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**Equal Opportunities and Outcomes in University:
A Narrative Bourdieuan Approach**

CACUSS: June 21, 2010

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Abstract

The input-output system of universities, in the context of a self-regulating market that values individual competition, serves to facilitate a cycle of privilege in many countries, including Canada. This presents a significant social problem given the functional value of education, particularly university education, in our neoliberal global context. This conceptual paper argues that state intervention is required to stop the reproduction of social hierarchy resulting from the exclusion of non-socioeconomically privileged students from university participation. The university landscape is discussed with relation to perceived and real benefits, followed by an illustration of how students who are not from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds experience barriers concerning access to university and persistence through degree completion. The need for equal opportunities and outcomes is then presented, with an emphasis that a narrative Bourdieuan methodology would enhance understanding of why these students are underrepresented in universities.

Introduction

Contemporary postindustrial Western society has been largely interpreted using a *structural functionalist* framework. Through such a perspective, society is made analogous to an organism where constituent components (economic, political, education, and religious, for example) constantly interact and adapt to fluctuations in order to maintain a state of equilibrium and harmony (Taylor, 1994). To a large extent, the structural functionalist framework has been used to examine government mandates in the context of neoliberal ideology and globalization.

Current neoliberalism incorporates flavours of classical economic liberalism where individual competition and the self-regulating market are held in high esteem (Olssen and Peters, 2005); consequently, the role of the state is to facilitate optimal conditions for these functions. Given the global knowledge economy, the role of the state, particularly related to education, is to ensure that citizens possess knowledge and skills for both individual and state prosperity. Indeed, according to Slaughter (1998), through studying educational policy in Canada, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, governments regard postindustrial society as strategically dependent on the training and research functions of universities for success in the global economy.

Pannu, Schurgurensky, and Plumb (1994), conclude that the transformation of the university can be attributed to three concurrent developments, which are the elimination of the *welfare state* (government retrenchment and corporate liquidation, favouring market-driven approaches), the emergence of *institutional capitalism* (the power of business over the political realm), and the *commodification of culture* (where the dominant class articulates the rules). Overall, “education is represented as an input-output system which can be reduced to an economic production function” (Olssen and Peters, p. 324). However, the input-output system of universities, in the context of a self-regulating market that values individual competition, serves to facilitate a cycle of privilege in many countries, including Canada. This presents a significant social problem given the functional value of education, particularly university education, in our neoliberal global context.

This conceptual paper argues that state intervention is required to stop the reproduction of social hierarchy resulting from the exclusion of non-socioeconomically privileged students from university participation. The university landscape is discussed with relation to perceived and real benefits, followed by an illustration of how students who are not from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds experience barriers concerning access to university and persistence through degree completion. The need for equal opportunities and outcomes is then presented, with an emphasis that a narrative Bourdieuan methodology would enhance understanding of why these students are underrepresented in universities. Indeed, such an approach provides the depth and breath necessary to understand causality and contribute to the development of policy that will break the historical cycle of privilege.

The Policy Problem: Underrepresentation in University

The University Landscape

The neoliberal and global context has democratized universities, transforming them from elite finishing schools to mass-education institutions with a commitment to equal opportunity for all (Fleras, 2005). Such a context has resulted in increased university participation as a means for citizen investment in future individual success. For example, in 1939, three percent of 18 to 25 year-olds participated in university, with enrolment steadily increasing to seven percent in 1963 and 30 percent in 1994 (Fleras). Furthermore, according to Statistics Canada (Fleras), greater than 15.4 percent of the

population over 15 years-old earned a degree by 2001, compared with 1.9 percent of the population in 1951. These increases reflect both opportunity and financial benefits associated with possessing a university degree.

