Choices and Chances: The Impact of Widening Access Policies on
Non-Traditional Students in a Canadian College

by

Laura Autumn Servage

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

ADULT EDUCATION

Department of Educational Policy Studies
University of Alberta

Abstract

Citing statistical data that continues to show that lifetime earnings increase with post-secondary education attainment, policies in OECD countries, including Canada, promote universally accessible post-secondary education as a strategy to redress both economic and social inequality (Field, 2006; Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009). However, does education in fact lead to better life chances? My research question asked whether, and to what extent, widening access policies can be expected to deliver on their promise to reduce social inequality through enhanced participation in the labour market.

To address this question, I studied the experiences of six first-generation female adults who came to college to pursue diplomas in Practical Nursing. Biographical accounts of students' learning journeys were complemented by insights from interviews with informants at the students' college, who work closely with marginalized and first generation populations.

Normatively, the treatment of social inequality always boils down to whether we ought to "blame the person" or "blame society." In the case of my study, then, it was important to carefully theorize and consider relationships between social structures and individual agency. To this end, I used an ecological model of human development to extend and situate a Bourdieusian analysis. Findings show that navigation of post-secondary institutional complexities requires a practical "institutional know-how" and hard-earned cultural capital in the form of skillful self-advocacy. Institutions can provide no assurance of the acquisition of this needed cultural capital, and in some instance may even work against it.

My study findings support my claim that widened access to post-secondary education cannot redress social inequality, and in fact may exacerbate it. I close the dissertation with the argument that credentialism essentially functions to obscure and reinforce structural injustices in the distribution of labour itself. Future research is proposed, in which the moral economy may be used as an analytical lens on work and learning pathways to reconfigure the relationships between credentialed and workplace learning in more socially just ways.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Laura Servage. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from (a) the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office under the project title "Choices and chances: Decision factors for mature students pursuing post-secondary vocational learning" on August 11, 2011 (Pro00011534), and (b) Norquest College's Research Ethics Board under the same project title on September 15, 2011.

Gratitude and Dedication

A program and work of this scope is never the work of one person. Unseen are all those who have cheered you on, been furious with you, made sacrifices, and otherwise walked the journey of a doctoral program alongside you.

> *Thanks first and foremost to my partner and friend Patrick, and to all our kids, Carly, Jillian, Kirsten and Kiera, just generally for putting up with me. Yes, I am finally done! I promise not to do another degree!*

> *Gratitude to my parents, who fed me and provided informal therapy and a lot of take-out food. Thanks to my Dad, who planted so many of the seeds of curiosity that have driven me so far in my education. Thanks to my Stepmum Glennis, who has loved generously. Thanks to my Mum for tenacity, and just needing to be honest.*

> *Thanks also to family and friends: Jerry and Shel Iwanus, Heather Amos, and Emily Machura. Thanks to my fellow grad student "homies," and especially to Lorin Yochim, who has been a valued and constant friend.*

> *Thanks to my committee members for patience, guidance, and mentorship: To Alison Taylor, for the opportunities to enrich my program and learning with field work and co-authorships. To Jerry Kachur for Theory Love, only about a quarter of which I understood after any given conversation.*

> *I also wish to extend my appreciation for the thoughtful feedback and careful editing provided by other members of my committee: Dr. Walter Archer; Dr. Derek Britton; Dr. Bonnie Watt, and my External Committee Member, Dr. Peter Sawchuk.*

> *Thanks to my research participants, especially the students who shared their stories. I learned so much from you, and feel honoured to have been let, just a little bit, into your lives.*

Dedication of this thesis must go to Donna Chovanec, who supervised me as she lived her life: With integrity, a vision for a just society, and a seemingly boundless capacity to support and care for others. To the best of my abilities, all will be paid forward.

Acknowledgement

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Prologue

I was in my early teens when my dad began talking about a changing world. "You're going to need an education," he said. "When I was growing up, there were lots of jobs you could start coming out of high school, but people aren't going to be able to do that anymore." He was trying to impress upon me, I think, the importance of a post-secondary education at a time in my life when I was already drifting about and making very good work of failing to "live up to my potential." I remember our conversation well because it was the first time I felt genuine fear about my future. At the time, I was just trying to survive the hell that is junior high school. I couldn't see much beyond this adolescent fog. But with his words, a veil of sorts lifted, and I became cognizant of the precariousness of the adult world.

I remember – perhaps inaccurately – my dad coming from the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) that day. I don't know what he might have been doing there. His world of work and night school was something vague, something "adult" that he discussed with my homemaker mum at the dinner table. I knew he was an accountant, and that he was studying something or other to become something or other. I knew we didn't see much of him.

When I look back now, I realize that I didn't see much of him because he and my mother were caught up in a project: the project of social mobility. Neither came from money. Neither had parents with post-secondary education. Broke and squeezed out of the Toronto housing market, they piled my sister and me into a red Datsun station wagon. Towing a small U-Haul that held all of our family's worldly possessions, they drove west, west, west to find a place for our young family in Alberta's booming economy. It was 1975. My dad, having started accounting classes at night in Toronto, got a book-keeping job in a small firm. After seven years of part-time study, while working full time, he received his Registered Industrial Accountant certification[1]. I suspect it was hard work and his enthusiasm for learning and problem solving that helped him advance through the rest of his career. His interest turned to internal audit, and as "accountability" has come to dominate both public and private sector management thought, this particular niche has served him well.

As I write, my dad is easing out of his peak earning years, but he is still internationally recognized in his field. He still loves to work. Among the more fortunate within the fortunate demographic of baby-boomers, Dad pulls down a solid pension, and supplements this with contract work that continues to fulfill him, intellectually and creatively. Dad, one might say, "made it."

---

[1]   Later this credential was morphed into its present form – Certified Management Accounting.

I did not understand the significance of my parents' efforts and successes for many years – not, in fact, until I started graduate school as a single parent, and began to see the great social and economic gaps that divided the places I'd come from and the place at which I had arrived. I might say that my parents' intelligence and hard-won entry into the middle class provided me with some rudimentary tools to navigate worlds of privilege, but I remained – and remain today – awkwardly positioned as a PhD candidate who never lost certain sensibilities that come along with slinging coffee at breakfast joints, driving beaters, and seeing little of the world outside of one's own city and immediate neighbourhood. Thus as I reflect back on the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I now recognize how much of it has been intertwined with my own personal project of making sense of the self-conscious way in which "class movers" like me straddle two different worlds.

Chapter One: Introduction

This study examines the college experiences of six adult women students. It is a story of the role that post-secondary education, both past and present, has played in their pursuits to better their lives – that is, to achieve social mobility. All are "first generation" students in that they would be the first people in their families to obtain a post-secondary credential.

On its surface, this study describes how and why the women decided, after some years of work experience and in prior, aborted efforts to gain a credential, to return to college to become Practical Nurses. It discusses the strategies they used to manage complex institutional processes once they began their studies, and the kinds of hurdles they faced, including financial precarity, isolation, and lack of knowledge about the post-secondary system generally.

The ultimate aim of the study, however, was to investigate the more fundamental question of whether widening access to credentialed education can deliver on its promise of social mobility for people like the women whose stories are shared here – those who are otherwise likely to remain among the ranks of the working poor. Would the women I interviewed in fact be rewarded for the time, money and effort they were putting into their studies? Would they be able to obtain the social status, secure income and standard of living they anticipated would come out of their three year investments in Practical Nursing diplomas?

Certainly this happy ending grounds the claims of policy makers, who continue to provide statistics showing how an initial investment in a post-secondary credential yields lifetime earnings that justify both the time and money spent to attain it (e.g. Riddell, 2004). Policies to increase participation in post-secondary education have been premised on these historical patterns. As detailed in Chapter Five of this work, participation has indeed increased steadily over the past thirty years. Yet as evidence mounted that the increasing numbers of students were primarily middle class, concerns grew that some social groups – lower SES (socio-economic status) or "working class" people, older adults, and particularly in Canada First Nations people – continued to participate at very low rates (Davies & Guppy, 2006).[2] Over approximately the past two decades, then, emphasis has shifted from *increasing*

---

[2] The language and focus changes, of course, from country to country. I drew most of my research from Canada, the US and the UK. Canadian policy includes First Nations persons among groups that don't participate. US studies focus heavily on African American and Hispanic people. UK studies are more likely to demarcate "working class" students as less likely to participate and succeed. Race, class, gender and age are all variables that intersect with one another, depending on the focus of the study and its national context. Because of these variations, I usually

participation in post-secondary education to *widening* it by implementing policies targetting those social groups that were consistently less likely to participate. Accordingly, their participation rates have increased. But has widening access worked? What happens *after* these targeted groups enter the doors of a post-secondary institution? More specifically, my research question asks whether, and to what extent, widening access policies can be expected to deliver on their promise to reduce social inequality through enhanced participation in the labour market.

Study Design and Overview

The work that follows does not progress as a typical thesis. Although expected components – theory, methodology, literature review, data and analysis – are included, they are woven together in what some might consider unconventional ways. After many earnest attempts to "stick with the program," I rejected the traditional thesis format because it begged for a fairly linear analysis that did not reflect what has been a hermeneutic and organic process for me. Throughout this study, I have moved constantly between data, theory, and literature that inform my topic. Analysis, too has been ongoing, so appears throughout the thesis, although I have worked to shape this analysis toward some "big picture" conclusions in my final chapter.

The chapters that follow may be regarded as a linked series of arguments flowing toward a final discussion. Most chapters open with narratives like the one presented in the Prologue. They are stories – either from my own journey or those of my student participants – that introduce important themes in the chapter. The narrative approach here reflects my intentional effort to bring a more conversational and approachable tone to my dissertation without sacrificing theoretical and methodological rigour. I wanted to write a manuscript that would be relatively accessible, and reasonably enjoyable to read because this, to me, is central to broadening the dissemination of ideas outside the walls of the academy, and perhaps beyond one's immediate disciplinary area. In retrospect, this process has also been one of finding my own identity as an academic and a writer. I love writing. My academic writing here, for better or worse, is thus a hybrid of journalistic and academic styles.

Another important consequence of the structure of this work is that the stories of the six women, at the core of this work are quite abbreviated. In keeping with my chosen biographical research method, I conducted multiple extended interviews with the women, and crafted their learning biographies out of these interviews. In a more traditionally structured thesis employing a biographical or

---

refer more generally to "marginalized adults" or "low SES," recognizing that these labels don't capture the intersectionalities contributing to exclusion.

narrative methodology, each participant may be presented as a case, perhaps even in its own chapter. However, because I wished to consider relationships between structure and agency, between individuals and institutions, I had to construct this work in ways that would allow me to consider both.

In further keeping with my aim to reconcile structure and agency in my account, I conducted two types of interviews. The first set of interviews were extended biographical interviews (about 90 minutes in length) conducted with "student participants" – the six women, mentioned above, pursuing their Practical Nursing (PN) diplomas at Norquest College in Edmonton, Alberta. I met the women first in 2012, when all were in the second semester of the first year of their program.[3] The second set of interviews (30 to 60 minutes) were conducted with a variety of "informants." This latter set of participants, 12 in number, included academic advisors, career advisors, and faculty who work with Norquest's students.[4]

The final analysis in this study often juxtaposes the "institutional" perspective presented by my informants with the lived realities captured in biographical accounts of the student participants' learning journeys. Exploring the tensions between these two perspectives helped me to tease out some of the specific mechanisms through which institutionalized learning continues to penalize the kinds of "non-traditional" students invited into post-secondary programs via the widening access mandate. Those familiar with theoretical approaches to the study of education and social inequality will recognize that it falls roughly in the vein of conflict sociology, which has its roots in Marxism.

This is, however, not saying much in the way of narrowing one's theoretical approach. Marx's structuralism and materialism have been challenged and reconfigured many times over to build upon his central thesis that human history is a history of class struggle. Chapter Two is the fruit of my nothing-short-of-torturous process of choosing a conceptual framework, given theoretical approaches that vary widely in their considerations of material and cultural interests, and structural versus interpretive perspectives. As I discuss in greater detail in this chapter, my own position aligns with those theorists

---

[3] I originally intended to follow a three-phase interview model proposed by Seidman (1991). The model adheres to the principle, identified in methodological literature for biographical research, of beginning with an opportunity for the participant to share his or her story in a holistic way. This gestalt becomes the foundation for subsequent interviews, as needed, to develop detail and meaning (Johnson, 2001; Seidman, 1991). After writing detailed, narrative-style biographies from this first round of interviews, I conducted a second round of somewhat more structured interviews with participants in 2013. After this, for largely pragmatic reasons, I determined with my supervisor that two rounds of interviews were sufficient to complete the work. Additional information about the interviews with students is provided in Chapter Seven.

[4] Additional information about informant interviews is provided in Chapter Six.

who, in the social and critical realist traditions, seek accounts of society that are neither materially nor culturally reductionist.

In Chapter Two, I begin with an explanation of the importance of the "structure agency" problematic in the social sciences, as well as why this problematic is so central to my study. I'll consider some of the theoretical issues associated with structure/agency dualism, and discuss the efforts of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to "transcend" this dualism, thereby portraying social life – particularly its critical dimensions contributing to social inequality – in a manner that recognizes the complexity of the ways in which individuals butt up against and strategize in response to social structures. It is further worth noting that Bourdieu's enduring interest in the role of education in the reproduction of social stratification aligns nicely with the credentialism thesis that I favour as an explanation of expanding post-secondary markets, including the widening access "movement" on which I focus. Human capital theory, on the other hand, assumes a functional and complementary understanding of education and labour markets – "all is well," so to speak. I'll elaborate further on these basic ideas throughout the study, but for the time being, I want to point out that these are highly abstract concepts, as are accompanying normative arguments about their consequences for just social justice in terms of labour and its rewards.

Because theories and the policies that come out of them do operate at high levels of abstraction, their consideration, as argued by Dorothy Smith (2005) can render sociology into an uncritical and technocratic practice – sociology that is only in the most objectified sense "about people," and is certainly not "for people." It was largely due to my reading of Smith that I came to understand the central thread of liberal humanism in my scholarship, here manifested in my desire to give credence to the lived experiences of my research participants. In this pursuit, I was largely drawn in by American pragmatism and the Marxist humanist tradition, both of which emphasize a materially grounded subjectivity. I thus chose to center my study on the learning biographies of "real people" – that is, the six women who shared their past and present learning efforts in extended personal interviews. My methodology section in Chapter Two describes my chosen biographical method (Merrill & West, 2009; Siedman, 1991), and explains how I took the further step of contextualizing the biographies by employing an ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1984).

Chapter Three introduces the six women who offered their learning biographies for my study. How did they see themselves as learners? What hopes, aspirations and challenges occupied their lives at this important juncture: schooling for a new career, and a new professional identity? What strengths

and challenges came out of their learning histories from their perspectives? Did they regard themselves as disadvantaged?

This latter question was of particular importance. All were first-generation students, and "adult" or "mature students." As I learned throughout my study though, the naming or labeling of students who do not fit into the category of the "traditional" student is problematic, from both empirical and normative perspectives. I discuss some of these problems, and the challenges they posed for me in designing this study. It is noteworthy, however, that the women also labeled themselves. They shared a sense that they were "behind" in their life courses. Thus in the last section of this chapter, I discuss how the women situated themselves in the social world, comparing and contrasting themselves against an idealized education and work trajectory that they associated with successful "adulthood." The internalization of these life-course norms prove an important consideration for human capital theory – a connection I reconsider in the closing chapter of my thesis where I consider the power of discourses that "blame the worker" for stalled social mobility.

Chapters Four and Five emerged primarily out of my literature review, and may be treated as introductory arguments. In these chapters, I look at labour markets and post-secondary education as macro-contexts for the work and learning trajectories of my study participants. Given that the women were pursuing a post-secondary credential with the ultimate aim of obtaining a "good job," it made sense to consider the feasibility of their pursuit by critically examining both the education system and the nature of work available in the paid labour market.

Accordingly, in Chapter Four I talk about "good jobs" and "bad jobs," and I pose the question of what counts as a good job. I look at the effects of post-industrialism on job quality, the significance of a good job for social mobility, and the broader subjective meanings of a "good job." It is not, after all, just about money. The women who shared their stories for this study have other aspirations bound up in the pursuit of a nursing career: they want a professional identity they can take pride in, and opportunities to grow and learn in the future. They want to offer their children more possibilities than they experienced in their own families of origin. They want to support colleagues, and be supported in kind. A "good job" clearly has many dimensions. It fulfills material needs and some material wants, but it also meets many psychological and social needs.

Such jobs, however are not unlimited, despite the cheerful sidestepping of this obvious fact on the part of policy makers (cf. Brown & Lauder, 2003). The "more learning, more earning" narrative, while supported by historical evidence (Riddell, 2004), is presently fraying and under scrutiny. There is

mounting evidence that highly trained workers – particularly younger workers – are underemployed, unemployed, or experiencing precarious early careers stitched together via temporary and part-time labour (Frenette, 2004; Robinson, 2010; Vosko, Uppal, & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014).

How then ought we decide who is most worthy of a "good job"? The standard response is that the best jobs ought to go to the best educated. In Chapter Five, I consider why this prescription strikes many as fair. We operate according to a near universal assumption that schooling and its resulting rewards in the labour market are can be characterized as a meritocracy. We understand school achievement to be the product of innate qualities like intelligence, and innate (or perhaps learned) qualities of diligence and care, so it seems natural that those who possess these qualities should be equally recognized and rewarded in the paid labour market. In theory, then, educational achievement ought to be a level playing field; anyone ought to be able to exercise his or her abilities and good character to "get ahead." In many ways, the journeys of women in this study testify for this thesis. Yet they are exceptions to the general tendency of education to reproduce socio-economic orders. Decades of research have shown that educational achievement and subsequent labour market rewards are stratified by social class. Children tend strongly to achieve the education levels of their parents, and to enter the same kinds of occupations. The ways in which this process occurs were a central focus of the research of Pierre Bourdieu, whose theorizing underpins much of the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter Two.

These patterns of reproduction are not lost on policy makers. Efforts to "widen access" to post-secondary education and training (ET) emerge from recognition on the part of governing bodies that some social groups may need additional encouragement and support to pursue credentialed learning. To provide further understanding, I review Canada's particular take on programs and policies to widen access. Finally, in this chapter, I detail the central argument to be explored through my study. As I have suggested, educational institutions, despite opening opportunities through widening access policies, are prone to systemic failure. As a result, they continue to perform a gatekeeping function, narrowing the pool of candidates for those too-few "good jobs." I do not believe this is intentional. There is no conspiracy theory at work. Rather, institutions like Norquest College that genuinely go to bat for their students are themselves caught up in a system of education-to-work articulations that encourage credential inflation, and preclude more imaginative ways of thinking about work, learning, the just distribution of work, and the nature of its rewards.

In Chapter Six, the first of two data chapters that ended up incorporating analysis as well, I focus on Norquest College, the institution at which my students were pursuing the Practical Nursing diplomas. Although I intended to focus my study around the experiences of my student participants, I conducted interviews with numerous Norquest staff in two key areas: the Office for Prospective Students, and staff and faculty with the Practical Nursing program of studies. I also interviewed two employment and career advisors at Alberta Works. My primary intention with these interviews was to make sense of institutional contexts that enable and constrain students' choices.

These were intended to be strictly informational interviews, but morphed into dialogues in which informants pondered their own learning histories (most, interestingly, were first generation students themselves), and, to some extent, their own positions on the fairness and adequacy of the post-secondary system. I thus found myself taking as strong an interest in the stories of these informants as in those of my students. While much of this chapter presents descriptive data from these informants about the education barriers faced by marginalized and first-generation students, my analysis led me to see informants as themselves caught up as much as the students they served in forms of institutionalized, symbolic violence. The data in this chapter informs my analysis of how institutional doxa (roughly, culture) shapes normative stances on the relationships between structure and agency, and hence the critical evaluations of institutional actors respecting the students they serve. Norquest's case exemplifies the ways in which meritocratic norms are embedded in, and reinforced by institutional structures.

In Chapter Seven, my second data (and analysis) chapter, I turn to the stories of the six female students at the heart of my work. In the biographical interviews that inform the findings in this chapter, I asked the women about their histories as learners, their goals, their experiences in their present program of studies, and the sources of information and advice they had drawn on to choose Norquest's PN program as their best career route.

I was surprised to learn that even though I had targeted students pursuing their first credential, all but one of the six women I met had aborted post-secondary efforts in their past. Their stories highlight how credential barriers, weak infrastructures for career advising, a complex post-secondary market, and equally complex bureaucratic processes needed to manage programs and finances converged to make post-secondary education a precarious undertaking for the very students targeted by "widening access" policies.

In this chapter, I also draw on Bourdieu to examine alignments (or lack thereof) between habitus and doxa, or what Reay, Davies, David and Ball (2001) describe as "institutional habitus." I analyze my students' experiences to show how institutional structures are inimical to the kind of relational and experiential learning that first-generation students need to discern and adopt requisite social and cultural capital for success. In particular, I surmise that the capacity to self-advocate effectively in highly institutionalized settings like a college or a state employment agency is actually a form of cultural capital. Self-advocacy entails a kind of pragmatism and self-reliance that, for better or for worse, is rewarded in these settings. To draw on Bourdieu's frequent metaphor of players on a field, those with a habitus that aligns to provide an instinctive "feel" for this game of navigating institutionalized bureaucracies are more likely to fare well in these settings. Paradoxically, however, this "feel" for when and where to adopt pragmatism in relationships is itself best acquired in the contexts of safe and trusting relationships –those that shape the habitus. Essentially here I argue that the capacity to "navigate" complex institutional settings is treated as a skill set that can be acquired by students who avail themselves of student services, whereas instead it should be understood as a function of habitus. The acquisition of navigation, then, is experiential, often tacit, and unlikely to occur quickly.

Chapter Eight, my concluding chapter, synthesizes my findings in support of my original thesis that "widening access" policies function to defer or displace broader questions about the justice of social stratification by pushing the mechanisms of this stratification into a set of institutionalized practices that convolutes the whole business of sorting society's "haves" from its "have-nots." Credentialed education expands to shift the work of social stratification away from its more obvious and overt forms in the paid labour market. Bourdieu consistently made the case that education is a superlative form of social domination; its expansion through "widening access" thus arguably simply extends the reach of this process. Institutions like Norquest College, in the case of my particular study, struggle to cope with diversity and massification by expanding the "student support services" they offer; yet these in fact function as a form of symbolic violence because they give the appearance of redressing social stratification while actually reinforcing it.

I also discuss how relationships and experiential learning are needed to develop the forms of cultural and social capital that align most effectively with the world of work and learning under the "neo-liberal imaginary" (Ball, 2012). Rigid divisions between formal education and work-based practices place those with less complementary forms of capital at significant disadvantages. I discuss how these

structures perpetuate disproportionate risks for marginalized students, rendering "widening access" a much less helpful policy strategy than its rhetoric suggests.

"Widening access" may yield some successes. The women who were studying to become Practical Nurses may get lucky. Once they obtain their diplomas, they may land unionized full time nursing positions that will assure a steady income, and provide their families with needed additional benefits like dental care and paid sick leaves. At a deeper level, however, policies to "widen access" must fail because they fall in line with the dubious supposition underpinning human capital theory: namely that there are enough "good jobs" to go around. Although there is mounting evidence that there are not enough high quality jobs available to absorb exponential increases in educational attainment, past correlations between education and income continue to have a significant impact on policy. Increasing and widening access to formal education then becomes the problem and target of policy reform, rather than structures of the labour market itself. This is what's called a "Type Three error:" defining the problem to be solved incorrectly right out of the gate.[5]

What, then, is the alternative to spiraling credential inflation generated by a more fundamental lack of opportunity in the labour market? In Section Three of my conclusion, I draw on the notion of moral economy to consider learning and labour opportunities within a broader discourse around social justice, and touch on some radical proposals that would deconstruct the structural divides between work and learning that perpetuate social stratification rather than foster social mobility. The "contributive justice" thesis, proposed by Paul Gomberg (2007) draws on the "capabilities" tradition of social justice theorizing (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001) and on Aristotelian notions of work as human betterment through purposeful activity. It is a compelling vision for work and learning in that it asks how labour presently organized into clear occupations might be reconfigured to allow everyone to flourish by growing their talents, interests and passions through more equitable opportunities to contribute their labour in substantive and meaningful ways. While I am unable to provide much more than a cursory overview of the contributive justice proposition at the tail end of my work, it may well serve as grounds for my own future inquiries.

---

[5]Mitroff and Silvers (2010) review the origins of the "Type Three error" in the work of two statisticians. John Tukey pointed out that many statistical exercises are flawed because they offered the right answer to the wrong problem. Labelling this phenomena a "type three error" is attributed to decision theorist Howard Raiffa (1968). See Mitroff, I. & Silvers, A. (2010). *Dirty rotten strategies: how we trick ourselves and others into solving the wrong problems precisely*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

On a more pragmatic note and also in the interest of further inquiry, Section Four offers a couple of brief proposals about how my findings might generally inform policies related to work and learning for marginalized adults. These include a much more relational and experiential approach to student services, as well as an expanded and more holistic understanding of "soft skills" or personal development not as a function of employability, but of general, human flourishing. I stop short of enthusiastic and specific policy recommendations only because these briefly proposed directions are terribly idealistic, and at best band-aid solutions because they do not fundamentally alter the structures of work and learning that are radically critiqued by the "contributive justice" model just discussed. Nonetheless, policy advocacy and recommendations may have some interim value, and I am not above such pragmatism.

Section Five is my own "final reflection" on my work. I've had the proverbial "love hate" relationship with my dissertation, but it has at least solidified my enduring and perhaps romantic interest in exploring "the human condition" through the lens of labour. In the end, it was also at times a surprisingly intense journey of self-discovery. In my closing words, I "go back to the beginning," as it were. My prologue recounted a long ago conversation with my Dad that kicked off my own sense of myself as someone who would someday (alarmingly soon, he said) have to think about myself as a "worker." It turned out that would matter to my sense of myself much more than I imagined those thirty-odd years ago.

Chapter Two
Structure and Agency: Lying in the Bed You Made?

This chapter accounts for the conceptual underpinnings of my research approach, and describes my research methods and design. The title of my study, "Choices and Chances" captures a basic tension that drives both causal and normative accounts of how people fare in life. Are poverty and economic insecurity conditions that, if we are born into them, likely to persist? The answer to this question is complicated, and concerns many factors, including health and education in the natal family, and policy and economic contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Corak, 2013; Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2004). These factors shape "chances" for socio-economic mobility in significant ways. Policy related to post-secondary education acknowledges the role of "chances" rhetorically, but at the same time presents post-secondary education as a rational individual "choice" that is likely to improve socio-economic status. Certainly this faith in education has driven social policy in Canada toward the "widened access to education" model, both the efficacy and justification of which I will critique in the work that follows.

In sociology, choices and chances are framed as relationships between social *structures* and individual *agency*. This is not to say that such relationships are always acknowledged. A surprising amount of research, much of which informs policy, relies on over-simplified theoretical models that either reduce people to social automatons on the one hand, or imply/state unchecked individual agency on the other. To further complicate matters, these extreme positions, whether tacitly conveyed or explicitly stated, carry with them certain normative assumptions about whether people deserve their socio-economic fates.[6]

In the sections that follow, I will consider the importance of the "structure/agency" debate in sociology to the conceptual framework within which I frame my research problem. I'll describe how French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu seeks to transcend structure/agency dualism by presenting structure and agency as a "both-and" interplay rather an either-or debate. I will show how my chosen biographical method serves to discourage the kinds of over-simplifications that result when "the individual" and "society" are considered in isolation of one another. I then examine the usefulness of a model of human ecology that further teases out the relationships between structure and agency at different levels of social reality.

---

[6] On a large scale, assumptions are manifested as ideologies.

I. Structure and Agency: Lying in the Bed You Made?

Divorce may now be common as dirt, but it still throws families into chaos. My own parents' marriage spun out of control right about the time I began a decidedly precocious bout of adolescent rebellion. This landed me in foster care at thirteen. Shortly after I came home a few months later, my mother moved across the country with my two sisters, leaving me and my dad to fend for ourselves. Through all this, I stumbled into high school with the intent to graduate, but no real commitment. Everything was uncertain. I proceeded to disappoint my dad in most every way imaginable. I started smoking. I moved in with a guy. I dropped out of high school not just once but twice – the second time in my last semester of my graduating year. I waited tables, stayed out too late, and generally lacked direction. Then, just to really seal the deal, I got pregnant at 18.

As I was about to discover, single parenthood is no way to get ahead in life. Bootstrap African American economist Walter Williams may have raised some ire with his libertarian polemic "cure for poverty," but statistically speaking, he wasn't wrong: His four point plan for "not being poor" includes 1) finishing high school; 2) not having children out of wedlock and remaining married once you have children; 3) staying employed, even in a minimum wage job; and 4) refraining from criminal activity.[7] So according to his criteria, I'd already put myself behind the eight ball on two counts: at nineteen I was a single mother with no high school diploma. The four single mothers among my student participants were not dissimilar, although most had their children in marital or common-law relationships. What we all shared in our early adulthoods was a pattern of leaving high school with something of a shrug of indifference, and then producing dependents before obtaining any sort of post-secondary education.

According to Williams, the subsequent challenges we faced were our own damn faults. Williams' cure for poverty is framed in such a way as to point to individual choices as the root cause of a difficult life, and he's not really interested in alternative explanations, particularly those that invoke structural and systemic conditions as contributions to poverty. Williams' "cure for poverty" illustrates one extreme response to a perennial sociological question: Should we understand life outcomes as the product of individual choices and actions, or agency? Or, does society determine who we are and what we can become? For Williams, clearly, it's all about agency. Individual actions and choices determine life chances. People therefore get the lives they deserve: "You made your bed, now lie in it," as the expression goes.

Challenging William's position would be one that focuses on the kinds of circumstances that might lead people to poverty, early family trauma, and their accompanying ills. Might I have stayed in

---

[7] Williams is an African-American libertarian economist. cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zAibedU8G4

high school if my parents had not divorced? Would Tanis, a 30 year old student participant in my study, have fared better academically if she had moved to Canada ten years earlier and gained most of her education in English instead of Spanish? Would Jayden, 24, an academically gifted young Métis woman, already be a Registered Nurse had there been adults in her life who recognized and nurtured her ability? What ought to be made of the fact that none of the students in my study had parents with post-secondary education? In other words, to what extent should we attribute life outcomes to social structures – circumstances over which we have little or no control?

When it comes to being stuck in poverty, the basic distinction between "blaming the person" and "blaming society" warrants further attention; it points to fundamental divides in the ways in which people make sense of social problems, and subsequently decide what is just, or fair. For the purposes of this work, which considers not only the efficacy but also the ultimate fairness of widening access policies, it is important to think through whether less than desirable outcomes can be ascribed to the follies of students, or to structural facets of post-secondary systems and the labour markets, or to both.

Theorizing Structure and Agency

The "structure/agency problematic" has been widely considered in sociology. In preparation for this study, I struggled to land on a theorist or theoretical approach that would help me to systematically consider relationships between structure and agency in relation to the participation patterns of marginalized adult students in post-secondary education. What I discovered along the way is that theorists can examine the same phenomena and concepts using quite different language and different theoretical trajectories, depending upon their disciplinary area and the predecessors they draw upon (cf. Côté & Levine, 2002).[8] There is then, alas, no one theorist who can offer the wandering graduate student a tidy integration of theory, methodology and research strategies ideally suited to the problem under scrutiny.[9]

---

[8] It was particularly interesting to me to begin to compare how the structure/agency problematic is treated in sociology, psychology, and economics. Cote and Levine's book deals specifically with bridging theorizing about structure and agency under the hybrid of social psychology. Hybrid fields of economic sociology and behavioural economics synthesize economics with sociology and social psychology, respectively.

[9] Scope will also have much bearing on methodology and conclusions that can be drawn. Fine-grained studies like Margaret Archer's (2005) "Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation," for example, require a more phenomenological and psychologized approach, whereas Bourdieu's work theorizes at a much more abstract level from large scale quantitative data, such that the agency attains, as Archer critiques, a kind of "empty formalism" that places much less emphasis on individual subjectivity (p. 14). Archer, like Dorothy Smith, argues for a more "person-centered" approach, although, as I touch in a bit later, this runs into the usual problem of generalizability -- at least empirically.

So, in trying to figure out where I and my study would land in this morass, I read widely from the works of Archer, Bourdieu, and Giddens – all sociologists who have dedicated a great deal of thought to how the relationship between structure and agency ought to be theorized (Ritzer, 2004). All three theorists reject sociological explanations that rely rigidly on one approach.[10] Margaret Archer (1995) offers a clear and helpful account of some of the analytical problems that result when social issues are evaluated through only one lens or the other – that is, considering only structure, or only agency. The first perspective, which privileges structure in explanations of social life, Archer calls "downward conflation," because individual agency is subsumed by structure. Ontologically, this position privileges the facticity of social structures, and is therefore deterministic with respect to individual agency. The individual may be objectified behaviourally, or psychologically, but in either case, he or she is, as Archer (2003) describes, "society's being," wherein "all...human properties and powers, beyond those stemming from our biological constitution, [are…derived] from society" (p. 86). Writ large, the consequence is the erasure of agency as a causal force in the explanation of social life.[11]

The second perspective instead privileges agency in its explanations of life chances. "Upward conflation" accounts for social phenomena by adding up the decisions and actions of individual agents (Archer, 1995). In such accounts, material and social structures are largely disregarded. Archer describes the individual, from this perspective, as "Modernity's Man" because the ontology of the person is a product of Enlightenment philosophy. This person, she describes, "owes nothing to society;" he or she is autonomous, rational, and self-directed in motivation and action (p. 52). This is problematic, according to Archer and others (cf. Giddens, 1984; Porpora, 1989; Sayer, 2010; Wacquant, 1992) because it dismisses the possibility that social structures have real existence, or real impact on social life. As we will see in Chapter Five, this is also the perspective that dominates contemporary conceptualizations of work and learning through the lens of human capital theory.

---

[10] This is an example of how different constructs can apply to basically the same ideas: Giddens describes structuration, Archer human causal powers interacting with cultural, material and natural orders, and Bourdieu an embodied "habitus" responding and adapting in different "fields." Although each of these theorists weighs and conceptualizes structure and agency in different ways, they all take the interaction of the two as a central tenet.

[11] Also consider how Lovell's account might be brought in here. I like the way he frames Bourdieu within the broader case for critical realism. Right now I'm inclined to change this and offer some further explanations/defenses re: Bourdieu's desire to "transcend" dualism. Archer is critical of Bourdieu for this.

Setting aside nuances and critiques of Giddens and Bourdieu discussed in detail by Archer (2003), it is fair to say that all three theorists reject an either/or approach.[12] Instead, they seek to contextualize agency within cultural and material orders that are recognized to structure this agency, broadly, either by enabling or constraining it. They share a pragmatic understanding of agency, and regard social structures as powerful, ontologically distinct, emergent and mutable; and more or less in the vein of critical realism work toward a middle-ground between the extremes of positivism and strong constructivism (Sayer, 2000). On the latter points and by virtue of layered understanding of reality, these theorists also have affinities with systems theory – a point of entry for the application of an ecological model that helped me to organize my data and think through my findings (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Elder, 1995).[13] Thus in my way-finding, over time, I realized that I was circling in on Bourdieu, Giddens and Archer because they shared these theoretical underpinnings, as well as my own interest in how these underpinnings applied to questions of social stratification and social mobility.

My theoretical pursuits have also been guided consistently by my interest in how the institutionalization of so many facets of daily life impacts our sense of ourselves as people who can effect change in our lives and our self-concepts (cf. Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Sayer, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2001; Newman, 2006). Durkheim, Marx and Weber all shared a sense of unease around the impulses to efficiency and rationality under modernizing industrial orders, most famously captured in Weber's "iron cage" prognostication. More recently, such concerns have been taken up by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Both have considered the paradox of being "disembedded" from traditional social structures while simultaneously being institutionalized through increasingly complex state and market structures (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002). Canadian Marxist feminist and sociologist Dorothy Smith (2005) described a resulting bifurcation of consciousness between one's embodied sense of self – particularly in the domestic sphere – and a masculinized, abstract and rational system of "ruling relations" that is ultimately alienating and disempowering. Although I reject the standpoint theory that she arrives upon as a methodological prescript, I was captured by her proposed project of bringing greater clarity to the ways in which "ruling relations" shape and sometimes impede positive human action.[14]

---

[12] Archer's own morphogenetic approach is intended to retain both structure and agency in explanations of social stasis, and social change. Archer argues that the two must remain analytically distinct, but must also be related to one another in a way that avoids the resurgence of the forms of "one or the other" dualism she critiques.

[13] cf. Bourdieu's discussion of systems theory, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 102-104, as well as Elder-Vass, 2007; Ritzer & Goodman, 2004

[14] In addition to the problems of generalizing from standpoint theory (in particular, see Moore, 2009) another challenge I found here was the extent to which IE (Institutional Ethnography) relies on material artefacts within institutions and organizations. IE's emphasis on very concrete artefacts and institutional processes makes it

What this all amounted to for my study of "widening access" in education was the necessity of a study design that would bring structure and agency together to accomplish three objectives. First, in keeping with Smith's methodology, and my own fascination with the causal powers of bureaucracies and institutions, was the goal of building institutionalized policies and practices into my study data. Second, I needed a strategy for linking structure and agency in my analysis. Specifically, I needed a way to connect a) the broad discourses of human capital theory and credentialism; b) the aforementioned institutionalized processes through which these discourses are instantiated; and c) the interactions of these with the lived experiences of my research participants. Finally, again in keeping with Dorothy Smith's critical sociology, I sought to achieve this in a way that would keep the experiences of "ordinary people" present in sociological inquiry (Smith, 2005).

II. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

To satisfy the objectives I just described, I solidified a study design composed of three elements. I'll describe these here, illustrate how they are theoretically compatible, and explain how the overall model facilitated my study.

Bourdieu: Habitus, Field, and Forms of Capital

First, of the three theorists above who proposed strategies for bringing together structure and agency in analysis, I went with Bourdieu. This was largely a pragmatic decision. Because so much of Bourdieu's work examines relationships among education, social class and life chances, his theoretical framework has been taken up with some regularity by sociologists who are interested in social mobility.[15] In particular for this study I drew considerably on a body of scholarship from the UK that has used and further theorized Bourdieu's notions of habitus, capital and field in the study of non-traditional and sometimes marginalized adult students (cf. Ball, et. al., 2002; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Morrison, 2008; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). Especially in my analysis of my student participants' experiences in Chapter Six, it was useful to draw on Bourdieu's habitus and forms of capital as conceptual tools in my examination of students' strategies and resources respecting their programs of study.

---

difficult to "scale up" findings to the kind of broad sociological analysis I hoped to do. The very humanism that I find attractive in Smith's sociology is at the same time a limitation in that her methodology tends to equate abstractions from experience with the anti-humanism of what she calls "traditional sociology." (cf. Smith, D. 2005). For a critique along these lines, see Layder, D. (1994). *Understanding Social Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

[15]Bourdieu's interpretive and historicized structuralism also maps onto the Weberian underpinnings of the credentialism thesis, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu encapsulates his theory as [(habitus)+(capital)] + field = practice (Bellamy, 1994). This simple formula, however, belies the complexity of the concepts themselves, as well as the relationships between them. Thus while I consider the concepts separately to explain each, I do so heeding Bourdieu's statement that they work in concert methodologically (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Habitus

Habitus is probably the most considered and contested of these terms, and it represents Bourdieu's take on linking structure and agency. In reading the voluminous secondary literature on Bourdieu's theorizing, it's clear that it is not easy to define habitus. Indeed Bourdieu emphasized that some degree of fluidity was necessary for the concept to be theoretically useful (Reay, 2004). Definitions abound, but Bourdieu himself is a starting point:

> The conditioning associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53).

Close reading of the quote reveals a fundamental paradox that has generated mixed interpretations of Bourdieu's ultimate position on the question of voluntarism.[16] The habitus is "durable" yet generative, "structured" and "structuring," but adaptable. Critics charge Bourdieu with determinism (cf. Jenkins, 1992; Noble & Watkins, 2003)[17] [18] while others attribute this to a misapplication of his work (Nash, 1990;

---

[16] Collett (2009) observes, "The notion of habitus relies on the observation that in our most conscious thoughts we cannot but take some things for granted" (p. 420). Reay (2004) summarizes, "While the habitus allows for individual agency it also predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving" (p. 433). Bourdieu himself comes off as rather pessimistic about the power of habitus overall to effect change -- he seems to regard it as possible but not probable.

[17] Archer (2004) adds a methodological critique, noting that there is a relationship between the way the participant is conceived as a knower/actor, and who, ultimately, holds authority over the participants' account. Given Bourdieu's emphasis on the semi-conscious or unconscious directives of the habitus, she observes that "exalting habitus also valorises the investigator over the subject because the subject's own accounting cannot be taken as fully adequate" (2004, p. 43). Reay takes a different tack: she argues that the flexibility and "indeterminacy" of habitus as a theoretical tool carries with it the risk of "habitus becoming whatever the data reveal" (p. 438). To avoid this, Reay cautions that the habitus ought to be used as a tool to work with data, as Bourdieu proposed, rather than as an explanation for the data. Reay's approach also helps to avoid using habitus in a deterministic way -- an important consideration if, as I proposed for my research the subjectivities of my research participants were to be presented and interpreted in a wholistic way.

[18] Noble and Watkins (2003) are among critics who have noted that Bourdieu lacks theories of change and resistance. Although he states that the habitus is generative and creative, he almost exclusively emphasizes its reproductive functions. A framing of habitus as "strategic use of knowledge, skills and competence" re-introduces much needed conscious, agential behaviour (Noble & Watkins, 2003).

Reay, 2004). Reay (2004) argues that habitus has been dismissed for its determinism only because it has been conceptually divorced from the context or "field" within which the habitus performs and operates: "For Bourdieu," she observes, "it is the interaction of habitus, cultural capital and field that generates the logic of practice" (2004, p. 435).[19]

Another central feature of the habitus is that it is embodied.[20] This is perhaps best understood as an anti-Cartesian stance that, for Bourdieu, bridges artificial distinctions between objective and subjective modes of understanding (Wacquant, 1992). Wacquant traces this facet of Bourdieu's ontology to phenomenological roots, nonetheless ultimately subject to material and symbolic structuring. The embodied characteristic of habitus also conveys the weight that Bourdieu ultimately accords covert mechanisms of socialization, such that much of what drives human action is tacit and intuitive with the feel of being "natural."[21] Finally, the embodied nature of habitus further emphasizes its particularity – that is its inseparability from context, or the "field(s)" in which it operates. Bourdieu frequently described habitus as a "feel for the game;" using the sports metaphor to illustrate the mutual instantiation of habitus and field.

The embodied nature of the habitus provides a further avenue of critique on the part of those who charge Bourdieu with determinism, because embodiment suggests a bypassing of reflexivity and self-awareness. By focusing on the unconscious as a source of action and behaviour, critics charge, Bourdieu does not adequately account for processes of identity formation – particularly when people try to change, consolidate, or otherwise actively direct their social locations. The question of self-identity with respect to social location is considered further in Chapter Three.

Field

Bourdieu's "field" can be roughly understood as a fluid and dynamic social structure, or more clearly one among many overlapping structures that make up "social space" (Bellamy, 1994). Wacquant describes a field as a "set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)" (p. 16). Again, however, definitions prove somewhat paradoxical. Structures are objective and

---

[19] Bourdieu states that his key concepts ultimately "have no definition other than systemic ones, and are designed to be put to work empirically in a systematic fashion. Such notions as habitus, field and capital can be defined, but only within the theoretical system they constitute, not in isolation" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96).
[20] This is not dissimilar to Giddens' account of tacit/non-discursive knowledge that must be deliberately brought to consciousness.
[21] For Bourdieu, much of this naturalization and naturalized expression is organized via class positions, although some of Bourdieu's later work, along with additional theorizing, has extended concepts of social location and corporate agency to include more complex intersections of race, class and gender (cf. McCall, 2012).

objectifying, but only activated by the actions of human agents (Wacquant, 1992).[22] Agents themselves – or "players" on the "field" in Bourdieu's analogous terms, can have objective positions in the field, but at the same time can only be understood in relation to one another, as a field is also a system of relations (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The "boundaries" of a field are only discovered via empirical investigation. As Bourdieu describes it, they are sussed out only by observing the points at which their effects are no longer forceful (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This point is important in the contexts of my study, given that the "ecological model" presented below may give the impression of imposing a greater rigidity around the concept of the field than is warranted. Nor should fields be understood as rigidly hierarchical, given the "nested" model proposed by Bronfennbrenner (below). Instead, I employ the idea of nested fields more in the sense that it is used in organizational analysis as a general means of organizing macro, meso and micro-contexts of action, as well as highlighting their interactions and overlapping boundaries (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). The application of Bourdieu's understanding of fields is considered further – particularly in the contexts of institutional analysis – in Chapter Six.

Capital: Forms, Acquisitions and Conversions

For Bourdieu, maintaining or advancing social positions requires the possession and manipulation of three forms of capital. The value of such capital, put into practice by social actors, varies depending upon the configuration of these forms of capital, and on the field in which it is brought into play. Again drawing on an extended metaphor of gamesmanship, Bourdieu (1992) equates various forms of capital to chips or cards of greater or lesser value in a card game (Bourdieu, 1992). Again, he emphasizes that forms of capital lack a clear definition -- they only take their value and make sense in the context of a field and given "players" on that field in competition with one another.

In addition to economic capital, which is reasonably self-explanatory, people and families hold varying degrees and forms of social and cultural capital. Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1986) as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 51). More simply, social capital describes relationships and group memberships that preserve existing stocks of capital, leverage their flows, and generate new forms of capital. Cultural capital is broken into three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). In the simplest terms, embodied

---

[22] There are intriguing potential avenues here with respect to causal powers in the vein of critical realism.

capital is that reflected in one's disposition – habits of speech and mannerisms, or expressions of the habitus.

Objectified capital describes cultural products and objects, and institutionalized capital, various forms of credentials. Education is an important sub-species of cultural capital, in part because it invokes an institutional presence in the social competition for status. Credentialing, says Bourdieu (1986), creates a mechanism and exchange rates for the conversion of cultural capital to economic capital – that is, it contributes substantively to the differential remunerations of occupations, and to the linking of high economic and cultural capital in the professions (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu emphasizes that non-economic forms of capital may not be readily acquired. Social capital, for example, emerges out of social obligations and these, he states, take time and energy to cultivate (1986). Much of the capital a child is endowed with, stresses Bourdieu, comes out of the time invested by parents, later realized in school readiness, which poises the child for the accumulation of further cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Davies & Guppy, 2006; Nash, 1990). Institutionalized cultural capital (i.e. credentials), also require lengthy investments of time and money. These long conversion processes have direct consequences for education and labour when they are mapped onto the trajectory of a given life course. As will be validated in some detail in later chapters, two tenets of higher education policy -- namely widening access and the notion that work and learning are now "cyclical" and subject to constant renewal and reinvention – are challenged by Bourdieu's (1986) observation that the required conversions are subject to an economy of time.

Power

As this study is critical in its stance, it is useful to provide a brief account of Bourdieu's understanding of power. Like his predecessor Weber, Bourdieu is interested in symbolic expressions of power. Swartz (1997) states that while Bourdieu is fundamentally materialist in his orientation, he is non-reductively so; cultural practices constituting the symbolic order do indeed mask or "misrepresent" relations of domination, but such practices are not reducible to, as Marx proposed, material relations of production. Bourdieu's objective, states Swartz, is to "transcend…cultural idealism and historical materialism" (p. 72).

As is the case with the aforementioned habitus, capital and field, Bourdieu understands power to be relational. The forms and expressions of its exercise are field-specific, and specific to the relationships among those in the field. Again working from the game analogy, Bourdieu explains that power in the field has both objective and subjective dimensions. It is a "force" impacting all players

(hence an objective phenomenon) via its articulation of effective versus ineffective configurations of capital. Although actors may benefit differentially from such configurations, all are subject to them (Bourdieu, & Wacquant, 1992). At the same time, power is enacted subjectively and dynamically in the field in the form of competition. "In a field, agents and institutions constantly struggle, according to the regularities and the rules constitutive of this space of play," states Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 102).[23] Bourdieu further delineates a second order of competition: that of dominance to determine the rules of the game and distribution of its spoils. That is, power is exerted at one level in the struggles between actors, but simultaneously and at a deeper level in struggles to conserve or challenge practices that legitimize the existing social order (Swartz, 2013). Achieved dominance in this latter sense is what Bourdieu describes as symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).[24] "Indeed," states Wacquant, "the whole of Bourdieu's work may be interpreted as a materialist anthropology of the specific contribution that various forms of symbolic violence make to the reproduction and transformation of structures of domination" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 15).

