

UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN CANADA: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian university students in Canada helps to understand their educational experience using the concept of cultural capital put forward by Pierre Bourdieu. It was found that Ukrainian students possess high levels of cultural capital, which provides them with advantage in Canada. Specific patterns of social inequality and state-sponsored obstacles to social reproduction lead to particular ways of acquiring cultural capital in Ukraine represented by a more equitable approach to the availability of print, access to extracurricular activities, and popularity of enriched curriculum. Further research on cultural capital in post-socialist countries is also discussed.

Key words: *cultural capital; immigrant students; literacy; non-visible minorities; post-socialism.*

INTRODUCTION

As a result of increased immigration (Statistics Canada, 2011a) and further internationalization of higher education (OECD, 2014) Canadian universities now educate more diverse students than ever before. It is important to understand factors responsible for educational attainment among immigrant and international students as it influences their educational trajectories, job prospects, and well-being. The main body of research on academic achievement among students from different ethno-cultural groups in North America focuses primarily on visible minorities understood as ‘persons who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour and who do not report being Aboriginal’ (Statistics Canada, 2012). The reason behind this choice is that they suffer from racial discrimination, stereotyping, or exhibit higher than average drop-out rates (Harris, Jamison, & Trujillo, 2008; Lee & Kao, 2009; Peng & Wright, 1994; Portes & MacLeod, 1996). On the contrary, non-visible minorities comprising around 1.5 million of foreign-born Canadians are rarely researched based on the often erroneous assumption that they face insignificant integration problems (Cilliers, 2005). One of significant non-visible minority groups in Canada is represented by Ukrainian students and their parents (Statistics Canada, 2011b), who were influenced by educational environment in their post-socialist homeland. There is some evidence that educational experiences of Ukrainian and other Eastern European students in North America do not always meet the expectations of their parents, which forces

the community to create their own schools, arrange tutoring or choose private education (Asanova, 2005; Nesteruk, Garrison, & Marks, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to explore the academic experience of Ukrainian university students in Canada as under-researched non-visible minority group with the help of Bourdieu's capital theory (Moore, 2008). Non-visible minorities are often presumed not to have any barriers in education (Cilliers, 2005), but their experience is always shaped by different circumstances, and might result in obstacles on the path to educational success. The study is shaped by the following research questions:

1. How does the cultural capital of Ukrainian immigrant and international students affect their educational experience in Canadian universities?
2. What are the elements of respondents' culture that influenced their educational experience both in Canada and Ukraine?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To get an insight into the educational experience of Ukrainian students I decided to use the concept of capital put forward by Pierre Bourdieu and analyse how cultural capital translates into university persistence and success among Ukrainian students in Canada. One of the key contributions of Pierre Bourdieu to the social sciences was a re-examination and redefinition of the term "capital" freeing it from limitations imposed by the economic theory (Moore, 2008). He complemented economic capital with social, cultural, and symbolic capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). Grenfell (2009) underlines the complex nature of the capital in its relation to the practice theory of Bourdieu, where capital, field and habitus work together and should not be viewed separately. Field represents the autonomous microcosm within the social world, which has its own rules, and hierarchical position among participants struggling for capital (Wacquant, 2008). Habitus is a subconscious set of dispositions, which define our perception and actions in the world based on our exposure to social structures (Wacquant, 2008). Capital is the "currency of the field", which determines what has value in the field and what has not, who is included or excluded and what is required to boost one's status or power as the basis of distinction. Not surprisingly, distinction creates hierarchies, which result in inequality (Grenfell, 2009).

The field of education is one of key areas where capital comes into play with far-reaching societal and individual consequences. Bourdieu considers education to be the main mechanism of class reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Through education dominant groups impose arbitrary culture and value the type of achievement, which corresponds to their interests (Broadfoot, 1978). Subsequently, the "symbolic violence" of education prevents many non-elite students from succeeding academically as they lack the values and linguistic capital, which children of privileged backgrounds share with their teachers.

