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Crashing the Party: A Working Class Perspective on the Ivory Tower

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Abstract: *This study explored the experience of having a working class background and an earned doctorate as part of a research course using phenomenological methods. Findings revealed a “working class way of looking at the world” that colors the meaning of the experience of graduate school and one’s professional life.*

Introduction

Social class exerts a powerful influence on educational attainment, one that is often invisible and unacknowledged. Adults from working class or economically disadvantaged backgrounds are far less likely to pursue an advanced degree than are their peers from more affluent backgrounds (Choy, 2001). The impetus for this research stemmed from two synchronous events. First was a research course to explore existential phenomenology and consider its implications for adult education. “Existential-phenomenology seeks to be a descriptive science that focuses on the life-world of the individual. Rather than separating and then objectifying aspects of the life-world, the purpose is to describe human experience as it is lived” (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989, p. 136). Adult education and phenomenology share common concerns for making sense of experience (Stanage, 1987) and removing veils, which obscure or disguise reality. Second, we learned by chance that all of us, students and instructor, had come from working class or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Our common experiences formed the foundation for examining our assumptions about class in relation to higher education and spurred our decision to conduct collaborative research because as Ihde (1986) claims, “*without doing phenomenology, it may be practically impossible to understand phenomenology*” (p. 14). According to Van Manan (1997), phenomenological research is “a being-given-over to a quest” to make sense of some aspect of human existence. Our quest was to understand the unexamined meaning of the everyday lived experience of having a working class background and an earned doctorate – to make evident what was normally invisible.

Conceptual Frameworks

Framing our understanding of the intersection between class and education was the literature on first-generation college students – the first in a family to attend a post-secondary institution. Schools, rather than being vehicles for social mobility, often become a site for replicating existing class hierarchies (Cohen, 1998). The act of “breaking away” from their families can be a perplexing and painful issue for first-generation college students (London, 1989). According to Lubrano (2004), the college experience pushes students into a kind of class “limbo” where they must straddle different cultures. Studies have found that first-generation college students, many of whom come from working class families, experience feelings of not belonging (Van Galen, 2000) lack of confidence in their new environment (Cohen, 1998), and alienation or isolation from family and friends (Callaghan, 2003). While the college experience is well documented, less is known about the experience of having a lower socioeconomic background and earning a doctoral degree.

Ryan and Sackrey (1984) identified class inequality and stratification patterns of social mobility in higher education in a study of the autobiographies of academics. They exposed the myth that the completion of a doctoral degree admits those from a lower class to a professional

class. More recent research has focused on women in the academy (Dews & Law, 1995; Jones, 1998; Miller & Kastberg, 1995; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993) showing the impact of their lower socioeconomic backgrounds and their socialization into the academic profession. These studies form a conceptual foundation for understanding the influence of class on the attainment of a doctoral degree, but less on an examination of the experience itself, a need that could be addressed by employing a phenomenological methodology.

Methodology

The heuristic methodology for this study used procedures suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002). A purposeful sample of individuals was recruited through the use of a flyer that described the study and listed the following criteria for inclusion: working class or lower socioeconomic background, first-generation college graduate, and receipt of an earned doctorate within the last ten years. Seven volunteers ranged in age from 31 to 57 years; 3 were male and 4 were female; 2 were African-American and 5 were European-American; 4 were faculty and 3 were administrators in either a large public university or a small private college.

Data were collected in face-to-face interviews. A pilot interview was conducted to refine the primary question: As a person with a doctorate, tell me about a time when you became aware of your working class background. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Each member of the research team participated in a bracketing interview to surface assumptions about the topic and guard against leading the participants during the interview or data analysis (Polkinghorne, 1989). Working collaboratively assisted ongoing bracketing.

Our research team began the analysis of data by reading and re-reading two individual transcripts and noting meaning units – words, phrases, or events that described the participants' experience. Each interview resulted in a list of meaning units with accompanying text from the interview. We clustered meaning units by commonalities first by individual transcript then across transcripts into a set of themes that “repetitively recur as important aspects of a participant's description of his/her experience” (Thomas and Pollio, 2002, p. 37). Themes included meaning units from each participant. We distilled the themes into primary and secondary levels. The synthesis of the data continued until all members of our research group agreed that the themes represented the aspects of the experience of the participants.¹ Labels for each theme are taken from the participants' words.

Findings

The findings are reported in two parts based on the conceptualization of figure/ground, which is essential to phenomenological interpretation (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Themes stand out as figural against a ground of common perception shared by those who experience a given phenomenon. The ground of the experience that emerged from the data was “a working class way of looking at the world.” Standing out against the ground were aspects of the experience that were salient to participants. Each section begins with the quote from which the “label” for the theme was drawn.