For Bourdieu, education is a critical form of symbolic violence. Based on social practices and given class positions, argues Bourdieu, children are more or less "ready" to be educated when they attend school. As formal education unfolds, it continues to reward and recognize the middle-to-upper class habitus while systematically marginalizing the working class (Nash, 1990). Symbolic violence is eventually manifested in the form of a credential, which, in keeping with Weber's earlier work on the subject, contributes to rarified cultural practices and further functions in a more directly material fashion by contributing to occupational closure.[25]

Applications of Bourdieu

For the purposes of my study, I employ Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field and their interactions by considering, particularly in Chapters Six and Seven, how the life experiences of my study's student

---

[23] As Burawoy (2012) summarizes, "games obscure the conditions of their own playing through the very process of securing participation. Just as one cannot play chess and at the same time question its rules, so one cannot play the game of 'making out' on the shop floor and at the same time question its rules" (p. 189).

[24] Symbolic violence is that which can "impose meanings" and impose them as legitimate by "concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 4).

[25] It is rather difficult to pin Bourdieu down in the normative sense, as much has to be inferred. As Sayer (2011) points out, "while his analyses of symbolic domination tend to trigger a sense of injustice in readers, he leaves them to work out why" (p. 8). Certainly he's critical of social stratification in that he problematizes it at all. But he doesn't seem to come out and say directly why it is problematic. His work is empirical and analytical. Bourdieu's actors are not psychologized or endowed with distinctive, conscious pursuit of goals. Swartz says: "Bourdieu makes no attempt to delineate what part of social actions can be explained by conscious calculation and what part cannot" (1997, p.68).

participants impacted their adjustments to Norquest and the PN program. I also consider how the acquisition of cultural capital functions as an informal and sometimes hidden curriculum -- both at the institution and program levels.

Although it is difficult to "pin down" Bourdieu, the concepts elaborated above are useful if one heeds Bourdieu's own advice to consider them as methodological tools, working with their ambiguities rather than trying to eliminate them. In this sense, Bourdieu, although he consistently emphasizes the empirical nature of his work, allows for much interpretive "play" at the structural level. A description of the approach as "interpretive structuralism" – a term that has been used to describe the work of both Weber and Bourdieu – is thus quite appropriate (cf. Morrow & Brown, 1994).

For the critical and methodological reasons I touched on above however – namely heeding Smith's (2005) call for a "sociology for people" – a structural analysis, even given interpretive play, lacks grounding in peoples' first-person accounts of their experiences.[26] Bourdieu himself takes little interest in the psychologized individual, preferring instead to focus on social groups (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Nash, 1990).[27] In addition to Smith's normative critique of this kind of sociology (aspects of which Bourdieu would concur with in terms of sociology itself as a form of symbolic violence) is a substantive methodological problem – a weakness in Bourdieu's approach with respect to exploring the role of situated agency in the pursuit of social mobility (cf. Archer, 2007; Sayer, 2011). As a methodology, biographical research, discussed in the next section, invites the same dynamic understanding of structure and agency proposed by Bourdieu, Archer and Giddens, but does so without abstracting too far from the subjectivity of research participants.

Biographical Research

Biographical research is a mode of qualitative, interview-based research that develops meaningful contexts for an individual's life experiences, and then analyzes these experiences to explore broader sociological themes. Extended interviews, usually loosely structured or unstructured (Rosenthal, 2004) are used to develop the life stories of participants. Beyond this fairly straightforward tenet of data

---

[26] Smith argues that sociology tends to "bifurcate" the particularities of lived experience – for her feminized and privatized – from the abstract "ruling relations" of discourses that give the illusion of objectivity, and also marginalize lived experience as legitimate knowledge. Smith (2005) emphasizes the interconnectedness of these. So there are some interesting possibilities for mapping Smith onto a systems theory of development and/or extending the ecological model as a strategy to enrich institutional ethnography.

[27] This is not to say that Bourdieu took no interest in the reflexive subject; only that he placed a stronger emphasis on the structural causes and consequences of *the nature* of reflexive processes. To this end, individuals (for example, those considered in ethnographic accounts in *Weight of the World* (Bourdieu, 1999) are instantiations or cases that illustrate those processes; the individuals are not themselves the object of Bourdieu's inquiry.

collection, there are many potential ways to approach biographical research. Because it regards the whole life course as significant context, biographical research often crosses disciplinary boundaries (Denzin, 1989; Heinz & Kruger, 2001); emphases can be psychological, phenomenological, historical, or sociological (Chase, 2002; Rosenthal, 2004). Individuals, groups, or cohorts may be studied (Denzin, 1989). The common thread among various approaches to biographical research is that research participants' accounts of their lives are the primary data source for the study.[28]

Biographical research may best be understood as a variant of life course research (Elder, 1995). Broadly speaking, life course research is more inclined to the study of cohorts, and can therefore be quite structural and objectivist in its approach (Denzin, 1989; Rosenthal, 2004). In its most nomothetic forms, the life course approach will rely on large scale statistical research to find general patterns of social change.[29] Biographical research also considers life changes over time to be important, and similarly focuses on important life markers. However, this approach falls to the interpretive end of the methodological continuum in life course work.[30] Erben (1998) frames the approach as one of recognizing objective social structures, but using biographical research to draw out how these are experienced by people – a question that cannot be answered via quantitative strategies. Merrill and West (2009) describe it as an examination of the ways in which "wider culture and its discourses intrude into individual lives" (p. 45). What makes this approach "biographical" rather than narrative is that it rejects the pure narrative's strong emphasis on the subjective experiences of the research participant. I share the opinion of critics who argue that narratives have little analytical value in and of themselves until they are mapped back onto the social, cultural and historical conditions within which they are produced (Archer, 1995; Crotty, 1998; Warren & Webb, 2007).

Summarily then, my rationale for using biographical research was several fold. First, biographical research incorporates both objectified and subjective accounts of participants' lives; similarly my study sought to incorporate both objective structures and individual agency into accounts of student

---

[28] Also see Crossan, B., Field, J., Gallacher, J., & Merrill, B. (2003). Understanding participation in learning for non-traditional adult learners: Learning careers and the construction of learning identities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 24*(1), 55–67 for account of the "career" from objective and subjective perspectives. Fuller (2007) states that "a lifecourse orientation is central to understanding the lived experience of social change and making connections between experience, perceptions and changing patterns of educational involvement" (p. 219).

[29] A good example of this approach is Canada's Youth in Transitions survey, which ran from 1998 to 2009. These data have tracked aspirations, pathways and educational achievement in youth and young adults.

[30] Bourdieu edges in this direction in his claims that habitus is formed in and through early experiences, and has a trajectory. In other words, habitus has temporality; it is historically grounded (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 134).

participants' educational trajectories. Second, the holism of the biographical approach highlights the complexity of relationships between structure and agency (Heinz & Kruger, 2001; Merrill & Alheit, 2004). A strength of biographical research is that it allows, for display and analysis, the breadth of an individual's life course and life experiences (Dominicé, 2000). This strategy, I anticipated, would be useful for my study because studies of first generation adult students have shown that many factors interact to produce both enabling and constraining conditions for adult learning (Chovanec & Lange, 2010; Myers & deBrouker, 2006; Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Finally, from a normative or ethical perspective, it is desirable within many research traditions to retain the subjectivity of the research participant, and ensure that his or her perspectives are fairly and authentically represented. From an adult learning perspective, the process of co-creating one's learning biography, if sensitively and thoughtfully handled by the researcher, can be a valuable learning experience in and of itself for the research participant (Dominicé, 2000).

Ecological Model

Given the understanding that biographical research seeks to make sense of individual narratives within broader social contexts, the usefulness of the ecological model becomes clearer. The model was developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1983) as part of his extensive work on early childhood development. It represents our choices, actions and growth within multiple contexts – family and kin systems, social institutions, political and economic systems, and finally, at the most abstract level, ideologies, norms and attitudes that shape a given society.

Bronfenbrenner (1997) defines the ecological model of human development formally as "the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded" (p. 515). By stressing mutual accommodation, Bronfenbrenner challenged the clinically-based studies, which were the norms of the day, in favour of naturalistic inquiry and observation.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model [31]
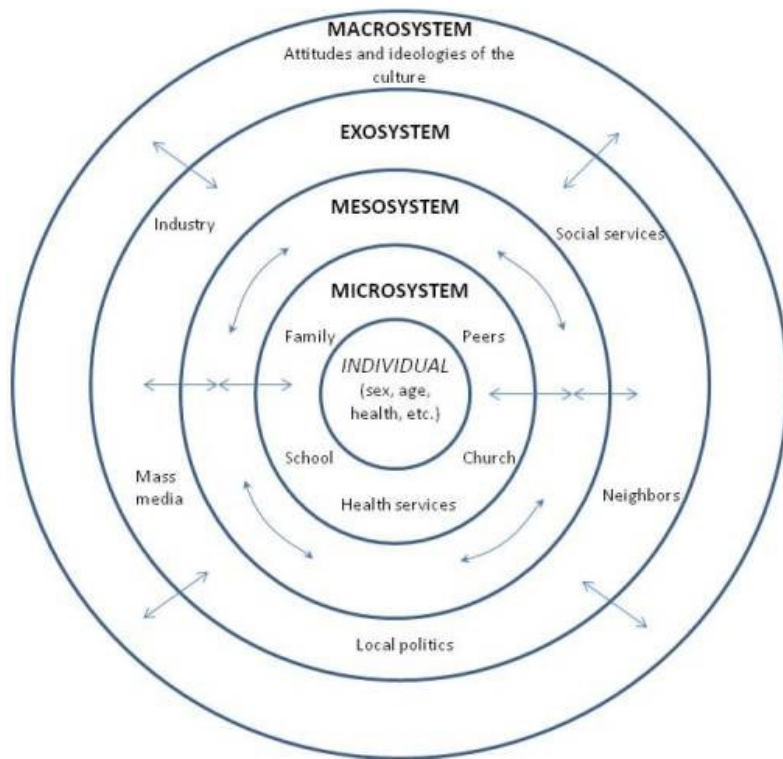
In Bronfenbrenner's model, the *microsystem* consists of the most immediate relationships and environments in one's life. These are characterized by higher levels of intimacy borne out of daily, mundane interactions, materiality, and embodiment in the sense of practice.[32] The *mesosystem* is comprised of networks of microsystems that tends to expand and become more complex as a child moves out of the home and begins interacting directly with people and institutions outside of the immediate family. The *exosystem* is comprised of "social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate system" (p. 516). In this level or layer of the system, Bronfenbrenner includes what sociologists usually describe as institutions or mesostructures. Exostructures can have material and/or cultural properties. The *macrosystem* is abstract. It consists of social patterns, which for the most part are "informal and

---

[31] Image retrieved from
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_systems_theory#mediaviewer/File:Bronfenbrenner%27s_Ecological_Theory_of_Development.jpg

[32] Microcontexts as Bronfenbrenner uses them are very similar to the home environments that Dorothy Smith (2005) described. Elder (1995) details how kin and friends impact persons throughout the lifecycle – interdependent and intergenerational. This is also very well rendered in Newman's Chutes and Ladders (2006), which shows how, for poor families, interdependency among immediate family and friends both enables daily survival, and limits social mobility.

implicit," and structure social behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). However, Bronfenbrenner is careful to qualify that structures are not deterministic; rather, they are contexts for action that enable or constrain the developing person in different ways.

Although Bronfenbrenner's work focused on child development, the nested contexts of his human ecology model may be used to study growth, learning and change in adults as well. The model is useful because it provides strategy to make sense of life pathways that is analytically powerful without being reductive in the ways that Archer (2000) cautions against. Bronfenbrenner, like Bourdieu and some of the other theorists considered here, kept a non-reductive understanding of structure and agency at the forefront of his theorizing by recognizing human development as a trajectory of reciprocal relationships between the person and his/her environments. Whereas Bourdieu's understanding of "fields" remains amorphous, the ecological model more helpfully situates action simultaneously within nested fields with qualitatively distinct properties that impinge upon the developing person in qualitatively distinct ways.

In later developments of the ecological model of human development, Bronfenbrenner began to incorporate temporality. Elder (1995) explains that early iterations of life course research and developmental psychology were too static, and did not adequately examine change over time. Basically, the chronosystem helps to place more weight on human agency within the system, making it an important conceptual development in both field. As Biesta and Tedder (2007) point out, an ecological approach also helps to conceptualize agency as something *procedural* and more or less achieved, rather than simply given.[33] We can then consider people as being more or less agential in given contexts, and through different phases of their lives. In this fashion, the ecological model brings the missing dimension of temporality to Bourdieu's theoretical "formula" of habitus + field + forms of capital (Bellamy, 1994; Noble & Watkins, 2003).

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) nested ecological model provides a ready strategy for organizing the various components of participants' accounts into a "map," which I anticipated would help me to consider structure and agency interactions in multiple contexts.[34] This ecological approach would

---

[33] The authors wish to emphasize agency as something that is enhanced through learning – a perspective with potential implications for theories of adult learning and development.

[34] I do want to clarify that I am not doing full justice to Bronfenbrenner's model, which is detailed and rigorous. Bronfenbrenner's work comes out of the field of developmental psychology, and the ecological approach is best appreciated as a critical response to then-dominant approaches in the field, which used lab based, controlled experimental designs. Bronfenbrenner's approach uses naturalistic inquiry, and experimental designs that show how multiple contexts influence development in the real world. What I am extracting from Bronfenbrenner's

require, however, further knowledge of contexts than my student research participants could provide through their own biographical accounts, or in Bourdieusian terms, a more objective account of the fields within which they were operating. In addition to extensive interviews with my six female student participants, then, I interviewed several "informants" – people who worked at Norquest College, where my students were attending their PN program. I interviewed six people who worked in Norquest's student intake area, and three people who worked in administrative and/or teaching capacities in Norquest's PN program. I also interviewed two employees with Alberta Works, Alberta's "one stop shop" for job searches, career counselling Employment Insurance, other work and learning related services. These informant interviews, along with a survey of Alberta's post-secondary landscape, were used to develop and analyze the broader institutional contexts of my student participants' experiences.

The work that follows is structured with the ecological model in mind. In Chapter Three, I focus on the families of origin of the student participants. Chapters Four and Five focus on what Bronfenbrenner (1986) calls the exosystem and macrosystem: the network of institutions, cultural practices and doxa that structure post-secondary learning, and the world of work in the province of Alberta. Chapter Six, which focuses on Norquest as an institution and draws on the insights of my study informants, forms the meso-level of my analysis. In Chapter Seven, I consider the experiences of my study participants in depth, which constitutes analysis at the micro and individual levels.

---

approach is the principle of nested contexts, and the importance of recognizing systems of interactions in any structure/agency analysis. Bronfenbrenner (1986) draws a specific parallel to life course research when he considers the temporal dimension in developmental research, which he defines as "chronosystems."

Chapter Three
Adult Students: Fitting In and Catching Up

If policies intended to "widen access" to post-secondary education have become prominent, who are they intended to widen access for? This chapter introduces the student participants in this study, showing how their family backgrounds and aspirations position them as mature or "non-traditional" students. Their stories capture a consistent observation among those who specialize in working with adults: Whether the learning is formal, informal or nonformal, it always involves complex and important intersections with one's evolving sense of identity (Dominicé, 2000; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). As my students worked through their personal histories and learning experiences, they confirmed this truism, describing how college education and a professional career tied in with changing family relationships, and their own perceived developmental tasks of "adulthood." In other words, most adults pursue formal education with the practical aim of improved life chances through the labour market, but at the same time with the more global sense that they are improving themselves.

The first part of this chapter presents abbreviated biographies of the six women. The original biographies, crafted from two extended interviews held with each of the participants, were important sources of data for my analysis; however, I chose to make some compromises in terms of the length of the presented biographies in order to accommodate structural analysis of the stories into the manuscript.[35] Although the presented biographies are not as detailed as those used in the analysis, they do provide context for the quotes and anecdotes from the women that are threaded throughout the dissertation, and treated more substantively in Chapter Seven.

In the second part of this chapter, I review some of the characteristics that have been ascribed to adult students, and the ways in which both diversity in post-secondary participation and the potential stigmas of labeling can make it challenging to identify and discuss those who have started a program of studies outside of the "traditional" window of young adulthood. I spent some time developing this discussion because what began for me as a fairly technical exercise, that of finding consistent descriptors for the student participants in my study, wound up posing a subtle ethical dilemma. It turns out that the kinds of foundational assumptions about "choices and chances" discussed in Chapter Two

---

[35] In retrospect, it was highly ambitious of me to attempt to combine biographical research with what evolved more over time into a stronger structural analysis. Narrative and biographical methods "proper" focus much more attention on idiographic analysis, but such detailed treatment and presentation would, I felt, have made the work unwieldy. Some additional thoughts and reflections about my methodology are offered in the concluding chapter of this work.

are unavoidably bound up in the language we use to discuss poverty, learning, and occupational outcomes. I struggled to find a descriptor that would simultaneously describe the objective social locations of my participants while avoiding the trap of a deficit perspective (Warren & Webb, 2007).

A brief synthesis and overview of patterns in the students' experiences follows. All, I learned, came from families with no history of post-secondary education, making the women "first generation" students, according to the literature. Participants' accounts of their histories and families aligned with existing research on the particular challenges faced by first-generation students, and as others have also observed, support Bourdieu's thesis of habitus that more or less align with the *doxa* of academia. This alignment is discussed in greater detail in Chapters Six and Seven, but for the time being, it is enough to observe that student participants' backgrounds, both objectively and from their own perspectives, made the work of "fitting in and catching up" more difficult.

Finally, in this chapter, I consider students' perceptions of their work and learning to date through the lenses of "normal" and "choice" biographies in the construction of learning pathways. Again, the exercise dredged tensions that arise when descriptors carry normative baggage (Sayer, 2005), but also reinforce the usefulness of the human ecology model as a heuristic, through which such tensions can be explored and exercised. The human ecology model, mapping nested layers of social reality, also illustrates the complexity of choice. This complexity is noteworthy as a compelling critique of human capital theory – a topic that will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapter.

I. Students' Stories

Terry: "I want a career. I don't want a job anymore."

Terry, 45, is the oldest student among the women I interviewed. This petite single mother of two school-aged children looked weary when we met, but spoke energetically. She was excited to be starting the PN program and building a new future for herself after many years of work in a packing plant – a job she told me more than once she hated. I saw a "toughness" in Terry – a kind of pragmatism you need to stick with a job you detest for twelve years because it provides security and benefits. We talked about the cost of dental work for two children, the cost of bussing for school, the cost of groceries at Costco. "Paying your bills" was a theme that resonated throughout our conversation.

Terry grew up in Edmonton. Her father was a labourer, and her mother a homemaker. After high school, Terry worked retail and restaurant server positions until her later 20s, when she decided she wanted "a career – not just a job." She went to NAIT (Northern Alberta Institute of Technology) to

upgrade her high school marks. She also completed work experience at an Edmonton hospital, and realized that a career as a dietary technician would allow her to continue to interact with people – this was the aspect of her server jobs she had most enjoyed. Terry enrolled in a two year program at NAIT to become a dietary technician. She completed her program just as Klein era cuts hit public services.[36] She was never able to get a job in the field for which she was trained. Almost twenty years later, her disappointment with this outcome was still pronounced. "It was a waste," she said.

With a family to care for, Terry took a union job with wages and benefits. After divorcing her husband, she continued with full-time shift work at the plant. She would have struggled much more with the hours if her parents had not provided childcare.

Terry came to Norquest at a time when she felt her children were old enough to be a little more self-sufficient. She was nervous about coming back to school, but determined. At the time I met her, early in her first year, she was feeling a bit isolated: she had been out of school for a long time, and was older than most of the students in the program. Terry's accounts of her experiences in the program and her past work experiences suggested that she tends to keep to herself; she described disliking group work, and feeling judged by program instructors. Threaded through our conversation were expressions of disappointment and suspicion when it came to dealing with other people and institutions – program advisors, for example, or her union at her former job. I had the sense that Terry felt the need to keep her guard up.

I tried to contact Terry a number of times for a second interview. After several attempts, I did reach her cell phone, and she hung up on me. I thought this was very strange; I wondered if things had gone poorly for her in the program, and that she might, then, not want to talk about her experiences. I called her back and left her a message wishing her well, and told her I would not attempt to contact her again. I was able to determine from Norquest's list of graduates (2014) that Terry had completed her program – a satisfying outcome for a woman who had so much riding on her "second chance" to build a career after years of paying her dues in a tough, repetitive factory job.

Jayden: "Everybody has the choice whether or not to continue doing good or bad."

Jayden, 23, was the youngest of the students I interviewed. She is the middle child in a large Métis family. Her parents had worked hard when she was younger, but ill health had taken its toll, so that the

---

[36] Ralph Klein was Premier of Alberta from 1992-2006. When he was voted in, he enacted a substantial austerity program that significantly reduced public sector positions.

family was on social assistance for much of the time Jayden was growing up. Jayden spoke of her parents with love and respect, and described how they taught her to be proud and to work hard. She described her siblings and her family relationships in detail; it was evident that she was close to her family and that they formed a major part of her identity. "Sorry; I'm just talking all about my family," she said at one point.

Jayden grew up in Edmonton's inner city, which was "pretty rough." She was always very conscious of being poor, and being Native – different from the "white kids" with smaller families, larger houses, and brand name clothes. Jayden was a bright student who enjoyed school. She described herself as a "good kid….Like all my other siblings were getting into trouble and doing things, and I like, just like to read." She recounted times and places in her young life where peer pressure might have taken her down another road, but she was always driven to find "something more….I wanted to be able to... to respect my own self. With having a respectable profession. Like, I realized even at a young age."

With no clear goals in mind at the time, however, Jayden drifted out of high school one course short of a full diploma. "That was my partying time," she recalled. "And, it didn't last very long, and I would always regret it the next morning." She worked a series of service and retail jobs, but quickly grew bored in these positions. Eventually, she enrolled in a health transitions program sponsored by Métis Nations, and it was in this program that she began to appreciate her academic potential. While some of her peers struggled, she found that high grades came easily for her.

Jayden's academic success continued once she began her PN program at Norquest. She was driven not only by her own goals, but by a strong desire to help others, and to set an example for her family, and her people. She spoke with pride about her involvement with the Student Ambassador program at Norquest. Jayden saw this leadership development program as an opportunity to share her journey, and hopefully to inspire others. "I try to be involved, she said, "just because, like, it's a good thing to do. I've come a long way. Like, I'm not trying to toot my own horn…. I figure that if...when I succeed, the hard work that I put in will be a good reflection for my nieces, my nephews, for people that know me, people that'll read about me. Like, 'look where I've been. You are there too. You can do it too.'"

Sadly, Jayden became seriously ill after our first interview, and was forced to drop out of the PN program in her second year. When I touched base with her a year after our meeting, she was still in treatment. It was difficult to witness this setback; I could only tell her what a kind, bright young woman

she is, and how much I hoped she would get well and get back on track. She has much to offer as a professional and a role model.

Anna: "They didn't exactly set me up for success."

Anna was 30 years old when we met, and the mother of two school-aged children. Intense and sensitive, she moved from despair to indignation to laughter at lightning speed in the two interviews we shared. Anna's biography resonates with her strong sense of her Métis heritage. She described her family as "tight," and mentioned regular Sunday dinners, summer cook-offs, and monthly theme suppers as events for which her large family gathered. Anna derived a great comfort and a sense of place from her family, but also tried to stay away from "drama." She relied on her granny and mum, her "rocks," for emotional support, and both had helped her with childcare in the past. She managed other family relationships more strategically; sometimes, she said, family can hold you back.

When she was growing up, Anna and her family moved around northern Alberta, following her father's various jobs in the oil patch. No one in Anna's family has a post-secondary education. Anna settled in Edmonton as a teenager, and has remained there ever since. In our interview, she recalled dreaming of working in an office downtown as a teenager. She pictured herself as a business professional. A high school counselor tapped in to these dreams, getting Anna involved in an Aboriginal Stay in School program, and helping her work in an internship at a bank after high school. She was hired full time out of this placement.

Anna met her partner. "And then," she said, "I got pregnant....Life happens, right?" Anna described how, after she had her first child, she attended a "Health for Two" program at a local health community center. The program for new mums included crafts, lunch, child care, and social interactions with people "from all different walks of life; from all different age ranges." The *Health for Two* program had a profound impact on Anna. She recalled it as an important part of her learning, and her motivation for going into health care.

Anna said that having children never deterred her from her goal of going back to school, "cause I've always went to school. I went to the Business Admin and Accounting. You know? So I knew there was something I wanted to do, but I didn't know exactly what that would look like, or what I thought it was going to be about." The Business Administration and Accounting program was offered in a cohort format for Aboriginal students. Anna thrived in this environment where she felt supported, not just as a student, but as a whole person. In our second interview, we talked about the importance of community and connectedness for Métis and Aboriginal people, and Anna realized that these values, woven in to

the program, had given her a sense of belonging and contributed to her success. However, once she began work in a business setting, Anna was surprised to realize that the staid setting didn't let her connect to people in ways that she wanted to. She re-oriented her career goals, attending another Aboriginal cohort program to prepare for a career in health care.

When I met Anna for our second interview, she was on hiatus from the PN program because she was missing or had failed key courses. She was depressed and struggling to determine her next steps. As a single mother now, Anna was also trying to figure out how to find work as quickly as possible because she was no longer on student loans. She was scared and discouraged.

Provocatively, the confidence with which Anna self-advocated for housing, scholarships, and other opportunities through Métis Nations seemed to evaporate when it came to resolving problems and concerns she encountered at Norquest. Her past experiences with learning – the ones that had nourished her and given her confidence – were all undertaken in cohort formats that gave her a strong sense of community. Now Anna seemed to have experienced a degree of culture shock, and was really struggling with ways to make the interpersonal connections she needed to survive an intensive academic program at a large and largely impersonal institution.

Although she was not as strong academically as some of the other students, Anna clearly brought a great sense of compassion and protectiveness to her relationships with family, friends and her student peers. She was down-to-earth and kind, and gravitated naturally toward mentoring and supporting others. All of these qualities would, I felt, likely make her an excellent health care worker if she was able to overcome the barriers she was facing when we last met.

Khomal: "I know now, so I can help people who don't know anything yet."

Khomal, 27 when we met, is the mother of a rambunctious preschooler. After she escaped from a brief, abusive marriage, her family gathered around to support her as she completed her education. When I met Khomal, she was living with her daughter, her parents, and her younger brother. She also has an older sister. Khomal is a bright, curious woman. She described this as a blessing and a curse because her curiosity also made it difficult to focus on one goal. However, she did experience success in a Health Care Aide program she completed after her daughter was born. The experience she gained working in continuing care settings with this certification gave her confidence that she would enjoy and succeed in a career in health services. A good student, she aspires to continue her studies beyond the PN credential, and eventually to become a doctor.

Khomal's family moved from Pakistan when she was about 10 years old. Many extended family members are also in Edmonton, and Khomal and her parents are steeped in their Islamic faith community. Khomal expresses a savvy, "hybrid" identity; she values her family, her community and her culture, but moves fluidly and confidently between this world and the western cultural norms that still dominate in Canada. She recalled that she was very quiet and shy in junior high school, but in high school, she got caught up with friends, boys, and skipping classes. After a tumultuous Grade 10 year, Khomal's parents pulled her and her sister out of high school, and enrolled the two girls in distance classes.

Khomal thus finished her high school by correspondence. In retrospect she appreciated her parents' efforts to protect her from negative values, but we discussed how home schooling had isolated her and her family from some supports and influences that might have helped her to focus her education path sooner. Because neither Khomal nor her family members had experience with post-secondary education, or the Canadian system in particular, Khomal's further learning was uncertain. She worked a series of jobs – for example as a pharmacy technician and call center representative – each of which she jumped in to with gusto, but with which she then quickly became bored as she hit the limits of what she could do without further education.

After an aborted family move to Toronto – including a "wasted" semester at a junior college there – Khomal and her parents and brother moved back to Alberta. Arranged marriages are the norm in Khomal's culture, and the family was by then occupied with finding a husband for Khomal. The man chosen for her by her grandmother proved to be "abusive in every way possible." After only two months of marriage, he left the country, and Khomal found out she was pregnant. She had the baby on her own, with her parents' support.

For Khomal, her short but traumatic marriage and subsequent divorce were catalysts for seeking help and focusing her career goals. Social workers provided advice and resources at a time when she was in need, and listening carefully for good advice. She successfully completed a Health Care Aide program when her daughter was only a few months old. Confident in her academic abilities, she then sought the challenge of the PN program at Norquest. When I last met with Khomal, she was finished her first year of courses, and looking forward to her first extended clinical placement.

It was clear that Khomal loves her family very much, and that they are very supportive of her efforts to complete her education. She is drawing on student loans to fund her education, and her

mother helps her take care of her daughter while she works and studies. Khomal, more than my other student participants, enjoyed both affective (emotional) and instrumental support from her family.

Tanis: "I want to start making my own life; start travelling and meet new people."

Tanis was 30 years old when we met. She is quiet, determined, and conscientious -- sometimes to a fault, perhaps, because she is so hard on herself. She had lived in Canada for about 12 years, and spoke very good English, albeit with a strong accent. She came to Canada from El Salvador with her mother and her sister. A strong student in her native Spanish language, Tanis struggled to overcome language barriers once she arrived in Canada. Because she has had to play "catch-up" at the post-secondary level, learning English while studying academic subjects, Tanis had to work very hard to progress before achieving her entrance into Norquest's PN program.

Tanis and her sister were raised mostly by their mother. Her father, who she describes as doing "anything handy" travelled in the US and Canada for work. Eventually, her father moved her mother and the two girls to Canada. Tanis was 19. Although she worked hard in high school in Canada, her English held her back from immediately pursuing a post-secondary education. She joined the Royal Canadian Navy after completing her high school diploma as an adult student. She generally enjoyed her work, but health problems, including sea-sickness while on ships, caused her to return again to consider her options for a post-secondary credential.

In our interviews, Tanis shared a history of aborted attempts to complete a career-oriented program of studies. She failed a critical course in a psychiatric nursing program, which held her back from continuing that program of studies the following year. Following this effort, she completed coursework toward a dental technician credential, but failed her clinical component at the hands of an instructor she believed was racist. Tanis took these experiences very hard; she recounted them with regret, guilt and disappointment, especially in that she received funding from the navy to pursue further education. "I feel really ashamed and really sad," she said," "I feel extremely bad." Sometimes these strong feelings, coupled with setbacks to her health, have led to bouts of depression. Yet Tanis is resilient. The PN program was her third attempt to obtain a credential, and despite the past setbacks she described, she appeared newly determined to succeed. In our second interview, she had made friends with some of her fellow students, and was feeling confident and positive about her progress.

Tanis downplayed her hard work and determination with a more spiritual take on her own life circumstances. She mentioned God, and the importance of "having faith" when getting through difficult

times. Yet she approached healing herself physically and psychologically with the same initiative she took in her studies – trying diets, alternative medicine and meditation to feel better.

Tanis emphasized the practical benefits of an education in our interviews. She certainly wanted a career that would pay well, and she was also interested in opportunities to travel with work. However, it was also clear that academic achievement mattered to her; she was proud of her grades as a child, and aspired from an early age to a professional occupation. In our second interview, she was pleased that she was doing very well in her PN program, and toying with the idea of transferring back into psychiatric nursing. For Tanis, a post-secondary credential seemed to be at least in part a kind of "unfinished business" in her life.

Elaine: "You can do it. You've got it. You're good to go."

Elaine is a mother of three young children. She was 31 years old when we met, and had been separated from her husband for three years. When I met Elaine, she had recently moved to Edmonton from Saskatchewan in order to start the PN program, and get a fresh start in her own life. She loved working in health care, and felt she was making a solid career choice after obtaining an HCA certification, and working for a number of years with disabled adults in group home settings.

Elaine described her family, ruefully, as "interesting." She had a distant relationship with her father, and was raised mostly by her mother. Both her mother and sister suffered mental health problems. As a result, Elaine grew up greatly isolated. The sense that she must "do things on her own" was woven into the stories she shared in our two interviews.

Largely because she enjoyed learning, Elaine finished high school despite the chaos in her personal life. Her mother became more involved in her life as she neared high school graduation, and pushed Elaine to go to college and become a lawyer, even though Elaine had already expressed interest in health care. "I don't know why," said Elaine, "I don't think she knew….She just wanted to have one successful child, I think."

Elaine wasn't interested or prepared to be on her own in college, and quickly dropped out. After this, she "bounced around" in low-skill jobs, moving frequently. She had one child on her own, and then met her husband, with whom she had two more children. For the time, further education was on the back burner. Her husband travelled frequently and was completing a trade certification, so Elaine took care of the home and her children, and brought in extra money for the family cleaning houses. She recalled, though, that she never abandoned the idea of returning to school. Eventually, she grew restless waiting for her husband to finish his ticket, and began taking distance courses toward a Health Care Aide

certification. As she worked part-time toward this credential, she began her work in group homes. She very much enjoyed this work.

Elaine is a non-conformist. She "hated" the oil-patch economy around her, and felt disconnected from the materialism that seemed to drive the aspirations of her peers. She described a time when she tried to be "the perfect mum with the perfect house," but simply didn't find the lifestyle fulfilling. She didn't fit in with her husband and his family either, although her in-laws were quite involved with the children. For Elaine, all the women around her seemed content to "settle," working part-time jobs and letting the man be the breadwinner. She described wanting more for herself, and for her children.

II. Of Labels and Stigmas

Recruiting participants for this study required that I developed some criteria. This posed a practical problem at first: policy and research literature uses many different definitions and criteria to classify increasingly diverse student populations. How would I describe my participants? I knew I wanted to talk to the kinds of students who (like me) had not experienced a smooth transition from high school to post-secondary education to a career, or in my more vernacular version of my research question had "been through some shit." But what does it mean to be an adult student, and how does one label people who have faced difficulties without diminishing and stigmatizing them? Labeling a student population is, after all, a political act, for it positions all as more or less capable, more or less fortunate, more or less motivated to succeed.

Referring to the student participants in this study innocuously as "adult students" wasn't terribly satisfactory, because it conflated their learning situations with those of other adult students who come from much more privileged backgrounds. Zhang and Palameta (2006), for example, define formal adult education as "educational activities undertaken by individuals who ha[ve] stopped attending school and ha[ve] been working for some time before returning to school" (p. 5).

Here, it is the "working for some time" business that poses a problem. On the one hand are adults who tend to have completed credentialed education earlier in life, and are returning to school to build on already established careers. Professionals, managers, and those working in larger firms are the most likely to have the opportunity to continue learning, and this learning is often funded or subsidized by the employer (Field, 2006; Myers & deBrouker, 2006). Royal Roads University in British Columbia, for example, targets these kinds of learners, billing itself as "Canada's University for Working Professionals."

This certainly doesn't describe the women in my study. Their past life and work experiences place them at the other end of the spectrum: all had faced, and continued to face, barriers that made post-secondary education a high-stakes, high-risk endeavour. They weren't topping up stable careers. Instead, as is evident in their stories, their pursuit of a college diploma represented a major effort to break away from a cycle of dead-end jobs and precarious finances.

Another frequently used distinction between "traditional" and "non-traditional" students also quickly breaks down: if the "traditional" student is defined as a young adult attending a full-time program, such students are now, as noted above, among the minority of attendees (AUCC, 2011; Levin, 2007). Thomas (2000) defines non-traditional students as "those students emanating from social groups who do not usually participate in formal, post-compulsory learning" (p. 95). But as boundaries between life stages blur, and transitions between work and learning become more frequent and less distinct, what, then, can we call "usual?" The "traditional" student may be more visible and more prominent in our cultural imagination, but he or she is no longer representative of the diversity of the collective we call "post-secondary learners."

So now what? At one point I settled on the "second chance" label which has been used quite extensively in UK policy and research literature. It seemed to have some currency in a range of studies of the experiences of similar students, and housed some useful statistical patterns. For example, "second chance" students are more likely to have unstable participation patterns in post-secondary education (Bash, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, 2006), and to have not proceeded directly from secondary to post-secondary education (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2007; Spellman, 2007). Second chance adult students may have had no experience with higher education, or a history of negative past experiences, either of which may cause them to approach new learning tentatively (Askham, 2008; Bash, 2003; Crossan, Field, Gallagher & Merrill, 2003). "Second chancers" are also more likely to come from lower SES backgrounds (Fuller, 2001; Norman & Hyland, 2003). Unlike adult students who return to formal education after already obtaining a credential, "second chance" adult students are less likely to have their education financed by an employer (Myers & deBrouker, 2006), and more likely, past and present, to hold insecure, low paying employment. Education may be perceived by these workers a way to break out of a cycle of "dead end" jobs (Purcell, Wilton & Elias, 2007; Reay, 2003).

Summarily, then, the "second chance" label is a basket for an array of factors that make post-secondary education a tough slug. It is a useful descriptor. But then, who wants to be called a "second

chance" student? If a student is a "second chance" student, why did she blow the first chance? By extension, a "second chance" smacks of a certain, shameful history that must be overcome.

Mature Students Facing Barriers

Essentially, all labels are problematic. They inevitably gloss over important in-group differences, and reduce people to a single dimension. Yet at times they are necessary. For the purposes of this work, I'll refer to my student participants and other students in the same boat as "mature students." I like Toynton's (2005) definition of the "mature student" or "adult learner" as one whose "prior knowledge includes a significant element derived from work or life experience in addition to, or instead of any prior formalized study" (cited in Wyatt, 2011, p. 13). Perhaps it is a product of my own life experience as a 40-ish woman, but the recognition of prior life and work experience as legitimate "knowledge" seems a necessary if underutilized counter to the overwhelming bias of formal, credentialed education and its exclusionary nature.

I'll also refer to my student participants, and other demographic groups of students as "barriered adult students" or "barriered adult learners." This label is not without its problems either; as Ahl (2006) points out, it feeds into a hyper-individualized model of learner motivation, and the state's interest in the "learner as earner." Further, despite careful rhetorical efforts to separate the person from the barriers, use of this label can still run the risk of positioning students as deficient. However, with these caveats in mind, the notion of barriers retains analytical usefulness, particularly via Cross's (1981) widely used categorizations of institutional, situational and dispositional factors variously impacting participation and persistence, as well as Conrad's (2001) addition of structural barriers. The classification of barriers creates a common language for researchers, and is more specific and less stigmatizing than some of the other descriptors I considered for my work.

III. Fitting In

In his studies, Bourdieu consistently emphasized the significance of family in the cultivation of habitus, and remained fascinated by the ways in which formal education perpetuates social stratification by rewarding students whose families have prepared them for schooling with the "right" forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, Bourdieu tended to represent his findings at high levels of abstraction. While he theorized about both the subjective and objective dimensions of habitus, it has

been up to other scholars to enhance this work with closer qualitative examinations of the forms and processes of reflexivity as these pertain to educational attainment.[37]

To this end, numerous studies have drawn on Bourdieu to examine the experiences of working class students – some of traditional college and university age and some older – when they transition to post-secondary education. Here, habitus is situated within the meso-level "field" of a post-secondary institution. The discussions and conclusions consistently show that while these students more or less adapt to the institutional settings, they remain ill-at-ease.[38] Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) describe working class students in elite universities as "strangers in paradise;" Redmond (2006) more pessimistically calls them "outcasts on the inside." Arguably the more egalitarian community college setting of my study produces less culture shock for first generation students than would an elite university. Nonetheless, the college experience was, for the students I interviewed, momentous.

On Being the "First One"

Children thus begin school with a greater or lesser likelihood of educational success given the extent to which their parents possess and work to pass along forms of cultural capital that align with those that characterize what Ball et al. (2002) call the "institutional habitus" of schooling. In keeping with Bourdieu's theorizing, the education of one's parents remains a powerful and consistent predictor of educational attainment (Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2004; Frenette & Robson, 2010; McElroy, 2008).[39] In my participant requirements, I had sought adults who were completing their first credential. Although I had not specifically sought out "first generation" students, all of my participants fell into this category:

---

[37] For more detailed considerations of Bourdieu's understanding of subjectivity, see Bottero, 2010; Noble & Watkins, 2003; and/or Lizardo, 2004. As discussed in Chapter Two, Bourdieu generally underplayed reflexivity in favour of unconscious action generated by one's habitus. The women's stories accounts of their lives and aspirations challenge

[38] The bulk of this literature is drawn from the UK, where the "working class" descriptor is much more common and, I believe, in some ways makes persons' subjective class positions easier to articulate and study. I've chosen to apply it here as well, while recognizing that popular perceptions of social classes are much more diffuse than in Europe, and that people generally in North America are inclined to identify themselves as "middle class" regardless of their socio-economic status.

[39] Over 80% of youth whose parents have a university degree go on to pursue a degree themselves. This figure drops to less than 50% for youth whose parents have no post-secondary education (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2009).

Table 1: Student Participants: Parents' Education

Participant	Father	Mother
Anna	Trades, uncredentialed	Less than high school
Khomal	Trades, uncredentialed	Less than high school
Elaine	Trades, uncredentialed	High school
Terry	High school	Less than high school
Jayden	Less than high school	Less than high school
Tanis	Trades, uncredentialed	Less than high school

None of the parents of the students had obtained a post-secondary credential. Tanis and Elaine both had fathers who, despite not possessing a certification, had done very well financially in their respective positions, but could offer little advice about a post-secondary trades route.

The understanding of a "first generation student," from my reading of the literature, tends to be applied to students entering academic programs rather than trades, although there is some blurring of these distinctions with respect to two year "college" routes depending on whether the program route is remedial, applied, or intended to bridge to a four year degree. Generally speaking, the more a program approaches or aspires to a full academic degree, where one's parents have not obtained such an education themselves, the more likely the "first generation" label is to capture the student experience.

First generation students have been widely studied, and have been found to face a number of challenges and barriers, including later post-secondary entrance, weaker academic preparation, higher debt, and a greater likelihood of dropping out (Choy, 2001).[40] First generation students tend to come from backgrounds where expectations for education were not high. Low educational expectations in one's family and within one's social milieu can have an "anchoring" effect that limits both aspiration and achievement (Bayero, Trottier, & Doray, 2009; Kenny & Bledsoe, 2005; Pitre, Johnson, & Cowan-Pitre, 2006).[41] This anchoring effect may result at least in part from the inexperience of family members who

---

[40] Choy (2001) states that access and persistence are lower for FG students "even after controlling for other important factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools in planning and preparing for college, and family income" (p. 4).

[41] "In contrast to attitudes, subjective norms are a function of normative beliefs about the social expectations of significant others (e.g., counselors, teachers, parents, peers, etc.) and an individual's motivation to comply. In other words, subjective norms are the social cues and pressures an individual perceives when making a behavioral decision" (Pitre et al., 2006, p. 38). See Schwartz (2004) for explanation of anchoring effect in relation to decision making.

did not themselves have post-secondary education (Choy, 2001). It is thus unsurprising that my participants shared that their families were unable to offer much guidance, even when they were supportive of education efforts.[42]

Families of Origin

Khomal was the only one of my student participants who had "hands on" support from her family, both in terms of funding her education, and helping her work with various schools and institutions to complete needed paperwork. She had also been encouraged by her parents and religious community to "aim high" in her education. However, her parents, while loving and supportive, were limited in the advice they could offer. According to Khomal, educational attainment in Pakistan, her home country was typically low, as few families could afford the expense of higher education. Her parents thus could not draw on their own experiences. As first generation immigrants, they also lacked cultural knowledge and experiences that might have helped them to guide their children. Although Khomal's extended family and community is large, she stated that "because nobody grew up here, nobody knows what goes on in schools or what courses are better to take and stuff like that. So yeah – nobody was able, nobody can help you out in that way."

Tanis's family also encouraged her to pursue further education, although again, her parents had little to offer in the way of helping Tanis to sort out career alternatives and navigate schools and post-secondary offerings. Like Khomal, Tanis came to Canada with her parents, and she and her family faced language and cultural barriers. Tanis did have the benefit of a father and two older brothers who had worked in Canada and the United States, and were able to offer her some guidance. Tanis described, for example, that her brothers provided advice about post-secondary entrance requirements, and that it was one of her brothers who directed Tanis to look into joining the military – a strategic choice which has offered her opportunities to upgrade her education and to travel.

My remaining student participants were all truly "on their own" when it came to planning and pursuing their education. Terry, for example, described that because no one in her family had obtained post-secondary education:

---

[42] It is interesting that in their analysis of low income Canadian students, Finnie, Childs and Wismer (2010) did not find significant differences between first generation students and others with respect to family support. A possibility is that the study did not distinguish between general affective support (i.e. encouragement and positive feedback) and the more instrumental or targeted supports that might be offered by family members with post-secondary education experiences. Among participants in this study, some did feel "supported" by their families, but distinguished between this affective support and support in the form of knowledge, advice and guidance.

...you never even thought of it. And if you even mentioned it, it was like "well you'd better get a job so you can afford to go and pay for it yourself because there's no money."...I mean we lived... we weren't poor but we weren't rich. And you just lived at that level. And if you wanted post-secondary education you'd better find a way to go, and you'd better find a way to pay for it. So it wasn't ever emphasized.

In some cases, family has actually been a deterrent to further education. Echoing the "anchoring effect" described above, Anna said she felt held back sometimes by her large Métis family. Her granny and mum consistently supported her education efforts, but other members of her family and community seemed "threatened" or "jealous" of her ambitions. Anna believes that her studies have changed her for the better, and that "people don't like that. People don't like when you change." In particular, she recounted that her former partner was threatened by her return to school, to the point where the relationship turned abusive.[43]

Jayden, like Anna a Métis woman with a large extended family, described similar feelings of estrangement in her insightful comments about "changing the way [she] spoke:"

Yeah, that's a big thing. .... I can be well spoken when I want to be. I notice that when I'm with family, I'm... how I talk changes. I sound like a... a big Indian. And...it's just really different. And, when I'm trying to change how I speak, and...I speak to my family, they get mad at me for sounding different. So, I'm kind of ... warring between two different language types right now, I'm trying to sound like a nurse, while my family wants me to sound like me.

The "warring" Jayden described was not simply between two ways of speaking, but two ways of being. As a young woman without children Jayden came across, among my participants, as the most driven by a project of social mobility relative to practical matters of earning and living, and this was creating a degree of bifurcation in her sense of her own identity – a sense of "habitus dislocation" (cf. Lehmann, 2009).

Elaine also experienced resistance from family members. She was actively discouraged from furthering her education by her partner. "He's really against this," she said, "and he wants me to fail. And he wants me to have to go back to him." She believed her ex-husband "needed to be needed." Elaine described how his family background taught him to think in terms of "good enough" instead of aspiring to something more. Elaine also described how her mother had only recently offered short-sighted advice: Although she was uncertain she'd get her funding, Elaine told her mum she was going to class anyway. Her mum responded "There's no point," and advised Elaine to look for a job instead.

---

[43] Horsman (2006) finds that domestic violence can be an additional barrier to learning for some women.

Elaine rejected this advice, "cause if I don't continue then I'm screwing myself in the long run if I do find a miracle and find this money somewhere."

One very clear pattern among all participants was that, regardless of whether families were generally supportive, none were able to provide significant guidance through processes like career selection, financial issues, or choice of a post-secondary institution. Consequently, after high school, post-secondary education was either ill-conceived, or simply didn't happen.

Perceiving Social Location

The student participants in some cases discussed how they saw themselves in relation to others more broadly – that is, outside of the contexts of their program at Norquest. Although I did not specifically raise questions around race, gender, or social class in my interviews, it was clear that these markers of social location played into my participants' self-concepts. I did not, however, get the impression that participants felt significantly limited by these factors. It was most interesting that all perceived themselves as lifelong outsiders, despite the various configurations of race, class and socio-economic status that led them to this sense of self.

Two of my study participants were Métis women, and both perceived themselves as outsiders on this account. Anna felt a strong sense of belonging in her family and Métis community, but mistrusted people and institutions that were not associated with Métis Nations. This was particularly evident in her encounters with her children's teachers and school principals. In her accounts of these meetings, she equated whiteness with insincerity, and did not trust school professionals. Jayden grew up feeling like an outsider because of Métis status, and her family's poverty: "My white friends," she recalled "were so different from me. Their families were smaller. They had more stuff. They had such nice houses. I didn't feel like I was part of them." Now, Jayden was anxious to be a role model in and for her community. "My dad is always about pride all the time, taking pride in yourself and what you do," she said. In her activities as part of a Norquest outreach program, she described, "I do represent my culture in the things that I do. I'll wear my earring set – make it obviously known that I'm Native. I'll wear certain things that just looking at me, you'll know 'That's a Native girl.'"

