Class Inequalities in Lebanese Higher Education

May Sabbagh

Universitat de Lleida

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Class Inequalities in Lebanese Higher Education

May Sabbagh

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Director/a

Professor David Block

Tutor/a

Professor Josep Maria Cots

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Abstract

Class Inequalities in Lebanese Higher Education

The highly stratified Lebanese educational system has always been a fundamental mechanism through which social inequalities are reproduced. Grounded in a critical realist framework and a critical interpretivist approach, this study explores the narratives of a group of university students from North Lebanon to understand how their class position (the volume of economic, social and cultural capitals they possess) shapes their university experience and career orientation. In particular, I examine how the students' class position mediates their acquisition of a range of skills and attitudes valued by the neoliberal employability agenda. The study illustrates how a cluster of identity markers such as region, gender and religion, interact with class to perpetuate social disadvantage in a peripheral and underprivileged part of Lebanon. The findings, which highlight structural inequalities in the Lebanese society, contribute to the revival of debates about social class in a country where sectarian politics dominate public discourse.

Resum

Desigualtats de Classe a l'Educació Superior Libanesa

El sistema educatiu libanès molt estratificat ha estat sempre un mecanisme fonamental a través del qual es reprodueixen les desigualtats socials. Basat en un marc realista crític i un enfocament interpretatiu crític, aquest estudi explora les narracions d'un grup d'estudiants universitaris del nord del Líban per entendre com la seva posició de classe (el volum de capitals econòmics, socials i culturals que posseeixen) configura la seva experiència universitària i orientació professional. En particular, examino com la posició de classe dels estudiants media la seva adquisició d'una sèrie d'habilitats i actituds valorades per l'agenda d'ocupabilitat neoliberal. estudi il·lustra com un grup de marcadors d'identitat, com ara la regió, el gènere i la religió, interactuen amb la classe per perpetuar el desavantatge social en una part perifèrica i desfavorida del Líban. Les troballes, que posen de manifest les desigualtats estructurals a la societat libanesa, contribueixen a la reactivació dels debats sobre la classe social en un país on la política sectària domina el discurs públic.

Resumen

Desigualdades de Clases en la Educación Superior Libanesa

El sistema educativo libanés, altamente estratificado, siempre ha sido un mecanismo fundamental a través del cual se reproducen las desigualdades sociales. Basado en un marco realista crítico y un enfoque interpretativista crítico, este estudio explora las narrativas de un grupo de estudiantes universitarios en el norte del Líbano para comprender cómo su posición de clase (el volumen de capital económico, social y cultural que poseen) moldea su experiencia universitaria y orientación professional. En particular, examino cómo la posición de clase de los estudiantes media en la adquisición de una variedad de habilidades y actitudes valoradas por la agenda neoliberal de empleabilidad. El estudio ilustra cómo un conjunto de marcadores de identidad, como la región, el género y la religión, interactúan con la clase para perpetuar la desventaja social en una parte periférica y desfavorecida del Líbano. Los hallazgos, que resaltan las desigualdades estructurales

en la sociedad libanesa, contribuyen a revivir los debates sobre las clases sociales en un país donde la política sectaria domina el discurso público.

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Chapter 1

An Overview of the Lebanese Education System

1.1 The "uneasy" state of Lebanese education

Lebanon is historically known for being the education hub of the Arab world. Long before the creation of the Lebanese state in 1921, missionary universities dating back to the 19th century introduced multilingual modern education, playing a major role in grooming local and regional elites (Womack, 2012). As opposed to neighboring Arab countries which endorsed nationalist language policies post-independence (Miller, 2003), the Lebanese education system has been committed to multilingualism using Arabic as a first language and French or English as second languages. Pioneering modern education offered by well-reputed private universities has long nurtured Lebanese self-perceptions of cultural distinction in the Arab world. One of the most striking examples of these self-perceptions of excellence and superiority can be found in the words of Michel Chiha (1891-1954), the "organic intellectual" of the Lebanese financial-commercial bourgeoisie (Salloukh, 2023, p.4). In a 1952 article published in the Belgian Journal, *Civilisations*, Chiha (1891-1954) praises the high caliber of Lebanese students who join elite Western universities, noting how these distinguished scholars feel "at home" in these institutions.

> In Paris as in Oxford, in Salamanca and Louvain, or on the other side of the Atlantic, in Princeton, in Harvard, *the Lebanese* is *at ease* (p.337). (emphasis mine)

In Chiha's essentializing view, *The Lebanese* seems to refer to privately educated students, whose fluency in foreign languages and upper class upbringing, enable them to effortlessly navigate the familiar waters of Western elite education. To borrow the language of French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, these high flying students feel like "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127) in an environment congruent with their class "habitus" and their dispositions. The "ease" they feel encountering this world, after all, is the "true mark of privilege" as American sociologist Shamus Khan (2011) explains (p.79).

While it is true that generations of Lebanese graduates have forged their academic path in elite western universities with success, Chiha's depiction of the Lebanese academic prowess barely applies to any Lebanese outside his bourgeois social circles. The distinguished educational trajectories of a minority of privileged students can hardly overshadow the deep-seated inequalities that the vast majority of Lebanese students face. The Lebanese dual system, which consists of an under-resourced public sector and a mosaic of private institutions, presents glaring disparities in the quality of education that students receive (Nimer, 2013).On one hand, public schooling is generally perceived as deficient and stigmatized due to its low foreign language standards. On the other hand, access to quality education and the mastery of foreign languages seems to be the reserve of affluent social classes who can afford the hefty fees of private schools and universities. Thus, social class in Lebanon largely mediates educational attainment and occupational outcomes. The cultural complexity of the multi-confessional Lebanese society adds new dimensions to class inequalities. Class position interacts with other identity markers such as religion, gender and geographical location to shape students' experiences, aspirations and career paths. This exploratory qualitative inquiry is an attempt to understand the structural inequalities entrenched

over decades in the Lebanese higher education system. On the conceptual side, it is based on the deep reading of multiple sources focusing on educational inequality, both in general terms and specifically with reference to Lebanon. On the empirical side, it examines and analyses in depth semi-structured with 15 university students from North Lebanon, a peripheral, underdeveloped part of Lebanon. The aim is to understand how these students' class position shapes their university experiences and mediates the acquisition of marketable skills valued in today's workplace. The study sheds light on students' unequal access to employability skills in a deeply stratified system which sets students on different career paths and greatly affects their social mobility. It illustrates how the Lebanese educational system reproduces social inequalities in a society where almost 70 percent of wealth is concentrated in the hands of 10 percent of the population. This monopoly is supported by an oligarchic economic structure which constitutes a barrier to social mobility [Economic and Social Commission for Wester Asia [ESCWA], 2022).

1.2 Diversity Vs equality

Private education in modern day Lebanon preceded the creation of the Lebanese state in 1921. While the Lebanese had to wait until 1959 to witness the birth of a public university, more affluent classes received higher education in private universities established by missionaries such as The American university of Beirut (1866) and Saint-Joseph (1875). Before the French mandate (1918-1943) the country had mainly religious parochial private schools concentrated in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The public school system funded by the state was initiated by the French and expanded later due to demand for education (Farha, 2012). The diversity of the system is rooted in the sectarian make-up of the Lebanese state, a confessional democracy with 18 recognized religious denominations (Salloukh, 2023). The Lebanese state has adopted a laissez-faire educational policy which gave sectarian communities a great deal of autonomy in education matters. The freedom of education is enshrined the Lebanese constitution which guarantees the right of different religious communities to establish their own schools (Lebanese constitution, Article 10). Although this policy promoted a culture of diversity within the system, it also prioritized the freedom of choice over the equality of opportunity. Thus, by leaving education to the religious communities, the Lebanese state abdicated its role as an equalizer of its citizens' life chances and its duty to provide equal educational opportunities for these citizens. This laissez -faire stance which leaves education to the forces of the market, shares a common ground with the neoliberal logic of "choice" where access to education is largely mediated by the family socio-economic status (Mahfouz, 2020; Ball, 2014). As several scholars (Valin, 1969; Farha, 2012) have noted, this kind of fragmented educational system undermines social cohesion and national identity. Farha (2012) maintains that educational institutions in Lebanon divide the Lebanese society along sectarian and socio-economic lines reinforcing "communal cocoons and class hierarchies", impeding thereby "the formation of civic national identity" (p. 64).

In addition to the horizontal stratification of the system, regional inequalities have serious implications for students' educational outcomes. Educational disparities are historically the result of the concentration of schools and universities in central Lebanon (Beirut and Mount Lebanon as opposed to peripheral regions of Lebanon (North, South, Bekaa). Despite the expansion of the educational system, students in underdeveloped peripheral regions of Lebanon are presented with their own set of challenges and hardships. While most Lebanese regions have a sufficient number of schools and universities, significant disparities persist in educational attainment (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2008). The North, which is the most socio-economically deprived region, has one of highest illiteracy rates in the country (12.42 %) and the highest concentration

of students who drop out after the elementary school (43%,). Beirut and Mount Lebanon, on the other hand, have the highest ratios of university education attainment. Tfaily, Diab and Kulczycki (2013) who measured educational attainment across Lebanese regions based on the 1996 Lebanese Population and Household Survey, confirm that the North has the lowest level of educational attainment, and that Sunni Muslims are the most educationally disadvantaged group in Lebanon. The North in particular remains the most underprivileged region (The United Nations Commision for Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2018) as successive Lebanese governments have perpetuated the disparities between what Nasr and Dubar (1976) called "Central Lebanon" (Mount Lebanon and Beirut) and peripheral Lebanon (South, North, Bekaa Valley). Tripoli, the capital city of North Lebanon is the poorest on the Mediterranean as 77 percent of the population suffers from economic deprivation and soaring unemployment rates (ESCWA, 2015). These dire socio-economic circumstances add new layers of inequalities that shape students' educational outcomes, aspirations and career orientation in this underprivileged part of Lebanon.

1.3 A brief Overview of the System

Schools

The Lebanese system is largely dominated by private institutions. According to the data published by the CDRP (Centre de Recherche et de Development Pédagogique) for the year 2018-2019, 65% of Lebanese students are enrolled in private education (52.6% in paying schools, 13.1% in free paying subsidized school) whereas only 30.9 % enroll in public schools. Palestinian refugees who study at UNRWA Schools constitute with 3.4 % of the Student population (United Nations relief and works agency for Palestinian refugees in the Near East). Private schooling is in high demand among middle classes eager to offer their children quality education and mastery of foreign languages. While most religious communities today have their own schools, it is common that Muslim families enroll their children in missionary and Christian parochial schools reputed for quality education. Islamic schools, on the other hand, host a less diverse population.

The new curriculum reforms in 1997 reconfirmed Lebanon's commitment to multilingual education (The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education [MEHE], 2018). Schools teach Arabic as a first language, in addition to French or English as second or third languages. Unsurprisingly, Lebanon has witnessed in the last two decades an increase in the number of English-medium schools as a response to the global demand for English. (CRDP, 2018). Students sit for one official examination at the end of grade 9 (Brevet) and another final one at the end in grade 12 (the Baccalauréat). This final year of schooling consists of four branches: General Sciences, Life Sciences, Sociology and Economics, and Literature and Humanities. (Ministry of Higher Education [MEHE], 2018). Students can also join private or public vocational schools after obtaining their brevet certificate. This path however is less preferred by middle classes due to the stigma attached to vocational education in Lebanon (Vlaardingerbroek, 2016)

Higher Education

The history of higher education in Lebanon dates back to the 19 century with the foundation of two missionary universities in Beirut. The American University of Beirut (1866) and Saint-Joseph University (1875) remained the only providers of higher education until 1951 when the Lebanese public university (LU) was established. Under the Nasserite influence, the Arab university of Beirut was founded in 1961 as filial of the University of Alexandria in Egypt. The sixties and the early seventies also witnessed the expansion of the public school system and the Lebanese

University in a bid to meet the demand for education from lower income students and supply cadres for the growing Lebanese bureaucracy (Zbib, 2014). The expansion of the public university (LU) was the result of a long series of strikes where students and professors united to improve teaching conditions and establish new faculties (Al-Amine, 1997).The LU currently hosts the largest student population in Lebanon **(**77 240) (CDRP 2018), with regional branches spread all over the country**.** During the civil war a few private parochial universities were established such as Christian Maronite Notre Dame de Louaizeh (1987) and the Christian Orthodox University of Balamand (1988). The end of the civil war in 1991 marked the chaotic proliferation of market-oriented private universities (Kabbanji, 2012). Most of these new universities attract lower middle class students with their low fees and English medium instruction. While the expansion of the system might be deemed a positive development, it consolidated the pre-existing symbolic hierarchy within higher education and perpetuated educational inequalities. Thus, many of these newer institutions are perceived as offering lower educational standards and in many cases metaphorically described as "shops" that sell degrees (Al Haj, 2021).

1.4 Critique of educational inequalities

Persisting inequalities in the Lebanese education system have been subject to criticism from foreign scholars and Lebanese scholars alike. One of the earliest studies conducted by French researcher Jean-Pierre Valin in 1969 highlighted educational disparities between central Lebanon (Beirut and Mount Lebanon and peripheral Lebanon) concluding that Christians had more access to foreign private education than Muslims. The findings of Valin refuted the presumed liberty of choice enshrined in the Lebanese constitution by demonstrating that Lebanese students' educational attainment was predetermined by their geographical location, their socioeconomic status and their sectarian identity. In his study, published a few years before the eruption of the civil war, Valin argued that the system created an increasing socioeconomic and cultural distance between different Lebanese social groups which could potentially undermine social cohesion. He concluded that diversity in the educational system could be an agent of social and economic dislocation

> Plural education can be an agent of social and economic dislocation…. The solution is in the quest for transcomunitarian education integrated in national development action (p. 178). (my translation)

Another poignant critique of Lebanese education can be found in the writings of the Lebanese Leftist thinkers who have unpacked the ideological underpinnings of the system. For these scholars, teaching French or English as a second language constituted a barrier to the education of popular classes. For example, Lebanese Marxist thinker Mehdi Amel (1936-1987) argued that the role the system was to reproduce the privilege of the Lebanese bourgeoisie excluding those at the bottom from quality education. Meanwhile, for Amel, (1972/1991) the system is open class warfare against popular classes which makes public schools a site for "miseducation" (*Tajheel*) (p.62), the same term used by scholar Diane Ray (2018) in her critique of educational inequalities in Britain. Amel adopts a Marxist view in which the system is a state apparatus working to filter students by imposing foreign language on popular classes. Accordingly, foreign language instruction becomes a form of class violence inflicted upon the children of monolingual working classes. As he wrote in 1972, "foreign language is the key to class victory, it opens all the doors ….. The system is a purgatory where only those who master the language survive" (p.60). This type of analysis, however, was largely ignored by ensuing generations of Lebanese educational

researchers who have been more preoccupied with cultural and identity issues rather than social justice. Thus, while educational inequalities are often acknowledged by Lebanese scholars, class has rarely occupied a central place in academic educational research. This erasure of class is rooted in the Lebanese sectarian identity politics in which "recognition" (of sects) overshadows debates about wealth distribution as I will explain in the following section.

1.5 Significance of the study: reviving the class debate

While most educational researchers in Lebanon acknowledge educational inequalities, class has rarely occupied a central place in Lebanese educational research. The dearth of research into the lived experiences of Lebanese students can be quite intriguing considering the stark disparities in the educational system. In the last decade however, a few studies with a social justice agenda have broken the silence around the lived experiences of Lebanese students. Bahou (2015) explored the daily injustices that students face in three public schools in Beirut locating these practices in the economic socio-cultural and political injustices inflicted upon Lebanese citizens in general. Research conducted by Nimer (2016) examined the experiences of a group of low-income students at private university in Beirut highlighting the role of gender and socio-cultural norms in shaping their educational performance and career orientation.

One possible explanation for the erasure of class in educational research and Lebanese sociological research in general, could be found in the sectarian identity politics that dominate public debate. In the Lebanese confessional democracy, the political and social rights of Lebanese citizens are generally determined by their sectarian identity. Accordingly, their access to social goods such as health, education, appointment to public office is often mediated by the sectarian share of public resources. (Tabar & Egan, 2016). Sectarian identity interferes in all aspects of life, especially in the labor market due to the sectarian allocation of appointments in the state and public sector. Thus, in the Lebanese political system, sectarian leaderships share the spoils of public resources and struggle over the distribution of state services, public works and contracts (Leenders, 2012). As Traboulsi (2014) puts it, "the state constitutes a space for the reproduction of sectarian/confessional allocation policies based on sectarian partisanship (including negotiated settlements), just as it provides a space for the reproduction of the class structure" (p. 105). In many cases, sectarian conflicts (or squabbles) about the rights of the sects work as an ideological tool to distract from real issues of class inequality and distribution of wealth. The rights of the sects has become a "common sense" imposed by sectarian elites to hinder debates about social justice (Traboulsi, 2014). Accordingly, it is in the interest of sectarian elites that the politics of recognition (Mac Nay, 2010) occupy the central place in Lebanese political life. Among the many nepotistic practices that plague the Lebanese sectarian system, *Wasta*, the clandestine exchange of favors (Tabar & Egan, 2016) represents a major source of inequality in the Lebanese society. This peculiar form of social capital plays a significant role in students' educational advancement and labor markets opportunities, especially that the majority of Lebanese graduates find work through personal connections (Attallah, 2013). Thus, it is common for well-connected families to activate this form of social capital to boost the career opportunities of their children.

As I explained above, educational inequalities in Lebanon are embedded within a political system that that divides the country along class and sectarian lines. Hence, this study is an attempt to reclaim the politics of distribution in a society in which parochial identity politics dominate public

debate. While inequality has always been a defining characteristic of the Lebanese educational system, the recent structural changes in higher education and labor markets have created new realities for Lebanese students. The expansion of higher education in the world came hand in hand with the devaluation of university degrees and heightened labor market competition, a situation that greatly exacerbated already existing inequalities. In particular, the employability agenda promoted by neoliberal educational discourses has set new rules for the game, rewarding those endowed with more resources, as I will explain in the following section.

1.6 The Global Context: the employability agenda and the "opportunity trap"

The second half of the 20th century witnessed the remarkable expansion of higher education systems around the system. In Europe, the UK and the USA, widening participation has become part and parcel of educational policies aiming not only at increasing the number of university students, but also by enabling historically underrepresented groups to access higher education (Marginson, 2016). Marginalized social groups such as students from lower socio-economic strata, ethnic minorities and women have now more access to what used to be the monopoly of a privileged elite. There is a widely held belief today that higher education is the route to upward social mobility, self- realization, personal emancipation, which potentially remedy the injustice inflicted upon disadvantaged groups. Students today are exhorted by governments and international organizations to invest in their education, training and skills, as gaining better credentials is supposed to lead to better jobs opportunities and enable employers to fairly select workers based on merit and personal achievement (Brown &Tannock, 2009). These official discourses on education in the "knowledge driven" economy are predicated upon human capital models that suggest a linear relationship between learning and earning (Becker, 1964). Thus, it is assumed that developing higher skills and acquiring more credentials will definitely lead to a higher income. In particular, the neoliberal discourse which subordinates education to the economic imperatives emphasized the role of education and training in enhancing economic competitiveness and redressing a range of social ailments (Keep and Mayhew, 2010).

While an increasing number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to higher education, there are major developments on the global higher education scene preventing them from reaping the rewards of this achievement. More specifically, the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, which positions education as a private good to be purchased on the market, has deepened the stratification of the system entrenching older inequalities and creating new ones. The expansion of the field has been paired with the hierarchical differentiation of higher education institutions which confer on their degree holders different levels of prestige and value. Elite institutions such as the Ivy league in the United States and Russell group universities in the United Kingdom operate as "engines of privilege" (Marginson, 2016), as they host privileged social groups who possess the economic resources to afford their prohibitive fees, along with the adequate cultural capital to go through the admission process of these highly selective institutions. While "the chosen few" are destined to rewarding trajectories, newly participating groups join lower-ranking universities which fail to provide the same social status or the same labor market outcomes.

Therefore, far from levelling the playing field, the expansion of the system has turned wider access into "an opportunity trap" (Brown, 2003), which simply means that groups from disadvantaged backgrounds now have the opportunity to compete in the market against those from more privileged backgrounds. This neoliberal "fallacy" of fairness as the freedom to compete (Brown,

Lauder and Ashton, 2013), obscures that fact that the participants in the game do not possess the same resources. In a congested labor market, the oversupply of graduates, has compelled anxious middle classes to mobilize various economic, cultural and social capitals to a stay ahead in the competition and enable their children to "stand out from the crowd". Accordingly, these parents strive to equip their children with a set of skills and competences that facilitate their access to prestigious educational institutions and their distinction in the labor market. These marketable skills rewarded on global markets- often labeled as "soft skills"- include a number of intangible competences (such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking, team work, adaptability, cosmopolitan exposure) which are highly valued in global corporate environment (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). The acquisition of these skills, however, appears to be the product of a long socialization process and is becoming increasingly mediated by family economic resources. These changes are particularly relevant to the Lebanese context where access to marketable skills and English language education is usually the reserve of privately educated students.

1.7 Personal interest

My interest in researching educational inequalities stems from a number of experiences and personal encounters that raised my awareness about the long lasting effect of social origin. As a socially mobile person within the middle class, I experienced first-hand the role of education in transforming lives, nurturing aspirations, and accessing material comfort. I grew up in a middle class family with a relatively low income but a considerable social capital that my father developed during his political activity in a pan-Arabic political party. Basics were provided, but my father's meager salary as a teacher could hardly provide any kind of material comfort. Like other middle class parents with no inherited wealth, my parents knew that getting a university education was the only way for us get ahead in life and avoid the perils of slipping downwards. Thus, it was inconceivable not to take an academic path. While my two older brothers attended public schools, my family made great sacrifices to enroll me in an affordable private school, hoping that I would receive a better language education than my brothers. The school, which belonged to the Christian Greek orthodox community, hosted a socially diverse student population from different religious denominations, as it is the case with most parochial Christian schools.

As leisure activities were beyond our means, I spent most of my teen years reading books that I borrowed from the personal library of some upper middle class family friends. While I was fully aware that my social circle had more material wealth, my interest in culture and languages shielded me to a great extent from any "injuries of class". Respect for culture and education and irreverence for money were integral parts of my family values. My parents could not afford private universities, but I was fortunate enough to receive in 1992 a full scholarship for a BA degree at the University of Balamand, a young private university in the North. This was followed in 1998 by another scholarship for a Masters' degree at the University of Cambridge. My highly regarded British degree landed me a job as an English language instructor at my previous university. At that time, my decision to teach English was purely instrumental: I was simply "riding the wave" to secure better employment prospects as demand for English was growing. My well-remunerated job allowed me more material comfort, extensive travelling, and most importantly, free time for leisure and self-care. Without private schooling and two scholarships, I would have probably joined the faculty of Humanities at the Lebanese public university, which would have set me on a completely different path in life. But beyond private schooling and university scholarships, I like to attribute my ascension within the middle class to the "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004) I

developed through reading in my teens. I believe that my access to this "objective cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1992) played a decisive part in my academic and career path.

Teaching English was another opportunity to ponder over class inequalities. I have personally witnessed how English could be a great source of frustration for those who attended French-medium public schools. The majority of these students were placed in intensive or remedial English classes, which delayed their graduation and prevented them from starting major courses. Many of them got stuck in remedial courses, endlessly repeating costly standardized tests (IELTS, TOEFEL, SAT) in their hope to skip pre-college courses. Despite receiving full scholarships, many students failed to join more prestigious universities or majors because of their limited English. This, of course, was not the case for their privately educated peers, most of whom sailed through English courses with confidence. I have also noticed how students from modest backgrounds were used to more traditional authoritarian styles of communication with academic figures. Their feelings of shyness or inadequacy contrasted with the confidence of their middle class peers, who displayed remarkable ease (and entitlement) in communicating with teachers. These observations also made me question many teaching practices and social dynamics taking place inside the classroom. Most teachers at my university (including myself), held the assumption that all students possessed the same resources. It took me quite a few years of teaching to realize that even those who were on scholarship had to struggle to pay for books, transportation, Wi-Fi, phone bills and laptops. My personal misperceptions motivated me to look further into the immense challenges these students face on daily basis inside and outside classrooms.

Finally, I grew up in city where more than half the population lived below the poverty line. Tripoli, the regional capital of North Lebanon, has been neglected for decades by the central Lebanese state. Destructive import policies have shattered the economy of a productive city renowned for its traditional crafts, furniture, and food industry. Successive civil conflicts left the city languishing in unemployment and despair. Young Tripolitans who dwell in the city's poverty enclaves have no option but attending miserable public schools where physical and verbal violence is the norm. Many of these students drop school to support their families as they realize they have little to gain from the quality of education they receive. Sadly, these marginalized young also face double stigma. On a local level, middle class Tripolitans perceive them as the lumpen uneducated "mob". On a national level, the city is labelled as the "Kandahar" of Lebanon (Gade, 2022) due the strong presence of Islamist groups in the city. I hope this study can highlight the importance of addressing these socio-economic grievances as a necessary condition for the success of any educational reform.

1.8 Theoretical framework and research questions

This study adopts a Bourdieusian definition of social class to examine educational inequalities. The basic proposition in Bourdieu' class theory is that all agents in a particular society occupy an objective position within a social space depending on the combination of capitals they possess. Bourdieu (1984) defines capital "the set of actually usable resources and powers" (p. 114). He identified different forms of capital such as economic capital, which involves various kinds of economic resources, social capital (connections, networks, and group membership) and cultural capital. This last type of capital, usually inculcated through family and school socialization involves a variety of cultural resources. Most importantly, it involves a form of symbolic mastery or a capacity of abstract thinking, (for example, recognizing the difference between two schools of painting). Finally, symbolic capital is the form that the previously mentioned types of capital

take when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. Thus, the structure of the social space is shaped by the distribution of different forms of capital among agents. As Bourdieu (1987) explains:

> The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the 'powers or forms of capital which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this universe is the site. It follows that the structure of this space is given by the distribution of the various forms of capital, that is, by the distribution of the properties which are active within the universe under study-those properties capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder. (p.3-4)

For Bourdieu, agents are distributed in the social space according to three dimensions. The first is the global volume of capital they possess, the second is the composition of their capital, and the third dimension is the evolution in time of the volume and composition of their capital. In other words, their trajectory in social space depends on whether the agents experienced change or stability over time in the volume and composition of their capital. Various combinations of capital constitute a habitus- a set of acquired patterns of thought, behaviours or tastes, or a system of dispositions and competences shared by all individuals living in similar life conditions. This habitus is also be embodied, hence the Bourdieusian notion of "body hexis", the physically embodied habitus, or the manner, and style in which actors "carry themselves" in the world. These dispositions empower the agents to struggle for positions different social fields. A field is a social arena within which agents struggle and use certain strategies to access specific resources, maintain or improve their position in relation to the defining capital of the field. (Crossly, 2008).

For Bourdieu, class is a group of social agents who occupy neighboring positions in his three dimensional social space and share the same habitus produced by the similar life conditions. Bourdieu (1987) suggests the following definition of class:

> …….constructed classes can be characterized in a certain way as sets of agents who, by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in social space (that is, in the distribution of powers), are subject to similar conditions of existence and conditioning factors and, as a result, are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices. (p.6)

Having this definition of social class in mind, I used the concepts of habitus, capital and field to understand where my participants stand in the social space, the cultural economic and social resources they possessed, and how these resources shaped their lived experiences in higher education. I also engaged with applications of Bourdieu's theory of practice in other global contexts such as the UK (Ray, 2018; Ball &Nikita, 2014 ; Allen et.al, 2013; Bathmaker et al, 2016), the US (Lareau, 2003) and France (Draelants, 2014). Taking into consideration the Lebanese cultural context, I have formulated a number of questions that have arisen upon reviewing the Bourdieusian literature on educational inequalities. The key question that I aimed to answer in this thesis was:

How does class position shape the experience of Lebanese students in higher education?

I divided my inquiry into three chronological phases: Pre-enrollment (school to university transition), post-enrollment, and near graduation phase. In the first phase, I was interested in understanding what motivated students to take an academic path, how the type of school they attended conditioned their choice of university, and the extent of parental involvement in these choices. In other words, I wanted to assess the type and volume of capitals they possessed upon university enrollment.

