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“I Don’t Know the Secret Handshake”: Making Social Class Visible in a Learning Context

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Abstract: This phenomenological study focused on the lived experience of being a mature adult pursuing a doctoral degree and having a working class background. Findings illuminate the persistent influence of social class on educational experience and the implications for adult education.

Although awareness of social class is often unspoken and unacknowledged, it influences how people make meaning of social inequality and how social inequality gets reproduced. Yet, many argue that the idea of class has outlived its usefulness (Nesbit, 2006), especially those who argue that class mobility undergirds the American dream. Making meaning of social class is powerfully shaped by where individuals stand in the class structure. Those who occupy subordinate social class positions tend to construct social class as a more salient issue than gender or race (Stuber, 2006). According to Nesbit (2006), research in adult education has left social class and its effects largely unexplored even though society remains structured along class-based axes of inequality and exploitation. Studies of the relationship between working class and higher education are generally from the perspectives of first-generation college students and rarely from the perspective of adults from working class backgrounds who choose to continue their education at the doctoral level. The longer and deeper experience of graduate education has the potential to shed light on whether the inequality of class difference persists beyond college. Autobiographical evidence suggests that social class remains a prominent factor for adults who complete degrees and enter professional life (Dews & Law, 1995; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984). This study extends this evidence to include the lived experience of adult students and its implications for education in general and adult education in particular.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of mature adults from working class backgrounds as they pursued a doctoral degree in an academic “world.” This research focuses on social class as a phenomenon that shapes the educational experience across the life span. It is the second phase of a study that emerged from a graduate research course to explore existential phenomenology and consider its implications for adult education (Frye, Curran, Pierce, Young, & Ziegler, 2005).

Existential phenomenology, based on the philosophy of Husserl (1970), provided a conceptual perspective for this research. Phenomenology is germane to adult education because of its focus on the primacy of everyday, lived experience and the interaction of the “being” and the “world” (Stanage, 1987). The literature on learning theories, often disembodied and decontextualized, focuses either on the “world” (for example, from a critical theorist’s perspective) or the “being” (for example, from a cognitive theorist’s perspective). In phenomenology, the being and the world are not objects for study, but co-constituting subjects. “Being” can only be understood as a “being-in-the-world” and the “world” from the perspective of the “being” living in it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In this

sense, phenomenology contributes to understanding the interactive and co-constituting nature of learner and the context. Thomas and Pollio (2002) contend that the embeddedness of experience is captured by the concept of figure/ground, meaning that a part (what is figural) cannot be separated from the backdrop of the whole (ground).

According to Brookfield (1994), researchers in adult education need to “grant greater credibility to adults’ renderings of the experience of learning from the “inside”” (p. 164) by conducting more phenomenological studies that describe the learning experience in learners’ own words. Although one of the highest values in adult education is the learner’s experience (Lindeman, 1961), it is often neglected. While the experience of college is well documented, less is known about the experience of having a working class background and earning a doctoral degree. Findings illuminated how adults, who are in the heart of the educational process as doctoral students, experience the academic context and make meaning for their lives.

Phenomenology can be understood as both a theoretical perspective and a research methodology. We used the phenomenological method developed at the University of Tennessee by Thomas and Pollio (2002) that extends the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1962) to an inquiry method for probing into the experiences of everyday life to better understand the underlying meaning common in human experience. A purposeful sample participated in this study based on their self-identification according to the following criteria: working class background (or lower), first-generation college graduate, and currently active in a doctoral program as a student. Respondents ranged in age from 31 to 51 years, 6 were female, 5 male (1 African-American, 1 Asian and 9 European-American), and had 9 different majors. Data were collected in face-to-face interviews. In the phenomenological method, asking only one question (tell me about an experience, as a PhD student, where you became aware of your working class background) allowed for a broad range of descriptive responses rather than theoretical explanations. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

We analyzed the interviews collaboratively in an iterative process following the procedures outlined by Thomas and Pollio’s (2002). We read and reread each interview aloud and identified themes (words, phrases, or events) using the participants’ words. After analyzing each interview separately, we compared themes across interviews by clustering similar themes together and testing their coherence by rereading all of the data associated with a particular cluster. During this process, we identified which experiences formed the “ground” of the experience and which were figural, standing out against the ground. Finally, we formed a thematic structure that showed how the aspects of the experience related to one another.

