International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,
Vol. 17, No. 6, November–December 2004

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Conceptualizing higher education students as social actors in a globalizing world: a special issue

Laura M. Montgomery[a*] & Joyce E. Canaan[b]
[a]*Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA, USA;* [b]*University of Central England, Birmingham, UK*

This introductory essay describes an analytical framework that locates students, staff, and institutions within both local and extra-local patterns of stratification and clarifies our theoretical understanding of ethnographic data concerning student perceptions and practices in higher education. The essay introduces four articles based on ethnographic research that utilizes such a framework.

This special issue encourages the development of ethnographies of higher education that consider how local, national, and global structures interpenetrate and interact to shape and stratify students' educational choices and experiences and how students' practices, in turn, feed into these larger structural conditions. Many ethnographies of education have explored how hierarchies based on gender, class, race, and sexual preference have emerged as a consequence of the ways in which the informal and formal curricula and student learning during primary and secondary school have been structured (Willis, 1977; Mac an Ghaill, 1988, 1994; Weis, 1990; Mirza, 1992; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Weis & Fine, 1993; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Yet, few have considered how these forces operate within higher education. Existing work tends to focus on either how student culture reproduces these hierarchies or how these patterns of stratification constrain student learning and choice (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Stone & McKee, 1997, 2000). A handful of studies are now beginning to explore how these hierarchies can be either productive and creative or oppressive forces molding students' experiences, the informal and formal curricula, and institutional structures (Ellsworth, 1992; Lather, 1992; Orner, 1992; Canaan, 1997; Epstein, 1997).

*Corresponding author: Laura M. Montgomery, Department of Sociology-Anthropology, Westmont College, 955 La Paz Road, Santa Barbara, CA 93108-1099, USA. Email: montgome@westmont.edu

ISSN 0951–8398 (print)/ISSN 1366–5898 (online)/04/060739–10
© 2004 Taylor & Francis Ltd
DOI: 10.1080/0951839042000256420

Many of the works cited above often produce contradictory conclusions regarding the status of students as social actors and the relationship of their behavior to both educational and broader social structures. Some imply that students are engaged in fairly unproblematic practices of cultural reproduction, while others present data which suggest that students also contest and transform the status quo. These contradictions raise important questions: What are students doing culturally as they participate in higher education? In what situations and under what conditions do students reproduce, transform, and/or contest the educational process and its attendant institutions? What is the interrelationship of higher education and broader, global economic and social processes? All these questions assume a new complexity as we consider how the new globalizing[1] economy has precipitated a state of crisis in higher education. The new postindustrial economy relies much more on the production and control of information than on industrial output. Businesses and governments have called into question the relevance and quality of the education that has been provided by post-secondary institutions as well as their continued ability to deliver that education in a manner that the new forces of the globalizing marketplace would deem efficient. As Lyotard (1984) argues, the university is no longer the primary location of knowledge production as it now must compete in the marketplace with corporate training departments and for-profit learning centers.

We (Canaan and Montgomery) argue that an analytical framework that locates students, staff, and institutions within both local and extra-local patterns of stratification—in particular those being created by increasingly globalizing capital flows, production processes, and labor use—would clarify our theoretical understanding of the ethnographic data. Such analysis is of growing importance as the role of the university is undergoing profound transformations and students, faculty, and administrations might be operating with contradictory ideas about their own positions and about what higher education is and can be. We contend such an approach will clarify the theoretical significance of students' practices in particular educational contexts.

Four articles based on ethnographic research follow this introductory essay and demonstrate how our proposed framework can strengthen the analysis of ethnographic data of student practices and perceptions. The final essay by Shumar explores the many ways in which recent globalizing, neo-liberal economic processes are placing new demands on as well as transforming higher education. In this essay, we first introduce the four ethnographic articles. Next, we discuss more thoroughly the analytical framework described above. Finally, we examine the common theme of meritocracy that emerges from the four articles to demonstrate the fruitfulness of this analytical framework.