In the second phase, (post- university enrollment), I was interested in knowing how students were able to develop and mobilize and develop these capitals during the university years. To this end, I asked the students about their involvement in extracurricular and CV building activities, and the kind of interaction they had with academic figures. I also wanted to understand the role that institutions play in the development of these capitals.

Finally, in the third, near-graduation, phase, I inquired about the institutional resources available for students, and the role of dominant discourses in steering them towards certain career paths. I was also interested in exploring the views of employers and career advisors to understand how educators and gatekeepers construct the ideal worker, and the implications of these constructions for labor market outcomes.

In each of these three phases, I tried to examine how other identity markers such as gender, geographical location, and socio-cultural norms interacted with class to shape students' experiences. Thus, I hoped that my conversations with students would help me answer the following questions:

1. What was the students' motivation to pursue higher education? To what extent were parents involved in this transition? How did their class position affect their choice of university? How did other identity markers shape these choices?
2. How did the students' class position affect their acquisition of social and cultural capital and their involvement in extracurricular activities? What was the role of higher education institutions in providing these opportunities? What other identity markers interacted with class to shape the acquisition of employability skills?
3. How did the students' class position shape their career prospects? What role did institutional discourses and resources play in their career orientation? How did students perceive the role of *Wasta* accessing job opportunities?

1.9 Organization of the thesis

This thesis is organized as follows.

After the present introduction, I engage in chapter 2 with debates around the relevance of class reviewing the arguments of post-modern theorists of reflexive modernity. Then, I proceed to explore the conceptualization of class in three foundational sociological traditions, namely, in the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu.

In chapter 3, I examine the role of education as a fundamental mechanism through which social inequalities are reproduced. To this end, I explore how schooling in capitalist societies perpetuates social inequality rewarding those endowed with more economic, social and cultural assets. Finally,

I examine different sociological interpretations of educational inequalities and discuss new reproduction strategies in the light of recent changes in education and labor markets.

Chapter 4 is a discussion of the neoliberal turn in education. I specifically examine the discourse of employability that constructs the student/worker as a bundle of skills (Urciuoli, 2008). In addition, I argue that the soft skills discourse mediates labor market inequalities as these skills are generally the product of a middle class socialization process**.**

In Chapter 5, I present a detailed account of the methodology I used to conduct the study. I identify the ontological and epistemological assumptions that guided my qualitative inquiry and justify my adherence to a critical realist philosophical framework. This is followed by a detailed description of different stages of my study such as sampling, conducting interviews, establishing rapport with participants. I also discuss ethical considerations, and translation challenges.

Chapter 6 explores the narratives of students in order to understand the effect of class on their transition to higher education. Data from this chapter illustrates how the cultural, social, economic capitals they possess shaped their motivation to pursue higher education and conditioned their choice of university. In the second part of the chapter, I examine the role that schools play in preparing students for the university transition, emphasizing middle class parents' strategic thinking and "concerted intervention" (Lareau, 2003).

In chapter 7, I continue my data analysis to understand how the participants' social background impacts the way they develop social and cultural capital during their university years. I examine students' involvement in extra-curricular and CV building activities, highlighting how gender and socio-cultural norms shape their access to employability skills

In chapter 8, I examine the forms capitals that mediate students' access to labor market opportunities. To this end, I try to identify the structures of inequality that shape students career orientation, focusing on the regional inequalities in this peripheral part of Lebanon. Moreover, I explore the role that institutional cultures and resources play in steering students towards certain career paths, shedding light on the labor market inequalities created by *Wasta*. Finally, I analyze conversations with a group of educators and Human Resources officers to understand how gatekeepers construct the ideal worker and the implications of this construction for recruitment practices.

In Chapter 9, I summarize the major findings of this study, acknowledge limitations, and discuss the implications of my findings for policy makers and educators.

Chapter 2

Sociological Approaches to Class

2.1 Introduction

The second half of the 20th century witnessed the remarkable expansion of higher education systems around the system. . As universities and colleges proliferate around the world, students today seem to have a wide array of choices compared to previous generations. In Europe, the UK and the USA, widening participation has become part and parcel of educational policies aiming not only at increasing the number of university students, but also at diversifying the student body by enabling historically underrepresented groups to access higher education. Marginalized social groups such as students from the lower socio-economic strata, women, and ethnic minorities have now more access to what used to be the monopoly of a privileged elite, which may seem like a step towards a more just and equal world. There is widely held belief today that higher education is the route to upward social mobility, self-realization, personal emancipation, which can potentially remedy the injustice inflicted upon disadvantaged groups. Students today are exhorted by governments and international organizations to invest in their education, training and skills, as gaining better credentials, the argument goes, leads to better jobs opportunities and higher rewards in the labor market, and enables employers to fairly select workers based on merit and personal achievement (Brown &Tannock, 2009). These official discourses on education in the "knowledge driven" economy are predicated upon human capital models that suggest a linear relationship between learning and earning (Becker, 1993).Thus, it is assumed that developing higher skills and acquiring more credentials will definitely lead to a higher income, which is equated with a better life.

Although these developments have led to undeniably important advances for marginalized groups, the belief that wider access to education can redress social injustice should be taken with caution. A long research tradition has identified education as a fundamental mechanism through which inequalities are reproduced and entrenched over the generations. In capitalist societies defined by inequality, educational research has scrutinized the processes through which education perpetuates an unequal social order, favoring and rewarding those endowed with more economic, social and cultural assets (Bourdieu, 1992). While an increasing number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and marginalized groups have access to higher education, there are major developments on the global higher education scene preventing them from reaping the rewards of this achievement. More specifically, the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, which positions education as a private good to be purchased on the market, has deepened the stratification of the system entrenching older inequalities and creating new ones. Thus, the expansion of the field has been paired with the hierarchical differentiation of higher education institutions that confer on their degree holders different levels of prestige and value. Elite institutions such as Ivy league universities (in the US) and Russell group universities (in the UK) operate as "engines of privilege" (Marginson, 2016), as they host privileged social groups who possess the economic resources to afford the prohibitive fees, along with the adequate cultural capital to navigate these highly selective institutions. While "the chosen few" are destined to rewarding trajectories, newly participating groups generally join lower-ranking universities which fail to provide similar occupational outcomes.

Therefore, far from levelling the playing field, the expansion of the system has turned wider access into "an opportunity trap" (Brown, 2003), which simply meant that groups from disadvantaged backgrounds had now the opportunity to compete in the market against those from more privileged backgrounds (Peters, 2001). This neoliberal "fallacy" of fairness as the freedom to compete, (Brown, 2013, 682) obscures that fact that participants in the game do not possess the same resources. In a congested labor market, the oversupply of graduates, has compelled anxious middle

classes to mobilize various economic, cultural and social resources to a stay ahead in the game (Brown, 2003). Thus, in highly stratified educational systems, social background plays a decisive role in shaping opportunities to access a high ranking institution and secure a highly rewarded job on the market (Triventi, 2013). Therefore, stratification tends to trump the inclusive and equalizing effects of expansion emphasizing the role class inequalities in structuring the trajectories of students from different class positions. However, before delving into the literature on class and educational inequalities in capitalist societies, it is necessary to elucidate the concept of class itself and the place it occupies in wider sociological debates.

The proliferation of recent academic publications on social class, reflects "the remarkable recovery" (Savage, 2016) of a concept that has been described as anachronistic and irrelevant to our present era. This revival of class research owes a great deal to the unprecedented levels of inequality that have accompanied the entrenchment of neoliberal policies around the world and the austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. But before this renewed interest in class inequalities, the concept had lost ground to post-modern sociological perspectives. Following the "cultural turn" in sociology which privileged culture and language over materiality, sociologists became increasingly preoccupied with more fashionable concepts such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity (Bradly & Hebson, 1999). At the same time, post-modern theorists have shown an unwavering hostility to class, rejecting Marxist meta-narratives based on class struggle. Social class came under fire from the sociologists of reflexive modernity such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000), Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) who referred to structural changes taking place in Western societies to justify the "death of class". The aim of this chapter is, first, to engage with debates around the relevance of class in late modernity, second, to explore the conceptualization of class in three foundational sociological traditions, namely, in the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu.

2.2 Death and revival of class

The detractors of class analysis often justify their "funeral orations" on class (Atkinson, 2007, p. 546) by referring to major developments that swept across western societies in the age of neoliberal globalization. These structural changes on the economic, cultural and political levels have allegedly rendered class an obsolete concept which has no relevance to the emerging social and cultural phenomena. To begin with, structural changes in Western economies have led to the decline of collective class-based identities. Deindustrialization initiated a new global division of labor as manufacturing has been relegated to developing countries. Moreover, the emergence of the service sector (finance, media, tourism, personal service) meant that the vast majority of workers today were in the service sector. Thus, the decline of manual work has undermined the collective basis of working class identity (Atkinson, 2015). In addition to the new post-industrial organization of work, another major development was the entrenchment of neoliberalism as a dominant ideology in modern western societies. A major tenet of this ideology is that

> Society as a whole is best served by maximum market freedom and minimum intervention by the state. Thus the role of the government should be limited to security, the defence of the realm and the protection of private property together with the creation and maintenance of markets. Other functions including essential services (such as transport, water, energy and even health and education) are best carried out by private enterprise. (Crompton, 2008, P.2).

The emergence of a new way of economic thinking, which followed the stagflation crisis (a combination of high inflation and stagnation) in the late seventies, put an end the Keynesian economics which advocated government intervention in the economy to mitigate the effect of recessions or depressions. Neoliberal economists argue that for markets to be successful and to produce the best outcomes for everyone, they should be completely unregulated by the governments (Harvey, 2005). Accordingly, the government should withdraw and remove any restriction on competition between businesses and promote the unrestricted global mobility of capital, which contributed to deindustrialization and to the expansion of the service sector. In addition, the neoliberal work order requires a flexible organization which gives companies full freedom to hire and lay off without being hindered by employment laws. Thus, the long term employment model has waned off as it has been replaced by the precarization of the workforce. Therefore, new forms or work organization have weakened employment- based collective identities and undermined the prospects of unionization. This hostility to collective thinking and action is a defining feature of neoliberalism which places too much emphasis on the individual. In the neoliberal world view, ideal citizens are individuals who act upon their interests and unleash their entrepreneurial spirit to compete against each other in the market (Harvey, 2005).

Along with these economic changes, the popularity of the post-modern theory in the 1980s and 1990s represented a major blow to class analysis. Postmodernism, with its focus on race and gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, played a key role in what Bradly and Hebson (1999) call the "sequestration" of class in sociological research. Postmodernists rejected the Marxist grand narrative and its claims to historical development, privileging culture and language over materiality. One of their main claims is that there is no reality that exists "a priori", no directly accessible material reality that constitutes the base of any particular social order. (Wright, 2006). Thus, reality is socially constructed and a mere effect of discourse (Harvey, 2005). Post-modernism gives prominence to the realm of representation where the material lends itself to different interpretations, or different version of reality. Therefore, there is no place in the post-modern theory for the Marxist view of the world where social reality is grounded in the material capitalist order. For post-moderns, the present is too fluid, liquid (Bauman, 2000), ephemeral, and complex to be analyzed using anachronistic theoretical concepts such as class.

Another central proposition of the post-modern theory is that the new cultural practices that emerged under globalization have lost their class connection. Working class cultures have dwindled as deindustrialization has dispersed the old working class communities. Today, the argument goes, people can afford goods and lifestyles that were exclusive to privileged classes. (Beck, 1992). In their much cited anti-class manifesto, Pakulski and Walters (1996) argue that the well-defined boundaries between high-brow culture associated with the upper classes and popular lowbrow culture of the working classes have been blurred as people today have a diverse repertoire where they mix different cultural practices. The post-modernist culture defies claims of cultural legitimacy or absolute standards of tastes in favor of mixing different genres and aesthetics. For Pakulski and Walters, the class basis of stratification has disappeared as consumption and lifestyle have become the main source of self-expression and identity. "The principal social divisions in what may be labelled "post class society" emerge along lifestyle, consumption, or value lines" (p. 671)

Along the same lines, the theorists of reflexive modernity dismissed class as a basis of identity in late modernity. Giddens (1991) refers to progressive "detraditionalisation" of the social order: with the expansion of communication technology, people are exposed to different ways of life across

the world which weakens local attachments such as family and community. The traditions, cultures and communal ties, including class identities, have been replaced by a context of "multiple choice" (p.5). As a result, the self has become a reflexive project in which individuals must actively choose, revise and reinvent their narrative of identity themselves. "We have no choice but to choose". It is this reflexivity rather than class constraints that became the basis of action. A similar emphasis on reflexivity can be found in the work of German sociologist Ulrich Beck. In late modernity, Beck contends, actors can no longer fall back on traditional attachments to construct their biographies but must now reflexively construct themselves- a process that Beck calls "individualization" (Beck, 1992, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Beck defines individualization as "a concept which describes a structural, sociological transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society, freeing people from historically inscribed roles and constraints" (Beck& Beck-Gernshein, 2002, 202). Under the conditions of reflexive modernity, individuals are liberated from "historically prescribed social forms and commitments" (Beck, 1992, 128) including those related to class and subsequently re-embedded in new ways of life in which they "must produce, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves". Thus, individual agency and choice replace traditional constraints and determinations as people are increasingly forced to construct their own biographies and self-identities from the diverse options available. As Lash (1999) puts it, "Individuals must innovate rules in a bricolage of their own identities" (P.3).

The reflexive modernity thesis has been subject to diverse critiques which highlighted its inconsistencies and its lack of empirical evidence. For example, Skeggs (2004) argues that Giddens overlooks class conflict by assuming that all individuals possess equal resources to invent their selves. His theory is a generalization of the middle class experience, which clearly echoes the neoliberal denial of class inequalities. On another level, Adams (2006) questions the possibility of an individual totally "disembedded" from traditions, noting that individuals cannot but rely on common cultural forms to make sense of their experiences. It is implausible then that individuals could stand outside any historical, social or cultural context to create their selves. Adams argues that reflexivity and self-development are modern cultural norms, therefore, by being reflexive, individuals are actually embedding rather than disembedding themselves in a certain cultural framework. Elsewhere, Atkinson (2007) pinpoints several inconsistencies and contradictions in the work of Giddens. While the latter emphasizes that individuals today choose their lifestyles and that all social classes have the means of self-actualization (Giddens, 1991), he also concedes that class is a filter of life chances which may impact upon lifestyle options (Giddens, 1995).

Along with post-modern cultural trends hostile to class, major political developments have contributed to the emergence of a new political scene and the marginalization of class politics. The collapse of the Soviet Union, together with the growth of new social movements, have weakened the discourse of class inequalities. These new social movements advocate for the rights of groups that have been historically excluded from full economic and political participation aiming at redressing the historical injustices inflicted upon them because of their gendered, ethnic, sexual or racial identities. For Pakulski and Waters (1996) these movements have "post-materialist values" that "do not fit class-based ideological cleavages." As a consequence, class discourse has been abandoned by political parties, unions, associations, and even and academics on the left.

This new form of activism labelled by some as "identity politics", in which the aim of the struggle is the "recognition" of historically devalued or denigrated identities, has been the subject of ongoing controversy among leftist scholars. Many Marxist scholars have criticized identity politics for displacing the analysis of the material roots of oppression. For these critics, these new divisive

and depolitcized social movements represent a distraction from the radical critique of late capitalism as their struggle for recognition leaves the capitalist economic structures unchallenged (Heyes, 2002). For others, the focus on identity represents a reification and an essentialization of social difference leading to a parochial politics of recognition that hinders participation in wider democratic debates (Mac Nay, 2010). Elsewhere, Wendy Brown (1995) suggests that identity politics resubordinates individuals rather than liberating them, for categories such as race and gender were historically created to subjugate and subordinate individuals. In other words, when individuals become over-invested their own historical suffering, they sometimes perpetuate their subordinate position as they refuse to give up their "wounded attachments". For Brown, this attachment to a wounded identity reproduces the same repressive order. Furthermore, Brown argues that identity politics relegitimizes capitalism. By seeking state protection and demanding the same privileges of dominant groups such as upward mobility, protection against violence and reward in proportion to effort, excluded groups align with bourgeois values. Thus, their understanding of justice "reinscribes a bourgeois ideal as its measure". (p.59).This quest for state protection ignores that the state itself is vehicle of domination and that "protection" could be a technique of this domination. For Brown, identity politics did not emerge from the demise of class politics, but can be partly explained by the demise of a critique of capitalism and the consolidation of bourgeois cultural and economic values. This conclusion reiterates the classical Marxist argument that identity politics cannot deliver any radical critique of structural economic inequalities in capitalist societies.

Identity politics may well be *la bête noire* of Marxists (Heyes, 2002), but its proponents have also taken issue with advocates of class politics. Feminist scholars in particular have objected to the Marxist tendency to privilege class as the only difference that matters. They reproach Marxists for their lack of engagement with feminist scholarship and their tendency to dismiss the struggle against any form cultural oppression as a distraction that obscures the material relationships embedded in capitalism. For example, Geographer Doreen Massey (1994) accuses Marxist scholar David Harvey of "sexist Marxism" as he –allegedly- assumes that the white heterosexual male is the principal agent of social change. Harvey (1989) calls for the "unity of the emancipatory struggle" which can be achieved by "recuperating such aspects of social organization as race, gender, religion, within the overall frame of historical materialist enquiry… and class politics" (p. 355). Massey, however, rejects this call to force all struggles under "the overall frame of ...class politics", claiming that unity requires the recognition of differences, individual experiences, and the power differentials among different groups. Accordingly, "wishing for coalitions of the oppressed without first analyzing the contradictions and power relations within those potential coalitions is to court political failure" (p.230).

Despite this seemingly unbridgeable gap, there have been attempts to reach a *modus vivendi* between the cultural and the material approaches to justice. For example, Nancy Fraser (1995,1996) suggests a framework that can transcend the antagonism between identity and class politics. Fraser rejects the "false antithesis" between recognition and distribution and suggests a framework where the two can be seen complementary forms of justice. In her dual perspective of social justice, Fraser acknowledges the existence of two ideal types of oppressed groups. On one end of the spectrum, there are social groups who need recognition as they suffer from cultural depreciation and exclusion such as gays and Lesbians. These groups are not exploited classes, thus, recognition can remedy the economic injustice they suffer as result of their low cultural status. On the other end of the spectrum, some groups, such as exploited working classes, need the politics

of redistribution as the injustice they suffer from derives from the economic structure. In this case, the cultural devaluation they face can be addressed with fair economic distribution. As for the middle of the spectrum, Fraser identifies "bivalent" groups who face both economic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition injustices. These categories such gender and race need both recognition and distribution. Therefore, Fraser rejects both economist and culturalist approaches to justice claiming that in capitalist societies "class hierarchy and status hierarchy do, not map isomorphically onto one another; rather, they interact causally. Likewise, neither political economy nor culture is reducible to the other; rather, they interpenetrate." (p.39). A dual perspective which takes into consideration both dimensions (recognition and distribution) is a necessary condition for the *parity of participation* which enables all members to participate on a par with one another as peers in all the major forms of social interaction. Fraser's framework has a close affinity with the theory of intersectionality which highlights the intertwining layers of oppression and the interplay between class and other identity markers such as gender and race. (Crenshaw, 1989).

Despite her commitment to reconciling recognition and distribution, Fraser (2000) warns against the dangers of a culturalist approach to justice in which the politics of recognition displace the claims for egalitarian distribution. This focus on identity is taking place against the backdrop of rising economic inequalities produced by neoliberal globalization, thus, identity politics is flourishing when class politics is needed the most. As paradoxical as this may seem, the displacement of class politics is totally congruent with what Fraser recently called "progressive neoliberalism" which combines the progressive rhetoric of recognition with market freedom. (Fraser, 2018). As Harvey (2005) notes, the progressive left endorsement of identity politics makes it complicit in the neoliberal assault on class.

> …progressives of all stripes, seem to have caved in to neoliberal thinking since it is one of the primary fictions of neoliberalism that class is a fictional category that exists only in the imagination of socialists and crypto-communists (p. 202).

As I explained above, the entrenchment of neoliberalism, the emergence of identity politics, and the hostility of post-moderns and theorists of reflexive modernity to class analysis were all factors that cast serious doubt over the relevance of this concept in late modernity. Class analysis, however, is currently witnessing a revival and seems to be regaining its central position in sociology, often in intersection with other identity markers such as race and gender. The global financial crisis of the late 2000s and the austerity measures that followed, have drawn attention to stark economic inequalities and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small elite. For many class analysts, the persistence of these inequalities legitimized again their interests in class and called into question the funerary orations on class written by the theorists of reflexive modernity (Block, 2014). Most importantly, the recovery of the concept owes greatly to the way sociologists have reinvented the concept by exploring the new forms that inequality has taken in the light of recent economic, political and cultural transformations. As Atkinson (2015) puts it,

> Class inequalities and differences have not declined or disappeared in the twenty-first century, in other words, only change their form- they may look very different from the past, but class structures, cultures, struggles and modes of domination persist as doggedly as ever (P.15).

I have discussed so far the main controversies surrounding class without clarifying what I mean by class. However, any discussion of class cannot be complete without providing a clear definition

of this concept. In the following section, I will explore different conceptualization of class in three dominant sociological traditions, namely in the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu.

2.3 Defining class

As opposed to other sociological concepts which remain confined to the boundaries of academia, the concept of class has never been exclusive to social sciences. As Savage (2016) notes, class straddles both academic and popular discourse. One does not need to be a scholar to talk about class: in everyday conversations, in the press, in movies and TV shows, representations of class are ubiquitous. People have a sense of the place they and others occupy in the world. They classify, make judgements and assign a certain worth to others and to themselves. In sum, they are able to perceive class differences and articulate a language to describe it. In the popular discourse, though, class is usually defined as gradational concept. When asked about class, most people evoke the image of rungs on ladder as they identify three large classes usually indexed by income (upper, middle, working). In addition to this popular representation of social hierarchy, class is used in social sciences to mean many different things. It sometimes refers to a notion of prestige or status which involves a certain rankings of lifestyles. In other cases, the concept describes the structures of material inequality stemming from unequal access to economic, and power resources (which can be ownership of capital, productive resources, skills or qualifications). Classes can also be understood as actual or potential social or political actors that can transform society (Crompton, 2008). This ambiguity makes it difficult to find a single definition which encompasses all the aspects of this multifaceted concept. For some, class is a purely economic phenomenon; for others, class also includes a cultural dimension. There are indeed different sociological perspectives on class which gave birth to different research agendas and different class schemes. These competing research agendas are theoretically grounded in three foundational sociological traditions laid out by Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Pierre Bourdieu. In the following section, I will discuss the conceptualization of class in these three dominant sociological traditions.

2.3.1 Marxism: class as exploitation

Writing as a witness of the rapid industrialization in the 19th century and the dreadful life conditions of the British working class, Karl Marx developed a class theory based on his erudite analysis of the capitalist mode of production. While Marx never provided an explicit definition of class, class analysis remains a central theme in his books, essays and letters. Class struggle, as Marx and Engels state in the first chapter of the Communist Manifesto (1848) is the force that shapes human history leading either to the triumph of the oppressed revolutionaries or to their defeat at the hands of their oppressors:

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.
>
> Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

Marx scattered writing on class can be pieced together in order to allow an understanding of the fundamental tenets of his theory. In the Marxian view, class relationships are embedded in production relationships. The two antagonistic classes in capitalist societies are the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production and distribution, and the proletariat who sell their labor power to the bourgeoisie in order to survive. The relationship between these two classes and is defined by exploitation, a concept he explains in his theory of value. For Marx, human labor creates a "surplus value", which is the difference between what the workers earn and the profits that capitalists make when they sell commodities in the markets. Capitalist retain this surplus value to buy/ reinvest more labor power and means of production. Accordingly, there is a conflict of interest between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie who appropriate the fruits of workers' labor. This conflict of interest between these two major classes would inevitably lead to historical change. Thus, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) Marx predicted that the proletariat will eventually move from a *class in itself* (a group of people who live under the conditions of existence) to a class *for itself* (a class fully aware of its shared situation and interests). Once the proletariat develop this subjective class consciousness, they would eventually overthrow the capitalist order, seize the state and abolish private property.

Another interpretation of class can be found in In the *18 Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, an essay Marx published in 1852 to discuss the coup d'état undertaken by Louis-napoleon- Bonaparte in 1851. In this essay, Marx provides a further elaboration of all the basic tenets of historical materialism-the theory of the class struggle and proletarian revolution, the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx explains how different relationships to the mode of production generate different material conditions of existence that in turn, produce different cultures and lifestyles, creating thereby class conflict:

> Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. (p.62)

In the same essay, Marx acknowledges the existence of other classes such as the middle class, the landed aristocracy, the financiers, the petty bourgeoisie, the lumpen proletariat. However, he believed that those were only transitional classes as the dynamics of capitalism would eventually divide society into two major classes.

Accordingly, these different material life conditions emanating from the different relationships to the means of production, constitute for Marx the economic base which conditions the legal and the political superstructure of society. In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* published in 1859, he writes:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The total sum of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of these relationships, the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which corresponds definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production conditions the social political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

For Marx, the economic base is the organization of production which generates particular social relationships and modes of interaction between individuals. The state is the legal and political superstructure which he describes as "the executive committee of the bourgeoisie" in charge of maintaining the status-quo. Thus, for capitalism to reproduce itself, the bourgeoisie seeks to diffuse among workers an ideology that justifies the unequal social order. The erroneous belief that capitalism is a fair system that works for the best interest of workers, is what Engels (1893) calls "false consciousness". Elsewhere, in *The German ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels highlight the ability of dominant classes to impose their worldview on dominated classes:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

The Marxist class model came under fire from different political and academic disciplines. In particular, Marxism was accused of historical determinism that leaves little room for individual agency. Moreover, there were objections against the base/superstructure model where economic relationships determine political, social and cultural phenomena. The Marxist theory was also criticized for its economic reductionism, for it emphasizes the primacy of class as the ultimate source of social division (Honneth, 2017). Thus, other elements of social differentiation seem to bear no influence on the Marxist view of class structure and stratification. This critique, however, was rejected by Marxists who argue for the need of a more nuanced reading of Marx and Engels' legacy. In a letter he wrote in 1890, Engels denies accusations of economic determinism:

> According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. (emphasis mine)

Finally, one of the greatest challenges to the Marxian dualistic view of class struggle is its applicability in the light of structural economic transformations of the post-industrial era. When Marx developed his theory of class struggle in the 19th century, most of the workers were in manufacturing sector. Major economic developments, however, have led to changes in the occupational structures of industrial societies as most of the population is employed now in the expanding service sector. Thus, the middle class posed a serious challenge to Marxist class analysis. Analysts who wished to remaining faithful to the Marxist model meant that the members of the middle class should belong either to the working class or to the exploiting bourgeoisie. The response to this challenge came from Marxist sociologists who attempted to update and refine the Marxist class model in the light of recent economic changes. For example, neo-Marxist sociologist Eric Olin Wright tried to accommodate the middle class in his class scheme arguing the members of this class occupy contradictory class locations (Wright, 2000).

In sum, the Marxist class theory which grounds the concept of class in the exploitative relations of production has provided an elaborate analysis of material inequalities in capitalism. Marxism, however, is not the only school of thought which engaged in such an enterprise. Class analysis owes greatly to the ideas of German sociologist Max Weber, who challenged the Marxian view on class, but also confirmed some of its basic tenets, as we shall see next.

2.3.2 Class as life chances

A competing perspective on class derives from the work of the German legal theorist and sociologist Max Weber, who diverged from the Marxian views on several levels. Weber's fragmentary and brief writings on class in his masterwork *Economy and Society* (1922/1978) provided a more systematic definition of class and a different approach to social stratification. As opposed to Marx, a committed revolutionary who considered class analysis as a means of social change, Weber had no prior ideological commitment that guided his sociological analysis. He advocated a "value free" social science (Crompton, 2008) and was often described as a "methodological individualist". In other words, he believed that subjective individual motivation explains social phenomena change rather than class or group dynamics. This of course sets him apart from Marx who believed that history was shaped by class struggle. From the Weberian perspective, social classes are not necessarily agents of historical change, for history is shaped by many different factors that cannot be reduced to a material base. Whether classes play a role in historical change for him was contingent rather than inevitable. For Weber, "classes are not communities, they merely represent, possible frequent bases of communal actions". Thus, he denies the inevitability of struggles and revolutions arguing that individuals in the same class situation may or may not develop class consciousness or pursue collective action. Whether or not members of a class display class consciousness depends on certain contingent factors as it is "linked to general cultural conditions ... and especially linked to the transparency of the connections between the causes and the consequences of the class situation" (Weber, 1978, p. 928-32). Being in the same class situation then does not automatically give rise to class consciousness or class action, which only occur when individuals can recognize the causal link between their life conditions and the advantages or disadvantages related to these conditions.