While social capital is understood here as valuable resources acquired through membership in a particular social group, the definition of cultural capital is more contentious. Bourdieu included exposure to highbrow culture (theatre, opera, ballet, galleries and museums) into the notion of "cultural" capital, but his peer sociologists paid more attention to other values and dispositions capable of aiding students in their navigation of educational systems. Lamont and Lareau (1988) mentioned that before the tool of cultural capital can be used, its content has to

be determined empirically. As Bourdieu, they emphasize that cultural capital is used for social and cultural exclusion and comprises not only highbrow culture, but also “attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviour, goods and credentials” (p. 156). In the educational context cultural capital is what a child brings to school, e.g. familiarity with books, proficiency in the language of instruction, and behaviour expected from students.

In other words various researchers operationalize cultural capital differently now. In his study of university students Grayson (2011) views a post-secondary degree of at least one parent as the most important type of cultural capital available to students, which allows them to boast higher degree expectations, receive more family encouragement for studies and spend more time interacting with their peers other than students. Likewise, Lehmann (2007, 2009) showed that working-class university students have higher drop-out rates and prefer more vocational occupations due to their habitus and irrespective of their academic performance levels. One successful contender to be the proxy of cultural capital is reading, which is positively correlated with better grades in schools (De Graaf and De Graaf, 2000; OECD, 2010b).

To sum up, the notion of cultural capital can be an effective tool in understanding the background of Ukrainian university students and its influence on their educational experience in Canada to better serve this particular group of diverse students. It also helps to analyse particular features of Ukrainian culture, which can potentially have a significant impact on the way participants cultural capital is valued in Canada.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs qualitative paradigm, because it suits the purpose of exploratory work aiming at deep understanding of educational experience of Ukrainian university students in a Canadian university. Case study is a natural fit for the small sample of nine participants and provides clear boundaries for the in-depth study. The main feature of a case study is that rather than looking at few variables in multiple subjects, here we look at multiple variables in few subjects (Thomas, 2011). Applied to this study the focus is on multiple variables defining cultural capital (role of children, importance of education, parental education, popularity of reading, language skills) in few (nine) students from one university in Canada. Restricted number of subjects in a case allows for rich, in-depth exploration of different variables at play. The case described here, even though not linked to a hypothesis, is strengthened nonetheless by a clear theoretical framework of Bourdieu’s capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Moreover, it illuminates theoretical models (cultural capital in education) in real context (Ukrainian university students in a Canadian university) (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Ukrainian immigrant students in the study would have arrived in Canada after their 13th birthday ensuring no less than 6 years of formal schooling in Ukraine, while international students were enrolled in such a capacity and did not have a status of Canadian citizens or permanent residents. Participants were recruited from the midst of Ukrainian students at the university via the personal network of the researcher after the clearance from the institutional ethics research board had been secured. All participants came from two-parent homes with at least one university educated parent (only one participant was an exception with

both parents being high-school graduates), who had middle-class professions (engineers, teachers, doctors, business owners). Five participants are Ukrainian international and four Ukrainian immigrant students attending undergraduate or postgraduate courses at one of the largest Canadian universities. Two participants are undergraduates, three pursue Master's degrees and four are doctoral students. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted for approximately one hour each.

Semi-structured interviews took place on the university premises (in study rooms, library, campus cafe), which facilitated the relaxed, but professional discussion in the safe environment familiar to the participants. Interviews had a chronological structure starting with childhood educational experiences moving towards participants' arrival to Canada and finishing with their future academic plans and aspirations. Questions were open-ended for participants to enlarge on the topics.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis and interpretation. Data was coded manually by reading transcripts in search of emergent themes. Data analysis used the inductive approach to establish topics and patterns through which findings emerged, coupled with the deductive approach to test the exploratory questions. Established topics and patterns were analysed in connection with the previous research and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to answer our research questions. Narratives were constructed in the chronological order for every participant starting from family and education in Ukraine moving to education in Canada before proceeding to cultural preferences and linguistic repertoire and finishing with life in Canada.