“Working Class Way of Looking at the World”: The Ground of the Experience

“Well I think, I think this is very, that's a very working class way of looking at the world. The object is ‘what are you doing? What are you physically showing for your effort?’” A particular way of looking at the world that came from one's background was prevalent in all

¹ The course extended over three semesters. Two doctoral students and the instructor formed the core team. Two students left after the first two semesters and one joined the group after the first semester.

interviews and shaped the totality of the experience. Rose explained it in the following way:

I'm always aware of the working class background . . . I don't think I'll ever not be aware of it. . . if I need a reminder, I can just go home. But I don't feel I need a reminder because I carry that around with me, and it influences the way I think. It influences what's important to me (Rose).

Rose described how her working class background affected the way she “thinks.” This ground, although invisible, colored the participants’ perceptions of their world. “My working class background... really does influence the – even the language you use about uh, what you are doing (Judy).” Carrie related her identity to her background rather than her accomplishments. “I’ve got my doctorate and no one can take that away from me. But I still always feel working class...I think my identity will always be that.” The language the participants used showed their strong loyalty to this way of looking at the world. As Ivan said, “I know where I came from.”

Dan, an African American participant, related that class was such a powerful component that it even superseded race when he stated, “my experience as a class person in many ways overrides my experience as a race person. Class looms so large, even across racial lines.” Rose, also African American, agreed that people who grew up poor have a lot in common “because of the way we thought about things.” While participants function in an environment that values the theoretical, they reported that their upbringing grounded them in the practical or “very real things,” therefore they valued what one “does” and “produces.” Judy said, “your job is to think about – but I guess my working class background tells me that part of that has to be doing. Carrie summed it up this way:

I feel like the real me is a working class person even though I make a good salary and I have this PhD. I feel like the real me is, you know, the girl that was raised in the country, very working class, with parents who didn't go to college. That feels like the real me.

The ground of the experience recedes and aspects of the experience stand out against it. Aspects have a temporal quality as the first aspect describes the experience of graduate school and the last the current reality of people’s lives.

“Crashing the Party”: Accessing the Ivory Tower

Because part of what I had to do as an African American and as someone coming from a working class background [was] to negotiate these new academic arenas, but also class arenas, where I wasn't figured into the mix. I would always tell myself, ‘I'm not really supposed to be here.’ An ‘I'm crashing the party kind of thing.’ (Dan).

The theme of *crashing the party* assumes that one is not present legitimately, not invited to join in the experience of higher education. Understanding expectations is difficult without an invitation. Dan saw that those with an invitation had families who gave them a “legacy” or a framework for knowing how to access higher education. In contrast, parents who had not attended college could offer no practical advice. This theme included having no frame of reference for accessing or understanding higher education, mentoring as a way to move through the process, and the steadfast determination necessary to finish.

Participants used powerful metaphors to describe the difficulty of accessing college and graduate school when one’s parents had no experience in higher education. Warren referred to higher education in general as a “blind” experience that required “groping in the dark” in order to decipher the way to move forward. Referring to his parents, he said, college “was a foreign world to them, one that they encouraged me in for the most part, but had no real way of, of helping with. So it was, it was groping in the dark a lot of the way.” Ivan referred to the experience as “wandering around in an ocean somewhere.” Mentors played a role for five of the

participants. Terry was the only female who talked about having a mentor who “helps you understand that you’re not crazy and what you feel is normal. For me, anyway, that’s comforting.” Dan explained that he eventually found a mentor who “took a very blue-collar approach” to getting a doctorate meaning he was explicit about what Dan needed to do. Participants characterized themselves as having powerful determination despite obstacles they encountered. Ivan said, “I think it all comes back to work ethic. That, you know, I refused to quit. You know, I REFUSED to quit. And I could have quit. It would have been easy to quit.” Most said they wanted to prove to themselves that they could earn the degree. Fierce determination surfaced whether participants were talking about their first experience as a college freshman or finishing their doctorate.

“Benefits/Fallout of Education”: “A Sword that Cuts Both Ways”

Tolerance is one benefit, I would term it a benefit, some others might term it a fallout of higher education. Folks with higher education in general tend to be more tolerant. . . I had such a good experience tearing down some of those walls, seeing a much broader horizon. The environment is stimulating. Learning, not being afraid of exploring new ideas or where those ideas took you (Warren).

Although participants acknowledged expanding their horizons and broadening their viewpoints, they also expressed the pain caused by these supposed benefits of education. Warren described education with the metaphor of a “sword that cuts both ways” because it created contradiction in his life. His family valued education from the perspective that it would lead to an easier life and a higher wage, but feared its potential to change his values or beliefs. Terry conveyed a similar experience as she explained how her view of education’s benefits contrasted with her family’s view. Terry said,

Transformation, different world views, different belief systems. One of my more powerful experiences has been my family equating, on some level, education with not being saved anymore, or with backsliding, kind of. Because to me, what higher education is all about is becoming more open minded and tolerant of diversity of opinions.

