, I came upon several first-generation male students from working-class backgrounds who were eager to participate; however, for the scope and timeline of this project, it was not feasible to include them. In hindsight, I wish I had included more questions about how students perceived their class identities. At least two of my participants identified with equity-seeking communities; however, little was discussed regarding race which is also an area for focus in the future.

Limitations

As with any research study, limitations always exist. Qualitative research involves data collection, analysis and interpretation conducted by the researcher, which consists of a risk of researcher bias. To reduce these risks, I consistently reviewed any tendencies or standpoints that I had throughout each step of the process, data collection, analysis, and writing, affecting the study's validity. Regardless, my viewpoint and experience could affect the research findings.

Purposeful sampling may affect this study's reliability as three of the participants knew the researcher. The participants may have similar backgrounds because of referrals to the study through snowball sampling as it relies on personal networks (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 57). To safeguard from this, I was intentional about including participants from diverse races, gender, age and ethnic backgrounds to reduce the possibility of a homogeneous sample. Some participants may have been intimidated by having their interview audio recorded, making them feel uncomfortable discussing personal information during the focus group or interview. Online focus groups and interviews can add another element that may impact the meaning, such as the inability to capture body language in the same way as a face-to-face interview. Not collected in this study were students that represent all ethnicities or socioeconomic backgrounds. These groups were not excluded by design; however, typically, FGSs have lower family socioeconomic backgrounds.

Finally, qualitative research is typically not generalizable and not all FGSs have the same experiences. Critics often state that qualitative research cannot generalize findings to larger populations due to smaller sample sizes (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Sociologist David Karp discusses how every study, whether statistical or in-depth interview, will have generalizability limitations as we are always 'trading off' breadth for depth or depth for breadth (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Final Thoughts

As stated earlier, when I began my university journey, the end goal was quite simple. I was working towards acquiring the credentials required for a career. Little did I know that my curious mind would grow as an academic, finding answers to life-long questions, and a passion for learning more as one article after the other would lead me down different rabbit holes. As I

later embarked on this research project, I found myself reflected in the research findings, which spurred me to continue making sense of my own academic journey.

I was excited to delve into a deeper understanding of my new FGFS identity, but I did not expect this level of intensity of thoughts and internal experiences compounded by the awareness of the habitus war going on inside me. In some ways, I have felt as though this has been two years of writing therapy. I spent more time alone than I ever have in my life. In that way, the pandemic was a gift, allowing me extended time to retreat into myself and work through the tangling thoughts and emotions that arose throughout this research. At times my procrastination in writing the next chapter was an effort to avoid feeling. I caught myself minimizing the weight of the cleft habitus experience, only to recognize that I was 'holding back', 'not wanting to be vulnerable, not wanting to cry, not wanting to feel the painful parts of what it took to get here and what might have been different. There was a continuous push/pull feeling. I wanted to focus on other people's pain and especially the success, the end goal, the degree, the capital, the merit, the achievement, and celebrate all the exceptions to the rule. I wanted to come away from this work having beaten my habitus into submission.

To be honest, at my weakest moments, I wanted to quit. If I am really honest at one point, I wondered why the hell I would encourage FGFSs? It was too much to read, feel, think, and analyze everything critically. I expected it to be challenging but not in this way, and now sometimes, I am plagued by what I know. As I reach the end of this part of my educational journey, I should feel successful, and I do, but soberly, I question whether I am better off for it. I have been trained to better understand power structures and their reproduction of disadvantage and privilege. I cannot "unsee" that.

What I learned from my working-class background was responsibility, interdependence, collaboration and a work ethic that deters from an attitude of entitlement. I was taught that no one is better than anyone else. These parts of my working-class habitus I do not want transformed. I have gained new and lasting skills through conducting graduate-level research, which has been rewarding and valuable. I feel privileged to have been able to pass on the best of both worlds in a hybrid style of parenting that merges both working-class and middle-class characteristics.