RESULTS

First research question was to find out how cultural capital of Ukrainian students affected their educational experience in Canada. To answer this question their academic success and cross-border portability of different types of capital were analysed. Based on gathered data, Ukrainian students achieve significant success in the Canadian university in question based on high GPA scores as reported by participants, which is especially relevant for undergraduate students, and external funding opportunities enjoyed by graduate students in this group.

Educational success of minority students is often explained by social bonding capital as represented by community relationships, membership in peer groups and ethnic clubs and social bridging capital, which denotes connections with other ethnic groups or social classes (Birani & Lehmann, 2013). Only two participants in the study take part in the life of the Ukrainian community. Others either prefer to communicate with people from different ethnic groups, for example Ivan: I am more of an international guy...I just decided not to join something like this, because it would potentially limit my circle of friends or cite lack of time, geographic distance or affinity. Yana says: I don't belong to any of these groups. I probably should, but again, because of time, I can't really fit anything into my schedule. Because we live kind of very far from where most Ukrainians would live, so I don't have as many connections, as I would love to.

As a PhD student Sasha dedicates most of his time to academic life: I don't take part in cultural activities, except that in September I went to that Ukrainian festival, but I don't engage in the life of the community. I don't go to Ukrainian church and I don't gather with Ukrainian community.

Looking in more detail at the elements of respondents' culture that impacted their educational experience and success both in Canada and Ukraine, we have to mention, that some of the key elements behind relatively high cultural capital of Ukrainian university students are centrality of children, status of education, high parental educational capital, popularity of reading and high level of linguistic capital.

Despite the severe political, economic and ultimately social turmoil in Eastern European nations after the fall of communism, family remains an institution highly valued by people with children playing a central role in family life (Robila, 2004). Parents offered unconditional support to their children in school years and assisted with the university selection and tuition fees in case of undergraduate students.

My mom spent all her time on me. I went to different groups. I have been learning English, since I was five. I was going to the dancing club, swimming, all of that stuff. All my childhood I spent with her. What about school? She cared a lot about that, because education is the main part of my family, so our parents want us to be educated... (Natasha)

Participants in the study reported high levels of parental expectations, especially regarding the completion of high school. Even though there is no reliable data on the dropout rate in Ukrainian high schools, all nine participants confirmed that school completion is taken for granted and most of them have no alternative but to finish school. Ivan voiced this expectation in the most straightforward and clear way when answering the question, what would have been his parents' reaction for his decision to drop out of school:

Oh, I would have been in so much trouble! My parents are strict, even though they might have been liberal and let me do stuff by myself, when I was in school... If I decided to drop out of school, firstly, they wouldn't let me do it of course! Secondly, my parents would be really angry! I would probably get a lot of extra-curricular education at home, so I don't think, it would be possible in my family to drop out of school! Because nobody did!

Parental education is often viewed as a major element of cultural capital, because it facilitates the transfer of culture-related dispositions and preferences, including reading behaviour. It also affects educational attainment of students (Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010). Despite the absence of reliable data on university enrolment in Ukraine most students in the study have both parents with higher educational credentials, which translate into high expectations towards their offspring. Going to university is often taken for granted.

As has been shown by Crook (1997) in Australia and De Graaf and de Graaf (2000) in the Netherlands, reading behaviour is a better vehicle for the reproduction of cultural capital than the participation in highbrow cultural activities (opera, theatre, classical music concerts, museums and arts exhibitions). Parental reading and media socialization affect children's academic attainment (Notten & Kraaykamp, 2010). All nine research participants gave a positive answer to the question if they loved reading. Both in Soviet and in independent Ukraine reading was promoted in schools with long required reading lists of 15-20 titles provided for summer vacations between the school grades. Some students resented the practice, but reading featured prominently in their everyday lives nonetheless. According to Sasha: When I was a kid, I didn't like to read. My parents made me read. When I was in elementary school, I had to read 10 pages a day during my

summer break, and I hated it. I tried to finish as soon as possible and go and do something else. Now I really appreciated that they did this to me, because at that age, I did not see the value in that activity.