Findings

Findings describe the experience of being an adult from a working class background pursuing a doctoral degree. The common “ground” of the experience served as a backdrop against which other figural aspects stood out and attained meaning. Quotes of the adult learners who participated in the study contained the “label” for that aspect of the experience that begins each section.

“They Had It Handed To Them”: Different from Others

It’s just a different way of getting into the world. I kind of feel like they had it handed to them and I had to work my butt off to get there (Doug).

“They had it handed to them” described the common ground of participants’ experience; they were set apart from privileged others. Participants perceived that it was what others had and who they were that made it apparently easy to succeed in a system that was designed for them. Differences were varied and not always clear. Lori stated, “early on these students had a privilege that I was not aware even existed. You just feel like they have more something [sic]. You don’t know what it is, but you feel like that other people have more something that you don’t have.” The “more something” was described variously: more time because they were not constrained by jobs and family responsibilities, more intergenerational knowledge passed down from parents who have degrees, a broader knowledge of “the things that are out there,” and more “connections” that seemed to enable others to fully engage in the academic experience.

What the privileged others appeared not have is an understanding of what it is like to be from the working class. Sophie said, “...sometimes people who have professional parents, I sort of get the impression that they don’t really understand what it’s like to work at a job you dislike, that wears you . . . makes you come home in the evening and you are so tired you can’t, you know, talk for a few minutes, that you have to just collapse and get something to drink.” The graduate school experience illuminated these differences. As Christina says, “my father didn’t finish school and he reads about on a fourth grade level and that really hit me when I realized my background is a lot different than the other people in my [courses].” Because of a working class background, one was likely to “start off behind.” Amanda summed it up as, “They just have it made.”

“Do What You Have to Do”: Hard Work

Probably for many, many working class individuals, you realize you have to do what you have to do. Sometimes you don’t have time to sit back and . . . whine or reflect or this or that, you do what you have to do (Jerome).

Doing what one had to do was “hard work,” the heart of what it means to be working class. Even though participants in the study were mature adults, they recalled their childhoods and youth and the hard work done by their parents. Christina described her father’s work that enabled her to go to college. “And my dad sold used cars and he worked on them himself and he might come home with oil and grime and whatnot all over his hands.” Others described parents’ jobs in farming, the military, the post office and the challenges they faced daily. “They didn’t want us to have to work as hard as they had to work” (Christina). Many participants mentioned how lack of financial resources led to limited experiences such as travel and exposure to other people and places.

As adult learners, participants described their own hard work that brought them through college and to graduate school, distinguished them from others, and revealed their characteristics of “pure grip,” “very hard work ethic,” and having a working class “mentality.” Most individuals could not afford graduate school without working. “It’s a struggle for me . . . I can’t afford to just quit and go to school like some of my classmates” (Amanda). Because most participants had the full responsibilities of adulthood, hard work extended to balancing a job, family, and school.

“I Don't Know the Secret Handshake”: Learning the Unwritten Rules

The whole time I have had a case of imposter syndrome . . . You sit in the classroom and you think, ‘Why am I here? I don’t belong in this group of people. Everybody has this secret that I don’t know. I don’t know the secret handshake or whatever it is to belong to this group and why am I here?’ (Melissa).

The “secret handshake” describes the unwritten rules, unspoken expectations, and implied meanings of the academic system that are unfamiliar to adults from working class backgrounds, even those who have graduated from college. Universally, expectations of graduate school were not clear. As Eric stated, “I have noticed that when you get around smart people [they] communicate differently than people who come from my background...it’s that wink, wink, nod, nod thing where you understand . . . it is implied and everybody knows except for me.” Powerful metaphors described the difficulty of accessing college and graduate school and the lack of guidance and assistance for those who had not been exposed to how the higher education system worked. Eric referred to the consequences of his “not knowing” as being a “Darwinian social strata thing where if you were lucky enough to be exposed to it then you’re going to rise above the rest and the other people just have to be the base upon which you climb and there’s something about that makes you kind of angry.” Lack of exposure led to missed opportunities. The general perception was that other students who did not come from a working class background were already well-equipped to handle the unwritten rules before they started graduate school.

“You Can’t Hack It”: Obstacles

And you know, okay, maybe they have a point... ‘You can’t hack it, you don’t need to be there.’ But most people could hack it if they had a little help (Eric).