Two more of my student participants were first generation immigrants, and for these women too, feelings of being an outsider resulted. Khomal moved to Canada from Pakistan with her parents. Her transition was buffered by having learned English in school, and also by the large extended family and faith community she has in Canada. Like Anna, Khomal saw her family and extended family as a source of identity and protection. "You need family support throughout your life whenever you can get

it," she said. Tanis, on the other hand, still seemed to carry feelings of shame around the difficulties she had learning English. Tanis came to Canada at 19, and described ongoing frustration and disappointment that her scholarly aptitude in her native Spanish was so compromised.

The Canadian born white women in my study also, however, expressed feelings of being outsiders. Working among many immigrants and men at the packing plant, Terry described feeling isolated – a feeling that seemed to carry over into her first months at Norquest, where she perceived instructors and students alike as hostile. Terry was also conscious of the fact that she was one of the older students in the program. Elaine, detached from her family and ill at ease with the materialism of the oil-patch culture, saw her work as a PN as a way of being authentic in an inauthentic world.

Of the six women, three perceived themselves as being very academically engaged at an early age. For them, completing a credential was an important part of affirming a part of themselves that had to date been unfulfilled. Elaine reflected that she had always been confident that she would go back to school when her children were old enough. Tanis adopted the very practical strategy of joining the navy after completing high school, but her accounts of her childhood and past post-secondary efforts suggested that proving herself academically was important, unfinished business in her life. Jayden described herself as a "nerd" who "loved reading." Although she was the youngest of my participants at 23, she spoke with a quiet self-assurance about her academic ability, and she enjoyed helping others with their studies. All of my student participants, however, held a belief that education is a significant marker of social mobility, and that they carried particular roles in their families to this end – as groundbreakers.

III. Catching Up

In policies and studies related to work and learning, "pathways" are frequently employed as metaphors because they capture the idea that people invest time and money into educational credentials because they have goals – they have a destination that they want to reach at the end of their "path." The metaphor is also helpful because it is used to describe contemporary conditions of work and learning (Raffe, 2003). Pathways are less "linear" than they once were. For young adults, this means longer and more complex transitions to secure full-time labour. For established adults, this means multiple transitions between work and learning throughout the life cycle, as well as possible career changes (Drewes, 2008; Nicoll, 2006). "Pathways" then can be longer or shorter, more or less direct, and travelled at varying speeds. They can be winding or circuitous. In the worst cases, they can lead to dead ends.

Pathway metaphors are also used in different modes of life-course research. Whereas work and learning research tends to focus on "markers" or transitions specifically related to paid labour, life-course research considers markers for all sorts of transitions: moving away from parents' homes, getting married, having children, "empty nesting" and retiring from the paid workforce, for example (Shanahan, 2000). The advantage of this broader perspective on life changes over time is that it recognizes the importance of human relationships and other contextual factors that shape major life events. As Raffe (2003) notes, the "pathway" in work and learning policy tends to portray the journey as a highly individualistic one – the traveler is alone, and singular in his or her objective. From a life course perspective, a more ecological perspective on adults' education transitions becomes possible.

A "Normal" Biography

The students I interviewed for this study ranged in age from 23 to 43. Four were parents, and all had previous work experience. So in keeping with my study aims, none were "traditional" students in the sense that they had followed a direct, uninterrupted path from high school into post-secondary education and then career-oriented paid labour. This scenario is not uncommon (AUCC, 2011; Milesi, 2010). Yet although study participants' experiences were not unusual, most measured themselves more or less against a belief that their lives ought to follow, "normal" and orderly trajectory from education to work to marriage and children. On the other hand, the women were very conscious that they were not "normal" because they were, as the preceding section showed, trailblazers in their families, and as such sometimes experienced sensations of liminality, or what Lehmann (2009) has described as "habitus dislocation."

The "normal biography" is normative in the sense that people who follow it take cues unreflexively from their environment. However, within the human ecology model, the normal biography can be examined from multiple perspectives: with what levels or layers of society do people identify when they define themselves as "normal" or deviant, and what are the impacts of immediate contexts versus cues taken from past experiences? Prompted by consistent and persistent correlations between socio-economic status and educational attainment, much research, in a similar vein to this study, invokes meso-level experiences and expressions of social class as a key determinant of subjective accounts of "normalcy," which include values and expectations of academic achievement. This kind of analysis aligns with Bourdieu's understanding of the power of habitus. Ball et al. (2002), for example, drew on Bourdieu in comparisons of education choice on the basis of social class and showed that students, regardless of their class positions, tended to follow "normal biographies" by forming

education plans and choosing institutions according to the norms of their class positions. Drawing similarly from Bourdieu, Colley, James, Tedder and Diment (2003) concluded that tertiary education reinforced the "vocational habitus" of the working class adult students they studied.

Instead of this "normal biography," however, the women in this study followed the pattern of the "choice biography" by bucking the past patterns of educational attainment and work drawn from their families of origin and socio-economic status. Like the working class students in other studies, then, the choice to pursue a college degree was accompanied by anxiety and a high degree of self-reflexivity because the women had to move beyond the "natural" feeling of pursuing a normal biography (Lehmann, 2007; Reay, 2003; Redmond, 2006).

On the other hand, the women also took chronological cues from what one could estimate as broader social cues about the sequencing of key life transitions. Fuller (2007) uses the normal biography in this sense when she states, that, in past decades, the "front-loaded model" of post-secondary education "cohered with the 'normal' life concept (biography) of the post-compulsory phase as coinciding with a transition to adulthood involving 'progress' in employment, marriage and parenthood" (p. 220). Four of the students in this study expressed a clear desire to pursue a "normal" trajectory, and expressed anxiety that they were "behind." Some of the women expressed concerns that they were "running out of time." Khomal stated, "I want to really accomplish something and get over it now, right? So yeah. I'm old enough now so I have to get something going." Anna also had this feeling of being behind. She described this as not keeping up with her own "time frame....My own clock about when I should be doing stuff, right?" Anna, Khomal, Tanis and Jayden all perceived the achievement of a credential and career as a marker of adulthood. For the four women who had children, an additional layer of "adult" achievement was added in the form of their desires to provide better lives for their children, and to model independence and the importance of education.

How are we then to make sense of seemingly contradictory compulsions to "invent ourselves" yet rank, evaluate, or otherwise measure our worth according to perceived social norms, roles and prescripts? Commentators on late or post-modernity observe that the development of our "selves" is less constrained by social roles and norms, but that we are then compelled, with varying degrees of creativity and anxiety, to make and make anew a sense of self (Aintikainen & Konomen, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 1992; Giddens, 1991).[44] On the other hand, life course theory and studies (Elder, 2000;

---

[44] Beck in particular has been critiqued for his assertion that markers of collective identity – class, gender and traditional family roles, for example – have lost their sociological punch (Atkinson, 2007).

Shanahan, 2000) provide a kind of "birds eye" perspective or retrospective, showing how factors like key macro events (e.g. wars and economic shocks), human geography, positions within family and kin networks, and biological processes (birth, development, aging, and life expectancy) profoundly impact social norms and individual choices in ways that are often neglected in studies of social mobility.

From the human ecology perspective, the stories of the women in this study reflect both meso- and macro-level forces, as well as their own personal psychologies – reflected, for example, in their perceptions of themselves as "loners," or "nerds" or in their attributions of their educational pathways not to society's expectations, but to their own desires and goals – particularly to continue learning, mentor others, and work as caregivers through their professional roles. As student participants' stories illustrate, we look both within and without ourselves to determine the "rightness" of individual pathways/passages.

The women's accounts of their histories also point to the complexity of the decision-making process when it comes to a major life change like attending school full-time. Their biographies are a stark contrast to the vocationalism and instrumentalism that is assumed in policies that encourage people to invent and re-invent themselves via lifelong learning. The individualism that underpins both such policy perspectives and the "choice biography" is challenged by the clear evidence – consistent in this study and others examining barriered mature students – that education and career aspirations are intimately intertwined, as Bourdieu proposed, with social locations, particularly the push and pull of family and family history.[45] The complexity of choice stands as a powerful critique of the application of human capital theory to education choice – an argument developed further in Chapter Five.

---

[45] Bottero (2014) adds the argument that Bourdieu's thesis can be elaborated with greater attention to intersubjectivity – that is by considering relationships "*between agents*" rather than simply between habitus and field (author's emphasis; p. 5).

Chapter Four: The Good Job

Elaine, an intelligent and articulate mother of three, has taken a long and winding road toward her eventual dream of becoming a nurse. She was 31 years old when she began her Practical Nurse program at Norquest College in Edmonton. The path was "convoluted," she said, "I didn't really figure out what I wanted to do until I was 25." In the meantime, she had, in her own words, "bumped around," working stints as a 7-11 clerk, a restaurant cook, and a line worker at a packing plant. She wasn't too wound up about her early lack of direction. "I wasn't ready for college. Didn't want to be there. Didn't care," she recalled.

However, as Elaine progressed into her later twenties, the stigma of low-paid, low-status labour began to chafe. Settled in the Saskatchewan town where both she and her husband had attended high school, Elaine felt alienated by the conspicuous consumption she saw around her. She described her town as "a very rich town; a hockey town; a very cliquey town. The women... they all drive the Cadillac and wear the pretty make-up." Elaine felt like an outsider – a loner status that was reinforced by the nature of her work: cleaning houses. She described cases where, "You know, I clean your house every week and I talk to you and you chat with me and I know personal things about your life but you won't say hello to me in public." She didn't really want to fit in anyway, though. "I always knew I'd get back to school," she insisted in our interview. And she couldn't wait to get the hell out of town to do it.

For the vast majority of people, paid labour is the sole determinant income, making the attainment of a "good job" a central task of adulthood. Certainly it was an important goal for the student participants in this study. For them, like most, education for its own sake, even if it is desired, is not feasible. Tertiary education, for better or for worse, is about accessing better paying jobs.

In this chapter and the next, I consider the relationships between credentialed education and labour markets – two essential macro-structures that will be shown to determine, to a considerable extent, the relationships between structure and agency for the people I interviewed for this study. The two chapters are unified by a critical stance. Like Bourdieu, I take formal education, overall, to be a tool of "misrecognition," via which earned credentials and other forms of capital legitimate unequal life chances embedded in existing social structures. These oft-obscured structural forces, described in this chapter and Chapter Five, shape the capacities of Norquest College to support its students (Chapter Six) and the opportunities available to Jayden, Khomal, and the other women who shared their learning biographies for this study (Chapter Seven).

The present chapter takes the deconstruction of a "good job" as its central task. In the same Weberian vein employed by Bourdieu, I consider both the material (economic) and symbolic (social prestige) dimensions of various occupations. However, because the students I interviewed were also pursuing personal growth and fulfillment through their career aspirations, I also wanted to consider the

psychic dimensions of the "good job" – that is, the relationship between the nature of our work, and our sense of identity and purpose. In the conclusion of the chapter, I touch on an issue I explore in greater depth on my study conclusion, namely that of who *deserves to have* a "good job." Tacit beliefs about merit are, in their own right, an emergent sociological force to be reckoned with. In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I argue that this normative understanding is a significant driver of social mobility through labour market opportunities, yet is almost entirely ignored in mainstream public and policy discourses.

I. Good Jobs and Bad Jobs

Elaine arrived in Edmonton in December, 2011 with three small children in tow, and just enough money in her pocket to get settled and pay her first year of tuition. When I met her the following February, she was well underway with her coursework. A self-described "super mom," she was already tired from managing the heavy course load of the first year of Norquest College's Practical Nurse program, while keeping up with her kids' numerous extra-curricular activities. But she was optimistic, too. There was lots to look forward to once she completed her program. Because being a PN makes for a pretty good job.

A Practical Nurse once required relatively little formal education, and correspondingly wasn't paid that well. But the occupation has professionalized. At Norquest, it is an intensive two-year diploma program, providing the option to bridge into a full RN degree after 1,700 hours of clinical experience. Although the shift work can be difficult, the job is reasonably well-paying at $25-$30/hour, and PNs are in demand. Many of the jobs are unionized, and there's a good chance of working for organizations that provide benefits, paid vacations, and sick leaves.

The security and material rewards of becoming a PN were foremost on the mind of Elaine and the five other students I interviewed for this study. But the women also spoke about how much the field afforded in terms of future opportunities. Elaine knew she could eventually obtain her RN if she wanted to. Khomal, a bright, single mother of a two-year old girl, saw her PN diploma as a first step toward fulfilling a childhood dream of becoming a doctor. Anna, a single mother of two, enthusiastically described the future focus areas she had learned about from one of her course instructors: "You can specialize in any area, like eyes, ears. You can do all these different things!" The hope, in all cases, was almost palpable. The "good job," for these students, wasn't just about pay; it was about the sense of possibility that was opened through their exposure to the health care professions.

The women also described their growing sense of identity as nurses. This was a source of pride, and of motivation to continue to work hard. The work they anticipated would, in most cases, make them

the first professionals in their families, and all would significantly surpass the education levels of their parents. This pride and sense of responsibility was especially evident in Anna and 23-year old Jayden, both of who came from large Métis families and saw themselves as torch-bearers of sorts. Jayden described that her parents "are very proud of me, of going into nursing. They're all saying, 'Oh, I'm gonna do great, I'm gonna do great,' and what not. Honestly it's just scary, to have not only my own expectations on me, but everybody else's as well."

Clearly Jayden, Anna and the others have lots invested in the successful completion of their diplomas. They all believe that nursing is a "good job" that will afford them fulfillment and future possibilities in addition to a better standard of living. They need a post-secondary education to get that good job and get ahead. But what counts as a "good job?" What does it mean to "get ahead," and why would we want to anyway? The pursuit of a secure high paying job is commonsensical enough that it is largely unquestioned, yet to probe the relationships between paid labour, education and social mobility, generates some challenges to widely held assumptions about educational attainment and ensuing paid labour as a just way to distribute society's resources.

It's important to examine these assumptions because this critical process begins to strip away the veneer on the near ubiquitous reliance upon education to redress social stratification. As the logic goes, if you get a good education, you will get a good job. If you get a good job, you will move up the income ladder and experience social mobility. I take up the centrality of education for social mobility in detail in [Chapter Five](#), but first, in this chapter, I consider the "good job" in terms of its material, psychic and social rewards, and the ways in which occupational attainment figures into our very human need to be esteemed in the eyes of others (Sayer, 2007; Sennett & Cobb, 1972). We can then better understand just what it is that Anna, Elaine and the others were aiming for, and the futures riding on their successful completion of the PN diploma.

From Karl Marx to Taco Time: The Alienation of Labour

I have two daughters. As I write, they are 24 years old, and coming up 17. Both were precociously independent, which is a hereditary condition. Both, at a very early age, champed at the bit for paid employment, and the feeling of freedom and pride that comes out of paying one's own way. I was exactly the same as a kid: I had a paper route at eleven, and was out hustling for jobs involving less inclement weather and fewer early mornings – a promotion of sorts – by the time I was thirteen.

My first "real" job was at Taco Time, a Mexican fast food joint. I got the job by harassing the local franchise owner, who, in between hearing my pitches for part-time work, told me how much he liked to hot tub with his young employees. It was probably a blessing that he did not hire me, but instead recommended me to another location. It took an hour by bus to get there, but no matter. It was my first

"real job." It was also a rude awakening. For $3.35 an hour, I pulled shifts at a kiosk in a crowded mall, fended off catty co-workers, and cowered as my "manager" berated me for the smallest of infractions. I washed my greasy uniform – a visor and t-shirt – between shifts, and bit my tongue until it bled. I discovered the indignity of the crappy job.

In 1961, humanist psychologist Erich Fromm published *Marx's Concept of Man* – a series of brief chapters prefacing English translations of selections of Marx's writings. Fromm here describes contemporary understandings of Marx much as anyone who, like me, grew up in the Cold War era would have absorbed in school: that Marx was the intellectual father of communism, and bore at least partial responsibility for the mysterious threat emanating from behind the Iron Curtain of the USSR.

Fromm's project was to redeem Marx from what he believed to be gross and widespread misunderstandings, and he did this with a readable account of Marx's earlier writings. These works, as Fromm explained, show that while Marx rejected the idealism of his Hegelian roots, he did not steer far from the romantic belief in a redeemable or retrievable human "essence." This essence – roughly, ontology, or what it means to be human – is, for Marx, bound up in the execution of creative and productive labour. The *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts of 1884* reveal a Marx who was deeply concerned that work in an increasingly industrialized capitalist economy meant that workers were being robbed of the intrinsic satisfaction of labour as meaningful action in and on the world (Ezzy, 1997; Murphy, 1993). Capitalist relations of production, Marx believed, objectify work – that is, work becomes a product, rather than a process through which we "make the world our own," and establish authentic relationships with nature and one another (Fromm, 1961).

Marx argues that we then become alienated from our labour: Man [sic] then "does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless" (Marx, cited in Fromm, 1961, p. 82).[46] In other words labour, which ought to be a natural extension of our innate desire to be productive, becomes a "job" yielding little or no satisfaction. Capitalism, says Marx, makes us hate work.

A known limitation of Marx's labour theory, however, is that he divided classes under capitalism into the economic categories of "workers" and "owners," which fails to account for the wide range of

---

[46] Originally appears in the Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts of 1844, First Manuscript, XXIII.

occupations and forms of occupational life that have evolved since the bad old days of early industrialization (Weininger, 2005). So while many of today's checkout clerks, assembly line workers, and general labourers may relate readily to the "misery" Marx describes above, a host of contemporary workers who find their jobs more interesting and meaningful might not experience more than a passing sense of alienation. Thus while Marx introduced an ideal that work ought to make us fully human – a fundamental assumption that tends to guide my own interest in labour – he could not have been prepared, in his time, to make sense of the meaning and conditions of paid labour within an entire, complex stratification of jobs that are good or bad relative to each other. Marx could not have anticipated the contemporary challenge which I will later consider in terms of distributive justice: Who gets a good job? And on what basis? First, however, let's consider what is meant by a "good job:"

Defining a "Good Job"

Although Jayden was young, she had already worked enough to know what kind of job she didn't want. She recounted minimum wage retail positions, and serving fast food at hockey games. "Be careful what you eat when you go there," she shuddered. "There's so many mice. I know it's a gross thing to share, but I figured everybody should know." Jayden ambled through stories of growing up in a very poor home, the youngest of seven children. Because her parents were both ill, the family largely relied on social assistance. Her siblings worked and had children, and Jayden spoke with great affection for her parents, sisters, nieces and nephews. "But," she struggled, "I don't want to just go to work and do... come home and take care of the home. I wanted to be able to respect myself. With having a respectable profession." She described knowing from a very young age that "I wasn't just gonna work. Like I knew that I had to do more."

All of the women in the study, like Jayden, had experienced their own share of crappy jobs and wanted to "do more." Among them, though, it was Terry who seethed the most about her past work experience. As the oldest of, my student participants, Terry had the longest work history, the bulk of which had been twelve years in a packing plant. "I hated it from the first day I started it," she said emphatically. "The first day I started I thought to myself, 'What a disgusting job.'" In our interview, Terry recalled repetitious and dull work. More often than not, she felt lonely in a crowd.

> It was cold. You were... a plant worker. You were just a worker; you were just a number. You... it was not individualized like at some jobs you're at. You're treated like an employee there. There? You're just a worker and that's it. And I didn't like that. You know? And there was over two hundred people working there...

> Terry stuck with her job for years because it was unionized. The benefits and job security were especially important once she became a single mother, and both of her children required extensive orthodontic work. But she was miserable. She had counted the months and years, waiting until her

children were older so that she could go back to school. Terry was probably the best off materially of my six student participants, and she could have played it safe by staying at the plant. But she was looking for purpose and meaning in her labour. She wanted to be recognized as more than "just a worker." She wanted to help people. She wanted the colour of interacting with people from all walks of life – something she'd learned that she enjoyed years before when she worked as a waitress before her two daughters were born. She wanted to come home from work every day with a sense of fulfillment.

Although some subjectivity enters into the picture and job quality operates in practice more along a continuum, an outstandingly "good" or "bad" job, much like pornography, is hard to define, but "you know it when you see it."[47] Nonetheless, job quality is multi-dimensional, making systematic evaluation of "good jobs" versus "bad jobs" more difficult (Holzer, Lane, Rosenblum & Andersson, 2011; Kalleburg, 2011). Objective, economic considerations are easier to measure. High wages and benefits have the obvious effect of improving one's standard of living, and secure stable work buffers against economic uncertainty and its material and psychic effects. In the longer run, security – again, both material and psychological – is extended when a job provides a pension.

Non-monetary aspects of job quality, however, are also very important, and make it difficult to judge, ultimately, whether a job is "good" or "bad." However, some criteria can be gleaned. Considerable theory and empirical research highlights autonomy as one of the most significant determinants of work satisfaction; that is, to a greater or lesser extent, we are happier when we have some control over the content and structure of our paid labour (Campbell-Clark, 2001; Chung-Yan, 2010; Murphy, 1993; Sayer, 2007). Autonomy may refer to autonomy over one's work processes or products, but it also carries over into work-life balance issues, or the flexibility with which one can organize paid work and other life activities (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Kalleburg, 2011). Other subjective dimensions of job quality include one's work environment and relationships. Subjective dimensions also include the intrinsic value that a person places on the work (Sayer, 2011).

In addition to providing a relatively high standard of living, then, a "good job" also accounts for paid work activities that are creative, meaningful, and fulfilling. The opportunity to grow and learn on

---

[47] For an interesting ethnographic account of stigmatized labour, see Mills, Drew & Gassaway's (2007) *Dirty work: The social construction of taint* (pp. 14–21). Waco, TX: Baylor University Press. The book discusses, among other topics, the ways in which workers form organizational cultures to protect themselves from the social stigma that accompanies their work. The extent to which the work involves deference to others is a form of "social taint...when...work a servile relationship to others" (p. 4). Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) takes up the indignities of low-wage, low skills work in *Nickeled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*," New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company.

the job thus also becomes an important criterion (Field, 2006; Murphy, 1993). We might thus locate the quest for "the good job" at least to some extent in the inherent meaning of the pursuit itself, as this has been taken up from Aristotle to Hegel, to existential philosophy and contemporarily in humanistic psychology (Murphy, 1993; Wallace, 2005). Like English mountaineer Mallory, we do, in our own ways, "climb Everest because it is there." Khomal, for example, obtained a health care aide certification before starting her PN program, but this achievement was not enough to satisfy her. "I just like to learn...I just want to do something." At 27, Khomal was relatively young, and craved learning and challenge. In both of our interviews she bubbled over with excitement when she described her plans. Like Jayden, Khomal struggled to articulate the forward momentum that so animated her. "I'm like my dad" she said, describing him as curious and constantly animated by new ideas.

A "good job" also tends to be esteemed by others.[48] Doctors are admired more than ditch diggers, and teachers are regarded more highly than utility workers. Much has been written about the relative status of occupations, and how occupations configure relative to social class (Breen, 2005; Goyder, 2009). What are the sources of such esteem? As Goyder highlights, occupational prestige is somewhat of a "mysterious force," – surprisingly durable through historical changes, multifaceted, and hard to pin down. Lay perceptions of relative prestige, unsurprisingly, involve the level of education required to perform the work, its remuneration, and the power and influence it affords (Sayer, 2011). More important than individual criteria, however, is the central insight that occupational prestige is a social construct that expresses and reinforces status hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984).

Closely related to the notion of the status or "prestige" of work is the sense of dignity it affords the individual. Piqued by contemporary emphases on anti-harassment and anti-bullying in the workplace, Sayer (2007) offers a deeper and more nuanced consideration of what it means to be valued and respected by others in our jobs. The facets of dignity he describes overlap many of the criteria of the "good job" already discussed, including autonomy, and a level of material well-being considered "essential and normal" (p. 569). What Sayer emphasizes, as does Goyder's discussion, is that a "good job" is not just a bundle of rewards and working conditions. It has significant relational dimensions; it

---

[48] Whereas Marx, focused on the material dimensions of social inequality – that is distributions of wealth and assets – later sociologists looked to symbolic dimensions as well. Two major, well known examples here are Weber's essay, "Class Status and Party" (Gerth, H. & Mills, C.W., (Eds.), *From Max Weber*. New York: The Free Press), and later in the 20th century, Bourdieu. Both considered the relative prestige of occupations as a source of social power and social mobility. Weber preceded Bourdieu with the idea that non-monetary "assets" could have market value (Breen, 2005)

positions one relative to others in one's social milieu (Ezzy, 1997). It matters to us whether our work is perceived by others as useful, interesting, and valuable.

The "Good Job" for Social Mobility

Khomal was fiercely proud and protective of her parents, although she recognized they could offer little practical experience to help her get through her education. Her faith community didn't serve as a resource either because "some people that we do know or something who have good education or something are not willing to help you….Like there's this lady in our community…her husband's a doctor and her son's becoming a doctor. Her daughter's doing teaching and stuff and she graduated from Calgary and stuff too. So all whole smarty pants family." Khomal had shared that she was working toward her degree, and now bristled recounting the woman's disdainful response. "She doesn't like everybody else to come up to that stage…..Like you come from a lower class or something, so why don't you stay where you supposedly belong. And don't try to come mix with the higher class, the upper class people and stuff right? And that lady's really classy, upper class lady, right? And you can tell from her rolling her eyes: 'Oh great you're going to be a doctor.' And it's like. 'Yes! Just watch me.'"

Khomal's description of her exchange with the doctor's wife illustrated her keen awareness of relationships between education, occupations, and perceptions of social class, as well as the dialectic of pride and shame that characterizes the pursuit of social mobility (Sayer, 2005). For Khomal, the goal of becoming a doctor was part defiance, part legitimation of a social order defined considerably by occupational status. For Khomal and others, a hierarchy of good and bad jobs forms a landscape of possibilities for social mobility.

As almost everyone relies on paid labour to survive economically (Jackson, 2010), social mobility – that is improving one's economic situation and accompanying social status – depends on obtaining a good job that offers both the material and psychic rewards noted above. The fortunate find both sufficient income and satisfaction in an occupation they enjoy, but for many, intrinsic satisfaction is sacrificed. The "good job," out of fear or blind ambition, is pursued in the name of security and social mobility (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2010). But social mobility still begs the question of its own significance. Why even pursue the "good job?" Why should we care about "life chances" – either our own or those of others? The obvious answers have already been noted – namely better material living conditions, and our desire for the recognition or admiration of others – what Max Weber described in *Class Status and Party* as "honor" (Gerth & Mills, 1946). More fundamentally, however, our capacity to achieve social mobility through our own efforts is grounded in the moral significance of our capacity for self-determination. As Sayer (2007) details, human dignity is intricately bound up not only in the substantive acts of labouring, but in the emancipatory possibilities they accord (Ezzy, 1997). The puzzle of our uniquely human capacity to plan and reflect upon our actions is taken up from different

perspectives in philosophy, biology, anthropology, and psychology. The puzzle of our volition is equally profound for its ethical implications when it comes to balancing a society's collective wellbeing with the freedom to pursue plans, hopes and goals (Wright, 2012).

Thus as Kerschkoff (1989) rightly notes, the hard numbers of large-scale quantitative approaches to social mobility don't capture the whole story. We need to get at the psycho-social dimensions of the business; we need to get into the kinds of hopes and ambitions – raised, dashed or otherwise – that make the pursuit of social mobility meaningful. But then, why ought we care that it is meaningful? Again, why should we care if social stratification is reproduced? The answer is that the kind of "widening access" policies that brought my study participants into the post-secondary fold would not exist if we did not care. To pursue policies of "widening access" implies first that we accept the meritocratic promise of education, and second and more fundamentally that we accept the justice of a meritocratic system; that is, we believe that educational attainment and the jobs it leads to represent fair and just ways of distributing society's resources. We make a moral claim that social mobility *ought* to be possible (Halliday, 2004; Wright, 2005), and this is, as I would argue (as have others) because as a society we place a very high value on the voluntarism I described above. It appeals for its seemingly easy alignment with liberalism and democracy although, as I will substantively problematize in the next chapter, these strains are rather illusory.

II. Limited Access to "Good Jobs" Under Neo-Capitalism

In an ideal world, it might be said that everyone ought to have a good job, and indeed this kind of optimism characterized the zenith of the welfare state. Donald Fagan released IGY (What a Beautiful World) in 1982. The song refers to the "International Geophysical Year," 1957-1958, and the references in the song were actual utopian speculations about the power of science during this heady 18 month period of research engaging 67 countries. To the casual listener, it's a catalogue of optimistic predictions for the future: "90 minutes from New York to Paris" by undersea rail, solar powered cities, and the promise that we'll all be "eternally free and eternally young." But if you're a little more attentive, you quickly pick up on the satire.

In some circles, a similar but sincere utopianism characterized predictions about the direction of work in the "post-Industrial" age, as Rojek (2010) recounts, the 1960s were the pinnacle of a starry-eyed futurism, "in which the ugly features of industrialization and urbanization [would] be corrected." The rise of a new leisure society was to be accompanied by a simultaneous decline in the kind of rough,

repetitive labour that had characterized the industrial age. In such as society, perhaps everyone could anticipate a "good job."[49]

But while manufacturing, as predicted, did indeed decline in favour of service occupations, this shift in the nature of work did not deliver on anticipated prosperity and democratization. Livingstone and Raykov (2009) stated that service workers made up one third of the Canadian workforce in 2004. The "service work" descriptor, however, cuts a wide swath, so means little.[50] The dental hygienist, working full-time day hours and earning $65,000 a year is a service worker. So too are the minimum wage checkout clerks who may never get the scheduled hours they need to qualify for the bare-bones benefits theoretically available to employees.[51] The increasing significance of these precarious service sector jobs was crystallized when the "McJob" entered popular lexicon as a descriptor for low-skilled, dead end restaurant and retail jobs.[52] The Merriam-Webster dictionary captures the generalization of the McJob as a "low paying job that requires little skill and provides little opportunity for advancement."

Supply Versus Demand Side Explanations

There is much contestation around the question of whether the supply of "good jobs" has expanded, or contracted. It is an important question because the perception that a good job can be had is central to the pursuit of social mobility. Otherwise, at least from a vocational perspective, why invest in an education?

To consider this question requires at least a basic understanding of how economists and policy makers think about labour markets. Simply put, a shortage of "good jobs" in the form of unemployment, or underemployment, can be problematized either from a supply-side or a demand-side perspective. Under the sway of neo-liberalism, which is discussed further in Chapter Five, economists tend to promote supply side explanations. This means that pathologies in employment patterns reflect deficiencies on the part of workers – that is labour supply.

---

[49] "Creative Cities" guru Richard Florida may well stand as a contemporary iteration of the "leisure society" thesis.
[50]The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada(2011), for example, states that "demand for a highly skilled and educated labour force" has been the primary cause of increased university attendance, and further states, all too broadly, that "the service sector economy has created high-paying, quality jobs" (p. 5).
[51]As I write, August 30th 2013, Superstore (Loblaws) employees have voted to strike. One of their concerns is cuts to work hours that "results in economic hardship for [workers] trying to plan their monthly budgets and stay on their benefit plans without getting cut off." (Christine McMeckan, United Food and Commercial Workers Communications Representative cited in Kuhl, ,2013, August 30). For more on vulnerable workers in Canada see Chaykowski, 2005; Saunders, 2003.
[52] Amitai Etzioni's (1986) essay "The fast food factories: McJobs are bad for kids," published in the Washington Post, is available at http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/etzioni/B170.html

This perspective is recognizable in fairly routine laments by employers that workers are inadequately trained and experienced. In such accounts, it is proposed that unemployment and underemployment are a result of a skills mismatch rather than a dearth of good jobs. This headline from the Toronto Star is exemplary: "Jobs: Fix education so we don't have people without jobs, conference told" (Lu, 2013). The article goes on to highlight the need for education that better aligns with industry to avoid a "people without jobs and jobs without people scenario."

Supply-side approaches to un/employment argue instead that it is the supply of labour that must be addressed. Typically education is targeted, as in the article above, but in a parallel discourse of "employability" which extends, at times, into inadequacies in workers themselves (Brown & Lauder, 2006; Coffield, 1999, Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009a). As discussed in my concluding chapter, "employability" has some troubling consequences, by virtue of bypassing problems with job quality and the labour market itself in favor of pathologizing the individual worker.

Demand-side perspectives, on the other hand, focus on the systems that impact employers' demand for labour, and locate problems in the labour market with the quality and quantity of jobs available to be filled by workers. As a result, demand-side analysts focus on labour and monetary policies that either promote or hinder full employment (Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009a). From a demand side perspective, it is more justifiable for the state to intervene in labour markets with mechanisms like minimum-wage laws, Keynesian style economic stimulation, and training programs to increase employment in given sectors or regions.

Summarily, then, supply versus demand side perspectives will blame "bad jobs" on the quality of the worker versus the quality of employers and jobs, respectively. While this is a very simplified representation of how labour is understood, it is sufficient to illustrate that radically different answers may be given to the question of whether or not there are enough "good jobs." Theoretically, the debate above might be resolved in part by accurate empirical data about the availability of "good" versus "bad" jobs, but this task is also problematic. The sheer complexity of the labour market makes it difficult to generalize about the availability of jobs, given that long-term trends may only become visible in retrospect, and that shocks to the labour market can make it difficult to see longer-term trends and patterns. Shortage and surplus labour pools also break down into sub-categories by occupational sector and geography, which can make broad accounts of trends and averages less meaningful. Surveys of occupations are expensive, difficult to keep current, and are not an accurate description of the full range of skills and knowledge used on the job (Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009a).

Quantifying the availability of "good" versus "bad" jobs is also made more difficult by the many criteria, just discussed above, against which job quality may be assessed. Even if objectively measured criteria are satisfactory – for example salary, job security, benefits, pensions, and working hours – work also has powerful subjective dimensions, which cannot be captured by large scale surveys. Terry's packing-plant job, for example, had some features of a "good job" by objective standards, but the work itself was lonely, dirty, repetitive, and dull.

Although exact numbers are difficult to pin down, some general patterns have been established, and are widely accepted in research. These patterns support the thesis that the availability of "good jobs" is in decline. First, low skill manufacturing sector jobs have declined significantly as these jobs have either been automated, or moved to countries with lower labour costs (Field, 2006; Fuller, 2007; Schmitt, 2008). This means that there are fewer opportunities for those without some form of post-secondary education. Although critics claim the demand for knowledge workers is considerably over-stated (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2004; Livingstone & Raykov, 2009), it is still well demonstrated that those without a post-secondary education have much higher unemployment rates, and lower wages (Jackson, 2010).

A second well-documented change affecting job quality has been the decline of unionized work (Field, 2006; Holzer, et al. 2011; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). Holzer et al. cite that in the United States, unionized jobs fell from approximately 35% in 1955 to less than 12% in 2008. In the private sector this figure is a mere 7% (p. 7). Canadian union memberships have also declined steadily from a peak of about 40% in the mid-1980s to 31.5% in 2007 (Jackson, 2010, p. 226). Less than 20% of private sector jobs in Canada are unionized (Jackson, 2010). Third, and likely in part as a result of declining unionized labour, part-time and contingent labour have increased (Chaykowski, 2005; Fuller, 2001; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006; Vosko, 2006). Vosko defines contingent or "precarious" employment as "forms of work characterized by limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high risks of ill-health" (p. 11). Low rates of unionization and contingent status weaken workers' abilities to demand improved wages, job security, safe working conditions, and other aspects of a "good job" (Chaykowski, 2005). Finally, it is well established that certain groups are more likely to be unemployed or to occupy "bad jobs." Unskilled males suffer the highest rates of unemployment. Young adults and immigrants experience high rates of unemployment and underemployment. Groups under-represented in "good" jobs in Canada include immigrants, First Nations persons, and persons with disabilities (Livingstone & Raykov, 2009; Holzer, et al. 2011; Vosko, 2006).

Interpretation of these general trends in labour market participation goes back to the earlier question of how one makes sense of labour markets as supply or demand driven. My own position expands upon the thesis that supply side arguments are problematic – or at least *more* problematic than those arguments proposed by demand side proponents. This has to be linked to the assumption that's being made below, by both by Livingstone and by me going forward, that the "demand side" is worthy of much more attention than it receives. Simply put, we concur that the more significant problem is that there are too few "good jobs" to be had.

III. Distributive Justice: Who Gets a "Good Job?"

At a plenary I attended a few years ago, Canadian sociologist David Livingstone did a great job of stating what is and ought to be the obvious, but for the ideological obfuscation of "knowledge economy" rhetoric: There are only so many decent jobs to go around. The solution he espoused is to create more good jobs by revitalizing labour unions and collective bargaining.[53]

But good jobs are not the same thing as good work. There will always be a great deal of work that no one wants to do – the kind of work that is stigmatized as "dirty," and servile (Gomberg, 2007; Mills, Drew & Gassaway, 2007; Sayer, 2007). Someone still has to clean the toilets. So after the plenary, I asked Dr. Livingstone who ought to clean the toilets. I think he was probably just in a hurry and also that I caught him off guard, because the furthest we got was to some sort of a hypothetical case where everyone *takes turns* cleaning the toilets.

This hypothesizing wasn't as absurd as it sounds on the surface, recognizing that the question we were really tossing around beneath the metaphor was one of *distributive justice*: Given the premises first that there will always be jobs that are perceived to be "bad" or less desirable, and second that principles of scarcity will apply in that the number of bad jobs will continue to greatly exceed the number of good jobs, who ought to have which job, and on what basis? If one takes to heart assertions that the conditions under which we labour have profound impacts on our sense of self, any system that allocates "good" and "bad" jobs is at the same time allocating chances for human growth, satisfaction, and happiness (such that this is realized through labour and its rewards). This is not a small concern.

The easiest response to questions around the difficult issue of a just distribution of meaningful work is one of denial that it is a problem at all. As Brown and Lauder (2006) argue, this is essentially the tack taken by those who tout the "knowledge economy" as an unceasing wellspring of opportunity for

---

[53] This was also the conclusion of Katherine Newman in "Chutes and Ladders." She observed that those most likely to "get ahead" in her study were those with unionized jobs.

all workers. However, once these blinders are removed, we are left with a fundamental question of distributive justice, which Brown (2003) argues is presently being addressed under a dysfunctional and collapsing system of positional competition (Ehrenreich, 1990; Frank, 2007; Hirsch, 1976). In essence, this is a collective action problem, and a race to the bottom. As Phillip Brown (2003) points out, "If all adopt the same tactics nobody gets ahead" (p. 142).

Because avoidance and denial constitute the primary neo-liberal strategies for dealing with the problem of distributive justice, the aforementioned faith we place in meritocracy – our belief that those who "get ahead" deserve to get ahead by virtue of their hard work and talents – dominates not only our understanding of social inequality, but that of our sense of ourselves as we stack up against others in the arms race for education and "good jobs." In the following chapter, I will more closely examine how meritocracy fuels the expansion of tertiary education, and justifies "widened access," regardless of whether or not it actually works for the people like the women in my study, who are the targets of such access policies.

IV. Conclusion

The genesis of this chapter was my initial literature review, inquiring into the actual opportunities afforded to educated versus uneducated workers in contemporary labour markets. "Widening access" policies are premised, after all, on the assumption that we need more educated workers to fill jobs in the knowledge economy. Do these jobs for educated workers exist? Are they "good jobs," given the complex criteria just discussed? To use Bourdieu's language, what were the "objective probabilities" for my study participants' eventual success in the labour market? Through my discussion, I have tried to show that the ultimate success of widening access to post-secondary education depends mightily on the structure of the labour market, and that there are good reasons to be skeptical of claims that do not problematize or at least acknowledge the complexity of this relationship. Cause for this skepticism is developed further in Chapter Five, where I look more closely at how post-secondary education has been positioned through policy as saving grace – a reiteration of the "American Dream" of unfettered social mobility, given that mere effort, *sans* credentials, no longer carries the mail.

The chapter also introduced moral concerns around the *just distribution* of rewarding labour. It was not my original intention to consider this. However, through ongoing reflection, I realized that in considering the nature of the "good job," I was not simply pursuing an empirical question. The subjective hardships and rewards of paid labour generated moral questions, which have deep hooks in my own history. I had listened to the work and learning careers of six single women, four of them with

children, and been caught off guard by the fierceness of my own empathy. I felt the wounded pride of Terry, who hated being "just a worker," of Elaine ignored on the street by the women whose houses she had cleaned, because I had experienced the same moments of indignity through my own career of low paying service work before coming to university. Could education really improve a world wherein some labour is invisible and looked down upon, while other labour is so richly rewarded, monetarily and in the social esteem it affords?

I return to the question of what constitutes a just distribution of labour and its rewards in my final chapter, but for the time being, my next chapter looks at the education side of the education-jobs relationship. The nature of the post-secondary system is considered as another macrostructure that has shaped the prospects of the students in my study.

Chapter Five: "People Without an Education Are Going to Get Left Behind"

When my Dad cautioned me thirty years ago that I'd be entering a radically different labour market than the one he had, he wasn't pulling the idea out of nowhere. I remember him, always, as curious, and intellectually engaged. I reflect back on what the world must have looked like through his eyes around the time he had that conversation with me. It was about 1980 – just prior to a major economic recession with double digit inflation that would put us, like many families, upside-down on our home mortgage. Margaret Thatcher became Britain's Prime-Minister in 1979, and Reagan assumed the American presidency in 1980. These two world leaders would, retrospectively, be assigned formative roles in the ascent of a still-dominant neo-liberal era, with its vilification of the welfare state and accompanying proclamation of the saving graces of the free market. Studying management practices and organizational behavior in his night classes, my father probably read the likes of Peter Drucker's "Managing in Turbulent Times," or Deming's "Out of the Crisis" – management lore to soothe the souls of American manufacturers who were having their butts kicked by the Japanese. Management consultants, economics, and industry commentators heralded the coming post-industrial age, the ascent of the knowledge economy, the crumbling of manufacturing sector, and of the social stability and economic prosperity that had grounded the Western world after World War II. No wonder he was sober about my future.

In the quest to evaluate "widening access" policies, it is of course important to understand what it is that one is being granted access *to*. In this chapter, I take a closer look at North America's post-secondary education system, offering some explication of the forces that have led to its remarkable expansion over the past several decades. As considered in the preceding chapter, many of these forces are material and economic in nature. Undeniably, the nature of work has changed as Western economies have evolved from industrialism to post-industrialism. However, these material conditions have been accompanied by a profound ideological shift away from state welfarism, toward neo-liberal forms of political economy. As I will show in this chapter, the ubiquity of neo-liberal ideology has been expressed in labour markets and education through policies fuelled by human capital theory.

This chapter is important to my argument because it further establishes the objective structures that shape the potential of people like the participants in my study to gain "upward mobility" by furthering their education. In addition to labour markets and occupational qualities discussed in Chapter Four, these structures include, at the macro-level, education, funding policies, and the underlying assumptions that drive them. These structures in turn shape the expression of the post-secondary education system through institutional features at the meso-level. These features are considered in greater detail in Chapters Six. Chapter Seven, which centrally features the experiences of the student

participants in my study, shows how these structural features work together to render tertiary education a disproportionately risky endeavour for first generation and marginalized adults.

Chapter Four began the work of demythologizing the power of education to lead to a "good job" by showing that such jobs are not infinitely available. In this present chapter I will show that, logically, given a shrinking or static labour market, this must lead to credential inflation. By contrasting human capital theory as the dominant justification for the expansion of tertiary education with the credential inflation thesis, this chapter begins to make sense of why the illusion of social mobility through education has to persist, and how this fundamental misrecognition serves in fact to reinforce class stratification (Bourdieu, 1984).[54] In the final section of this chapter, I detail Canada's particular take on the "widened access" mandate, and the impacts of this mandate on the marginalized persons and social groups it is intended to serve. I will argue that widening access has served to extend credentialism and its costs to those for whom linkages between education and a "good job" are increasingly tenuous. Widening access also extends the reach of meritocratic moral sanctioning, and thereby functions as a central post-industrial strategy via which the poor can be blamed for their own fate.

I. Understanding the Push for Education

The changes that were going on as my father completed his formal education were all part of a profound shift in both material conditions and thinking about the nature of work, education and the economy. In Chapter Four, I briefly reviewed some of these changes, which had the significant effect of killing off the relatively low-skilled yet secure and decent-paying jobs that once fortified and stabilized North America's working and middle classes (Holzer et al. 2011; Jackson, 2010). This loss has come about as a result of sweeping, interconnected changes that are by now familiar: the globalization of markets, including labour markets, the ideological ascent of capitalism after the Cold War, and a breathtaking pace of change in information and communications technologies. As state policies, think tanks and NGOs are fond of reminding us, we now live in a "knowledge economy," driven by services and information rather than manufacturing and extraction.

It was not, however, just the actual nature of work that changed. The shift to a knowledge economy or what's often called a post-industrial or post-Fordist economy was also an ideological one – that is, it fundamentally altered the way we think about work and learning. The argument that follows

---

[54] For a classic account of a mechanism of misrecognition, see Clark's (1960) seminal article detailing the "cooling out" function of community and two year colleges, explaining how these institutions make failure and stalled mobility projects more palatable to both individuals and to society, without disrupting the overarching faith in the role of education in social mobility.

lays out the ways in which this combination of material "real world" changes and neo-liberal ideology have functioned to increase both the risk and the importance of post-secondary education. Education, in turn is central to propping up merit – or what I'll argue is the myth of merit – as the criterion by which to resolve the question of distributed justice posed at the end of Chapter Four: Who gets a "good job?" And on what basis?

When It's Learning or Nothing

A couple of years ago I was doing some volunteer work with an Adult Outreach school – an underdog of a place in the basement of a downtown city building frequented by – well some pretty scary looking folks. Homelessness and addictions characterized the lives of many of the people who congregated inside and outside of the building. The school itself offered basic literacy and high school preparation programs. Generally I hung around the computers in the main area, offering over-the-shoulder tutoring for people who might want to learn some computer skills or look up some topics on the Internet. But most of the stuff that went on with the computers was recreational – Facebook, games, and maybe reading some online gossip or news. It was unusual, then, to have an older guy like John – perhaps in his mid-to-late 50s – take a sudden and very intense interest in learning office applications. I hardly knew where to start, but I introduced him to some basic features of spreadsheets and word processing. He really didn't have a clue, so it was slow going. But no matter.

It was only after a couple of afternoons of working with John that the source of his motivational burst was revealed. It turned out he performed janitorial services in the complex in which the school was housed. "They're hiring for this position upstairs," he intimated. He went on to describe what amounted to a basic clerical position – one that would require some book-keeping, correspondence and general office duties. "When's that happening?" I asked. "End of the month!" he responded. My heart sank. I wasn't going to tell him that it would take months to teach him what he needed to know. John wasn't there when I came back the following week, nor in the weeks that followed. And I was pretty sure I knew why.

As C. Wright Mills discusses in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), most of us fumble our way through life with little sense of how our "personal troubles" connect to "public issues." Profound changes like those described by my Dad tend to be manifested in our daily lives in mundane if still significant and sometimes painful challenges. For John, globalization and weakened unionism take the form of few to no job opportunities for a middle-aged, low-skilled worker, and what I can only imagine was a quiet defeat when he no longer appeared in the computer lab.

The Massification of Post-Secondary Education

Historical accounts of the development of post-secondary education, particularly higher education (universities, colleges), reveal that until only a few decades ago, this level of learning was relatively rare. Indeed, until the middle of the 20th century, university attendance in North America and Europe rarely

exceed 5% of the population of young adults (Trow, 2006). After WWII, Canada, like other industrialized countries, encouraged wider participation as a strategy to absorb men returning from the war, and to expand skills and knowledge in response to increasingly complex and technical workplace demands. By the mid-1970s, post-secondary participation in Canada was approaching 20% (Davies & Guppy, 2006). University full-time enrollments more than doubled between 1980 and 2010 (AUCC, 2011). By 2002, about 65% of Canadian youth attended some form of post-secondary education after completing high school, and about half of these youth attended university (Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil, & Shimmons, 2003). Almost 60% of Canadian parents expect their children to attend university (Davies & Guppy, 2006), and a (2009) report by The Canadian Council on Learning states that 85% of 15 year olds expect to attend college or university (CCL, 2009). Internationally, the OECD (2013) predicts that 60% of young people will attend a university program. And, while there is some emerging evidence that university enrolments are waning in favour or more technical and trades programs (Government of Canada, 2014), there appears no end in sight to the expansion – and privatization of the costs – of post-secondary education.

There are two very broad ways in which this expansion can be understood. I'll explain both in detail. It's important to remember that these two offerings are simplifications: in practice, education and labour market dynamics have to be understood as a complex interplay of many factors, including economic conditions, government funding of education, demographics, regional economics, industry requirements, and the expectations of parents and youth. But the positions examined here do provide a framework for understanding the reach of the dominant perspective – human capital theory – and what insights may be drawn from an alternative explanation in the form of credential inflation. Importantly, the two perspectives draw opposite conclusions about educational expansion. Human capital theory proposes that the expansion is a functional response to an expanding demand for skilled labour. Credentialism, on the other hand, takes the pessimistic stance that educational expansion is in fact due to competition for a shrinking pool of "good jobs."