Reading to children, especially before bedtime, was a typical activity usually organized by mothers. Most parents and grandparents also read themselves:

Yes, my parents really read a lot. Much more than I do! Well, they read a lot and my grandparents still read a lot, so I may say that almost everyone in my family reads regularly. I can see them every day with a book! (Ivan)

One of the best predictors of academic success during study abroad is the proficiency in the language of instruction and Ukrainian students are uniquely positioned to reap the rewards of linguistic capital. Ukrainian is the only official language in the country, but around 50% of people speak Russian as their mother tongue. As a result most Ukrainians have two languages in their repertoire, which helps to learn further languages (Cenoz, 2013). The following is a typical answer to the question about the number of languages spoken (Sonya): Russian, Ukrainian, I also speak Polish, but a little bit. I understand it well enough, but I speak a little bit, English, a little bit of German and Spanish.

PARTICULARITIES OF ACQUIRING CULTURAL CAPITAL IN EASTERN EUROPE

As has been already mentioned cultural capital is a scarce resource, which allows the dominant classes to protect their privilege (Moore, 2008). The emergence of communism in the former Russian Empire, which included Ukraine, led to the change of the class paradigm. Communist party leaders, who assumed power, tried to destroy the bourgeoisie and middle classes through forced immigration, repressions and restructuring of the economy. As a result, particular features of acquiring cultural capital in Ukraine emerged at the time, and they persist until now. Interview data allowed distinguishing three facets of this process, which are quite different from mechanism at play in capitalist societies like Canada. They deal with the availability of print, access to extracurricular activities, and popularity of enriched curriculum.

Access to print is one of the key predictors of literacy development and positive reading behaviour. Lindsay (2010) in his rigorous meta-analysis of 108 studies found, that access to print materials has a causal relationship with children's attitude towards reading, reading behaviour, emergent literacy skills, and reading performance. Evans, Kelley, Sikora and Treiman (2010) in their assessment of connection between the number of books at home and children's education across 27 nations found, that children who had many (500+) at home boasted additional 7 years of education compared to those, who had no books at all. It holds true in rich and poor countries regardless of parental education, occupation or class. Moreover, the home library size is a good predictor for other elements of scholarly culture like going to the library, leading conversations about books or having an active teaching role with children (Farkas & Hiber, 2008 as cited in Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010).

In Soviet times book publishing was focused on Russian and foreign classics, which were printed in millions of copies and were available to all. The number of titles was limited, because of censorship and general governmental control over the literature consumption of Soviet readers (Pristed, 2013). As a result, selected

titles were in deficit and became symbols of social privilege and prestige (Tromly, 2014). Many people amassed extensive book libraries as a sign of intellectualism, where the ownership of difficult to get books or censored texts functioned in accordance with the elite closure model (Bourdieu, 1986) to recognize fellow members and exclude others. Seven out of nine participants had large libraries at home. Sometimes it was “more than we should in an apartment” (Yana). The following answers are typical: If you look at all Soviet families, you know, almost all Soviet families, especially middle-class, they all tried to have own libraries at home. Imagine walking into someone’s home and there will bookshelves somewhere there. My father had a kind of obsession with getting books. He read them and made us read them. The availability was not a sign of an upper socio-economic class. Even my grandmother, who lived in a village, she was a bookkeeper at the sugar plant, she had books in her house. She had different books. These were not cheap romances, she had Balzac and history books. She lived in the village. When we were going for the summer breaks, we were given the list of literature we had to read – Ukrainian literature and World literature, so we had to read, whether we liked or not (Sasha).

Those participants who did not have large libraries at home could either borrow books from friends, grandparents or school library. As a result of developed network of libraries in Canada, most of participants go to local or university libraries now.