With the exception of Davies and Shumar, the ethnographic articles were presented at two sessions organized by Committee No. 3, The Anthropology of Post Secondary Education, of the Council on Anthropology and Education at the 1997 and 1998 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Joyce E. Canaan's article, 'New Right students?: high achieving British university students' discourses of the learning process,' describes how working-class students at a university in Britain have incorporated, in part, both neo-liberal and neo-conservative

economic and political views into their perceptions of who should succeed or fail in higher education. She argues, however, that such ideas do not completely determine their perceptions of academic success and failure but contradictorily sit alongside more social democratic principles of social justice. Diana Haleman's 'Great expectations: single mothers in higher education' discusses the ways in which women on public assistance pursue education at a major US research university not only to improve their socioeconomic position but also to contest public attitudes toward 'welfare mothers'. She explores the implications of recent welfare reforms in the United States and changes in the globalizing economy for similar programs to aid poor women at other US universities. Laura Montgomery examines how the rhetoric of individualism obscures the role gender and class stratification play in student's choices of major studies. Her article, 'It's just what I like: explaining gender and class stratification in the life choices of college students,' is based on ethnographic research at a private, liberal arts college in the United States. Women at this institution seem to feel less pressure than men do to pursue financially lucrative careers, because they expect to occupy a traditional, feminine position of wife and mother with a gainfully employed spouse. Montgomery argues that this serves the larger political economy by creating an educated reserve labor force but may restrict women's earning potential giving them less financial security should they not marry, lose a spouse through death or divorce, or their spouse's earning capacity declines. Alison Davies considers, in her article, 'Preparing professional performers: music students' perceptions and experiences of the learning process at Birmingham Conservatoire,' how students at a musical conservatory in Britain develop their ideas of musical success or failure through using notions of 'talent' and 'hard work.' She shows how mature working-class and younger middle-class students utilize these notions differentially, with the latter maintaining that innate capacities primarily determine a music student's degree of success or failure and the former believing that ability and social factors operate simultaneously to influence student outcomes. She further argues that the Conservatoire education leaves both groups of students unprepared for a professional world with shrinking employment possibilities for performers and with less governmental support for the arts.

A key feature of our proposed analytical framework is that it incorporates multiple levels of analysis and requires maintaining a focus upon the dynamic relationship between social structure and agency.[2] It considers, as many prior ethnographies of schooling have done, how students are actors from multiple and often contradictory social locations which provide possibilities for and constraints on their practices. The initial analytical step, then, is to locate students within hierarchies of gender, class, and ethnicity. Their placement plays an important role in their exposure to and understanding of social structures that inform their beliefs and practices. The next step is to consider how students view their own locations within higher education. Such knowledge, we maintain, demonstrates their recognition of gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies. Subsequently, the ways in which students' perceptions are shaped by the social position of their university or college within institutional hierarchies and by a particular national context that interprets the purposes of higher education are

to be addressed. Finally, the framework explores how national social policies and economic resources reflecting globalizing economic forces are affecting students' social locations, educational experiences, and life choices. Such investigation, however, must recognize the variegated landscape of higher education, particularly students' reasons for pursuing higher education based in part on their educational histories, the diverse missions of their college or university, and the differential linkages between these institutions and the global economy. While the differences among students and institutions of higher education may seem self-evident, it often has not been considered theoretically important in the analysis of the ethnographic data. Such emphasis is necessary given that social and economic policies are dictating what institutions teach, what students can learn, and how these institutions are managed in a globalizing knowledge economy.

Male and female students of all social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual preferences participate in higher education though neither in equitable numbers nor in equally prestigious institutions. The financial and social capital that students gather from families and pre-university education significantly guides their selection of and acceptance by any particular institution. Likewise their reasons for pursuing education beyond the secondary level are diverse. Some, like many students in the article by Montgomery, attend because it is 'the next step' of their participation in a privileged life. Others, like the women in Haleman's article, hope to move themselves and their children out of poverty and endure significant hardships to do so. These same women hope that their educational achievements will also undermine negative societal stereotypes of welfare mothers, especially of themselves. The working-class students in Canaan's study understand higher education as important to their projects of self-improvement, as do the poor women in Haleman's work, but the British students also see themselves as deserving of a university education because they have ability and have worked hard. The music students Davies describes are pursuing training to gain entry into the increasingly competitive world of professional musicians. Middle-class students initially presume that their unproblematically inherent 'talent' should ensure their continued success while at the Conservatoire. Some of those who neither thrive nor receive the recognition they feel they deserve begin to question the meritocractic assumptions that informed their prior understanding of their abilities. However, working-class students, who lacked middle-class cultural capital prior to entering the Conservatoire, never presume that 'talent' provides the sole criterion of success.