Increasing numbers of jobs require a postsecondary credential: “The number of jobs for those with a post-secondary certificate increased by 1.83 million [in 1997], while total employment for those who didn’t finish high school dropped by 962 000” (Fleras, 2005, p. 266). In addition to increased opportunities, the financial benefits of a university degree are also clear, as demonstrated in numerous studies (Davies, 2005). For example, the average income in 2000 for Canadians with a university degree was \$61,823, compared to average incomes for those with a college degree or high-school diploma at \$41,825 and \$36,278, respectively (Fleras). When considering this data, it is not surprising that approximately 85% of Canadian parents hope their children will participate in some form of postsecondary education (Corak, Lipps, and Zhao, 2003).

Overall, functionalists argue that knowledge and expertise are pivotal for economic development and that governments must enhance human capital in order to be competitive in a global market (Taylor, 1994). Furthermore, functionalists maintain that educational institutions are neutral enterprises where, through competition, rewards are bestowed to those with demonstrated ability and talent (Davies, 1994). Taylor highlights this functional perspective, where educational credentials are “earned by those who have the necessary talent and personal drive to successfully compete” (p. 40) within “a meritocratic selection process by means of formal education” (p. 44). Essentially, the functionalist perspective asserts a social-Darwinian “survival of the fittest” philosophy, deliberately ignoring historical barriers to university participation and relegating the underrepresentation of certain groups to lack of ability, talent, and/or drive.

Critiquing the functionalist perspective, Taylor (1994) comments that “in virtually no Western industrialized society has formal education become an instrument by which disadvantaged and impoverished groups can achieve a substantially greater degree of social and economic equality” (p. 47). Indeed, this is clearly the case for students who are not from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds.

Socioeconomic Status and University Participation

Fleras (2005) presents a general construction of class as “persons with similar family backgrounds with respect to wealth, power, and prestige. More specifically, classes are defined as groups of individuals who share a common relationship to scarce and valued resources” (p. 41). As a class level, the United States Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences (n.d.), defines socioeconomic status (SES) as “a measure of an individual or family’s relative economic and social ranking” comprised of factors such as income, education, and occupation. In an attempt to conceptualize SES as privilege, I will use the term socioeconomically privileged (SEP), instead of high-SES, to refer to students who experience societal benefits resulting from certain family background characteristics, which include high income and parental/guardian education level. Conversely, non-socioeconomically privileged (non-SEP) will refer to students who experience societal barriers resulting from family background characteristics, which include low income and parental/guardian education level.

Taylor (1994) summarizes multiple studies from Canada and the United States that indicate a strong relationship between family background and academic performance at all educational levels. Taylor specifically highlights Miffelen and Miffelen (1982, cited in Taylor) who conclude that SES is associated with “virtually every variable pertaining to educational attainment in industrial societies” (p. 50). Furthermore, Finnie, Lascelles, and Sweetman (2005) present numerous studies, concluding that, though a correlation might

exist between financial resources and school achievement, the relationship does not imply causation. Instead, it is family background (which includes parental education level, family type, ethnicity) that is strongly associated with achievement.

Evident from the preceding data is that academic achievement is strongly related to family background; that is, achievement is associated with whether a student comes from a SEP background or not. Consequently, family background has a strong relationship to both access to university and persistence through degree completion.

Access

It is becoming increasingly clear that family background, not tuition fees, affects who attends university (Finnie, Lascelles, and Sweetman, 2005). Brennan and Naidoo (2008) illustrate that increased university capacity at multiple European institutions did not correspond to enhanced access for non-SEP students: "In most countries recent increases in higher education participation rates among young people from lower socio-economic groups have been less than the overall rate of increase" (p. 292). Similarly, using data from the Higher Education Council for England (HECFE), Longden (2004) demonstrates that, when university capacity increased from 1940 to present day, participation increased significantly only from SEP students.

