The Habitus and Social Capital of First-Year Students: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper describes a first-year student's experience at a South African university of technology by exploring how his habitus and social capital influenced his social and academic integration into higher education. This student was part of a group of eight participants whose first-year experience and academic performance were investigated through a series of in-depth one-on-one and focus group interviews. In order to obtain information that captures the student's habitus and social capital and explore its influence on the way the student negotiates his interaction in the first year of study, we focused on the following themes: family life, transition to university and experiences on campus. The study provides an analysis of one student's negotiation of the academic and social systems at university and the role that habitus and social capital play in the way he experiences university life and performs academically. The paper attempts to contribute to research in this area by using a conceptual framework that foregrounds a deep understanding of pre-entry academic and non-academic factors influencing the first-year experience and academic performance, specifically of disadvantaged students.

Keywords: first year students' experiences, academic integration, academic performance, transition to university, habitus and social capital

Introduction

The widening and increased participation in South Africa's higher education

since the advent of democracy in 1994 has resulted in a diverse intake of students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited educational experiences (CHE report 2013). Accordingly, students' needs and expectations have become less homogenous while university resources have remained unchanged. Research has revealed that the first year of study has been identified as a year in which the highest number of academic failure and attrition occurs (McInnis 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). This has resulted in the first-year experience becoming a focus of national and international concern among higher education institutions (e.g. CHE report, 2013).

Much of the literature pertaining to first-year experience focused on student retention, attrition, academic success, student engagement and academic performance (Tinto & Astin 1993; Bean 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991; Terenzini & Reason 2005; Berger & Milem 2000). These writings contribute mainly to the understanding of students' involvement in academic and social systems at higher education institutions (Reason, 2009) and do not explicitly incorporate or emphasise the role and/or effects that students' habitus and social capital (Bourdieu 1984; 1990) play in the way they experience university life and perform academically.

In addition Wilcox, Win & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) note that many studies on first-year experience that employ Tinto's concept of social and academic integration rarely discuss the concept of integration in detail and the studies also lack an analysis of how such social and academic integration takes place. Harvey, Drew & Smith (2006) concur that although there has been a large amount of data collected on the students' first-year experience at the institutional level, relatively little has been reported with a view to explicitly exploring the students' personal experiences in their first year of study. In South Africa, there has been limited research on university students' first-year experience. For example, in the majority of studies that we reviewed, the ambit of the research focused on questions as they related to the intra-university environment i.e. academic performance, student learning, student support and student retention amongst others. After reviewing international studies like those of Dumais & Ward (2010), Lane & Taber (2012) and Gaddis (2013), we notice a shift in focus toward the role played by social class, capital and habitus on educational experiences and academic success. Hence, we suggest that the extra-university environment of the student should not be ignored especially, when investigating the first-year experience in South Africa.

Given the context in which higher education institutions in South Africa has rapidly increased its student complexity, we believe that there is a growing urgency for a critical exploration and understanding of students' first-year university experience through the voice of students. This paper thus aims to address this gap by identifying and exploring the influences of social capital and habitus of an individual student on first-year experience and academic performance. The understanding of this phenomenon is pivotal to the increase in the diversity of the higher education student body that has added complexity to the nature of the students' first-year experience. This paper makes use of Tinto's (1975; 1993) student integration model together with Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical tools: capital, habitus and field to provide a deeper understanding of first-year students entering higher education.

Given the new racial and class configurations in South Africa's higher education institutions, gaining knowledge on students' pre-entry attributes become particularly important to understanding and interpreting their first-year experience and academic success Although the intention of this article is to provide an analysis of one student's negotiation of the academic and social systems at university and the role that habitus and social capital play in the way he experiences first year at university, all eight participants' data was analysed to provide the themes in this paper. In addition it also provided an important contextual understanding of where these students are coming from and what habitus and social capital they bring with them into higher education.