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory describes a broad shift in thinking about economic productivity from the significance of things as factors of production to people as factors of production. As Livingstone and Pankhurst (2009a) explain it, industry up until the latter part of the 20th century had no real reason to or interest in thinking of human knowledge as a potential source of competitive edge. When your human labour is for the most part unskilled, workers are more or less interchangeable, warm bodies. When

human knowledge and skill became more important to production, the significance of "human capital" grew. Both firms and individuals had to start thinking beyond simple exchanges of wages for labour, because the character and quality of that labour was increasingly specialized, and increasingly represented in the form of educational credentials – diplomas, degrees, trade tickets and the like.

Neo-Liberalism

It is important to understand that human capital theory operates in or can be subsumed under a broader, political economy of neo-liberalism, and thus shares many of its underlying assumptions. These assumptions are best understood with a brief foray into 20th century history – specifically the fundamental shifts in economic thinking that were occurring about the time my Dad was giving me a talking to. As noted, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came into power in 1979 in the UK and 1980 in the US, respectively. These two economic powerhouses were under the sway of that shift from manufacturing to "knowledge" economies I described. In the 1970s Western economies had been hit by an unheralded combination of high inflation and high unemployment – "stagflation." Such an outcome hadn't really been conceivable under Keynesianism – the body of economic strategy and theory that had dominated Western countries in the post WWII years (Cassidy, 2009; Mahon, 2008). Keynesianism and its fundamental tenets, one of which included strong justification for government intervention into the economy, were thus rejected in favour of a renewed faith in the laissez-faire principles of classical economics (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2010; Cassidy, 2009).

This turn to classical liberal economics was accompanied by a political mood of libertarianism, which Cassidy (2009) attributes in no small part to the work of Milton Friedman, a popular American economist who explicitly equated political freedom with economic freedom. As Europe and North America were caught up in the cold war and Soviet threat, Milton's equation of state market intervention with eventual political totalitarianism had strong resonance. Free-market reforms under Reagan and Thatcher were thus justified both economically and morally. Olssen (2002) summarizes the tenets of classical liberalism, of which neo-liberalism is an extension, as faith in the self-interested and rational individual – homo economicus; the superiority of the market as the most efficient means to allocate all of a society's resources; minimal government intervention in these markets; and, along with this, free trade, or maximum opportunities for goods and services to flow freely among various, global markets.

In recent decades, under this revival of free-market economics, government services and government owned industries have been privatized, and individual choice in the marketplace has been

re-asserted as the most effective means of distributing resources. However, as both Olssen (2006) and Harvey (2005) point out, neo-liberalism bears an important distinction from classical, laissez-faire capitalism, namely that the state, rather than distancing itself from markets, takes an active role in nurturing and protecting them. While proponents of neo-liberalism have long justified the re-assertion of markets by arguing that the welfare state was unsustainable, critics have maintained that political and economic reforms were designed to serve the interests of large capital at the expense of civil society.

Counting on Homo-Economicus: The Ontology of Human Capital Theory

Because the heart of neo-liberalism is faith in unfettered free markets, the same kind of thinking has dominated popular understanding of labour markets in the form of human capital theory (HCT). Perhaps most centrally, HCT shares and promulgates the assumption inherent in neo-classical economics that we can understand the world as an aggregate of individual actions.[55] In other words, when we see social structures like unemployment, literacy levels, or urban sprawl, these can be understood as simple sums of individual choices to work, to learn, or to live, say, in a suburb versus an older neighbourhood. Statistical methods are used to aggregate or "count up" individual instances of a phenomena. By extension, such data can be disaggregated. This is important to the discipline of sociology because it presumes that all social action can be understood in terms of individual characteristics and choices.[56] A ready link can be seen here between this insight, and the idealization of individual choice and action in the liberal tradition.

Human capital is also a functionalist perspective. Broadly, functionalism assumes that society is coherent, or at least has some sort of impulse to coherence. In this tradition, sociological phenomena

---

[55] The use of the terms "neo-classical" and "neo-liberal" may be confusing. The "neo-classical" label may be applied to a movement in the discipline of economics that re-examined and re-theorized the principles of supply-and-demand economics, ultimately asserting that if markets were left alone, an equilibrium would emerge at which all productive resources (including human labour) would be maximally employed to their most efficient uses. The "liberalism" in the neoliberalism describes a reassertion of liberal values in the face of strains of interest in collectivism, socialism and communism that reached their hay day in the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 70s. The term "neoliberalism" is thus a combination of neo-classical economic principals with varying degrees of political liberalism or libertarianism. For a very good overview of varieties of liberalism, see Mahon, R. (2008).

[56] Theoretically, this approach may be labelled methodological individualism. Methodological individualism characterized one branch of sociology known as "exchange theory," which sought to account for social interactions as a series of rational, self-interested actions. Archer (995) discusses this approach as central to a "bottom up" sociology. This "upward conflation" is mistaken because it does not distinguish between individual actions and the social structures they produce as qualitatively distinct expressions of reality with distinct properties and causal powers.

are explained in terms of how they function to hold society together.[57] The application of this idea in human capital theory is the underlying assumption that the relationship between education/skills training (ET) and economic growth is functional and unproblematic (Walters, 2004). More education produces more wealth, again because "knowledge" is assumed to be a key productive factor in post-industrial economies. The validity of this supposition was supported by studies, emerging post WWII, which documented correlations between years of formal schooling, increased individual income, and increased aggregate productivity (Gorard & Rees, 2002; Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009a; Walters, 2004).

Human capital theory's proposed linkage between a better educated population and a country's economic competitiveness in the "global knowledge economy" has become a pillar of post-secondary education policy in OECD countries (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2010; Coffield, 1999; Rizvi & Lindgard, 2006). In Canada, a recent HRSDC publication exemplifies this stance:

> The importance of human capital to individual and societal economic prosperity is well understood and Canada invests heavily in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education....[F]rom a broader policy perspective the promotion of a culture of continual engagement in learning may simultaneously promote a culture of innovation, thereby creating the necessary conditions for the development of a comparative advantage in the knowledge driven world economy (HRSDC, 2008).

Post-secondary education also functions to improve individual attachment and re-attachment to the labour market, which is achieved by obtaining recognized certifications and credentials. Despite efforts to recognize informal learning and experience through strategies like prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), formally obtained credentials remain the dominant means by which employment is obtained (Rubenson, 2007). OECD countries have thus sought not only to expand post-secondary enrollment, but to widen it, in the sense of increasing participation rates for groups that have not traditionally pursued PSE, particularly higher education in universities and four year colleges (Boud, 2004).

In keeping with the individualism of neo-liberal political economy, linking education and earning potential has the further effect of justifying the privatization of the cost of education (Marcucci, & Johnstone, 2007; Woodhall, 1987). In Canada, increasingly privatized education costs have taken the

---

[57] Collins (1994) locates the origins of functionalism in sociology in the "Durkheimian tradition." Durkheim, like his predecessors in the earliest sociological work, ascribed to the nomethic worldview described above. Early sociology attempted to mimic the natural sciences by seeking general laws and rules that could explain society, but this of course requires an underlying faith that society is, at some foundational level, ordered and predictable. With this assumption in place, it follows that sociological phenomena may be explained as some function of the larger, abstract system or "skeleton" (Collins, 2004, p.184).

form of reduced government funding of post-secondary institutions and the deregulation of tuition fees, resulting in tuition fees increases exceeding the consumer price index consistently since the mid-1990s (CCL, 2009). Canada now ranks toward the bottom of 26 OECD countries with respect to proportion of public expenditure on tertiary education (CCL, 2009).

Individualism also extends to the representation of the individual as a private contractor, who invests in his worth as a worker through education, and "sells" him or herself to firms on an open, competitive market. "Every worker," observed Bowles and Gintis in 1975, "is now a capitalist" (p. 74). Accordingly, she must behave as an entrepreneur. It is no longer sufficient simply to work for wages; workers must "market themselves," "promote themselves," or even "brand themselves." In a recent Huffington Post business column, for example, Executive Coach Karen Wensley (2013) advised university students that it is never too early to start thinking about how you'll market yourself for a job. Wensley says students are "starting to realize that good grades are not sufficient for career success, and are having to think, for the first time, about their brands."

The supply-side perspective thus carries with it the assumption that individual workers are primarily or even solely responsible for the ultimate outcomes of their work and learning trajectories – a position rendered all the more high stakes by the erosion of the welfare state and publicly funded "safety nets." As Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2010) state, the loss of these supports has made education all the more necessary. Phenomena such as unemployment, and underemployment are, for the head-counting neo-classical economist, understood as the simple sum of the choices and actions of "rational actors."

This belief is in turn premised upon a particular understanding of human agency – that is, our capacity for choice and action, or our will, as described in Chapter Two. For Marx, whose earlier works reflect romantic critiques of capitalism (Lowy, 1987) "labour" was something fundamental to our whole selves, and our whole being in the world. *Homo faber* describes an ontology or human essence found in both the necessity and creativity of our engagement with the material world (Archer, 2000). It is certainly a romantic way of thinking about work compared to its representation according to human capital theory, which reduces all labour to a calculated and entirely instrumental economic exchange.

To get at this exchange theory of labour from the perspective of the individual worker requires a conceptualization of human beings not as *Homo faber*, but as the rather more and narrow and calculating *Homo economicus*. Literally, this is "economic man," whose actions and decisions are always guided by rational measures of self-interest. According to this model of human agency, people can be

expected to "seek to maximize their material wellbeing…in economic transactions, that they possess full knowledge of market conditions; and that they will act rationally to achieve their preferences in the light of this knowledge" (Livingstone, 2009, p.18). *Homo economicus* is the model of agency assumed in policies that attempt to predict how, when and why people will pursue post-secondary education (cf. Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2007; Riddell, 2007).

Homo economicus is, however, an abstraction, proper to the realm of theoretical modeling rather than daily affairs, although this seems to be overlooked frequently when it comes to work and learning choices as these are represented in education and training policies (Redmond, 2006; Weeden, 2002). As critics have noted, human capital theory has been instrumental in narrowing conceptualizations of learning to a functionalist exercise aimed almost exclusively at enhancing individual and societal economic wealth (Robeyns, 2006). Critics further argue that these economic models do a poor job of capturing the true complexities of human agency (Archer, 2000; McDonald, 2008; Mueller, 2004). They also in some cases function to pathologize people who fail to make the correct "choices" in their learning and career paths (Cruikshank 2002) – a problem I will take up in further detail in my concluding chapter.

Credential Inflation

Despite increasing PSE participation at increasing costs, the supply-side strategies proposed by human capital theory don't appear to be working. Alignment between education and labour market outcomes is nothing to write home about. Young adults are more educated than ever, yet youth unemployment and underemployment is pervasive across OECD countries (OECD, 2009; Robinson, 2010). Canadian employers continue to claim a shortage of skilled labour that, mysteriously, never seems to be addressed by the increasing number of highly skilled, highly educated workers in Canada. Immigrants, despite having skills and qualifications, are often underemployed or unemployed (Guo, 2009; Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009b), and there is some evidence of ageism when newly trained older workers seek labour market positions (Purcell, Wilton, & Elias, 2007). Some sectors that require post-secondary education are still characterized by relatively low wages, instability, and lack of employer-supported future learning opportunities (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006).

These findings demonstrate that formal learning does not capture the whole story when it comes to labour market success; discrimination on the basis of age, race, gender, or disability may impede successful education to work transitions, and labour market instability cuts across all sectors of the labour market. So if, as these findings suggest, expanding post-secondary education is not

functioning to meet labour market needs, why do participation rates continue to grow? As Coffield asked in 1999, "if the thesis [of more learning] is so poor, why is it so popular?" (p. 479).

Theories of credentialism or credential inflation contrast starkly with human capital theory because they propose that the expansion of tertiary education is the result not of an expanding array of "good jobs" but rather, a growing scarcity. The empirical question of whether there are greater or fewer "good jobs" to be had is, as noted in <u>Chapter Four</u>, more difficult to answer than it might first appear. But the answer – or assumption in the absence of good, consistent data – is important to determining whether more education participation is a good thing.

Perhaps ironically, credential inflation draws on the same basic theory of the kind of supply-and-demand economics that HCT proponents rely upon. Just as the price of scarce goods can be "bid up," so too the price of, or entry point into scarce "good jobs" can be bid up in the form of increasingly complex and lengthy-to-obtain credentials. In an inflationary situation, the value of money is weakened so that more of it is required to pay for the same goods. Similarly, the credentialism theory argues that the value of credentials have weakened due to their oversupply on the labour market. Individuals are forced to pursue more credentials at higher levels or, as Phillip Brown puts it, to "run faster, for longer, just to stand still" (2003, p. 142). Critics thus challenge the basic premise of human capital theory that education has universal, leveling effects on life chances (Bourdieu, 1999; Field, 2006; Halliday, 2004; Myers & deBrouker, 2006).

Theorizing Credentialism

Credentialing theory, or credential inflation, is premised on a very different understanding of the social world than that proposed by human capital theory. It is a conflict perspective, meaning that human activity in society is best understood not as promoting a functional and coherent society, but rather as ongoing competition for status, power, and material interests. Conflict perspectives in modern sociology are rooted in Marxism, although the notion of society as fundamentally conflictual has earlier manifestations in political science and philosophy — most notably in Hobbesian political philosophy.

Credentialism itself has its origins in the sociology of Max Weber, who extended Marx's materialist accounts of social struggle into cultural and symbolic realms.[58] Weber observed that

---

[58] Weber offers this expanded definition of "class situation" as "the typical chance for a supply of goods, external living conditions, and personal life experiences, in so far as this chance is determined by the amount and kind of power, or lack of such, to dispose of goods and skills for the sake of income in a given economic order" (Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 181). Essentially, Weber differed from Marx in his understanding of social class as

educational credentials, along with other symbolic markers of status, were important determinants of class position, which he defined more broadly than Marx as the "probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and finding inner satisfaction" (Weber, cited in Breen, 2005, p. 32). As first discussed in Chapter Two, Bourdieu considered credentials in these symbolic terms as well.[59] Credentials do not represent accumulated knowledge so much as they capture social and cultural capital and convert these into economic capital through access to the rarest and most financially rewarding opportunities in the labour market (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 2013). In a similar vein, neo-Weberian North American theorists, most notably via Collins' (1979) *The Credential Society*, revived Weberian theories of credentialed education as a form of "social closure," or the control of education as a means to protect elite occupational sectors (Murphy, 1994). Credentials thus work to limit access to "good jobs" and the social recognition and material rewards that come with them.

Bourdieu and neo-Weberians like Collins thus share a rejection of the consensus view of a politically neutral, open and fair contest within education and the labour market in the advanced economies. For these theorists, the organisation of positional competition will inevitably reflect a power struggle between competing interest groups.[60] The credentialism thesis also recognises differences in the power of individuals and social groups to deploy their material, cultural and social capital in the competition for credentials and jobs (Brown, P. 2003; Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu especially, obtaining credentials is part of a wider "economy of practices" through which various forms of capital are exchanged. A credential, for Bourdieu, is obtained through an exchange of economic capital in the form of time and education costs, but also, importantly, an embodiment and legitimation of years of cultural capital acquired in one's family of origin.

David Brown (2001) proposes that credentialing theory is useful for the study of employment transitions between work and learning because it invites a more emergent approach to understanding individual actions and their effects than either functionalist or Marxist structural approaches, both of which de-emphasize human agency. The phenomenon of emergence is present in both Bronfenbrenner's human ecology model, and in Bourdieu's understanding of fields. It is probably best

---

mediated/facilitated by both material and symbolic forms of capital, whereas Marx defined social classes strictly in relation to ownership of means of production.

[59] Bourdieu was influenced by Weber in numerous ways. In addition to the affinities with theses of social closure noted, Bourdieu drew from Weber as a historical sociologist, and like Weber sought to reconcile the relationships between material and symbolic sources of social inequality. Bourdieu shared with Weber a strong interest in how symbolic power operates to legitimate domination in social orders (Swartz, 2013).

[60] This has led to significant variations in the way competition rules are drawn up and how they relate to labour market opportunities in different countries (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Brown et al, 2001).

understood by the aphorism that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Emergent perspectives, instead of simply counting heads to make sense of what people do, are interested in the ways people interact when they are doing what they do.[61] And, because these interactions impact choices, such choices can never be reduced, or traced back, to the atomistic individual. Emergent approaches are thus more apt to look to social properties or structures in society as things unto themselves, qualitatively "more than" and distinct from the individual actions that make them up (Archer, 1995).[62]

Distinction between emergence versus methodological individualism are not just theoretical concerns; they have important normative implications for the study of work and learning. To back up a bit, HCT, in keeping with classical economic underpinnings, regards the individual as the basic "unit of analysis" in any explanation of something one sees in society. As noted earlier, this ultimately amounts to the moral position underpinning of neo-liberalism as a political philosophy – namely a particularly American anti-statist libertarianism (Cassidy, 2009). Crudely put, poor or sub-optimal life outcomes result, according to this perspective, from poor or sub-optimal personal choices (Heath, 2009), and this extends to individual choices about educational paths and career choices.

Emergent perspectives like Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model recognize causal factors at the level of the individual as well, but also take into consideration interactive effects – that is, interactions between individuals, for example family members, or students and teachers in a school, or colleagues in an office – and interactions between individuals and larger social institutions and structures. Because these interactions are complex, inter-related, and going on at multiple levels they cannot, from the perspective of emergence, be explained just in light of individual action. Normatively speaking, this also means that explanations of social problems are not reduced to questions of individual responsibility. People can and do act in the world, but as Marx famously stated, "Men make their own

---

[61] The premises of methodological individualism guide much economic theorizing, and economics has been accused by some critics of "colonizing" sociology. It should be noted that this is an over-simplification. Early sociology employed a great deal of "head counting" and there is still a strong statistical presence in contemporary sociology. It isn't so much the generation of statistical data that matters here, as what it's understood to mean. For the methodological individualist – whether in economics or sociology or any other field – the "truth" is in the counting, and big picture effects can always be traced back to individual actions. It is this underlying understanding rather than the use of quantitative methods per se that characterizes methodological individualism. Methodological individualism characterized one branch of sociology known as "exchange theory," which sought to account for social interactions as a series of rational, self-interested actions (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004).

[62] This is the essence of the "structure/agency" problem in sociology. Theorists who have explored the structure/agency problem in great detail include Anthony Giddens (1984), Margaret Archer (1995), and Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but in circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (1974, p.146). People's choices and actions are thus influenced and mediated by the social world. By extension, explanations from a perspective of emergence are accompanied by norms that don't leave people twisting in the wind when things go badly. To the point of work and learning, failure of individuals to leverage education into meaningful and economically viable employment is considered an outcome that might be "blamed," if we want to use that word at all, on some complex relationship between people and society, not simply on one individual's poor choices.

II. Lifelong Learning for Lifelong Earning

The growing significance of formal education for the development of human capital found a convenient expression in the ascent of "lifelong learning" as a policy discourse. Common policy rhetoric asserts that lifelong learning is required for an individual to keep his or her skills and knowledge current and relevant to the needs of organizations with rapidly evolving needs (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2004). Perhaps the best known example of lifelong learning as a policy strategy was Tony Blair's 1997 election promise that the top priorities for his Labour Party, if elected, would be "Education, education, education." Once elected, the Labour party began an ambitious program of educational reform, seeking to increase engagement with learning across the lifespan. Not only was learning to make Britain more competitive; it would also redress social problems emerging out of the increasingly stratifying effects of a de-regulated labour market. Blair wasn't alone in his elevation of formal education as a double whammy – addressing both social and economic woes. Since the early 1990s both advanced and developing economies have held this near messianic faith in learning (Field, 2006; Grubb & Lazerson, 2006).

The notion that learning ought to occur over one's life lends a normative and justifying air to the increasingly unstable nature of work. Lifelong learning serves as a euphemism for non-linear career paths carrying greater risks of unemployment or underemployment as people are forced to acquire new learning to transition between jobs. Field (2006) offers an extensive overview of the gradual transformation of "lifelong learning" from a humanist manifesto into a key policy strategy for economic growth and competitiveness. It turns out that "lifelong learning," as originally conceived, had a lot more to do with human flourishing than pulling down a decent income. *Learning to Be*, released by UNESCO in 1972, presented a democratizing vision for education that had been influenced by the progressive social ferment of the late 1960s. Chair Edgar Faure described four assumptions underlying the report. These included a global understanding of a common, human good, the right of every person to realize his or

her own potential through education, the right of every person to develop as a whole individual, and the right to continue to learn throughout one's life. Faure describes the aim of lifelong learning as

> the complete fulfillment of man [sic], in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments--as individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer. (p. vi)

When one compares this lofty vision with the unimaginative references to "skills," "mobility," and "employability" that characterize contemporary policy justifications for learning, the basis for the critique that lifelong learning is "human resource development in drag" becomes more clear (Boshier, 1998, p. 4). Canada's position, articulated in this current HRSDC webpage of well-being indicators, is not atypical:

> Learning contributes to the social and economic well-being of individuals and of the countries in which they live. Education and training provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to participate effectively in society and the economy. Participation in education and training can offer personal pleasure and pride in one's accomplishments, and open the door to new opportunities that can improve one's standard of living. Post-secondary education, life-long learning, and opportunities such as job-related training enable Canadians to acquire knowledge and skills that ultimately contribute to a high quality of life in Canada. (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013)

> Contemporary policy rhetoric invoking "lifelong learning" is thus rather far removed from the

idealistic origins of the concept in the Faure report. Such policy may also be challenged on the grounds that it conflates equality of opportunity with equality of outcomes, betraying a liberal and individualistic normative stance that conflicts with more collectivist understandings of social justice. Even if equality of opportunity is established as desirable, it is questionable whether strategies to widen access to education in fact create this equality; to date, strategies to widen access have not been very successful in bringing traditional non-participants into the PSE fold (Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2004; Field, 2006). Finally, critical perspectives challenge the implication that full citizenship and social participation hinges on, or may even be reduced to, economic participation as a worker and consumer (Field, 2006).

III. Education for Social Mobility

My partner of ten years is a "car guy." He's played around with cars since he could pick up a Matchbox. Predictably, by seventeen, he had a beater – 1965 Pontiac Parisienne convertible – and spent every spare moment and spare dollar restoring it. At the same time, high school held no interest for him. He drifted out in Grade 11 without fanfare, and pumped gas for a living. But car guys know how to talk to other car guys. Patrick, by his early 20s, had acquired a second project car, and was working in what's known in the vernacular as "the glass business." He took phone orders for auto glass suppliers, but eventually his logical mind and great eye for detail made him a natural fit for inventory and procurement. That's his job today – managing inventory for a dozen warehouses. The "glass business" is among few remaining niche

industries where a smart person without a high school diploma might be able to make some progress without going back to school. In most cases, however, all but the least-skilled forms of work have become impenetrable without a post-secondary education.

Education, Work and Merit

Our acceptance of merit as the best and fairest way to distribute rewards is so ubiquitous as to be almost unquestioned. In popular culture, it is most embodied in the idea of the "American dream" – the idea that anyone can achieve the kind of social mobility described in Chapter Two if they exercise enough hard work and determination (Samuel, 2012).[63] However this myth – and I have already proposed that it is indeed a myth – has manifested itself differently over time. In the early 20th century, it took the form of rags-to-respectability stories of the Horatio Alger variety. In these morality tales, a young man – Ragged Dick, or Ben the Luggage Boy or Frank the Cash Boy (really they are all the same) – through his determination, "pluck" and inerasable positivity, "makes good" in the world and sees his socio-economic status rise.[64] The stories emphasize the rewards of good character, which, in these hopeful renditions, can even be possessed by the poor.

Today, the myth of social mobility persists in popular imagination, although good character, in and of itself, isn't going to yield opportunity. In the present tense, one is self-made through education. In a summer web feature, for example, The New York State of United Teachers (2013) proclaims that education is the "path to the American dream," and highlights young people who, despite language barriers and grinding poverty, have "made good," just like Alger's heroic young men. The audacity to put oneself out there is all well and good, then, but it had better be accompanied by some sort of credential.[65] Policy assertions that education is central to social mobility are thus propped up by a general belief that social mobility is desirable, and by the myth, in the form of the American Dream, that it is possible. For the state and its institutions, it seems reasonable to follow through with strategies that expand access to education.

---

[63] The American Dream is indeed distinctly American; I don't mean to imply that it translates directly to the Canadian context. I do believe that the dominance of American culture in media has given "legs" to the lure of rapid social mobility. This is ironic, given that the United States is one of the greatest offenders in terms of social inequality and social mobility (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

[64] "Ragged Dick" was the first of Horatio Alger's best-sellers. He produced over 100 of these formulaic stories. http://www.nysut.org/news/nysut-united/issues/2013/june-2013/education-the-path-to-the-american-dream

[65] In contrast, see O'Brien (2013), *The Great Gatsby curve: Why it's so hard for the poor to get ahead*. This article directly challenges aphorisms that education assures success and social mobility. http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/06/rip-american-dream-why-its-so-hard-for-the-poor-to-get-ahead-today/276943/

Widening Access

Policy responses to inequality have thus largely focused on providing "more learning" and reducing barriers to participation in formal learning (Field, 2006; Gorard & Rees, 2002). In Canada, for example, the now defunct Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation operated from 1998-2009 with a mandate to "improve access to postsecondary education in Canada, particularly for those facing economic and other barriers" (Lavallée & Backus, n.d.). Canadian post-secondary institutions have continued to expand to accommodate increasing demand,[66] and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada advocates for increased capacity, including for non-traditional groups (AUCC, 2008). Thus, as the logic goes, increasing seats in post-secondary education, targeting marginalized groups for financial and other forms of support, and increasing flexibility in program admissions collectively widen access to credentialed learning, thereby reducing social and economic inequality via subsequent labour market participation.

Canada's Strategies for Widening Access

Like other OECD countries, Canada seeks to redress and ameliorate inequitable participation and completion of post-secondary education through policies intended to widen participation (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009; Kirby, 2007; Myers & deBrouker, 2006). "Widening" here refers specifically to efforts to reach groups with persistently low participation rates. Key strategies include increasing the availability of student loans, scholarships and bursaries; providing multiple routes to and through PSE; and ensuring that information about the value and availability of post-secondary education is widely available.

Financing Post-Secondary Education

In recent years, a key policy vehicle for equalizing access to post-secondary education has been to expand the availability of student funding. Canada is second only to the United States in its overall expenditure on post-secondary education (Riddell, 2004). However, the private costs of post-secondary education in Canada have been increasing steadily since funding cut-backs to the system began in the 1990s (CCL, 2011), and the percentage of PSE revenues coming from private sources[67] in Canada well exceeds the OECD average (43% versus 23%) (Kirby, 2007). Canada ranks near the bottom of 26 countries measured by the OECD for portion of public expenditure on education (CCL, 2009).

---

[66] Apart from labour market considerations, demographic pressures and student and parent demand for post-secondary education are resulting in increased pressures to expand PSE participation (Marshall, 2004).

[67] Private sources include endowments and people paying their own tuition. Private sources to fund post-secondary education must increase as public funding of PSE decreases.

Thus while overall participation in PSE in Canada is high, it is increasing funded by private means. The Canada Council on Learning (2009) states that the number of people borrowing to finance post-secondary education, as well as the amounts borrowed, have "increased substantially" in recent years (p. 10). According to Rounce (2004), year 2000 Canadian PSE graduates had 76% more debt than those in 1990 (2000 constant dollars) (p. 7). While approximately 75% of loan holders are able to pay off their loans within five years, a substantial minority do not (CCL, 2009).

These conditions have rendered the affordability of PSE a significant policy issue. In order to improve access to PSE without substantially increasing public funding, the federal and provincial governments have focused on subsidizing and streamlining their systems of student financing. The Canada Student Loan program provides financing, along with provincial level funding bodies. Canada's Millenium Foundation, in addition to providing bursaries to Canadian students since 1999, conducted ongoing analysis of the effects of funding supports on participation and completion of post-secondary education (see Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2008; Lavallée & Backus, n.d.)

Myers and deBrouker (2006) assert that Canada's present system of student financing is biased toward younger, full-time PSE students, and does not meet the needs of adult learners. Supports for part-time learning and secondary education upgrading are poor, and adult students may be required to use savings to finance their education before being able to access loans or bursaries. Also, note Myers and deBrouker (2006), married students are expected to be supported by a spouse's income, even where that income is not enough to live on. These factors likely contribute to declining participation rates in part-time education and undergraduate education among older adults.

There is also some evidence that other factors besides financial feasibility are impacting participation and success rates. A recent report commissioned by the Millennium Foundation found that several years of federal bursaries have had no discernible impact on PSE participation or persistence (Lavallée & Backus, n.d.). PSE attendance among First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) and lower SES groups has not increased substantially (Rounce, 2004), and university attendance still favours students from wealthier families two to one (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2008). It is also possible that increasing numbers of student loan holders do not reflect growth in participation by those who have traditionally accessed education, but instead indicate that middle class students who did not have to borrow before are borrowing now (CCL, 2009). Berger, Motte and Parkin (2008) conclude that cost itself is less of a deterrent to participation in PSE than the perceived value of further education. If these findings are accurate, policy vehicles focused on easing the financial burden of PSE are unlikely, in and of

themselves, to reach a significant population of adults who, for various reasons, are simply not interested in formal learning, or do not see it as a good investment.

Although much research focuses on access, persistence once a student has entered a PSE program is also of critical importance. Statistics from Canada's Youth in Transition Survey, for example, found that while 78% of the 2000 high school graduate cohort measured had enrolled in some form of post-secondary education, 12% of this group had dropped out (Berger Motte & Parkin, 2008). The dropout rate is significant because years spent in education that do not result in an accreditation or credential tend not to pay off in the labour market (Riddle, 2004). Further, research has suggested that lower SES student are at greater risk of non-completion (Acumen Research, 2008; Rounce, 2004; Spellman, 2007). Consequently, it is likely that people who drop out of their PSE programs will have difficulty servicing and paying off student loans accumulated to that point.

A "Seamless" Post-Secondary System

Facilitating smooth entry, exit and transfer among institutions is another policy strategy that is presently being used to increase access and make it more equitable. University transfer programs, and the recent extension of applied and baccalaureate degree programs to some colleges both increases the number of seats available in such programs, and addresses regional disparities in educational offerings (Oldford, 2006). However, it is possible that such a system has an under-explored downside, namely that such a system makes it easy for people to become "lost," shuffling between institutions and in and out of programs, all the while accumulating debt (see Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Students with unclear goals appear to at greater risk of dropping out (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2008). Given the increasing mobility of students, only about half of university and college students complete their programs at the same institution they started at (CCL, 2009). Myers and deBrouker (2006) note that while many Canadian provinces are implementing reforms to coordinate and streamline adult education alternatives, much work remains to be done.

Consequences of Widening Access

In her 2006 ethnography, *Chutes and Ladders*, Katherine Newman follows the strivings of US adults who began at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Newman began research with a large cohort of Harlem fast food workers in the early 1990s. As she recounts, her initial study was followed by a period of economic growth that had not been seen in the United States for many years. Given the multiple barriers faced by the impoverished young adults she had had worked with when she began the study, Newman saw an opportunity to examine whether a "rising tide" really does lift all boats. She concludes

that policy mechanisms like education funding, tax credits, and childcare and health care benefits either exclude the poor entirely, or are too weak to substantially change their life prospects.

In contrast to the great hope of education articulated in the contemporary American Dream, the role of education in the social mobility of Newman's participants was strikingly lackluster. While some of her participants beat the odds, obtaining an associate (2 year) or bachelor's (4 year) degree, these credentials afforded at best middle income jobs. None of her participants completed lengthy professional programs, or entered the ranks of the professional classes. Instead, the modest success realized by the sub-cohort she called "high-flyers" was arrived upon through varying configurations of shorter college programs and quality – usually unionized – work opportunities that offered living wages, security, and benefits. In the end, a "good job" mattered, and experience, duly noted by the most street smart, taught participants that social and cultural capital counted more than a credential.

Most however, noted Newman, still blamed themselves for their own failure. Newman and others have noted the paradox that those least likely to succeed educationally are the most likely to believe in its transformative power (Pitre, Johnson, & Cowan-Pitre, 2006).[68] Education is a ubiquitous, hopeful projection – so hopeful, in fact, that Grubb and Lazerson (2004) describe it as a "gospel." Vocationalism – the lynchpin of the Education Gospel – is the distinction between "mere jobs" and "occupations... that provide personal meaning, economic benefits, continued development over the course of a life, social status, and connections to greater society" (p. 3). The culmination of our effort to flourish as human beings, according to the Gospel, is to be found in paid work, and formal education is the one path to achieve this. For Bourdieu, this unquestioned faith in education is among the most powerful forms of symbolic violence: presented as beneficial to all, it in fact continues to serve the interests primarily of dominant classes (Bourdieu, 1984, 1999; English, 2012). In a similar vein, Halliday (2004) describes vocationalism as one among functional "stories" that resolve tensions emerging from unequal distributions of society's resources. "Stories function when they "touch on" the notion of the common good in ways that "resonate with people's concerns and avoid direct confrontation with the contested nature" of these goods (p. 157; also see Clark, 1960).

Hope and possibility form the emotional content of this "discourse" of post-secondary education (PSE) – that is an aggregate of meaning created by the portrayal of adult learning in mass

---

[68] The idea of the attitude-achievement paradox is attributed to Mickelson (1990). Most follow-up studies have focused on ethnic minorities, where the paradox seems to be most visible.

media, in policy, and in the ever-increasing volumes of marketing materials produced by PSE institutions themselves. Yet beneath the gloss of college promotional brochures, behind the promise of social status and a comfortable living embodied in the notion of having a "career," beyond the progressive impulse of educational "journeys" and "pathways," is the growing reality that pursuing education beyond high school is a forced choice. Brown (2003) describes this dilemma as "the opportunity trap," and Bourdieu offers a similar analysis of education for the working class in *Weight of the World* (1999).

Theories of credentialism or credential inflation propose a strong alternative explanation for the expansion of post-secondary education although this explanation isn't terribly palatable to policy makers and governments. This is, as I argue in this study, due to the threat that the credential inflation argument poses to the fundamental order of work and learning, and the meritocratic illusion that underpins it. As Halliday (2004) proposes, "despair would arise if it came to be accepted that education in general was little other than a gamble hopelessly weighted in favour of those who have significant wealth and property" (p. 152).

Despite this, neo-liberalism and its manifestations in human capital theory remain ideological forces to be reckoned with, for they have eclipsed any other ways in which we might imagine the idea of vocation. Policies to "widen access" simply feed into this status quo, both reifying and reinforcing systems of social relations that perpetuate social inequality. Widening access policies do not challenge the educational meritocracy. Rather, they extend its reach and force into career trajectories typical of those who, historically, may have neither been interested in formal education, nor seen the need to pursue it. In this sense, in addition to the obvious burdens of being economically poor, the marginalized adults may also be increasingly endowed with the same qualities of anxious reflexivity around work and learning that Ehrenreich (1995) and Brown (2003) described as characteristic of the middle class.

Neo-liberal economic policies implemented over the past thirty years have successfully "freed" markets from previous constraints of the state. At macro-economic levels, these policies led to reduced trade barriers and increased international flows of goods and services between countries. But as this chapter has shown, this assertion of the market was not limited to broad exchanges; the "neo-liberal imaginary" as numerous commentators have observed, has woven its way into our very concepts of ourselves, including the ways in which we think about the presence and value of work and education as aspects of a "normal" life trajectory (Field, 2006; Rizvi, 2007). The impacts are not simply "imaginary" or cultural, however. Close examination of "choice and "navigation" in Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate how

rational choice has woven its way into institutions and their material practices in ways that systemically perpetuate inequality, while at the same time upholding the myth of meritocracy.

Chapter Six: "We Do the Best We Can For Each Student"

"The greatest line I never said," is a recent Washington Post article in which the author collected quotes that never got past the lips of college student advisors who are faced daily with the often delicate balance between being encouraging and being realistic as they guide students through the admission process. As one commentator quipped, "We were thinking of having coffee mugs printed– *[School name] College Guidance: Where Dreams Go to Die.*" Such gallows humour can be a coping mechanism when people are in situations that are threatening and distressing (Thorson, 1993). And if there is one thing I learned from my brief time with the frontline staff in student services at Norquest College it is that they are faced with overwhelming human need in their daily work.

Needs are overwhelming because Norquest is a community college. In addition to diploma programs like the PN program in which my student participants are enrolled, Norquest, houses high school completion programs, transition programs, and short vocational courses. These types of programs tend to attract and serve the interests of what in Chapter Three I describe as "barriered learners" – immigrants, high school non-completers, and people who, generally, have had a tough go of completing education and remaining attached to the labour market. Norquest faculty and staff, whose experiences are shared in this chapter, thus find that adults' educational needs overlap strongly with their social, emotional and developmental needs.

Institutions: Fields within Fields

The goal of this chapter is to piece together the institutional mechanisms that can either hinder or support a widening access mandate. Most importantly, as this chapter shows, a community college is a very particular *kind* of post-secondary institution marking one aspect of the socio-economic stratification of post-secondary education more generally. Norquest must thus be examined not only on its own terms, but also as it is situated within the broader institutional field of higher education.

Institutions play an important mediating role between habitus and the types of large scale social, political and economic forces and outcomes I documented in Chapters 4 and 5 (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). In Bourdieusian terms, institutions are fields. More specifically for the purposes of my study, they may be considered as fields-within fields, requiring meso-level analysis. Meso-analysis is not an easy task, none-the-least because the scope and boundedness of the inquiry is so difficult to establish (Warde, 2004). Fields are nested and overlapping, and their boundaries are not fixed. For Bourdieu, boundaries are also objects of contestation, thereby making the mapping of a field all the more complex (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Bourdieu stressed that field(s) in a given study are determined empirically,

not nominally (Béland, 2005; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Emeribayer and Johnson, 2008). This means the work of mapping fields and identifying the rules that govern conduct – again as Bourdieu would put it identifying the "rules of the game," – is an inductive process. That is, the field is determined by the nature of the inquiry.

This is all well and good in theory, but presents a practical problem for the researcher, who must still make some rough draft of the field as a starting point. If the starting object of inquiry is a meso-level construct like a school or family, one is faced with the perennial problem of overcoming micro/macro dualisms while still keeping the analysis itself manageable (Layder, 1994). In the case of my study for example, then, I had to consider Norquest as having structuring effects on both the informants in this chapter and the student participants in Chapter Seven. At the same time, I had to take the college as itself structured within the larger field of Alberta's post-secondary system. The essential challenge here was to treat each perspective in sufficient detail without resorting to reification.[69]

For Bronfenbrenner (1977) institutions work at the levels of mesosystems and exosystems. Bronfenbrenner defines a mesosystem as 'the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life" (p. 515). The exosystem is "an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass these immediate settings.... These structures include the major institutions of society...as they operate at the concrete local level" (p. 515). In early childhood, for example, public health clinics, early childhood education, community support programs, and transportation access are among the many institutions that the developing child and his or her family would encounter. These in turn are situated within a political economy that more or less values early childhood health and learning depending on the ways in which the institutions just described are funded and made accessible.

In many ways, Bronfenbrenner's approach is similar to Bourdieu's – both recognize the interdependence of fields, and the complexity of exchanges between them. Bourdieu's approach,

---

[69] This would explain why some researchers have turned to "institutional habitus" and "familial habitus" as heuristic tools. Although Atkinson (2007) points to some significant potential problems with this strategy – certainly reification stands out – institutional habitus and familial habitus may function simply to reduce the complexity of a given research focus to something more manageable. Otherwise, I daresay every study would look like *Distinction*. My take on it to date is that Bourdieu skirted the problem of meso-analysis by focusing his empirical work on illustrating macro-level forces and leaving the linkages between individual practices and fields largely to theoretical suppositions alone. In the end, the problem was complex enough that I chose to avoid taking up the (temptingly) accessible notion of "institutional habitus" because of the outstanding theoretical questions around its use.

however, favours structural analysis to elucidate conflict and power, whereas Bronfenbrenner's approach as a psychologist is one that takes the developing human being as its core object of inquiry. If one wishes to apply Bourdieusian analysis to make sense of how an individual habitus confronts and is confronted by a given field, Bronfennbrenner's human ecology introduces the possibility of a psychologized subject that Bourdieu doesn't give much weight to. Indeed this is a key critique issued by Margaret Archer, who charges that Bourdieu greatly neglects discursive consciousness (Archer, 2000). Warde (2004) adds that Bourdieu's emphasis on struggle and conflict may not always be appropriate: not all fields are governed by a "competitive logic" (p. 15). Further, it is entirely reasonable that conflictual and cooperative incentives and impulses can co-exist in a given field, at both expressed and structural levels.

Recognizing that macro/micro dualisms raise thorny theoretical problems, I still work in this chapter to maintain a meso-level perspective, situating Norquest as a field-within-fields, while also considering the informants, in light of the above, as psychologized subjects. My aim is to present a rich portrait of Norquest College. In turn, a detailed understanding of Norquest informs the analysis of the students' stories shared in Chapter Seven. As the findings of this chapter will show, informants, by virtue of their institutionalized roles, must individualize and pathologize student barriers. Informants understood and talked about structural and systemic issues – they understood that the students they work with are "socially located." However, they do not problem-solve in this vein. This may be attributed to the ways in which institutional contexts frame the prospective students' issues, and impose certain constrains on both students and faculty as they work together to set directions and solve problems.

Informants

In my research design, I distinguished between my student participants, whose stories are threaded throughout this work, and interviewees whom I identified as informants. I made this distinction between the two groups – students and informants – because my purposes for interviewing each were quite different. Whereas I followed a [biographical method](#) in developing my students' work and learning careers into coherent narratives, informant interviews were semi-structured, and focused on understanding the institutional contexts within which my students were learning and living.

Nonetheless, some of my best informant interviews were those that were enriched as my informants were prompted by our conversations to reflect on their own learning journeys. Those who shared some of the characteristics of my student participants – single motherhood and/or being a first

generation graduate themselves – took particular interest in my study topic. This generated some unanticipated analysis of informants themselves as agential. Like the students who were intended to be the main focus of this work, informants too have habitus that, for the most part, caused them to rest uneasily in roles that essentially bound them to contribute to the symbolic violence of the education system.

The informants whose data ground this chapter are drawn from three areas. I interviewed eleven informants who worked in various capacities in Norquest's Practical Nurse program (instructor, student advisor) and in the college's Prospective Students Office, which provides career, financial, and admissions counselling. I also interviewed two long-time career advisors with Alberta Works. These additional two interviews added to my understanding of the spectrum of transition and support services available to youth and adults who are not students at a post-secondary institution, and to the types of challenges people typically experience when researching and choosing career paths and education routes.

I. Norquest College

Founded in 1965, Norquest College (originally Alberta Vocational College Edmonton)[70] has, from its inception, been a safe place for learners who need basic education, high school courses, and/or short vocational courses. In 1972, in response to a proposed (though unrealized) merger of Grant MacEwan Community College and Norquest, newly elected premier Peter Lougheed asserted that "those with economic, social, cultural and learning disadvantages needed an atmosphere where they did not feel like second-class learners" (Needham, 1991, p. 23).[71] With its purpose thus affirmed, Norquest has worked to fulfill this mandate ever since. Today, Norquest's foundational and short vocational programs are supplemented by two-year diploma programs, and the campus is bursting at the seams. From its eight story main campus building in downtown Edmonton, program spaces have spilled over into adjacent buildings. Norquest's (2012) Comprehensive Institutional Plan includes the college's high hopes

---

[70] Norquest College was founded in 1965 as the Alberta Vocational Centre (AVC), housed at NAIT. AVC expanded and opened in its present downtown location in 1971. It was renamed Alberta Vocational College in 1990, and became a public, board-governed institution in 1998. In 1999, AVC became Norquest College. Although many colleges provide undergraduate transition programs – that is junior level university courses – Norquest has its roots in vocational training and academic upgrading, and retains this focus (cf. http://www.norquest.ca/ourquest/about/history.htm)

[71] This is Needham's account of Mr. Lougheed's position rather than a direct quote. The content is taken from an "informal history" of AVC, pulled together by a team of college staff.

for a new campus complex that will bring students, staff and faculty together – not just physically, but as a stronger learning community.

Located in downtown Edmonton, Alberta, Norquest is mandated through Campus Alberta's six-sector model to provide foundational and vocational learning, and serve as a hub for adult education and literacy in the central Alberta region (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007; Norquest College, 2012). Community colleges like Norquest occupy a unique place in Canada's post-secondary system. Skolnik (2004) observes that unlike universities, colleges have always been "instruments of government policy" in that they were created, both in the United States and Canada, with a direct eye on labour market needs. To some extent then, community colleges are characterized by an unapologetic pragmatism. As one of my interviewees put it, "we're teaching [students] for work....We need to teach them to get them ready for the workforce." Consequently, curriculum tends to be focused on short-term training to meet immediate labour force needs, and programs of two or less years in length with direct routes to mid-level skilled occupations (cf. Alberta Advanced Education, 2007). Although Norquest provides both foundational and vocational learning, a couple of informants described a degree of concern on the part of the college that it is so centrally dependent upon Alberta Works for foundational funding, while having to compete with other institutions for post-secondary students for its diploma programs. Norquest's 2012 annual report states that the college is seeking to improve its retention rates, and its capacities to bridge foundations students from high school completion to further post-secondary learning. However, persistence, like attendance in the first place, is stratified by parental education and socio-economic status (Choy, 2001; Wells, 1997), making it challenging to increase retention and access.

Because community colleges typically serve barriered adult learners – especially immigrants, refugees, and high school non-completers – they also embody a kind of grassroots anti-elitism. They offer foundational college and high school courses that help students to bridge from a spotty academic background to greater possibilities – typically in a setting that is more welcoming and less imposing than that of a four year university. Compared to universities, colleges have less stringent admission requirements and lower tuitions (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Spellman, 2007), and this translates to cultures that are similarly more open and relaxed.

Norquest's students may be subdivided into three broad programming populations: those for foundational learners, short-vocational programs, and diploma-based programs (Norquest College, 2012). The majority of students seen in Norquest's student services office are students studying

foundations (literacy and high school) and short vocational programs. Many of these foundational learners are refugees with multiple barriers – large families, and little education in either their native language or in English. Norquest also serves skilled immigrants transitioning to the Canadian labour market. Diploma programs, approximately two years in length, have high school level admission requirements, and serve both mature and more traditionally-aged students who have come into a program directly out of high school. This latter group, however, is very much the minority of Norquest's student population; one advisor estimated that diploma students make up only about 20% of the student body.

Norquest is an institution in transition, operating within a provincial policy climate that strongly encourages "matching" unemployed Albertans with vacancies in the labour market, regardless of the quality of the jobs available to be filled. The "dead end" nature of many of these jobs, characteristic of the "bad jobs" [discussed in Chapter Four](#), means that they provide neither security nor a living wage. This was recognized by the Norquest informants I spoke with, but not directly addressed by the Alberta Works counsellors. All informants, however, readily recognized and discussed the complex barriers to education and employment faced by many clients.

Student Services

The main floor of Norquest's central building houses the college's student services, where about two dozen employees perform the complicated and sometimes overwhelming work of career, admissions, and financial counselling to present and prospective students. Burnout in this front line role can be a problem, in part because of work intensification. The kind of post-secondary expansion discussed in Chapter Five doesn't just affect instructors via larger class sizes; others who work directly with students struggle to keep up with the ancillary supports demanded by students and their parents. In a recent report of counselling in Ontario's community colleges, Lees and Dietsche (2012) note a 26% increase in enrolments between 2007 and 2012, with an accompanying increase in counselling staff of less than 5%. Academic counselling, state the authors, is increasingly eclipsed by personal counselling, which advisors may or may not feel equipped to deliver (cf. also OECD, 2004).

But as was all too clear in my interviews with Norquest informants, whether you feel prepared or not, you meet students "where they are at." Among students like the 55% immigrants/refugees and 80% women that make up Norquest's student body, academic counseling also readily spills over into the sorts of things that make life and education difficult when you're poor: housing, childcare and

transportation are among myriad "situational barriers" that can derail a program of studies, or prevent an adult from pursuing further education in the first place.[72]

Norquest's Practical Nursing Program

As I discovered during the course of my interviews, advisors worked mostly with what Norquest describes as its foundational students – that, is students without high school diplomas – many of whom are immigrants. This was not ideal for my research, as the informants in the Prospective Students Office were not able to speak directly to the experiences of diploma students like my study participants, whom, I learned, tended not to seek out Norquest's intake and advisory supports. As will be shown, however, many diploma students can experience the types of issues and barriers described by my informants. Further, I was also able to learn about the issues more specifically faced by diploma students through interviews with informants who worked directly within the Practical Nurse program.