Unfortunately, a plethora of studies demonstrate that the same phenomenon exists in Canada. Knighton (2002), through an examination of the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, found that postsecondary participation for Canadian youth aged 18 to 21 was affected by family background; specifically, 88% of youth with university-educated parents pursued postsecondary education, compared with 68% whose parents were college-educated and 52% whose parents had a high school diploma or less. Similarly, Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil, and Shimmons (2003), using the Postsecondary Education Participation Survey data, highlight that 67% of Canadians aged 18 to 24 pursue postsecondary education when it is perceived as expected by their parents, compared with 34% of youth whose parents do not expect postsecondary participation. In addition, as family earning increased, so did the likelihood of postsecondary attendance. For example, 83% of students aged 18 to 24, whose families earned \$80,000 or more, pursued postsecondary education, whereas just over 50% of youth from families earning less than \$55,000 attended postsecondary education (Barr-Telford et al, 2003). Barr-Telford et al., also found that 70% of youth whose parents had some form of postsecondary education completed their education, compared with 57% of youth whose parents did not have some form of postsecondary education. Consequently, Knighton concluded that "parents' education and household income [remain] strong determinants of postsecondary participation" (p.31).

Family background (specifically pertaining to income and education) has a particularly significant impact on whether an individual not only chooses postsecondary education in general, but university specifically. According to Fleras (2005), in 1998 wealthy Canadians were 2.5 times more likely than the poorest quarter to attend university. This is highlighted recently by Corak, Lipps, and Zhao (2003) who, through an analysis of Canadian studies examining family background and postsecondary participation, concluded that "children from higher income families are more likely to attend university" (p. 13). Knighton (2002) provides further evidence for this correlation. In examining four income quartiles (less than \$30,000; \$33,000 to \$49,000; \$50,000 to \$66,999; and \$67,000 and higher), Knighton found that youth whose parents were in the highest income quartile were more than twice as likely to pursue university than youth with parents in the lowest income quartile. In addition, 49% of youth with university-educated parents chose university compared with 17% of youth whose parents had a high school

diploma or less. Rinnie (2005), though an examination of the 1999 data from Statistics Canada, found that youth are over three times more likely to pursue university when both parents are university-educated, compared with youth whose parents have a high school diploma or less.

Persistence

When examining persistence through degree completion, we see similar themes emerge related to family background. Walpole (1997), using data from the American Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), found that non-SEP students “have lower educational aspirations, persistence rates, and educational attainment than do their peers from high-SES backgrounds prior to and during college” (p.4) and, in addition, experience lower levels of income and graduate school attendance nine years after graduation.

The few available studies indicate that this phenomenon is the same in Canada. Lambert, Zeman, Allen, and Bussiere (2004) present many observations about persistence to degree completion (or, more accurately, lack of) for non-SEP students. They found that youth who dropped out were more likely male, married, and from families with lower levels of education. With the latter, youth whose parents had a high school diploma or less were likely to leave university before completion, compared with youth whose parents had some form of postsecondary credential. In addition, Lambert et al. (2004), found that family attitude also impacts persistence as 21% of youth, whose parents did not value postsecondary education, left their studies, compared with 14% of youth where parents emphasized the value of postsecondary education. Because of such observations, Tinto (2007) suggests that more research is needed to illuminate factors that influence persistence for non-SEP students. These sentiments were recently reiterated by Parkin and Baldwin (2009) who, in their assessment of parental income and education, concluded that the Canadian literature offers little insight into persistence for non-SEP students.

Policy Research Agenda

Policy Problem Definition

An issue becomes a social problem when it (a) originates within the social context, (b) is identified as problematic by a portion of society, (c) can be remedied through social interventions, and (d) has negative consequences for segments of society (Fleras, 2001). With respect to non-SEP students, the central concern is a significant and recurring gap between “haves” and “have-nots”, where barriers prevent qualified individuals from changing their circumstances. As Whitehead (2006) highlights, “children from the lower socio-economic classes may be increasingly excluded from postsecondary opportunities, thus leaving them with fewer opportunities for meaningful participation in an economic system that increasingly requires post-secondary credentials for access to well-paying jobs” (p. 103). Without significant change, Canadian society will continue to reproduce a university system that excludes non-SEP students – a system where social mobility is an illusion.