In closing, the words Bourdieu shares in an interview with Terry Eagleton about Doxa and common life reverberate through my being:

> I try to put together the two parts of my life, as many first-generation intellectuals do. Some use different means — for instance, they find a solution in political action, in some kind of social rationalization. My main problem is to try and understand what happened to me. My trajectory may be described as miraculous, I suppose – an ascension to a place where I don't belong. And so, to be able to live in a world that is not mine, I must try to understand both things: What it means to have an academic mind - how such is created - and at the same time what was lost in acquiring it. For that reason, even if my work - my full work - is a sort of autobiography, it is a work for people who have the same sort of trajectory and the same need to understand. (Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992)

Bourdieu's work has been significant to my inquisitive mind, desperately trying to understand; Why am I interested in higher education? How have I succeeded? Why did I feel like a fish out of water? What makes me so different from my six siblings? Why did my parents not encourage higher education? When were these limits placed on me? Why do I feel shame about my accomplishments? Is it just me? I was led to many of the answers in a basement classroom, outside the cafeteria at Brock University, during a fourth-year cross-listed course of Sociology and Child and Youth. It was selected as my last course after 19 years (7 active) of working towards my undergraduate degree. I emotionally unravelled as I read through journal articles and became more mindful that parts of my story were being told. Pain and loss have accompanied me

in my pursuit of higher education, yet I am proud, grateful, and found the clarity I didn't know I had been looking for until it was presented.

When I began this project, there was a deep-seated desire for this work to impact more than just me. I am no Bourdieu, but in my small corner of the world, I was given an opportunity to meet with six FGFSs to deepen my analysis while connecting in the most humanly way – our shared stories. In writing this thesis, my heart has grown exponentially for these women who were friends, acquaintances, and strangers. I hope they feel respected and honoured in this work. I am proud of the legacy they are leaving due to their perseverance. May they learn a bit more about themselves as they engage with the words of their newfound friends. Like mine, their questions might be answered and lead to a more profound sense of self-understanding as they move through the world.

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APPENDICES

A: Network Screening

B: Letter of Invitation

C: Informed Consent

D: Focus Group Questions

E: Photo Elicitation Instructions

F: Photo Elicitation Interview

APPENDIX A: Network Screening

Dear _______________,

Are you a First-Generation Female University Student?

(for the purpose of this study first-generation is defined as being from a family where neither parent has more than a high-school education)

Are you interested in sharing your academic journey as a First-Gen?

I am a Masters student from Brock University who is currently writing a thesis on the academic journeys of first-generation female university students. I am reaching out to you as part of my network, knowing that you are currently in university or are a graduate, and to ask if you might be interested in participating in my study. I am interested in this topic as a first-generation student myself, and because students who come from families without a history of university attendance are 61% less likely to attend university (pnpi.org). If they do attend they are often less likely to continue through to degree completion. I would love to include you in my study.

1. Do you identify as a past or present first-generation female student? (for the purpose of this study, first-generation is defined as being from a family where neither parent has more than a high-school education)
2. Are you a graduate of a four-year program at an accredited university in Canada, or currently enrolled in a four-year program at an accredited university in Canada?
3. Are you 18 years of age or older?

If you meet all of the above criteria, you qualify to participate! Contact me at sa00bq@brocku.ca if you are interested in learning more! If you do not meet the criteria listed above, I sincerely appreciate your time in viewing this, however, will not be able to include you in this research study.

Sincerely,

Sophia Attema
Master Student, Child & Youth Studies
905-650-3957
sa00bq@brocku.ca

Tom O'Neill
Professor
905 688-5550 ext 3110
toneill@brocku.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [20-230 - O'NEILL]

APPENDIX B: Formal Letter of Invitation

February _____, 2021

Title of Study: "We are a family that works with our hands" or uterus: An exploration of first-generation female university student's academic journey
Student Principal Investigator Sophia Attema, Child & Youth Studies Department, Brock University
Faculty Supervisor Tom O'Neill, Child & Youth Studies Department, Brock University

I, Sophia Attema, principal student investigator, from the Department of Child & Youth Studies Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled "We are a family that works with our hands" or uterus: An exploration of first-generation female university student's academic journey.

The purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of 8-10 first-generation female students (FGFS) in order to gain a deeper understanding of how FGFS experience their journey to and through higher education. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to, participate in one small online focus group discussion with 4-5 people. You will also be asked to take 5 photographs, and participate in a 'one on one' online photo elicitation interview, where you will have an opportunity to share the story of your academic journey. The story then becomes the data that will be analyzed and interpreted.