At the time of this study, the Practical Nursing program was still in transition from a certificate program to a diploma program. The role of the practical nurse has professionalized over the past several years. One result is the increased status of the occupation, which has made it more attractive to young adults coming out of high school. In fact, the majority of the students in Norquest's full-time program were young Caucasian women. Non-Canadian born students and older adult students like my study participants form a small minority. Most students who take the PN program are planning to transition into an RN degree program at some point. Presently, Norquest's Practical Nursing program can be laddered into an RN program with Athabasca University after 1,700 hours of work experience as a Licensed Practical Nurse.

II. Inside Norquest College

Hang around any place long enough and you will become blind to its cultural particularities. This tendency among academics, who are perhaps more susceptible than most to thinking that they "know better," was a central pre-occupation with Bourdieu. Good sociology, said Bourdieu requires an "epistemological rupture," or, as C. Wright Mills (1959) described it, a willingness to "make the familiar strange."

---

[72] Stats taken from Norquest College (2012). *Norquest by the Numbers*. Retrieved from http://www.norquest.ca/NorquestCollege/media/pdf/publications/NQByTheNumbers.pdf. According to Norquest's student data, students are overwhelmingly female (80%), and 2/3 of these students are over 24 years of age – a typical cut-off demarcating "mature" students. These statistics mean that many Norquest students are parents – a factor contributing to the challenges of staying with and completing a program of studies. As discussed further in this chapter, child care and poverty were paramount issues. Many Norquest students are single mothers.

My own familiar world is the University of Alberta. It immediately became strange to me when I contrasted it with the environment at Norquest College. At Norquest, the students were clearly older. They wore jeans and sweatshirts, not the name brands preferred by largely middle class students who fill the halls of my Faculty of Education. And I was struck anew by the whiteness of my day-to-day world, particularly in my own Faculty, and the privilege that accompanies this. Norquest, in contrast, was brimming with visible minorities and Canadian newcomers. Muslim women combined traditional abaya with the backpacks and heavy coats marking the winter uniform of the Canadian student. At Norquest, the clothing worn by faculty, mostly not unlike that worn by faculty or grad students like me, seemed oddly status-ridden: a clear if not necessarily intentional communication of what Bourdieu might have recognized as a particularly aesthetic form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984; McRobbie, 2004).

Students' Barriers

Advisors I interviewed spoke frequently and in detail about the range and persistence of barriers students face.[73] Although many individual barriers are easy to recognize and define – for example cultural differences among immigrant/refugee students and language barriers – they are not discrete in the actualities of peoples' lives. Instead, as noted by Chovanec and Lange (2010), barriers present in complex constellations, overlapping and feeding in to one another. For example a female refugee could very typically face cultural and language literacy barriers with respect to North American culture, stigma within her own culture if she attempts to adapt, childcare issues, and poverty. One advisor, described a mother who, after spending many years in a refugee camp, found the most basic tasks of organizing her family's life a challenge: "When you come to Canada and you have to get these four, five kids out to school or daycare then you have to get to work, you have them dressed. I have a student here with four kids. She told me by the time she leaves the house in the morning – there's one bathroom in the house, subsidized housing – and she said "By the time I get here I'm tired." Another woman, an Alberta Works client and single mother, very much wanted to work and participate in training, but struggled to do so because her children were caught up in gang culture. Frequent crises and disruptions made it almost impossible to keep a regular schedule for work or school.

Such complexities were well understood and recognized by the informants I interviewed and met with a kind of resignation. Informants spoke with air of practicality, perhaps as a result of their limited ability to meet the full scope of students' needs through brief advisory sessions. Nonetheless, they conveyed a commitment to students, and to Norquest's distinctive role as a community college.

---

[73] Also see Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (ACCC), 2008; Hurst, 2012.

Situational Barriers

Situational barriers – life circumstances that interfere with learning (Cross, 1981) – are very, very common for Norquest students. According to the informants I spoke with, many of the women who attend Norquest are single mothers, for whom time constraints, childcare needs, transportation, and poverty can quickly spiral into situations that make persistence in a program an enormous challenge, even where funding has been provided through grants and loans. "It's how the small stuff piles on," I mused, alongside one of my informants who had herself been a single mother. "I know," she said, "your tire blows and you don't even have fifteen bucks to get it repaired. Then you don't have transportation...how are you going to get to [class]? Or your daycare up and closes down on you."

Indeed, accessible, affordable childcare was noted by informants as an almost ubiquitous concern, and "an exceptional barrier." The majority of Norquest students are women, and many have children. School and daycare offered only during the day makes shift work or evening classes problematic, particularly for single parents. Thus, for example, health services careers, many of which require shift work, may not be feasible for many students, even though nursing and nursing-related careers generally attract women. Unreliable childcare may mean that students miss classes, or drop their programs altogether.

Poverty also imposes constraints by limiting the strategies that students have to meet their basic needs. Adequate housing, childcare and transportation must be in place if the student is to have any chance of success. Newman (2006) and Ehrenreich (2001) provide detailed accounts of the ways in which poverty restricts choice – for example, reliance on public transportation limiting options for work and housing. When adults are struggling to meet their basic needs, it is difficult to place sustained energy and focus into study (Bowles, Durlauf & Hoff, 2006; Chovanec & Lange, 2010).

Poverty also leads to problems with managing institutional deadlines. Uneven cash flow and wait times for loans and funding can leave students scrambling. As one advisor commented, "I always hear every year that things aren't lining up, and they don't get their student loan in time, so they can't get their books, can't get their uniforms, or whatever it may be. They can't pay their rent and things." Others recounted emergency services provided by the college on an ad hoc basis when students lacked even the basic necessities of food and shelter.

Loan funded students must also consider how long they can afford to be out of the workforce, and how much debt they can accumulate. Adult students tend not to live at home to save money while going to school. Many have families of their own to support, and family obligations can disrupt learning

(Bash, 2003; Chovanec & Lange, 2010; Fuller, 2001; Wurzburg, 2005). Having to borrow to pay for both tuition and living expenses limits the number of years a student can afford to be in school. Grant-funded students are limited to up to 30 months of funding which, as informants discussed, is often insufficient considering how much upgrading or foundational learning many students need even to reach the requirements of a post-secondary program.

The immigrants, refugees, and marginalized adult populations that make up the majority of Norquest's population also frequently experience cultural differences, weak English language literacy and racism as barriers. Language barriers are common, although this is less likely to be the case with students in diploma programs, who tend to be Canadian or to have completed most of their secondary education in Canada. Informants described how language barriers not only affect students' learning, but also their ability to do career research and engage with potential employers.

Cultural barriers are more nebulous and difficult to account for. For informants, cultural barriers included cases where all kinds of students, not just immigrant students, have difficulty adapting to the dominant culture. For example, informants reported that work programs are designed to assist students in adapting to the norms of the workplace in order to increase their employability. Yet, barriered students might find workplace culture unfamiliar and challenging to conform to.[74]

Institutional Barriers

MacKeracher, Suart and Potter (2006) describe institutional barriers as those that "reside within the organizations that provide learning opportunities" (p. 14). These organizations can include educational institutions and workplaces. Institutional barriers can also take the form of government programs and policies that fail to meet learners' needs, or make it difficult for some learners to participate (MacKeracker, Suart & Potter, 2006). Myers and deBrouker (2006), for example, are critical of student loan and bursary programs that do not meet the needs of low-income working adults, and Wurzburg (2005) notes a lack of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) strategies.

Consistent with these critiques, multiple institutional barriers were evident at Norquest. Findings here show that the provincial government and Norquest as an institution impose or generate a

---

[74] The significance of cultural barriers to successful employment is evident in the wide range of training programs and information resources, for both employers and employees and across Canadian provinces and post-secondary institutions, that specifically address soft skills like punctuality, communication skills, and workplace decorum. "Essential skills" programs include explicit curricula to promote understanding of workplace cultures and expectations. Norquest runs training programs based on Alberta's Workplace Essential Skills Training program, http://employment.alberta.ca/AWonline/ETS/4328.html

number of institutional barriers, including complex funding schemes that can be difficult for students to understand and navigate, a lack of capacity to support student counseling needs, and disincentives to pursue long-term education goals generated by the Alberta Government's workfare program. A central issue shared by informants in both the Prospective Students office and PN program staff was a lack of resources that are needed to support students more fully. An advisor described how, years earlier, "they used to do three days with the student to determine career and funding options. And if you did not attend every day on time, you were not eligible for funding." In stark contrast, presently, students can expect a maximum of about two hours of services, typically scattered between two or three advisors. "But it's really just a snapshot," said an informant. "You have to hope for the best, and you have worry about all the other barriers that they're facing – the language being huge. But then trying to understand our daycare system, our bus system, our housing system." In essence, advisors were faced with student support needs that bleed over into other forms of social services.

Norquest informants also described the complex systems of funding and programming within which they operate when offering students career advice. Alberta Works (aka grant) funding requirements create some significant boundaries and conditions under which career counsellors and students must work together. A maximum of 30 months of funding is available; consequently students are motivated to obtain as much "free" education as possible within this window, working toward the highest possible credential. A student financial advisor described how this funding window incentivizes students to "condense" their program planning, leaving no space for the strong likelihood of contingencies: "They would have to pass everything and, you know, really do well in all their courses, and continually progress, and no time off in between terms and, or anything." With no latitude for failure or change, such compressed programming, she observed, contributed to student drop-outs.

Alberta Works programs, also create potential disincentives to transition to the labour market.[75] The "welfare wall" refers to policies and systems of policies that essentially penalize those who leave income support.[76] Informants noted that particularly in large families, grant funding was a better source

---

[75] Alberta Works programs pay low income adults to attend school. These adults are classified by the province of Alberta as "Expected to Work" and are thus required to seek employment and/or training. A description of this policy is available at http://humanservices.alberta.ca/AWonline/IS/6167.html (Retrieved September 18, 2014).
[76] Ontario's Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) offers this definition of the welfare wall: "The term 'Welfare Wall' is used by politicians and policy makers to refer to barriers that they feel discourage people from leaving social assistance. Usually the greatest concern is that if people on social assistance are financially better off than people earning minimum wage, there will be no incentive to find paid employment. The term 'Welfare Wall' is also used to highlight the loss of drug and dental benefits that many people soon face when they leave social assistance" (ISAC, 2007). The fact sheet proposes that the "welfare wall" obscures/upholds myths about poverty,

of income than labour market participation. One example offered was a mother of four children who completed a day home provider program through Alberta Works. Leaving income support to earn income as a day home provider would have resulted in a net decrease in household income for this family, as well as the loss of dedicated health and childcare income supports.

Barriers Posed by the Practical Nursing Program

Within Norquest's larger institutional framework, the Practical Nursing program itself has some unique properties that can function to construct additional barriers for students. First, I was surprised to learn how intensive and complex the program is. Packed into a little over two years, as this faculty member described it:

> It depends when they come in, the layout's a little bit different. But generally there are two terms and then a clinical and then another clinical mixed with courses. So they do 7 weeks of courses and 8 weeks of clinical. So yeah, it's heavy. The students in the certificate program often worked and took courses but in the diploma it's just difficult. The students that usually work and come to school full time struggle.

Transitioning between semesters in class and clinical placements proved to be surprisingly precarious, and students without time and financial buffers could find themselves abruptly removed from the program if they did not pass required courses, or made mistakes in the timing and processes of registering for their clinical placements.

Culture of the PN Program

From informants' accounts, students' experiences are also influenced by at least two important cultural aspects of the nursing professions. The first of these, as earlier noted, is the professionalization of the credential, particularly over the past decade. Informants described that this could create cultural rifts and differing expectations among staff and students depending on whether a nurse had grandfathered/mothered in from earlier programs that required less education, and were less explicit in their aims of professional acculturation.[77] Some staff may then "not necessarily model" the levels of professionalism that the program wishes to cultivate in students.

---

particularly that labour market participation resolves poverty. Policies may fail to address the needs of the working poor, and large/enduring systemic barriers to improving one's prospects after entering the labour market (i.e. whether it is feasible to obtain better paying work through promotions, further education, etc.)

[77]Nursing is characterized by established practices of credentialing closure, which can create status hierarchies in workplaces, and has, according to both my informants and literature on the topic, contributed to a culture of disrespect in nursing (cf. Bartholemew, 2006; White et al., 2008). In the field, there are status hierarchies moving from Health Care Aide at the "bottom" to Licensed Practical Nurse – now a diploma program – to RN, which requires a full university degree. This can be a source of tension. Also, as Bartholomew documents, nursing has

In addition to generational differences in professional values, faculty complement in the program is also thwarted by high turnover and little formal learning in adult education.[78] The program cannot pay instructors competitively, and as one informant noted, the difficulty of the work contributes to high faculty turnover: "You're taking people who don't have any educational experience, and are currently working in an environment that is insane," with short staffing issues, and large class sizes. Thus students "complain about a lot of the instructors. And you know to be fair to this a lot of the instructors never had a good teaching experience."

These tense, fragmented work environments for instructors can have direct effects on students. Literature pertaining to at-risk post-secondary students and first-generation students points to the importance of faculty's efforts to create a sense of community, both in and out of the classroom (Tinto, 2006). According to Collier and Morgan (2008) faculty without explicit training in and awareness of the needs of such students may experience "considerable frustration" with students' questions and requests for support.

Another important feature of nursing as a program of study is that it has a strong "hands on" element. Several informants discussed the centrality of the students' aptitude in clinical settings to their "fit" and long term success in the nursing profession. Health issues or discomfort working with people can be a problem for some students. Just as important, however, is "fit" with the nursing culture, and within the cultures of health care facilities. For new Canadian students, lack of cultural understanding and language can make adaption to the work environment very challenging. One instructor offered an interesting and detailed explanation, noting that the nurse has to be fluent in medical terminology, but also fluent in reading patients' body cues, understanding their questions, and in essence "translating" fluidly between medical and lay language in their work with patients.[79]

Again, this clinical practice facet of nursing as a program of studies has consequences for students' success. Because students do not gain authentic field experience until well into the program,

---

been plagued by "horizontal hostility," or what in lay terms has been described as "nurse bullying." An informant commented on this phenomena: "I work directly with students who are in their senior practicums who are out with preceptors. So there is some hostility there. And our students are quite aware sometimes, of the hostility towards them or the hostility amongst the staff. And they can see that."

[78] It should be noted that the program does have some very well trained and committed educators. The faculty is also challenged because it cannot obtain the funding or the staffing consistency to offer ongoing professional development for instructors.

[79] To address some of these issues, Norquest does offer bridging and refresher courses for immigrant students that more explicitly address cross-cultural communication and English language in the curriculum. The mainstream PN program does not have these components.

they may have invested considerable time and money into their learning, only to find that they are not well-suited to nursing. Many of the informants I spoke with stated that they would like to see students doing better career investigation before entering the program.

Academic Barriers

Norquest students may also face academic barriers. Academic barriers overlap significantly with institutional barriers, as it is institutions, in cooperation with industry professional organizations and associations that establish and reinforce credentialing systems. Institutional barriers describe policies and procedures that interfere with learning or learner access. Course or program pre-requisites, for example, are a form of institutional barrier, as are state policies or programs that systematically discriminate against, or fail to meet the needs of certain populations (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). As a further example, in Alberta students' academic barriers are exacerbated by policies that limit tuition-free participation in public education to adults under twenty years of age. Without government funding provided through programs like Alberta Works, adults over 21 must pay college tuition rates to pursue high school courses (Government of Alberta, 2012).

As noted above, many students and potential students are immigrants or refugees. These groups tend to face different kinds of problems. Refugees may have had little formal education in addition to having little or no English language literacy upon arriving in Canada. Norquest informants stated that many years of learning are needed for these adults to achieve secondary education. Immigrants, on the other hand, tend to face issues in having their credentials and foreign work experience recognized (Guo, 2009; Hawthorne, 2007). Often, these individuals will seek additional language training or forms of re-training or re-credentialing to improve their opportunities to work in their fields.[80] Canadian born students generally have the asset of basic English language literacy. However, many of Norquest's students are returning for upgrading because they did not complete their public (K-12) education. In some cases, they have not attended school for many years. Even students admitted to diploma programs may over-estimate their academic abilities if they completed high school requirements several years earlier.

---

[80] As non-traditional adult learners continue to seek formal learning opportunities, post-secondary institutions have responded with programming and administrative innovations to help these students transition into credentialed learning opportunities. Spellman (2007) notes, however, that the stigma of remedial courses and programs can discourage learners from participating.

In the Practical Nursing program and the nursing profession more generally, the academic barrier is the high grades required to get into the program. However, students can continue to struggle once they are in the program, particularly if they are not strong academically. One informant described how the program had had to adapt by supplying remedial learning and tutoring supports in mathematics. English as an Additional Language (EAL) students might come with the science qualifications but lack needed English grades.

Dispositional Barriers

Studies of the motivations and attitudes of non-traditional post-secondary students broadly recognize both instrumental aims and personal development as motivators for adult education (Bash, 2003; Crossan, Field, Gallagher & Merrill, 2003; Fuller, 2001; Warmington, 2003). Students tend to have clear objectives with respect to future employment, but many also value learning intrinsically, and see it as a source of personal growth (Chovanec & Lange, 2010; Purcell, Wilton & Elias, 2007).

However, adult students may experience a number of psycho-social or "dispositional" barriers to success in their programs. These types of barriers make up the third category in Cross's (1981) model. For a variety of reasons, a person may not be motivated to seek learning, or may be discouraged from completing a program of learning. Adult students' experiences in formal education programs can be alienating; students may feel uncertain of their abilities, and uncertain that they "belong."[81] Older adults may believe that they are too old to learn, and some adults are discouraged by negative past experiences (Chovanec & Lange, 2010; Illeris, 2006).[82]

When I asked informants to consider which students were mostly likely to be successful, many, while recognizing systemic barriers, still concluded that disposition factors mattered too, noting that "there are some things the student has to do as well." Students who asked questions, came to meetings with supporting documents, and followed through on career investigations were perceived to be more likely to complete a program of studies.

---

[81] Outside employment and family responsibilities can inhibit participation in social and extra-curricular activities on campus, perpetuating a sense of marginalization or isolation (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2007; Redmond, 2006; Spellman, 2007). Considerable research now shows that engagement models for traditional-aged post-secondary students are not effective with mature students.

[82] In their review of learning barriers experienced by low income adults, Chovanec and Lange (2010) conclude that dispositional barriers cannot be understood in isolation from situational and institutional barriers; for those most removed from learning, barriers are often multiple and interacting. Further, note the authors, barriers are often deeply entrenched at systemic levels that are difficult to address by focusing on barriers faced by individual learners; a more holistic and macro-structural understanding of barriers is required.

Generally speaking, informants were ambivalent about students' dispositional barriers, making this one of the more difficult areas to talk about, and indeed to analyze. This informant, for example, felt she was "a little bit jaded because I've been working in the social assistance system for so long...I've seen a lot of students who are here because it's better than going to work. So to say that you just have to introduce education and they'll just blossom... I think I'm a bit jaded there." Yet she quickly followed up, "They keep attempting, and it's good because they're trying, and they want to learn, but there's so many things that are getting in their way."

Particularly with respect to grant funding for foundational students, informants also considered incentives and disincentives. Part-time workers, for example, qualify for less funding than the unemployed:

> If they're employed full time they don't qualify for the funding….Regardless of it's a dead end job – you could continue to work at Wendy's or McDonalds or Tim Horton's at that job. And you could go to school part time. Whereas the ones they consider more barriered – and this is something a lot of people struggle with – then they qualify for the funding. So in a way you reward the people you think are more barriered for whatever reason, maybe lack of motivation. Whereas somebody who is trying, you said "Okay you don't qualify for the funds." Somebody comes to you who is unemployed, well he qualifies for the funding. Why isn't he employed? A lot of times it's because he's not looking for a job. Right?

The dis-ease with which informants discussed questions of motivation suggested that this is difficult and contentious issue. It has clear implications for the structure agency debate, and will be considered further in the conclusion of this chapter.

Students' Career Readiness

Closely related to the barriers noted above, and perhaps in part as a consequence of them, are students' varying levels of readiness to engage in program and career planning. Readiness, as I'm using it here, describes potential students' willingness and ability to perform the tasks needed to choose a realistic and achievable career route. Readiness, according to the advisors I spoke with, was frequently limited. "I think there's an assumption [on the part of Alberta Works] that when they walk through our doors, that they have a pretty good idea of what they want to do, and that if they choose that career goal, it's because they've put some thought into it," said one advisor. But, she added, this was not at all the case.

Realistic Goals

According to advisors in the prospective students' office, students who come to Norquest often have career ambitions well beyond those career routes offered by the College; in keeping with the many facets of a "good job" I outlined in Chapter Three, they want to pursue careers that offer prestige,

security, and a good income. However many of the careers that Norquest prepares students for are terminal – that is, they do not offer opportunities for advancement, nor can they be built upon in future education programs. Jobs generally do not pay well unless they are unionized, and shift work and precarious work are not uncommon features of many of the occupations that students are prepared for (e.g. health care aide, community support worker). Further, many students come with the aforementioned barriers that will make loftier goals difficult to achieve: funding limitations, lack of academic pre-requisites, and/or long time horizons for program completion. Front-line counselors are thus placed in the position of having to shape prospective students toward more limited career aspirations. At the same time, these individuals also have to encourage prospective/present students to have aspirations – that is to be positive and forward thinking with respect to the career/employment prospects that are realistically achievable.

Advisors stated that the great majority of the students they counselled demonstrated limited understanding about what their career goals entailed. For example, students may be interested in a career as a psychologist or counsellor, and but not realize that this occupation generally requires a Master's degree. Students plan further education without knowing entrance requirements and what is required to achieve them, the length of the program required to obtain the qualification, and the opportunity costs associated with study, or the working conditions for the chosen occupation, including shift work and what this might impose on work-life balance and childcare needs.

Poor or partial career preparation did not just characterize the highly barriered students encountered in Norquest's front-line offices, however; staff and faculty from the Practical Nursing program similarly observed that many students did not deeply understand the nature of the occupation they were entering. In fact, they wished that diploma students were accessing the career services offered by the college more than they were. As one advisor described, "When it comes to PN a lot of the people...didn't have a clue what nursing was all about. When we send them for the first clinical...you go into a seniors' facility. And it's long term care. And that's where you really get to know what nursing is really all about."

Overall, respondents' observations suggest that lack of experience with the Canadian labour market and being younger are the factors most likely to contribute to unrealistic or inappropriate career choices. However, as will become very clear in the following section, redressing inappropriate career choices is no small feat, as the career investigation process itself is subject to an array of barriers.

Researching Career Goals

According to informants, not only do students often lack realistic career goals; many also lack the ability, supports and/or confidence to research these goals and the steps they will need to take in order to achieve them. Career exploration is an important and necessary stage of effective career planning (cf. Hartung, 2010). Career exploration, however, requires foundations in information literacy – the capacity to acquire, make sense of and use information for planning one's life activities and goals.[83] Informants described that potential students applying for funding were often missing key information pieces: daycare costs, transcripts, EI claim information, or tax and employment records, for example. Advisors reported that the majority of students they see have difficulty completing required paperwork, including career planning and applications for financial support.

Conversely, counsellors saw greater likelihood of success for students who did possess information literacy and planning skills. They described students who had completed forms, lined up childcare, and/or who had already considered some different options with respect to a career path: "They come in, and they'll be like, oh I already have the day care set up, it's all set up, I've got back up plans, so if the daycare doesn't work, I do have babysitters. So everything seems to be already in place. They have everything organized and...every decision is well thought out."

Advisors did have some tools and strategies in place to help students move past barriers to complete the steps they needed to take to make informed choices about their career goals. However, these efforts were often unsuccessful. Advisors noted that successful career research depended not only on the knowledge and awareness that students brought into the process, but very significantly on their willingness and ability to build this knowledge and awareness. Norquest counsellors try to help with this process, for example by providing potential students with worksheets to help them gather information and do career exploration. "I wonder how much this helps them though," considered an advisor, "you know, in terms of focusing on what their goal is. I've often thought of that, actually, and whether they're just, you know, copying down the information."

Staff also encourage students and prospective students to contact employers, and refer students to the various information nights offered by post-secondary institutions and programs. Again, multiple barriers come into play here. In some cases, English language literacy can be a very significant barrier. If potential students have low English language literacy, said one informant, "how will they

---

[83] UNESCO (2005) states, "Information literacy empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals." Retrieved from http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=27055&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

remember all the questions to ask an employer? I can give them a list of, let's say 5 or 6 questions and say these are good questions for you to go over, and I can prepare them, but when they go in there nervous, will they remember that?" Informants described some practical barriers – for example time, transportation and child care – that made it difficult for people to visit workplaces and learn about work. Informants also described barriers related to fear, lack of motivation, and lack of confidence – conditions that are often intertwined. One informant explained that they had abandoned earlier efforts to have students complete career research because "students were not doing it:"

> When we ask them to go and talk to three people who work in that field, what you would hear was "Well I don't know anybody who works in this field. They wouldn't talk to me." They would come up with a bunch of excuses about not being able to get some direct, you know, information. And sometimes, you know, people are a lot more willing to help you and give you that information than they think. But they're really, really, really scared about it. "Oh they don't have time for me. They're too busy. They think I want a job." And that kind of stuff.

The inability of counsellors to "pin down" a specific reason for lack of follow through suggests the complexity and diversity of barriers that potential students present. Informants were thus understandably hesitant to make global observations, or to generalize too greatly. What was clear was that the present system is not providing the support and/or the incentives that potential students need in order to formulate feasible career plans.

Sources of Career Advice

Given that so many of the students Norquest serves demonstrate limited understanding of career choices and labour markets, where do they get their career ideas from? Informants offered a number of possibilities here. Advisors stated that many students are motivated to help others through their career choices. Students' own past experiences of surviving and overcoming adversity or personal travails manifest in a desire to support others. Students who spent time in refugee camps, for example, may aspire to be a volunteer coordinator or community support worker like the volunteer leaders in their camp communities. Health care professions, social work and addictions counselling are among the helping professions that students express interest in, at least in part because they have either benefited from such supports in their past themselves, or want to offer others better supports than they experienced.

Informants also stated that word of mouth among peers plays a significant role (cf. ACCC, 2008). Students will hear rumours that a particular sector is flourishing, and then identify a career goal in this field because it they believe it will assure them a job upon graduating. One advisor described, "It

spreads like wildfire, particularly when you get into the school." Once students are in foundational or preparatory classes, they share information. So, as this advisor explained, a student might approach a career counselor saying "My friend said if I came down here, and changed my career goal to this, then I can be this." Students also exchanges stories about the best ways to maximize and make use of Alberta Works funding. Students may be attracted from out of province because they find out about Alberta Works learner funding through friends and family members.

However, advisors noted that much of the "word of mouth" learning about careers was restricted to considering labour market demand and pay. Students, as noted above, did not have information about the nature of the work itself, nor had they necessarily considered its suitability. Conversely, advisors felt students' career plans were more realistic when they had been exposed to the day-to-day realities of a given occupation through volunteer work, or a friend or family member who worked in the field. This informant, for example, described:

> I sometimes get students who come in and say "I want to be a nurse, my mom is a nurse, and I've helped her, or she talks about it, so I know what it's about." And truly, you can tell because when you talk to them they're like, "Oh yeah, they do this, and this," and they are familiar with [nursing]. Also, students who have volunteered at other places are familiar with the occupation.

Media plays a role in some prospective students' career planning. To some extent, the media's unrealistic portrayal of careers was felt to be a factor when students propose unrealistic career goals. "The news is a source," said one informant. "Or maybe they see things on television – Crime Scene Investigator was one – *CSI*. Those kinds of things that we see. But they are getting the information from the wrong sources."

Two informants discussed the role of marketing practices in the post-secondary sector as well. These informants had some reservations about the ways in which Norquest was forced to compete with other institutions, and also with how provincial funding and policy priorities sometimes placed advisors in the position of promoting programs that were not necessarily in the best interests of the students. Students too might be incentivized by funding provided by the government. Shared one advisor:

> [A student might say] "Well I could get a lot of free money for this program... for this particular program." So again it's marketing in a way. Norquest doesn't have the big budgets as in those other schools. But in a way really is it really proper career planning? Are you making an informed choice?

Broader "consumer models" of education thus appear to influence both students' approaches to career planning, and Norquest's own marketing practices (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2007).

III. Analysis

The findings from my informants were, as I continue to reflect upon them, mundane and unsurprising on the surface. There is nothing new, for example, in documenting the kinds of barriers that adult students can face in post-secondary learning – p articularly those who have a history that has marginalized them and reduced their odds for success (Chovanec & Lange, 2010; MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006). Nor is it particularly surprising that tight budgets coupled with enormous need in the learning community can create frustrating gaps between the optimal and the feasible for service providers.

Yet as straightforward as these observations and patterns are, they pose great challenges for analysis. Much of what is meaningful about the findings is rendered so by reading "between the lines" – by recognizing subtle patterns in the ways in which Norquest's faculty and employees made sense of both the students they serve, and of the institution itself as a field-within-fields that shapes and constrains the actions of staff and students alike. In Bourdieusian terms, this is an uncovering of *doxa*: the fabric of taken-for-granted beliefs that govern practice (Atkinson, 2011). For Bourdieu the doxa masks and legitimizes systems of domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the contexts of policy analysis, for Bourdieu, misrecognition occurs when policy orthodoxies achieve a taken-for-granted condition of practices (Thomson, 2005). From this perspective, informants' views reflected greater critical awareness than a Bourdieusian perspective might anticipate. Many articulated the tensions of supporting a marginalized student population within a wider institutional field characterized by positional competition and pressure to generate revenue in the face of eroding public funding. It is important to recognize that my informants were speaking as social beings and lay moralists, evaluating the world around them (Sayer, 2005), but also as institutional functionaries, evaluating this same world in terms of efficiencies, enablements, and constraints. Their comments about the students they served were thus always characterized by this dual perspective.

For the balance of this chapter, I'd like to focus my analysis on two overarching themes related to conceptualizations of human agency under given policy and institutional conditions. First, as noted earlier, it is helpful to interpret the data offered by my informants by looking at how the *doxa* of Norquest and the wider fields it occupies shapes normative understandings of human agency. The second theme, related to the first, is the ambivalence of informants in trying to characterize the nature and extent of students' actions and choices. Together, these two themes show how meritocratic norms

are reinforced through Norquest's structure, which is in turn an institutional embodiment of the normative force of human capital theory.

Structuring at the Institutional Level

Wright (2012) argues that social policy generally lacks a clear position on the relationship between human agency and institutions. Lacking a reflexive component, policy presents itself as neutral, so that its failures are easily attributed to pathologized, passive recipients of such policy. This section shows how institutions mediate policy. At least three features of Norquest reflected the ways in which underlying ascriptions of agency are instantiated in institutional structures (both material and cultural), subsequently shaping possible practices for both Norquest's employees, and the students they serve. These include the strong influence of Alberta's mandatory education and training programs on Norquest's operations, the shift to a "self-serve" student service model, and the professionalization of practical nursing, as this has played out in the context of Norquest's PN program.

Alberta Works

The first of these three features is the Alberta Works program. When informants discussed "grant funding," they were referring to the fully funded education and training program offered by the provincial government. Students applying for and receiving this funding make up the vast majority of clientele seen through the Prospective Students office. Norquest's relationship with the province is longstanding, and the organization is heavily dependent on grant funding for its foundational programs. The processes through which the Prospective Students Office advised students were thus significantly determined by grant funding requirements. For example, to qualify for funding, students needed to establish a career goal. Yet ineffective practices related to career exploration and planning meant that plans were unrealistic, and goals were frequently adjusted after the fact.

Thus prospective students and advisors alike were locked into an individualized, deficit model of education and career planning that reduces the individual to his or her "employability" (cf. Compton, Cox & Laanan, Warren & Webb, 2007). This phenomenon was best captured by an informant who explained, "Grant funding they're allowed to be a full time student for three years. So where can we get them in that amount of time to get them employed? Cause the whole point of the program is to lead them to employment." Yet in the next breath she considered "If that philosophy changed and we were looking at better life circumstances, would thirty months be enough? Probably not."

The comment on "better life circumstances" in the context of my conversation with this informant, reflected a more holistic conception of what it means to learn. It shifted the

conceptualization of the learner from an inadequate worker to an adult who would learn chosen content at her own pace, according to her own interests, needs, goals and priorities. The comment also points to the established learning divide between learner "haves" and "have-nots," wherein learning begets more learning (Field, 2006; Myers & deBrouker, 2006). Whereas PSEs compete for adults continuing their professional education by offering flexible delivery options, options for foundational and vocational education, at least at this institution, are less flexible. In these foundational programs, there are "not a lot of choice for people who have to work," noted one informant. Another person I spoke with discussed the ways in which the funding formulas worked against part-time students, forcing them to disengage with the labour market in order to study. Provocatively, as I discuss in the next section, Norquest, as an institution, associates more flexibility and freedom in programming with greater responsibility on the part of students, again affirming a meritocratic impulse to reward the autonomy and self-initiative valued by post-industrial employers.

Self-Serve or Full-Serve?

The second way in which I observed that Norquest's institutional structures set parameters and standards of individual agency lay in the college's repositioning of itself within Alberta's post-secondary landscape. As noted earlier, funding and the Campus Alberta Framework[84] have pushed Norquest to re-invent itself, which it did in a committed way via a lengthy consultation process. Norquest was in the process of formally "re-branding" when I completed my interviews for this study in late 2012 and early 2013. This discursive context was quite helpful for my work, because I was able to engage some informants in what amounted to more philosophical questions about the goals of their work, and the goals of adult learning.

One aspect of this re-branding discussed by several informants was the shift of Norquest from a "full service" student support model to one of "self-serve for all; full-serve for those who need it." This slogan hardly rolls off the tongue, and its awkwardness reflects philosophical tensions between the two approaches. As one informant summarized, "There are two camps. One thinks that we need to guide the student through the system and the other camp where we just have to... they should be able to do it on their own."

---

[84] The *Campus Alberta Framework* was launched in 2002, and was intended to clarify and coordinate the mandates of the province's various post-secondary institutions. A significant outcome of Campus Alberta was that it opened the doors for 2 year colleges to develop full four year degree programs. MacEwan, Edmonton's largest community college, became "MacEwan University." Potentially, as MacEwan shifted its focus and structures, opportunities might emerge for Norquest to step in and create more two year diploma programs.

One obvious rationale for the drive to "self-serve" is the cost savings it offers. As earlier noted, declining budgets have made it more and more difficult for Norquest to offer support services. Enrollments have increased without proportional increases in operational costs that would go to student support services. There is also a strong pragmatic case to be made: As one informant asked, is full-serve "hurting or helping the student?" If staff continue to provide the kind of "full service support" they have in the past, she said, "The student doesn't learn anything in the long run. So what happens when the student leaves Norquest? And is applying for her first job?" Other informants discussed aspects of institutional isomorphism or "mission drift," as Norquest repositions itself to scale up into offering more diploma programs and continuing professional education (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011).[85] These are not just fiscal considerations, however. Informants who discussed the strategic direction of the college expressed uneasiness with decisions that at least in part seemed caught up in a wider ethos of positional competition in the post-secondary sector.

The "full-service" versus "self-service" model determines two different possibilities for growth and learning: one embedded in relationships, and another upholding autonomy and self-sufficiency as desirable, individual qualities. This distinction is captured in present intake and counselling structures – recalling these are very much shaped by the requirements of Alberta Works programming – that limit advisors to the basic, hands-on forms of support. These forms of support are precisely those that are least likely to build capacity in students to eventually self-advocate. One informant described more robust forms of counselling as requiring "role-modelling." But she added, "This takes a lot of time, right? It's not something you can do in a one-hour appointment. That's something that takes quite a bit of time because there is so much you can role model. There's so much you can teach them."

Thus the present model, described as "full-service" yet under-resourced, appears to offer a level of relationship that does not practically exist. Instead, the relationships between advisors and students are necessarily structured as fleeting and superficial. Paradoxically, the "full-service model" operates at the same time to script students as dependent and failed according to norms of autonomy and self-

---

[85] This "mission drift" may be regarded as an institutional response to the transition of MacEwan College (Edmonton) and Mount Royal College (Calgary) into "university colleges" able to grant full four year degrees. As these new universities aspire to strengthen traditional degree offerings to compete with the province's established research universities, Norquest in turn attempts to strengthen the two year diploma offerings that have been the staple of the colleges in the past. What is interesting about this repositioning is that it is not only a pragmatic response in terms of competing for students; it is also symbolic in the sense that the currency of institutional prestige trickles down, benchmarked at the high end by internationally recognized research universities.

sufficiency. These norms are legitimized by the practical end game of completing an education, completing a job search, and becoming employed.

Practical Nursing as a Professional Culture

Nested within Norquest, the Practical Nursing program is a third way in which institutional structures instantiate norms of agency. The more obvious structures have already been highlighted as "institutional barriers:" a highly structured and intensive program of studies, complex transitions between theory and clinical placements, and resource constraints that make it difficult to create a stable complement of faculty to support students. But the PN program is also the lone program at Norquest steeped in a well-established professional culture. As one informant noted the culture and expectations of the program are powerfully driven by a "hidden curriculum" that significantly impacts a students' success, but is not articulated clearly, if at all, in instruction.

Informants from the PN program consistently emphasized that it was not academics but what might be called "soft skills" that determined program success. And to learn these, said one instructor, "I think it probably takes a long time. I don't think the students are with us long enough for us to be able to teach that." In essence, students must be able to understand and conform to an occupational culture that is dominated by white, middle-class females. The informants I spoke with recognized this cultural hegemony, and described how the shifting of the PN from a vocation to a profession placed demands on students who did not come from middle-class North American backgrounds. Described one nurse,

> I remember some other students who were kind of, you know, it seemed like they were the rough, camp cook kind of person... and you know just a real... they're like the diamonds in the rough. They need a little polish. And once they get that polish, they are such great nurses, sometimes. You know, they're able to take... and if we can tone down some of those tough surfaces.

Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and habitus are particularly useful here. The nurse was observing embodied qualities that students must change in order to be "professional." Informants understood these qualities as products of students' backgrounds – as outcomes of their social locations and past life experiences – but also stressed that students had to be willing and able to adapt, demonstrating qualities like punctuality, self-management, self-care, and initiative to self-advocate. Students who demonstrated these qualities earned the respect and support of program staff.

Such qualities are more likely to be possessed by students who have the correct "habitus" to begin with, although as the informant quote above illustrates, this is not always a determining factor of success. Like all of the informants in the PN program, this nurse emphasized the commitment to care as

the most important attribute in PN candidates. In fact, many perceived a "sense of entitlement" among younger middle class students as a barrier to successful practice in the field, even though these students possessed the social and cultural capital to navigate the formal education components of the program. Students without familial capital endowments, even if they demonstrate caring dispositions, are still "diamonds in the rough" who may or may not learn to "read" the professional culture of nursing.

The Agency of Students: Sources and Consequences of Ambivalence

Informants' observed correlations between certain risk factors and completion can be backed by other studies about college persistence and completion (e.g. Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Robbins et al., 2005). Some of these risk factors, while troubling, are quite straightforward, and informants were able to account for these in a matter-of-fact manner. Lack of affordable childcare and the limitations of public transit, for example, pose clear challenges. Particularly with respect to non-Canadian born students, informants accorded legitimacy to poverty, linguistic and cultural barriers, and to past experiences -- for example, having largely grown up in a refugee camp and thus "not understanding the North American work ethic."

Many situational barriers can be considered in broad, abstract terms. To speak of "poverty" or "discrimination," for example, one can point to the existence of such phenomena without invoking questions of moral culpability. Because social problems are complex, even where systemic injustices appear to be operating, it is difficult to point specifically to their causes and origins. Institutional barriers, closer to home but none-the-less still emergent enough to diffuse responsibility for their causes and effects, can also be considered this way. It is quite obvious that if students must be rushed through career and program planning they are less likely to get as much support as they need. Advisors in the Student Services office and informants from the PN program clearly and consistently indicated that they cannot build needed relationships with students or further develop in their helping roles because they lack both time and training to do so. Informants' accounts demonstrate that the kinds of barriers that make it challenging for students to succeed are both well understood and pervasive. Informants, then, did not struggle to articulate the social, economic and institutional barriers that many of the students face.[86]

Questions of dispositional barriers, however, proved much more difficult to discuss. As the preceding section shows, Norquest has institutional structures and practices that value and reinforce

---

[86] The Alberta Works funding program, informants consistently observed, compelled people to formal learning regardless of their readiness to undertake it.

qualities of autonomy, initiative, and the ability to conform to dominant cultures and discourses in higher education. Drawing on their past experiences with students, informants found that students exhibiting these qualities were more likely to complete their programs and therefore, from Norquest's perspective, "succeed." Even while recognizing the depth, array and complexity of barriers, they were more confident that people with individual traits like organization, clarity of purpose, and motivation would complete their programs and reach their career goals.

Yet how and under what conditions are such dispositions cultivated? For Bourdieu, they constitute habitus, and the durability of habitus thus becomes a central consideration for analysis of life chances. Some of the people I interviewed clearly struggled to articulate their own personal perspectives on what portion of challenges they saw students encountering could be attributed to structural or systemic issues versus individual agency and choices. Empathy was evident in their responses, but there was also a current of resentment with respect to clients who appeared to be accessing grant funding because it provided more money than the basic income support they would otherwise receive. Informants referred to past life "circumstances" or "choices" like leaving high school or becoming young parents. Were actions in fact products of circumstances beyond the individual's control? Or were they personal choices? Or some combination of both? Such ambivalence was a common theme in informant interviews.

In practice, structure and agency is a matter of "both/and," not "either/or." This central insight has motivated theorists like Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Margaret Archer among others, to try to articulate a way of thinking about society that is not reductive in either sense. It is little wonder that informants would similarly struggle. Terms like "barriered students" or "barriered individuals," terms frequently used by Norquest and Alberta Works informants,[87] can function as a kind of discursive whitewash – a way to capture moral tensions without delving into the sticky discussions that might require taking overt political stances. Consequently, while the effectiveness of the Alberta Works program was easy to challenge, the morality of workfare itself was never on the table (Wright, 2012).[88]

---

[87] Alberta Works also carefully and consistently referred to clients as "Albertans," rather than people. For example, "An Albertan may come into our office," or "Albertans can access…" This was clearly a policy directive, and its effects, at least in the contexts of my conversations, were nothing short of bizarre.

[88] In her discussion of welfare-to-work policies in the UK, Wright (2012) identifies a "gap between accounts of agency grounded in the lived experiences of social actors (policy-makers, front-line workers and service users) and hypothetical models of individual agency (e.g. 'rational economic man') which have been more influential in policy design" (p. 309). This gap was very evident at Norquest College.

An Institution Divided Against Itself

One significant challenge to my data analysis was an unanticipated gap between the two groups of informants I interviewed. As earlier noted, Student Services staff work almost entirely with "foundations" students – those with less than a high school education. The PN program, on the other hand, generally serves a traditional student population. Most of the students in the PN program are white, female, and recently graduated from high school. I wondered whether I could find commonalities in the experiences of informants from these two very different groups, especially given that the student participants for my study did not go through the intake process designed for grant-funded students.

But again, fields reside within fields, and this is part of both the challenge and the richness that comes with meso-level analysis. The PN program and the Student Services office have distinctly different cultures and concerns based on the very different students and purposes they serve. But when both are mapped within the larger fields of Norquest as an institution, and Norquest in turn is considered in light of the political economy of Alberta's post-secondary system, patterns do indeed emerge. Most notably, there is a thick texture of what Bourdieu would call "symbolic violence" governing the experiences of Norquest informants and students alike. As a community college, Norquest carries vestiges of an institutional ethos of egalitarianism and inclusion (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004) – a sort of championing for the underdogs in the game of social mobility. [89] This ethos is challenged by high-stakes credentialism, and broader individualist discourses that ratchet up both tension and competition in the game.

This challenge is perhaps most evident in the shift underway from a "full serve" to a "self-serve" student support model, and the tensions this generated for intake staff. "You have a couple strong voices at the college," said one informant. "They think these are adults, and they don't need that type of hand-holding. And, we are a post-secondary." These "voices" likely reflect broader conditions of "being post-secondary" under two significant factors shaping Alberta's post-secondary system today. The first is that all institutions are under intense pressure to generate revenue, causing them to compete for students and develop programs and practices based on market appeal.[90] Norquest, then, must focus on revenue-generating diploma programs and continuing professional education offerings, strengthening doxa of self-reliance, individualism, and entrepreneurialism. This is quite in keeping with Alberta's policy

---

[89] Grubb and Lazerson (2004) state, "It is tempting to see...two competing conceptions of community colleges: as egalitarian institutions extending schooling upward for greater numbers of students, and as inegalitarian institutions keeping masses away from the university. In practice they are both" (p. 98).

[90] Campus Alberta Planning Frameworks are released by Advanced Education to help institutions plan based on labour market trends, but in urban centers, I would argue that institutions also jostle for market share by creating and marketing programs based at least in part on consumer appeal. But that's a whole other paper.

messaging in recent years, and the frontier mentality accompanying Alberta's wealthy, resource based economy.[91]

The second significant driver, related to the first, is the pressure of "academic drift" within a post-secondary system increasingly characterized by a symbolic economy of prestige. Students, hearing messages that higher credentials are always better, have flooded to universities, pressing colleges to strengthen academic transfer programs and offer applied degrees (Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Raffe, 2003). In Alberta, this has been evident in the morphing of colleges into "university colleges," and subsequent shuffling and reconfiguration of two-year diploma programs.[92] MacEwan College, for example, became MacEwan University, and began offering four year undergraduate degrees. Given that MacEwan is now focusing resources on its more prestigious ranking as a "university," Norquest now competes directly with MacEwan University and other institutions for diploma level students, even though 80% of their students are undertaking foundational learning and short vocational programs.

"Being post-secondary" for Norquest, then, means entering a positional competition for prestige. Both symbolically and materially, the institution is compelled to betray its own institutional ethos and history as a "community" college. The "full serve" and institutional supports presently offered reflect an underlying belief that community supports are valuable – that they enhance opportunities and capacities for choice for students who have lacked these in their past lives.[93] Staff in both the student services office and the PN program believed that stronger relationships with students were ideal, and expressed dissatisfaction that they were unable to offer more when students were so clearly in need.

In contrast, the officially promoted "self-serve" model positions students as lone arbiters of their fates. The types of decisions that students must make about their programs of study and career plans – decisions that will factor into their labour market success – are to be rendered more, rather than

---

[91] The Alberta Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education web page states: "Education and entrepreneurship are cornerstones of the dynamic economy that Albertans continue to build through their knowledge, adaptability and entrepreneurial spirit. Toward that end, Alberta Innovation and Advanced Education aligns economic development activities in the province with post-secondary education, entrepreneurship, industry training, research and innovation." Retrieved Oct 7, 2014 from http://eae.alberta.ca/ministry/about.aspx.

[92] Again this is a result of the major restructuring of Alberta's post-secondary system into a "six sector model" (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2010).

[93] Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) make the case that career planning has been dominated by the field of psychology. The "social" dimensions and contexts of education and career planning are thus often overlooked. These authors and the British studies that build on them – these have been the focus of my literature reviews given their focus on class – show that education pathways and career planning are highly subject to habitus.

less in isolation of supports offered by front-line advisors and instructional staff. This "self-serve" proposition is being advanced despite the observations of informants in both the PN program and the student services office that more rather than less career planning is needed for all students, not just grant-funded students.

The accounts by Norquest informants together add up to an institution that, despite its historically egalitarian ethos, is subject to broader political and economic constraints that undermine the very students they wish to serve.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the institutional environment experienced by the student participants enrolled in the PN Program. PSEs, as meso-level phenomena, mediate and materialize policies and funding schemes that reflect the Alberta government's ideological faith in human capital theory, and by extension its faith in education as a meritocracy. However, the gap between the empirical realities experienced by informants who work on the front lines with students and the mandates of the college and Alberta government (Alberta Works; Alberta Advanced Education) shows that "widening access," in and of itself, can function to push students into a system that actually exacerbates existing inequalities. This is achieved, in effect, by a soft certification of students' "deficits" via their institutionalized status. Under worst-case conditions, post-secondary education makes it possible to flunk out in the labour market in new and creative ways. Human capital theory, as discussed further in my concluding chapter, positions individual workers and learners as "entrepreneurs" who sell their skills portfolio on the labour market (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). Norquest students' learning is, from informants' accounts, as much about learning this kind of entrepreneurship as it is about the content of course work.