Just as students' diverse social locations, perceptions, and practices are critical for interpreting their conduct, so are the differences in educational settings. Colleges and universities operate within their own regional, national, and international hierarchies of prestige, have diverse educational missions—often designed to attract students of particular ethnic and class backgrounds—and have disparate financial resources. Yet as numerous books and articles increasingly report, the current process of a globalizing economy[3] is fundamentally changing governmental policies towards social welfare programs, including education, in Northern and Southern nations alike (Hirschl, 1997; Lerner, 1997; Lazarus, 1998/99; Jameson & Myoshi,

1998). This shift results from growing reliance on neo-liberal economic philosophies, which aim to introduce 'economic deregulation and the lowering of social costs within national communities' (Scott in Lazarus, 1998/99, p. 92). Governments are using this philosophy to encourage education, including higher education, to be organized according to the same principles that apparently operate in the marketplace. Consequently, higher education, like primary and secondary education, is increasingly becoming 'economicized' or 'entrepreneurialized' or 'marketized' (Ovetz, 1996; Miyoshi, 1998; Hatcher, 2001; Levidow, 2001). Higher education is being reconfigured. Noticeable movement has occurred away from the idea that higher education occupies an 'ivory tower,' where academics and students pursue ideas for their own sake apart from the 'real' world, toward the idea that it should provide students with transferable skills that they will need to meet the dynamic demands of the global marketplace. In both the United States and Britain, this process manifests itself in practices such as eliminating academic departments or courses on the basis of low enrollment or 'demand,' increasing emphasis on vocational skills, terminating tenure for some faculty, and increasing the use of part-time faculty. Indeed, while the United States' federal government proposes to increase educational funding to institutions that evidence excellence and to expand access to higher education, the criteria that it will use to determine which institutions will expand or contract seems to be dependent on the degree to which an institution submits itself to market discipline. Students and their families are even more concerned about how employable they will be upon graduation, pushing admission offices to operate more like corporate marketing departments. In the United Kingdom, similarly, the government's declining monetary resources for and greater scrutiny of higher education is resulting in some 'new universities'[4] facing serious deficits while other 'old universities' are being encouraged to increase their student numbers as a means of increasing institutional income. Furthermore, British universities are now monitored much more fully and regularly by government bodies to account for the 'performance' and 'quality' of their teaching and research, a process that is paralleled in some instances in the United States. In Britain, the introduction of fee payment, the elimination of student grants, and the relatively 'marketized' primary and secondary education system have resulted in students striving for admission to universities highly placed on the newly established 'league tables'.[5] Consequently, British students and their parents choose universities increasingly on the basis of 'value for money,' i.e. what long-term economic value an education at a particular institution will potentially offer. Similar trends are occurring in the United States with publications like *U.S. News and World Report*'s annual college rankings increasing in popularity and authority among prospective students and their families. In response, some institutions are attempting to improve their ratings in these publications so as to compete more keenly for top students.

Yet, the increasing penetration of globalizing capitalism does not affect colleges and universities in a monolithic way. In the United States, public institutions may be subjected more to these policy shifts than private ones, because they are more dependent on government funding; due to declining government funding, private colleges

and universities now encounter growing competition with the public ones for resources from private entities. The large, public research university where Haleman conducted her research has government mandates and resources to serve a broader range of students that the private, highly selective, liberal arts college described by Montgomery does not. High costs virtually eliminate the possibility of welfare recipients obtaining a private education except in those situations where government funding or large endowments make substantial scholarship funds available. Even then, these women need additional resources to fund their child-care, housing, and health-care needs. Haleman reports that recent changes in US welfare policy may make higher education even less accessible to these women even though they are highly motivated to seek further education. In Britain, where with few exceptions all higher education is government funded, changes in public policies and governmental financial support are increasingly determining the survival or the demise of an institution and subsequently the overall availability of educational opportunities. Nonetheless, the stratification among colleges and universities appears to be increasing in both Britain and the United States. As colleges and universities are increasingly thought to be preparing future workers for the globalizing marketplace, a growing linkage seems to be developing between each institution's location within a hierarchy of institutions and the kinds of jobs for which they are preparing students. In particular, the ethnicity and social class of the prospective student pool may be providing the basis for this process as working-class and ethnic minority students who have had less chance of 'success' in their pre-baccalaureate education have greater likelihood of entering less prestigious institutions. The greater an institution's prestige the more selective it can be about the kind of student it matriculates, and its focus, more likely, will continue to be on research (knowledge production) and the preparation of professionals for the highest-skilled jobs. The lower prestige colleges and universities will be under mounting pressures to push their curriculum in more vocational and technical directions as they serve less advantaged or, as neo-liberal politicians argue, less able or less motivated students.