While Marx explains class in terms of exploitation embedded in production relations, Weber grounds his definition of class in market relations which condition the life chances of individuals.

> We may speak of class when (1) a number of people have in common a certain specific causal component of their life chances. In so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income and (3) is represented under the components of commodities or labor markets. This is "class situation".
>
> It is the most elemental economic fact that the way in which the disposition over material property is distributed among a plurality of people, meeting competitively in the market for the purpose of exchange, in itself creates specific life chances…But always this is the generic connotation of the concept of class: that kind of chance in the market is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual's fate. "Class situation" is, in that sense, ultimately "market situation" (p.927-228).

Life chances are the chances that individuals have for acquiring economic or cultural goods in a certain society, or the access they have to these scarce and valued resources. A class for Weber is a collection of individuals who share what he calls a similar "class situation" and have as a result similar rates and causes of "life chances". Accordingly, classes are defined by different rates and causes of life chances and these life chances are determined by an individual's "market situation", which means their ability to secure income through the resources or the goods they can bring to the market. Thus, the market distributes life chances according to the assets that individuals bring to it. Weber recognized that these resources can have different forms such as property, skills and

knowledge. Most importantly, it is the market that determines the value of these assets, hence, class situation is identified as market situation. Therefore, the different resources that individuals possess shape the opportunities they have. Those who own means of production have different life chances from those who own credentials or unskilled labor power. (Wright, 1996).

As for class structure, Weber identified four major social classes under capitalism claiming that social mobility among these main social groupings was difficult and improbable, but "easy and typical" within the same group. The first distinction is between those who own property or the means of production, and those who do not, but both groups are 'further differentiated ... according to the kind of property ... and the kind of services that can be offered in the market' (Weber 1978, p.928). These four classes are the 'dominant entrepreneurial and propertied groups'; the petty bourgeoisie; workers with formal credentials (the middle class) and unskilled workers who only own their labor power (the working class).

In another break from Marx, Weber contends that class is not the only form of social division, or the only source of social differentiation. He introduced a cultural dimension to social stratification through the notion of "status" associated with honor or social esteem. This is a different resource which confers on certain individuals social power and prestige. Status groups are characterized by common lifestyles and cultural practices, and a degree of social closure. Class and status can interact and even merge, but these two forms of inequality have their own dynamics; being high in status does not guarantee a dominant class situation, and being economically privileged does not necessarily imply a high social status.

Despite these differences between Marx and Weber, many have argued that the Marxist and the Weberian perspectives converge in several ways. As Eric Olin Wright (1996) notes, both provided a relational definition of class (a class location is defined by virtue of its relationship to other class location). Moreover, both traditions define class as a relationship between people and economically relevant assets or resources. Both "exploitation" and "life chances" refer to inequalities in material life conditions that are generated by differential access to various resources. Accordingly, both concepts refer to the unequal distribution of these resources. Thus "relation to the means of production" and "market capacities" point to the same empirical phenomena. Wright even suggests the possibility of linking the analysis of market (exchange) relations with production relations reconciling thereby Marxian and Weberian approaches to class.

As was mentioned earlier, the primacy of class over other sources of social differentiation remains, theoretically at least, a serious point of contention between Marxists and Weberians. One has to remember, however, that many Marxist thinkers have shown considerable awareness of the limitations of their theory. For some, engaging in Marxist class analysis does not presuppose the primacy of class as the ultimate source of social differentiation. As Wright (1996) notes, abandoning the primacy of class does not necessarily undermine class analysis:

> For class analysis to constitute a research program worth pursuing, it is sufficient that it identify causal mechanisms; it is not necessary that class be the most important or fundamental determinant of social phenomena. (p.700)

Elsewhere, Marxist thinker David Harvey (2005) acknowledges the complexity of class identities. While he calls for resisting the class power of the neoliberal economic elite, he admits that his call "does it necessarily mean that there is some simple conception of class to which we can appeal as the primary (let alone exclusive) agent of historical transformation", therefore,

> To point to the necessity and the inevitability of class struggle is not to say that the way class is constituted is determined or even determinable in advance. Popular as well as elite class movements make themselves, though never under conditions of their own choosing. And those conditions are full of the complexities that arise out of race, gender, and ethnic distinctions that are closely interwoven with class identities (p.202).

Finally, the Marxian and Weberian approaches to class have long served as the theoretical basis for several schemes aiming at measuring class. These class schemes attempted to divide the population into social classes that correspond to the classifications suggested by Marx and Weber. The most influential relational class schemes grounded in these two traditions were devised by neo-Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright's and neo-Weberian sociologist John Goldthorpe, who located class structure in the employment structure and used the technique of large sample surveys. In his attempt to update Marxism without sacrificing the Marxist dual model, Wright suggested a new way of thinking about the problematic middle class. However, his innovative idea of middle class members who occupy "contradictory class locations" was considered a departure from classical Marxism. Moreover, his reliance on skill and expertise to identify social groupings in his second revised scheme, along with his emphasis on authority and educational credentials gave his analysis and undeniable Weberian character, which attracted criticism from orthodox Marxists. (Atkinson, 2015). Meanwhile, another influential class scheme was devised by Goldthorpe, whose name is often associated with the Nuffield program of research into social mobility in the UK. Goldthorpe (1982) constructed his scheme via the aggregation of occupational categories into distinct classes. These occupations were clustered together based on "market situation" and their 'work situation" two concepts borrowed from the British conflict theorist David Lockwood. While "market situation" meant for him source and level of income economic security and chance of economic advancement, work situation referred to the level of authority and control in the workplace. In his second revised scheme, Goldthorpe identified different classes based on two types of employment relationships, labor contract and service relationships. (Crompton, 2008)

Both Wright and Goldthorpe were criticized for drifting away from their respective theoretical foundations, but responded differently to criticism. While Goldthorpe denied his allegiance to the Weberian theory arguing that his class scheme was only a research instrument, Wright (2000) adopted a more pragmatic stance suggesting the possibility of reconciling the Weberian and Marxist agendas:

> There is no metatheoretical rule of sociology which says that every sociologist must choose between these two ways of grounding class analysis. It certainly might be possible to construct an eclectic hybrid between Marxist and Weberian class analysis. (2000, p.33)

These two class analysis agendas dominated the sociological scene for decades. However, around the turn of the millennium, many sociologists felt the need to put forward a different approach to studying class. One major critique addressed to these agendas was that these statistical schemes reduced class to a technical debate about finding the best instrument and using the most adequate variables (Atkinson, 2015).This focus on the technical and quantitative aspect alienated scholars from other disciplines who were willing to engage with the concept of class (Bradly & Hebson, 1999). Therefore, many acknowledged the need for qualitative and ethnographic investigation that can give researchers insight into class as a lived experience. Thus, the dissatisfaction with the limitations of statistical class schemes paved the way for a new perspective which some scholars

called "cultural class analysis" (savage, 2003). This research trend was mainly inspired by the class theory of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to which I turn in the next section.

2.3.3 Class as misrecognition

Described sometimes as the most prominent sociologist of our time, Pierre Bourdieu is indisputably a canonical figure in class theory. Despite the "esoteric" character of his writings (Jenkins, 1992), his conceptualization of class has imbued much of the research on class inequalities around the world. Bourdieu's class theory is often considered an attempt to transcend the objectivist/ subjectivist divide bridging the gap between individual agency and social structure, and reconciling economistic and culturalist approaches to social stratification. For Bourdieu, power is not only about the possession of material resources, but also derives from cultural and social resources. His theory, as Weininger (2005, p.119) rightly notes, does not have a single "father figure" for his relationship to canons was rather pragmatic (Jenkins, 1992). In *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu explains his relationship to different sociological traditions:

> …one may-and should use Weber against Weber to go beyond Weber. In the same way, one should follow Marx's advice when he said "I am not a Marxist, and be an anti-Marxist Marxist, one may think with Weber or Durkheim, or both, against Marx to go beyond Marx and sometimes, to do what Marx could have done, in his own logic. Each thinker offers the means to transcend the limitations of the other the logic of practice (p. 284)

The basic proposition in Bourdieu' class theory is that all agents in a particular society occupy an objective position within a social space depending on the combination of capitals they possess. Bourdieu (1984) defines capital "the set of actually usable resources and powers" (p.114). He identified different forms of capital such as economic capital, which involves various kinds of economic resources, social capital (connections, networks, and group membership) and cultural capital. This last type of capital, usually inculcated through family and school socialization involves a variety of cultural resources. Most importantly, it involves a form of symbolic mastery or a capacity of abstract thinking, (for example, recognizing the difference between two schools of painting). Finally, symbolic capital is the form that the previously mentioned types of capital take when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. Thus, the structure of the social space is shaped by the distribution of different forms of capital among agents. (Atkinson, 2015). As Bourdieu (1987) explains:

> The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the 'powers or forms of capital which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this universe is the site. It follows that the structure of this space is given by the distribution of the various forms of capital, that is, by the distribution of the properties which are active within the universe under study-those properties capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder. (p.3-4)

For Bourdieu, agents are distributed in the social space according to three dimensions. The first is the global volume of capital they possess, the second is the composition of their capital, and the third dimension is the evolution in time of the volume and composition of their capital, in other words, their trajectory in social space depending on whether the agents experienced change or

stability over time in the volume and composition of their capital. Various combinations of capital constitute a habitus- a set of acquired patterns of thought, behaviours or tastes, or a system of dispositions and competences shared by all individuals living in similar life conditions. This habitus is also be embodied, hence the Bourdieusian notion of "body hexis", the physically embodied habitus, or the manner, and style in which actors "carry themselves" in the world. These dispositions empower the agents to struggle for positions different social fields. A field is a social arena within which agents struggle and use certain strategies to access specific resources, maintain or improve their position in relation to the defining capital of the field. (Crossly, 2008).

For Bourdieu, class is a group of social agents who occupy neighboring positions in his three dimensional social space and share the same habitus produced by the similar life conditions. Bourdieu (1987) suggests the following definition of class:

> …….constructed classes can be characterized in a certain way as sets of agents who, by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in social space (that is, in the distribution of powers), are subject to similar conditions of existence and conditioning factors and, as a result, are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices. (P.6)

In Bourdieu's social space, the closer the individual agents are, the greater their probable number of common properties, and conversely, the farther they are from each other, the fewer properties they will have in common. To be more precise, the agents who occupy neighboring positions in this space are placed in similar conditions and are therefore subject to similar conditioning factors: consequently, they are likely to have similar dispositions and interests, in other words, a similar habitus generating the same practices, tastes and lifestyles, and a sense of place in the world, which is their class habitus. Thus, habitus can explain the differences in tastes and lifestyles between those who occupy distant positions in the social space. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu demonstrates the homology between social positions and tastes and lifestyles. Bourdieu argues that people's tastes are mediated by their position within the class structure, which is defined by the volume of capital and its "composition" of capitals they possess. Unburdened by any economic constraints, dominant classes have the privilege to pursue intellectual and aesthetic concerns. In contrast, the life conditions of dominated classes dispose them to make the "choice of the necessary" (Atkinson, 2015). These different tastes are organized in line with a "highbrow/lowbrow" opposition. Consequently, the hierarchical "status" of a lifestyle depends on its proximity to or distance from the "legitimate culture", which refers to cultural elements universally recognized as worthy. Thus, the power of the dominant does not only stem only from their economic resources, but also from their cultural domination which Bourdieu calls "symbolic violence". This form of violence occurs when dominated classes recognize (or misrecognize) the cultural practices of dominant classes as worthy and legitimate while perceiving their own as common, vulgar and unworthy. Misrecognition is defined by Bourdieu (1987) as "the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder "(Bourdieu &Passeron, 1977, p. xiii). Despite the cultural dominance of those who occupy the upper positions in the social space, Bourdieu (1979, 1987) asserts that there is a perpetual struggle over what should be considered as worthy and legitimate, thus the symbolic struggle over value is an important aspect of class conflict.

Finally, like many other critics, Bourdieu takes issue with the economic reductionism of Marx. For Bourdieu, the Marxist theory of class has reduced the social world to the economic field by

grounding social class solely within the relations of economic production, thereby ignoring relations of cultural production and forms of social antagonism that cannot be reduced to the opposition between the owners and non-owners of the means of economic production. In addition, Bourdieu adopts a Weberian stance rejecting the idea that class consciousness is an integral part of class. While it is true that classes are formed by individuals who occupy the same positions in the social space, live in the same conditions, and have the same predispositions, this does not mean that these individuals will inevitably develop class consciousness and pursue their common interests. The social groups he identifies in his work, are only "classes on paper". In another break with Marx, Bourdieu (1987) acknowledges the importance of other forms of social differentiation that compete with class:

> Contrary to what Marxist theory assumes, the movement from probability to reality, from theoretical class to practical class, is never given: even though they are supported by the "sense of one's place" and by the affinity of habitus, the principles of vision and division of the social world at work in the construction of theoretical classes have to compete, in reality, with other principles, ethnic, racial or national, and more concretely still, with principles imposed by the ordinary experience of occupational, communal and local divisions and rivalries (p.7).

The class model suggested by Bourdieu represented a historical reconciliation between economic and cultural approaches to class and provided a much needed insight into the processes of social stratification. As I will explain in chapter 2, his conceptual toolkit has immensely helped educational researchers to understand the role of education in reproducing an unequal social order. However, his theory of social practice has been contested on several levels. First, many have argued that Bourdieu's theory of social practice is too deterministic as it leaves no room for change. For example, Bourdieu explains in *The logic of practice* (1990) how the habitus perpetuates its dispositions:

> ….in reality, the dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions… generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to its demands. The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of intermediate submission to order that inclines agents to make virtue of necessity, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable" (p.53).

This idea of a habitus that keep reproducing itself maintaining a kind of status quo, is quite pessimistic as social agents seem to be imprisoned in their own habitus. In the Bourdieusian logic, social structure produces the habitus and the habitus generates practices which in turn reproduce social structure, so history repeats itself. This understanding of the habitus does not account for the possibility of internal change (Jenkins, 1992). Bourdieu responded to these criticisms denying accusations of determinism and fatalism. For example, in an interview with French historian Roger Chatier in 1988, Bourdieu states

> The habitus is not a destiny…it's an *open* system of dispositions which will always be subjected to experiences, and thereby *transformed* by these experiences. Having said that, let me correct immediately: there is a *probability* inscribed in the social destiny associated with a certain social condition that experiences would confirm the Habitus, in other words, that people will have experiences conforming to those that formed their habitus. (my translation/emphasis mine).

In addition, many critics have contested the Bourdieusian claim that agents have no awareness of what motivates their actions. Thus, even when agents believe that they act by formulating goals and making decisions, Bourdieu asserts that this is only an illusion as the true explanation of their behavior is to be found in their habitus (Jenkins, 1992). Thus, Bourdieu (1977) denies social agents any form of reflexivity when he claims that

> Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning. Because his actions and works are the product of a modus operandi of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery, they contain an "objective intention," as the Scholastics put it, which always outruns his conscious intentions … It is because subjects, strictly speaking, do not know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know (p.79).

Elsewhere, Bourdieu (1990) argues that the practices of agents "have as their principle not a set of conscious, constant rules, but practical schemes, opaque to their possessors, varying according to the logic of the situation" (P.12).

Finally, French sociologist Bernard Lahire challenges Bourdieu's conceptualization of the habitus as the "generative and unifying" principle of practices and behavior, arguing that this concept lacks empirical grounding. Based on the results of his research on cultural practices in France, Lahire (2003) refutes the idea of a coherent system of dispositions generating practice, highlighting the incongruity between beliefs and practices. Individuals, Lahire argues, do not necessarily do things out of passion, but sometimes out of necessity or as a routine. Dispositions can be weak or strong; they can even decline if they are not actualized under certain conditions. They can also be inhibited or deactivated depending on the social context. Thus, he portrays the individual as "a complex product of various socialization processes". In other words, family, school and work are different contexts of socialization that can give individuals different or even contradictory dispositions. Lahire's research agenda is an invitation to engage with "internal plurality" of social agents:

> the coherence and homogeneity which sociologists attribute to individual dispositions at the level of the group or of institutions will then be replaced by a more complex visions of the individual as being less unified and as the bearer of heterogeneous habits, schemes or dispositions which may be contrary or even contradictory to one another" (p. 344).

The claim that individual have incoherent dispositions is grounded in Lahire's empirical research on cultural practices in France. He notes that agents across social classes have "dissonant or heterogeneous cultural practices" as the same individual consumes a mix of low brow and high cultural products. Thus, he concludes that the boundary between cultural legitimacy (''high culture'') and cultural illegitimacy (''popular culture'', ''simple entertainment'') does not only separate different social classes , but also divides up the different cultural practices and preferences of individuals, across all classes of society. He also found that individuals with coherent cultural profiles were statistically rare. Most importantly, Lahire (2008) emphasizes the necessity to investigate the relation that agents have to their cultural practices. The fact that two individuals listen to the same kind of music does not mean that they have the same relationship to it as they might have different motivations that range from passionate to cynical. These are questions that statistical analysis cannot answer, hence the need for qualitative data:

> In the field of culture, very different relations are created between cultural products, practices and individuals: one may know more or less well, one may practice or consume

> more or less intensely, one may like more or less strongly and, to make more complex a field which is anything but simple, one can practice through simple habit but without intense passion, etc.
>
> Similarly, we do not know the nature of the relation(s) – variable by situation – that respondents have with their practices which are culturally the least legitimate, when they have such relations. Are they ashamed, in certain instances (but not necessarily in all) of some of their practices? Or, on the contrary, do they live these same practices in a relaxed fashion and without complexes? Do they take ironic distance in relation to these practices or do they evoke ‘‘extenuating circumstances’’ which led them – slightly despite themselves – to do what they did (when they were ‘‘not really themselves’’) (p. 170).

Finally, although sociologists of late modernity have argued that the high-brow/low-brow distinction identified by Bourdieu is no longer valid, cultural class analysts influenced by Bourdieu assert that class differences in cultural practices did not dissipate, but simply changed their form. For Bourdieusian researchers, what distinguishes dominant social classes today is precisely their cultural omnivorousness, in other words, their ability to consume different genres across presumed class lines. Many case studies have shown that educated middle classes were more likely to have eclectic repertoires, and that this eclecticism- which requires certain skills and cultural knowledge- has become itself a new form of distinction. (Hazir & Warde, 2015)

2.4 Conclusion

Class has always been a contested concept in sociology. In academic and popular discourse, class encompasses a variety of meanings. For some, class is a purely economic category; others emphasize the cultural dimension of the concept. Different sociological traditions proposed various conceptualizations of class and gave birth to different research agendas. Class is also the center of an ongoing dispute. While post-moderns deny the relevance of class in late modernity, class apologists argue that class inequality is an enduring feature of capitalist societies. In particular, class theories grounded in the Marxian, Weberian and Bourdieusian traditions have provided educational researchers with the analytical tools to examine the role of education in reproducing an unequal social order. This role will be the focus of the following chapter where I review foundational research on social reproduction in education.

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Chapter 3

Social Reproduction in Education

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored sociological approaches to class in the Marxist, Weberian and Bourdieusian traditions. Although class is conceptualized differently in these three schools of thought, there is a broad agreement that class is a relationship between people and a variety of assets or resources that condition their mode of existence, their opportunities in life and thereby the position they occupy in the class structure. These class positions are maintained or enhanced over time through a variety of social practices that ensure the transmission of family resources to the next generation. For dominant social groups, monopolizing valuable resources and passing them to their children is crucial to maintain their privilege and confine the dominated to their lower position. These social processes by which individuals occupy the same class positions as their parents are referred to as "social reproduction", a concept first used by Marx (1992 [1886]) to designate how the capitalist mode of production reproduces the conditions of its existence. The term has been extended later by class sociologists to encompass the social practices that contribute to the perpetuation of an unequal social order. In this sense, social reproduction does not only refer to the practices and strategies used by privileged classes to reproduce their privilege, but also to the problematic social practices of disadvantaged classes who inadvertently reproduce their own inferior position. Among these reproductive strategies, education appears as a fundamental mechanism through which inequalities are reproduced and entrenched over the generations. Despite the expansion of the education system around the world and the official meritocratic discourse around education, social origin remains decisive in shaping students' educational performance and ultimate attainment. A wealth of research supports the fact that middle-class students out-perform their working-class peers, and that even with similar academic achievement, working-class students are less likely to gain higher qualification than their middle-class peers. In order to explain the persistence of educational inequalities, educational research has scrutinized the processes through which schooling perpetuates social inequality favoring and rewarding those endowed with more economic, social and cultural assets. This objective reality, however, lends itself to different sociological interpretations. In fact, there are competing accounts of how schooling mediates social inequality. The aim of this chapter is to review foundational research on social reproduction in education and discuss new reproduction strategies in the light of recent changes in both education and labor markets.

3.2 Marxist approach: the school as an ideological state apparatus

Marxist accounts of social reproduction are largely inspired by French thinker Louis Althusser's foundational essay "Ideology and ideological state apparatus: notes towards an investigation" (1971). Drawing on the Marxist concept of social reproduction, Althusser maintains that the reproduction of the conditions and the relations production (exploitation) is accomplished through two types of state apparatuses. First, there are repressive state apparatuses such as the army and police, which function primarily by force, and second, there are ideological state apparatuses of various types (family, political, religious, cultural, communication) that ensure the subjugation of the exploited by diffusing the capitalist ideology of the exploiters:

> I shall say that the reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words' (p.89)

In particular, Althusser points the finger at the education system which plays a dominant role in reproducing the capitalism. Thus, far from being a neutral institution, the school is a "silent" state apparatus which spreads the ruling bourgeois ideology channeling students to different social trajectories and outcomes according to their class position. By giving each social fractions different forms of knowledge, the school works as a social selection machine that reproduces the same relationships of production. In this process of social selection, the school

> …drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology (French, arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected 'into production': these are the workers or small peasants. Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on: and, for better or worse, it goes somewhat further, until it falls by the wayside and fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white-collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last portion reaches the summit, either to fall into intellectual semi-employment, or to provide, as well as the 'intellectuals of the collective laborers, the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers), the agents of repression (soldiers, policemen, politicians, administrators, etc.) and the professional ideologists (priests of all sorts, most of whom are convinced 'laymen') (p.104-105).

Although Althusser does not provide any description of the specific school practices that contribute to social reproduction, his essay was a precursor to other Marxists critiques of schooling. A few years after the publication of "Ideology and ideological state apparatus", Bowles and Gintis (1976) developed their own account of educational inequalities in the USA in *Schooling in capitalist America.* This book can be read as a reiteration of Althusser's central claim about the education system. For Bowls and Gintis, schools are ideological apparatuses that play a central role in social reproduction by preparing students from different class positions to occupy the same places in the economy as their parents.They identify a correspondence between the social organization and relationships of the school and the workplace claiming that school hierarchies mirror the hierarchical relations of work and production. Thus, schools replicate the structure of corporations and prepare people for adult work rules, by socializing them to comply with the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation and rewarding docile behaviour. As Althusser has pointed before, schools ration different kinds of knowledge and discipline for those destined to working class occupations, (the practical know-how), while inculcating a more abstract, synthetic and analytic knowledge for those destined for middle-class professions. Accordingly, schools have a "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 1979) that transmits different dispositions, skills to students from different class positions. This hidden curriculum reproduces the same unequal social order in which the exploiters and the exploited remain in their same social positions (Collins, 2009).

Bowles and Gintis Correspondance theory attracted much criticism even from fellow Marxists due to its lack of empirical grounding. Critics like Giroux (19843) maintained that the theory remains unverified as Bowls and Gintis did not conduct ethnographic research in American classrooms to

supports their theory. Nonetheless, their central Althusserian claim that schools inculcate different kinds of knowledge to different social groups based on their social class or their ethnicity holds a fair amount of credibility based on research conducted by Anyon (1997), Carnoy and Levin (1985) and Oakes (1985). Other critics pointed out the deterministic character of the theory which leaves no room for agency and change, arguing that Bowles and Gintis overlook the possibility of resistance by representing students as passive agents who simply accept the ruling ideology. For example, Holborow (2012a) notes that education in capitalist societies paradoxically produces dissident voices, independent thinkers, and critics of the system. In this view, education is a site of contestation, resistance and struggle rather than blind submissiveness.

Resistance to school culture was to be explored by British sociologist Paul Willis (1977) who used a bottom-up approach to social reproduction by conducting ethnographic research into group of working class high school students in an industrial town in the north of England. At a time where structuralism and grand theory were dominant, Willis offered a discussion of social reproduction based on the analysis of everyday life in the classroom, taking into account the subjective discourses and attitudes of the dominated (Laurens & Mischi, 2018). Willis found that the working class "lads" may be dominated but they are not passive, for they are actively complicit in the reproduction of their social position. The culture of resistance that Willis describes in his book, has a close affinity with some aspects of the shop floor culture that these boys were exposed to in their working-class community. For example, the lads denigrated desk positions as a form of feminized mental labor and associated manual labor with liberation and manhood. Paradoxically, their resistance to the formal knowledge and skills that the school offered, reproduced their subordinate position at the bottom of the social ladder. As Collins (2009) puts it, Willis study is one the "sophisticated accounts of how the winners lose" (p.36).

Willis ethnographic approach was groundbreaking in the sense that it combined the theory of social reproduction with the analysis day of day practices and interactions and giving a valuable insight into the atttitudes of the lads and their ways of thinking. The study, however, was criticized, first, due to its small sample (twelve boys), and second because it does not explain why some working class students conformed to school culture. Other critics questioned the Marxist affiliation of the study arguing that the relationship of between Willis' analysis and the Marxist theory remains unclear (Atkinson, 2015). Finally, many have noted that the economic context of the study has become irrelevant with the decline of manufacturing in the West and the alleged dissipation of working class cultures (Pakulski &Waters, 1996). Despite any flaws, Willis provided a valuable insight into the "dialectics of hegemony and resistance" (Mumby, 1997). Marxism, however, was not the only school of thought that scrutinized the role of the education system in social reproduction. In the following section, I will discuss another approach to social reproduction which explores the relationship between class positions and language use, demonstrating how different forms of cultural and linguistic socialization can mediate educational inequalities.

3.3 Linguistic reproduction

In "Class, codes and control" (1971), British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein examines the role of language in social reproduction and the effect of family linguistic practices on the children's school

performance. Bernstein main argument rests on the idea that there is a direct relationship between a certain class position, in other words, the individual's relation to the means of production, and particular ways of using language. Comparing the language practices of working-class and middle-class families, Bernstein identifies distinct forms of verbal communication that have a direct effect on children's linguistic and cognitive abilities. While Bernstein associates middle class families with an "elaborated" code congruent with the school culture, he notes that working class families socialize their children into a "restricted" code which alienates them from the school cultural practices and expectations. These different codes that favor or hinder the children success are grounded in the different life conditions that working and middle-class children are exposed to. For example, working-class families that he labels as "position-oriented", live in smaller dwellings where children have less space and privacy, and are exposed to a more authoritarian parenting style. In contrast, in "person-oriented" middle class families where children have more personal space and autonomy, Bernstein observed that parents adopted a more liberal parenting where interactions were based on dialogue rather than prescribed family roles. This form of parent-child interaction enables children to develop abstract thinking and fosters their communication skills. Since the whole process of education is mediated by language, the elaborated code of middle-class children favors their school success, while working class children suffer the mismatch between their families' linguistic socialization and the school culture.