Informants' accounts in this chapter clearly show that the cultivation of such "entrepreneurialism" through formal education does not start on a level playing field. Students' capacities to research career options, choose programs of study, and persist to completion are hindered by an array of material and cultural barriers. The Alberta Works funding program, informants consistently observed, compels people to formal learning regardless of their readiness to undertake it, or the ultimate value of such learning on the labour market. It is thus not terribly surprising that the emergent system, while claiming to level the field via widening access, in fact reinforces the status quo by setting up people for failure. As the next chapter will show, such "skills" are better understood as forms of cultural capital, acquired relationally and experientially rather than through technical,

institutional processes. For this reason, as I will further argue, institutional settings, by virtue of their top-down, technocratic structures, can offer little in the way of helping students to cultivate the cultural capital they require to transition successfully to the labour market.

Norquest is a key access point to the post-secondary system, but, as this chapter has shown, is increasingly positioned within its broader political economy in ways that are more likely to undermine students targetted by "widening access" programs than support them. Informants' accounts in this chapter have shown that it is not enough to "widen access" to post-secondary education; comprehensive policy thinking must consider what is likely to happen to students once they are in the doors of a PSI. This conclusion will be considered from students' perspectives and further reinforced in Chapter Seven. The detailed experiences of the student participants in my study presented in Chapter Seven will show not only the hazards posed by institutionalized policies and practices, but also the labyrinth of learning constituted by what Bourdieu has consistently argued is the real credential: the incorporation of appropriate cultural capital into the habitus.

Chapter Seven: Choices and Chances

It has been many years since my first tentative steps toward an undergraduate degree. It was late summer, and I walked from my nearby waitressing job to the Faculty of Education building that houses my graduate office and department today. I don't remember a lot of the details of my exchange with the advisor across the counter from me at the undergraduate student services office – only that it was perfunctory, and kind of anti-climactic. After all, I'd had to screw up some courage even to walk into that office in the first place. It was potentially my date with destiny: there was an air of ceremony – at least in my head – around taking the first steps toward registering for a Bachelor of Education degree. I'd had enough of my parents' and teachers' frustration about my failure to achieve my "potential;" it was time to see what this university business was all about.

I walked back to my crummy restaurant job armed with a thick calendar of courses and a handful of coloured sheets that reviewed admission requirements and the structure of the program itself. It was a bit overwhelming. "What if they're all wrong?" whispered a little voice inside me. "What if I don't belong there at all?"

Although it has been a long time since I experienced those initial feelings of uncertainty and trepidation, the scene above came readily to mind as I listened to the stories of the student research participants. Like me, they had invested a great deal of meaning in the act of returning to school. Some also shared the feeling that there was something life-altering and momentous about the transition – for example Anna's almost reverential confession that she would be "the first one" in her family to complete a college diploma, or Tanis' unfinished business in terms of confirming her academic abilities in a professional program.

We all shared strong feelings of trepidation and hope. In their study of social class and education choice, Reay, David and Ball (2005) observed that working class students were more emotional in their narratives than their middle-class counterparts. The authors' explanation was simply that for working class students, the choice of a program and institution was more novel and more risky. General anxiety, too, came out of the unfamiliarity of the academic environment -- what Bourdieu would account for as a habitus deeply at odds with this environment (Swartz, 1997).

The role of education in cultivating and converting the "right" forms of capital is a central thesis linking Bourdieu's many works. Bourdieu also emphasizes, however, that the educational dice are loaded because cultural capital possessed in the first place, drawn largely from one's family of origin, plays a significant role in how well the student will fare (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual framework, this chapter delves into my participants' experiences as "non-

traditional" students. If Anna, Tannis and the other women in this study are the types of students targeted by "widening access" policies, what factors make their success more or less likely? The thematized findings from the women's stories, which make up this chapter, especially focus on the types of relationships the student participants formed with instructors, peers, and advisors. Within the ecological framework, this roughly constitutes a micro-analysis,[94] and from a Bourdieusian perspective, provides specific accounts of interactions between habitus, field, and individual complements of capital.

I. Big Ticket Mistakes

Terry's pursuit of a Practical Nurse diploma wasn't her first kick at the post-secondary can. In the 1990s she had attended NAIT to upgrade her high school marks, and went on to complete a two-year program to become a Dietary Technician. Terry did her best to make a good choice. She got some work experience in hospitals in food service, and knew she would like working in that setting. From several years of working as a waitress, she knew that she liked to interact with people from all walks of life. Terry told me that she had read about the career route in literature from NAIT, which assured her that job prospects in this field were good. She had no reason to mistrust what she had read. It was only once she was in to the program that she became worried. "I went around talking to people," she said. "They said they don't even know why NAIT offered that course because there was very few jobs in that field, and based on reading the credentials – the books [NAIT] put out – there was a high number of jobs. So it was misleading."

The "word on the street" seemed to be confirmed when NAIT cut its Dietary Technician program the year after Terry finished, and rolled it into Hospitality Management. This was disconcerting. Why had they run her through an obsolete program of studies? Second and more importantly, Terry graduated just as Alberta's Klein government took a machete to the public sector. "The cutbacks were phenomenal," she recalled. "All the dietary technicians all got laid off."

Disheartened and in need of a job to pay off her student loans, Terry took a job that "paid the bills." How could others avoid her disappointing experience? Echoing the significance my Norquest informants placed on potential students learning more about their chosen field, Terry emphasized "Research, research, research where you wanna go and if that's what you want to do. Make sure that there's jobs there. Don't... don't go by the stats. Go out and, you know, look for yourself and see if there's jobs there."

---

[94] I say "roughly" here because there are overlaps between representing a "psychologized subject" and investigating micro-relations from a sociological perspective. One of the most interesting side-roads I took while writing was Côté and Levine's 2002 *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis.* As the title suggests, the project of this book is to compare, contrast and bring together conceptualizations of the self from the disciplinary fields of psychology and sociology. The book helped me to understand why I was wrestling so much to pin down the notion of "agency" in my study. In Bronfenbrenner's model, the "grey areas" between psychology and sociology with respect to representations of the self are better understood when "proximal processes" are invoked, because these are mediate between the self and the micro-environment, which is constituted both by relationships and materialities (cf. Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2004). From my reading to date, Margaret Archer probably offers the best correspondence with Bronfenbrenner when it comes to representing the complexity of these inter-relationships (Archer, 2007).

In this section, I'll take a closer look at the stories of my study participants' past learning efforts. All but one had at least one aborted post-secondary attempt in her post-secondary history. In each case, "failure" had been expensive and had inflicted psychic wounds – regret and shaken confidence. How did these paths fail? Did my participants "choose wrong," or were the odds somehow stacked against them?

Education and career paths are among the "big ticket" choices that, once acted upon, for better or for worse, have significant life consequences (Mueller, 2008). Not only are people from lower socio-economic status families of origin less likely to attend post-secondary education in the first place; they are also less likely to persist once they get there (Choy, 2001; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Parkin & Baldwin, 2009). And while it is not unusual for students of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds to change their minds, change institutions, or otherwise disrupt a program of studies (Fisher & Engemann, 2009) the consequences may be felt disproportionately by those who have few resources to begin with.

Although structural barriers – especially financial barriers and childcare issues – can make persistence difficult (Reay, 2003), according to the student participants in this study, structural barriers were not a key consideration. Past education efforts had not panned out because they were not a good "fit," for the student's interests, because of grades, or, in Terry's case, because of bad timing due to economic and labour market changes. Thus while the" wolf was never far from the door" for any of the women, many other factors worked against their success. In the case of this small sample, in addition to lacking "inherited" capital from their families of origin (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), two factors were evident: the quality of the career planning advice they had accessed, discovering after enrolment that the program was a poor fit; and, for some of the women, academic barriers in the form of low grades or missing pre-requisites. These factors added time and money to the ultimate costs of their career pursuits.

Getting Good Advice

Choosing a career path and the education needed to achieve it can be a challenge for many people, and indeed is a strong focus in the study of young adults (e.g. Lambert, Zeman Allen & Bussière, 2004; Lehmann, 2007). Some studies do suggest, however, that first-generation students face more hurdles in such choosing, none the least of which is a lack of relevant social and cultural capital in the family of origin (Jaeger, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Where do students go for ideas and advice when their families are unable to offer direction? It is a difficult enough problem for first-generation youth, let alone those mature students who, over time, become disconnected from both

secondary and post-secondary institutions as sources of advice (OECD, 2004; Grubb, 2004).[95] The student participants in my study had little in the way of advice about which careers to pursue, or institutions to attend. Parents and family, as noted in Chapter Three, could offer few practical supports in this regard, leaving the women largely to their own devices. In some cases they considered word-of-mouth from friends, but they mostly relied on institutionalized services – that is career advice available during high school, or through college counselling offices.

Career counselling experiences left much to be desired. An adult mentor or career counsellor can be a crucial influence on the aspirations of young adults who may not be encouraged to pursue post-secondary education otherwise (Hurst, 2012). Confirming the weak presence of career counselling and vocational learning in high schools (Bell & Bezanson, 2006; Grubb, 2004), and the generally marginalized status of students who are not high academic achievers in high school (Lehmann, 2007), my student participants described high school experiences with indifference. Only Anna described an influential relationship during high school -- one with a school counsellor who had directed her to a targeted program for Aboriginal Youth.

Student participants' experiences with post-secondary counsellors were not very fruitful either. Outstanding here was the consistency with which their encounters with these front line workers yielded less than was hoped for. The students I interviewed expressed the general expectation that institution-based advisors ought to be able to provide career advice, rather than just program planning. Khomal described her experiences this way:

> I tried to get help from the counsellors and stuff and nobody was really there to actually help you, like that listened to everything you're talking about. And they'd be "Well what program would you like to get into?" And I kind of wanted a suggestion about what would be better for me....There's really not enough guidance being given.

Students relied on this program advice, sometimes to their folly. Khomal, for example, had, prior to her present enrollment in the PN program, completed a Health Care Aide program at a cost of $16,000. She had been told by the advisor that this program would ladder in to more advanced programs in health sciences, and was surprised to find out, after the fact, that the HCA certification was a dead end.

---

[95] In Chapter Five, Norquest respondents provided some ideas about students' sources of advice and information: mass media, advertising, and the "huge" impact of word of mouth among peers. In both the student services office and the Practical Nursing program, staff described students' generally shaky foundations for career plans. They also noted the importance of practical experience to determining "fit," particularly in the PN program, which prepares students for a specifically defined and strongly practice-based career.

With little sense of direction and few advice resources at their disposal, the women in this study had chosen some pathways that, in retrospect, were not a good fit for their interests and aptitudes. Tanis recalled of an aborted Dental Hygiene program that she had simply thought during a trip to the dentist that it "looked like a pretty nice job. But I think maybe that was my mistake; I didn't get any information. All I have was the requirements about getting a position, and they told me how to be a dental assistant you have to have your certificate or diploma." Khomal's initial college enrollment in an elementary education stream was something she had quickly realized did not suit her, but not before spending several thousand dollars on tuition for non-transferable courses. Anna had initially pursued business administration, only to discover that she did not enjoy sedentary desk work. Overall, it was clear from my student participants' accounts of their past efforts that they had worked hard to make good choices, but in most cases simply didn't know what they didn't know – a point clearly tracing back to the social and cultural capital they had not been able to acquire in their families of origin.

Academics

Of the six students in my study, three had some challenges with grades.[96] Unsurprisingly, two of these three were the women who had come from other countries. Khomal's English and academic achievement were very good by the time she enrolled in the PN program, but her high school marks had not been strong. She attributed this more to the isolation of home study than to language, however. Regardless, Khomal found her post-secondary options limited until she completed upgrading courses. Tanis, who came to Canada as an older teen, experienced more academic difficulty as a result of her developing English language learning. She too had to return to take upgrading as an adult. Both women were faring well in the program at the time of our second interviews, and proud of the grades they were achieving. Anna, on the other hand, was struggling. As will be discussed in the next section, a failing grade in a course had significantly de-railed her participation in the PN program.

For some of the women, a sense of urgency, by their own admissions, sometimes contributed to suboptimal decisions. Tanis described, with much regret, how she had plunged into a psychiatric nursing program with a course overload, and had not followed the recommendations of an advisor who had suggested that she slow down and plan to graduate a year later. Juggling paid employment, care of her

---

[96] Norquest informants I interviewed in/for the preceding chapter noted several points at which weak academics could trip up a student, and the importance of solid academic foundations is also consistently emphasized in literature related to student persistence (Choy, 2001; Parkin & Baldwin, 2009). For the PN program in particular, with increasingly rigorous academic requirements, weaker grades and long gaps between high school and program entry could mean that students struggled, particularly with math and chemistry requirements.

aging parents and health issues, Tanis felt that "being impatient...rush... that is my big mistake." Four of the women chose program routes in part as a way to avoid pre-requisites that otherwise would have slowed them down. Of her efforts, Khomal explained "'I don't want to take the extra course; I just want to get into the program. So you change the program cause you don't want to take that extra course but then that program isn't exactly good for you, so it was like that way... just bouncing around." Even Elaine, who had generally expressed confidence in her preparation for the PN program, faltered when her student loans were jeopardized: "If I had waited a year to start this... if I had held off I would be in a better place right now. I would be in a better position to accomplish what I need to accomplish."

II. Navigation and Survival

It's one thing to get through the process of choosing a career path and a program of studies; it's another to get through the course one has set once these choices have been made. Widening access policies may have succeeded somewhat in diversifying and expanding post-secondary enrollment, but this doesn't translate to successful program completion. Studies of persistence have grown as PSIs are motivated, and in some cases mandated, to work toward improved completion rates (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2009; Mueller, 2008). Lower income and first-generation students are at greater risk for non-completion than their peers (Choy, 2001; Mueller, 2008), but these categories of students contain and largely overlap the class of mature students, many of whom are challenged by competing work, studying and family obligations (cf. Quimby & O'Brien, 2004; Reay, 2003). Persistence literature may examine the phenomenon from structural and institutional perspectives that emphasize favourable or discouraging policies and practices, but can also look at individual and psycho-social contributions -- family supports, or traits like resilience and efficacy, for example (Fisher & Engemann, 2009).

In this section, I focus particularly on Anna and Elaine to explore the areas of the student experience that are most likely to affect persistence. While all of the student participants had challenges, Anna, Elaine and Terry struck me as the most vulnerable. Supportive families and friends contribute significantly to the persistence of busy adult student (Lundberg, McIntyre & Creasman; 2008). In my interviews, my sense was that these women were somewhat socially isolated – a condition exacerbated by their status as single mothers. With few supports in their personal lives, students like these may be especially dependent on both instrumental and affective supports within their institutions, and especially vulnerable to negative effects when these supports fail.

A Tale of Two Students

In my study design, I had originally anticipated that interviews with my student participants would be completed in short succession of one another. Instead, several months passed between first and second interviews. This proved to have happy, unintended consequences for my research in that second interviews deepened my understanding of complexities of my participants' life circumstances. In these interviews, I learned "in the moment" how the continuity and completion of PSE programs may be threatened by unanticipated events, and the challenges of managing these events with few resources.

Although all of the student participants in my study had actively worked to position themselves for success in their studies, it was Anna and Elaine who came off as the strongest and most intentional in their self-advocacy. In my first round of interviews, both credited this in part to self-awareness gained through ongoing personal counseling, and to a "survivor" mentality (cf. Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). Both women were thirty-year old single mothers, and of the six students I interviewed, they were the two in direst financial straits. The similarities between the two noted in my first interviews meant I was surprised to the level of divergence I saw between the two women when I conducted the second round of interviews.

In my first encounter with Anna, I was struck by the initiative she had taken to access funding and resources to help her through school. Separated from her partner after a bout of domestic violence, she "fought for" Metis Housing: "And they don't have like an emergency housing or anything like but... I went in there and I was like 'Listen I need a home cause I want to go to school.' So that's what I did." She'd been funded for a course she had to repeat toward her business certificate because she had made her case to the funding organization. And she "fought" teachers and parents at her children's school: "You have to tell people what you want them to do for you," she said, "and you have to be like that straight up. Cause people will not do shit for anyone else if they don't have to."

Anna's learning biography was one of strategically accessing an array of programs targetting Aboriginal peoples. She had gained good work experience coming out of high school through an Aboriginal Stay-in-School program, and completed two college level cohort programs for First Nations and Métis adults. She was settled in a subsidized house through Metis housing, and had accessed several grants and scholarships to fund her education. Anna was matter-of-fact about these advantages: "I benefit, because a lot of people they have stats they have to reach. They need to have this many Aboriginal people in their workplace....So what a great thing! You're a Metis but you look white and you got work ethic! Like this is what they're thinking. I know what they're thinking. And it's fine."

In her first interview, Elaine exhibited similar confidence. Like Anna, she had a child with special needs, and actively engaged her children's school for needed accommodations. Using the same language of struggle as Anna, Elaine described, "I've been fighting for over six years to get her diagnosed. And fighting to get help for her. I fought everybody. The school – everybody. So I've been advocating for her for a long time as well," she said. But additionally, Elaine had cultivated a broader passion for self-advocacy through her prior work with adults with disabilities. Part of her role in the group homes she had worked in was explicitly teaching self-advocacy and "voice" to adults who, she described, had sometimes been deprived of making the simplest decisions for themselves. For Elaine, whose biography was characterized by a lifetime of emotional neglect, self-advocacy seemed a means to independence and self-reliance – not only for her clients, but for herself.

Things Fall Apart

I met with Anna and Elaine again at the end of the first year of the PN program, and their situations were, again remarkably parallel. Each found her studies in jeopardy, albeit for different reasons. Elaine and I met for the second time in spring, 2012. Unlike in our first interview, in which she was articulate and confident, Elaine averted her eyes just a little when I asked her what she was doing to get by between her semester break and her practicum. "Just retail," she said, almost apologetically. "Something easy. Just a couple of extra bucks here and there." But we both knew she had taken what she could get to survive the summer financially – there were no "extra" dollars for splurging on clothes with her employee discount.

Elaine had just come from a meeting with her bank. A student loan from many years prior was still, much to her surprise, on the books. "I had a student loan when I was eighteen and young and stupid, and hadn't finished the program," she recalled. "And I thought it had been taken care of cause I had taken care of part of it. Apparently I had only taken care of the provincial portion of it." The outstanding loan was now jeopardizing her next semester of study. She described the complex process of negotiating a loan settlement with her bank, seeking co-signors, and arranging bridge financing with an uncooperative ex-husband. Scheduled to start her clinical placement in only ten days, Elaine was pulling every string she could to find the money to pay back the outstanding debt so that she could proceed with a fresh student loan application.

I'd met with Anna just a couple of days earlier. She was struggling to pull together the psychic energy to restructure her program. She'd failed a critical course, and her academic advisor had walked her through the steps she would need to take to complete needed courses as an open studies student in

order to be re-admitted to the PN program. We sat at the kitchen table in her neat two-story home. Plaques and pictures on the walls show the centrality of family relationships in Anna's life... an observation she confirms when she talks wistfully about missing her boyfriend's children because she hasn't been seeing much of them lately. Busy weekends of baking and shopping with five children in the house helped Anna to feel grounded, and gave her a sense of purpose.

Together, we looked over a couple of pages printed off by her program advisor. They described options for three different courses offered through four different institutions. The array of choices was overwhelming: distance or face-to-face delivery? Should she take condensed courses back to back, or try to take two or even all three in one semester? Could she even pay for all three at once? Should she take a night class and leave her kids on their own a couple of evenings a week? "I'm not even sure where to start," she confessed.

I could tell Anna's program was in serious jeopardy. I had done enough interviews with Norquest informants and other students by now to recognize that money and the disruption of a failed class would make it difficult to get back on track. But I wondered if her fear and uncertainty weren't equal contributors. Although all of my student participants had fears and tribulations associated with their learning at Norquest, the juxtaposition of my interviews with Elaine and Anna, held within a couple of days of one another, offered significant insights into the types of life events that could "make or break" a student's program of studies, and the kinds of ongoing supports that seemed the most likely to help.

Persistence: Navigating Norquest

Accounts from Anna, Elaine, and the other students shed light on numerous institutional conditions that are more or less likely to lead to student persistence. These conditions are also well supported by persistence literature, which points to specific areas in which students can be tripped up. As will be further developed in this chapter, supports are not simply practical matters; daily institutional practices can contribute to feelings of belonging, or feelings of alienation. Research on non-traditional students has consistently demonstrated that both practical supports and these subjective feelings of "belonging" are important to student persistence.

Applying and Registering for Programs

Entering a post-secondary program can be an overwhelming experience. The inexperienced student is faced with application and admission processes that the Association of Canadian Community Colleges [ACCC] notes to be "often cumbersome, difficult to understand and lengthy" (2008, p. iii). Admission and registrations become more complex in not atypical cases of engagement with multiple institutions --

particularly if the student is relying on student loans, grants or scholarships (Frenette & Robson, 2010). Coordinating actions across multiple institutions, each with their own logics, protocols and deadlines, can contribute to the precariousness of transitions between institutions, and/or between work/schooling transitions.

Institutional admission processes are premised on a rational choice model in which the student systematically assesses institutions and the programs they offer, applies to these programs, and awaits acceptance (Redmond, 2006). It's a seductively straightforward account that did not at all capture the experiences of student participants in my study. Students described how difficult it could be to apply and register for programs, particularly when deadlines didn't always line up between institutions, and supports were difficult to access. Khomal, for example, recounted how her application process in Ontario had been thwarted by wait times for counselling, the complexity of transferring grade transcripts between provinces, and her own general lack of knowledge and direction:

> You have to make an appointment and wait another week or two. And sometimes by the time you get around to it your deadline's gone. So it's like now I have to wait a whole semester or the next term that the program's available in, and then apply and all that stuff. I wasted a lot of time like that....Cause I was like "Maybe I want to get into this; no maybe I want to do this. Apply here, apply there, it's like waste of $50 everywhere.

Anna's dilemma, continuing from her story above, made the registration process all the more complex, as she was placed in the position of weighing her options among four institutions and an array of course offerings. She did not have a working computer at home, and was nothing short of paralyzed by the task that lay in front of her.[97] Anna and others had at times been confused by pre-requisites, or sought the most expeditious routes to program enrollment because they did not want to take extra time and money to upgrade pre-requisites unless they absolutely had to. Three of my students described making program and institution choices at least in part based on avoiding certain pre-requisites. Tanis, for example, chose a private college instead of NAIT for a dental assistant program she had previously enrolled in because "if I want to go at NAIT I have to do upgrading. But with the KDM I didn't."

---

[97] Although it was not a significant factor in this study, the digital divide present at Norquest is noteworthy. Norquest's library was brimming with students at all times, because many students do not have computers to work on at home. Digital access and literacy also affects whether students like Anna will be able to research institution and enrollment options. Cf. Jesnek, L. M. (2012). Empowering the non-traditional college student and bridging the digital divide. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 5*(1), 1–9. Czerniewicz, L., & Brown, C. (2013). The habitus of digital "strangers" in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 44*(1), 44–53.

Stressors and mistakes made around registration processes may be exacerbated when decisions, by choice or by force, occur at the last minute. Late registrations, note Fisher and Engemann (2009) are one contributing factor to student attrition, perhaps because these cause problems like those described by my student participants. Tanis' first nursing program at MacEwan got off on the wrong foot when she was taken off a waiting list at the last minute. Rushing to meet admission paperwork requirements on short notice, she missed a crucial orientation session which she believed contributed to her lack of success in the program that year. Short time horizons can also contribute to financial difficulties. Both Elaine and Anna started their programs with no books because their funding had not come through in time. Such scenarios, according to Norquest informants, were not unusual.

Funding, Tuition and Living Expenses

The near hand-to-mouth existence of some of my participants -- particularly the four single mothers -- was a constant threat to program continuation. As noted above, the institutional timelines and processes were themselves a source of potential difficulty. These concerns were exacerbated when tight finances provided no buffer at all to help a student through a tough spot. Elaine's unwelcome surprise of past student loan debt and Anna's course failures were two examples of the kinds of circumstances that could throw a student off her timeline and put her program at risk. When I met Elaine and Anna for their second interviews that spring, both were scrambling to earn enough money to manage in the months that were not covered by student finance, and the circumstances each faced during those funding gaps made an already difficult situation worse.

In contrast Tanis and Terry were the two women in the group who had the least worry financially. While both were accessing student funding, each had also left secure and reasonably well paying work – Terry at the packing plant and Tanis with the Canadian Armed Forces – in order to return to school. Unlike Elaine and Anna, whose years before school were characterized by spotty and precarious employment, Tanis and Terry had time to think and plan ahead for their school years. Tanis and Terry both owned homes and were reasonably settled in terms of their living circumstances, whereas Anna and Elaine's situations were more fluid and transient.

The stories of Norquest informants in Chapter Six and my student participants in this chapter both highlighted "institutional barriers," but from two very different perspectives. Because Norquest staff were working with and processing a large number of students, efficiency necessitated rigid deadlines -- truly an institutional logic. However, the stories from my student participants showed that

this same rigidity could cause students like Elaine and Anna to slip through the cracks and out of their programs of study.

Practical Academic and Management Skills

Adult students and first generation students can struggle more than other students to understand and manage what is expected of them once they enter their program of studies (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Students' accounts pointed to some key areas where this was the case, or had been in the past. Struggles included accessing support services, managing time and study priorities, and the ongoing process of understanding and managing program requirements. These practical skills constitute a curriculum in their own right, yet are rarely "taught" to students in transparent ways. Students' accounts here support the notion of unarticulated expectations that form a "hidden curriculum," which various critical pedagogues and critical social theorists have proposed as a significant contributor to the role of education in the reproduction of social class structures (e.g. Apple, 2004; Bernstein, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). From a Bourdieusian perspective, these practices emerge naturally for those possessing a habitus that has been acculturated to succeed in the education system. The accounts that follow illustrate the challenges that can be experienced by students like those in my study, whose families of origin did not equip them with a habitus that would generate "appropriate," and intuitive responses.

First, my student participants had to learn how to seek out and make use of institutional supports – behaviours that non-traditional students are less likely to take up without explicit coaching in this direction (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2009).[98] The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (2008) found that many learners "are intimidated by the college environment, are afraid to ask for help or simply are not aware that such services exist" (ACCC, 2008, p. iv).[99] However, students may or may not know how to access support services offered by their institutions. Khomal recalled herself, for example, as a "totally naive, idiot" when she started her program:

> So I didn't know like you can like talk to others or go into a school and there's open lab type of things. Or like the library has instructors you can talk to and get some help on stuff and all

---

[98] In a demonstration project funded by the Millennium Scholarship Foundation, at-risk college students in 2-year programs accessed support services on their own only about 14% of the time. Uptake rates increased to 50% when a personal case manager was assigned, and 72% when an additional incentive of a financial bursary was introduced (cf. Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2009, p. 81).

[99] Conscious of its high-needs student population, Norquest strives to offer comprehensive supports, despite budget constraints. Supports at Norquest, for example, include tutorial services through the library, program advice, financial advice, emergency bursaries, and personal counselling.

that. Even like just... cheap Kijiji instructors or something. And like you can also get help
from other students too, right?

In addition to learning about institutional supports, student participants had to work hard to

organize their lives and manage their time well. Jayden was the only one of the participants who did not

come across as having significant time pressure. Even Tanis, the other woman without children, was

working as much as possible to maintain the home she owned and shared with her parents, who also

required some care and attention on her part. Khomal, in addition to studying full-time and caring for

her daughter, worked 15-20 hours per week as a health care aide.

The fast pace and rigid sequencing of the PN program demanded much of students in terms of

time management, and all were struggling to keep up, although they also framed their efforts as

learning. Terry, for example, had been a fairly indifferent student in high school, but in her first post-

secondary experience had approached her upgrading with clear goals in mind: "It showed me how hard

you have to work towards a goal. And, you know, you have to study and really... you know... put your

perspectives in line. You can't just pull it off and think you're going to get there." Elaine felt that full time

study had pushed her to "organize my life a bit more, because I tend to be a very 'run here run there'

kind of person." Elaine had learned to compartmentalize her life, in part to ensure she spent time with

her children. Anna, who seemed to be struggling a bit more academically than some of her peers,

described her learning curve in detail:

> It's all the little things and I just have to take them one thing at a time. That's why I'm not
> done my other thing? Cause I had a midterm yesterday. So I really focused a lot of my time
> on that midterm. And then I have this thing today. And I have a midterm next week. So I try
> to take things one thing at a time so I'm not overwhelmed. So I don't get all stressed out.
> And then that it seems achievable. That's my strategy right now. Is it working? I don't know.
> We'll see.

Finally, students had to meet both academic and professional expectations within the PN

program, as well as organize the transitions between their course work and clinical placements. The PN

program, as noted earlier, intersperses course work with clinical placements and practice labs.[100] All of

this learning is sequenced in a particular manner to assure that students have the knowledge and clinical

practices they need before they go into placements. PN program staff confirmed that students' failure to

understand and manage their programs could have significant consequences. "They aren't reading the

requirements," said one instructor. She described difficulties within the program of maintaining good

---

[100] As both Norquest instructors and students noted, the practice lab component of the program also presented an
array of unfamiliar expectations, with the care and the concern of the instructor playing a significant role in
students developing confidence.

communication with the students as they moved from classes to practicums. "So they're having to make decisions without all the information is a lot of what... what is happening."[101]

As an academic program, the PN program also requires study skills similar to those required in an undergraduate degree program. In their study of first generation college students, Collier and Morgan (2007) conclude that some students may lack basic skills that might help them to stick with and succeed in their programs – for example, knowing how to study effectively, or understanding the importance of attending classes regularly. They describe, for example, this first-generation student's lack of knowledge about routines that most post-secondary instructors take for granted: "I had no clue what the syllabus was or the importance of the syllabus. I remember just seeing a bunch of writing, a bunch of words, a bunch of recommendations and expectations, but it didn't register to me what it was, what the importance was" (p. 437). In a similar vein, Anna also described how her lack of knowledge had made things difficult. She still hadn't received her funding when classes started, and didn't know what to do:

> So I literally waited two days and then I was like 'Maybe I'll go to school cause I don't want to miss,' but then again I didn't know exactly what to do. If they had enrollments? And they had this when you register, and you enroll and they had, and they said 'Okay if you want to, I don't know. Here's the contact person for issues, for program information, or they have resources for such-and-such – tutoring or like whatever." Just so I could be like in a better position I think that would have helped me. If that makes sense.

Tanis attributed her failure in a previous program in part to not understanding program expectations.

> I was sure that what I was doing was right. So I didn't have any doubts that I wasn't doing things. So when I hand it in, it wasn't right at all and it lowered my marks. And then a classmate told me like when I told her "I don't understand what's wrong with this." And she told me that the information was online about how the assignment's supposed to be and all that and I say "no I don't have that." They told me when they were handed in that was the day that I wasn't there...I lose so much marks. And then I wasn't successful in two classes.

Interesting here was not just that Tanis missed the information session – this could happen – but that she managed to go through so much of her class work without otherwise picking up on assignment expectations. This observation supports Collier and Morgan's (2007) proposition that first-generation students do not always pick up cues from instructors and other institutional agents. It also exemplifies the "hidden curriculum" described above, as well as the role of habitus in its interpretation. Collier and Morgan conclude that instructors may have to make their expectations more explicit for novice students

---

[101] Another example of giving advice: "The sections that are in classes have access to me fairly easily so they can ask questions, but they don't know what acute care clinical is like on a medicine or a surgery ward. They've never been anywhere other than that very first clinical. So they honestly have no idea what medicine or surgery nursing will be like and they're being forced to make a choice between continuing care, medicine, and surgery."

– a process that they may be impatient with if they are not sensitive to the needs of these students, and to the socializing functions of education.

In addition to academic study skills it requires of students, the Practical Nursing program has an explicit socialization function because it is a professional preparation program. According to Colley et al. (2003) education plays a highly significant role in affirming a student's "vocational habitus," in other words, the disposition set with which the student enters a program of study. Norquest informants identified two kinds of students who were unlikely to succeed in the program, and in both cases these were attributed to the poor "fit" between the nursing profession and the student. Thus while the age of students was noted to be an issue contributing to poor fit, so too was the capacity of the student, regardless of his or her background, to read and interpret the informal and "hidden" facets of the curriculum.

Feeling Supported

The greatest value of my second round of interviews with my student participants, as noted in the stories of Anna and Elaine above, lay in better understanding the sources and nature of support they needed to succeed. Lundberg, McIntyre and Creasman (2008) note that adult students rely considerably on emotional support from family members and in some cases work colleagues. Yet for most of the student participants in this study, neither of these arenas were significant sources of routine support. In such cases, an institution's support structures may become more important. However, while formal resources offered by Norquest were clearly valued by the students, they were not perceived to be accessible and personal in the ways that students sought. My conversations with Norquest staff and my review of Norquest's Annual Report (2012) showed that the college was aware of the need to improve its student supports, and was taking steps to make it easier for students to access program advice, counselling, and other services. Access to these services, however, requires that students seek them out, and student participants' accounts suggest that this is often an unlikely course of action. Formal structures and supports – for example the PN program's orientation day – were perceived by students as overwhelming and alienating, and some staff were perceived as busy and inaccessible. Instead, student participants sought both affective and instrumental supports in the *people and relationships they were most likely to encounter in their day-to-day lives*, that is, in their relationships with faculty and fellow students in the PN program.

The intensive nature and lockstep progression of the Practical Nursing program may put some students in jeopardy if they lag academically or have personal difficulties, but one clear advantage of the

structure was that it creates a cohort of enrolled students who shared classes and study breaks (cf. Lundberg, McIntyre & Creasman, 2008). The power of this cohort model was much in evidence when I interviewed my student participants for the second time. They recounted how building a peer community had greatly enhanced their access to both affective and practical supports. Khomal described her classmates as "like a huge family now, and everybody helps everybody out....It's better to be talkative than to just sit around and just listen to orders and take orders and stuff." Of her classmates, Elaine described "a few girls that I've really connected with at school who've been really supportive even though my life is ridiculous." Tanis, who had seemed quite lonely the first time we met, was much happier in her program at the time of our second interview. "I got a really good friends there," she said. "They're nice, and we help each other."

For the students in this study, faculty were also important, potential sources of support. For students who lack confidence, faculty who exhibit understanding and caring may contribute to student persistence (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Cox & Orehovec, 2007). Interactions with faculty also influence students' perceptions of their larger college environment (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson & Cantwell, 2011). The less at ease the student is in the post-secondary setting, the more important is the role of faculty in making the student feel welcome and comfortable, and capable of success (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

The students shared both positive and negative encounters with their instructors. Khomal, Terry and Tanis all described negative interactions with instructors that had shaken their self-confidence. One of Khomal's instructors had sent mixed messages by acting incredulous when Khomal said she wanted to be a doctor. This same individual, however, also gave Khomal some valuable program advice after the fact. Instructors were important sources of practical information and advice, but were also valued when they provided direct encouragement. Tanis, who had had her confidence shaken by an impatient and "racist" lab instructor in a former program, was buoyed by the support she felt at Norquest: "I find the environment there more friendly." She was encouraged by this: "You know, the instructors the first thing they told us 'We're not here to see how many people going to fail; we're here to help you through.'" For Anna, a relationship forged with an instructor was a significant source of encouragement. She was the same age as Anna and also had children, so Anna identified with her. She felt cared for when the instructor loaned her textbooks until she was able to get her own.

In light of the cited research and student participants' anecdotes, it became more significant that not all faculty members within the PN program had a background in teaching adults. Informants' accounts discussed in Chapter Six made it clear that time pressures, lack of funding, and staff turnover

were challenges faced by staff in building the type of professional culture and values that the program wishes to pass on to students. These needed changes were also reflected in Elaine's comment that she "had great lab instructors…I've been really lucky with my instructors. And I know I have because I've heard stories about the other instructors."

Interestingly, the lab components of the PN program appeared to offer the same organic benefits that students had found in their peer relationships. Anna, Elaine and Khomal all highlighted that their practice labs allowed for lots of contact with instructors, and had given them places to offer and receive support and encouragement from one another while actively engaging in their learning: "I think that's one of the reasons I've been really successful with my labs," considered Elaine. "In lab you've only got eight of you, and one instructor. So it's a lot easier to connect with people." Anna said almost the same thing: "It's more interactive, right? Where the other classes they don't even care if you come, right?"

Anna's comment is particularly worth considering: even indifference can unsettle and discourage students like Anna and Terry, both of who were particularly shaky in their confidence of their abilities to begin with. For better or for worse then, faculty did indeed play an important role in creating a supportive environment. The students relied on instructors for encouragement and advice, and expressed injured feelings when they were assessed harshly or treated dismissively.

III. Navigation as the Acquisition of Social and Cultural Capital

I'd like now to return to the story of Anna and Elaine. As noted earlier, the women both came off as strong and capable self-advocates. Anna and Elaine shared many similarities – both women had a raw sense of compassion coming out of their own childhood feelings of isolation. Both demonstrated high emotional awareness, seemingly coming out of a lifelong project of creating narrative order out of their interior disquietudes. Both women framed their engagements with institutions and agencies as sites of struggle. Yet while Elaine swallowed her fear and pursued the barrier posed by her past debt with systematic determination, Anna was simply overwhelmed by the steps she would have to take to get her program back on track. What insights might be drawn from looking at the experiences of Elaine and Anna? I believe the two women revealed, through the experiences they shared with me, fundamentally different orientations toward what I'll describe as their institutionalized subjectivities – that is, their sense of themselves in a complex network of institutions and institutionalized practices which in turn impacted their capacities to discern when, where and how to self-advocate in bureaucratic environments.

Anna, it turns out, had been successful in settings that provided a strong sense of community. In a mother-infant care group through community health, she began as a participant, and continued on in the program mentoring other new mothers. Anna also thrived in cohort programs she had attended prior to Norquest. These programs served Aboriginal and Métis students. Again, Anna found herself assuming leadership and organizational roles in these settings. It was especially during our second interview that I came to see that Anna's ability to advocate for herself and others was directly tied to her sense of identity as a Métis woman:

> I need a connection. I need the support, period, throughout. Cause I went to Asokin which is for Aboriginal women for... and that's for your business, your accounting. And they always had a facilitator for the program, and they worked really close with you. So they're like really on top of your life. Everything. And that was supportive.

Anna was seeking the same organic relationships at Norquest that she experienced in her large extended family, and that she had experienced in her previous cohort programs. Anna's account of Norquest's orientation, which she did not attend, was telling: "I didn't know how school worked," she explained. "I didn't know how, like, *actual* school worked, not being in a program….Being in a program they would have called you. They'd be like, 'Where are you?' They would have. That's how they work." Reflecting on her challenge at Norquest overall, she concluded, "I think what happened was sort of a downfall. Having that support and then not having it kind of threw me for a loop." In other words, Anna experienced success in educational settings that matched her habitus. She drew reassurance, a sense of purpose, and belief in herself when supports occurred in the context of the kinds of close-knit relationships she had grown up with as part of a Metis family and community. Anna evaluated all of her encounters with fellow students, support staff and instructors in terms of the caring they communicated, and she consistently expressed disappointment in relationships – whether with family members, peers, or Norquest staff – that did align with her understanding that this was *how the world ought to be*. I concluded, after much reflection, that the pragmatism with which Anna sought the advantages afforded through bursaries, subsidies, and targeted programs occurred *only in the contexts that matched her habitus*. When she was secure in systems of relationships that reflected her world view and culture, Anna was able to self-advocate, and navigate bureaucracies effectively.

Elaine, on the other hand, appeared to have no expectations that the experience of being a student would be one that included emotional support. This expectation aligned with her own personal history – one in which family relationships could not be counted on to provide a sense of support or belonging. Elaine, in sharp contrast to Anna, appeared to take as a starting point that bureaucracies

were inimical to relationships: "They've got a million other students, you know?" she said. She continued,

> I've had to say that at the college recently just because of this whole mess with my financial stuff. "I understand I'm only one of thousands of students. I need help. And I understand you've got six other people on the line waiting for your help. But right now I need you to actually help me." And I've had to say that a few times because I've gotten the brush-off. And I'm like "No no. Come back. Kind of thing. You're going to help me now." And I know it's not important to them. And I get that. You know? So I do a lot of apologizing. And I do a lot of "I really appreciate it." And I do.

Elaine's accounts of Norquest and the banks she was working with to renegotiate her student loan illustrate that she expected strictly transactional relationships in these contexts, and strategized accordingly. Thus while she strongly believed the college *ought* to provide a more supportive environment, she did not experience the same level of disappointment that Anna experienced when this did not materialize.

I believe that Anna was unable to thrive academically and manage the administrative challenges she was facing during our second interview because her habitus prevented her from adopting the pragmatism that Elaine consistently displayed in her engagement with Norquest, the banks she was dealing with, and even her strained relationships with her ex-husband and mother. Differently put, Elaine experienced greater alignment with the post-secondary field, or Norquest's "institutional habitus," (Reay et al. 2001) whereas the experience of an institution was fundamentally alienating and foreign to Anna, who appeared only able to make sense of successes and failures in the contexts of interpersonal relationships.

With respect to the rest of the student participants, Anna and Elaine may be thought of as "ideal types," or extremes on a continuum. All of the women demonstrated both kinds of experiences in their institutional encounters – that is, all had, in varying degrees, dashed expectations of interpersonal connections like those experienced by Anna, and all demonstrated instances of the kind of pragmatic strategizing described by Elaine. One of the important keys to student success, as discussed in the next section, may reside in acquisition, through informal and experiential learning, of strategies and mindsets that constitute a subset of cultural capital needed to successfully navigate the complex and often alienating institutional structures that govern students' post-secondary experiences.[102]

---

[102] For more on alienation and the student experience generally, see Mann (2001).

Acquiring Cultural Capital

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) work on the roles of capital in education focused on how families of origin cultivate these assets in their children (e.g. Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Lehmann, 2007; Reay, 1998). Authors writing in this area follow Bourdieu's lead in emphasizing cultural capital as embodied and naturalized symbolic consumption practices and presentations of the self (e.g. Colley et al., 2003; DiMaggio, 1982). Yet the aesthetic markers that supposedly constitute cultural capital, laid out most fully in *Distinction* (1984), have not been found to lead directly to school success (Kingston, 2001; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

Instead, this study supports an alternative understanding of cultural capital proposed by Lareau and Weininger (2003) that cultural capital can be thought of as "strategic use of knowledge, skills and competence" as these pertain to institutional interactions. "Students and parents," they believe, "have different skill levels for managing institutional encounters" (p. 597). Collier and Morgan similarly propose that "mastery of the student role can be considered "an especially valuable component of Bourdieu's cultural capital (2007, p. 443). A clear example of cultural capital as an intuitive skill set was offered by Tanis, who compared her own experiences to those of the young middle class women who dominated the student body in the PN program. "They are "pretty informed," she said. "Their mums are nurses....their mothers help them, right? They...*just knowing* what to expect." While advice from parents in the profession is clearly relevant, it is Tanis's account of "just knowing" that reflects the embodied nature the vocational habitus as the wellspring of intuitively correct practices for the academic setting.

How, then, do some adults cultivate capital in the absence of formative support from parents and childhood schools? The student participants in this study provide some insight. Their accounts suggest that first generation students can acquire cultural capital – particularly skills in managing information and overcoming institutional barriers – through their encounters with the multiple institutions they contend with over the course of their studies. This notion of acquisition aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1986), as well as the developmental perspectives offered by some adult educators (e.g. Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Adult learning literature is more apt to emphasize that post-secondary education, particularly for marginalized adults, is not just an academic experience, but a developmental one (Tennant & Pogson, 1995; Reay et al. 2009; Wells, 2008), through which students "begin to engage in a process of self-conscious reflexivity in which self-awareness and a propensity for self-improvement become incorporated into the habitus" (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009, p. 1105). It is

also, as student accounts show, a largely experiential process – the acquisition of an informal and sometimes hidden curriculum of "institutional know-how" (Karp, 2011).

Discernment

Although "institutional know-how" appears to contribute to student success, it is not simply a matter of seeking advice and acquiring information. It can be difficult to distinguish good advice from bad. The accounts of student participants – particularly their accounts of their "big ticket mistakes" – showed a pattern of initial assumptions that institutions could be trusted to provide the "right" advice and expertise, including career planning, labour market advice, and program planning. Students in this study developed discernment as they gained knowledge through experiential learning of what sources of information one could rely on, and of how to use information and to ask questions strategically.

Discernment seems to describe students' capacities to evaluate the quality and trustworthiness of the information they receive from many sources along their learning and career pathways.[103] The students in this study illustrated the initial possession and the acquisition of such discernment in varying degrees. Discernment developed as students recognized the limitations of institutionalized support services, and moved beyond it by self-advocating.

Discernment becomes especially important when advice includes conflicting messages. One one hand, for example, practical nursing staff and advisors described the problems that could be created when students eschewed their instructions or advice in favour of peer input. On the other hand, Terry's experience showed that "official" information about the prospects of employment from her dietary technician program were not reliable. After consulting NAIT's program literature before starting her dietary technician program, Terry recounted, "Three months into the course when I went around talking to people they said they don't even know why NAIT offered that course because there was very few jobs in that field, and based on reading the credentials – the books they put out – there was a high number of jobs. So it was misleading." There were thus gaps between official knowledge that Terry had relied upon, and the kind of "street knowledge" that is gained only through experience and knowledgeable contacts. For students with the right family backgrounds, this streetwise knowledge is constitutive of a habitus that "fits" with educational and professional settings.

Discernment then, for these women, also meant learning to become more wary of the post-secondary experience. When I asked them about advice they would give to others, most said that the

---

[103] This might be described as "information capital" held by individuals in the same sense that valuable information is an asset to firms.

hardest lesson they'd had to learn was that the kind of "received wisdom" they had relied on in the past to make decisions could not always be taken at face value. Khomal, discussing the bridging program from PN to an RN degree, illustrated this when she described how she had learned not to trust every piece of advice or information she heard:

> I'm getting different information; whoever I speak with its different information, which is what screwed me over the first time. Right? So now I'm like "Really?"….I still have to see a counselor now. To see like exactly what is a proper process. But I called Athabasca to confirm too right? Cause if I'm doing it to confirm like what the marks they take and everything.

Similarly, Tanis explained how she had asked specific questions about the nature of labs and clinics in her PN program because she did not want to fail in this setting. Discernment is needed because neither drawing on "official" sources nor relying on the "street smarts" of others serves as a consistently reliable strategy.

A further important component of discernment may also be learning when and where relationships and emotional supports can be safely established within the institution. Feelings of safety and belonging have been found to be critical to the success of first generation students (Walpole, 2003). The findings from student interviews suggest that their initial understanding of support in the form of information and support in the form of affect were organic and interconnected – certainly this was Anna's understanding based on her past experiences in her cohort programs. As a consequence, advice from peers might be more trusted than it ought to be, and advice from official sources left students like Khomal, Terry and Anna feeling alienated. Overall, the desired linkages between relationships and advice were, for these students, organic and even familial. Thus the weight given to advice was very much influenced by its affective contexts. This finding is very consistent with studies of choice from the field of behavioural economics, which defy the rational utility/homo-economicus model of decision making (Schwartz, 2004). Discernment from this perspective may be described as knowing when to "turn on" *homo economicus*, and also, perhaps, when to turn it off.

Whether and when emotional and relationship needs can be sought out and counted on thus becomes central to the acquisition of effective cultural capital in PSE settings. The experiences of Anna and Elaine illustrated two distinctive understandings brought to the student role (Collier & Morgan, 2007): one based on relationships as trusting and interpersonal, and one based on relationships as transactional. Each approach has different implications for the ways in which students seek out and

process needed information, but only the latter lends itself to successful alignment with the bureaucratic features of a post-secondary institution.

Self-Advocacy & Initiative

Discernment may also be an important component or pre-cursor for effective self-advocacy, or the turn from a passive to strategic, active stance in the pursuit of reliable "institutional know-how." Like most of the students at Norquest, described by informants in Chapter Six, my student participants had, in the past, made use of advisors during the intake process, but relied on these people as sources of "received wisdom" – a function of both the absence of such supports in their families of origin, and their expectations that institutionalized functions could *take the place of* such familial supports. When this insight is coupled with the confessions of advisors in Chapter Six that they were unable to offer the depth and level of support they knew students really needed, it becomes clear that students could easily sell themselves short, allowing advisors, by virtue of their role constraints, to set narrow parameters around the scope of support that constituted "advice."

In other words, students would have to take a level of initiative above and beyond the most obvious institutional resources offered in order to navigate the student role effectively. As Elaine described, "So if you have a learning disability, you go to SALS. If you don't have a problem, you can't go to SALS. If you have a problem you can go book it in with a tutor, but they don't tell you that; you have to find that out." Elaine had an explicit understanding of self-advocacy because she had coached adults with disabilities in her group home work. She was thus an "asker," who described herself as unafraid to pursue the information she needed. "I've been very... I've been very fortunate that I can utilize what I've learned through the years," she reflected.