Not only do we believe that the investigation of student behavior within a more nuanced and layered context of stratification and globalization lends greater clarity to our theoretical understanding of students as social actors, but we also believe that comparative analysis of such work has the potential to produce fruitful insights into the nature of stratification, specifically into the ways in which students, faculty, and administrators deploy the notion of meritocracy. The ideal of meritocracy—that those who have the most inherent ability and work the hardest will receive the greatest tangible and intangible rewards both during and after their college or university career—seems profoundly to shape students' constructions of higher education and their own practices and choices. While the discourse of meritocracy is most overt in the students' comments in articles by Canaan, Davies, and Haleman, it is implicit in the data collected by Montgomery though not reported in her article here. Even in those instances, such as those reported by Canaan and Davies, where students express frustration or suspicion concerning the degree to which an institution functions like a true meritocracy, none of the students openly contests or resists its validity

or reality as a rationale for who enters and succeeds or who leaves and fails in higher education. Why? The students represented in these articles are those for whom, however imperfectly, the meritocracy has thus far paid off. It may well be that those students who recognize its failure and perceive the elitist nature of higher education are those who do not attend a college or university or who leave prematurely. At least in the United States, white women and ethnic minority women and men with bachelor's, master's, and professional degrees still have average incomes below those of white men of the same and, in some cases, less educational attainment (US Census Bureau, 1999). For those who remain in higher education, to contest the meritocracy openly is, perhaps, to endanger their own positions and to cast doubt on the validity of their own achievement and would prove threatening to the self, as Canaan's data suggest. It may also call the entire democratic project and its current neo-liberal manifestations into question.

Perhaps the students interviewed for these articles have not contested the notion that education operates as a meritocracy, in part, because they have seen that higher education has, during their lives, opened its doors to more ethnic minority and working-class students. Both the United States and the United Kingdom extended their systems after World War II to accommodate broader segments of their societies than had previously been the case. Even with the income-earning disparities, higher education has provided the potential for upward social mobility for subordinate groups. It has played an important role in supporting the ideology of meritocracy that seems to be essential to the legitimization of the inequities that capitalism produces within democracies. As inequality in the United States and Great Britain has accelerated during the last two decades, both governments have, in fact, revitalized powerful political and economic discourses which reinforce beliefs that poverty results from the lack of ability and motivation or from the erosion of these characteristics by a welfare state that has made individuals overly dependent on government dole rather than being productive, self-reliant citizens. Here the data presented in the subsequent articles raises three critical questions. First, how will the changes, influenced by neo-liberal market ideology, in social welfare policies in the United States and the United Kingdom transform higher education? Shumar's essay outlines some of these current trends. Second, to what degree will the current globalizing economy corrode or reinforce meritocracy and higher education's role in its maintenance and students' investment in its ideology? As the gap between the haves and the have nots grows across Northern nations, governments will be increasingly challenged to explain away the inequalities in a manner that the majority of their populations will find acceptable. It is for this reason that political leaders at present in both Britain and the United States are renewing the meritocratic notions of academic success and failure. However, the shrinking of social welfare benefits may result in worsening conditions that ultimately will unmask the weaknesses of capitalism. Third, how will students both inside and outside higher education conceptualize the role of higher education in a globalizing economy and choose to seek further education beyond the secondary level?

In conclusion, our hope is that the work presented here will spark further research and conversation about the location of higher education within processes of globalization. Such attentiveness to both micro and macro levels of analysis is not new in anthropology (Pelto & Dewalt, 1985), but it has been employed most often in studies of the impact of capitalism/modernization on tribal societies or peasant communities. We propose that higher education can be an equally productive locus of anthropological inquiry bringing our understanding of higher education as a social process into greater focus and highlighting its complexities as well as its contradictions. Such work would add important dimensions to our understanding of stratification and the mechanisms that create and maintain it or contest and transform it. Given that we, anthropologists, receive our training in colleges and universities and that many of us spend our professional careers there, such research can also illuminate how we are implicated by these social processes.

Notes

1. Throughout the paper, we deliberately use 'globalizing' rather than 'global' to describe current economic processes throughout the paper. Canaan, using the argument of Gibson-Graham (1996), believes that 'globalizing' suggests an incomplete process whose end result is uncertain while 'global' connotes that the process of economic domination by multinational corporations is complete.
2. We prescribe no particular theorist with regard to the relationship between social structure and social actors, but the authors of this issue in particular make use of the work of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu.
3. From its early development, capitalism formed an economic system that spanned the globe in search of resources, markets, and labor. Here we are referring to the increasing influence of neoliberal economic policies over the last two decades that involve the loosening of controls on capital flows, ending trade barriers and protectionism, and emphasizing economic growth through trade. The International Monetary Fund has demanded that many developing countries adopt these policies as a condition of receiving foreign debt relief.
4. 'New' universities are the former polytechnics that traditionally educated working-class students and that the Major government declared to be 'universities' in 1992.
5. League tables of universities 'list universities and colleges in rank order in terms of one or other criterion' (Tight, 2000). As Tight notes, league tables in HE were first introduced in 1996. Increasingly as students and their parents are encouraged to view students as 'consumers' of HE, and as the government encourages students to view HE as a financial investment that will pay off financially later on, league tables play a more central role in students and their parents' decisions about what university to attend.