Both Fincher (1993) and Brennan and Naidoo (2008) argue that universities must change radically in order to facilitate broader and more diverse participation. However, Fleras (2005) warns that “discriminatory structures are not easily dismantled in the light of entrenched interests and ideologies” (p. 256) and that most reforms tend to be superficial and lack significant impact.

With clear benefits to university participation, concomitant with a system that perpetually excludes non-SEP students, policy intervention is needed to facilitate

necessary and meaningful change. Consequently, equal opportunities and outcomes must serve as overarching policy goals.

Equal opportunity focuses on the rights of individuals to be free from discrimination when competing for the good things in life. It operates on the principle that true equality can only come about when everyone is treated equally regardless of gender or race. By contrast, equal outcomes concentrate on the rights of historically disadvantaged groups to a fair and equitable share of scarce resources. True equality arises when differences and disadvantage are acknowledged as a basis for divvying up the goods. (Fleras, 2005, p. 65)

This position is supported by Corak, Lipps, and Zhao (2003), who argue that barriers to university participation remain an important policy issue in Canada.

However, in order to develop appropriate policy interventions, we must understand *why* non-SEP students are underrepresented in universities. Though correlations exist between family income and/or parental education and access and persistence, we must explore deeper issues of causality, which also requires delineating the various influences of family background. I will overview the dominant paradigm for understanding student departure, and its inappropriateness for investigating non-SEP participation in university. Following this, I will demonstrate how a Bourdieuan research framework and narrative methodology provide an efficacious means to understand the previously discussed barriers non-SEP students face.

Theory of Student Departure

Research concerning student persistence in higher education is bountiful (Metz, 2005), dominated by Vincent Tinto's theory of student departure, which has "enjoyed near-paradigmatic status, as indicated by more than 400 citations and 170 dissertations pertaining to this theory" (Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000, p. 569). Tinto's (1993) model explains persistence decisions resulting from students' interactions in the social and academic realms of the institution and its communities: though descriptions of individual attributes associated with persistence may result, the purpose of the model is to explain how interactions may lead to student withdrawal. Tinto highlights that the model is (a) longitudinal by focusing on events students experience preceding and following entry; (b) primarily concerned with voluntarily withdrawal, versus academic dismissal, though the latter is discussed; and (c) interactional, emphasizing student interaction within the social and academic realms of an institution. Tinto's model of student departure theorizes that diverse students enter higher education with initial goal and institutional commitment levels and, through interactions in the academic and social realms of the institution, commitments are modified: academic integration reinforces goal commitment, whereas social integration reinforces institutional commitment. Increased integration enhances goal and institutional commitment, resulting in persistence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Tinto's model has provided researchers and student affairs practitioners with a theorized means of viewing student departure; however, many researchers have illustrated significant shortcomings with Tinto's theory, which compromise its applicability to inform policy intervention to enhance non-SEP participation in university.

Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) present concerns raised by various critical scholars who question the validity of Tinto's model for nonwhite and other marginalized students (such as non-SEP students), given not only the characteristics of the privileged demographic studied (that is, white males attending private residential colleges in the United States), but also because the model is grounded in an assimilation/acculturation framework. By incorporating Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage concept, Tinto's model professes a hegemonic process of integration: that minority students "must separate

from their cultural realities and take the responsibility to become incorporated into colleges' academic and social fabric in order to succeed" (Rendon et al., 2000, p. 129), with little to no responsibility placed on systems within the institution. The rites of passage model is particularly problematic when one investigates its underlying assumptions: (a) An individual's culturally associated beliefs and values must be abandoned and replaced by those of the majority population, (b) full participation requires one to become more similar with the dominant culture, and (c) finding membership in the new culture will be easy (Rendon et al.). Tinto's (1993) incorporation of the assimilation/aculturation rites of passage concept is highly problematic as the model dishonours backgrounds of minority students by suggesting that the transition process is their responsibility and that they must divorce themselves from past associations and assume characteristics of a dominant population in order to integrate and be successful. Tinto's model is further compromised as he espouses a rite of passage framework that he himself, having membership in a dominant group, never experienced; nor does he reflect on theoretical implications that would result from his privileged perspective (Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, 1997).