Benrstein's characterization of the working-class linguistic culture as a "restricted code" that hinders school success gave rise to a swirl of controversies around working class cultures and literacy. Although he vehemently objected to what he saw as misinterpretations of his theory (Bolander & Watts, 2009), he was accused of promoting "a deficit view" of the working class. For example, American sociolinguist William Labov (1970) saw in his theory a form of class prejudice that denigrated the "linguistic deficit" of the working class. To make things worse, Bernstein's ideas were appropriated in the early 1960s by a group of American educational psychologists, who used his work as the 'proof' of the intellectual cultural and linguistic deprivation of African American children (Jensen, 1968). Subsequently, anthropologists and other critics of the deficit model argued that minorities underperformed in school not because of their language, but because they are treated as inferiors in the education system. (Leacock 1969, 1971; Rist 1970). Beyond the deficit controversy, another critique came from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) who reproaches Bernstein for neglecting the ideological dimension of language use and the power relations among the social groups he researched. Arguing that dominant classes impose their own language practices as legitimate, Bourdieu accuses Bernstein of "fetishizing" the middle-class elaborate code, overlooking the fact the elaborate code is valued because of its association with dominant classes and not because of any intrinsic superiority (Bourdieu, 1991). Bernstein (1971), however, was not unaware of the ideological implications of his theory. In an attempt to ward off accusations of class prejudice, he explains his view that the value of different language codes is socially constructed:

> Clearly one code is not better than the other, each possesses its own aesthethic, its own possibilities. *Society, however, may place different values* on the order of experience elicited, maintained and progressively strengthened through the different coding systems. (P.106) (emphasis mine)

Similarly, a year before the publication of "Class, code and control", Bernstein (1970) explicitly rejected the linguistic deprivation thesis emphasizing that the restricted code is not deficient per se, but only because of its incongruence with educational discourses. This stance brought him closer to the "difference view" held by Labov:

> My own view has always been that code restriction where it exists does not constitute linguistic or cultural deprivation; for there is a delicacy and variety in cultural and imaginative forms. I can understand, however, that from a specific psychological viewpoint code restrictions may be equated with educational deficit. That there is an educational issue I do not deny, but that is why we have schools. The schools' central task as I see it is to offer all children the possibility of exploring the boundaries of man's consciousness in such a way that the boundaries are not experienced as a prison, but as a tension between the known and the possible (p. 117)

It is worth noting here that the "deficit debate" triggered by Bernstein's theory in the USA greatly influenced American educational research in the following two decades. The 1980's and 1990's witnessed a series of studies that examined teacher-student and student-student interaction to understand the disadvantages faced by working-class African American students in standard classroom literacy lessons (Collins 1999; Gee 1996). This line of research shifted the blame for poor performance of African American children onto the school cultural hierarchies that devalued/stigmatized the African American vernacular.

Despite all the controversies surrounding the code theory, Bernstein's work laid a solid foundation for subsequent research on the role of language practices in social reproduction. A leading contribution to this tradition is Shirly Brice Heath's "Ways With Words" (1983) which explores the effect cultural environment of children on their language development and school performance. To this end, Heath analyzes three different communities in the Carolina Piedmont: a mixed race middle-class cohort of "Townspeople"; a black working-class neighborhood of "Trackton"; and a white working-class neighborhood of "Roadville." As Teachers complained about the difficulty of interacting with Trackton children, Heath was particularly interested in comparing the cultural and linguistic practices in these three communities with language expectations in formal educational settings. Through interviews and observations, Heath identifies striking differences in parent-child interactions, language practices, and cultural values that have a direct impact on children's school performance. Her findings suggested that Trackton children were less prepared to engage with the school values or display expected behaviour. In contrast, Heath notes a congruence between family modes of socialization in Roadville and the school culture. As for the established middle-class cohort, Heath maintains their children possessed upon their entrance to school, an adequate linguistic and cultural capital, in other words, they have already acquired at home the skills that favor school success and embraced the values that schools transmit. Thus, *Ways with Words* reiterates the Bernsteinian claim that congruence or the disjunction between family linguistic and cultural practices on one hand, and educational discourses on the other hand, plays a decisive factor in school success. For Heath, the cultural distance between home and school resulted in a miscommunication between the working-class children and their teachers. As the latter were not familiar with interactional norms of the Trackton community, they often judged children as difficult, non-verbal or even unintelligent. As Collins and Blot (2003) explain

> Rather than a deficiency in language-using abilities, Trackton children's language and social behaviors were manifestations of the rules of communicative competence acquired successfully in their community. They had acquired a set of question forms and uses and the meanings associated with them; these were competent children responding as they had learned was appropriate. But judged by the expectations and standards of the school, their responses were deemed inappropriate (p.41).

There is also the matter of how members of the working-class white community showed an element of upward mobility, drawing on what today would be called 'white privilege'. As white people, they had more access to the ways of the middle-class white community and the American (white) imaginary of how people should behave across a range of contexts. They were thus able to adopt white middle class norms in their interactions with their children. By contrast, black working-class families were so marginalized and distant from this dominant white middle-class culture that they were not able to do the same. Although Heath's ethnographic immersion was much praised, especially for paving the way for "new literacies studies" (Street, 1985), the book was criticized for overlooking power relations among the social groups she observed. Her critics (De Castell and Walker, 1991; Rosen, 1985) contend that her analysis could not engage with the class and racial inequalities in the American society.

In sum, the research tradition inaugurated by Bernstein has greatly contributed to understandings of the effect of language practices on the children development and their performance at school. By highlighting the mismatch between working class families' modes of socialization and school culture, this line of research cast a new light on the underlying causes of education inequalities. The fact remains, however, that Bernstein's theory did not elaborate on the relationship between language and power, nor did it explain why some cultural and linguistic practices are devalued while others are deemed legitimate. The answer to this question can be found in the theory of cultural domination developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to whom I turn in the following section.

3.4 Bourdieu: social and cultural reproduction

The social and cultural reproduction theory developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offered of a valuable conceptual toolkit for educational researchers wishing to understand the persistence of educational equalities in capitalist societies The main tenets of this theory are found in *The inheritors* (1964[1979]) and *Social and cultural reproduction* (1977) both co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron. On his own, Bourdieu clarified and refined in later publications many of the theoretical elements arising in these two books, which will be the basis of my discussion in this section (see also Atkinson, 2011; Lizardo, 2008; Lareau, 2003).

In line with the Marxist tradition, Bourdieu agrees that the school is a social selection institution that channels students from different class backgrounds into different social destinations, reproducing thereby an unequal social order. Far from being a neutral meritocratic institution, the school for Bourdieu is an ideological apparatus in the service of dominant classes. Bourdieu, however, diverges from Marxist accounts of schooling by bringing to the forefront the cultural processes of domination. He argues that students from dominant classes possess rich cultural resources, a "cultural capital" that they effortlessly acquire through family socialization. This

cultural capital is "embodied" (in the form of dispositions, tastes and orientations), objective (in the form of cultural artefacts such as books or paintings, or "institutionalized" (in the form of educational credentials) (Bourdieu, 1983 [1979]). These privileged students, free from economic constraints, possess knowledge and appreciation of high-brow cultural forms such as painting, theater, and classical music. Their inherited cultural resources also involve a familiarity with abstract thinking and a more complex use of language. In sum, cultivated parents from dominant classes inculcate in their children a sort of "symbolic mastery" that they transmit to them through certain modes of children-parent interaction. In contrast, the dominated classes, constrained by economic necessity, possess less cultural capital and can only foster in their children "practical mastery" acquired through everyday experience. Their children are less able to engage in abstract or theoretical thinking. This differential access to cultural resources represents for Bourdieu and Passeron the root of educational inequalities. They depict the school as a bourgeois institution that favors and rewards the cultural capital of dominant classes. While the *inheritors* take to school like "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127), children from disadvantaged backgrounds lack the cultural competences valorized by school and feel alienated by the school culture. This institutional bias against the children of dominated classes is obscured by the school meritocratic ideology. By treating all students as equals and using the same evaluation criteria, the school rewards privileged students constructing the differences in performance, as differences in talents and innate dispositions rather than the products of family socialization. In this way, meritocratic selection constitutes a "misrecognition" of privilege that legitimizes inequality. As children from lower classes, are categorized as failures, they either follow vocational paths or reject education altogether to take manual work. The school transforms social inequalities into educational inequality and these educational inequalities translate into social inequalities again as students are destined to different labor market outcomes (and class positions). Thus, the education system reproduces domination by dissimulating power relations, which constitutes for Bourdieu a form of "symbolic violence". Widening participation, therefore, cannot remedy social inequality because its meritocratic and egalitarian ideology serves to mask the power relations of domination.

Bourdieu's account of educational inequality undeniably opened up new territories for educational research as it provided a much needed insight into the cultural processes of domination. In the Anglophone world, the translation of *Social and cultural reproduction* in 1977 has greatly inspired educational researchers who have been applying his theory in different educational contexts (Reay, 2018; Ball, 2005; Lareau, 2003, Bathmaker et.al, 2016). Thus, Bourdieusian concepts are constantly being refined, reinterpreted and in many cases challenged in the light of the recent transformations in education systems and labor markets. Despite its canonical status in the sociology of education, Bourdieu's theory social of reproduction has been contested by other competing accounts of educational inequalities.

3.5 Rational Action Theory

The earliest critique to social reproduction came from Bourdieu' prominent rival, the French sociologist Raymond Boudon, who challenged Bourdieu's reproduction thesis in his book *L'inégalité des chances* (the Inequality of Chances) (1974 [1973[). As opposed to Bourdieu's emphasis on the structural constraints that condition the action of social agents, Boudon aligned with a neo-Weberian methodological individualism which explained social phenomena as results

of individual actions. While Boudon agrees that educational outcomes are related to class positions, he emphasizes individual agency maintaining that educational inequalities are unintended results of rational individual actions. To begin with, Bourdon distinguishes two components of educational inequalities, first, a cultural *primary effect*, which refers to the differences in school performance related to the student's social origin, and second, a *secondary effect* related to the educational choices made by families from different social backgrounds. Boudon argues that families from different class positions make their decisions in educational matters based on different perceptions academic achievement. For example, finishing school (A levels in Britain, Baccalauréat in France) for working-class children represents a form of social promotion as it means that they have already reached their parents class positions. For these students, reaching a higher educational level may involve greater risk and more financial sacrifices. Moreover, studying longer and might threaten group cohesion as it may widen the educational gap between parents and children. In contrast, for a middle-class students, this educational level is not enough to maintain their class position and avoid downward mobility, thus attaining a higher educational level becomes imperative to no matter the sacrifices. Boudon (1993) contrasts these differing rationalities in an interview with *Sciences Humaines*

> I have explained differences in behaviour among students from different social origins and with similar academic results using a simple story. A person from a higher social origin who sees himself below the people in his milieu tells himself: even it's difficult to get there, I must make the effort. Another who, with the same results, has already reached his family's position, tells himself: let's not complicate things any further. (my translation)

In this view, the decision to leave school or to study longer becomes a matter of cost-benefit analysis that families undertake depending on their economic resources. Thus, even with similar academic achievement, middle class students are more likely to stay longer in education than their working class peers.

Furthermore, Boudon reflects on the consequences of educational massification. While this expansion encouraged the participation of disadvantaged classes in education, it has also increased competition and contributed to the devaluation of degrees. As the labor market employment structure cannot accommodate the increasing supply of individuals holding degrees, students feel compelled to study longer (an "emergent effect") in order to enhance their job prospects. This "emergent effect" (studying longer) leads to a further devaluation of diploma, which constitutes for Boudon a "pervert effect" or an unintended consequence of individual rational actions. Accordingly, students find themselves caught in the middle of the "Anderson Paradox", whereby acquiring a higher degree than one's father does not guarantee social mobility. Due to credential inflation, individuals need to attain even higher educational levels to maintain their class position.

Boudon's account of educational inequalities has greatly inspired the rational action theory developed by the British sociologist John Goldthorpe (2007). In his work Goldthorpe rejects the idea that working class students are excluded by school culture and that this leads to educational inequalities. Contesting Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, he maintains that socio-cultural elements are irrelevant to families' educational choices, emphasizing the role of economic resources in educational attainment. Thus, he contends that any family's priority is to avoid downward social mobility (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). Therefore, students will remain in education until they reach an educational level that enables them to maintain their class position.

In particular, children from higher class positions need to study longer in order to avoid downward mobility. Families analyze the costs and benefits (and the risks) of different educational options and act upon their analysis. The fact that families from different class positions have different orientations and ambitions explains why middle-class students are more likely to continue in education than their working class counterparts, even when both groups achieve similar academic results.

Although in later years Goldthrope revised his position (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2013), admitting the importance of cultural resources and parental education in educational attainment, his Rational Action Theory still fails to answer several questions. First, the theory does not address the relationship between class position and early school performance (which Boudon identifies as a *primary effect*), in other words, it has nothing to offer in the way of understanding the effect of early family socialization on school performance. In this sense, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital fully retains its explanatory relevance. Second, the distinction between primary (performance) and secondary effect (choice) is also controversial as performance and choice can be strongly related or can even have the same causes (Nash, 2006). For example, the fact a student has highly cultivated parents can explain both his success at school and his taken for granted orientation towards higher education. This questionable distinction stands in contrast with Bourdieu's notion of habitus which provides a unitary framework for both performance and orientation. As several critics (Hatcher 1998, Savage, Warde &Devine 2004), have noted, Goldthorpe (like Boudon before him) overlooks the fact that rational action and culture are not necessarily two different things. If a class fraction uses a certain rationality that consistenly leads to the same outcomes (educational inequality), there is no reason why this rationality cannot be a component of this class culture, or to use a Bourdieusian term, an element of a "class habitus". This means that these two approaches can be complementary. As a matter of fact, there have been recent attempts to reconcile both theories. For example, Glaesser and Cooper (2014) research into the educational choices of British and German teenagers suggests that "social class background, mediated by habitus, can constrain individual decision-making" (p. 476). Therefore they conclude that

> In both England and Germany, it seems, young people do apply cost-benefit reasoning in making educational decisions, but, in each case, the lower and upper boundaries within which this reasoning occurs strongly reflects their class habitus (P.477).

3.6 Atypical cases: refining the theory

Another classical critique of Bourdieu's reproduction thesis highlights its deterministic character which leaves no room for change or resistance. (See chapter 2). As Sayer (2005) notes, the theory assumes the passivity of social agents who reproduce their social so experiences over generations without any form of reflexive thinking. Thus, the Bourdieusian concept of habitus overlooks the inner contradictions and of social agents. Most importantly, the opponents of the reproduction thesis argue that the theory does not account for deviant trajectories claiming that cases of upward or downward mobility, albeit statistically low, are enough to discredit the Bourdieusian claims. These cases include for example, working class individuals who, against all odds, attain tertiary education, or students from privileged background who opt out of university to end up in lower social position. Moreover, critics argue that the theory cannot explain why two siblings who have access to the same family resources can have very different academic performance or orientation. Along the same lines Goldthorpe (2007) rejects the idea that schools are conservative forces that

reproduce privilege arguing that the expansion of the education system in the course of the twentieth century has increased the participation of working classes and promoted upward mobility. He substantiates his argument by referring to empirical evidence for social mobility in Britain (Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980) and in France (Thélot and Vallet 2000). Accordingly, Goldthorpe asserts that schools can create "cultural capital" for those who do not have it, suggesting the education system can operate as an "engine of social transformation" (P.7).

Golthorpe's critique of the reproduction thesis has been contested by several researchers, who objected to what they considered a simplistic and reductionist reading of Bourdieu. To begin with, Lizardo (2008) argues that Bourdieu was fully aware of the effects of massification noting that Goldthorpe fails to distinguish between "exchange mobility" and "structural mobility" both of which occurred due to changes in social structure such as the decline of industrialization and the expansion of the service class. Moreover, even if more working-class individuals participate in higher education, there are several related phenomena that prevent these students from reaping the benefits of this participation such as credential inflation, heightened competition and increasingly stratified educational systems in which different universities are valued differently. Thus, we should also take heed of recent changes occurring at the top of the social ladder. As labor markets are flooded with university graduates, dominant classes adopt novel reproduction strategies to maintain the distinction which contributes to creating new inequalities and neutralizing the effects of massification.

Furthermore, other researchers, like Atkinson (2012) warn against facile interpretations of the reproduction thesis emphasizing the importance of reading Bourdieu's later publications where he clarified his theory and engaged with critiques. Thus, he objects to popular misreadings of Bourdieu where social agents are depicted either as winners with plenty of social capital, or culturally deprived losers. While he admits that Bourdieu's relatively impenetrable style contributed to this misinterpretation, he advocates a more complex understanding of the notion of capital:

. The nature of Bourdieu's writing fuelled this perception, but implicit in his early work, and elaborated in his later writings, is the idea that class and capital possession are fully relational, gradational and refracted by family dynamics, thereby suggesting the existence of all manner of possible shades of difference between the two poles of reproduction (P.735).

Atkinson maintains that cases of apparent upward or downward mobility should be thoroughly scrutinized before reaching hasty conclusions that discredit the reproduction thesis. His research into the life trajectories of a group of individuals in the city of Bristol, suggests that dominated individuals who achieve social mobility often benefit from "hidden advantages and familial particularities" (p.739). They might have, for example, a slightly more cultivated relative, or the opportunity to be in contact with individuals from a different social class, which could generate in them new ways of thinking as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990 [1977]) have noted in Reproduction. Similarly, Atkinson analysis illustrates how middle-class individuals who temporarily experience a form of downward mobility can "recover" or pick up themselves later in life thanks to their family resources.

In the French context, research on atypical cases in education challenged the widely held assumption that parental cultural capital is automatically transmitted to children. This line of research sought to open the "black box" of cultural capital in order to understand the exact nature of this capital and the family practices that favor or hinder its transmission. For example, in *Tableaux de Familles* (Family portraits) (1995), Lahire, investigates cases of school success among third-graders (CE2) from working class families in a bid to isolate the social and cultural practices that led to this unexpected/paradoxical success (*resussites paradoxales*) at school. Although the families that Lahire researched showed no affinity to highbrow culture, Lahire was able to identify a number of practices that favored the children's insertion into the school culture. For example, he found that these families had a "scritptural" relation to language (*rapport sctiptural avec la language*) in the sense that writing (lists, recipes) was a part of their mundane daily activities. Lahire also identified certain forms of parental authority and time structure that encouraged children to internalize norms and fostered the autonomy they are expected to display at school. Furthermore, he noted that the families of these successful students inculcated in them a respect for education and valorized the competences and the skills their children acquired at school. Despite their weak cultural resources, these working-class parents instilled in their children a respect for educational institutions and a certain docility that helped them to conform to the school culture. This alignment between family and school, more common among middle-class families, appears to contribute to the success of these working class students. Lahire's work displays a strong affinity with the Bernsteinian theory as it highlights the cognitive effects of early linguistic and cultural socialization within the family. Once again, the mismatch between family and school culture emerges as a fundamental cause of school failure. Interestingly, his findings dismiss the role of high-brow cultural practices in school success, although this definition of cultural capital is highly controversial, as I will explain in the following section.

Another study on divergent paths by Henri-Panabière (2010) explores the case of "misinheritors", or students from dominant class positions who underperform at school despite having educated parents. The school failure of these privileged students suggests that, contrary to common belief, the transmission of cultural capital occurs only through certain types of interactions between parents and children. For example, a father might be a great reader who owns a huge collection of books, but he cannot find the time to interact with the child in order to instill in the child the love of reading. Thus, Henri-Panabière maintains that the transmission of cultural capital requires favorable conditions and circumstances. Her study casts a new light on this transmission process as she identifies certain family dynamics and relationships that can negatively affect the children's academic performance. In brief, research on paradoxical educational success or failure raises three important points. First, if researchers want to provide a sociological explanation for atypical cases, they should follow a bottom-up approach in which they scrutinize intra-individual differences. Thus, adhering to the grand reproduction theory of Bourdieu should not deter researchers from refining their conceptual tools in order to give a more nuanced picture of the cases under examination. Second, research on atypical cases does not necessarily discredit the social reproduction theory as both Lahire and Henri-Panabière confirm the importance of familial modes of socialization for school success. Thus, their work can be read as an attempt to refine the theory rather than discredit it altogether. Third, these studies highlight the importance of a pragmatic and selective approach to the Bourdieusian theory. In other words, educational researchers are not under the obligation to commit themselves to his theory as whole. As Lizardo (2008) explains

> I propose that scholars should take a completely different attitude towards Bourdieu's work: it should be appropriated, dismembered and used and modified as the analyst sees fit, rejecting what they don't need (or find to be in contradiction to the facts). In this manner, […..] theorists should pick what is useful to them (and the analytical problem at hand) as they deem appropriate (p.13).

Finally, Lahire's research findings call for reflection on the content of the parental cultural capital that favors school success. His study suggests that parental participation in high-brow cultural activities is less important than linguistic practices that enhance the cognitive skills of children. This observation resonates with research conducted De Graaf (2000) in the Netherlands. The study found the parental reading behavior had a larger effect on school performance than parental participation in school activities. Thus, De Graaf concludes that "in the Netherlands, children seem to benefit more from their parents' linguistic and cognitive skills, as measured by the scale on reading behavior, than from their parents' participation in highbrow cultural activities" (p.105). However, it should be noted that research by De Graaf and other researchers (Di Maggio, 1982) often rests on two widely held assumptions about Bourdieu's notion cultural capital:

First, cultural capital is understood as an affinity with highbrow culture.

Second, cultural capital and cognitive skills are two different things.

These taken for granted assumptions have been contested by several researchers (Lareau, 2003, Fabiani, 2013, Lizardo, 2008) who advocate a relational and dynamic understanding of cultural capital based on more rigorous reading of Bourdieu's legacy.

3.7 Cultural capital: towards a relational definition

The Bourdieusian conceptualization of culture as a form of capital, has enabled researchers to view culture as a resource that confers social power and symbolic distinction on those possess it. Socially recognized cultural resources, according to Bourdieu, provide access to scarce rewards, and can be transmitted from one generation to the next and converted into other forms of capital. Therefore, the monopoly of these cultural assets becomes crucial to maintain symbolic distinction and access to various social advantages. One cannot but notice, however, the lack of consensus among educational researchers regarding the content of this capital and the best ways either to measure it or qualify it. This ambiguity initiated several controversies around the definition the concept and its relevance in a changing world.

To begin with, many sociologists working within a social constructivist frame have taken issue with the concept arguing that in late modernity, the Bourdieusian distinction between high-brow legitimate and low-brow popular cultural has lost its relevance as the boundaries between these two forms have practically dissipated (Pakulski & Waters, 1996). These claims have been backed by empirical research into the cultural practices of individuals from different social classes. For example, research into cultural practices in the French society (Lahire, 2004) highlights heterogeneous cultural orientations across different social classes as it shows the same individual consumes a mix of highbrow and lowbrow cultural products. In response to this critique, cultural analysts influenced by Bourdieu assert that class differences in cultural practices did not dissipate, but simply changed their form. Accordingly, what distinguishes dominant social classes today is

precisely their cultural omnivoursness, or their ability to consume different genres. These educated middle classes are more likely to have eclectic repertoires, and this eclecticism- which requires certain skills and cultural knowledge- has become itself a new form of distinction. (Hazir, 2015). One has to acknowledge, however, qualitative differences in cultural consumption. As Coulangeon (2005) notes, when educated middle classes consume popular culture, they see it through a distinctly 'enlightened' aesthetic lens and display more reflexive modes of appropriation (Vegard, 2015, Friedman, 2011).

In addition, other critics contested the Bourdieusian claim that schools legitimate certain cultural contents congruent with the culture of dominant classes. Research in the French context (Dubet, 2002; Siroux, 2011) suggests that schools are not immune to the adolescent culture. Due to the expansion of the system, French schools host a mix of social categories, which weakened the boundaries between school and popular cultural. Thus, Pasquier (2005) notes the school has lost its power of cultural legitimation to cultural industries on one hand, and peers on the other hand. For example, students who display an affinity with high- brow culture are often ridiculed by their peers. As children today are exposed to a variety of socialization contexts (Lahire, 1998), family education has to compete with other sources of cultural influence (media, cultural industries and peers). In these conditions, family cultural transmission is far from being guaranteed.

The aforementioned critiques both rest on the taken-for-granted assumption that Bourdieu equated cultural capital with high-brow culture. Several researchers, however, dismiss this definition as a misinterpretation of Bourdieu's work. As Lareau (2003b) notes, Bourdieu did not conceive of cultural capital as a set of immutable cultural practices. Thus, the content of cultural capital is subject to change depending on the historical context. If highbrow cultural practices constituted the cultural capital of the French elite in the 1960s, today's elites derive their distinction from different cultural practices. In effect, any cultural competences and skills that confer social power on their possessors can function as cultural capital provided that these cultural resources are recognized by the institutions that impose the evaluation standards (educational institutions and labor markets). For this reason, Lareau advocates a more flexible definition of cultural capital:

> Our conception [of cultural capital] emphasizes micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation. These specialized skills are transmissible across generations, are subject to monopoly, and may yield advantages or ''profits.'' This conception is one that we feel to be more in keeping with Bourdieu's understanding and, more importantly, has greater potential than the dominant interpretation (p.569).

Furthermore, Lareau (2003b) contests the dominant research trend in which researchers draw a sharp distinction between cultural practices and cognitive skills or measured ability. This separation between the technical and the symbolic, or the cognitive and the non-cognitive is for Lareau a misinterpretation of Bourdieu who considered that these two aspects were "irrevocably fused" (p. 580). However, Lareau's emphasis on the amalgamation of the technical and the symbolic raises another problematic Bourdieusian concept, that of the "cultural arbitrary". Critics like Goldthorpe (2007) argue that, precisely because of the amalgamation of cultural practices and cognitive skills, Bourdieu fails to distinguish between class-marked subjects such as literature and History and cognitive skills such as language, math and scientific knowledge. Accordingly, claiming that content of school teaching has no intrinsic value, but is only imposed by the arbitrary power of dominant classes is an untenable position. In response to this critique, Lareau (2003b)

and Lizardo (2008) contend that Bourdieu was perfectly aware of the difference between class-marked cultural content and technical skills and competences. While he does not deny that educational credentials do guarantee a certain skill or competence, he argues that this technical competence confers on its holders a form of symbolic distinction associated with their social status. As he explains in *The State Nobility* (Bourdieu, 1996), the technical and the symbolic are two indissoluble aspects of cultural capital:

> Titled individuals are legitimate titulars of exceptional positions, but to a certain extent they also possess uncommon technical competences, which provide a foundation for their monopoly. And we also note that the market value of a title, however fully it may depend on the power of symbolic imposition, is always partially determined by the scarcity of the concomitant technical skill in the market (p.118-119)

Following the Bourdieusian logic, one cannot deny, for example, that a high TOEFL score guarantees a high proficiency in English, but the value of this skill is socially constructed, in other words, this competence is held in high esteem because English today is valued by educational institutions and global markets, and associated to a certain social prestige. Similarly, in a highly stratified educational system, a degree from a prestigious Russell Group university in the UK or an Ivy League university in the US attests to the technical competence of its holder as much as to their elevated social status. As Farkas (2003) explains, the intertwining of the technical and the symbolic plays a major role in social inequality:

> …it may be that when stratification decisions are made--teachers assigning grades to children, colleges deciding whom to admit, employers deciding whom to hire or promote -judgments of skills that increase productivity are intertwined with notice of high or low-status cultural signals that do not, by themselves increase productivity (P.546).

Most importantly, Bourdieu maintains that educational credentials and the skills they warrant are necessary to "justify the distinction of title holders" (Lizardo, 2008) and "legitimate their position in a status hierarchy" (Lareau, 2003b). Accordingly, the monopoly of these valued skills certified by educational credentials becomes indispensable for those who wish to distinguish themselves in a fiercely competitive labor market (Brown, 2013).

In sum, while educational research confirms the role of family cultural resources in social reproduction, Lareau's relational interpretation invites reflection on the changing content of cultural capital in light of recent transformations in education systems and labor markets. To this end, I will discuss in the following section the novel reproduction strategies that middle-class parents employ in order to enhance the educational and labor markets outcomes of their children.