Objectives

This study focused on providing answers to the following research questions:

Who are our first-year students?
How does the habitus and social capital of first year students influence their first-year experience?
To what extent does habitus and social capital (that students report on) influence their social and academic interaction in their first-year of study?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Tinto's (1975; 1993) model features three very distinctive stages in the process of student departure. In the first stage Tinto states that students enter university with varying background characteristics (e.g. family background; parental educational level); individual attributes (e.g. age, sex, race, ability) and prior academic experience (e.g. schooling experience, grades). He regards the first stage of his model as a period of separation where the students' pre-entry characteristics have a direct influence on: drop out; initial commitment to the institution; and initial goal of persistence. The second stage in his model is the identifiable integration process. In this stage the students' level of integration into the academic and social systems of higher education will be influenced by their initial level of commitment to the institution and the commitment to the goal of graduation at the institution. The third and final stage of Tinto's model of integration entails structural and normative integration. Structural integration refers to the explicit standards required by the university (duties, responsibilities, procedures) while normative integration, in contrast, refers to norms and expectations of the students' identification of normative structures of the academic system that are not officially stated (Tinto 1975).

Tinto further explains that students' level of academic and social integration into their university communities is determined by their level of commitment to their own goals and those of the institution which in turn influence their decision to remain or leave the institution. Tinto's model asserts that students who engage in formal and informal academic and social integration are less likely to drop out. In addition, the integrative and positive experiences reformulate the students' goals and commitment thus reinforcing commitment (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006).The process of social and academic integration refers to the extent of congruency (matching) between the individual student and the social and academic system of the university. This implies that the greater the level of social integration (e.g. student interaction with his or her social environment, including peers, faculty and administrative staff), the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the university.

However, Tinto's theory focused heavily on traditional, White young American first-year students in private residential institutions. Consequently this has led to his model being criticised for the following: being too

homogeneous (Brunsden *et al.* 2000; Attinasi 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini 1983); its inability to explain racial minority student retention (Stage & Anaya 1996; Tierney 1992; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora 2000); studying the attrition of older students (Bean & Metzner 1985) and neglecting the 'widened community' of students that was a result of increased access (Rhodes & Nevill 2004).

A complementary approach to Tinto's model draws on Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) theoretical tools i.e. cultural capital, field and habitus, that he termed his three 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1989: 50). Bourdieu uses these three concepts to explain how the environment in which people are raised and their conditions of cultural and material existence, shape their attitudes, their means of interpreting the world and their capacity to engage with academic discourse (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Bourdieu's theoretical tools are thus predominantly geared to understanding the social world. This according to Maton (2008) is not simply the result of one's habitus, but rather of relations between one's habitus and one's current circumstances. For Bourdieu, habitus, capital and field are unavoidably interrelated, both conceptually and empirically (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 96-97). To talk of habitus without field and to claim to analyse 'habitus' without analysing 'field' are thus extracting habitus from the very context which gives it meaning and in which it operates (Maton 2008).

In examining Bourdieu's conceptual tools, Warde (2004) notes, that the concept of field although central and essential to the theoretical foundation of the analysis, does not play a substantive role as habitus and cultural capital, that accomplishes all the interpretive work. Bourdieu describes field as a socially structured space in which individuals play out their engagements with each other. Warde (2004) adds to this description by conceptualising a field as a relatively autonomous structured space, which has been socially instituted, thus having a definable, but contingent history of development. In most of Bourdieu's (1984) works he frequently employs the analogy of a game when conveying the sense of activity/ies within a field.