Literature in education related to self-advocacy focuses almost entirely on persons with disabilities, and this implies that only significantly disadvantaged people require explicit coaching in this area. Yet as schools are increasingly bureaucratized and institutional environments become increasingly complex, the capacity to advance one's interests in these settings assumes greater importance. Provocatively, the initiative and pragmatism required to self-advocate may very well need to be cultivated in the very contexts of care that were missing from students' encounters with institutional supports. Anna and Khomal, for example, had both gained self-advocacy skills in the contexts of the

health care system when they felt the care and concern of nurses and social workers during particularly fragile and difficult life transitions to single parenthood.[104]

Passing It Along

Studies of first generation students suggest that they are particularly conscious of post-secondary education as a significant life change across many dimensions. As Reay et al. (2003) discuss, this heightened awareness characterizes "choice biographies" as opposed to those of traditional middle-class students for whom the transition to higher education was "natural," and therefore less deeply considered. This heightened awareness of change extended to the women's self-conscious generativity. Khomal for example, was anxious to pass what she has learned along the way to her younger brother so that he does not "waste his time," and "doesn't make the same mistakes I did." Like the other mothers in this study, she also believed that as a result of what she had learned, she would better be able to support her daughter's education pathway with the "institutional know how" she had acquired. The mothers in this study viewed their post-secondary attendance as important modeling for their children. As all were single mothers, these accounts were also gendered; the women wanted their children to know, as Elaine put it, "this is what a strong woman looks like." The women believed their efforts today would increase the likelihood of their children planning careers and attending post-secondary education.

Importantly, peer relationships were also an opportunity to give, not just receive. With the exception of Terry, all of the women at some point expressed the great pleasure and satisfaction they got out of helping their peers. It was evident that they associated their "giving" role with an increased sense of their own competence and confidence. Jayden was proud to be a role model for other Métis women through her leadership role with Norquest's Ambassador's club, and enjoyed helping other students with their studies. In her second interview, Khomal, now much better aware of how her program worked and what resources are available, explained, "I didn't know, but if I know now I can help you guys who don't know anything yet. I have lots of different backgrounds and knowledge of different stuff now… I pass that information to anybody I know now right?"

---

[104] Gender dimensions that could be pursued here. See Quimby, J., & O'Brien, K. (2004). Predictors of student and career decision-making self-efficacy among non-traditional college women. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *52*, 323–339. The authors refer to feminist positions that "the importance of the nurturing role in women's lives" may "extend to career development" (p. 336). The women in this study who "felt responsible for another's well-being" – including mothers with children – showed stronger self-efficacy in their career decision-making.

IV. Conclusion

Widening access policies focus on formal learning as central to equalizing social and labour market participation. However, the findings in this chapter highlight the extent to which experiential learning contributes to "institutional know-how," – a significant component of cultural capital, and hence an important determinant of successful adaptation to the student role (Collier & Morgan, 2007). By focusing on students' experiences "navigating" Norquest and the PN program, this chapter has shown that even once a student has accessed post-secondary education, he or she is faced not only with the explicit curriculum of a program of studies, but also an accompanying "hidden curriculum." Mastery of this hidden curriculum depends on the extent to which the student is able to gain awareness of required skills (cultural capital) and self-consciously cultivate them as a kind of self-project of "habitus reform."

Mastery, at least in the cases of these students, appeared to be gained not through institutionalized supports and their logics but in spite of them. For the most part, institutional encounters taught the students self-advocacy and self-reliance not through an explicit programs like those offered through the student services described in Chapter Six, but through experiential and incidental learning. Some of these experiences might be described as a "school of hard knocks;" others were more uplifting tales of organic pockets of support that emerged – for example, in the small dynamic learning groups in the lab components of the PN program.

For the students in this study, cultural capital, in the form of the skill of pragmatic strategizing, was most successfully acquired in safe supportive environments that, while available, were not systematically embedded in the post-secondary environment and very often had to be sought out or accidentally encountered. Students who experience this relatively safe and supportive environment in their family of origin may be more likely to carry needed pragmatism and instrumentalism in their arsenal of cultural capital – aspects of habitus that align with complex institutional environments and with the broader logic of human capital theory. Paradoxically, then, strategy and discernment, which require a degree of objective distancing, may be acquired most effectively in relatively intimate settings. This explanation would account for both the alienation that students experienced in formal support settings, and the centrality of trusting relationships with others who might or might not provide good advice in practical terms.

Larger scale research examining mature students in post-secondary settings, particularly with respect to program persistence, is largely synchronic, offering a static snapshot of mis/alignment between habitus and the institutional setting. Students may or may not bring the right mix of capital to

the institutional setting (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Qualitative studies like this one and others (Reay, 2003; Lehmann, 2007) allow for the study of how and under what circumstances the habitus is dynamic and generative. This latter point is important, as critics have noted that despite Bourdieu's claim that habitus is mutable, he offered little in the way of illustrating this in his own empirical work (Hodkinson & Sparks, 1997; Noble & Watkins, 2003). Yet exchange, or the transmutation of capital from one form into another (Bourdieu, 1986), is an underlying principle of the whole "capital" metaphor, requiring that dynamic and temporal dimensions be brought into the analysis. When working with Bourdieu's three forms of capital – economic, social and cultural – it is easy to neglect the importance of the processes of acquisition and exchange. Discernment, as I've discussed in this chapter, may be thought of as a bridging mechanism between social and cultural capital. When cultural capital is taken to incorporate navigation skills (Collier & Morgan, 2007), it becomes clear that effectively acquiring social capital through connections with others requires the co-acquisition of field-appropriate cultural capital in the form of strategizing about when and where to adopt a pragmatic stance.

The Deficient Habitus?

In Chapter Six, I discussed the difficulties of talking and writing about "dispositional barriers," noting the ambivalence of Norquest informants as they tried to describe these barriers without labelling the students in question as somehow inherently, constitutionally deficient as persons. A similar tension accompanies my own account of the dispositions of the students I interviewed. In particular, I greatly struggled in writing up the contrasts I saw between Elaine and Anna. Yet when I wondered what it would be like if everyone had the opportunity to learn in a warm, supportive cohort setting, as Anna had in her previous programs, it became easier to locate deficiencies back in the realm of "institutional barriers."

It seems it is impossible to write about social class stratification without at some point coming up against the potential to label those at the lower end of the SES spectrum as deficient. Certainly it is very easy to fall into this way of thinking when one begins to articulate the complements of capital that make up a habitus, and begins to draw the conclusion that one habitus "works" in a given setting better than another. Yet it is important here to remember that for Bourdieu, there is nothing inherently valuable in capital. Instead, the value of capital is constantly negotiated in different social fields, with the dominant in a given field setting these values and seeking to defend them (Swartz, 1997). In my final analysis, Anna's success in her former experiences, contrasted with her struggles in her Norquest program, highlighted both arbitrariness and domination. Particularly in the worldviews – or perhaps the habituses – of Anna, Jayden and Khomal I recognized great purposefulness and groundedness in

belonging to extended families. This only highlighted the doxa of individualism that pervades post-secondary learning.

Chapter Eight: A Crowded and Crooked Path

Khomal moved to Canada from Pakistan with her family as a twelve year old girl, with enough English to get by in school. She's a savvy hybrid of her family's traditional Muslim faith and values, and Western youthfulness. Despite her open, feisty demeanor in our first of two interviews, she described herself as "shy and quiet," even "secretive." At 27, Khomal, after enduring a very short, very abusive marriage, is now the single mother of a two-year old girl. She and her daughter live with her parents – "kind and gentle people," she describes. She loves them and is fiercely protective of them. They're "naïve," she says. In the family's home country, it isn't unusual for people to have less than a 10th grade education, and neither of her parents spoke English when they moved to Canada.

None of this has slowed the family down. Khomal spoke with admiration of her parents' efforts to learn and adapt to life in Canada. "I'm like my Dad," she explains. "He works in hard labour, but he likes to work with his hands, right? And he's someone who likes different things. He's like a sponge on information. He needs to watch it, and he knows it." With the same desire to learn, Khomal worked a series of jobs in her late teens and early 20s – call center worker, collections agent, pharmacy assistant and early childhood assistant. In each case, she learned all she could and hit a wall in terms of what she could achieve without an education. Sometimes she sounds frustrated. She knows things she says, "but it's not educational... I have so much field work...but I have no actual paper to show my knowledge. And you can't actually obtain that certificate or something like that until you actually go through school."

As I discussed in Chapter Five, it is increasingly the case that those who do not have a post-secondary education will be shut out any form of paid labour that affords continuous learning and growth. Without recognized formal credentials, most people can expect a career like the one Khomal has experienced to date: a series of low paying, low skill positions, often part-time and without benefits, and largely without challenge or any hope of change. Such jobs are a reality for many in the workforce (Gomberg, 2007). For people like Khomal and her father it is, as she observed, not sufficient to be intelligent, curious and motivated to learn. Only credentials count.

Review

The original question driving this thesis was whether, and to what extent, widening access policies can be expected to deliver on their promise to reduce social inequality through enhanced participation in the labour market. I used Bronfenbrenner's human ecology model as an organizing heuristic to gradually work toward a position on this question, first examining, at a macro level the nature of labour markets and the post-secondary education system in North American contexts. Chapters Four and Five showed that there are reasons to doubt the aphorism that one "goes to school to get a good job." For this reason alone, the efficacy of widening access must be challenged, for there is little point in encouraging

higher and higher levels of education for the many when limited gains can be realized in the labour market.

In Chapter Five, I demonstrated that human capital theory obscures the inefficacy of spiraling credentialism first by asserting that underemployment is the product of skills mismatch rather than a scarcity of "good jobs," and secondly by contributing to the ideological construction of the entrepreneurial learner/worker, via which failure to maintain or improve upon one's socio-economic status can be represented as the product of individual deficits rather than structural barriers to social mobility built into education and labour markets themselves.

In Chapter Six, in what constituted the "meso" level of analysis according to Bronfenbrenner's model, I focused on Norquest College as the site of my research. In my analysis of informants' data, I was able to begin the work of examining that paradox of how a community college that clearly values and wants to support its population of largely marginalized learners, instead contributes to students' existing barriers through institutionalized norms and practices that legitimate the educational meritocracy. In Bourdieusian terms, taken for granted, entrenched and embodied practices and beliefs forge an institution-wide doxa that obscures the symbolic violence that Norquest, as an institution, is compelled to enact upon its students and staff.

In Chapter Seven, the stories of the student participants in my study illustrated that the formal credential they were pursuing was accompanied by a "hidden curriculum," the learning of which was only accessible through incidental and experiential learning. In particular, the contrasted cases of Anna and Elaine showed that cultural capital could be understood as a specific set of skills via which the transactional relationships characterizing bureaucratic functions could be strategically navigated.

In this closing chapter, I synthesize what I believe to be the two central findings of my study. Section One reviews the ways in which institutional doxa alienates students and thus works against the ethos of widening access. Section Two looks at broader social/systemic conditions that concentrate within PSEs and make formal education a "high risk" endeavour — especially for economically and/or socially marginalized adult learners. In Section Three of this chapter, I probe what is to me a compelling and largely unaddressed issue: if widening access does not offer a just solution to inequality, what are the alternatives? I will briefly discuss the moral economy as a lens through which to reconsider the ultimate relationships between credentials, learning, and labour. While I am unable to offer more than a cursory overview in this concluding chapter, I've included this discussion because I realized over time that this concern lay at the heart of my research question. It is a field of inquiry I would love to explore

in future work. In Section Four, I add some additional research directions and considerations to come out of this work. These ideas are less well developed, but still of great interest to me. I'd also like to think further research in this vein could contribute to policies and policy analysis relating to the work and learning transitions of marginalized adults. Finally, in Section Five, I turn to my own personal "lessons learned" through the long process of writing this work, and through the inevitable reshaping of self-identity that seems to come out of some combination of "content knowledge," theory, and acculturation into the very strange world of academia.

I. Habitus and the Doxa of a Post-Secondary Institution

As the saga that has been my study drew to a close — finally! — I reviewed the list of graduates of Norquest's PN program. I found Elaine, Khomal, and Terry on the convocation lists. Anna seemed to have disappeared, which did not surprise me, given the enrollment challenges she had been facing at the time of our second interview. Tanis was not on the list, although I suspect she may have transferred to another program at MacEwan. She had been doing well at Norquest when we last met, and was still interested in Psychiatric Nursing. Jayden had fallen seriously ill during the study and was forced to drop out and move home with her parents. Thus I can only confirm that half of the women completed their programs of study.

The first of the two broad conclusions I'd like to pull together in this chapter is that institutions are increasingly the settings in which we do important life and identity work. Yet they are often ill suited to forming the intimate, trusting relationships that we need to do this work. In the student participants in this study, I observed differing vulnerabilities – differing capacities to persevere despite the general absence of these trusting relationships in the institutionalized aspects of students' experiences. I've proposed that a mismatched "habitus" may make a student more vulnerable to being discouraged in the face of alienating, institutionalized relationships, and that overcoming such vulnerability requires, in part, a kind of cultivated cultural capital in the form of pragmatically-oriented self-advocacy skills.

In many senses, my findings aren't new. My study, like others examining patterns of persistence in post-secondary education, confirms Bourdieu's thesis that many of the basic structures and features of formal education are alienating for those students who do not have the complementary habitus (Lehmann, 2007; Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Redmond, 2006; Wells, 2008).[105] What I do hope to have

---

[105] The problem of persistence for low SES and first generation students of all ages has been well documented, as discussed in Chapter Five. As enrollments have increased and student populations have become more diverse, persistence rates are a growing concern (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2009; Mueller, 2009). Students who borrow to complete a program of study and drop out are then doubly burdened by weak employment prospects and several

contributed through my study is some empirical evidence of how these feelings of alienation are generated by a range of institutional practices, some of which are even intended to support students.

Self-Advocacy, Habitus, and Confrontations with Bureaucracy

At the time of my last interview with Norquest's Prospective Students' Office, the area was in the process of implementing its *Navigator* program. Aptly named, the effort was part of Norquest's efforts to make it easier for students to find and access the supports and information they needed to manage their programs (Norquest College, 2012). A key change being introduced by the program was the pairing of each student with a single advisor. The intent here was to build continuity and personal relationships into students' engagement with support staff. Both literature related to student support services and the findings from my study suggest that this is indeed a step in the right direction. Research on supports for first generation students and barriered students suggests that personal attention and clear orientations are important tools for these learners, as are efforts to create a welcoming environment. (ACCC, 2008; Frenette & Robson, 2010; Spellman, 2007).

The question that arises, however, is why it is first generation and barriered students who in particular seem to require a stronger sense of relationship to persevere in a post-secondary setting. This is not to say that all students — indeed all people — do not benefit from good relationships in schools and workplaces, and suffer feelings of alienation in their absence (Mann, 2001); it is simply that for marginalized students, such relationships appear to take on a make-or-break quality when it comes to persistence.

Students do, however, "survive" and may even thrive. In this study, Khomal, Elaine and Terry overcame the numerous barriers recounted in the preceding chapters to complete a difficult program and achieved their Practical Nursing diplomas. What factors contributed to their success? Findings from Chapter Seven showed that the cultivation of discernment or "institutional know how" is a critical secondary curriculum — often tacit — that must be grasped and learned (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Walpole, 2003). This may contribute to MacKeracher, Suart and Potter's (2006) observation that adults who are better educated also tend to manage the navigation of institutional processes more effectively. In my study, students had to know not only where to seek out support and advice, but how to "read" what they learned in light of Norquest's doxa. The case of Anna in particular showed that discernment

---

years of student loan repayments to make. Even if the ultimate market value of a credential is not assured, it is probably worse to have nothing at all to show for the time and money invested in coursework.

has important emotional and relational dimensions as well, which sadly amount to lowering and adjusting hopes or expectations that caring is woven into the institutional fabric.

The fundamental irony here is that the "game to be played" by the student, using Bourdieu's metaphor, is one of assuming the pragmatism required to be successful in a meritocratic, competitive system. Yet this disposition, whether valued intrinsically or adopted strategically by the "player," depends for its cultivation on relational and experiential learning. For the lucky, this occurs in the family of origin and in formative experiences that are incorporated into the habitus. Bourdieu's thesis of the acquisition of capital in one's family of origin is upheld by studies that show the strategic behaviours of middle class families advocating for their children in public schools (Lareau, 2000; Reay, 2000), and this is more likely to translate to the capacity to self-advocate in post-secondary settings. For students like those in my study, however, a strategic habitus is cultivated through trial and error under high stakes conditions in adulthood, with little or nothing in the way of a safety net in the event of a misstep.

II. Learning and Work: The Great Divide

The second broad conclusion I would like to draw in this chapter is that continued, rigid separations of formal education and workplace learning contributes significantly to the "high stakes" nature of an investment in (or perhaps a gamble on) a post-secondary credential. I have argued in this thesis that the risks associated with obtaining a post-secondary education are disproportionately high for adults who are already marginalized, poor, or otherwise disadvantaged. It is somewhat paradoxical that rigid divisions between work and learning persist in Canada's "loosely coupled system," meaning that pathways between education and work lack transparency (Bills, 2003). Both employers and workers have difficulty "reading" and responding to signals in the labour market.

What this amounts to, for students, is little assurance of a smooth transition to the labour market and a stable, consistent income. Terry's first career attempt as a Dietary Aid was perhaps the best example of the ways in which political and economic conditions contribute to insecure transitions between work and learning. "I'm graduating," she recalled,

> There's no jobs for me. I could go to other hospitals but so are these people with more experience going to go there, so who are they gonna hire? I could probably maybe have got a casual job. That's not gonna pay my rent. That's not gonna pay my tuition back. It's not nice to say but that would be a waste of my time – getting a casual position. It's not gonna pay nothing, hours aren't guaranteed, you're on call.

Terry's experience is a clear example of how weak articulations between work and learning as well as the emphasis on credentialing can make it very difficult people to break into an occupational field. As

Terry noted above, quite rightly, her credential was of no help in the face of a rigid hierarchy of work in health services and unionization, both of which prevented her from earning a living or even gaining further experience in her trade: "If you wanted to go to a health care job, you would have had to have taken a casual position because most health care jobs are unionized, so you have to start in a casual position," she explained.

The Tyranny of the Credential

Credentialism contributes to the divide between work and learning by drawing rigid distinctions between the two, and through its exclusive focus on formal classroom learning. A core argument of the credential inflation thesis is that credentials are poorly aligned with much of the learning and many of the skills required for work, and therefore often stand as unnecessary barriers to entry into work. Livingstone and Pankhurst (2009b) emphasize that Canada's present strategies for linking work and learning strongly favour formal credentials even though there is ample evidence through presented studies that experiential learning is a very significant factor in the development of skills and knowledge that are valuable on the labour market. "Experience is a more important source of learning in work than is formal education and training," they conclude, "and it has wide applications" (p. 314).[106]

Unlike the "high stakes" experience of spending time and money to acquire a credential with no certainty that its vocational outcomes will be satisfying, work experience and volunteer work are "low stakes" ways to determine interests and aptitudes. As Livingstone (2009) notes, experiential learning has "zero opportunity costs" because it is gained in the course of one's day-to-day activities, including hobbies, volunteering, care work, and workplace learning. This is highlighted in the stories of the women. All but one had accumulated debt and "wasted time" in studies that were either inappropriate for their interests, or failed to materialize into a feasible career. Instead, their best directions and decisions appeared to come out of what they had learned about their own strengths and interests through work and volunteer experiences. When students described their past work and learning, it

---

[106] A system affording little recognition of experiential learning has at least two consequences that contribute to the high risk nature of pursuing a credential — especially for those who can least afford to make a mistake. First, many young and older adults will come to a PSE ill-prepared and/or poorly informed about the occupation they are pursuing because they have lacked experiential learning/opportunities to explore their interests and aptitudes. Data from my informants at Alberta Works and Norquest strongly supported Billet, Newton and Ockerby's (2010) observation that, when it comes to career planning, "seemingly, the more remote from actual practice the decision-making occurs, the greater this choice is premised on ideals rather than actualities of the occupation" (p. 47).

became evident that clarity around career goals and interests was obtained through personal experiences, most of which were unplanned and serendipitous (Hodgkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

Despite the value of experiential learning (Billet, Newton & Ockerby, 2010; Grubb, 2004; Livingstone, 1999), credentialism increasingly ensures that the very paid labour that might contribute to valuable formative experiences and career exploration will not be available to those who have not "paid the credential price" of entry.[107] Like the students in this study, most will instead be consigned by default to dead-end, minimum wage jobs in which existing skills and talents are likely to stagnate (Gomberg, 2007).

A second barrier created by a highly credentialed system is that where experiential learning has occurred, it is unlikely to be recognized and valued in the labour market. A modular and flexible system of "competencies" has policy advocates (e.g. PLAR, cf. CCL, 2007; MacKeracher, Suart, & Potter, 2006), given numerous contemporary labour market issues like growing number of credentials earned from foreign countries, an increasingly geographically mobile labour force, and the increased number of career and work transitions occurring in flexible, "lean" economies (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Nicoll, 2006). Yet progress is slow and daunting given education systems and professional associations that are deeply invested in traditional systems of credentialing.

Privileging the Normal Biography

A continuing policy bias toward traditional life-course trajectories also contributes to rigid divisions between workplace and credentialed learning. Such divisions may be experienced more acutely by those who, like the students in this study, do not follow a "traditional" pathway from adolescence to post-secondary education, to coupling and having a family, to stable employment and retirement.[108] Although I did not draw on life course methodologies as much as I had originally intended for this study,

---

[107] Grubb and Lazerson (2004) discuss the ways in which formal education settings are often ill-suited and inefficient for learning for occupations. Needed resources are "more complicated and more expensive than the materials in most academic courses," and active learning in multiple settings is often required in addition to any book learning (p. 94).

[108] Vosko (2006) offers a historical account of the "standard employment relationship" of permanent, full-time work, showing that this has been a normative benchmark rather than an empirical reality. Similarly, in a widely read work, William Hutton (1996) characterized the UK as a "30-30-40" society, with 30% of people being significantly disadvantaged and marginalized, 30% working in insecure or precarious positions, and 40% working in privileged standard employment relationships that provide a secure and comfortable (or better) standard of living. Both accounts show that the "job for life" that is incorporated into the "traditional" life-course trajectory does not represent the realities of the majority of people.

the perspectives offered by this approach still proved useful for the purposes of analysis.[109] The "birds-eye" perspective offered by life course research provides a challenge to late modernist conceptions of "choice biographies," in which individuals have, at least in theory, been freed from traditional social constraints and life markers (cf. Beck, 1992). Discourses of individualism, choice, and pathways can create the illusion that there are many more choices than actually exist. Life course perspectives show that despite the appearance of great diversity in lifestyles and life choices, such choices still intersect with social norms and institutionalized functions in significant ways (Antikainen & Komomen, 2003; Elder, 1995).

For the purposes of this study, the point is important to raise because on balance, post-secondary institutions are still structured in ways that privilege traditional family structures, and historic and gendered patterns of life transitions. This occurs despite policy assertions that formal learning requires greater flexibility in order to accommodate diversity in life courses, as well as the anticipated need to cycle between work and formal learning several times over the course of one's career (OECD, 2004).

Both my data and literature highlight that, in practice, those who do not follow traditional pathways are more likely to suffer negative consequences in terms of their life chances. Here I recall William's "formula to not be poor." As noted, the formula has some empirical validity, even if one disagrees with his moral condemnation of the poor. Nowhere is this more apparent than for single mothers — four out of the six women in my student sample. While all students are suffering from cut-throat competition for "good jobs, young adults at least more likely have the option of falling back on their families of origin, and ultimately need only support themselves (Brown & Lauder, 2006). Although this has resulted in troubling delays in career and family transitions for young adults, those already supporting children and other family members are disproportionately hit when they miscalculate.

The risks here are exacerbated by absent or poorly structured social safety nets and policies that disproportionately damage single mothers and families (Wright, 2012). Parents (again, especially single parents, the vast majority of who are women) also have fewer education choices and are more likely to

---

[109] To recall my brief discussion in Chapter Two, life course and biographical methods share an interest in the whole of the life course as a context for analysis. Life course research in particular highlights social characteristics, norms around the timing of life transitions, and historical events, as these are experiences more or less in common by a given cohort. The average ages at which people marry, have children, become an "empty nester," and retire, for example, are tracked in many developed countries as population statistics, and these statistical patterns have changed over time.

be penalized in the labour market due to their lack of geographic mobility (Reay, 2003). Opportunity costs, risky transitions, and welfare-to-work programs also mean that already marginalized adults are more likely to take vocational and short programs that do not transfer to other credential streams (Fox Garrity, Garrison & Fiedler, 2010). In my study, four of the women, despite having larger educational ambitions toward obtaining nursing degrees, chose the PN route as a less risky and more affordable career path because it was shorter and had somewhat easier academic entry requirements than an RN degree program. Both Elaine and Khomal had compromised their goals by taking a Health Care Aide certification because they had young children at home.[110]

"Flexible" Learning?

Some of the aforementioned problems are recognized in policies that seek to make learning more "flexible" (e.g. Campus Alberta, 2012), but this still works to the benefit of established, middle-class, mid-career learners — the learning "haves" — rather than the learning "have nots" (Field, 2006; Myers & deBrouker, 2006). First, as shown in Anna's case in Chapter Seven, flexibility is accompanied by increased complexity. This makes navigation and choosing among multiple options more difficult, especially if these are indeed skills that are acquired experientially. Part-time offerings, another flexibility strategy, may be of limited value to precarious workers, who are more likely to have difficulty coordinating work schedules and families with classes. Redress is proposed here by classes and programs that are "self-paced," but this flexibility, can also be thought of as a lack of needed structure. There is evidence of both the attractiveness of flexible part-time learning for marginalized learners, as well as its considerable failure, in the very high non-completion rates in private post-secondary institutions that market flexibility as a benefit (Fox Garrity, Garrison & Fiedler, 2010).

In the case of my study, issues around workfare or welfare to work schemes also came into play. Although this did not affect my student participants, interviews with Norquest informants showed that part-time, flexible learning is, by virtue of policy, not an option. In Chapter Six I recounted how Alberta Works penalized part-time learners. By rewarding full-time studies instead, the program, detaches people from the labour market – a counter-productive strategy, in the longer term. Alberta Works is also structured to push people through a program of studies and get them working as quickly as possible, even if this entails a dead-end program with no transferability for future learning opportunities.

---

[110] Norquest informants in my study had also explained that many immigrants were forced into short credential programs for which they were already grossly overqualified because their foreign credentials were not recognized in the Canadian labour market (cf. Guo, 2009; Ikura, 2007; Ogilvie, Leung, Gushuliak, McGuire, & Burgess-Pinto, 2007).

Career planning is another area that privileges middle-class, traditionally structured life trajectories. The OECD (2009) states that institutional supports for career planning have not caught up with the lifelong learning process. For better or for worse, the nature of career planning and development research has had to change in response to the loss of the linear pathway in work. The "traditional plan-and-implement" model described by Rossiter (2009, p. 63) breaks down in the more diffused and cyclical transitions that characterize work in the "flexible" labour force.

"Flexibility," then, is not very flexible, and may even introduce new problems for marginalized learners. The expansion of course credit harmonizations and distance learning opportunities — key strategies pursued by Campus Alberta (2012) — also fail to address flexibility where it really counts. Missing are the social safety nets and program structures and supports that would protect students like Anna and Elaine from bouts of unemployment between semesters, and for at least some period after graduation. Presently, those already in a precarious position are more likely to suffer because there is little in the way of flexibility that would promote smooth transitions between work and learning rather than during the period of formal studies. There remains a significant lack of flexibility in terms of many workers being able to build on existing skills and credentials with further recognized learning. Flexibility and standardization of course transfers between institutions does little to disrupt or ease the underlying problems associated with credentialism, most notably the absence of "bridging," or "laddering" streams that would help adults to build gradually on prior knowledge and credentials, and the increasing lengths of time required in formal programs of study to have any hope of obtaining a "good job."

I have presented some evidence that structurally, post-secondary education is more likely to reward those who have followed a traditional — and increasingly uncommon — pattern of obtaining tertiary education, finding (and keeping) a partner, and then having children. These are no longer social realities. There is some recognition of increasingly diverse life-courses in lifelong learning policies, but they largely fail to acknowledge how institutions, still largely mapped on to traditional life course patterns reinforce social stratification. The problem manifests itself in terms of growing concerns with "persistence" and graduation rates, and this places pressures on institutions themselves to accommodate diverse, high needs student populations with eroding resources. Under-funding only exacerbates a more fundamental problem: the capacities of institutions to create learning communities given that these work so much against the standardizing logic of institutions.

III. Credentials and the Moral Economy

A couple of years ago when money was very tight, I began to look for server jobs again. At first I felt kind of okay about this. Perhaps I was trying to make the best of it by persuading myself that I could still "keep it real" after numerous years of unreality in the ivory tower. I called a pub near my house that was hiring. "What sorts of hours and shifts are you looking for," I asked. Seemed a reasonable question. "Let me tell you something," the woman on the phone shot back, "you need to bring in your resume. I am hiring you. You are not hiring me." I mumbled something and got the hell off the phone because I needed to process an old, familiar surge of helpless rage that had fired instantly in my belly. I hadn't felt it for twenty-five years. Yet here it was, as if no time had passed at all.

In Chapter Four, I shared the story of my first "real" job. It was the first in a long line of positions from which I was more often than not dismissed for shooting my mouth off, or if not that, by finding other ways to silently communicate my contempt for bosses and workplace settings that seemed to default to treating people with indignity. In my adolescent years, it was (as seems to be the case during this developmental stage for most of us) all about me. The indignities were my indignities. The anger and shame fuelling my non-compliance was my anger and shame, and I felt it hotly when I was fired. Again. And again.

The great gift of graduate school, and of writing this thesis, was gaining the theory and insights I needed to recognize that these events in my past were never really "all about me" at all. They were about a system of labour that encourages growth, autonomy and dignity for some, and robs it from others. About halfway through the production of this work, I realized it had never been about formal education for marginalized adults. At heart, it had always been a deeply felt moral assertion on my part that all human beings ought to be able to grow in, learn from, and be valued for their labour.

Prior to the rise of neo-liberal political economies, it was more often the case that firms and workers were bound in long-term or lifelong employment relationships -- a psychological contract that was shredded, most acutely in the 90s, by massive corporate layoffs and restructuring (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2010; Vosko, 2006). In its place, a new ethos of employability made it the worker's responsibility to make him or herself attractive to employers. Failure to do so is not a failing of employers, or of "the system," but of the individual (Coffield, 1999; Cruikshank, 2002; Leisner, 2006; Warren & Webb, 2007). It is easy to see from here how failure and blame can be extended to education choices, too.

This mindset was precisely demonstrated by Globe & Mail columnist Margaret Wente. In 2011, at the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement, she generated controversy when she described a 28-year old single mother pursuing a Master's degree in sociology as "the author of her own misfortune" for obtaining an education in a field that appeared to offer few job opportunities. In "Occupiers are Blaming the Wrong People," she makes some interesting points about high public cost of expanding

post-secondary education that offers little in the way of coordinating with supply and demand in the labour market. And she takes the usual sorts of shots at "progressives" that one would expect of a right-wing pundit. It looks a little bit like a structural analysis of education and labour markets from a conservative perspective, but the essential thrust of her column is the equation of a poor education choice with individual short-sightedness: "Just what kind of jobs did she imagine are on offer for freshly minted sociology graduates?," queries Wente. "Did she bother to ask? Did it occur to her that it might be a good idea to figure out how to support her children before she had them?"

Wente's critique isn't just mean-spirited. It is also useful. Blaming people for "choosing wrong" is functional because it upholds the legitimacy of the education system, and the social stratification it produces. One aim of my dissertation was to focus on how this stratification works, thereby taking some of the air out of political analysis that limits itself to demonization of the poor. To conclude my work, however, I want to briefly examine a more fundamental problem underlying the widening access mandate: namely, the very structure of the labour market and the vocational ends to which all this expanded participation supposedly leads. The labour market, as discussed by Gomberg (2007) and Murphy (1993) is parcelled into the kinds of "good jobs" and "crappy jobs" I described in Chapter Four, and good jobs are far and away scarcer than bad ones. So long as this is the case, people will compete to obtain those good jobs. This is the basis of the argument for credential inflation.

A scarcity of "good jobs" should, upon reflection, disrupt our near ubiquitous faith in meritocracy to serve as a principle for the just distribution of rewarding labour. Sayer (2011) describes "the fallacy of composition," which in this case would offer the (faulty) reasoning that "because success in getting a good job and upward social mobility are possible for some individuals, success must be possible for all individuals simultaneously" (p. 13). Clearly with a limited number of positions in the labour market that count as "good jobs," success for everyone is a logical impossibility.

But it is still a possibility we cling to. In his discussion of work and justice, Halliday (2004) argues that we need the myth of meritocracy to go on. His account, citing Williams (2002) is worth repeating in full:

> Social cohesion is perpetuated when "values are communicated through stories that members of the society tell about themselves, each other, their surroundings and their past. For Williams, social cohesion is enabled when at least some of those stories are hopeful and truthful enough to be plausible." (p. 152)

With respect to education, Halliday echoes Bourdieu's misrecognition thesis when he states, "despair would arise if it came to be accepted that education in general was little other than a gamble hopelessly

weighted in favour of those who have significant wealth and property" (2004, p. 152). It is both material necessity and the necessity of the myth that binds people in the "opportunity trap" described by Brown (2003). The opportunity trap is essentially a problem of collective action – a tragedy of the commons (Cassidy, 2009).[111] People pursue education and work experience because it is in their best interests to do so, but we all pay collective consequences in terms of necessarily instrumental attitudes toward both work and learning. The ubiquity and increasing aggressiveness of career building discussed by Brown and his colleagues (2006) points to the success of neo-liberal political economy in eroding not only the presence of organized labour, but also its spirit of solidarity. When it comes to getting a "good job," we are all on our own.

Wente's commentary also shows the ferocity of judgment that can be heaped upon those who do not succeed in the labour market, attributing their failure to individual, moral shortcomings. I focused on "widening access" in my dissertation because it struck me, frankly, as a particularly cruel form of credentialism because it has ratcheted up the price of the (illusory) American Dream for those who can least afford it. [112] To this dysfunctional state of affairs we can add creative new ways to position the poor as immoral drains on society's resources. The poor go to school, as they are told. But they had better not "choose wrong."[113]

The Complexity of Credential Inflation

So long as jobs are structured such that "good work" and "bad work" are packaged up as they are, any system of credentialed education – including any efforts to extend access to that system – only reinforces this labour market structure and its inherent inequities. The only possible outcome is credential inflation, which has taken on increasingly complex forms. One expression of this is increasing, status-based or positional competition among post-secondary institutions. Canada, noted Marshall in 2004, compared to the United States and Britain, has always been blessed by a relatively egalitarian

---

[111] Here is the original article by Garrett Hardin (1968): http://www.sciencemag.org/content/162/3859/1243.full

[112] When one believes school achievement to be the product of innate qualities like intelligence, and innate (or perhaps learned) qualities of diligence and care, it seems natural that those who possess these qualities should be equally recognized and rewarded in the paid labour market. In theory, then, educational achievement ought to be a level playing field; anyone ought to be able to exercise their abilities and good character to "get ahead." This logic is also used to make poverty a moral failing. Yet parents are often blamed or praised with respect to their children's achievement. Structure or agency are evoked as is convenient, and "the family" is embodies elements of both, so the intergenerational transmission of success (or failure) is ripe for ideological manipulation.

[113] At Norquest, Alberta Works programming is another intersection of poverty and credentialism. Welfare-to-work schemes simultaneously infantilize adult learners and shame them via discourses of responsibilization (cf. Ahl, 2006; Wright, 2012). Credentials (and their costs to the state) are attached to dead-end jobs with no prospects for growth, either through further education or experience.

post-secondary system. At the time of writing, Marshall feared that eroding public funding would increase competition within this system. Creeping references to "Canadian Ivy Leagues" and the high profile of Maclean's rankings, are indications that he was onto something.[114] Relatedly there have been notable increases in niche marketing and program specializations as post-secondary institutions seek to attract students (Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004). A highly marketized system makes choice more confusing for students, and can create situations of "information overload" like that which Anna experienced (Drummond, 2004).[115] There are also indications of new variants of credentialism in the form of extra-curricular activities, co-op programs, volunteering, and internships, all of which are more likely to accrue to those already in possession of cultural and social capital (Brown & Lauder, 2006; Lehmann, 2012, Redmond, 2006).[116]

The increasing complexity of credentialism is highly significant if I am correct in my proposition that the navigation of post-secondary education requires not only concrete skills, but experientially acquired discernment best classified as a form of cultural capital. As I pointed out in Chapter Seven, it is precisely this kind of embodied judgement that marginalized and first generation students are least likely to possess – it isn't part of their habitus. From this perspective, Bourdieu's argument for the role of education in misrecognition is clear. My focus on the "widening access" mandate is ultimately just an extension of this argument. The real "credentials" remain obscure and exclusive; there is no "widening access" to these through the education system.

If the education game is indeed rigged and credentialism is only making things worse, what is the alternative? In Chapter Three, I discussed the nature of the good job, and a conversation with David Livingstone about the distribution of labour.[117] Specifically, it was a conversation about who ought to

---

[114] The Globe and Mail referred to Canadian "Ivy League" schools in 2011: "You're spoiled for choice with Canadian Universities."

[115] The impacts of a marketized system on students' choices of institutions is an area that has seen scant attention, given growing evidence from the field of behavioural economics that excessive choices leads to decision paralysis, anxiety, and sub-optimal choices (Schwartz, 2004). There is also growing evidence of predatory marketing practices on the part of some institutions – particularly for-profit colleges and universities that appear to disproportionately attract and thus harm the vulnerable (Fox Garrity, Garrison & Fiedler, 2010).

[116] While many forms of experiential learning remain unrecognized through formal means, other forms have taken on qualities of "soft" or pseudo credentials. These are, however, all practices that privilege those in possession of cultural capital (Lehmann, 2012). Here, it is useful to examine Brown and Lauder's (2006) *Mismanagement of Talent*, which reveals an economy of managed selves, including the strategic use of extra-curricular and enrichment activities and hobbies that become commodified on resumes. In Redmond's (2006) study, working-class students who achieved academically nonetheless faced competitive labour markets, wherein the commodities cited by Brown and Lauder become much more important. (Also see Lehmann, 2012)

[117] It is actually interesting to think of this in terms of radical/fundamental restructuring of labour, which is really what Livingstone is proposing. The polarization between "good jobs" and "bad jobs" is dependent upon division of

clean toilets: What is a "fair" way to decide who performs unrewarding but still very necessary labour? In a similar vein to my question, Gomberg (2007) observes that someone has to sweep the floors (p. 62). For Sayer (2011), someone has to empty the garbage cans in the lecture halls at Lancaster. *Contributive justice* proposes that we all ought to share in such routine labour, affording the "specialists" who presently perform it to contribute other capabilities. The feasibility of this admittedly radical proposition – Gomberg, its proponent, claims it to be no less – is not as important here as the challenge it offers to moral justifications both for existing divisions of labour, and the system of educational credentials that legitimates it.

Connecting Economy and Society

My first encounter with Scottish philosopher Adam Smith was in high school. In a scant 300 word sidebar in a social studies textbook, I learned that Smith was the "father of capitalism," and that he had explained how "the invisible hand" assured that markets worked efficiently. In my subsequent years as an undergraduate, the critical orientations I was exposed to were roundly critical of capitalism, particularly as progressive voices rose against the assent of neo-liberalism under Thatcher and Reagan. As he was the "father of capitalism," then, I could only surmise that Adam Smith had been as cold and calculating as the market system he'd lauded.

I still remember my surprise and curiosity several years later in my after-degree when I discovered that Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments was a philosophical argument, not a dry "how to" guide to capitalism. Today, when I describe economics to my students as a "moral science" they are similarly surprised, if less curious and delighted than I was.

The students' surprise (and my own) speaks some truth to Sayer's (1999) observation that contemporary political economy has divorced normative considerations — how we ought to treat each other — from descriptive/analytical accounts of economics. Sayer writes in the vein of economic sociology, a branch of sociology that in its classic form, sought to bring together the disciplines in new ways. Economic sociology has its roots particularly in Weber and Simmell, who spoke directly to the

---

labour (both paid and unpaid) as they exist in the present. The problem with Livingstone's shared toilet cleaning below is that it doesn't recognize basic arguments about skills scarcity. Assuming that at least some innate talent combined with x years of education will produce a scarce or elite supply of a given skill, and that demand for this skill will always exceed supply, one can also assume, conversely, that work requiring very little talent and education can be performed by almost anyone. This contributes to their low status, as, frequently, do working conditions like routine, hard labour – all the stuff that makes a bad job a bad job. Hence supply here, in the long run, is much less likely to be scarce relative to demand. On the demand side, such jobs will never be as desirable as those with high status, high psychic rewards, etc. This is why I made the distinction between "good jobs" and "good work." Any rethinking of the distribution of labour must consider stratified inequalities inherent in the nature of the work itself; that is, some work is inherently less pleasant and satisfying than other work. So the notion of the good job is itself problematic. It assumes that the ways in which labour is presently packaged into jobs and occupations under our present system of labour market stratification is inevitable. The underlying structures of the division of labour in society are not transparent, nor are they problematized.

project, but also in considerations of labour by Durkheim, and in Marx's insight that relations of production are *social* relations (Swedberg, 2003). Contemporary efforts overlap with institutional theory (Bolton & Laaser, 2013) and network theory among others, but most may be characterized by a dissatisfaction with mainstream economics narrow emphasis on mathematics and deductive reasoning, and its continued reliance on *Homo economicus* as a model of human economic interests and behaviours (Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Swedberg, 2003).

A central concept in economic sociology is that economic behaviour is *embedded* in social relations (Granovetter, 1985; Polanyi, 1957). Given this broad premise, one can consider the role of social values in the governance of both of these phenomena. The concept of "moral economy" describes the relationship between our values and our economic behaviour. It poses the question of "our economic responsibilities towards others" (Sayer, 1999, p. 54). Contemporary accounts of markets focus on their technical features and mechanisms, assuming or even asserting that markets are value neutral. Moral economy instead emphasizes that markets are "a social and political construction that is steadily shaped and re-shaped by social, political and moral struggles" (Bolton & Laaser, 2013, p. 514).

In 2007, Paul Gomberg analyzed "good and bad jobs" from the perspective of moral economy to argue for a radical reconfiguration of labour markets based on a theory of "contributive justice." The theory is something of a mash-up of distributive justice and the "capabilities" approach advocated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. As Sayer (2011) explains it, distributive justice has focused on receipts – that is what people get. With respect to work and its returns, the problem of "bad work" can be treated on the basis of known considerations: remuneration, benefits and job security. Meritocratic norms can be upheld, and any sort of nagging feelings of injustice can be redressed through redistributive schemes typical of welfare statehood. Contributive justice instead focuses – as the name might suggest – on what people can *do* or contribute. Gomberg (2007) states that the latter position aligns much more with conceptualizations of work not as a burden, but, in the Aristotelian tradition, as the cultivation of human nature through purposeful activity.

When labour is examined from the standpoint of opportunities to contribute to meaningful projects and purposes, the "good" to be distributed in some form or another is not economic remuneration from labour but intrinsically satisfying aspects of labour itself. This requires a major rethink in how we organize work. Murphy's (1983) *Moral Economy of Labor* is helpful here. Murphy distinguishes between the division of labour processes (i.e. the technical division of labour) and the act of assigning workers to those processes (i.e. the social division of labour). This important analytical

distinction, he argues, is routinely overlooked in the study of labour. While the social division of labour has been justified on the grounds of efficiency, both Gomberg (2007) and Murphy (1983) draw on neo-Marxist analysis to pinpoint the social division of labour as a technology of power, rather than efficiency.[118]

What does all of this have to do with education? The system I have critiqued – a system in which institutions like Norquest and people like the students in my study are inextricably bound – legitimizes not only a meritocratic distribution of "good jobs" and "bad jobs" but the very composition of those jobs themselves. Credentialed education places significant limitations on who can do what. Thus "more education" through widened access can only perpetuate labour structures that limit human capabilities. The emphasis on greater investment in higher education as a solution to economic problems, or as a means of economic growth, ignores structural injustices in the labour market. As Livingstone concludes, "a passive adaptation of educational systems to job requirements fails to recognize the potential of human beings as active agents of their own learning, economic production, and cultural, political, and social development" (2009, p. 313).

It is in this sense that experiential learning – a topic I've given some attention to in this work – becomes important not only for the labour-friendly skills and dispositions it might incidentally provide, but for the challenge it poses to the social division of labour articulated by Murphy (1983), Gomberg (2007), Sayer (2005), Bourdieu (1984, 1999); and Sennett (2008, 1972). Hidden from view by the systems of misrecognition theorized by Bourdieu, experiential learning is a source of social stratification, obscured by its embodiment in the habitus, and by the unarticulated exchanges of capital that drive educational success, which are then named and commodified as "credentials." Legitimated in its own right, however, experiential learning can be a source of greater egalitarianism, functioning as a means of bridging formal learning and informal learning, paid and unpaid labour. It is this potential that underpins the importance that Livingstone (2009) places on experiential learning in his own studies of work and learning which very intentionally include forms of labour and learning that are presently marginalized and relatively unrecognized.

In my analysis of my data, I also became increasingly intrigued by the importance of learning in relationships. In invoking Marx's humanism in Chapter Three, I perhaps betrayed early on some

---

[118] In fact much of Gomberg's book is a detailed refutation of key arguments used to justify orthodox divisions of labour, which include differing "natural abilities," economic efficiency, and public interest in the education and practice of specialists.

remnants of romance and idealism lingering beneath my stronger tendencies to realism. The analytical mind goes readily to picking apart and critiquing most anything it encounters. The accompanying threat of descent into cynicism is real, and never far away. But there is something of an "adult educator" in me yet. I was heartened in my second round of interviews with the students to see the effects of the ad hoc learning communities formed as the women wove together affective needs for emotional support and encouragement with the practical and immediate work of mastering their academic curriculum. I saw Khomal and Tanis grow in confidence as they shared their knowledge, and the deep pleasure and sense of purpose expressed by Jayden and Anna when they were able to help others. In Norquest informants, I saw care and compassion for students, even though the needs these students presented never subsided. Care for others in the contexts of educational institutions that increasingly reward rational, self-serving conduct through credentialism, is not only necessary to facilitate significant forms of experiential learning; it is also a form of resistance.

IV. Future Directions

The word from past Dissertation Travelers is that it can be difficult to let go of a project in which you have invested years of your life. Mulling through a manuscript of this length also inevitably generates questions that cannot be immediately pursued. Whereas in the preceding section I considered relationships between work and learning from a broad, ethical perspective, the following avenues of study would result in policy critique or recommendations specific to learning opportunities and environments for marginalized adults. However, in keeping with my preceding discussion about the "moral economy," much of what is discussed in this section can be applied to the quality of work and learning experiences for all persons. In many senses, this is a call (if this does not sound too grand) for a reclamation of the kind of "lifelong learning" advocated in the 1972 *Fauré Report* discussed in Chapter Five that might transcend the class divisions that have been the focus of much of this work, and relieve "widened access" from its stigmatized status.

Is Self-Advocacy a Form of Cultural Capital?

First, I believe that useful theoretical insights could be gained by considering whether and how self-advocacy skills can be considered a form of cultural capital. My conversation with Elaine about self-advocacy for persons with disabilities proved, in retrospect, to be a turning point in my study, for it provided "self-advocacy" as a clear containing concept for the combination of self-confidence, persistence and, as I've described "discernment" to navigate bureaucratic complexities under conditions

of profound and increasing institutionalized individualism. Self-advocacy may be considered a form of capital that is unevenly acquired, but very, very necessary in a complex educational system.

In my review of literature on this topic to date, self-advocacy appears to be focused almost entirely upon persons with disabilities in institutional settings. I am interested whether, in the face of what Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) call "institutionalized individualism," the overt acquisition of these skills may become more important for everyone. There is awareness demonstrated in the literature that certain skill sets are required to navigate post-secondary education, and that relationships are important to students' success. But rarely is it articulated that the two go together in the cultivation of cultural capital. Reflecting the instrumentalism of the "skills" discourse more generally in PSE and employment, navigation skills are rendered instrumental and individualized. What my findings suggest is that navigation is a relational construct depending highly on the student's capacity to self-advocate. So self-advocacy, perhaps counter-intuitively, seems to depend on the network of relationships that cultivate the capacity to self-advocate in the first place.