3.8 New reproduction strategies: redefining cultural capital

Far from levelling the playing field, the expansion of the educational system worldwide has turned wider access into "an opportunity trap" (Brown, 2003), which simply means that groups from disadvantaged backgrounds now have the opportunity to compete in the market against those from more privileged backgrounds. This neoliberal "fallacy" of fairness as the freedom to compete, (Brown, 2013, p.682) obscures that fact that the participants in the game do not possess the same

resources. In a congested labor market, the oversupply of graduates, has compelled anxious middle classes to mobilize various economic, cultural and social capitals to a stay ahead in the competition and enable their children to "stand out from the crowd" (Brown, 2003). Accordingly, these parents strive to equip their children with a set of skills and competences that facilitate their access to prestigious educational institutions and their distinction in the labor market. These marketable skills rewarded on global markets- often labeled as "soft skills"- include a number of intangible competences (such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking, team work, adaptability, cosmopolitan exposure) which are highly valued in global corporate environment. Heckman & Kautz, 2012). The acquisition of these skills, however, appears to be the product of a long socialization process. For example, research on parenting styles in the US (Lareau, 2003) demonstrates how middle class parents foster the development of soft skills in their children in several ways. Lareau's study suggests that middle class parents tend to be highly involved in their children's education and display a remarkable adeptness at communicating with educational institutions. In addition, they cultivate the skills and talents through extra-curricular/enrichment activities such as music and sports. Additionally, these parents inculcate in their children a strong sense of entitlement and the necessary skills to interact with institutional authorities. This parenting style that Lareau describes as "concerted cultivation" favors the children's academic success and yields a range of social rewards. In contrast, she found that working-class families adopted a "natural growth" approach to parenting and depended on teachers for their children education. Although these parents valued education, they were less involved in their children education as their weak cultural resources and their economic constraints prevented them from assisting their children with school work. Finally, these parents lacked the knowledge and the skills that enable them to interact with teachers. Along the same lines, research by Vincent and Maxwell (2015) in the UK provides further evidence for the "concerted cultivation" thesis. Their study demonstrates how middle-class parents placed great importance on helping their children develop a "portfolio of skills and talents" (Vincent, 2017, p.544; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Middle-class parents encourage their children to accumulate credentials through extra-curricular activities which foster a range of personal characteristics (confidence, social skills, self-esteem) valued by college admission tutors and employers. This heavy middle-class investment in extra-curricular activities reflects the anxiety of middle classes striving to maintain their competitive position in the market. For middle-class parents, the child is an "unfinished self", a project in progress, therefore, it is their duty to give their children the best opportunities to realize their potential (Ball, 2010). To this end, middle class parents strategically deploy various forms of capitals to enhance the educational and job opportunities of their children. Their knowledge of the educational market combined with their economic resources and their social networks enable them to obtain the best social outcomes for their children and stay ahead in the competition.

This capitalist mindset that underlies skill and credential accumulation is clearly congruent with neoliberal discourses in which individuals are responsible for producing their own biographies. (Ball, 2010). Thus, all the mentioned skills and activities are instrumentally utilized in order to build an impressive CV**.** Rivera's (2011, 2012) research into the hiring processes of American elite firms, suggests that extracurricular activities have become a type of credentials rewarded in the labor market. These activities determine the candidates' social and moral worth in the eyes of recruiters and function as a proxy for some desired personal attributes such as motivation, flexibility, entrepreneurialism and ability to cope with stress**.** Accordingly, these skills and personality traits, constitute a new form of cultural capital legitimized by educational institutions and labor markets.

Finally, it is important to note that the acquisition of marketable soft skills, is becoming increasingly mediated by family economic resources. Thus, access to elite schooling, extra-curricular activities, private tutors and international travel requires much more than having cultivated parents. As Drealants and Ballatore (2014) rightly observe, well-off parents with weak cultural resources can convert their economic capital into cultural capital, as they can afford to enroll their children in elite schools and hire private tutors. In this way, children can acquire a cultural capital through the intermediary of a competent third party - *par procuration*, as Bourdieu (1979) would have called it. As Serres and Wagner (2015) have noted, the "managerial" cultural capital of the global elite is different from the "humanist" cultural capital associated with high-brow culture. This change of content of what counts as legitimate cultural capital today favors economic elites to the detriment of those who are more dependent on high culture. In other words, the legitimate components of cultural capital today (elite cosmopolitan education, soft skills, fluency in English, international exposure) are mostly accessed by those who have high economic resources, which tends to blur the boundaries between cultural and economic capitals. Therefore, the world is witnessing today a concentration of different forms of capitals by economic elites who wish to legitimize their privilege by obtaining prestigious educational qualification (Khan, 2012).This strategic instrumentalization of education blurs the boundaries between economic and cultural domination (Serres &Wagner, 2015) while further entrenching social inequalities. As Bourdieu have noted, the dominant are not only dominant because they are endowed with more capitals, but most importantly because they have the power to change the rules of the games and redefine the content of the legitimate cultural capital. In response to massification, dominant classes seek new ways to preserve their distinction, which eventually neutralizes the effects of widening participation and creates new inequalities. Bathmaker et al (2016) summarize these changes in the following paragraph:

> When the playing field appears to have been levelled for some people (i.e. even when working-class young people make it into HE), advantage is maintained through a shift in the rules of the game. The game is no longer just about educational advantage based on quality of degree. The stakes have been raised and the privileged seek ever-increasing ways of securing their position and coming out on top. (P.741)

3.9 Conclusion

Educational research has long identified education as a fundamental mechanism through which social inequalities are reproduced. Different sociological traditions in education provided much needed insight into the processes that perpetuate these inequalities. Competing approaches to educational inequalities highlight the role of family economic, cultural and social capitals in favoring or hindering school success. Thus, social origin plays a decisive role in shaping the students' educational trajectories and labor market outcomes. These class-mediated inequalities in both performance and attainment persist despite the educational expansion and the official meritocratic discourse around education. Contrary to the widely held assumption, the increasing participation of working classes in education has failed to mitigate social inequality as dominant classes use novel reproduction strategies to maintain their social distinction. In response to the devaluation of degrees and the heightened market competition, families endowed with high resources shift the rules of the game by imposing standards that favor their children's success. This shift, dictated by the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, has led to the redefinition of the legitimate cultural capital rewarded on the labor market. In the following chapter, I will explore

the new content of this cultural capital, namely, the set of marketable skills valued in the neoliberal work order, arguing that the acquisition of these skills is mediated by the student's class position.

Chapter 4

Marketable Skills for the Neoliberal Work Order

4.1 Introduction

In his article "Six Theories on neoliberalism" (2014) Terry Flew argues that neoliberalism is being used today as an "all-purpose denunciatory category" to describe a range cultural phenomena that are not necessarily "neoliberal". The term ''neo-liberal'' as Nonini (2008) notes, has recently appeared so frequently, and been applied with such abandon, that it risks being used to refer to almost any political, economic, social or cultural process associated with contemporary capitalism" (As cited in Flew, 2014, p. 51). Although the call for more academic rigor in the use of the concept is perfectly legitimate, the proliferation of academic literature on neoliberalism also testifies to the pervasiveness of neoliberal policies, practices and beliefs in people's lives today. The neoliberal ideology which rests upon the belief in free markets, minimal state intervention, and enterprising individuals has dominated Western democracies for more than 3 decades permeating all aspects of political, economic and social life. In particular, the prevalence of the market rationality which subjugates education to economic imperatives has produced new student/worker identity. In this neoliberal rationality, the role of education is no longer to produce well-rounded citizens, but rather to feed the economy by preparing corporate friendly workers. (Holborow, 2012). Accordingly, the neoliberal agenda employability agenda exhorts students to make themselves employable by developing a set of marketable skills valued in corporate settings. Thus, the "soft skills" discourse has become a new common sense embraced by higher education institutions, policy makers and employers alike. These skills, which include a set of personal attributes and interpersonal communication skills are deemed necessary for finding employment in the new neoliberal work order. In this chapter, I will first discuss the theoretical roots of the neoliberal employability agenda highlighting the multiple forms of inequalities produced by the Soft Skills.

4.2 Neoliberalism: a definition

Most scholars locate the basic foundations of the neoliberal economic theory in three influential schools of thought, namely, the Austrian school of Friedrich Von Hayek, the German Ordoliberals, and the Chicago School of Economics. Despite several differences between these schools, they all represent a rupture in classical liberalism rejecting Keynesian welfare model, and proposing a new understanding of the relationship between the state, the market, and individuals. This neoliberal legacy has been examined from different perspectives: While a Marxist reading of neoliberalism identifies it as a project of wealth redistribution, an ideology which serves the interests of the capitalist ruling class (Harvey, 2005) the French thinker Michel Foucault interprets neoliberalism as a new "art of government", an intersection between technologies of power and the techniques by which individuals govern their selves in relation to the market (Lemke, 2001). His 1978-1979 lectures, which offered an erudite analysis of the emergence of the neoliberal thought, coincided with the advent of the neoliberal economic restructuring in the US and the UK, providing thus a prescient account of a new political and economic phenomenon.

The implementation of neoliberal economic policies in the UK and the United States was a response to the economic crisis of "stagflation" (a stagnate growth rate coupled with high levels of inflation" (Ward, 2012, p.24) that took place in the late 1970's, rejecting about four decades of Keynesian welfarism, where social inequalities were relatively mitigated by state social services. For neoliberals, the crisis was an opportunity to lambast the welfare state as a bureaucratic institution limiting individual freedom and producing passive, lazy, dependent citizens who undeservingly receive middle class tax money. The neoliberal reforms championed by Margret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan find their theoretical roots in two economic schools: in part in the German Ordoliberals (Freiburg University Economists and legal scholars), but especially in the

University of Chicago School of Economics and key scholars such as Gary Becker, Milton Friedman and George Stigler. Despite notable differences, both schools believe in the liberalization of markets and that "human well- being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institution framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p.2). In theory, neoliberal economists professed an economic laissez-faire, a minimal intervention of the state (a myth belied by reality) based on the belief that markets are self-regulating. Individuals must, therefore, abandon their passivity and reliance on a "nanny state", unleash their entrepreneurial energies, make rational choices and take responsibility for their success and failure. In the neoliberal worldview, the individual is portrayed as *Homo Economicus*, a self-interested market creature who submits all his or her actions to a cost-benefit calculation. The market rationality does not only govern economic matters, but is also extended to all aspects of social life. Thus, education, health, and social relationships also become markets (Brown, 2003). Similarly, the political is also subjected to the market logic: neoliberalism emerges as a new political rationality. As Ward (2012) puts it, the neoliberal project is to "desocialize" and "reindividualize" society (P.28). Neoliberalism is, therefore, hostile to any form of collective thinking or action. Bourdieu (1998) identifies neoliberalism as a "programme for destroying collective structures", to "remake the world by sweeping away the social and economic conquests of a century of social struggles" (Bourdieu &Wacquant, 2001, p.2), a model that aims at

> dismantling of the social state and the correlative hypertrophy of the penal state, the crushing of trade unions and the dictatorship of the 'shareholder-value' conception of the firm, and their sociological effects: the generalization of precarious wage labor and social insecurity, turned into the privileged engine of economic activity. (p. 3).

Finally, a major contribution to the neoliberal thought, is the "human capital" theory, currently endorsed by official discourses on education around the world. Chicago school economists like Gary Becker, defined human capital as "the knowledge, skills and competences and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity" (OECD, 2001) Accordingly, individuals are expected to augment their capital by investing in themselves and acquiring skills needed in the market. According to Becker (1964)

> …..It is fully in keeping with the capital concept as traditionally defined to say that the expenditures on education, training, medical care, etc., are investments in capital. However, these produce human not physical or financial capital because you cannot separate a person from his or her own knowledge, skills, health or values the way it is possible to move financial assets while the owner stays put.

From a Marxist perspective, Bowles and Gintis (1975) maintain that the human capital theory is "perhaps the ultimate step in the elimination of class as a central economic concept" (p.74), arguing that any market phenomena cannot be explained without class analysis. In capitalist societies where the means of production are owned by a minority and workers sell the labor power to exist, schooling, family education, and health care are all processes that reproduce the existing social and economic order. As Holborow (2012a) observes

> Human capital…..is a false representation of both labor and capital in that it effaces of both social class and the actual mechanisms of the labor market in capitalism: it constitutes an ideological device which reifies the role of the individual to obscure class conflict (p.94).

Furthermore, Bowles and Gintis (1975) criticize the human capital theory for abstracting from the power relation between the capitalist and the worker, claiming that the maximization of human capital (or "the peak level performance by workers" benefits the capitalist and not workers (p.76). Accordingly, the skills and personality traits valued in the labor market (or "marketable skills" in today's globalized economy) are those that help the capitalist extract more work from workers. They also reject the idea that individual personal development is the product of choice, arguing that the educational system in capitalist societies reproduces and legitimizes economic inequality as it assigns individuals to unequal occupational positions. Moreover, they refute the fallacy that every worker is now a capitalist, or an autonomous entrepreneur whose wage is a revenue or return to the human capital that they embody. For Bowles and Gintis, the use of the word "capital" for educational qualifications and other skills is misleading. In the classical sense, workers cannot be owners of capital as they have no control over the means of production, but are in a subordinate position in relation to the capitalist. This prescient criticism is particularly relevant today in a globalized neoliberal market, where workers are viewed as free contractors, autonomous entrepreneur of their own capital, rather than employees dependent on a company. This new understanding of relationship between capital and labor increases their precarization and denies them any form of social security.

The neoliberal project which emerged in advanced western democracies in the late 1970's has been analyzed from different perspectives (Block, 2018). Neoliberalism has been associated with the expansion of global capitalism intensified by new technologies and the consolidation of political, cultural, economic and military American hegemony. At the global level, the Washington consensus reforms promoted by the World Bank and the International monetary fund aimed at restructuring the economies of the developing countries through the imposition of neoliberal policies such as trade liberalization, privatization, deregulation, welfare reduction, and abolishing labor protection laws to allow the free circulation of commodities and labor (Williamson, 1989). From a Marxist perspective, Harvey identifies neoliberalism as a redistribution of wealth from lower to upper classes enabling global elites (who can be "old money" or "nouveaux riches") to accumulate capital. Neoliberalism is also, a market ideology, a *misrepresentation* of world that suits the class interests of capital holders (Holborow, 2012, b), creating a common sense, "taken for granted and not open to question" (Harvey, P.5). At the discursive level, neoliberalism manifests itself in the colonization of the language by the corporate jargon through the "re-semanticization" of language or "stretching of meaning" which allows the extension of semantic boundaries into new fields, (Holborow, 2007). As English absorbs the dominant ideology of neoliberalism, the market discourse is extended to other fields, infusing certain "speaking styles which have been codified for the business of selling" (P. 30). Finally, Naomi Klein in the "Shock doctrine" (2007) argues that the neoliberal project has triumphed through the exploitation of crises (some of which man-made), which facilitated the implementation of policies that would not be accepted by citizens under ordinary circumstances. In addition to these different perspectives on neoliberalism, French philosopher Michel Foucault presents an attempt at understanding how neoliberalism as a disciplinary power compels individuals to align themselves to the market through self-regulating techniques.

4.2.1 Governmentality

Foucault's 1978-1979 lectures titled *The Birth of Biopolitics* (the regulation of territory and population) provide a rich historical account of the liberal and neoliberal arts of government. In these lectures, he examines the legacy of German ordo-liberals and Chicago school of economics, to shed light on the foundations of the neoliberal project such as the regulatory mechanisms of the market, the concept of *Homo Economicus*, (the entrepreneurial market creature) , and the extension of the market rationality to all social phenomena.

In his earlier works, such as *History of Madness* (1972), *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *History of sexuality* (1976-1985), Foucault provided an analysis of a top-down form of disciplinary power which produced "docile individuals". *The Birth of Biopolitics*, identifies, a different form of power which interpellates the individuals to constitute their selves as free and autonomous subjects by maximizing their human capital to compete in the market. Neoliberal power, then, does not directly interfere to subdue individuals; on the contrary, it is a power that governs through the apparent absence of the power, shifting the burden of regulation to the individuals, hence compelling them to take full responsibility of their lives, "care" for themselves, or become the "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Lemke, 2001). The intersection between the technologies of power and the techniques that individuals use to govern their selves is what Foucault calls "governmentality". "J'appelle «gouvernementalité» la rencontre entre les techniques de domination exercées sur les autres et les techniques de soi" (Foucault, 1982, as cited in Jean-Pierre, 2006, p.91). Accordingly, Foucault defines govermentality as "the conduct of the conduct" (la conduite des conduites), the techniques which "structure the field of actions of others" or, in other words, enable the imposition of behaviour on individuals and groups. (Jeanpierre, 2006). Individuals are not directly coerced to conform, but voluntarily use certain techniques to discipline, control, surveil and transform their selves. These are "technologies of the self" which "[p]ermit individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves" (Foucault, 1988, p.18).

As for neoliberal governance, Binkley (2011) provides the following explanation:

> Neoliberal governmentality, therefore, involves the process by which individuals are induced to cultivate within themselves the entrepreneurial, autonomous dispositions mandated by a wider economic rationality – a project that expands to incorporate wide and varied aspects of conduct, personality and everyday life far beyond economic practice in the narrow sense [……..] Moreover, neoliberal government operates through the excitation of a force of freedom and autonomy within individuals themselves, one that takes the form of a compulsory differentiation of the individual within a social field, conceived according to the model of an open market[……..] With freedom as its object, neoliberal governmentality designates a matrix of institutions, practices and discourses which exert rule through the apparent absence of rule, or government through the active problematization and curtailment of any form of government thought to impose limits upon the freedom of the individual to differentiate and maximize her own qualities for competitive advantage. This freedom is the freedom to competitively develop unique and personal potentials that might ensure a more strategic market position, where all social relations and fields are now understood on the model of the market. (p.382).

In his reading of the Ordoliberal thought, Foucault argues that the role of the state, is not to withdraw from the market, but to create the conditions for the proper functioning of the markets; in other words, the state itself creates the markets, or the artificial conditions to enable competition, becoming as ward (2012) puts it a" marketer" (creates the market) and an "auditor" (regulates it) (P.43). In the words of the American economist Milton Friedman, (2002 [1962]), "the role of the government … is to do something that the market cannot do for itself, namely, to determine, arbitrate, and enforce the rules of the game." (p.27). According to Miller (2010) Foucault identified a major neoliberal paradox:

> The grand contradiction of neo-liberalism was its passion for intervention in the name of non-intervention...hailing freedom as a natural basis for life that could only function with the heavy hand of policing by government to administer property relations' (P. 56).

Thus, a new political rationality emerges: the state derives its legitimacy from the market which becomes the "permanent economic tribunal for the government" (Lemke, 2001, P.198.) As Wendy Brown (2006) explains, "the state itself must construct and construe itself in market terms, as well as develop policies and promulgate a political culture that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life' (Brown, 2006, p.694). Accordingly, neoliberal subjects constitute their selves as responsible, self- disciplined, economically rational individuals who optimize their skills to compete in the market, thus becoming "governable citizens".

4.2.3 Entrepreneurial selves

In the neoliberal social order, individuals are induced to maximize, optimize, and optimize their skills to gain a competitive advantage in the market. They are expected, therefore, to "reflexively and flexibly" manage the self as a business or an enterprise by constantly developing their marketable skills. As Gershon (2012) explains, neoliberal agency

> … requires a reflexive stance in which people are subjects for themselves—a collection of processes to be managed. There is always already a presumed distance to oneself as an actor. One is never "in the moment"; rather, one is always faced with one's self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles. This is a self that is produced through an engagement with a market, that is, neoliberal markets require participants to be reflexive managers of their abilities and alliances (P.539).

This entrepreneurial self is not only characterized by flexibility, but also by "agility". It does not only adapt to changing markets, but takes advantage of the opportunities created by this change. The agile self, according to Gillies (2011)

> ……..reconfigures itself in anticipation of market changes, the value of this identification judged in so far as it secures economic survival and success… this call to flexibility actually suggests a market in self-identity. The self selects the identity which suits the market: so the agile self anticipates the market and reshapes itself accordingly (p.214).

This agility becomes of form of self- disciplining in response to the growing precarity of neoliberal labor markets where long term employment becomes the exception and workers constantly find themselves deskilled due to the acceleration of technological innovation, hence the neoliberal concept of life-long learning. This conscious refashioning of the self, resonates with the reflexivity thesis advanced by Anthony Giddens who argues that, "the self today is for everyone a reflexive

project" (1992). As subjects in the late modernity are allegedly liberated from traditional social and moral structures like location, class, gender, they are now choosing their lifestyle and shaping their identity.

The neoliberal prototype is then the "homo Economicus", the versatile and cosmopolitan entrepreneur who is not merely self-sufficient, but has the magical capacity to add (perhaps multiply) value to economic transactions in diverse locations" (Ley, 2011). As Mcguigan (2014) observes, Apple CEO Steve Jobs, to give one example, embodied "The epitome" of cool capitalist", the "neoliberal cool" who sometimes even embraces a counter-cultural attitude (college drop- out, vegan, and Zen disciple). This cool public persona, however, obscures Apple's exploitation of Chinese workers (Bilton, 2014) as well as its celebration of values which might, in another time and place, be considered uncool, such as selfishness and individualism. Another example of this "cool" neoliberalism is Spanish broker/athlete/life coach Josef Ajram who embodies the ideal neoliberal citizen (Block, 2018).

4.3 Neoliberalism and higher education

The critique of the neoliberal restructuring of higher education by no means intends to paint a rosy picture of the pre-neoliberal university. In capitalist societies, education was never totally autonomous or ideologically neutral. Nevertheless, before the colonization of the education by an economic rationality, the traditional liberal maintained a relative independence from the political and economic, operating as a democratic non commodified public sphere, where citizen debated public issues and dissident voices were tolerated (Giroux, 2002; Holborow, 2012b). The neoliberal age, imposed upon the university a new mode of governmentality, a rationality that shaped the conduct of both students and academics, producing new teacher and student subjectivities, and reconceptualizing the production and dissemination of knowledge (Ward, 2012). In the neoliberal worldview, the university's role is no longer the forming of well-rounded citizens who can participate in political life; rather, it is the provision of subjects for the employment market (Holborow, 2012 b) and the preparation of entrepreneurs who will be drivers of the global economy. In this instrumentalist and reductionist view of education, the university's mission is to produce "employment ready, corporate friendly" graduates (Holborow, 2012 b). Higher education today is committed to a skill-agenda, transforming democracy to "corporate oligarchy" (Brown, 2010). In the neoliberal project, the university becomes a private enterprise that should generate profits, and students are viewed as customers seeking education as an investment expected to generate future returns (Bori & Block, 2023). The Neoliberal logic also manifests itself in language as the market jargon infuses the educational discourse with terms such as "learning outcomes", "research output", "customer satisfaction" excellence", "performance", "accountabilitiy", "rankings", "scores" and "stakeholders". Accordingly, relevance to the market becomes then the first criterion to decide which research topic is useful or useless: humanities are increasingly viewed as irrelevant to the knowledge economy. Thus, students today are encouraged to invest in degrees that are "good value for money".

Most importantly, the neoliberal restructuring of higher education is producing new student identities, subjectivities, without necessarily being fully endorsed by students who also embrace other competing discourses. . This new dominant discourse begs a question to what extent students embrace neoliberal values and practices that situates good life in consumption and material success (Davies and Bansel, 2007). In the Australian context, O'Flynn, Bendix and Petersen (2007)

examine how different Australian schools (public versus private and prestigious produce different subjectivities and different understandings of what a good life consists of. In a similar vein, Nairn and Higgins (2007) examine the narratives of New Zealand neoliberal generation, the "Children of the market" born under the neoliberal school reforms, who have been have been immersed in discourses of competition and enterprise. Interestingly enough, the researchers came to the conclusion that students were not passive recipients of neoliberal discourses as they positioned themselves within other competing discourses to craft their subjectivities. As Davies and Bansel (2007) note commenting on the work of Nair and Higgins

> This complex range of discourses, which students juggle in the shaping of their identity can lead to creative and surprising life plans that do not necessarily conform to the neoliberal rational, economically driven mode of subjectivity. (P.255)

In contrast, research from South Korean suggests a wider endorsement of the neoliberal discourse by university students. Abelmann, Park, and Kim (2009) who investigated the creation of new student subjectivity following the neoliberalization of Korean higher education, suggest that South Korean students "inhabit" new discourses of human development, and fully accept the burden of managing their self- formation with very little awareness to structural differences and class positions.

In brief, neoliberal educational discourses encourage students to engage in a constant process of self-development. Thus, the burden of finding employment rests solely upon the shoulders of students who should strive to acquire the skills valued by corporate employers. Among these desirable social competencies, communication skills in English are being promoted as a necessary requirement for job market entry, and an integral part of the "neoliberal personhood" (Park, 2013) as I will explain in the following section.

4.4 English and neoliberalism

Although English has been historically associated with international capitalism, the turn towards a globalized neoliberal economy has accentuated the entanglement between English and the neoliberal ideology. The consolidation of the neoliberal hegemony coincided with an unprecedented spread of English around the world. Philipson (1992, 2008), who identified the spread of English in the world as a form of "linguistic imperialism", maintains that global English is the "capitalist neo-imperial" language and "a key dimension of the U.S empire" (p.1) which serves the interests of the corporate world and its allied governments. Meanwhile, Holborow (2007) places "teaching English at the forefront of the neoliberal agenda" (p. 5) for English is the "embodiment of the neoliberal project" (Holborow, 2012a p.26). However, before discussing the symbiotic relationship between English and neoliberalism, it is important to clarify the relationship between language and ideology. On the one hand, there are ideologies *about* the language, political, social, cultural and economic meanings/values associated with a certain language. For example, the neoliberal ideology promotes/constructs English as the global language of economic opportunity, excellence and self-improvement. On the other hand, there is an ideology *in* the language, an ideology that finds expression in the language, (or is articulated through the language). English in this case becomes a vehicle through which a neoliberal construction of the world circulates. In other words, there is a neoliberal discourse *on* English, and a neoliberal discourse embedded in language itself. As Terc (2012) puts it

> There are ideologies about language, ideologies articulated through language and ideologies that combine the two. In all of them, language ideologies are a ―mediating link between social forms and forms of talk (p.11)

However, the boundaries between these two discourses remain fuzzy, for "ideology and language overlap in so many ways that it is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins". (Holborow, 2007, p.4).

4.4.1 The market ideology in the language

The marketization of all domains of life under neoliberalism manifests itself in the pervasive use of the market metaphor for both economic and non-economic domains. Thus, the corporate jargon permeates discourses on education, healthcare, and social relationships reshaping the way we understand ourselves and the world according to a neoliberal worldview. As Barnett explains, "extending the range of activities that are commodified, commercialised and marketised necessarily implies that subjectivities have to be re-fitted as active consumers, entrepreneurial subjects, participants, and so on" (Barnett, 2005,P. 9).

Holborow (2015) draws on the Marxist and Gramscian understanding of ideology to examine the interconnections between language and neoliberalism. In the "German Ideology" (1845), Marx and Engels equate ideology with a distorted, one-sided and incomplete view of the world, comparing it to a *Camera Obscura* that produces an upside down representation of the world. Within the Marxist framework, Gramsci maintains in his "Prison notebooks" (1929-1935) that language as a hegemonic tool, reproduces ideology and establishes it as a truth or a common sense taken for granted. Thus, the market metaphor disseminated by the architects of neoliberalism (dominant classes), infuses the language to construct a "skewed" view of the world (Gray & Block, 2014) and legitimize the capitalist social order. (Holborow, 2015)

The neoliberal ideology in language does not merely manifest itself through market jargon. Global capitalism has promoted, even beyond the business domain, certain interactional norms and communication styles associated with the marketing customer care culture. Over two decades ago, Cameron (2002) highlighted how language itself had become part of brand-image or "nice speak". As she explained, global capitalism was "promoting particular interactional norms, genres and speech styles across languages on the grounds that they are maximally "effective" for purposes of "communication (p. 68). Cameron saw this development as a new non-traditional form of linguistic imperialism achieved "through instruction and training in particular linguistic practices" aimed at developing "communication skills", or "soft skills" that are highly valued the new work order. Although Cameron did not use the term neoliberalism, she did refer to a "deregulated", "hyper-competitive", post-industrial and globalized economy (p.72). For Cameron, the new capitalist work order placed a great importance on the interpersonal communication skills of the workers, especially those who interact with customers, a key example being call center workers (Holborow, 2007). These marketable language skills also play a central role in the neoliberal self-improvement culture. Thus, the customer care speak which originally aimed at creating rapport with customers is extended to the personal sphere to become a way of "branding" oneself.

However, it is worth noting that this neoliberal speak is not restricted to English. As Kramsch (2006, as cited in Park &Wee, 2012: 159) notes, the American neoliberal discourse is also present in other languages, such as French and German. Thus, the spread of the corporate jargon and interactional styles, cannot by itself account for the popularity of English. To explain the spread

of English, Park and Wee (2012) examine another level of the entanglement between English and neoliberal ideology, specifically, how the neoliberal ideology constructs/ brands English by associating it with specific social and cultural meanings which naturalize and legitimize its use as global language.