Two major obstacles faced by adults from a working class background were a system designed for privileged students and the responsibility of adulthood. The system, seen as structured for traditional-age students, did not address the needs of adults who most likely worked while they pursued a doctorate degree. Jennifer described the bias in course design for educators when she said, “It doesn’t make sense to me to offer a program for educators that only accommodates people who are not practicing educators.”

Sam’s experience had similar overtones. “I was awarded an assistantship. You’re told by the department and your advisor, [that if] you take the assistantship, you’re not allowed to have an outside job.” A “fundamental disconnect” was described between the system’s value of theory and the participants’ value of application. Those who had the resources of time, money, connections, and know-how were able to maneuver their way through the system. Adults from working class backgrounds had to learn to navigate the system without these resources.

Lastly, participants described the obstacles they overcame in their adult roles as family members. One participant noted the need to get a hotel room in order to complete preparation for an exam because her spouse “wouldn’t leave me alone” even though he was ostensibly supportive of her academic goals. Not all family members were supportive. Melissa described an experience of “conscious sabotage” from her spouse in order to keep her from “attaining that goal.” Although obstacles were pervasive, participants found various ways to overcome them.

“I Learned to Camouflage Myself”: Staying

I guess what I am saying is that I learned to kind of camouflage myself or learned to change my spots, so to speak, when I got into the graduate school in the graduate curriculum (Eric).

Although as adult learners, participants did not see their needs as supported by the university or the professors, they found ways to stay in the academic environment by drawing on their internal strength, finding external support, or learning something of value. Internal supports included the ability to “camouflage” oneself to either be less visible or to look and act like the “others.” The tenacity needed to persist was a common theme and was often fueled by the “dream” of obtaining a terminal degree. According to Amanda, “She’s like, you don’t need a Ph.D. I don’t need anything, but I want it. It’s been my dream, you know,” a dream that one “cannot let go.” External supports included knowing others from the same background, financial support, and occasionally a mentor relationship. Four individuals said that the values their families placed on education supported them to achieve their goals. Only two mentioned an academic mentor. For Sam, it was a group of peers from a similar background – “blue collar and they work” – who could identify with his experience. An emerging theme, not experienced by all participants, described the learning gains that had occurred along the way.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The experience of mature adults from working class backgrounds as they pursued a doctoral degree illuminates the persistent influence that social class has on the subjective experience of formal education. The thematic structure depicts the respondents’ experience and describes their class-mediated lifeworld as doctoral students. The ground of the experience was identifying oneself as different from others. In contrast to those who are perceived as privileged with easy access to education, the legacy of the working class is that achievement comes only through hard work and struggle. Working class individuals often see their hard work as morally superior to those whose life appears easy (Lamont, 2000). The structure of the academy, with its apparent “secret” culture designed for the privileged, supports the idea that it takes hard work for those who had no previous exposure to graduate school. The route to discovery is overcoming structural obstacles that get in the way of achieving one’s academic goal. In order to stay in a culture that seems neither welcoming nor supportive, adults in graduate school, similar to adult learners who return to college (Kasworm, 1990), modify their voices to accommodate themselves to what they perceive the structure requires. They do not abandon their identification with the working class, but rather they see it as a salient contribution that sets them apart from others.

Lived experience infuses meaning into how adult learners from working class backgrounds understand formal education and extends the idea that class is not only about levels of material possessions but about ways that multiple forms of power and privilege divide individuals and groups (Nesbit, 2006). Social class is a powerful category that shapes how adult learners experience themselves and their lifeworld. The experiences of working class during the formative years continue to inform how adults make meaning of their lives even after they have become upwardly mobile (Jones, 2003). In this study, meanings of class emerged as a dialectical relationship between the agency of individuals to build on their belief that they can “beat the odds” and the power of

structures to sustain inequality and limit opportunity. In the U. S., the dominant belief is that individual agency fuels social mobility. “Being-in-the-world has a dual nature; it is at the same time a world-for-me and a pre-existing social world within which I am situated” (Bufton, 2003). Thus, the meaning that adult learners construct of social class based on their experience is co-constituted by the external world of formal education and the unrecognized assumptions about a hierarchical power structure.

Social class, like other forms of diversity, permeates the experience of all who engage in educational activities. Implications for the practice of adult education include acknowledging how social class shapes one’s knowledge of the world. By opening opportunities for discourse about the power relations in educational settings, adult educators can help make class stratification more visible and thus more available for critical reflection.

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