References

Canaan, J. E. (1997) Examining the examination: tracing the effects of pedagogic authority on cultural studies lecturers and students, in: J. E. Canaan & D. Epstein (Eds) *A question of discipline: pedagogy, power and the teaching of cultural studies* (New York and Oxford, Westview Press).

Ellsworth, E. (1992) Why doesn't this feel empowering?: working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy, in: C. Luke and J. Gore (Eds) *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (New York and London, Routledge).

Epstein, D. (1997) The voice of authority: on lecturing in cultural studies, in: J. E. Canaan and D. Epstein (Eds) *A question of discipline: pedagogy, power and the teaching of cultural studies* (New York and Oxford, Westview Press).
Fine, M., Weis, L., Powell, L. C. & Wong, L. M. (1997) *Off white: readings on race, power and society* (New York and London, Routledge).
Gibson-Graham, J. K. (1996) *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): a feminist critique of political economy* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK, Blackwell).
Gillborn, D. & Youdell, D. (2000) *Rationing education: policy, practice, reform and equity* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press).
Hall, R. M. & Sandler, B. (1982) *The classroom climate: a chilly one for women?* (Washington, DC, Association of American Colleges).
Hatcher, R. (2001) Getting down to business: schooling in the globalised economy, *Education and Social Justice,* 3(2), 45–59.
Hirschl, T. (1997) Structural unemployment and the qualitative transformation of capitalism, in: J. Davis, T. Hirschl, and M. Stack (Eds) *Cutting edge: Technology, information, capitalism and social revolution* (London and New York, Verso).
Holland, D. C. & Eisenhart, M. A. (1990) *Educated in romance: women, achievement, and college culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
Jameson, F. & Myoshi, M. (Eds) (1998) *The culture of globalization* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press).
Lather, P. (1992) Post-critical pedagogies: a feminist reading, in: C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds) *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (New York and London, Routledge).
Lazarus, N. (1998/99) Charting globalization, *Race and Class,* 40(2/3).
Lerner, S. (1997) How will North America work in the twenty-first century?, in: J. Davis, T. Hirschl, and M. Stack (Eds) *Cutting edge: technology, information, capitalism and social revolution* (London and New York, Verso).
Levidow, L. (2001) Marketing higher education: neoliberal strategies and counter-strategies, *Education and Social Justice,* 3(2), 12–23.
Lyotard, J. F. (1984) *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).
Mac an Ghaill, M. M. (1988) *Young, gifted and black: student–teacher relations in the schooling of black youth* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, Open University Press).
Mac an Ghaill, M. M. (1994) *The making of men: masculinities, sexualities and schooling* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press).
McCarthy, C. & Crichlow, W. (Eds) (1993) *Race, identity and representation in education* (New York, Routledge).
Mirza, H. F. (1992) *Young, female and black* (London and New York, Routledge).
Miyoshi, M. (1998) Globalization, culture and the university, in: F. Jameson & M. Miyoshi (Eds) *The cultures of globalization* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press).
Orner, M. (1992) Interrupting the calls for student voice in 'liberatory' education: a feminist poststructuralist perspective, in: C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds) *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (New York and London, Routledge).
Ovetz, R. (1996) Turning resistance into rebellion: student movements and the entrepreneurialization of the universities, *Capital and Class,* 58.
Pelto, P. & Dewalt, B. (Eds) (1985) *Micro and macro levels of analysis in anthropology: issues in theory and research* (Boulder, Westview Press).
Stone, L. & McKee, N. P. (1997) *Gender and culture in America* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice Hall).
Stone, L. and McKee, N. P. (2000) Gendered futures: student visions of career and family on a college campus, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly,* 31(1), 67–89.
Tight, M. (2000) Do league tables contribute to the development of a quality culture?: football and higher education compared, *Higher Education Quarterly,* 4(1), 22–42.

United States Census Bureau (1999) Table 8: Income by educational attainment for persons 18 years old and over by age, sex, race and hispanic origin: March 1998, in: *Educational attainment in the United States: March 1998 (update) Current population reports* (Publication No. P20-513) (Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office).

Weis, L. (1990) *Working class without work* (New York, Routledge).

Weis, L. and Fine, M. (Eds) (1993) *Beyond silenced voices: class, race, and gender in United States schools* (Albany, State University of New York Press).

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to labour: how working class kids get working class jobs* (Westmead, UK, Saxon House Press).