Indeed, Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) conclude that "the overall tone of the social/academic integration theory is that individuals, not the system, are responsible for departure" (p. 144). This observation reflects comments made by Tinto (1993) himself where "individuals must also exhibit personal initiative" (p. 5) and his summative statement that "departure from college is taken to reflect the unwillingness and/or inability of the individual to become integrated and therefore establish membership" (p. 121) in college. While the students Tinto researched may have had ability to exercise initiative and experience congruence as a consequence of their dominant and privileged positions, non-SEP students clearly experience struggles persisting in university through degree completion.

Zepke and Leach (2005), in their review of the student retention discourse, found that two dominant categorical themes emerged: the dominant theme is concerned with fitting students into existing institutional cultures while the other, still emerging paradigm, suggests that cultures must change in order to engage an increasingly diverse student population. It is the latter context where a Bourdieuan analysis of student persistence and retention can assist both researchers and practitioners in universities to best create, and indeed change, cultures where non-SEP students can succeed to degree completion. Indeed, many researchers, including Berger (2000), call for an alternative theoretical lens concerned with inequities in university and the resulting unique experiences of underrepresented students.

Bourdieu and Student Persistence

The work of Pierre Bourdieu provides a powerful analytic framework for investigating struggles faced by non-SEP students as they seek membership in universities. Horvat (2001) provides a comprehensive summary of the hallmarks of a critical Bourdieuan approach, which focuses on (a) bridging the gap between individual agency and embedded societal structures to understand social interaction; (b) the centrality of power and domination; (c) unmasking symbolic power that is inherent in social interaction and perpetuates social hierarchy; (d) reproduction of social hierarchy, which largely occurs unconsciously; (e) the role of individual agency and mastery in influencing social interactions and structures; and (f) distinctions which are generated as a currency for exchange and power. Implicit is also Bourdieu's focus on resolving false dichotomies that tend to characterize social science research, namely, the structure/agency dichotomy and the subjective/objective dichotomy.

Bourdieu's framework is "fundamentally aimed at providing a more accurate and detailed vision of social interaction" (Horvat, 2001, p. 197) by understanding *practice*; that is, individual action as intersection of one's *habitus* and *capital* in a given *field*. These constructs, formulaically depicted by Horvat as "[*(habitus)(capital)*] + field = practice" (p. 214), are a hallmark of Bourdieu's framework and, therefore, understanding these constructs is pivotal for analysis.

Habitus refers to learned dispositions, which include beliefs, attitudes, and values, based on an individual's family background (Berger, 2000; Horvat, 2001). Bourdieu (1971) elaborates that habitus is a "system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, function at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (p. 83). Habitus represents a tacit perspective of the world that individuals with similar lifestyles share: an unconscious understanding of the "rules" of social interaction (Horvat, 2001). Capital has many forms, but all are symbolic (non-material) forms of power in a given field: (a) Money and other monetary resources are referred to as *economic capital*; (b) *social capital* refers to the social networks where one has influence; and (c) *cultural capital* encompasses many facets, which include knowledge about highly valued social artifacts, mannerisms and practices associated with the "upper-class", and credentials. Horvat (2001) defines the concept of field "as the embodiment of the rules of the *game* [*italics added*] as well as the site wherein the struggle to own or control these rules takes place" (p. 213). Within each field there are the dominant and the dominated who behave or practice (a function of their habitus and capital) in a manner to advance their current status. University, as a field, contains such struggles, particularly for non-SEP students.