4.4.2 The neoliberal construction of English

Neoliberalism constructs English as a global language, a universally valuable linguistic capital that can be converted to other types of capital (economic and social), across several markets (Education, employment) and across space. (Park &Wee, 2012). The neoliberal discourse on English presents it as neutral language detached from any specific culture, a language that can bring economic benefits to anyone who acquires it, for it "affects all the members of a community equally without discriminating against anyone" (p.143). In addition, Park and Wee argue that the spread of English cannot be explained only by the promise of the economic benefits it holds. While they agree with Heller (2008) that English is a commodity pursued in the market in the hope to exchange it with material benefit, they emphasize the importance of how this commodity is branded, or associated with specific social and cultural meanings. Park (2013) also notes the importance of local contexts in understanding the indexical meaning that English carries.

> Both English and neoliberalism are always located within a specific sociopolitical context and their specific meanings and manifestations must be contingent upon the varying political and ideological landscape in which they settle in" (p.288)……. Understanding the role of the link between English and neoliberal reforms in relations to the highly particular political context of individual nation states becomes crucial: only in that way we can reach a nuanced analysis of how English functions as part of the broader ideological framework of neoliberalism, generating particular outcomes under specific constraints rooted in the local context. (P .289)

As Ong (2007) and Dardot and Laval (2012) have suggested, neoliberalism is not a set of unified policies, but a rationality that "travels both as a technique of administration and a metaphor" (Ong, 2007, p.5) which is translated differently depending on the local context.

To begin with, The South Korean case, which has been explored in depth, provides a valuable insight into the indexical meanings of English. The neoliberal restructuring of the South Korean economy that followed the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990's, triggered the "English Frenzy" or the relentless pursuit of English in the country. Official and corporate discourses promoted English as a necessary condition for South Korea to compete in the Global economy. English became the promise of material success and employability. These discourses also promoted an ideal worker type required by the new capitalism, depicted as modern, flexible, mobile, globally oriented and fluent in English. This worker is expected to be an entrepreneur of himself/herself, engaged in a never-ending process of self-fashioning and self-improvement. English, then, becomes a part of the moral project of becoming a better person (park, 2010). For Koreans who internalize the logic of self-improvement, English works as technology of the self, a mode of neoliberal governmentality (Park ,2012) that enables them to align themselves with the "neoliberal personhood" (Park, 2013) while those who don't develop their English are stigmatized for being irresponsible, or "bad neoliberal subjects"

> ….. English becomes a language that fits the profile of a "neoliberal personhood"- a language that indexes individuality and mobility, some of the very essences that define the

> ideal person imagined according to the neoliberal worldview, one who seeks autonomy and independence from traditional structures and surpass their constraints through life of mobility and vitality (Park, 2013: 297)

Furthermore, the South Korean case brings to light the social inequalities that English can mediate. The Korean media, which celebrates successful learners of English, constructs their English proficiency as the result of their hard work on themselves, as the personal achievement, often obscures how their privileged class positions could have mediated this success. (Park, 2012). Middle classes, driven by the anxiety to retain their class positions in a competitive world, naturally have access to better schools, private tutoring and sojourns in an English speaking country, whereas lower classes, who may share the same cosmopolitan aspirations of middle classes (Abelmann & Park 2004), have limited resources to enter the competition. Park (2013) suggests that the neoliberal educational reforms in South Korea, were largely endorsed by Korean middle classes, who were eager to end the equalization policy previously adopted by the ministry of education. These reforms, as Piller and Cho (2013) argue, have exacerbated class inequalities in higher education.

The South Korean context discussed above illustrates the social inequalities mediated by English. Neoliberal discourses in education promote English as a key marketable skill for job market entry, and the ultimate "technique" of self-improvement, while obscuring the class-based inequalities in accessing English language education. English communication skills are being promoted as an integral part of the Soft Skills package, a set of personality traits and attitudes valued the corporate employers. The skill discourse embraced by higher education institutions policy makers and international organizations alike, has created new forms of inequality, as I will explain in the following section.

4.5 The employability agenda

The neoliberal reconfiguration of education as the feeder of the economic activity (Holborow 2012a) has led to emergence of several interrelated discourses on skill, employability, and lifelong learning. These discourses are largely informed by the human capital theory which views education and training as private investments that would bring future dividends. These discourses exhort students-workers to invest in their skills in order to gain advantage in a highly competitive labor market. The advocates of the human capital approach maintain that a highly skilled workforce would be a cure-all solution for unemployment and inequality, as it would deliver growth and competitive advantage for individuals, corporations and nations. At the institutional level, the skill agenda has been widely promoted by international organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and has become central to the educational policies of countries like the UK (Payne, 2000) the USA (Hilton, 2008) and Australia (Williams, 2005). Along with these institutional discourses, the nineties witnessed the explosion of the popular culture of personal branding, which turned skill development into a thriving industry (Lair et al, 2005). These official and popular discourses construct the student/ worker as a bundle of skills (Urciuoli, 2008) that need to be constantly upgraded in a rapidly changing market. The skill and employability rhetoric prevails in education policy documents in the UK (Payne, 2000), Australia (Williams, 2005), USA (Hilton, 2008) and Ireland (Holborow, 2012b) and has been widely endorsed by several international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Economic Forum and the European Union. These organizations

lament the shortage of skills required in the new knowledge-based economy constructing unemployment as a skill deficiency. To cite one example, the World Bank rhetoric promotes the belief that skill development is the panacea for all economic ailments as it holds the promise of growth and productivity:

> In recent years, skills development has become a priority among developed and developing countries alike. Having a skilled workforce has been recognized as paramount to boosting competitiveness in an increasingly global and interdependent economic environment, fostering innovation and business creation and increasing productivity. As individuals with the right skills and knowledge are more likely to find employment, skills development can also have positive effects in reducing unemployment, raising incomes, and improving standards of living.
>
> Equipping the workforce with job-relevant skills has proven to be a challenge around the world. Mismatches between skills demand and supply are a common occurrence; school leavers and graduates struggle to find jobs that are commensurate with their education and training while employers struggle to fill vacancies. Employers lament the scarcity of skills considered essential for business competitiveness in the current economy that demands quick adaptation, innovation and flexibility. Unexperienced youth have trouble finding employment, but so do experienced workers with outdated skills (World Bank, 2016).

The new concept of "employability" is loaded with a neoliberal ideology which unburdens the state and holds individuals fully responsible for making themselves "employable" by investing in their skills. As Rose notes, contemporary workers are expected to engage in "skilling, reskilling, enhancement of credentials and preparation for a life of incessant job seeking" which turns life into "a continuous economic capitalization of the self" (Rose, 1999, P.161). It is worth noting here that employability has also become a part of the marketing schemes of universities. In addition to traditional rankings, employability rankings published by higher education think tanks such as Times higher Education and QS (Quacquarelli Symonds), inform the student/consumer about universities that produce "employable", "work -ready" graduates. As education becomes a private investment, students become entitled to know which investment will yield better market outcomes. Accordingly, those who cannot find employment are those who failed to develop the skills desired in the labor market, hence the construction of unemployment as a skill deficiency and a personal failure. For Fejes (2010), employability has become a technique of governance which exempts the states from its responsibility in providing education and training, leaving citizens no other choice but to fashion themselves to fit the market requirements. Thus, the discourse of skill and employability which aims at creating autonomous entrepreneurial subjects, legitimizes unemployment, obscuring any structural inequalities that determine labor market outcomes. Following this logic, unemployed individuals are believed to lack the right attitudes and personal skills required in the labor market. This focus on skills is often justified by the changing nature of work in late capitalism to justify the need for a combination of generic, transferable skills often labelled as "soft skills"**,** in addition to technical knowledge and abilities. As manufacturing in the West was offshored to developing countries, the new "knowledge- based economy"- an often taken-for-granted concept- involves a new form of immaterial, intangible labor where knowledge, creativity problem solving and communication play a central role. In addition, high tech industries place a great importance on a new class of specialist knowledge workers, "the Symbolic analysts", innovators capable of identifying and solving problems (Reich, 1991). Furthermore, the changing

nature of work together with advanced communication technology has led to the emergence of new organizational structures: flatter hierarchies, team work and flexible employment, are new forms of organization that require workers to be autonomous, self-reliant and constantly available (Boltanski& Chiapello, 2005). As the dominant pattern today is flexible, short term employment, a worker's career has become a series of projects, hence the importance of career management skills which include constant upskilling and personal branding to survive in a highly competitive environment and adapt to rapidly changing markets. Another justification for the new skills, is the expansion of the service economy where employees are expected to possess attitudes and competencies that enable them to successfully interact with customers (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Payne, 2009).

4.6 Defining skills

Although neoliberal discourses in education center around "skill", the concept itself remains ill-defined. While skill traditionally meant a certain technical knowledge and ability (Payne, 2000), Urciuoli (2008) argues that skill today "denotes any practice, form of knowledge, or way of being constituting productive labor" (P.212). Second, the skill and employability discourse has expanded the notion of skills to include a cluster of personal attributes desirable in the new work order. The rationale behind this expansion is that the knowledge and service based economy requires, in addition to hard/technical skills, a cluster of "soft skills", to handle new forms of immaterial, intangible labor, where communication and information exchange play a central role. A close reading of policy documents in several Western countries reveals that the notion has expanded to include, in addition to technical or subject knowledge, a cluster of personality attributes that were never traditionally classified as a skill. Thus, skill becomes any personal characteristic, attitude and behavior desirable in the labor market such as efficient communication, team work, problem solving, creativity, motivation, drive, flexibility, ability to cope with stress. Accordingly, the skill discourse equates skill and competence with a certain type of personality desired by employers. More than a decade ago, Boltanski and Chiappello (2005) highlighted the importance of the worker's character in late capitalism:

> Transverse modes of coordination place greater weight not only on linguistic mastery but also on qualities that might be called more "personal", more clearly bound up with the "character" of the person, for example, openness, self-control, availability, good humour, composure, which were by no means so highly prized in the old work culture (p. 241).

For the service economy in particular, these desired attributes have been also expanded to include any personal trait that could be exploited to enhance the corporate image and satisfy customers. Research on aesthetic labor by Warhurst and Nickson (2007) highlighted the importance of physical appearance of workers as they are expected to embody the corporate image. Similarly, workers are also expected to deploy "emotional labor" to manage their emotions while interacting with customers (Hoshchild, 1983).

As is clear from the above, the soft skill discourse which conflates character and competence suggests the erosion of the boundaries between professional and private life (Payne, 2000) and demarcates a new era of capitalism in which the private self of the worker is totally subjugated to

corporate imperatives. This new definition of skill represents for Payne (2009**)** a heightened phase of capitalist exploitation:

> It can be argued that definitions of skill are now widening to include almost anything that an employing organization can extract and utilize from the worker in order to create value — be it skills or knowledge (as conventionally defined), emotions, physical appearance (what is now referred to as 'aesthetic labor skills'), commitment, motivation, or physical stamina…This marks a significant shift from past understandings of the term 'skill' when to be a skilled worker meant having a good job with a decent wage, some genuine autonomy over one's work and a real degree of labor market power (p.362).

Along the same lines, Brown (1995) links the "personification of labor" to changing labor market conditions. He argues that the oversupply of graduates resulting from widening participation policies, together with the precarity of contemporary employment and the scarcity of high paying jobs, has changed the "rules of game" for labor market entry. In response to this credential inflation, graduates strive to display personal qualities desired by employers to differentiate themselves for the rest of applicants and "stand out from the crowd"

> …."The rules of entry" and the "rules of the game" become increasingly personalized… it is now the whole person who is on show or is at stake in the market for managerial and professional work…It is the "personality package", based on a combination of credentials, Technical skills and charismatic qualities which needs to be repackaged and sold in the market for managerial and professional work. (p.41, 42).

Thus, graduating from a high ranking university is still necessary, but not enough to stay in the game. As Brown puts it "credentials is the key that unlocks but does not open doors" and job seekers today have internalized the need to accumulate different types of credentials, in addition to their academic qualifications. In this atmosphere of intense competition, what makes a graduate employable is not his or her ability fulfill the requirements of a specific job, but their ability to accumulate more credentials than other applicants. As employers value today certain personal skills, personality becomes a form of credential rewarded on the labor market, a phenomenon that Rivera (2011) refers to as" the credentialization of character". In other words, finding employment in a highly competitive market becomes a matter of branding oneself, or marketing one's personal qualities, a strategy popularized by the personal branding movement in the late nineties (Lair et al, 2005). Along these lines, non-professional activities such as hobbies, pleasure and cultural consumption have become a sort of investment that helps job seekers to construct an impressive CV and distinguish themselves from the rest of the applicants. For Cremin (2003) this instrumentalization of life experiences amounts to a "commodification of personality", for workers today are exhorted to produce a life narrative that aligns with the corporate ethos. Thus, workers engage in a sort of "reflexive exploitation of the self" as they internalize the necessity to shape their CV in accordance with corporate norms. Challenging Giddens' claim that individuals in late modernity reflexively produce their identity, he pessimistically argues that this self-production take places under market pressure, excluding the possibility of resistance or the creation of alternative subjectivities. Cremin's claim, however, requires further empirical evidence, for a worker's apparent acquiescence to the market requirements does not necessarily exclude forms of

resistance that could still be underexplored. As Davies and Bansel (2007) note commenting on the work of Nair and Higgins

> This complex range of discourses, which students juggle in the shaping of their identity can lead to creative and surprising life plans that do not necessarily conform to the neoliberal rational, economically driven mode of subjectivity. (P.255)

Finally, recent research has highlighted the importance of extra-curricular activity for employers as proxy for marketable skills (Rivera, 2011; Bathmaker; 2013; Brown, 2003). For example, Rivera's (2011) research in to hiring process of three elites American firms, suggests that extracurricular activities have become credentials rewarded in the labor market as they determine the candidate social and moral worth in the eyes of recruiters. These activities are usually taken as a proxy for some desired personal attributes such as motivation, flexibility, entrepreneurialism and ability to cope with stress. Most of these extracurricular activities generally are associated with a middle class culture whose members possess the time and resources to engage in such activities. Thus, the "soft skills" discourse ideal student/ workers are those who embody middle class cultural dispositions, which leads to the exclusion of applicants from different cultural background, class or race who do display a middle class culture capital valued in corporate setting as I will explain in the following section.

These desirable personality attributes such as presentable physical appearance, certain modes of communication, and manners that employers value today are mostly associated with white middle-class culture. Thus this discourse promotes an Americanized version of communication. Cameron (2002), discussed previously, also highlighted how the communication skill discourse promotes American middle class interactional norms: **"** the ideal of good and effective communication bears a non-coincidental resemblance to the preferred speech of habits of educated middle class and predominantly white people brought up in the US" (p.70).

4.7 Critique of soft skills

The soft skill discourse has been mainly criticized for circulating a class-based construction of the competent worker which entrenches inequalities and increases labor market stratification. As Bailly &Lene (2013), Warhurst et al (2012), Rivera (2011) and Davidson (2016) have noted, these skills are not necessarily developed in higher education but are rather the product of a long socialization process into the middle-class culture. Ainly (1994, as cited in Payne, 2000) notes that these skills are in fact not technical abilities, but social competencies possessed by those who were born into middle classes

> [these skills]... are neither personal, transferable, nor skills; they are social and generic competencies ... To present attitudes and habits detached form their cultural context as technical abilities that can be acquired piecemeal in performance not only divorces them from the cultural context that gave them their original meaning but represents them as equally accessible to all students whatever their class, cultural background, gender or race...It ignores the fact that middleclass students already possess these competencies as a result of previous education and family socialisation ... For at rock bottom, the real personal and transferable skills required for preferential employment are those of white maleness and traditional middle-classness. (p.363)

Skill is a social construct as dominant classes have the power to define what constitutes competence and legitimize or stigmatize certain communication styles. Thus, when personality is conflated with skill, middle-classness becomes a skill rewarded on the labor market, which opens the door for all types of racial, gender and class discrimination against job candidates from non-traditional backgrounds. (Bailly, 2013). Research into employers' perceptions and preferences in several global contexts suggests that the middle-class profile is desirable in the labor market. In the British context, research by Leslie (2002) and Walls (2008) into UK retail market found that applicants who do not conform to the middle class culture in the appearance and behavior were less likely to get the job as they fail to embody a desirable corporate image. Their findings suggests that employers in the service industry discriminate in favor of the people they perceive to be better looking or more presentable and exclude candidates they believe to be as less physically attractive. In the American context, race also plays role in the exclusion of some candidates. Research by Moss and Tilly (2001) into the perceptions of American employers highlight racial stereotyping of black male applicants. They found that American employers believed that Black men lacked the desirable soft skills and attitudes for work. Accordingly, when presentation, attitude, behavior and, especially, physical appearance become decisive factors in the selection process, employers will most likely base their decisions on stereotypes in terms of social class, race or gender. (Cullen, 2011, Nickson et al 2003; Williams & Connell 2010). Those lack the knowledge, the resources (or sometimes the will) to package and brand themselves in accordance to market requirements are perceived as inadequate for the job. As Lair et al (2005) have argued the personal branding discourse is blind to gender, race and class inequalities, for it ignores the fact that people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have access to the material and cultural resources necessary to market themselves nor do they know how to display their qualities as the members of the middle class do (Skeggs, 2004). Therefore, as a middle class cultural capital is economically rewarded on the labor market, the soft skill discourse functions as a **"**form of closure, deepening middle-class forms of social and cultural reproduction". (Avis, 1996, p. 117).

While the above mentioned forms of discrimination can affect job applicants regardless of their nationality, research has highlighted the Soft Skills discourse can negatively affect the job prospects of migrants from nonwestern backgrounds. As Siebers (2018) notes, migrant job applicants have the "double burden" of having the right credentials, and providing at same time provide evidence of their cultural adaption. They are often viewed as lacking the "soft skills" required for the job. In the Dutch context, Siebers argues that assessing applicants on the basis of soft skills represents a form of symbolic violence which intersects with nationalist discourse hostile to migrants. His observations clearly resonate with Allan's (2016) ethnographic Research into a language training program for professional immigrants in Canada. Allan highlighted the ideological underpinnings of the communication skills discourse emphasizing that language and personality cannot be separated. Her findings illustrate how soft skills have become a technology of neoliberal governance, or a way "languaging the workers" (Dlaske et.al, 2016) to produce a neoliberal subjectivity through language and communication. The program which aimed at enhancing the employability of participants constructed their underemployment as a soft skills deficiency. Accordingly, the trainers promoted among the participants entrepreneurial attitudes that would help them to market themselves in the Canadian workplace. Thus, in casting unemployment as a lack of skills, the soft skill paradigm lays the blame on workers for their lack of employability obscuring the structural economic and social barriers to their labor market entry

(Hora, et.al. 2018). Accordingly, the soft skills discourse has becomes a technique of governance aiming at producing neoliberal subjectivities through language and communication.

4.8 Conclusion

In the neoliberal worldview, the role of higher education is to feed the economy with "corporate friendly" workers who possess a set of marketable skills valued in the neoliberal work order. (Holborow, 2012 b) .The current employability agenda embraced by higher education institutions are predicated on a neoliberal ideology that unburdens state and exhorts individuals to develop their skills in order to gain competitive advantage in the market. Thus, the student- worker is constructed as a bundle of skills (Urciuoli, 2008) that can be measured and priced in the labor market. These skills include, in addition, to technical abilities (hard skills) a cluster of personal traits attitudes, ways of communication desirable for the knowledge and service economy. These discourses have redefined the meaning of skill to include any knowledge, attitude or behaviour that contributes to production and profit. Thus, we witness in late capitalism the total exploitation of the workers labor power as their emotional, aesthetic and linguistic abilities are fully utilized in the service of capital. The definition of what constitutes skill, however, remains highly contested. As several researchers have noted, the personal attributes desired incorporate settings are mostly associated with a middle-class culture and fully conform to the entrepreneurial neoliberal personhood. Therefore, conflating personality with competence opens the door for all types of discrimination in terms of race, gender, and social class. Thus, the soft skill discourse mediates social inequalities by constructing students' unemployment as a skill deficit obscuring thereby the structural inequalities that shape students access to the job market. In the remaining parts of this thesis, I will explore these structural inequalities in the Lebanese context through the narratives of 15 students from North Lebanon. The following chapter describes the methodology I have used to conduct my research.

Chapter 5

Research Methodology

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the methodology I used in order to explore social inequalities in Lebanese higher education. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to examine the social structures that generate inequality in order to explain how the students' class position shapes their university experience and their career orientation. Therefore, the study addresses three sets of questions:

4. What was the students' motivation to pursue higher education? To what extent were parents involved in this transition? How did their class position affect their choice of university? How did other identity markers shape these choices?
5. How did the students' class position affect their acquisition of social and cultural capital and their involvement in extracurricular activities? What was the role of higher education institutions in providing these opportunities? What other identity markers interacted with class to shape the acquisition of soft skills?
6. How did the students' class position shape their career prospects? What role did different higher education institutions play in fostering better opportunities? What role did *Wasta* play in accessing job market opportunities? How did other identity markers such as geographical location and gender affect their career opportunities?

As Padgett (2004) notes, the reliability of a qualitative study cannot be established unless the researcher is committed to making the research process as transparent and rigorous as possible. Accordingly, the sections that follow will explain and justify the methodological choices that oriented the research process. First, I will explain the philosophical framework of the study (critical realism) by identifying the ontological and epistemological assumptions that guided my research. This justification will be followed by an explanation of the critical methodological approach I have adopted. I move then to explaining the qualitative nature of the study and the role of the researcher in establishing rapport and managing power relationships. In addition, I will provide a detailed description of the research design which includes the sampling process, the data collection methods, and the content analysis of the data I collected from interviews. Finally, I will close this chapter by discussing the credibility of my study which I have attempted to achieve through the transparency and the rigor of my research process.

5.2 Critical realism as a philosophical framework

A fundamental component of any credible research process is a reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the social phenomena under examination. Thus, it is crucial for the researcher to determine the ontological (related to nature of reality) and the epistemological (related to the knowledge of reality) assumptions that underpin the study. The qualitative inquiry documented in this thesis is predicated on the premise that educational inequalities are generated by social structures that unequally distribute material and cultural resources to social agents according to their class position. I see these social structures as an objective reality that operates

independently of me as a researcher or the participants in my study. At the same time, as direct access to these structures is not possible, this study attempts to explore the effects of this inequality on the lived experiences of Lebanese university students. In other words, the aim of the study is to examine how this inequality manifests itself in their actions, feelings, beliefs and opinions, aspirations and the meanings they assign to their experiences. My role as a researcher is to interpret their accounts in order to unveil these social structures, or explain how the students' class position, constituted by their economic, social and cultural capitals mediates unequal educational outcomes. Thus, without denying my participants any sort of agency, I believe that they operate within the constraints of the social structures that generate inequality and that the students' "class habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977) conditions or shapes their perceptions, beliefs and actions. On the one hand, the epistemological stance I have described above clearly contrasts with the positivist paradigm in which reality can be fully known empirically. Unlike the natural world, the complexity of the social world and the "intangible quality of social phenomena" (Cohen et.al, 2007 p.11) suggest that the behavior of social agents cannot be fully predictable. On the other hand, my stance is also incongruent with a purely interpretivist or social constructivist paradigm in which reality (read inequality) is a mere discursive construction (Willis, 2007). Therefore, the most suitable framework for this study is critical realism, which provides an alternative to the dichotomy between the positivist and the interpretivist paradigms (Fletcher, 2017).

Critical realism originated in the 1970s and 1980s from the work of the Indian-British thinker Roy Bhaskar. Other critical realists such as Sayer (1992), Archer (1995), Collier (1994), and Lawson (1997) further discussed and refined this philosophical framework. As a scientific alternative to both positivism and constructivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011**),** critical realism reconciles elements from both paradigms without being committed to any particular set of methods (Brown et al., 2002; Nielsen, 2002). To begin with, critical realism suggests that there is an objective reality that exists regardless of whether the researcher or social agents are aware of its existence. However, human knowledge can only capture a small part of this reality. Because human knowledge of reality is always partial and limited, reality cannot be reduced to our knowledge of it. (Bhaskar, 1998). With this assertion, Bhaskar transcends the opposition between the two paradigms. On one hand, he agrees with the hermeneutic approach that "social sciences deal with pre-interpreted reality, a reality already brought under concepts by social actors" (Bhaskar, 1998, P.21). Thus, he admits that reality is always mediated by the already existing the concepts of social actors. For Bhaskar, however, the fact that a researcher is unable to show that social reality exists does not imply that this reality does not exist. Therefore, critical realism rejects the "epistemic fallacy" conflating ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (our knowledge of reality). Our incomplete and partial knowledge of reality cannot be equated with reality itself (Bhaskar, 1998). In this way, critical realism distinguishes itself from both positivism and constructivism which Bhaskar finds equally guilty of reducing ontology to epistemology (Fletcher, 2017). The epistemic fallacy he rejects can be found in positivism, which limits reality to what can be empirically known through scientific experimentation, but also in the constructivist paradigm which views reality as entirely constructed through human knowledge or discourse (Bhaskar, 2002). Accordingly, he asserts that

> there is no inconsistency between being an ontological realist (believing that there is a real world which consists in structures, generative mechanisms, complexities which exist and

> act independently of the scientist, and saying that knowledge is itself socially produced….. science is characterized by relativism, diversity, difference and change (Bhaskar, 2002, p. 211).

The ontological and epistemological orientation described above provides a valuable insight into the relationship between the researcher, the social world and the social theories attempting to explain social phenomena. From a critical realist stance, there is a social reality that exists "out there" independently of researchers; however, for Bhaskar (1998), social phenomena cannot be accessed in isolation from their effects. Researchers do not have direct access to the social structures generating inequality, but they can identify, imagine or capture these structures by observing and analyzing the social events, activities, the patterns or "demi-regularities" produced by these generative mechanisms, rather than any predictive laws. (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 70). Therefore, Bhaskar does not endorse any deterministic association between social structures and human actions as human behavior cannot be predicted in a law-like manner. In other words, the causal explanations that researchers look for do not strip social agents of their agency. Rather, critical realism acknowledges the dynamic relationship between structure and agency. For Bhaskar (1998) society is not simply the result of human activity. Society (structure) precedes agency for it is the necessary condition for social activity. But these social structures are always present in social actions in the sense that they orient, shape or condition these actions. Thus, society and its causal powers exist independently of human activity which either reproduces social structures or transforms them. "Society is ….to be regarded as ensemble of structures, practices and relationships, which individuals both reproduce and transform, without which society would not exist" (Bhaskar, 1998, p.3).

Finally, although social theories can help researchers explain the social world, Bhaskar (1979) does not profess any commitment to the content of specific theories emphasizing "the conditional nature of all its results' (p. 6). Therefore, even if social researchers need to rely on initial theories to analyze social phenomena, the results of their analysis might support, refine or even challenge these theories to propose a more plausible explanation of reality. For Bhaskar, all explanations of reality are treated as "fallible" (Bhaskar, 1979), including the explanations provided by research participants, theorists, and scientists. However, he rejects "judgmental relativism" which suggests that all explanations of reality are equally valid, claiming that there will always be some knowledge or theory that is closer to reality than another. Thus, he rejects the radical interpretivist view in which all constructions of reality are acceptable, as this view maintains the status quo and prevents any action aiming at redressing social injustice. (Fletcher, 2017). This divergence from the constructionist paradigm makes critical realism particularly useful for change-oriented research seeking the most plausible explanation of a social phenomenon under examination.

Accordingly, I have chosen critical realism as a philosophical framework for my study due to my alignment with its ontological and epistemological assumptions. As an ontological realist, I believe that the social structures generating inequality exist and operate independently of me as a researcher or my participants. At the same time, I accept that my knowledge of the social world of my participants is mediated by my personal interpretation of the students' accounts of their lived experiences in higher education. My role as a researcher is to provide the most plausible

explanation of the social world in the light of the theories of social and educational inequality I have discussed in chapter 3. This epistemological stance also means that my study is affiliated to the interpretivist paradigm, which by definition attempts to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). As Yanow (2006) notes**,** interpretivism is "umbrella term" for different schools of thought, including those drawing (explicitly or implicitly) on phenomenology, hermeneutic (Klein and Myers,1999) or Frankfurt School critical theory along with symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. This study clearly rejects radical interpretivism/constructionism which adopts ontological and radical relativism (Rowe, 2009). According to this the radical interpretivist school, there is no social reality "out there" for there are multiple socially constructed realities. Therefore, our knowledge of the social world can only be gained through social constructions of realities. In this view, social structure is a mere consequence of the ways we perceive social relations (Guba& Lincoln 1989). These interpretive approaches are often criticized for

> ….. their relative neglect of the power of external- structural- forces that shape our behavior and events. There is a risk in interpretive approaches that they become hermetically sealed from the world outside the participants' theater of activity-they put artificial boundaries around subjects' behavior. Just as positivistic theories can be criticized for their macro-sociological persuasion, so interpretative and qualitative theories can be criticized for their narrowly micro-sociological perspectives. (Cohen et al, p. 26).