The expected duration is 60-90-minutes for the focus group discussion, and 45-60 minutes for a 'one on one' photo elicitation interview. Both will take place online, using Zoom.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You should feel no obligation to participate. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. If you decide to participate and change your mind, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

This research should benefit you by giving you a place to tell your story and perhaps, gain some insight into an important aspect of your experience as a first-generation female university student. You may also gain satisfaction knowing that your story could potentially contribute to the improvement of policies, identification of barriers, and early intervention for first-generation female students.

This research should benefit the needs of first-generation female students and identify areas of further research. This knowledge is valuable for early childhood educators, teachers, guidance counsellors, youth workers, professors, parents and FGS support programs, to ensure equitable supports and opportunities for all children. Unaddressed, girls from working-class families can be set up for a future of precarious work, limiting personal potential and repeating a generational cycle of low socio-economic status.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext 3035, reb@brocku.ca)

If you have any questions related to the study, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

Sophia Attema
Master Student, Child & Youth Studies
905-650-3957
sa00bq@brocku.ca

Tom O'Neill
Professor

905 688-5550 ext 3110
toneill@brocku.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [20-230 - O'NEILL].

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent

Date: February 23, 2021
Project Title: Project Title: "We are a family that works with our hands" or uterus: An exploration of first-generation female university students' academic journey

Principal Investigator (PI): Tom O'Neill
Department of Child & Youth Studies
Brock University
(905) 688-5550 Ext.3110
toneill@brocku.ca

Principal Student Investigator (PSI):
Sophia Attema, MA student
Department of Child & Youth Studies
Brock University
(905) 650-3957
sa00bq@brocku.ca

INVITATION
You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to explore the academic experiences of 8-10 first-generation female students (FGFS) in order to gain a deeper understanding of how FGFS experience their journey to and through higher education. Through focus groups and photo elicitation interviews done online, you will have an opportunity to share the story of your academic journey. The story then becomes the data that will be analyzed and interpreted.

WHAT'S INVOLVED
As a participant, you will be asked to:

Step 1 (March, 2021): During this stage we would meet and get to know each other through one of two online focus group discussions. There will be 4-5 participants in each focus group. Participation will take approximately 90 minutes of your time.

Step 2 (March - April, 2021): During this stage you would take 5 photos that represent your academic journey. Instructions will be given to you at the end of the focus group discussion. It's expected that photos be emailed to me at sa00bq@brocku.ca within approximately 2 weeks from your focus group participation.

Step 3 (April - May 2020): During this stage, I would email to set up a time to meet with you one on one, on Zoom, to interview you about your photos. Participation will take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS
Possible benefits of participation include that you learn more about yourself and others who may have similar experiences. You are helping to produce valuable knowledge for childhood educators, teachers, guidance counsellors, youth workers, professors, parents and FGS support programs, that has the potential for early intervention to ensure equitable supports and opportunities for all students.

There are minimal risks associated with participation. However, it is possible that a participant may feel emotional upset in discussing past experiences such as, discrimination, prejudice, loss or relational challenges from childhood or attending university that may be sensitive. I will acknowledge the potential of this risk and remind participants regularly that they may leave the focus group or interview at any time. Should you require additional support as a result of participation in this study we recommend you reach out to these free services:

Brock University Personal Counselling Services
https://brocku.ca/health-wellness-accessibility/personal-counselling-services/

AbilitiCBT by Morneau Shepell - Free Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
https://myicbt.com/home?gclid=CjwKCAiAyc2BBhAaEiwA44-wW9ngWNKxSxYD0z

CONFIDENTIALITY

All focus groups and photo elicitation interviews will be visually recorded on Zoom. You may find their privacy policy here - https://zoom.us/privacy. In addition, they will be audio recorded on an iphone as a backup. All recordings will be transcribed. Recordings will only be listened to by Sophia Attema and Tom O'Neill. Information provided will be kept strictly confidential.

Focus groups: All information you provide will be considered confidential and grouped with responses from other participants. Given the format of this session, we ask you to respect your fellow participants by keeping all information that identifies or could potentially identify a participant and/or his/her comments confidential. I will remind participants to maintain confidentiality when we meet.