Bourdieu defines capital as any resource that holds symbolic value within a field and therefore acts as a currency that actors take with them to the field. He adds that in order to 'play the game' in the field, individuals need to have some existing stock i.e. capital that is relevant to the new field (1984: 446). He identifies the following three types of capital: economic, cultural and social capital. Economic capital is regarded as 'immediately and

directly convertible into money' (1986:245); cultural capital refers mainly to the products of education, whether these are visible in individuals (accent, vocabulary, behaviour, etc.), connected to objects like qualifications, or connected to institutions, like schools and universities (Bourdieu 1986; James 2011); and social capital as an individual's social connections or networks of lasting relations that have been established and continue to expand (Bourdieu 1986; Grenfell & James 1998). The concept of the field is closely linked to that of capital - capital does not exist and function, except in relation to a field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 101). Therefore, within a field, individuals hold unequal positions and experience unequal trajectories based upon the volume and composition of their portfolio of capital (Wacquant 1998).

Habitus appears to be a difficult concept to grasp, yet it is central to Bourdieu's' distinctive sociological approach, 'field' theory, and philosophy of practice. It is also crucial to his originality and contribution to the field of social science (Maton 2008). Habitus can be described as a set of values, practices and norms which people assimilate as part of who they are and how they operate. It represents how individuals make use of their past and present experiences to address a current situation. Bourdieu explains habitus as: 'systems of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (1971: 83). Formally, he defines habitus as a property of actors (whether individuals, groups or institutions) that comprises a 'structured and structuring structure' (Bourdieu 1994: 170). It is 'structured' by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. One's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices. It is a 'structure' in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or haphazard. This 'structure' comprises a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (Bourdieu 1990: 53).

Bourdieu's conceptual tools were used to explore differential higher education experiences by gender, race and class of the varying student population, i.e.: minority students (Ovink & Veazey 2011); black students (Jones 2001); first-generation/non-traditional students (Watson *et al*. 2009); low-income/working-class students (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010) and both genders (Dumais 2002). Many studies focused specifically on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to explain, interpret and understand habitus in

varying educational settings, i.e. institutional habitus; individual and collective student habitus; and habitus of academic staff (Kloot 2009; Jawitz, 2009; Reay 2004). Cultural capital was also a tool that was often highlighted to explore its influence on student behaviour and experiences (Ball *et al.* 2002).

Although Bourdieu's concepts have been applied and reviewed in many empirical studies (Reay *et al.* 2007), there have also been several researchers that criticised his concepts (Kingston 2001; Sullivan 2002; Reay 2004). Much of the criticism points to the vagueness of habitus and cultural capital. Kingston (2001) maintains that a lack of a more explicit description of, for example, Bourdieu's cultural capital concept has resulted in a wide variety of variables being used to study this concept. To add to the vagueness, Bourdieu in his own work identifies the following as elements of cultural capital: educational credentials, linguistic capabilities, and school systems. Cultural capital is inculcated in high-class homes and thus enables high-class students to gain higher educational credentials than other students (Bourdieu 1973). Sullivan (2002) criticised Bourdieu for not being precise enough about exactly which of the resources associated with high-class homes contribute to cultural capital and how these resources are converted into educational credentials. However, Bourdieu admits that his cultural capital concept is not as precise in definition as economic capital and points out that cultural capital must be fluid to be reflective of the society which is being studied. Sullivan (2002) acknowledges that the concept of cultural capital, although not constructed concisely by Bourdieu, is substantive enough to be potentially useful to empirical researchers.

Methodology

This study is designed within the qualitative research paradigm and uses the case study approach as the main research strategy. According to Harrison (2002), a case study is more aptly described as a strategy than a method as it sets out to address the understanding of a phenomenon within its operating context. This study can be classified as an instrumental single-case design (Stake 1995). A defining characteristic of this case study was its intensive investigation of a single unit (Yin 2008) and that its primary concern was with particularistic, descriptive and heuristic analysis of a single unit within a bounded system (Merriam 2009). Thus this study was principally focused on students' first-year experience at a higher education institution as its

situation. It was bounded by a particular group of students i.e. first- year teacher education students and the bounded time period was for one academic year i.e. only their first year of study.