Accordingly, in my analysis of the participants' accounts, I find it crucial to avoid any kind of "naïve interpretivism" or relativistic social construction (Boje, 2001) which overlooks the influence of social structures on social agents. Therefore, this study subscribes to *critical interpretivism* which

> …..takes the grounds of interpretation to be essentially linked to social power and domination and, thus, to require a systematic analysis of the nature, structure, and impact of power on the constitution and understanding of meaning. In the same vein, the focus on power gives this theoretical project a critical dimension inasmuch as its cognitive interest aims at a normatively motivated transformation of social practices toward more freedom, self-realization, and equality. The basic idea is that acts of interpretation are internally related to forms of power, whereas this reflexive insight can foster practices of critical interpretation within which power practices are unmasked. Those existing power practices thereby become challengeable, enabling an improved ethical practice. (Kogler, 2009, p.151)

As Kogler explains, in a critical interpretivist approach, the role of the researcher is not limited to simply accepting participants' accounts of social reality at their face value, rather, the researcher's task is to discern behind the words of participants' the power structures that shape the social world. This critical interpretation should also take into account that participants might entertain false beliefs, as more powerful groups in society are able to impose their world view on others, which means that researchers should to seek an objective account of the social reality (Rex, 1974). This critical interpretivist approach which reconciles value (equality, social justice) with objectivity (Archer et al, 2016) constitutes a bridge between critical and interpretivist research (Myers and Klein, 2011).

5.3 Methodological approach: Critical educational research

The purpose of this study is to examine the social structures that generate unequal educational outcomes in the Lebanese society. Therefore, it represents a critique of the Lebanese educational system which entrenches social inequalities in the Lebanese society. By examining the mechanisms that generate unequal educational outcomes, I hope to produce a knowledge of the system which can inform a social justice agenda seeking to challenge the status quo and redress these social inequalities. Therefore, this qualitative inquiry subscribes to a critical methodological approach which has a clear affinity with a critical realist philosophical orientation. Indeed, these two independent movements both emerged from Marxism and both endorse an emancipatory agenda concerned with unveiling "the real state of the affairs" as Marx and Engels stated in the *German Ideology* (1988, [1932]). In addition, both orientations offer methodological flexibility due to their lack of commitment to any specific methods. One has to note, however, that critical research is not considered a philosophy of knowledge that can be compared to positivism, interpretivism or critical realism, but rather, as Rowe (2009) notes, a methodological approach which is best suited for change-oriented research. (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Myers and Klein, 2011)

This methodological framework is inspired by critical theory which emerged from Marxism in the first half of the 20th century. Whereas classical Marxism focuses on capitalist-workers relationships and the control of means of production, Critical Theory attempts to explore different forms of power relationships such as class, gender, race and ethnicity (Willis, 2007). In particular, critical educational research is heavily influenced by the early work of Habermas and to a lesser extent his predecessors in the Frankfort school Adorno, Marcuse, Horkhiemer and Fromm. (Apple, 2003). As Kilgore (2001) explains, the main task of critical research is to critique dominant ideologies, seeking to uncover oppressive relationships which give some groups more resources and assets while marginalizing others. Therefore, the aim of this school of research is to expose power relationships between individuals and groups of individuals and question taken for granted assumptions and values in order to develop an "emancipatory consciousness" in scholars and social members in general (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994,). This emancipatory orientation highlights the political nature of critical research and its liberating potential (Cohen, 2007). Accordingly, researchers who identify with this paradigm cannot claim political neutrality as they openly endorse a transformative agenda seeking a more egalitarian society. In particular, the role of critical educational research which I have discussed in chapter 3 is to examine the relationship between society and the educational system to understand how educational inequalities are reproduced and entrenched over the generations. This enterprise brings under scrutiny the processes through which schooling perpetuates social inequality favoring and rewarding those endowed with more economic, social and cultural assets. The focus on structure, however, does not imply that social agents have no agency. In alignment with the critical realist paradigm, critical educational research recognizes that social agents can intentionally act to change the social world, but it also admits that these actions are constrained/ shaped by different structures of social, cultural, economic and political domination. Thus, individuals do not create society out of nothing, rather, they operate

within already existing social structures that they can either reproduce or transform. These social structures are prerequisites for any human action social (Bhaskar, 1993). Therefore, the critical methodological approach enables the researcher to make visible the power structures that shape social action. As Danermark et.al (2002) explain

> The most productive contribution to social practice that social science can make…. is the examination of social structures, their powers, and liabilities, mechanism and tendencies, so that people groups and organizations may consider them in their interaction and so-if they wish-strive to change or eliminate existing social structures and establish new ones. (P.182)

5.4 A Qualitative study

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of Lebanese students in higher education in order to unveil the power structures that generate unequal educational outcomes. As I explain above, from a critical realist perspective, I am aware that as a researcher I do not have direct access to these structures; therefore, my role is to examine the manifestations of social inequalities in the students' accounts of their educational experiences. My decision to conduct a qualitative inquiry was dictated by my interest in inequality as a lived experience which involves, the feelings, perceptions, and beliefs of my participants. In a qualitative enterprise, researchers attempt to provide in-depth descriptions and plausible interpretations of the human behavior (Lichtman, 2013). As Denizen and Lincoln (1998) note, qualitative research is interpretive by nature as researchers try to make sense of social phenomena and understand the meanings that participants assign to their experiences. The scarcity of qualitative educational research in Lebanon and the constant marginalization of students' voices in Lebanese educational research meant that there is very little knowledge of what was going on in students' lives, hence my interest in conducting a qualitative study. Finally, this choice was also inspired by a long tradition of qualitative research exploring the effect of class in education in Western contexts (see chapter 3) which provided me with reliable research models and helped me "imagine" conducting similar research in Lebanon. I was also aware that qualitative inquiry offered methodological flexibility as researchers can use a variety of methods such as individual interviews, focus groups, case studies, diaries, observations, texts and visual material. (Cohen, et. al, 2007). In my case, I found that individual and focus group interviews were the most feasible methods considering the busy schedules of the participants and my own work commitments. Accordingly, this study does not qualify as an ethnography because it did not involve observations of participants. I can claim , however, that it has an "ethnographic orientation" , and is ethnographic in spirit, as I spent a little more than a year on university campuses, interacting with students, conducting most interviews in natural settings, taking notes, which enriched my data analysis. In the following sections, I will provide a detailed description of the different stages of this qualitative inquiry explaining the rationales behind my research design and reflecting on my role as researcher and my relationship with students.

5.5 Social context: North Lebanon

This study explores social inequalities in Lebanese higher education by examining the educational experiences of 15 university students from North Lebanon. My choice to research this part of Lebanon has a double justification. As I have already explained in chapter 1, peripheral Lebanon remains underdeveloped compared to the rest of the country. The socio-economic discrepancy between central and peripheral Lebanon is a well-documented phenomenon (Nasr & Dubar, 1976; Salti &Chaaban, 2010; UNDP 2008). Several reports published by international organizations confirm that the North stands at the intersection of several forms of economic, social and educational inequality. Thus, the socio-economic profile this underprivileged part of Lebanon makes it an ideal field to research educational inequalities. According to the United Nations development program UNDP report, "Towards a citizenship states" (2009), the North in particular remains the most underprivileged region in Lebanon with an overall poverty rate of 52.27%. Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon is considered among the most impoverished cities on the Mediterranean. Poverty is even more acute in the rural regions of the North, specifically Akkar and Minnieh-Dinnieh, where it affects over 60% of the population (UNDP, 2008). Another report by ESCWA (2015), estimates that 51% of Tripoli's residents live in extreme poverty, on an income of less than $4/day for a household of five. Half the population is considered poor by UN standards and 18% percent in extreme poverty. A more recent report by ESCWA (2015) confirms that while 77 per cent are deprived in terms of the economic status factor, whereas 35% percent are deprived in terms of accommodation, 35 %in terms of health and 25 per cent in terms of education. This deprivation is coupled with 58.8 unemployment rate in the working class neighborhood of Bab-Al Tebbaneh (UNICEF, 2018) and the highest number of school dropouts in Lebanon (UNDP, 2008). Moreover, regional developments have also exacerbated the worsening socio-economic conditions in this part of Lebanon. The North, which already hosts around 475 000 Palestinian refugees (UNRWA, 2020), has witnessed the arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees (251, 537 in 2018) since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2012 (OCHA, 2018). This has put more strain on the already poor infrastructure affecting the supply of water and electricity, waste management and other basic services in an area of poor infrastructure. Finally, the city witnessed from 2008 till 2014 politico-sectarian clashes between Tripoli's Alawite community of Jabal Mohsen and the Sunni community of Beb el Tebbaneh, a conflict exacerbated by the eruption of the Syrian war in 2012. This armed conflict came to an end in 2014 after the implementation of the security plan by the Lebanese Armed Forces (UN Habitat, 2016).

Furthermore, the educational profile of the North offers an interesting context for educational research, given that it hosts diverse educational institutions which cater for different social strata. In addition to public schools which mainly take in working and lower middle class students, a range of private schools attract middle class. Meanwhile, upper middle classes prefer globally-oriented elite schools such as the Lycée Alphonse de Lamartine, and the International school of Choueifat Similarly, the North hosts in addition to the public Lebanese university, several private universities which range from affordable market-oriented universities such as the Lebanese International University (LIU) and (Université Libano-Francaise (ULF), to other universities with higher costs and more prestige such as Université Saint-Joseph (USJ) and the University of Balamand (UOB). It is worth noting here that a minority of more ambitious students endowed with better economic and cultural resources choose to enroll in elite universities in the capital such as The American University of Beirut (AUB) or the American Lebanese University (LAU). The North also hosts a mix of Muslim and Christian populations, which provides an opportunity to reflect on the possible effect of religious diversity on educational outcomes. Finally, the area is

an ideal field to examine the Urban/rural disparities as higher education institutions are virtually absent in the rural areas in Akkar and Minieh-Dennieh.

On the practical level, conducting research in the North was a convenient option for several reasons. As someone who received most of her education in Tripoli, and worked as an instructor at a Northern private university, I had insider knowledge of the economic, cultural and social context of my participants. Thus, my familiarity with the different social groups that make up the Northern population facilitated communication with students and helped me achieve a deeper understanding of their experiences. In addition, conducting research in the North enabled me to reconcile work and research, as my university was only twenty minutes away from Tripoli by car. Therefore, it was easy for me to schedule visits to university campuses and arrange for interviews with students and educators. Moreover, having lived all my life in the North meant that I could mobilize my personal and my professional network to recruit students. Thus, my friends, relatives and colleagues have generously helped me find my key informants who accompanied me in my first visits to universities and introduced me to other students.

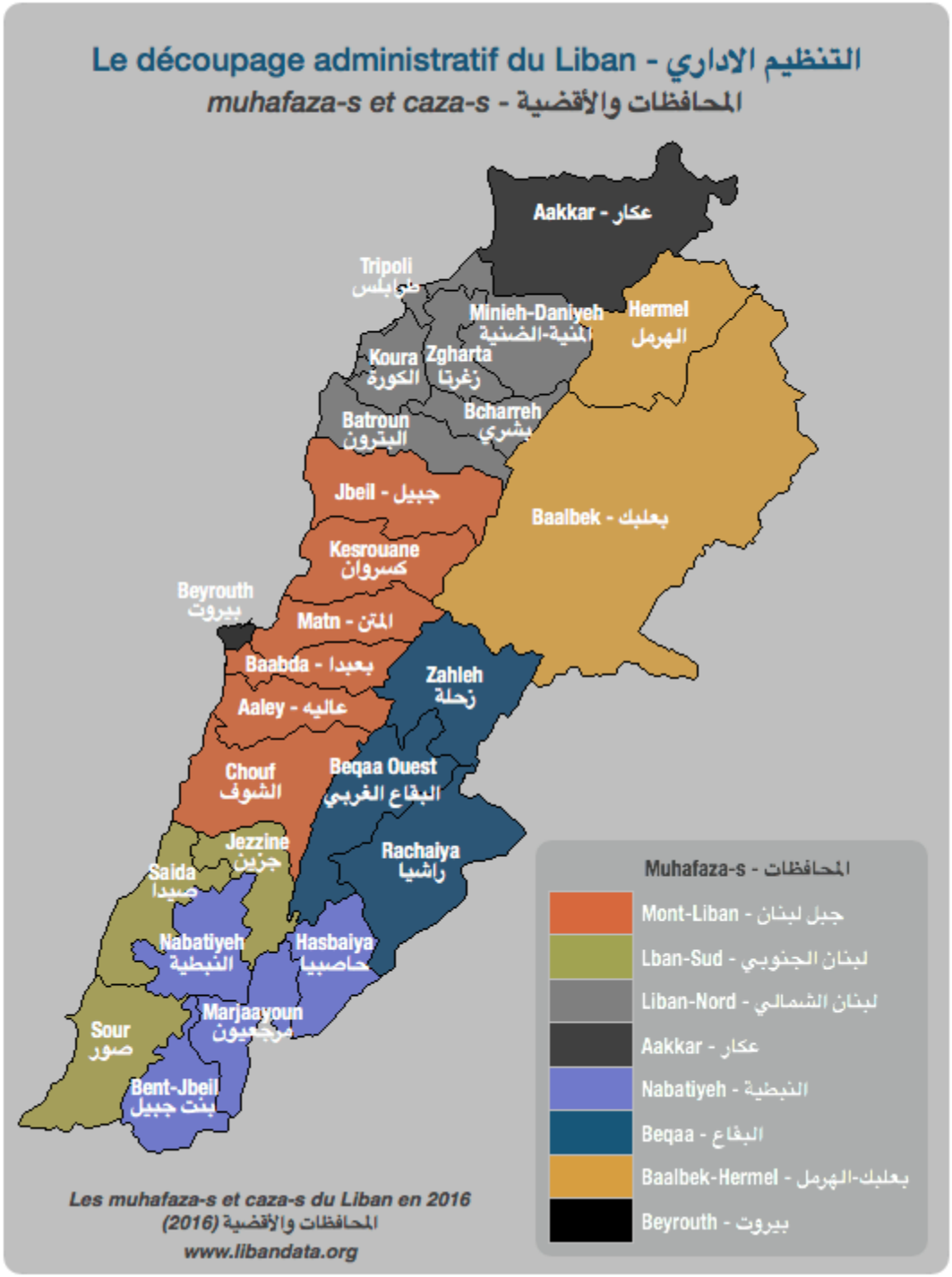

Figure 1. Map of Lebanon

5.6 Sampling

Although qualitative inquiry is not expected to yield generalizable results (Lichtman, 2013), my main concern was to recruit a diverse sample that could represent typical cases across class positions, in addition to a couple of atypical cases that would enrich the data analysis. In addition, I aimed at a balanced sample in terms of gender, religion and geographical location (urban/rural).

The sampling process included two phases. In the first stage that started in September 2018, I have used snowball sampling, a strategy in which a researcher identifies a small number of individuals who have the characteristics in which they are interested. These people are then used as informants who help the researcher to identify other potential participants who qualify for inclusion in the study. (Cohen et.al, 2007, p.116). My key informants were students recommended by friends, colleagues and family members. I contacted them to arrange for visits to 5 university campuses, spent time talking to them about their university life and explained to them that I was researching the skills that students needed for the labor market. These students took me on campus tours, introduced me to their friends in the cafeteria and other open spaces on campus. I did not ask for prior permission from the university administrators to visit campuses with my informants as it was normal for outsiders to visit their friends, relatives in universities. During these informal visits with key informants, I introduced myself to their friends, explained the purpose of study, and requested personal interviews. I was mainly interested in students near graduation rather than first year students because they were likely to have some knowledge of the labor market; at the same time they spent enough time at university to be able to reflect on their experiences. My interview request elicited different reactions from students. While a few agreed to participate in the study, others said they had no time for the interview. In some cases, one student at a small affordable university in Tripoli jokingly declined my request saying that I should not even bother to conduct my research "which job market? Just tell your supervisor there are no jobs here!" After visiting several campuses with informants, I decided to make a few visits on my own and introduce myself again to different students. The purpose of independent visits was to have several points of entry to the student population in order to avoid the bias that could result from recruiting students who belong the same social network (Babbie, 1998). The students who agreed to participate in the study were asked to fill in a preliminary questionnaire (see appendix A) which gathered personal contact information in addition to several social class indicators such as the school they attended, parents' educational attainment, parents' occupation and area of residence and the students' own designation of their social class. I decided not to ask the students about their parents' income because many students do not necessarily have an accurate estimation of this income (especially that some students parents were not salaried employees). I also felt that in a society where appearances are important and poverty highly stigmatized, this question could have exposed the vulnerability of lower income students and negatively affected the egalitarian rapport I was striving to establish with participants.

University campuses were not the only site of research. A university student recommended by a colleague, introduced me to a group of working class and lower middle class students who received a scholarships from by a local NGO (Achievers) operating in an underprivileged neighborhood of Bab Al Tebbeneh). I contacted the organization secretary in early December 2018, obtained the permission to conduct a focus group on the premises of the organization. My informant helped me spread the word to arrange for a focus group of 8 students. All the students who participated in the focus group were asked to complete the same questionnaire and 2 of them (Rami and Tareq) accepted to grant me an interview later that year.

By spring 2019, I had obtained the verbal consent of 25 volunteers for the interviews. Subsequently, I handpicked the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of "their typicality

or possession of the particular characteristics being sought". (Cohen et al., 2007, p.114-115). To this end, I tried to come up with a diverse sample which included typical class positions and a couple of atypical cases to enrich the analysis. I was also concerned to have a balanced female/male ratio and made it a point to include students from different geographical locations in order to highlight urban/rural disparities. I also tried to recruit a religiously diverse sample as the existing literature indicated that female students from conservative Muslim families sometimes face considerable social restrictions (UNDP, 2006). Thus, the ultimate goal of recruiting a diverse sample was to understand how the interplay of several identity markers could affect educational outcomes. This intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) was particularly helpful given that several participants were subjected to multiple forms of inequality that interacted with their class position. For example, in the case of Mira, who comes from a conservative working class family, poor economic resources restricted her choice of university while her family's social restrictions hindered her mobility and limited her experience of the world, and her acquisition of employability skills. Thus, we need to consider this combination of economic and social disadvantage if we are to understand the source of educational inequality. Having these criteria in my mind, I selected 15 participants out of the 25 volunteers. In addition to students from Northern universities, my friends, colleagues and students introduced me to 3 students attending elite universities in Beirut. The aim behind this inclusion was to highlight mobility itself as a form of class privilege. Thus, as opposed to other participants who were practically "grounded" due to their limited economic and cultural resources, these well-resourced students, who attended elite schools in the North, were destined to "fly high" as they would reap the benefits of graduating from a prestigious cosmopolitan universities.

Although my sampling process had clear objectives (recruiting students from different class origins), classifying students into social class categories turned out to be a challenging task. In addition to the self- reported class position the students provided in the questionnaire, I was aware that conducting a credible analysis of the effect of class on educational outcomes required some objective classification of my participants' class positions. While reviewing qualitative educational research in Western context (the UK, the USA, Europe), I realized that researchers rely on national socio-economic classification schemes. For example, in their research on inequality in British higher education, Bathmaker et. al 2016 use the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), a widely used social-class schema in Britain. They describe this scheme as

> …..an occupational scale which conceptualises social classes based on employment relations in modern societies…Beyond income, it attempts to capture labor market position, power, status, long-term economic security and prospects, as well as relationships of authority and command in the workplace. (P.25).

Other options for British researchers include the Great British survey (2011) embedded in a Bourdieusian theoretical framework (Devine et. al, 2017). As for Europe, the ESEC (European socio-economic classification) is a categorical social class schema based on the concept of employment relations (Harrison & Rose, 2006). Another widely used scheme in France is the PCS

(Professions et Catégories Sociales which classifies the French population into 8 categories based on employment relationships. (Coutrot, 2002).

While the class schemes mentioned above are often subject of criticism, they nonetheless help researcher justify their classification of participants. Needless to say, these schemes are not transferable across national contexts. As Rubin et al. (2014) note, "objective measures of social class and SES [socio-economic status] need to be benchmarked and interpreted relative to population-based standards" and these can be difficult and controversial to establish" (p.5). Unfortunately, Lebanese researchers do not have similar socio-economic schemes at hand. Moreover, I was aware that conflating socio-economic status and social class would be a mistake and that special attention should be given to cultural capital (in its embodied and institutional forms) when classifying students. Rubin et al (2014) explain

> SES [socio-economic status] refers to one's current social and economic situation and, consequently, it is relatively mutable, especially in countries that provide opportunities for economic advancement. In contrast, social class refers to one's sociocultural background and is more stable, typically remaining static across generations…Hence, it is possible for a working-class person to have a relatively high SES while remaining in a stereotypically "blue-collar" occupation (P.3).

Therefore, I had to rely on a range of class indicators which could reflect the different combination of capitals that participants possessed. These indicators which I gathered in the preliminary questionnaire included parents' occupation, father and mother educational attainment and in some cases the area of residence. However, this approach which made sense for typical cases, or students with homogenous class profile, turned out to be quite problematic for others. For example, Malek is a third year business administration at a prestigious elite university in the Beirut. Both parents are doctors who graduated from the same university, continued their specialization in the US and currently lives in one the most expensive upper-middle class neighborhood in Tripoli. Thus, I could confidently classify him as upper-middle class. However, other students presented a more complex class profile. For example, I was hesitant to classify Rami as working class despite his father's occupation (a well-paid construction foreman) because he attended a private school in Tripoli which mostly caters for a middle class population. Another problematic case was Hilal, the son of a baker who won a scholarship to an expensive private university. In those two cases, the interviews revealed a significant exposure to middle class environments and provided evidence for what Bourdieu (2004) calls a "cleft habitus". For these cases, I decided to rely on the student's parents' occupation and educational attainment to decide on a class category, and highlight the heterogeneous class profile of these students in the data analysis.

Name	Town of residence	Social class	University and major	Father's educational attainment and profession	Mother's educational attainment and profession
1.Hanadi	Akkar	lower middle class	Law /LU	elementary grocer	Elementary
2.Malek	Tripoli	upper middle class	AUB Business	Doctor	Doctor
3.Zaynab	Akkar	Llower middle class	Biology/ PreMed Balamand	elementary army first sergeant	elementary
4.Tareq	Bab-Al-Tebbaneh/ Tripoli	lower middle class	Al-Manar Architecture	Elementary unemployed	Baccalaureat teacher
5.Nancy	Akkar	middle class	English Literature/ LU	Brevet self-employed florist	Brevet
6.Rami	Tripoli	lower middle class	Mechanical Engineering LIU	elementary construction foreman	elementary
7.Bilal	Tripoli	working class	Balamand Business	shoemaker	elementary
8.Mona	Menieh/ Akkar	middle class	English Literature LU	Baccalaureat Civil servant	Baccalaureat
9.Michel	Akkar (Tripoli resident)	middle class	Civil Engineering Balamand	Baccalaureat Retired police officer	BA teacher
10.Georges	Koura	middle class	Business LAU	Baccalaureat Supermarket owner	BA beauty salon owner
11.Mira	Kalamoun	lower middle class	Computer Science ULF	Elementary Construction foreman (deceased)	elementary
12.Sameera	Tripoli	lower middle class	Architecture LU	Baccalaureat store assistant	elementary
13. Hilal	Tripoli	working class	Chemical Engineering	Elementary baker	elementary

			Balamand		
14. Khadija	Dennieh	Working class	Sociology LU	elementary Mechanic	elementary
15. Ameen	Tripoli	middle class	Electrical Engineering Balamand	Engineer AUB	BA

Table 1: participants' social Profile

5.7 Researcher's class position and the challenge of establishing rapport

Successful communication with participants is of paramount importance in qualitative inquiry. In this personal encounter, the researchers' subjectivities, as well as the subjectivities of the participants, are an acknowledged and valued part of the process (Flick, 2002). The quality of the data gathered is largely affected by the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Singleton, Straights & Straights, 1993). Establishing rapport with participants and gaining their trust is crucial for productive communication. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to reflect on their relationship with their participants in order to anticipate any problem that could undermine the rapport they strive to establish. In my case, it became clear from the moment I started my informal conversations with students that my own class status as a middle class researcher could play an important in my interactions with students. I was also aware that the challenges of building rapport are not the same for privileged and underprivileged students. (Khan, 2012). For students from modest origins, my job as a university instructor clearly indexed a middle class position. Thus, I was worried that the social distance between this social category and me could lead to a power imbalance that would undermine the trust I am trying to establish. I also found that for some underprivileged students the interview itself could be an uncomfortable situation (Young, 2004). In order to deal with these power asymmetries, researchers need to gain the trust of research participants by showing genuine interest in their experiences and listening to their stories with empathy and in a non-judgmental manner (Glassner &Laughlin, 1987).

Accordingly, I found that the best way to win the trust of my participants was to share my own my own educational journey that I have detailed in chapter 1. I felt that honestly telling my own story could encourage students to reflect on their own story (Munro, 1998). During our informal conversations, I told students about my family's modest economic resources and explained to them that I could have never afforded studying at a private university if I had not received two scholarships. By sharing my personal economic hardships, I hoped to convey that they could share their economic constraints without being judged. However, I was careful not give the impression that I was too familiar with their experiences as I wanted them to feel that they had something worth telling, a valuable knowledge to share. Although I was looking for a relaxed, friendly and egalitarian communication, I did not want to appear as "insider" in the eyes of my participants. In fact, I was hoping that students would take more time explaining things to me if they assumed that I was not familiar enough with the information they were providing (Taylor et al., 1995). As Miller and Glassner (2004) explain:

> The existence of social differences between the interviewer and the interviewees does not mean that the interviews are devoid of information about social worlds. In fact interviews can be accomplished in ways that put these social differences to use in providing opportunities for individuals to articulate their feelings about life experiences……. One potential benefit of social distances…. is that the interviewee can recognize him or herself as an expert on the topic of interest to someone typically in more powerful position vis-a vis the social structure……to find oneself placed in this position can be both empowering and illuminating because one can reflect on and speak about one's life in ways not often available (P. 132)

Although power relationships become less problematic when the researchers and participants belong to the same social world, communicating with more privileged students also presented some challenges. My social status as a university instructor and PhD student made me closer to the class position of these students. I also found that these middle and upper middle class students were comfortable in the interview and displayed confidence in presenting themselves. The main challenge, however, was to elicit from students information about their social privilege without raising suspicion and losing their trust. As I was aware that some privileged students could attribute their success to hard work rather than social privilege, I had to probe students in order to get more information about their valuable resources and their middle class lifestyle, trying as much as possible not to be intrusive.

5.8 Focus group

Focus group interviews can be the source of valuable data as they mainly rely on interaction on within the group (Morgan, 1988). In this method, the participants have more control of the situation than researchers, whose role is to moderate the interaction of the group members rather than impose their own agenda. Thus, the role of the moderator or facilitator (Creswell, 1998) is to pose questions, keep the discussion flowing and encourage all the members of the group to fully participate. In focus groups, students have the opportunity to react to the responses of other group members , building on them and sometimes contradicting them, creating thereby "a synergetic effect" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Therefore, I decided to include focus groups in my research methods hoping that some valuable data could emerge from the group dynamics. I conducted a focus group interview in early December 2018 with 8 students from working and lower middle class background. This opportunity presented itself to me during an informal conversation with a student attending an expensive private university in the North. Hilal, a third year chemical engineering student told me that he and several students from the North received scholarships from a local NGO which operates in an underprivileged part of the town. Unlike Hilal who succeeded in the entrance exams of an expensive private university, most of these students attended small low-cost private universities in the North. Following our conversation, I contacted the NGO secretary and obtained permission to conduct a focus group interview. My key informant introduced me to his friends and helped me spread the word about the focus group. 8 students showed up to interview, filled in the questionnaire, and discussed for about 90 minutes the main challenges they faced in higher education and their labor market readiness. Most of these students attended public schools and would have never got into higher education without the scholarship.