Photo elicitation interview: The information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. I may wish to use the photographs for publication and would seek additional permission in advance. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send a copy of the transcript to give each participant an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points.

Participants will have one week from the time they receive the transcript to confirm the accuracy of the conversation. If participants do not respond, I will follow up one more time, after which time it will be assumed that the transcript was accurate.

Data collected during this study will be stored in a secure place. Physical materials will be kept in a secure filing cabinet and electronic data will be kept in a locked safe. Data will be kept for, a maximum of 2 years following completion of the research project, after which time, all information will be permanently destroyed (shredded or erased, pending the nature of the information).

Access to this data will be restricted to Sophia Attema and Tom O'Neill.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. You should feel no obligation to participate in this study. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time. If you withdraw from the focus group discussion, your contributions will be removed from the transcript only, as it is impossible to remove them from the recordings. If you withdraw from the photo elicitation, all content and contributions will be removed from the study immediately and permanently destroyed.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. This study will be available to participants when the final thesis is complete. I will send you a reminder email when it is available. Contact Sophia Attema at sa00bq@brocku.ca

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Tom O'Neill or Sophia Attema using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [20-230 - O'NEILL]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: ____

Signature: ____Date:_________________________

APPENDIX D: Focus Group Questions

Introduction

- Let's begin by finding out a little more about each other by going around the group one at a time. Share your name, where you live, your university major and your occupation.

General Questions

- Today's topic is about understanding first-generation female university students' academic journeys. If you were to give me three words to describe your journey what would they be?
- When and where did you first realize you were a first-generation student and what emotions did that evoke in you?
- What do you think university education means for individuals and society?
- From your experience, what barriers do you think some groups face within education that prevent equitable opportunities?

Parents, Family and Culture

- What can you tell me about your family background? (parent's education and employment, culture, norms, values, beliefs, relationships)
- Describe your parents' expectations, attitudes or responses toward your academic experiences and achievements. (support, pressure, disapproval etc.)

Elementary School Experiences

- What was elementary school like for you? (friends, teachers, grades, challenges, adversity, extracurricular activities, schoolwork, etc.)
- What kind of student were you?

High school Experiences

- How did your high school experience impact your decision to pursue higher education?
- What were the resources or people that you relied on for guidance and direction on how to best prepare yourself for university and its educational opportunities and challenges? (friends, parents/family, teachers, guidance counselors, university guidebooks)
- Do you think that every high school student in Canada should aspire to a university degree? Why or why not?

University Experiences

- What was your first impression of university?
- Some first-generation students say that they feel out of place in university, like a 'fish out of water'. Did you ever feel that way? If so, why do you think that was?
- How was your lifestyle similar or different from your peers/housemates in university?

Reflection

- In what ways do you think you were advantaged or disadvantaged as a first-generation student?
- What would you say to other first-generation female students, or parents of first-generation students?
- In closing, I'd like to go around and have each person tell me what one or two things you will take away from this discussion today. It can be anything relating to any of the topics we discussed over the past hour and a half.

APPENDIX E: Photo Elicitation Instructions

Within the next 2 weeks, please takes pictures of the following:

1. Take a picture that represent how you felt as a student in your childhood.
2. Take a picture that represents the stories you were told about university (from family, friends, or society).
3. Take a picture that represents the story you now tell yourself about university.
4. Take a picture that represents how you 'felt a part' of the university experience.
5. Take a picture that represents how you did not 'feel a part' of the university experience.

When you have your collection complete, please email them to me at sa00bq@brocku.ca I will then follow up, to arrange an interview time to talk about your photos.

APPENDIX F: Photo Elicitation Interview

These questions are a guide for the photo elicitation interview and will be responding to the content of specific images.

Opening: Tell me a little about yourself, such as your background.

1. Can you tell me why you chose this picture to represent how you felt as a student in your childhood?

2. Can you tell me why you chose this picture to represent the stories you were told about university (from family or society)?

3. Can you tell me why you chose this picture to represent the story you now tell yourself about university?

4. Can you tell me why you chose this picture to represent how you felt a part of the university experience?

5. Can you tell me why you chose this picture to represent how you did not feel a part of the university experience?