While self-advocacy is clearly relevant and important for marginalized people who fall within this social category, my study participants made it clear for me that people differ widely in their ability to self-advocate within complex systems, and that many factors contribute to these differences. What I would like to see here is a widening of the application of self-advocacy to include all marginalized persons, regardless of the sources/factors of such marginalization. There are pockets of understanding that marginalized people need to be politically empowered and engaged, but when I talk about self-advocacy, I mean this in the context of a set of skills and dispositions that enable people to assert their rights and interests in institutional settings. This is distinct from the construct of self-efficacy, which has been used in studies of career choice, education choice (OECD, 2004) and job searches (Fort, Jacquet & Leroy, 2011). As a psychological construct, "self-efficacy" lacks the critical/political questions raised by examining similar issues from the perspective of "self-advocacy."

Recasting the "Skills for Employability" Discourse

In considering the ways in which credentialism has made it more difficult for people to enter the workforce and gain meaningful skills and work experience, I have examined policies and grown increasingly frustrated by the ways in which work-related skills are increasingly offloaded by employers onto the post-secondary system. It is validating to find comments like that recent report by the Conference Board of Canada (2014) noting

a troubling correlation between rising calls for PSE institutions to produce work-ready graduates and declining employer spending on training and development. Surveys of Canadian organizations for the Conference Board's Learning and Development Outlook show that employer spending on training and development has declined by about 40% over the past two decades.[119]

Further, while I am no fan of the Harper's Conservative government, it is encouraging to hear 2013 appointed labour minister Jason Kenney vocally calling upon Canadian employers to "get more skin in the game" when it comes to investing in workers' ongoing learning and skill development. Kenney's agenda is backed by figures that point to Canada's weak showing in this area internationally (Goodman, 2014).

At the time of this writing, there are movements afoot in Canada to strengthen connections between formal and workplace learning, and to help students develop "soft skills" for the workplace (Millar, 2014). While the equating of these skills with the "employability" discourse is unfortunate, it does not negate the more holistic and developmental nature of the skills themselves. Problem solving, as pedagogues like John Dewey have proposed, has intrinsic rewards, and for some (e.g. Freire), critical emancipatory dimensions. Teamwork and communication emphasized as "employability" skills also have important components of emotional intelligence and even spirituality, contributing to meaningful cooperative practices in both paid and unpaid labour. Thus much of the kind of learning being promoted in post-secondary programs is of great essential value if reinterpreted in the tradition of *Bildung* (see Gustavson, 2002 Schneider, 2012), and I am curious about potential leadership roles that might be taken by post-secondary institutions to recast discourses of "employability" in this light, and particularly the role that critical emancipatory work with marginalized persons might contribute.

The Credentialing of the Working Poor

Encountering Norquest for my dissertation in many ways solidified my interest in, and commitment to, neo-Weberian theories of credentialism and social closure to make sense of relationships between work, learning, and social mobility. I've observed a tendency to focus on credential inflation – that is, the increasing length and complexity of existing programs of study as precursors to labour market entry and advancement. Ready-to-hand examples include the professionalization of the Practical Nursing credential discussed in my thesis, the expansion of professional Master's Degree programs in business

---

[119] http://business.financialpost.com/2014/05/12/employers-must-start-investing-in-skills-training-or-risk-having-public-policy-nudge-them-along/

and education, and the underemployment of young adults with generalist degrees in arts and sciences (Millar, 2014).

What my Norquest experience highlighted is a potential to give much greater critical consideration to the impacts of credentialism on less prestigious and less visible sectors of education and labour markets. I think, for example, of how institutional isomorphism, academic drift, accountability and governmentality may converge in welfare-to-work schemes like Alberta Works, and in federally funded retraining schemes like the Canada Job Grant that then function to increase credentialized gate-keeping at the lower end of the skills spectrum. In many ways, credentialed schemes are contradictory to other policy initiatives, already mentioned, that aim to increase the mobility and flexibility of labour. These initiatives – some of which I've mentioned, like PLAR – aim to create greater fluidity in the articulation of vocational skills/competencies. Rather than simply focusing on "widening access," then, policies pertaining to education and skills training should encourage and support early and closely spaced opportunities to build on prior learning with laddered credential offerings that can help working adults to build valued skill sets rather than cycle through short-term training affording few growth opportunities, either through workplace learning or further education. The Health Care Aide certification, for example – completed by both Khomal and Erin – provides no opportunities for workers who hold the credential to build their skills toward LPN or nursing credentials.

V. Reflections and Lessons Learned

Recently, I did something I haven't been able to do for a while, and took myself out for breakfast. One of the pleasures of graduate work and academia is working whenever and wherever you want. I won't get into the issues this creates for work/life balance, but I will say that I like working in crappy pubs and breakfast joints, which Bourdieu of course would attribute to the durability of my essentially working/lower middle class habitus. This particular morning, I went to the High Level Diner – a quaint restaurant a stone's throw from campus, popular with folks who work at the University Hospital, and with university faculty. It's a lovely place, scattered with antique tables and chairs, original art, and hangings of beveled glass. With that kind of unintentional eavesdropping that sometimes accompanies good "people watching," I overheard the conversation between the man and woman next to me. Snippets of "department" and "student," and "research" clued me in to the fact that they were both academics – perhaps colleagues or husband and wife. None of what I picked up of their conversations struck me as odd, or alien; I'm an academic too.

Yet I still never feel, in the Bourdieusian sense, that I wear this identity with naturalness, or ease. That's why often I still like hanging out at old school breakfast joints, even though the food isn't nearly as good. They provide a sense of comfort – an especially welcome background when I'm writing. So the following week – same day, same time – I had breakfast at Albert's, a restaurant I'd worked at for three years, on and off, as a teen. (And yes, the food tasted like the grill.) Having just come off the High Level Diner a few days earlier, I was struck afresh by the contrast between the two restaurants, which so parallels the contrast between my two inner worlds. At Albert's, in the heart of a largely industrial area, there are few women besides the servers. The men don't wear jackets or dress-shirts; here it's all golf shirts, ball caps, and coveralls. One wouldn't describe Albert's vinyl booths as "genteel," nor, likely is anyone in here too interested, *Portlandia*-style, in whether the food is organic, or local. The servers here are probably not working their ways through degrees, or heading after their shifts to other, outside gigs as actors or musicians. My server at Albert's was a young woman, greatly pregnant, with her black collared work shirt stretched over her swollen belly. Instinctively, (for better or for worse), I left a larger tip than usual.

In my daily observations of the world, I am terribly conscious now of how, again instinctively, I "read" social class, and situate myself within it. Feeling like one "never belongs" (in given restaurants, or otherwise) is not uncommon for working class students who come to university. I hear similar stories from others who have been in the same in-between space, including the highly self-conscious narratives of the students, and some of the informants, who participated in my study. That sense of liminality also seems to be common for others who navigate two (or more) worlds by virtue of being bi-racial, for example, or perhaps living as an expat, or being a transgendered person. There are many stories. The flipside of "not belonging" in either world is that of "partial belonging." That's not always comfortable, but the gift that comes with it, I believe, is the opportunity for creativity and generativity to come out of anything that jars you "awake."

On Theory

Writing my research proposal was hell. It took forever. One of the reasons it took forever was because I kept fumbling around trying to find the "right" theoretical framework for my study. I knew I was interested in structure and agency – more specifically I knew it bothered me that analyses of "poor people" tended to portray them as passive victims at one extreme, or as agential but morally bankrupt at the other. Neither extreme, in my opinion, has analytical teeth. More importantly, neither can offer a

nuanced and respectful portrait of the impacts of initial socio-economic status on life chances, or "social mobility."

The challenge was to find a theoretical approach that reflected these initial positions. I was often panicked and frustrated trying to find the one, magical theory that would allow this. Over time, however, I've come to understand that there are many, many ways in which a problem can be framed theoretically. Through my reading I have gradually come to appreciate that theories that, on the surface, appear very different are in fact united by the same normative, epistemological and ontological assumptions. This insight has allowed me to become much more relaxed about how I approach theory. In a sense theory has been demystified for me, and I like to think this allows me to pick it up and use it like a tool, instead of in an overly deterministic way. At least it doesn't intimidate me anymore!

On Field Work

In constructing my research design, I chose Norquest College because I expected it would be the best place to find the adult students I hoped to focus on. I chose the PN program because I already had an interest in the nursing profession from previous research, and thought I might gain further insights into nursing as a kind of potential "side project" to come out of my work. I also knew early on that I was interested in Norquest as an institution – that is, I wanted to compare students' accounts of their own experiences with the ways in which the "student experience" was perceived by Norquest staff and faculty, and see what would come of it.

In retrospect, this is all, still, sensible reasoning. But what I did not understand at all going into my work was the importance of having lots of access to an organization's workings and culture if one is going to pursue inquiry at the organizational or institutional level. I did not have this access. I was going into Norquest "cold," despite my best efforts to connect through formal channels via Norquest's Research officer. I had no established relationships within the organization. This had two important consequences for my research: one practical, respecting methods, and the other pertaining to the quality of my data and analysis.

The practical "lesson learned" came through the protracted process of finding student participants for my study. As an outsider to the PN program and to Norquest, it took painful months and several false starts to recruit students. These missteps added considerably to my work and anxiety. In retrospect, I recognize how valuable practitioner research can be. I've worked with numerous practitioners through my work with public schools, and through editing the graduate work of a range of

working professionals from corporations, public health, and higher education, to name a few. Yet I also recognize that I was probably able to bring some interesting "outsider" perspectives to Norquest's story by virtue of not being part of that organization. Overall, it is advisable to carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages – methodologically and also in terms of the ultimate aims of the study – of emic and etic perspectives.

The other important consequence of my outsider status was the quality and appropriateness of the data I obtained for this study. A couple of examples are illustrative: First, I was quite erroneous in my initial assumption that Norquest's PN program would be a good place to find mature students. Much to my surprise, the vast majority of the students were of traditional age (18-22) and quite fresh out of high school. Thus I've been plagued by skepticism about the representativeness of my findings. In another example, I had no idea that the vast majority of the students whom my informants served were "foundational students," very often immigrants or refugees, who shared some similarities with the student participants in my study, but also presented their own, very distinctive needs when it came to career planning and educational supports. Thus I was never convinced that the findings from my informants in Student Services could be readily mapped against those of my student participants. I did my best to work through and around these problems (among others), but duly noted that in future research where I was, again, "coming in cold," it would be highly advisable to conduct a pilot study, which might incorporate informal interviews and a few hours of site observation, where appropriate.

On Accidentally Writing about Yourself

Through reading about qualitative research during my Master's program, I entered my doctoral work with a good understanding of the centrality of reflexivity to good research. However, as much of my adult life has been spent trying to get my gaze *off* my own navel, I've held a certain – well I'm just going to say it – a certain derision for hyper-reflexive methodologies (e.g. auto-ethnography, strong constructivism) because they wander too readily into solipsism, or creatively executed, extended forms of personal therapy. Through my graduate work, I was always driven more by the desire to become a good researcher, in a very vocational sense, than by any desire to "find myself." Thus while I understood the importance of reflexivity, I regarded this as an ethical obligation as a researcher rather than a *raison d'être* for the research itself. This is certainly still reflected in what I've come to understand are my theoretical leanings toward critical and social realism.

I have also, however, softened my stance somewhat. I knew that the students I was interviewing were in some straightforward ways like me: they were women, first-generation students, and single

mothers. In retrospect it seems pretty obvious that these similarities would prompt emotional connections for me. I was a bit alarmed at the time, fearing the research would become "about me" in ways I had already declared to eschew.

Yet as I worked with my data, I made friends, in a sense, with my own interior. I had to get comfortable with the fact that my whole adult life has been a weird, protracted and subtle project of social mobility, and a journey to an at times uncomfortable class consciousness. There are many things I don't miss about my "younger self," but what I do miss at times is my naïveté about my own social location. It wasn't always bad to be blissfully unaware that there were other ways of being in the world besides slinging coffee for a living. (It never occurred to me to be ashamed of being poor, or of being a breakfast waitress.) It was also easier to lack the vocabulary and insights one needs to see such vast variations of "being in the world," to ask questions about what constitutes a "just society," or to trouble perennial variations of "why can't we all just get along?"

Thus in many ways this research did not start to come together until I allowed myself to connect with formative moments in my own project of social mobility, many of which I've understood as formative only retrospectively. To write the handful of personal narratives included in this thesis, I had to overcome my squeamishness about my research "being about me," and in doing so I came, I believe, to a deeper understanding of what it means to "be reflexive" as a researcher, and how important that is to achieve empathy with one's research participants. I still strongly wish to focus not on myself but on the world around me. Yet I have a better sense now that to do so requires a kind of quiet knowledge of how I relate to that world.

References

Acumen Research Group. (2008). *Do perceptions matter regarding the costs and benefits of a post-secondary education? A summary report of the research program Development of Measures of Perceived Returns on Investment from Post-Secondary Education*. Montreal, PQ: Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Retrieved September 18, 2008 from http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/images/Publications/PRoI-JUN2008_en.pdf

Ahl, H. (2006). Motivation in adult education: a problem solver or a euphemism for direction and control? *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 25*(4), 385–405. doi:10.1080/02601370600772384

Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2011*). Campus Alberta planning resource 2011: Profiling Alberta's advanced education system*. Retrieved August 2, 2012 from http://eae.alberta.ca/media/299589/capr2011.pdf

Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2007). *Roles and mandates policy framework for Alberta's publicly funded advanced education system*. Edmonton, AB: Author. Retrieved August 20, 2012 from http://www.assembly.ab.ca/lao/library/egovdocs/2007/alae/163161.pdf

Alberta Advanced Education. (2005). *A learning Alberta: Increasing accessibility to advanced education for under-represented Albertans*. Author: Edmonton, AB.Retrieved from http://www.assembly.ab.ca/lao/library/egovdocs/2005/alae/150151.pdf

Antikainen, A., & Komonen, K. (2003). Biography, life course, and the sociology of education. In C. A. Torres & A. Antikainen (Eds.), *International handbook on the sociology of education* (pp. 143–159). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Apple, M. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3rd ed.). London: Taylor & Francis.

Archer, M. S. (2007). *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2000). *Being human: the problem of agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Askham, P. (2008). Context and identity: Exploring adult learners' experiences of higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 32*(1), 85-97.

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC] (2008). *Universities: Addressing Canada's challenges*. Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved February 8, 2010 from www.aucc.ca/_pdf/english/.../univ_challenges_2008_e.pdf

Association of Canadian Community Colleges [ACCC] (2008). *Opportunities for everyone: Programs and services for disadvantaged and low-skilled learners offered at colleges and institutes*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC] (2011). *Trends in education, volume I: Enrollment*. Ottawa: Author.

Atkinson, W. (2011). From sociological fictions to social fictions: some Bourdieusian reflections on the concepts of "institutional habitus" and "family habitus." *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 32*(3), 331–347. doi:10.1080/01425692.2011.559337

Atkinson, W. (2007). Beck, individualization and the death of class: a critique. *British Journal of Sociology, 58*(3), 349–366. doi:10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00155.x

Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global education Inc: New policy networks and the neo-liberal imaginary.* New York and London: Routledge.

Ball, S. J., Davies, J., David, M., & Reay, D. (2002). "Classification" and "judgement:" Social class and the "cognitive structures" of choice of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology*, *23*(1), 51–72. doi:10.1080/0142569012010285

Barr-Telford, L., Cartwright, F., Prasil, S., & Shimmons, K. (2003). *Access, persistence and financing: First results from the Postsecondary Education Participation Survey (PEPS)*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.

Bartholomew, K. (2006). *Ending nurse-to-nurse hostility: Why nurses eat their young and each other*. Marblehead MA: HCPro Inc.

Bash, L. (2003). *Adult learners in the academy*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company Inc.

Bayero, D., Trottier, C., & Doray, P. (2009). *What do we know about the pathways and transitions of Canadian students in post-secondary education?* Montreal, PQ: The Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation.

Beck, U. & Beck-Gersheim, B. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London and Thousand Oaks. CA: Sage Publications.

Béland, D. (2005). Ideas and social policy: An institutionalist perspective. *Social Policy and Administration 39*(1), 1-18.

Bell, D., & Bezanson, L. (2006). *Career development services for Canadian youth : Access, adequacy and accountability*. Ottawa, ON: *Canadian Policy Research Networks.*

Bellamy, L., 1994. Capital, habitus, field, and practice: an introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In: L. Erwin and D. MacLennan, (Eds). *Sociology of education in Canada*. Toronto: Copp Clark Longman, pp. 120-136.

Berger, J., Motte, A., & Parkin, A. (2009). *The price of knowledge: Access and student finance in Canada* (4th ed.). Montreal: Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation.

Berger, J., Motte, A., & Parkin, A. (2007). *The price of knowledge: Access and student finance in Canada* (3rd ed.). Montreal: Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation. Retrieved February 5, 2010 from http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/images/Publications/POK07_e.pdf

Bernstein, B. (1990). *The structuring of pedagogic discourse*. New York and London: Routledge.

Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 39*(2), 132–149.

Billett, S., Newton, J., & Ockerby, C. M. (2010). Socio-personal premises for selecting and securing an occupation as vocation. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 42*(1), 47–62.

Bills, D. (2003). Credentials, signals, and screens: Explaining the relationship between schooling and job assignment. *Review of Educational Research, 73*(4), 441-469).

Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2007). *The new spirit of capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.

Bolton, S. C., & Laaser, K. (2013). Work, employment and society through the lens of moral economy. *Work, Employment & Society, 27*(3), 508–525. doi:10.1177/0950017013479828

Boshier, R. (1998). Edgar Faure after 25 years: Down but not out. In J. Holford, P. Jarvis & C. Griffin (Eds.), *International perspectives on lifelong learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Boud, D. (2004). Discourses of access: Changing views in a changing world. In M. Osborne, J. Gallacher & B. Crossan (Eds.), *Researching widening access to lifelong learning* (pp. 53-63). London and New York: Routledge Falmer.

Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (New York, Greenwood), 241-258.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J-C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd ed.). London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Bowles, S., Durlauf, S., & Hoff, K. (2006). *Poverty traps*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.

Braxton, J., & Hirschy, A. (2005). Theoretical developments in the study of college student departure. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: formula for student success* (pp. 61–88). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Breen, R. (2005). Foundations of a neo-Weberian class analysis. In E. O. Wright (Ed.), *Approaches to class analysis* (pp. 31–51). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology, 22*(6), 723–742. doi:10.1037//0012-1649.22.6.723

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977, July). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*, 513-531.

Brown, P. (2003). The opportunity trap: Education and employment in the global economy. *Educational Research, 2*(1), 141–179.

Brown, D.K. (2001). The social sources of educational credentialism: Status cultures, labour markets, and organizations. *Sociology of Education, Extra Issue*, 19-34.

Brown, P., Lauder, H., & Ashton, D. (2010). *The global auction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Brown, P. & Lauder, H. (2006). Globalisation, knowledge and the myth of the magnet economy. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 4*(1), 25-57.

Brown, P. & Hesketh, A., & Williams, S. (2004). *The mismanagement of talent: Employability and jobs in the knowledge economy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Campbell-Clark, S. (2001). Work cultures and work/family balance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 58*(3), 348–365.

Canadian Council on Learning (2009). *Postsecondary education in Canada: Meeting our needs?* Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved April 5, 2009 from http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/PSE/2009/PSE2008_English.pdf

Canadian Council on Learning (2007). *Post-secondary education in Canada: Strategies for success*. Retrieved May 8, 2009 from http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/25B8C399-1EA3-428A-81A1-C8D8206E83C6/0/PSEFullReportENLR16july08Bookmark.pdf

Cassidy, J. (2009*). How markets fail: The logic of economic calamities*. Toronto: Viking Canada.

Chase, S. (2002). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 651-679). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chaykowski, R. P. (2005). Non-standard work and economic *vulnerability*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks

Chovanec, D. & Lange, E. (2010). *Learning needs assessment for low-income adult populations*. Retrieved April 15. 2010 from http://www.ecala.org/LinkClick.aspx?link=2009+ECALA+Files%2FLearning+Needs+Assessment+2009.pdf&tabid=36&mid=371

Choy, S. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Post-secondary access, persistence and attainment.* Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf

Chung-Yan, G. (2010). The nonlinear effects of job complexity and autonomy on job satisfaction, turnover, and psychological well-being. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 15*(3), 237–51. doi:10.1037/a0019823

Clark, B. R. (1960). The "Cooling-Out" Function in Higher Education. American Journal of Sociology, 65(6), 569-. doi:10.1086/222787

Clarke M., & Patrickson M. (2008). The new covenant of employability. *Employee Relations 30*(2), 121-141.

Coffield, F. (1999). Breaking the consensus: Lifelong learning as social control. *British Journal of Educational Research, 25*(4), 479-499.

Colley, H., James, D., Tedder, M. & Diment, K. (2003). Learning as becoming in vocational education and training: class, gender and the role of vocational habitus. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 55*(4), 471-498.

Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education, 55*(4), 425–446. doi:10.1007/s10734-007-9065-5

Collins, R. (1979). *The credential society: An historical sociology of education and stratification*. Academic Press Inc.: San Diego.& Laanan

Compton, J., Cox, E., & Laanan, F. S. (2006). Adult learners in transition. *New Directions for Student Services, 114*, 73–80. doi:10.1002/ss

Conrad, D. (2001). The issue of access in adult education: Privilege and possibility. In D. Poonwassie and A. Poonwassie, (Eds.), *Fundamentals of adult education: Issues and practices for lifelong learning* (pp. 204-213). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Corak, M. (2013). Income inequality, equality of opportunity, and intergenerational mobility. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 27*(3), 79–102.

Côté, J. E., Levine, C. G., (2002). *Identity formation, agency, and culture: a social psychological synthesis*. Mahwah N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

Cox, B. E., & Orehovec, E. (2007). Faculty-student interaction outside the classroom: A typology from a residential college. *The Review of Higher Education, 30*(4), 343–362. doi:10.1353/rhe.2007.0033

Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Crossan, B., Field, J., Gallagher, J. & Merrill, B. (2003). Understanding participation learning for non-traditional adult learners: Learning careers and the construction of learning identities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 24*(1), 55-67.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process*. London and Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Cruikshank, J. (2002). Lifelong learning or re-training for life: Scapegoating the worker. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 34*(2), 140-155.

Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (2006). *The schooled society: An introduction to the sociology of education*. Don Mills ON: Oxford University Press.

Denzin, N. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park CA, London and New Dehli: Sage Publications Inc.

Desjardins, R., Rubenson K. & Milana, M. (2006). *Unequal chances to participate in adult learning: International perspectives*. Paris: UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning.

DiMaggio, P. J. (1982). Cultural capital and school success: The impact of status culture participation on the grades of U.S. high school students. *American Sociological Review, 47*, 189–201.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(2), 147–160.

Dominicé, P. (2000). *Learning from our lives: Using educational biographies with adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Drewes, T. (2008). *Adult education and training from a longitudinal perspective*. Human Resources and Social Development Canada: Gatineau, PQ.

Drummond, G. (2004). Consumer confusion: Reduction strategies in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Management, 18*(4/5), 317-323.

DuBois-Reymond, M. (1998). "I don"t want to commit myself yet': Young people's life concepts. *Journal of Youth Studies, 1*(1), 63–79.

Ehrenreich, B. (2001). *Nickeled and dimed: On (not) getting by in America*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company.

Ehrenreich, B. (1990). *Fear of falling: The inner life of the middle class*. New York: Perennial Library.

Elder, G. H. (1995). The life course paradigm: Social change and individual development. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder, & K. Luscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp. 101–139). Washington DC: APA Press.

Elder-Vass, D. (2007). For emergence: Refining Archer's account of social structure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 37*(1), 25-44

Emirbayer, M., & Johnson, V. (2008). Bourdieu and organizational analysis. *Theory and Society, 37*(1), 1–44. doi:10.1007/s11186-007-9052-y

English, F. W. (2012). Bourdieu's misrecognition: Why educational leadership standards will not reform schools or leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration and History, 44*(2), 155–170. doi:10.1080/00220620.2012.658763

Erben, M. (1998). Biography and research method. In M. Erben (Ed.), *Biography and education: A reader* (pp. 4-17). London: Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis Group.

Esping Andersen, G. (1999) *Social foundations of post-industrial societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ezzy, D. (1997). Subjectivity and the labour process: Conceptualizing "good work." *Sociology, 31*(3), 427–444.

Feinstein, L., Duckworth, K., and Sabates, R. (2004, May). *A model of the inter-generational transmission of educational success*. London: Center for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

Field, J. (2006). *Lifelong learning and the new educational order*. Staffordshire, England: Trentham Books.

Finnie, R., Childs, S., & Wismer, A. (n.d.). *First generation post-secondary education students*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Education Project.

Fisher, B. R., & Engemann, J. (2009). *Factors affecting attrition at a Canadian college*. Ottawa ON:
Canadian Council on Learning

Fort, I., Jacquet, F., & Leroy, N. (2011). Self-efficacy, goals, and job search behaviors. *Career
Development International, 16*(5), 469–481. doi:10.1108/13620431111168886

Fox Garrity, B., Garrison, M., & Fiedler, R. (2010). Access for whom, access to what? The role of the
"disadvantaged student" market in the rise of for-profit higher education in the United States*.
Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies, 18*(1), 203–243.

Frank, R. (2007). Falling behind: how rising inequality harms the middle class. Berkeley: University of
California Press

Frenette, M., & Robson, J. (2010). *Financial literacy of low-income students: Literature and
environmental scan*. Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Retrieved from
http://heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/FinLitENG.pdf

Frenette, M. (2004). The overqualified Canadian graduate: the role of the academic program in the
incidence, persistence, and economic returns to overqualification. *Economics of Education
Review, 23*(1), 29–45. doi:10.1016/S0272-7757(03)00043-8

Fromm, E. (1961). *Marx's concept of man*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.

Fuller, A. (2007). Mid-life "transitions" to higher education: Developing a multi-level explanation of
increasing participation. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 39*(2), 217–235.

Fuller, A. (2001). Credentialism, adults and part-time higher education in the United Kingdom: An
account of rising take up and some implications for policy. *Journal of Education Policy, 16*(3),
233-248.

Gerth, H., & Mills, C. W. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. New York: Oxford University
Press.

Gibbons, M. M., & Borders, L. D. (2010). Prospective first-generation college students: A social-cognitive
perspective. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *58*(March), 194–209.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge:
Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley and Los
Angeles, University of California Press.

Goldrick-Rab, S. (2006). Following their every move: An investigation of social-class differences in college
pathways. *Sociology, 79*(1), 61-79.

Gomberg, P. (2007). *How to make opportunity equal: Race and contributive justice*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Goodman, L. (2014, March 6). Jason Kenny bound for Germany on apprenticeships. *The Canadian Press*. Retrieved from http://metronews.ca/news/canada/963954/kenney-bound-for-germany-on-apprenticeships/

Gorrard, S., & Rees, G. (2002). *Creating a learning society?* Bristol, UK: Polity Press.

Government of Canada. (2014). *Jobs report: The state of the Canadian labour market*. Ottawa, ON: Department of Finance, Government of Canada. Retrieved from http://www.budget.gc.ca/2014/docs/jobs-emplois/pdf/jobs-emplois-eng.pdf

Government of Alberta (2012). *Education act*. Retrieved from http://www.qp.alberta.ca/1266.cfm?page=e00p3.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779769346

Goyder, J. (2009). *Prestige squeeze: Occupational prestige in Canada since 1965*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology, 91*(3), 481–510.

Grubb, W. N., & Lazerson, M. (2004). *The education gospel*. Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Gustavsson, B. (2002). What do we mean by lifelong learning and knowledge? *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 21*(1), 13–23. doi:10.1080/02601370110099489

Guo, S. (2009). Difference, deficiency, and devaluation: Tracing the roots of non-recognition of foreign credentials for immigrant professionals in Canada. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 22*(1).

Halliday, J. (2004). Distributive justice and vocational education. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 52*(2), 151–165. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8527.2004.00260.x

Härtung, P. J. (2010). Practice and research in career counseling and development. *Career Development Quarterly, 59*(December), 98–143.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Hawthorne (2007, Spring). Foreign credential recognition and assessment: An introduction. *Canadian Issues*, 3-11.

Heinz, W. R., & Kruger, H. (2001). Life course: Innovations and challenges for social research. *Current Sociology, 49*(2), 29-45. doi: 10.1177/0011392101049002004.

Hirsch, F. (1976). *Social limits to growth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Hodkinson, P., & Sparkes, A. C. (1997). Careership: A sociological theory of career decision making. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *18*(1), 29–44.

Holzer, H. J., Lane, J. I., Rosenblum, D. B., & Andersson, F. (2011). *Where are all the good jobs going? What national and local job quality and dynamics mean for U.S. workers* (p. 208). New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.amazon.com/Where-Are-Good-Jobs-Going/dp/087154458X

Horsman, J. (2006). Moving beyond "stupid": Taking account of the impact of violence on women's learning. *International Journal of Educational Development, 26*(2), 177–188. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.07.023

Hurst, A. (2012). *College and the working class: What it takes to make it*. Boston, MA: Sense Publishers.

Hutton, W. (1996). *The state we're in*. London: Vintage.

Ikura, J. (2007, Spring). Foreign credential recognition and Human Resources and Social Development Canada. *Canadian Issues*, 17-20.

International Labour Organization (2006). *Decent working time: new trends, new issues*. Geneva: International Labour Office.

Illeris, K. (2006). Lifelong learning and the low-skilled. In A. Antikainen, P. Harinen & A. Torres (Eds.), *In from the margins: Adult education, work and civil society* (pp. 39-52). Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.

Income Security Advocacy Centre [ISAC] (2007). *Fact sheet: The 'welfare wall.'* Retrieved August 24, 2012 from http://www.incomesecurity.org/documents/WelfareWall.May2007-new.pdf

Jackson, A. (2010). *Work and labour in Canada: Critical issues* (2nd Ed.) Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Jenkins, R. (1992). *Pierre Bourdieu*. New York: Routledge.

Johnson, J. (2001). In-depth interviewing. In J. Gubrium & A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 103-120). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jones, G. A., & Field, C. (2013). *Increasing access to higher education: A review of system-level policy initiatives*. Paper presented at the 2013 IALEI Conference on Access Policy in Higher Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China, October 31-Nov 2, 2013

Kalleburg, A. (2011). *Good jobs, bad jobs: The rise of polarized and precarious employment systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Karp, M. M. (2011). *How non-academic supports work: Four mechanisms for improving student outcomes*. Working Paper 54, Community College Research Centre. New York: Columbia University.

Kenny, M., & Bledsoe, M. (2005). Contributions of the relational context to career adaptability among urban adolescents. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 66*(2), 257–272. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2004.10.002

Kerckhoff, A. (1989). On the social psychology of social mobility processes. *Social Forces, 68*(1), 17–25.

Kirby, D. (2007). Reviewing Canadian post-secondary education: post-secondary education policy in post-industrial Canada. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 65*, 1–24. Retrieved from http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/kirby.html

Lambert, M., Zeman, K., Allen, M., & Bussière, P. (2004). *Who pursues postsecondary education, who leaves and why : Results from the Youth in Transition Survey*. *Statistics*. Ottawa, ON.

Lareau, A. (2000). *Home advantage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. B. (2003). Cultural capital in educational research : A critical assessment. *Theory and Society*, 567–606.

Lavallée, L. & Backus, J. (n.d.). *Impact of Canada Millienium Scholarship Foundation Bursaries on postsecondary education persistence, completion, and debt levels*. Retrieved October 11, 2009 from http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/learning/postsecondary_education/CMSF/PDFs/Laval_Backus_English.pdf

Layder, D. (1994). *Understanding social theory.* London and Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Lees, J., & Dietsche, W. G. (2012). *An Analysis of counselling services in Ontario colleges: Initial report*. Retrieved from http://www.occ-ccco.ca/pdfs/Research%20Documents/Jim%20Lees%202012/Final%20Documents/Initial%20Report/An%20Analysis%20of%20Counselling%20Services%20in%20Ontario%20Colleges%20-Initial%20Report.pdf

Lehmann, W. (2012). Extra-credential experiences and social closure: Working-class students at university. *British Educational Research Journal, 38*(2), 37–41.

Lehmann, W. (2007). *Choosing to labour? School-work transitions and social class*. Montreal and Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press.

Levin, J. (2007). *Non-traditional students and community colleges: The conflict of justice and neo-liberalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Liesner, A. (2006). Education or service? Remarks on teaching and learning in the entrepreneurial university. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 38*(4), 483-495.

Livingstone, D.W. (Ed.) (2009). *Education and jobs: Exploring the gaps*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Livingstone, D.W., & Scholtz, Antonie (2006). *Work and lifelong learning in Canada: Basic findings of the 2004 WALL Survey*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Retrieved April 11, 2009 from http://www.wallnetwork.ca/resources/WALLSurveyReportFINALMarch2007.pdf

Livingstone, D.W. (1999). *The education-jobs gap: Underemployment or economic democracy?* Aurora, ON: Garamond Press.

Livingstone, D. W., & Pankhurst, K. (2009a). Prior concepts and theories of the relationship between workers and jobs. In *Education & jobs: exploring the gaps* (pp. 11-31). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Livingstone, D. W., & Pankhurst, K. (2009b). Education and jobs: The way ahead. In *Education & jobs: Exploring the gaps* (pp. 309-326). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Livingstone, D. W. & Raykov, M. (2009). Education and jobs survey profile I: National trends in employment conditions, job requirements, workers learning and matching, 1983-2004. In *Education & jobs: Exploring the gaps* (pp. 67-101). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Lu V. (2013, March 25). Jobs: Fix education so we don't have people without jobs, conference told. *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved from http://www.thestar.com/business/2013/03/25/jobs_fix_education_so_we_dont_have_people_without_jobs_conference_told.html

Lundberg, C., McIntire, D., & Creasman, C. (2008). Sources of social support and self-efficacy for adult students. *Journal of College Counseling, 11*(1), 58–72. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.2008.tb00024.x

Mahon, R. (2008). Varieties of Liberalism: Canadian social policy from the golden age to the present. *Social Policy & Administration, 42*(4), 342–361. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9515.2008.00608.x

MacKeracher, D., Suart, T., & Potter, J. (2006). *A review of the state of the field of adult learning*. Retrieved from http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/AdLKC/stateofthefieldreports/BarrierstoParticipation.pdf

Mann, S. J. (2001). Alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education, 26*(1), 7–19. doi:10.1080/0307507002003068

Marcucci, P. N., & Johnstone, D. B. (2007). Tuition fee policies in a comparative perspective: Theoretical and political rationales. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 29*(1), 25–40. doi:10.1080/13600800600980015

Marx, K. (1974). The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. In D. Fernbach (Ed.), *Karl Marx: Surveys from exile.* New York: Vintage Books, pp. 143-249.

Marshall, D. (2004). Degree accreditation in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 34*(2), 69-96.

McElroy, L. (2008). *In pursuit of post-secondary education: Whether and when to go on*. Ottawa: Canadian Millenium Scholarship Foundation. Retrieved April 11, 2010 from http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/images/Publications/081125_IPPSE_EN.pdf

McRobbie, A. (2004). Notes on "What not to wear" and post-feminist symbolic violence. *The Editorial Board of the Sociological Review*, 99–109.

Meara, K. O., & Bloomgarden, A. (2011). The pursuit of prestige: the experience of institutional striving from a faculty perspective. *Journal of the Professoriate, 4*(1), 39 – 73.

Merrill, B., & West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage.

Merrill, B. & Alheit, P. (2004). Biography and narratives: Adult returners to learning. In M. Osborne, J. Gallacher & B. Crossan (Eds.), *Researching widening access to lifelong learning: Issues and approaches in international research* (pp. 150-162). Abingdon and New York: Routledge Falmer.

Milesi, C. (2010). Do all roads lead to Rome? Effect of educational trajectories on educational transitions. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, 28*(1), 23–44. doi:10.1016/j.rssm.2009.12.002

Millar, E. (2014, October 21). The expectation gap: Students' and universities' roles in preparing for life after grad. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/the-expectation-gap-students-and-universities-roles-in-preparing-for-life-after-grad/article21187004/?page=all

Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mills, M., Drew, S., & Gassaway, B. (2007). *Dirty work: The social construction of taint*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Morrison, A. (2008). 'I can't do any more education': Class, individualisation and educational decision-making. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 60*(4), 349-362.

Morrow, R., & Brown, D. D. (1994). *Critical theory and methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Mueller, D. (2004). Models of man: Neoclassical, behavioural, and evolutionary. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics, 3* (1), 59- 76.

Mueller, Richard E. (2008). *Access and persistence of students from low-income backgrounds in Canadian post-secondary education: A review of the literature*. A MESA Project Research Paper. Toronto, ON: Educational Policy Institute.

Murphy, J. (1993). *The moral economy of labor: Aristotelian themes in economic theory*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Murphy, R. (1994). A Weberian approach to credentials: Credentials as a code of exclusionary closure. In L. Erwin & D. MacLennan (Eds.), *Sociology of education in Canada* (pp. 102–119). Toronto: Copp, Clark Longman.

Myers, K. & de Broucker, P. (2006). *Too many left behind: Canada's adult education and training system*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks. Retrieved September 1, 2008 from http://www.cprn.org/documents/43977_en.pdf

Nash, R. (1990). Bourdieu on education, social and cultural reproduction. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 11*(4), 431–447.

Needham, M. (1991). *Alberta Vocational College: An informal history of our college*. Edmonton AB: Alberta Vocational College.

Newman, F., Couturier, L., and Scurry, J. (2004). *The future of higher education: Rhetoric, reality, and the risks of the market*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Newman, K. (2006). *Chutes and ladders: Navigating the low wage labor market*. NY: Russel Sage Foundation and Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Noble, G., & Watkins, M. (2003). So, how did Bourdieu learn to play tennis? Habitus, consciousness and habituation. *Cultural Studies, 17*(3-4), 520–539. doi:10.1080/0950238032000083926

Nicoll, K. (2006). *Flexibility and lifelong learning: policy, discourse and politics* (p. 170). London and New York: Routledge. Retrieved from http://books.google.com/books?id=cZZM398xg0EC&pgis=1

Norman, M. & Hyland, T. (2003). The role of confidence in lifelong learning. *Educational Studies, 29*(2/3), 261-272.

Norquest College (2012). *Comprehensive institutional plan 2012-2015*. Edmonton, AB: Author. Retrieved August 2, 2012 from http://www.norquest.ca/pdf/publications_2012/NorQuestCollege_CIP_2012-15_WEB.pdf

Nussbaum MC (2011) *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

OECD (2009). *Helping youth to get a firm foothold in the labour market.* Paris, OECD. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/54/50/43766254.pdf

OECD (2005). *Promoting adult learning*. Paris: Author.

OECD. (2004). *Career guidance and public policy: Bridging the gap*. Paris: Author.

Ogilvie, L., Leung, B., Gushuliak, T., McGuire, M., & Burgess-Pinto, E. (2007). Licensure of internationally educated nurses seeking professional careers in the province of Alberta in Canada. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 8*(2), 223–241. doi:10.1007/s12134-007-0015-y

Oldford, S. (2006). *Exploring options for institutional accreditation in Canadian post-secondary education*. Victoria, BC: School of Public Administration, University of Victoria. Retrieved March 27, 2009 from http://www.bccat.bc.ca/pubs/oldford.pdf

Olssen, M. (2006). Understanding the mechanisms of neoliberal control: lifelong learning, flexibility and knowledge capitalism. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 25*(3), 213–230. doi:10.1080/02601370600697045

Olssen, M. (2002). The restructuring of tertiary education in New Zealand: Governmentality, neo-liberalism, democracy. *McGill Journal of Education, 37*(1), 57- 87.

Parkin, A., & Baldwin, N. (2009). *Persistence in post-secondary education in Canada : The Latest research. Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation*

Pitre, P. E., Johnson, T. E., & Cowan-Pitre, C. (2006). Understanding predisposition in college choice: Toward an integrated model of college choice and theory of reasoned action. *College and University*, *81*(2), 35–42.

Polanyi, K. (1957). *The great transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Porpora, D. (1989). Four concepts of social structure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 19* (2):195–211

Purcell, K. Wilton, N., & Elias, P. (2007). Hard lessons for lifelong learners? Age and experience in the graduate labour market. *Higher Education Quarterly, 61*(1), 57-82.

Quimby, J., & O'Brien, K. (2004). Predictors of student and career decision-making self-efficacy among nontraditional college women. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *52*, 323–339.

Raffe, D. (2003). Pathways linking education and work: A review of concepts, research, and policy debates. *Journal of Youth Studies, 6*(1), 3–19. doi:10.1080/1367626032000068136

Reay, D. (2004). "It's all becoming a habitus': Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 25*(4), 431–444. doi:10.1080/0142569042000236934

Reay, D. (2003). A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to higher education. *Gender and Education, 15*(3), 301-317.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). "Strangers in Paradise"?: Working-class Students in Elite Universities. Sociology, 43(6), 1103–1121. doi:10.1177/0038038509345700

Reay, D., David, M. & Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Social class, race and gender in higher education.* Staffordshire, England & Sterling VA: Trentham Books Ltd.

Reay, D., Davies, J., DavidS, M., & Ball, S. (2001). Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Class, "race" and the higher education choice process. *Sociology*, *35*(4), 855–874.

Reay, D. (1998). *Class work: Mothers' involvement in their children's primary schooling*. London: Routledge.

Redmond, P. (2006). Outcasts on the inside: Graduates, employability and widening participation. *Tertiary Education and Management, 12*, 119-135.

Riddell, W.C. (2004). Education, skills, and labour market outcomes: Exploring the linkages in Canada. In J. Gaskell & K. Rubenson (Eds.) *Educational outcomes for the Canadian workplace: New frameworks for policy and research* (pp. 21-55). Toronto ON: University of Toronto Press.

Ritzer, G. & Goodman, D. (2004). *Modern sociological theory* (6th ed.) Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Rizvi, F. & Lingard, B. (2006). Globalization and the changing nature of the OECD's educational work. In H. Lauder, P. Brown, J. Dillabough, & A. Halsey (Eds.), *Education, globalization and social change* (pp. 247-260). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical research*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Robbins, S. B., Lauver, K., Le, H., Davis, D., Langley, R., & Carlstrom, A. (2004). Do psychosocial and study skill factors predict college outcomes? A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 130*(2), 261–88. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.130.2.261

Rojek, C. (2010). *The labour of leisure: The culture of free time*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Rosenthal, G. (2004). Biographical research. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. Gubrium, and D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 48-64). London, Thousand Oaks and New Dehli: Sage

Rossiter, M. (2009). Possible selves and career transition: Implications for serving nontraditional students*. The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 57*(2), 61–71. doi:10.1080/07377360902991858

Rossman, P. (2013). Establishing rights in the disposable jobs regime. *International Journal of Labour Research, 5*(1), 23–41.

Rounce, A. (2004). *Access to post-secondary education: Does class still matter?* Saskatchewan SK:
    Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved November 27, 2008 from the Canadian
    Center for Policy Alternatives website at
    http://www.policyalternatives.ca/reports/2004/08/reportsstudies815/?pa=A2286B2A

Rubenson, K. (2007). Determinants of formal and informal Canadian adult learning: *Insights from the*
    Adult Education and Training Surveys. Gatineau, PQ: Human Resources and Social Development
    Canada.

Samuel, L. (2012). *American dream: A cultural history.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Sayer, A. (2011). Habitus, work and contributive justice. *Sociology, 45*(1), 7–21.
    doi:10.1177/0038038510387188

Sayer, R. (2010). *Method in social science: A realist approach* (2nd ed.). London and New York:
    Routledge. Retrieved from http://ualberta.worldcat.org/title/method-in-social-science-a-realist-
    approach/oclc/473656888?referer=di&ht=edition.

Sayer, A. (2007). Dignity at work: Broadening the agenda. *Organization, 14*(4), 565-581.

Sayer, A. (1999). Valuing culture and economy. In L. Ray & A. Sayer (Eds.), *Culture and economy after the*
    cultural turn (pp. 53–75). London: Sage.

Schneider, K. (2012). *Becoming onself: Dimensions of 'Bildung' and the facilitation of personality*
    development. Weisbaden: Springer

Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice*. New York: Harper Collins.

Siedman, I. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the*
    social sciences. New York: Teachers College Press.

Sen, A. (2001). *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sennett, R. (2008) *The craftsman*. New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press.

Sennett, R., & Cobb, J. (1972). *The hidden injuries of class*. New York: Vintage Books.

Shanahan, M. J. (2000). Pathways to adulthood in changing societies: Variability and mechanisms in life
    course perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology, 26*, 667–92.

Skolnik, M. L. (2004). The relationship of the community college to other providers of postsecondary and
    adult education in Canada and implications for policy. *Higher Education Perspectives, 1*(1), 36–
    58.

Smith, D. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Lanham MD: AltaMira Press.

Spellman, N. (2007). Enrollment and retention barriers adult students encounter. *The Community*
    College Enterprise, 13(1), 63-79.

Strauss, V. (2014, February 10). *'The greatest line I never said' — from college admissions counselors*. The Washington Post. Retrieved February 15th from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/02/10/the-greatest-line-i-never-said-by-college-admissions-counselors/?tid=pm_local_pop#comments

Swartz, D. (1997). *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Swedberg, R. (2003). *Principles of economic sociology*. Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Tennant, M., & Pogson, P. (1995). *Learning and change in the adult years: A developmental perspective*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Thomas, L. (2000). "Bums on seats" or "listening to voices": Evaluating widening participation initiatives using participatory action research. *Studies in Continuing Education, 22*(1), 95-113.

Thorson, J. (1993). Did you ever see a hearse go by? Some thoughts on gallows humor. *Journal of American Culture, 16*(2), 17-24.

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention, 8*(1), 1–19.

Trow, M. (2007). Reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal access: Forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since WWII. In J. Forest & P. Altbach (Eds.), *International handbook of higher education* (pp. 243–280). Dordrecht: Springer.

Uppal, S., & LaRochelle-Côté, S. (2014). *Overqualification among recent university graduates in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Vosko, L. (Ed.) (2006). *Precarious employment: Understanding labour market insecurity in Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press.

Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). Toward a social praxeology: The structure and logic of Bourdieu's sociology. In P. Bourdieu & L. Wacquant (Eds.), *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (pp. 1–59). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wallace, R. (2008). *Reluctant learners: Their identities and educational experiences*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Walpole, M. (2003). Socioeconomic status and college: How SES affects college experiences. *Higher Education, 27*(1), 45-73.

Walters, D. (2004). *The relationship between postsecondary education and skill: Comparing credentialism with the human capital theory*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA

Warde, A. (2004). *Practice and field: revising Bourdieusian concepts*. [Discussion paper]. Centre for Research on Innovation and Competition, University of Manchester. Retrieved from http://www.cric.ac.uk/cric/pdfs/dp65.pdf

Warmington, P. (2003). 'You need a qualification for everything these days.' The impact of work, welfare and disaffection upon the aspirations of access to higher education to students. *British Journal of Sociology, 24*(1), 95-108.

Warren, S., & Webb, S. (2007). Challenging lifelong learning policy discourse: Where is structure in agency in narrative-based research? *Studies in the Education of Adults, 39*(1), 5–21.

Weininger, E. (2005). Foundations of Pierre Bourdieu's class analysis. In E. O. Wright (Ed.), *Approaches to class analysis* (pp. 82–118). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wells, R. (1997). The effects of social and cultural capital on student persistence. *Community College Review*, 25–47.

Wensley, K. (2013, January 18). University students: Brand yourself now and get ahead. *The Huffington Post, Canada*. Retrieved April 22, 2013 from http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/karen-wensley/branding-yourself-getting-hired_b_2497771.html

White, D., Oelke, N. D., Besner, J., Doran, D., McGillis Hall, L., & Giovannetti, P. (2008). Nursing scope of practice: descriptions and challenges. *Nursing Leadership, 21*(1), 44–57. Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18448890

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London and New York: Penguin Books.

Woodhall, M. (1987). Human capital concepts. In G. Psacharopoulos (Ed.), *Economics and education: Research and studies*. pp. 219-223.Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press.

Wright E.O. (2005) *Approaches to class analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wright, S. (2012). Welfare-to-work, agency and personal responsibility. *Journal of Social Policy, 41*(2), 309–328. doi:10.1017/S0047279411001000

Wurzburg, G. (2005). Why economic and financial sustainability matter for lifelong learning. *Literacy, 40*(1), 69–92.

Wyatt, L. G. (2011). Nontraditional student engagement: Increasing adult student success and retention. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59*(1), 10–20. doi:10.1080/07377363.2011.544977

Zhang, X. & Palameta, B. (2006). *Participation in adult schooling and its earnings impact in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved February 22, 2009 from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2006276-eng.pdf