As presented earlier, access and persistence of non-SEP students in university is an important issue for both governments and institutions. In fact, Tinto (2007) highlights research indicating that there is "less socioeconomic diversity than racial and ethnic diversity at the most selective colleges and universities" (p. 11). However, Tinto's (1993) model, for reasons previously explained, does not provide researchers with appropriate tools to analyze this phenomenon; arguably, Tinto's theory of student departure has actually impeded progress as it implicitly supports reproduction of the dominant SEP student habitus. Instead, for reasons recently articulated, Bourdieu's theoretical framework is an efficacious analytic tool; however, his work is infrequently utilized for studying student persistence (Horvat, 2001), with the notable exception of Berger (2000).

Berger (2000) suggests that institutions have a milieu with a dominant habitus, established by white, upper- to middle-class students, who have a history of university attendance. This should not be surprising based on the previously presented data. It is this ubiquitous habitus, in the form of aspirations, beliefs, mannerisms, and attitudes that impedes congruence for students who come from different backgrounds. Berger, therefore, conceptualizes that both access and persistence for SEP and non-SEP students could be explained by the constructs of habitus and capital.

SEP students are typically upper- to middle-class white students from families with comfortable to abundant financial resources and where at least one parent has a university education. The habitus of SEP students develops a perspective where postsecondary, particularly university, attendance is a normal progression and family tradition. Furthermore, the habitus of SEP students perceives higher echelon, or reputable, institutions as the only means to reproduce or increase capital and are, therefore, acceptable for attendance. In addition, their economic capital provides the opportunity to attend elite institutions, which may have higher tuition and/or require relocation in order to

attend. A SEP student is able to persist in university as their habitus is largely congruent with the institutional habitus.

In contrast, the habitus of non-SEP students develops a perspective where university education, though a means to increase capital, is not a normal or expected progression. Non-SEP students come from families with scarce financial capital; therefore, if they do pursue postsecondary education, they are likely to choose non-elite institutions or colleges and experience institutional restrictions based on financial resources. Non-SEP students also experience significant cultural dissonance in universities as the dominant institutional habitus is foreign.

The potential of a Bourdieuan analysis, specifically focusing on university access and persistence decisions and the role of the non-SEP student habitus, is powerful. Because such an approach focuses on identity, it can illuminate *why* non-SEP students experience access and persistence challenges in order to develop causal relationships. For this to occur, however, a methodology must be carefully selected that can both illustrate the richness of identity and explore comparison across non-SEP students as a group. The tools of narrative inquiry are discussed as an appropriate methodology to investigate and understand non-SEP student university participation.

Methodology

Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou (2008) advocate narrative inquiry as a powerful methodology to dissect conflicting layers of meaning and experiences, which, when revealed and discussed, enhance understanding of identity in order to facilitate individual and social change. In their discussion, Squire et al. (2008) present two focuses of narrative inquiry: *event-centred* (where significant events influence the narrator's identity) and *experience-centred* (which focuses on understanding identity from general life experiences and may include events or co-constructed meanings). Given that the experience-centred, co-constructed narrative approach focuses on the "social patterns and functioning of stories, whether the 'stories' are short, disjointed sequences of conversation or much more extensive representations that exemplify broad cultural narratives" (Squire et al., p. 5) and that such an approach "may serve useful, even 'improving' functions for people...[and] as a means to delineating and even theorizing under- or unrepresented lives" (Squire, 2008, p. 59), it would be appropriate for investigating the experiences of non-SEP students. An example of such an approach is the life history method.

Lewis (2008) highlights that the life history method provides insight into institutional context, a trajectory of decisions and transitions in individual experiences, and "rich description in the form of nuance and detail, as well as the emotion of lived identities and experience" (Lewis, p. 575); consequently, employing life histories in social research serves to challenge social meta-narratives, since individual narratives facilitate evaluation of larger institutional patterns. Therefore, the experience-centred, co-constructed approach, specifically the life history method, could elucidate why non-SEP students might not access or persist through university and what, if any, themes emerge across this underrepresented group.