At the same time, Terry’s family acknowledged how hard she had worked and what she had gained in terms of her lifestyle. Rose explained, “There’s this wall now because I have all these degrees, even though I’m their niece or cousin, or whatever, there’s this wall there now because that’s a significant part of my life that they haven’t shared with me.” Separation from one’s past was paradoxically both benefit and fallout (in varying degrees) for each participant.

Education provided opportunities that would not be available otherwise such as “improving your lifestyle, job opportunities, um, security” (Warren). Carrie reported that her father said, “I was paid to think.” Education had a downside. Carrie, Rose, Dan, and Ivan talked about the importance of remembering where one comes from meaning their working class roots. They spoke of the struggles of their parents and how different their lives are – their accomplishments are bittersweet.

“You Live Two Lives”: Not at Home in Either One

Maybe it is sort of like you can live two lives a little bit. Work and home. Work and community...sometimes I feel like I don’t quite fit in either world. But I feel like that more often about the professional world than about my family (Carrie).

Participants described changes in their lives that led to ambivalence about their social class. This theme included uncertainties about one’s identity, lack of connection to the perceived privileged class, and separation from the working class.

Participants reported that higher education changed their identities. According to Terry,

“You try to fit in when you go back home, and then you have a totally different life as a graduate student or a professor or whatever.” This dual identity generated internal conflicts. Carrie referred to the paradox of simultaneously “being proud of my heritage...and being embarrassed by it.” Feelings of pride were counterbalanced by a lack of confidence for some. “I feel a lot like an imposter – like I really am not smart at all and I’ve just fooled people” (Judy). Even though participants were eligible for membership in the privileged class by virtue of their degrees, the majority did not feel welcome and did not want to join the privileged class. Carrie expressed feelings of “disdain for our professional world...it seems like it is not very real or it is ivory tower.” Although they did not feel like they had membership in the privileged class, participants experienced separation from their working class background. Judy related, “I have a couple of friends – and one –takes a great deal of pride sometimes in letting me know that he doesn’t really understand what the good of all this education is.” Other participants experienced difficulty communicating with their families. “There’s only a limited set of topics I can talk about with my family...I respect their ways, and I watch what I say” (Terry). Yet, they expressed that while home and the people there did not change, they found “you can never go home again” or “feel as if you belong there” because their identity had changed.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Many common assumptions govern the link between education and social mobility. The goal of this study was to describe the phenomenon of having a doctoral degree and a working class background from the perspective of those who have had that experience. The aim was to transform the lived experience into a textual expression of its essence (Van Manen, 1997). Findings show that a lower social class background plays a prominent role in the experience of higher education and even how professional life is understood.

The emphasis upon the figure/ground relationship in the phenomenological method describes a background against which aspects of experience emerge. The methodology attempts to make visible what is taken-for-granted. Participants described a “working class way of looking at the world,” an often invisible perspective that colored how they made meaning of their experience. The aspects that stood out against the ground had a temporal quality. First was accessing the academy by “crashing the party” because of one’s illegitimacy in that environment. Then the benefits of education in terms of expanded viewpoints contrast with the fallout, which is the separation from one’s roots. The benefits and fallout of education leave a person in a “bind” because they *live two lives* yet don’t necessarily feel at home in either one. The “old” life is too constraining but the professional life is seen simultaneously as suspect because of “privileged class” values and as a marginalizing force.

Findings about those who complete a doctoral degree differ from studies that focus on college level students. While first-generation college students described a lack of confidence in their new environment, the experience of participants in this study acknowledged an understanding of clashing world-views. While first-generation college students reported guilt for forward progress, participants in this study expressed no regret for moving forward with their lives. Rather than reporting isolation from family and friends, the separation came from a wider array of life experiences. Family relationships were strained in areas like communication and values but participants did not express feelings of exile found among first-generation college students (London 1989). Findings compare with the dissonance reported by other studies on lower social class and the academy (Dews & Law, 1995; Lubrano, 2004).

Although participants valued education as evidenced by their persistence in finishing a

doctoral degree, their experience was one of separation rather than connection. Each person navigated through the educational system in his or her own way and most benefited from a relationship with someone who helped them yet the experience did little to alleviate the sense that their “privileged” peers were valued more highly. Understanding that class disparities do not disappear when individuals enter graduate school or their professional life, may help institutions that espouse diversity develop ways to value those who come from lower social classes.

We began this study to learn phenomenology by doing it (Ihde, 1986) and undertake a “quest” to understand the phenomenon of having a doctoral degree while being from a working class background. Those of us who finished the study achieved our goal and also came to new understandings of how our own backgrounds influence the way we make meaning of our work.

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