Extracurricular activities not only contribute to what Annette Lareau (2003) calls “concerted cultivation” among middle-classes, but also influence educational outcomes and risky behaviour in a more positive way than unstructured play with peers and watching TV (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Participation in a variety of extracurricular activities (sports, arts, and clubs) increases chances of university attendance (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004). A specific element of life in former communist countries was the proliferation of free extracurricular activities, which allowed participants growing up in 1980s to get the benefits of “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2003) at no cost irrespective of the social class:

At the time it was still Soviet Union or post-Soviet Union time that is why most of the activities were free of charge, which meant no financial burden on my parents, which meant I could do pretty much everything I wanted to. For example, one of my friends went to arts school, and I decided to go along, and I attended an arts school for over a year... I did track and field, I did volleyball and even tried basketball, but I was too short for it, so I didn’t make a team. I did ballet dancing, but my partner quit, so I quit as well. I did very many things! (Zina).

Schools with enriched curriculum (immersion, gifted programs, International Baccalaureate (IB), etc.) offer not only additional and higher level exposure to certain types of curriculum content, but are also used for the purposes of accumulating cultural capital (Smala, Paz, and Lingard, 2013; Weenink, 2008). Access to such schools in Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine was different compared to the West. As far as all schools were public, it was possible to send children to schools with enriched curriculum free of charge. Schools focusing on Math or English retained their popularity until these days:

I actually wanted to get into that best school – English/French/German school in our city, but I couldn’t, as it was Ukrainian, and I didn’t know a word of Ukrainian at the time, that’s why I had to switch to Ukrainian school, study Ukrainian for a year, then I attempted to, and I passed the exams, and was admitted to that high-end school.

Absence of fees allowed all eligible candidates to enter such schools. Sometimes an entrance examination was required, but enrolment was based mostly on self-selection. Math/Science and language schools are available in most cities and towns, which ensures appropriate access for students across the country.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic experience of Ukrainian university students in Canada as under-researched non-visible minority group with the help of Bourdieu's capital theory (Moore, 2008). The goal was to get an insight into how the cultural capital of Ukrainian international and immigrant university students affects their academic experience in Canada, and which types of capital are more portable across the borders. Additionally, I wanted to distinguish the elements of Ukrainian students' background, which affect their educational experience in Canada.

Scarce quantitative data on Ukrainian school students in Canada (Samuel, Krugly-Smolka, & Warren, 2001), nevertheless, proved to be a proxy for university success among Ukrainian participants of this study as represented by high self-reported GPA and external funding for doctoral students. Interviews shed light on participants' family background and formative educational experiences in Ukraine, their lives and education trajectories in Canada. Crucially, their cultural preferences and linguistic repertoire clarified the connection between the elements of culture and educational experience of Ukrainian university students in Canada.

Unsurprisingly, it was revealed, that cultural capital crosses the border more easily than social capital (Bhattacharya, 2011). Ukrainian immigrant university students in the sample belong to the fourth (economic) wave of Ukrainians in Canada, which determines their alienation from earlier (political) waves. Modern migrants do not have strong social networks (Satzewich, Isajiw, & Duvalko, 2006), while Ukrainian international students leave their networks behind by definition and need social capital renewal to enhance their well-being (Neri & Ville, 2008).

Particular ways of acquiring cultural capital in Ukraine represented by a different approach to the availability of print, access to extracurricular activities, and popularity of enriched curriculum can be taken into account during further research on cultural capital in post-communist countries, which is the main implication for researchers. Specific patterns of social inequality and state-sponsored obstacles to social reproduction make these countries different from capitalist societies. Whereas in the West book ownership (Constantino, 2005), participation in a variety of teacher-led extracurricular activities (Lareau, 2003) and access to enriched curriculum (Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, & Desai, 2013; Resnik, 2012; Smala, Paz, & Lingard, 2013) have been traditionally associated with middle-classes, in Ukraine and other post-communist countries of Eastern Europe such resources were available to everybody regardless of socioeconomic status.

Finally, it is the availability of print that proved to be crucial in enhancing students' cultural capital with the maximum benefit for their educational outcomes (Cummins, 2011), which could serve as the implication for primary and high school educators, who are working with socially and culturally diverse learners and would like to bridge the gap between groups enjoying different levels of cultural capital to facilitate more inclusive approach to education.

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