There is a clear correlation between family background and university access and persistence. Unfortunately, this cycle has consistently supported the reproduction of privilege for dominant members of society, excluding social mobility for non-SEP students in the form of barriers to obtaining, and reaping the benefits of, degree completion. Narrative inquiry, combined with the Bourdieuan tools of habitus, capital, and field, would facilitate understanding of how the identity of non-SEP students impacts university access and persistence decisions, ideally advancing current understanding from correlational to causal in nature. From here, and keeping consistent with a Bourdieuan

philosophy of bridging the divide between qualitative and quantitative inquiry, themes derived from narrative inquiry – enhanced depth of understanding – would be used to develop a quantitative survey to evaluate the themes across a larger segment of non-SEP students – enhanced depth. Together, the qualitative and quantitative information would result in the development of policy that could enhance equal opportunities and outcomes for non-SEP students concerning university participation.

Outcomes

The first policy outcome would be facilitating access to university for able non-SEP students; that is, equal opportunity. Given that the current meritocratic structure is not facilitating equal access for non-SEP students, results from the narrative Bourdieuan approach should result in policy recommendations to change the game. This might be a variation, or even elimination, of the current merit-based admissions process, in favour of a process that identifies ability to engage with university studies and that representatively equalizes participation between SEP and non-SEP students.

Persistence through degree completion is the second outcome. As mentioned, universities have a dominant habitus that may inhibit integration for non-SEP students (Berger, 2000). Borrowing from Gillborn's (2005) discussion of whiteness-as-privilege, members of the university community may take-for-granted the privileging of SEP students, as demonstrated by Tinto's (1993) assimilationist model. By substituting "SEPness" for "whiteness", Gillborn's warning, that unconscious and unexamined inequality is the most concerning form, applies to the current discussion: "the most dangerous form of [SEPness] is not the obvious and extreme fascistic posturing of [certain groups], but rather the taken-for-granted routine privileging of [SEPness] that goes unremarked in the political mainstream" (p. 485). Therefore, the narrative Bourdieuan approach would serve to deconstruct symbolic and material aspects of university culture that perpetuate SEP privilege in order to develop policy to facilitate non-SEP persistence through degree completion; that is, equal outcome. Such information would also serve to enhance, or replace, Tinto's previously described model.

Application and Conclusion

Imagine a society where, regardless of birth, youth experience equal opportunity and equal outcome concerning university education. In such an environment, youth from non-SEP backgrounds regard university not as a privileged institution, but as a real option; parents, whether university-educated or not, also see university as an option for their children and thus provide support and encouragement; academic achievement is not consistently associated with family background; and university cultures are not truly diverse institutions in which everyone finds a place. In such an environment, the cycle of university privilege that has been enjoyed by SEP families becomes a cycle of equal opportunities and equal outcomes for all. However, for such a reality to exist, the game must change, and this can only be done through informed policy.

Rinnie (2005) succinctly summarizes that "the rate of going on to university is...much higher for the children of university-educated parents than for children of parents with any other education level" (p. 42). Together with illustrations from Tinto (2007) and Parkin and Baldwin (2009), we can confidently conclude that more information is needed to understand *why* non-SEP students are underrepresented in universities. This is crucial in the Canadian university context, which continues to reward those from SEP backgrounds in a "cyclical process that reinforces the hoary cliché about the 'rich getting richer'" (Fleras, p. 37).

A narrative Bourdieuan approach provides insights into experiences of non-SEP students and families, which is pivotal for policy intervention as “family background in terms of property, power, and prestige continue to influence what we do, who we are, and how others relate to us – that is, our identities, experiences, and opportunities” (Fleras, 2005, p. 40). Policy derived from such research must challenge the status quo. The end result would be a changed game that facilitates social mobility through equal opportunities and equal outcomes concerning university participation for non-SEP students.

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