Qualitative evidence was collected from eight first-year B Ed Foundation Phase[1] (FP) students using semi-structured one-on-one interviews at the commencement of the academic year and towards the end of the academic year a focus group interview was conducted with the same participants. The one-on-one interviews and the focus group interview were recorded and transcribed. The participants' were selected purposefully as such a technique is strategic and entails an attempt to establish a good correspondence between the research focus and the sampling (Bryman 2008). The participants selected for the study reflected the gender and racial balance of the B Ed FP first-year cohort of 2012 of the case study (the intake of male students in the Foundation Phase programme is extremely low). The purpose was to ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the range of variation. In order to obtain information that captures the student's habitus, capital and field and explore its influence on the way the student negotiates his or her interactions in the first year of study, we opted for focusing on themes when interviewing the participants. Students were asked to discuss the following: their family life; schooling experience; their expectations of university; friendships and their experiences on campus.

The eight interviews provided insight into how certain pre-entry factors pertaining to them influenced their first-year university experience. Some of the phenomena influenced by the student's habitus and social capital were emerging as strong themes. Given the nature of this type of construct it needed further investigation and thus further investigation was conducted via a single in-depth case study with one of the participants and described in this paper. According to Nock, Michel & Photos, data collected from one individual in a case study is detailed, qualitative, anecdotal and has a strong focus on the unique aspects of the case, thus allowing the researcher to note complexities arising from the distinctive history and influences specific to that individual (2007: 338) We purposefully selected Thabo's (pseudonym) story for this paper as he was one of the two male students in the FP programme that was eager to share his story, expectations and experiences with us.

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[1] Teacher education students specialised to teach Grade R to Grade 3.

The analysis of data relied mainly on the thematic approach. According to Braun & Clarke, thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data (2006: 72). Thus for this study to be fully engaged with and immersed in the corpus of data, thematic analysis provided the most effective means to organise and describe how participants made meaning of their first-year experience in rich detail. For example the student's perceptions, attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings and experiences were analysed in an attempt to approximate their reality. The theoretical lens used to analyse and interpret the data was guided by Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus, field and capital and Tinto's student integration model. The theoretical lens brought about a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the student's first-year experience.

Discussion

In order to discuss how social capital and habitus influence the participant's first-year experience we focused on the participant's knowledge about university life. Having a demonstrable knowledge of the participant's university experience together with a clear understanding of his social capital and habitus is significantly associated with his ability to academically and socially integrate into his new environment. In this study social capital comprises social connections that shape the student's expectations and behaviour and also assists the student in gaining information on university life. Habitus in this study refers to how a student uses his/her past and present experiences to attend to the current situation. These experiences influence a student's expectations of university and also his perceptions of reality. In this regard if a student's habitus is closely matched with the institutional habitus, a student would be more likely to successfully integrate academically and socially into his/her new environment which consequently will have a positive response to his/her first-year university experience and academic performance.

Who is Thabo?

Thabo is a 24 year old male African student from the Eastern Cape. He was raised by his mother who was a domestic worker. His father died when he

was very young of whom has no recollection. His mother took care of him and his older sister. In 1998 when Thabo was eleven years old his mother died of HIV/Aids and Thabo and his sister went to live with their aunts. As young children they did not have a stable place to call home and moved around between their three aunts and grandmother in the Eastern Cape:

> *Our aunts took over took care of us. We had three aunts, my sister was with a much older one, my big aunt and me I was with the little one, we were brought up and then so I came to Cape Town and I came back to Eastern Cape 2008 and then I had to move from my aunts place to my er to my er grandmother's place. So both of us moved back, because we were older, Oh ja, so ja we were brought, because they wanted us to be old to be responsible and all of that blah, blah. So ja I also had to find a way to work to earn money*

Thabo attended a small public rural school and regards his school experience as fun. He had many friends and felt school was not stressful as he had the freedom to do as he pleased. He saw school as a taken-for-granted experience and not as a stepping stone to university. Thabo and his friends never spoke about going to university. Every day after school Thabo helped out at home by taking care of all his younger cousins and assisted them with their homework:

When Thabo turned 18 he felt obliged to help out financially and moved to Cape Town to look for a job:

> *Uhm I first came here in Cape Town in 2007, I passed my matric in 2006, in 2007 I came down here and then I worked as a truck assistant. I started working there and then I applied to do a computer course; I wanted to do data-capturing. So while I was also doing that, I was also working, so I was doing part-time there and then uhm I did get a job in data-capturing just before I got retrenched.*

Thabo had no intention of going to university as his first priority was to financially support his family:

> *I'm supporting my sister only when it comes to eating and clothing. I send her money every month. R700 sometimes, sometimes R600,*

> *sometimes R300, depending on the money that I have and but a ja the family my aunt is working, my aunt's husband was working, but is not working any more so I would say at home I'm more of a breadwinner,   that's why I don't have enough money to pay for my fees, I would've loved to do that.*

For Thabo university was not an automatic or taken-for-granted decision. It was only after he was retrenched that he decided to study. His intention to go to university was based on getting a secure job with a good salary so that he could provide a better life for his daughter and family. Thabo's young daughter lives in the Eastern Cape and he feels he needs to provide for her and save for her education. Thabo struggled with the decision to enrol as a full-time student at university. He felt guilty about going to study as he sensed there was an unspoken expectation from his family that he take responsibility for his family's financial circumstances:

> *Uhm because I grew up there, I think there is that expectation, even though they are not saying that to me, I think there are those expectations. And I try my best to move away from those thoughts, because they gonna disturb me, in terms of my studies, because I would want to er impress them financially to give them money every month. I try my best to look at my sister and my sister's child and my child as well my aunts and so and so……*

Thabo thus opted to work part-time as a security guard so that he could still send some money home to his family. Thabo is a first generation university student and his intention is to make his family proud of his achievement and also to be an inspiration to other young children from his home town or who experience similar circumstances:

> *I would be taking my family and putting it into the map as well. People will know that there's a person coming from that background, he has made it that far, so that even for those ones coming up to see whatever challenges they are facing, someone made it and they can too.*

Transition to University

Thabo has limited resources that restricted his entrance to university which were mainly his social and economic capital and his habitus. Thabo's learning about university was through his interaction with people outside his home, community and school and using social media. His work experience had exposed him to many possibilities, especially with regard to tertiary education. His social connections/network were limited and thus his choice of institution and course did not receive great consideration. In fact it was Thabo's aunt who had suggested he take up teaching as a profession:

> *Uhm this teaching thing, my aunt was the one who said I should go for it and do teaching, not that I didn't think of it. I did think of it, but she saw the hands I was like the way I was interacting with the children with her children as well…. she wanted some help with their homework, my aunt is 56 years, she is much older and can't help them with homework. So she saw the treatment I was giving the kids and all of that….*

For Thabo, teaching was not his first choice but it is something that can assist him to achieve his dream:

> *So I would say that as I set my dreams to be a psychologist and I'm not giving up on that.*

However, with regard to Thabo's perception of family support, he had mixed emotions. He was very happy that he had the emotional support from his family and that his aunts encouraged him to further his studies even though they did not have the money to pay for his tertiary education. He also felt disappointed that he could not get any financial support from them:

> *If I had a family support ja, maybe financially or whatever…. I would have done better in maybe some other stuff, but that's not an excuse… er but I do have a sister, who's supportive, my aunt's sister, my aunts child, who I say is a sister who played a part in saying that this is good for me. She motivates me and says, so keep on doing it, she asks me to keep her updated, she wants to know what's been*

> *happening at the campus and stuff like that so I call her I took her as family.*

Thabo struggles financially and tries very hard to balance his academic work and provide for himself and his family. He applied for a student loan and hopes he will be successful as he finds it very difficult to be a full-time student and work night shift as a security guard. He says it does not really affect his concentration as he occasionally tries to get a quick nap at work:

> *Eeeh Because I have these responsibilities at home, I asked the NSFSAS to help me and er the financial Aid so ja I got help from them, so ja they are the ones paying my studies. It's more of a student loan, because we have to pay back after you done and you start working yes. So ja I'm working and studying again, it's been quite a ride, not an easy one, it's quite daunting at times when you sleep on the weekends, you passed out. ja because it's been like yor the week, nearly to end*

University Experiences

This section is discussed under two themes: social integration and academic integration. It is evident from the data that much of Thabo's experiences at university were influenced by his habitus and social capital which had an impact on his level of social and academic integration in his first year of study

Social Integration

Thabo's social integration was influenced by the following challenges: financial; part-time job; culture; being an older student; and motivation to succeed.

He found it difficult to integrate with students from other race groups as he attended a school with African students only. However, he remembers that in his university class they did discuss interacting with students of other races and realised that regardless of race, they were all the same - all studying to become teachers, but they still found socialising difficult:

Sometimes when you are in a serious conversation with a diverse group of students, you would find that you feel like an outsider. Honestly speaking I do feel like an outsider at times that's my honest opinion. You know for example, you all are talking then you are left out of the conversation then you feel alone then you would like ask something just to get in the conversation again so it's kind of like ja there's like that thing…. he's Black or maybe, maybe its because of I don't know I   wouldn't say it stupid it is, the way to go about it, but ja it's difficult...

Although Thabo feels a little uncomfortable in having a conversation with peers from other racial groups, he is very eager to learn more about them in his class. He feels doing group work is one way of learning about other race groups, although he feels the tension from his African peers:

When it comes to group work I think students would like to be in a comfort zone. So they want to be with people who understand them, that's what I noticed. Eh for instance we were doing a presentation about a Religion. I found that I wanted to be in another group. I wanted to be more exposed into other peoples like culture and the way they think and get challenged in terms of my English and all of that but then my friends wanted me to go with them. So sometimes it's not right to eh separate yourself to exclude ourself from that because at the end of the day we are all students we came here to learn.

Most of Thabo's social connections have been formed to assist him with his studies. He has a few peers from his class whom he regards as friends, but most of their conversations are related to their academic work.

Well I wouldn't say they are my friends. We are on Facebook all together uhm classmates most of them we help each other and if we need to find out anything about work we can just ask.

Thabo feels that being in a programme together helps with social integration as they work as a team and assist each other, but they do not socialise off campus. Thabo feels that there is very little time for socialising

as he has to juggle his full-time studies, part-time job and studying for tests and completing assignments.

Academic Integration

Thabo's level of academic integration is influenced by his culture and upbringing. His interaction with his lecturers is very limited. He does not make contact with his lecturers, unless they request to see him. He also regards them as elders and in his culture you do not have much contact with your elders and they should be respected. This affects his interaction with his lecturers as he will not argue with or challenge them in anyway.

> *I would love to get some kind of a… how would I put this, I would love to be more involved with them, meaning one of the difficulties is that maybe I faced during the year, maybe they could've helped me maybe, but they are elders…but I tend to be more open with my friends and people from outside of the campus to give me their version of things.*

Thabo's perception of his lecturers being 'elders' has restricted him from obtaining academic support from them, however he does have tensions with this and wishes it would change:

> *I haven't asked for support but ja I see the lecturers and I always treat the lecturer as an older person who is more experienced. Because I'm younger than them so I give them that respect, because our culture is more about respect. I find it difficult to approach them. Eh I wouldn't say it's the best way to handle this, I don't know about that one, but I know when it comes to comparing it and putting culture into it and where it comes from maybe. A lecturer is a lecturer who is older than you if you don't get a chance to ask this in a class and stuff like that; you'll get the chance maybe next time when he comes into the class, but not out of class...*

Thabo finds the academic work quite challenging as he is an older student and had completed Grade 12 in 2006, six years before his first year at

university. Nonetheless, he is highly motived to work hard and successfully complete his degree:

> *The workload that is daunting that is killing us that we push ourselves so hard that we want to do this we want to get this done. I would say that it is more for say that eh not getting it done but knowing that the reward afterwards that is what we looking for actually. So I wouldn't say like completely I'm enjoying myself no that is not, we came here to work, we came here to do this we want this degree. I want it so bad so I do whatever it takes sometimes to make sure that I get the work done.*

Another challenge for Thabo is the language barrier. Although he is passing all his courses, he struggles with the English language. He is not doing well in academic literacy and he is afraid he is going to fail that course. He notes that lecturers just assume that all students know how to write an essay or do referencing and not much support is given in class:

> *There are times when you write an assignment, you write your assignment and you feel what you are writing you love it, you keep reading it because you like it so much but when the results come and then it's a different story! We need to get feedback in class about the work.*

Despite Thabo's many challenges he feels positive, motivated and self-driven. He feels his tough upbringing with limited resources i.e. money, food and clothes has made him strong and ready to deal with challenging situations.

> *Luckily for me, I'm coming from a family I was not so like uhm how would I put this eh not so good upbringing uhm suffering and knowing how to save money and economically and ja financial stuff so to be responsible more so now when it comes to here comparing it ja I would say I am much more matured that's why these challenges I'm facing at the campus I feel that I am overcoming them bit by bit if there are no like big challenges but I am mentally strong I have to be,*

> *I have to be mentally strong because of my upbringing although not*
> *so nice it has made me strong.*

It is evident that Thabo's difficult and poor upbringing, especially with regard to issues of family dynamics, rural challenges and disadvantage, has been an important factor in building in him strength to persevere in the face of adversity during the first year at university. Bourdieu emphasised that first-generation students' commitment to succeed and reach their educational goal placed them in an advantageous position equal to the students from the upper sectors of society who enjoy increased levels of cultural capital (1997: 495). Cleyle & Philpott's (2012) study concur with Bourdieu (1997) and add that factors such as family circumstances, past experiences and economic forces were decisive for students to be committed to their educational goals and university studies.

Conclusion

Thabo's narrative on his habitus and social capital enables an understanding of the complexity that he encountered while trying to negotiate his first-year university experience. Thabo found himself experiencing tensions and having to re-invent himself in order to succeed at university. His narrative reinforces the imperative of educational research not to ignore the social capital of students, the everyday manifestations of racial inequalities and the notion of social class and their connection to broader structural systems. While this research project noted and exposed the experiences of an economically disadvantaged student from a rural area, the next and more important step should be a commitment to a particular paradigm of empowerment of underprivileged first-year students. Thabo's narrative on his first-year experience ensured that his voice is heard, a naming of his own reality, where the voice of the marginalised serves as a means toward emancipation. Thabo spoke with strength and confidence of his skills, his knowledge of hard work and role as breadwinner, the fact that he had different life experiences of first-year students of other race groups or black students from privileged contexts, and that he knows about struggle and he attributes his strength to commit himself to university was borne from his struggle. However, we also note in his narrative, that when he discursively wandered beyond the borders of his

inner strength, stigma and fear permeated his story. He described himself as academically handicapped, by opportunities denied, ill-equipped to attend university, embarrassed by limited vocabulary and discomfort in engaging with lecturers. Social capital of economically disadvantaged first-year students should not be ignored as it reinforces important factors of profoundly classed experiences that have an effect on student drop-out. Factors include details of their family, which schools students attended, the extent and type of extracurricular activities they have engaged in, where they live and the nature of their housing, the nature by which they are prepared for university admission and benchmarking testing, the nature of school based counselling and their health. In this regard as Paulsen & St John (2002) warn that when studying diverse student groups it is imperative that the student's situated circumstances be taken into account. Thabo's situated context helped to explain how his habitus shaped his first-year experience and academic performance. His determination, motivation and self-resilience, brought about by his life circumstances, helped to understand why he chose to behave in a particular manner while trying to navigate through his first year at university.

Acknowledgments

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