Therefore, the interview was an opportunity to gain insight into their higher education experience as group. Indeed, a collective identity emerged from the discussion as most of them used the pronoun "we" to talk about the obstacles they faced such as their limited English, their lack of confidence in their communication skills, the prevalence of *Wasta* in the Lebanese society, the inability to find training and the scarcity of jobs in the North. Although some scholars argue that each participant in the focus group should bear different characteristics to guarantee the representativeness of the discussion (Cohen et al., 2017), I had a different rationale for conducting a focus group with students from similar social background. My argument was that that students would feel less threatened when they expose their vulnerability if the other members of the group shared the same grievances.

While students were in broad agreement about the obstacles they faced, they also held conflicting views on a number of issues. These divergent opinions enriched the discussion as participants had to elaborate to defend their views. They also had the opportunity to see reality from their friends' different perspectives. These moments of "friction" gave a new momentum for the discussion. For example, when Ahmad (a third year Civil Engineering students at a low cost private university in Tripoli) complained about the fact that companies favored the graduates of prestigious universities even if other applicants possessed the necessary skills, Rami replied, "but is your university really teaching the skills?" questioning by that the quality of education that Ahmad is receiving at his university. This exchange elicited from participants more ideas about inequality in Lebanese Higher education. Thus, I tried to let students "run the show" and only interfered when I felt that some participants dominated the discussions to redirect the conversations to the shyer ones, or move to a new theme when I felt that students ran out of ideas.

Name	Place of Residence	Social class	University/ major	Father's educational attainment and profession	Mother's educational attainment and profession
1.Fadi	Tripoli	Working class	Accounting AUC	Elementary Unemployed Blacksmith	elementary
2.Layla	Tripoli	Working class	Accounting LIU	Elementary plumber	elementary
3.Salma	Tripoli	Working class	AUC Accounting	Elementary Unemployed Taxi Driver	Elementary
4.Ahmad	Tripoli	Working class	Mechanical Engineering LIU	Elementary Tailor	elementary
5.Rami	Tripoli	Lower middle class	Mechanical Engineering LIU	elementary Construction Foreman	elementary

7.Tareq	Tripoli	Lower middle class	Architecture Al-Manar University	Elementary unemployed	Baccalaureat teacher
8.Nada	Tripoli	Working class	Medical Engineering LIU	Elementary Carpenter	Elementary

Table 2. Focus Group social profile

5.9 Interviews with students

Semi-structured Interviews with 15 students were conducted between December 2018 and January 2020. Most of the interviews took place on university campuses, in quiet corners of cafeterias, on benches, and in other common spaces. This was more convenient for students as we scheduled the interviews in their free time between lectures. Conducting the interviews on Campus was also an opportunity to observe the material differences between different campuses and the glaring disparities in the resources available to students. The interviews which lasted on average 1 hour 20 minutes were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, but only the relevant parts of the data was translated into English. During the interviews, I tried to gain insight into the students' experiences and access the meanings they attributed to these experiences (Silverman, 2004). In order to be consistent with all participants, I divided my interview into a set of themes (See Appendix B) which covered different aspects of their educational experiences such as the school to university transition, parental involvement, university challenges and career orientation. As the interview progressed, I encouraged my participants to elaborate on certain points that I found interesting or problematic and I probed the students to provide more relevant information. I also contacted some students again after two weeks when I felt that some ideas needed more explanation or when I realized that I should have probed the student on a specific point. As in any qualitative purposeful sampling, I continued my interviews until no central theme or new constructs emerged (Ambert et al. 1995). After I coded the 15th interview, I felt that I had enough data to answer my research questions

In addition to the challenge of establishing rapport, avoiding extreme ideological bias was another thing I tried to achieve. Although it is normal for a study embedded in critical educational research to embrace values of equality and social justice, I tried not impose my ideological stance on participants. At the same time, I did not expect my participants to speak the language of class or to articulate any form or class consciousness. In a country like Lebanon where the class discourse is marginalized by sectarian identity politics (Traboulsi, 2014), I expected that class could be, as Bradly (1996) noted "a passive rather than an active identity" or that "class identities [could be] submerged identities, pushed out of sight by others which jostle more urgently for public attention" (p.72). My plan was to let the students share their experiences, feelings, attitudes, emotions without trying to influence their view of the world. I tried as much as possible to use assumption-free questions such as "tell me about the foreign languages you learned at school", or "how did you find the transition from school to university". In many occasions, however, I found it useful to probe the students directly on some issues. For example, I did not feel I was imposing my views

on a participant when I asked him "Do you need a *Wasta* to get an internship in the Electricity company?" because this practice is widely recognized in the Lebanese society.

Another challenge was how to make sense of the unique perspective of my participants. I was aware that the stories students told me were their own representations of the world rather than a truthful account of reality. Thus, I tried to maintain a critical/ skeptical distance from my participants' accounts knowing that their stories could be mediated by the dominant cultural beliefs of their society .Thus, I was aware that what participants told me was itself something that has been shaped by prior cultural understandings. As Rex (1974) has observed

> While patterns of social reactions and institutions may be the product of the of the actors definitions of the situations, there is also the possibility that those actors might be falsely conscious and that sociologist have an obligation to seek an objective perspective which is not necessarily that of any of the participating actors at all…. We need not to be confined purely or simply to that….social reality which is made available to us by participant actors themselves.

Accordingly, we need to remember that dominant social groups have the power to impose their ideas, definitions and beliefs and values on weaker groups. For example, several students expressed their gratitude to sectarian leaders who granted them scholarships rather than criticizing the state for not providing quality education for all its citizens without discrimination. In believing that sectarian leaders were benevolent actors, these students reproduced the clientelistic structures of sectarian patronage that dominate the Lebanese society.

Most importantly, I was aware that I could not solely rely on my participants' accounts to explain social action, hence the importance of a critical interpretivist approach. As the experience of many ethnographers have taught us, we cannot presume that our interviewees always do what they say. Thus, one of the limitations of this study is that it relies solely on interviews. Unlike ethnographers who ground their explanations of social actions in their observations, I had to construct explanations of social action without having witnessed it. Khan (2012) argues that researchers should distinguish between self-reported behavior and social action:

> Interviewers who say they are primarily interested in sense making nonetheless do make inferences about situated behavior from self-reports. In other words, while we agree with interviewers that understanding how actors make sense of their world is important (all competent ethnographers gather verbal accounts in addition to observations), it seems that in the end, interviewers are seldom interested in verbalized frames or schemas per se—rather, they usually consider actors' sense making and self-reported behaviors to be representative or predictive of social action……. accounts may not accord with behavior and may in fact contradict it. Thus, we have learned to be wary of verbal accounts as representations of "real"—that is, everyday—life (p.18)

5.10 Interviews with career advisors

Career advisors were an important source of data in this study as their role is to bridge academic programs with the labor market and guide students to enhance their market prospects. Therefore,

I hoped that my conversation with them would shed more light on the challenges that students faced when looking for jobs and internships and the resources available them to manage the labor market transition. I was also interested in the way they understood employability and their own definition of the skills valued by employers. Therefore, I contacted 3 interviewees in spring 2019. My first interviewee was a career advisor at a Business school at an elite university in Beirut. This was followed by another interview with a career advisor at an expensive private university in the North. My third interviewee, however, was not officially a career advisor, but the director of a small business school at a small market-oriented university in Tripoli who claimed he was informally involved in helping students find training and jobs. It is worth noting here that this position only exists in well-resourced universities which sometimes have career centers with several advisors. As for the public Lebanese university (LU) and other small private universities, students have to rely on their own social connections or the help of benevolent professors in order to find internships or permanent jobs. The three interviews took place in the offices of the interviewees and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. Data collected from the interviews revealed huge disparities in the resources available for students. Well-resourced universities assisted student in developing their skills through a range of activities such as CV writing workshops, presentations, and helped them develop their professional network through hosting career fairs and participating in local and international contests. These activities increased their knowledge of the market, boosted and their self-confidence and broadened their professional network. In contrast, the picture was very different in more modest universities, where students had fewer resources to manage the labor market transition.

5.11 Interviews with human resources officers

In the context of a career and internship fair which took place at the University of Balamand in April 2019, I interviewed 6 human resources officers who represented a variety of Lebanese businesses and companies operating in different fields such as business, insurance, engineering, tourism and telecommunication. While some of these were small local firms, others had a more global orientation. After introducing myself, I explained to them that I was interested in the profile of the ideal job applicant and the way they evaluated student's CVs. Six HRs agreed to answer my questions in a quiet lounge in the building where the event took place. The conversation focused on the skills, competences and personal traits that mattered to them. These short interviews which lasted 20 minutes on average gave me insight into the employers' perspectives and a better understanding of the Lebanese labor market opportunities and restrictions.

5.12 Other sources of Data

My original assumptions about social and educational inequalities in Lebanon were grounded in empirical evidence that I gathered from several sources. This study benefitted from a number of reports and surveys which provided data on the socio-economic disparities between different Lebanese regions, educational inequalities and the gender profile of Lebanon. These reports were published by international organizations such as the United Nation Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Lebanese Universities such as The American university of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese-American University (LAU), local banks (Bankmed) and international banks (Credit Swiss).

5.13 Content analysis

Following the transcription of the interviews, I conducted a qualitative content analysis in order to understand the effect of class on my participants' experiences in higher education. Julien (2008) defines content analysis as the "intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes**" (**P. 121). This analytic method involves an inductive reading of the text, grouping the data into categories which translate into themes or codes. This categorization process had already started before conducting the interview as I had a priori a list of topics that I wished to discuss with my participants. I elicited from students information about their the schools they attended, their experiences in learning foreign languages, their choice of university, their knowledge of the labor market, their extra-curricular activities, aspirations etc.). These topics and sub-topics helped me organize the interview and facilitated the categorization later. After transcribing the interviews, I analyzed the whole set of data, identified recurring themes, emotions and key terms. Identifying these categories was also guided by the social theories I have reviewed, especially the Bourdieusian concepts of Capital and habitus. For example, under the theme of "internship/training", I found the following categories (*Wasta*, family social capital, institutional social capital, the role of career advising centers, economic constraints and mobility). Moreover, I identified a number of new themes that emerged from the discussion such as the challenges that females students wearing headscarves face in the labor market. In parallel with the coding process, I tried to find common patterns and tendencies among students from similar class origins in order to propose a plausible explanation of the effect of class. Analyzing the data turned out to be a dynamic, non-linear process (Lichtman, 2013) and an enterprise which started with an inductive approach quickly turned into an *iterative process*" (Merriam, 1998) in which I moved back between theory and data, revisited categories and reorganized themes dividing or combining them. These multiple readings helped unravel new layers of meaning gaining thereby a deeper understanding of the students' accounts. Once thematic categories were identified, I made sure that all the relevant data were categorized and that these categories did not overlap. I was also interested in what was missing in the interview data: For example, how students did not mentioned the role of the state in providing education. I also considered nonverbal clues such as silences, hesitations, laughter or change of tone as significant as I was interested in the emotional aspect of interviewees' lived experiences and the affective dimension of class (Reay, 2015). Finally, translating the interviews from the Lebanese vernacular into English was particularly challenging especially because the students' accounts were filled with colloquial expressions. Therefore, I used my knowledge and experience as a holder of a degree in translation to be as faithful as possible to the original statements of my participants.

5.14 Research validity and limitations

While issues of validity and reliability are usually associated with a quantitative research paradigm, in qualitative studies, explanation and understanding replace measurement and generalization (Bowen, 2005). The credibility that qualitative researchers strive to achieve is largely dependent on the trustworthiness of the methods employed (Padgett, 1994) and the confidence that one can have the findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, it is the duty of

the researcher to offer a strong explanatory model which can generate the most accurate inferences and plausible interpretation of the social phenomena under consideration. To this end, it is crucial to make the research process as transparent and rigorous as possible. I have provided in this chapter a detailed description of all the stages of my research. This description started with a justification of my ontological and epistemological assumptions and the methodological approach I have adopted. Moreover, I reflected on my role as a researcher and the effect of my class position on my rapport with participants. This reflection was followed by a transparent account of my data collection methods and the data analysis process. Furthermore, I have also tried to offer an objective account of the phenomenon under examination by following two strategies. First, through my assumption-free questioning strategy, I avoided imposing my own ideological stance on participants. Second, by interviewing several stakeholders such as students, educators and employers, I collected data from different sources which validated my interpretations in some cases, and helped me in other cases examine the data with a critical eye. Finally, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) suggest that the relevance of the study can also be a source of validity: "*Validity-as-relevance/advocacy (VAR)* stresses the utility and "empowerment" of research to benefit and uplift those groups often studied" (p.290). Following this observation, the validity of this study also stems from the empowering knowledge it has produced as a critique of inequality in the Lebanese education system. This examination of the social structures that generate inequality will hopefully benefit policy makers committed to a social justice agenda or any advocacy groups seeking to transform the system.

Finally, despite my attempt to achieve credibility, I was aware that my study had several limitations that I need to acknowledge in this chapter. First, it explored educational inequalities in the Northern part of Lebanon. Although the students of the North have a lot in common with other Lebanese students, I am also aware that conducting the same study in another part of the country would possibly have yielded different results as each Lebanese region has different socio-economic and cultural characteristics. Moreover, the small size of the sample meant that I could not offer an exhaustive account of students' experiences and that some aspects of these complex experiences remained explored. My analysis of the possible effect of class on the students' labor market outcomes thus cannot be verified as this requires a longitudinal design beyond the scope of this study. Most importantly, due to scarcity of qualitative research on inequality in Lebanon, I could not build on pre-existing research, which confirms the exploratory and the experimental aspect of this study.

5.15 Ethical considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the guidelines recommended by the British research Association (BERA, 2018). I obtained the informed consent of students, career advisors and human Resources officers who participated in this study. Participants, however, were not asked to sign a form as this would have raised unnecessary suspicions. While this practice is customary in research in Western contexts, I was aware that in the Lebanese culture people would be wary of signing a document, especially when dealing with a complete stranger. I promised the total confidentiality of the recordings. Participants were aware that they could withdraw at any point, decline to do the second interview, or answer my post-interview queries, although none of

them hesitated to give me further clarifications. Another ethical concern was protecting the identity of my participants. This concern stemmed from the fact participants generously shared intimate accounts of their emotional and financial struggles, strained relationships with parents, and in the case of LU students, they addressed harsh critique to faculty and staff. In addition to using pseudonyms, I felt the need to change some identifying features that did not interfere in my analysis or alter the social profile of participants.

5.16 Transcribing and translating interviews

Interviews with students were initially conducted in Lebanese Arabic. Participants often inserted foreign words in English or French and some of them switched to English on and off. Code mixing and code switching are common among the Lebanese (Essieli, 2017), especially in higher education contexts (Bahous, Nabahani & Bacha 2014). These linguistic practices are rooted in the country's colonial history and its multilingual education policies. I was aware that the rigor, trustworthiness and the integrity of my research depended on the accuracy of my translation (McKenna, 2015). Translating interviews in qualitative research often carries the risk of losing or altering the original meaning. Metaphors, jargon and slang can be make cross-language data collection a challenging and problematic endeavor. As someone who holds a BA in Translation, I was no stranger to these challenges. My main concern was to attain semantic equivalence between the participants' utterances and the English transcription. To this end, I used the "back translation" method (Choi, Kushner, Mill & Lai, 2012) which consists of translating the English transcription back to Lebanese Arabic to ensure that both texts conveyed the same meaning. Utterances in English and French were kept in bold font in the transcription (See appendix C for transcription conventions). In a few cases, I provided an explanation for some colloquial idioms such as "cut off of tree" (having no relatives, no friends, all alone in the world (p.147). I also clarified the cultural connotation of some Arabic terms such as *Jered* (p.98, high mountains/ remote, isolated place) and some cultural references that are only understood by Lebanese Northerners such as *Fnaydeq* (p. 98, a village in Akkar stereotyped as socially backward).

5.16 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a description of the methodology I used for this study. First, I justified my adherence to a critical realist theoretical framework by discussing the ontological and epistemological assumptions that guided this project. This done, I have located my study within a critical methodological approach concerned with a social justice agenda. Then, discussing the challenges of establishing rapport with participants, I presented a detailed description of different stages of this qualitative research such as sampling, interviews, and data analysis. Finally, I closed the chapter with some of ethical concerns that have arisen during this research. In the following three chapters, I will analyze in depth the data I collected from interviews in order to examine the structural inequalities in Lebanese higher education.

Chapter 6

The Effect of Class on Lebanese Students' Transition to Higher Education

6.1 Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis, I highlighted the deep-seated inequalities that prevail in the Lebanese education system. The *laissez-faire* approach of the Lebanese state towards a system divided along confessional and class lines has contributed over time to the entrenchment of these inequalities in the name of diversity and freedom of choice (Farha, 2012). This highly stratified system, dominated by private education, operates as a selection machine which channels students to different social destinations depending on their class positions. As in other deeply unequal societies, the social origin of Lebanese students remains decisive in shaping their educational performance and ultimate attainment. As the state withdraws leaving education to free market forces, the onus of the child's education entirely falls on parents. Thus, the Lebanese educational system can rightly be described as a "parentocracy" (Brown, 1990) in which the "child's education is dependent upon the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than the ability and effort of pupils". (P. 66). While educated middle classes who have the "feel of the game" (Bourdieu, 1990) can mobilize their abundant capitals to provide their children with the best educational opportunities, structural barriers hinder the access of lower income students to high-performing educational institutions relegating them to less rewarding market opportunities. This chapter explores the narratives of a group of Lebanese students from North Lebanon in order to understand the effect of class on their transition to higher education. More specifically, my aim is to demonstrate how the cultural, social, economic capitals they possess shaped their motivation to pursue higher education and conditioned their choice of university. In the first part, I will discuss the role that families play in the students' decision to pursue higher education. While middle class students take this transition for granted, the desire to go to take an academic path is deeply inscribed in the affective history of lower income students (Reay, 2015; Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine, 2010) and their parents' hidden class injuries (Rondini, 2016). In the second part, I will examine the role that schools play in preparing students for the university transition, emphasizing middle class parents' strategic thinking and "concerted intervention" (Bathmaker et al, 2016). Finally, I will focus in the third part on the social, cultural and economic structures that govern the students' choice of university to illustrate how several forms social and regional inequalities interact to create disadvantage.

6.2 Going to university: the role of family

Educational research has long highlighted middle class students' propensity to pursue higher education. In Bourdieu's theory of social practice, middle class students' favorable dispositions towards education are generated by the *habitus* they acquire through family socialization (Bourdieu, 1990).The alignment between middle family practices, values and beliefs and the culture of educational institutions, in other words, between the *habitus* and the *field,* contributes to the success of middle classes students at university. Middle class families inculcate in their children a positive orientation towards academic achievement and nurture a set of skills that enable

them to successfully navigate educational systems. As children internalize the necessity to pursue further education, following an academic path becomes an unquestioned part of their life trajectory. In middle class families where most family members have gone to university, these children feel the imperative to retrace their family path. By doing so, children conform to a family-specific *doxa* which Bourdieu defines as "a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" (Bourdieu 2000, P.16). Thus, pursuing higher education is part of the taken-for-granted, unquestioned assumptions about 'what is done' or 'to be done', which are rooted in the shared experiences of the family members (Atkinson, 2014). Accordingly, family deliberations mostly center around the choice of university and major rather than the decision to go or not. Middle class participants in the study unanimously reported that their transition to university was hardly a decision. This was especially true for established middle classes where private education was part of the family legacy. For Ameen (Mechanical Engineering, Balamand) who belongs to a well-educated family from Tripoli, skipping university was an inconceivable option. His father holds a degree in electrical engineering from the American University of Beirut and his older sister graduated from the prestigious Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA-Balamand). Ameen does not remember explicitly discussing with his parents the pros and cons of going to university

> We didn't really discuss whether I should go or not/ It was **de facto**/ everybody in the family went to university/ so of course/ you need a degree/ to have a **career** /and make money or start a **business**/ so it was not something we debated/ of course you finish school and you go to university/

Although Ameen explicitly mentions the material rewards of holding a university degree, his motivation to pursue higher education mainly stems from his adherence to family norms. Other students whose families possessed less institutional cultural capital and more economic resources, displayed a more instrumental view of higher education. Georges belongs to a middle-class family from Koura, a semi-rural district of North Lebanon. His father left school early to run the family supermarket and his mother is successful beauty center owner who holds a business degree from a private university.

Elsewhere, Georges explains that his decision to study for a business degree at the prestigious Lebanese-American University (LAU) was mainly motivated by his desire for a highly rewarding job. A degree from a reputable university was a necessary step to realize his social ambitions:

> …because if you look at jobs and salaries and everything/ don't you want a good salary / who doesn't want a good salary? / don't you want a good position? If you don't have a good degree from a good university/ you won't get to these things/ because logically/ if you take any company/ the first thing they look at is which university you graduated from/

While students across class positions stressed the importance of having a university degree to enhance their job prospects, low-income participants revealed different types of motivation. For first generation university goers, the decision to take an academic path is deeply inscribed in their families' affective histories and the different emotions parents associate with educational attainment. Several educational sociologists have noted that feelings and emotions constitute an

integral part of the social structures that constrain the choices of social agents. Reay (2015) argues that including affective dispositions in the concept of habitus enables researchers to understand the emotional dimensions of a certain class position and how feelings of inferiority or superiority are internalized and played out in the practices of social agents. Along the same lines, Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine (2003) highlight the psychosocial aspect of the habitus emphasizing that social and cultural analysis requires an understanding of the emotional processes in which the social and the psychological are closely intertwined. The accounts of first-generation university goers from lower class fractions illustrate how the parents' feelings of shame, regret, inadequacy and their desire for social recognition, impacted their children decision to go to university. Hanadi (English Literature, LU) the eldest daughter of a grocer from Akkar, spoke at length about her parents' support for her academic enterprise

> First my father [encouraged me]/ and my aunt who lives with us at home/my father always dreamt of continuing his education/ and becoming a lawyer/ of course he couldn't do that/ because of the old mentality of his parents/ which is somehow ignorant and backward/ so he couldn't continue his education/ his father took him out of school/ and I was the eldest girl/ and the best in school/ so I was the first dream wanted to achieve/ he supported me a lot/
>
> My aunt is a copy of my father/ the same enthusiasm/ and support/ these two people are the reason why I got to this stage/ my aunt didn't even enter school/ she took literacy classes/ she knows how to read and write/so because they left school/ their father took them out of school/ this really affected them psychologically/ and my father and my aunt/ they've got character/ if you meet them/ you would think they have university degrees/ so when people meet them/ they always ask them what they have studied/ so my father says/ I didn't study at all/ so he feels sorry for himself/ he feels/ this is not my place/ if I studied/ I would have done this and this/ if if if!/ so it hurts/ so he tries to compensate this through us/ they could have benefitted from lot of opportunities in life/ if they were educated/ they would have taken high positions/ they would have earned a good social position/ but because they had no degrees/ they went downward/ so they say to me/ that the opportunities they couldn't benefit from/ these opportunities can come to me thanks to my degree/

Hanadi's' father and aunt explicitly articulated their desire to see her getting the life opportunities they never had. Her parents' feelings of shame, regret and self-pity testify to the "hidden injuries of class" (Sennett& Cobb, 1972) that they suffered because of their inferior social status. Rondini (2016) notes that academically successful students can represent "aspirational proxies" for their parents (P.97) as the children's achievements can symbolize their parents' success. For these parents, higher education holds the promise of healing their hidden class injuries and regaining the social respectability they lost due to their low educational attainment. Thus, Hanadi's education was experienced as a family endeavor and an opportunity to lift the status of the whole family.

Similarly, the story of Zaynab, (PreMed, Balamand) is another example that underscores the role of parents' aspirations in children's educational success. Zaynab is the eldest daughter of a low-ranking army sergeant from Akkar, a rural district in North Lebanon. Her father left school early to join the army and spent most of his life serving in Beirut. While Zaynab described her mother

as a conservative housewife, she repeatedly expressed her gratitude for her father's open-mindedness and his unconditional support of her academic enterprise. Although early marriage is the norm in her village, her father turned down all the suitors so that Zaynab could fully concentrate on her studies. Zaynab explains how her father's passion for education stems from his unfulfilled desire for social recognition and his exposure to more liberal lifestyles in Beirut

> Because my father spent most of his life in Beirut/ he realized that getting somewhere in life needs education/ and he saw how girls in Beirut go to university/ how they go out and mix with society/ I think if my father stayed in the village/ he wouldn't have encouraged his children to get anywhere/ he wouldn't have given them the trust/ but my father trusted us and gave us the opportunity/ he left school when he was in grade 4/ if he was educated he would have become an officer/ my father is sergeant now/ if he had a degree or stayed in school until grade 6 or 7/ it would have made a big difference/ he would have been in the best position/ so he says to us/ because I didn't get education/ I'm opening the way to you/ I'm giving you everything I can/ he always says that he's trying to give us the weapon/ because he will not be here forever/ and money doesn't last/ what stays is education/ my grades in school were very good/ my father couldn't imagine me studying anything but medicine/ You know/ they believe that high grades automatically mean medicine

According to Zaynab, her father's social encounters in the capital broadened his horizons and destabilized the gender norms he used to adhere to. His enthusiasm for medical studies reflects his desire for social recognition as a medical degree confers on its holder a great deal of prestige in the Lebanese society. Moreover, his aspiration for a higher social status has also been shaped by his exposure, albeit from a subaltern position, to the lifestyle of the Beiruti high society

> When he served with General J.S/ he used to drive his daughters to university/ so he was familiar with universities/ he always used to say/ the son of X has made it/ the daughter of Y succeeded / I want you to succeed/ I want to be proud of you/

While Zaynab praised her father's progressive attitudes, she gave a critical account of the cultural norms that prevailed in her village. In many socio-economically disadvantaged families, girls grow up under rigid gender norms that discourage them from continuing their education. Early marriage is a common practice even among better off families

> my best friend/ we competed for the first position in school/ they're well-off/ and they even got richer now/ but she got engaged when were in school/ and she got married in grade 11 and left school/ she was brilliant/ she used to say after marriage/ I will continue my education/ now she has three kids and she didn't continue/ I think that if her parents knew how important education was for a person/ as a weapon/ they wouldn't have deprived her from doing something important in her life/ ok/ everybody will eventually get married and make a family/ but I think the mentality/ the society she lives in/ it's a very rural or villager society/ her parents are form the *Jered* [high Mountains]/ from *Fnaydek* [remote village in Akkar, stereotyped as socially backward]/ their girls get engaged and marry at the age of 15/ they think that if she's 19 or 20 without getting married/ then she becomes a

> spinster/ or they say/ no one asked for her hand until now!/ I think she was the victim of this backward mentality/

For Hanadi and Zaynab, the decision to pursue higher education was largely motivated by their parents' desire to spare their children the class injuries (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) they personally suffered due to their low educational attainment. Other parents who experienced economic hardships hoped that a university degree would enable their children to secure a stable income. Mira (Computer Sciences, Université Libano-Francaise [ULF]) lives with her mother in a coastal village near Tripoli. Her deceased father used to work as a foreman in Saudi Arabia. After his death, Mira and her mother lost their only source of income as her married brothers and sisters were already burdened by family responsibilities. As a result, Mira and her mother found themselves in a painfully precarious situation. This might explain why the quest of economic security was a recurrent theme in her interview. For Mira's mother, a university degree is a kind of "insurance policy" (Brown, 1990, P. 77) against the unpleasant surprises of life

> my mother encouraged me a lot/ she thinks that a woman without a job is nothing/ she always says even if you don't get a job/ this degree is your weapon/ if you get married/ you don't know if your husband will be good/ or bad/ so you need to take precautions/

By conflating job and personal worth ("a woman is nothing without a job"), Mira's mother is probably referring to her own feelings of worthlessness as women who could not achieve financial independence. The "weapon metaphor" is widely used cliché in Arabic which compares education to a weapon that protects educated people in "battlefield" of life. Mira explained how her vocational degree in in Computer Sciences was negatively perceived in the Lebanese labor market due to the high social stigma around vocational education in Lebanon

> The vocational school in Mina (seaside district in Tripoli) is very good/ you know/ they say vocational education is not good/ …they say if you're a lousy student/ you go to vocational education/ I went to vocational school and I discovered it was difficult/ even more difficult than university/ It was a very nice experience/ when I came to university/ I felt that what I studied there was way better than here/ the problem is that here in Lebanon/ they don't recognize it/…although you kill yourself studying/ they say it's not enough/ we want an academic **Licence** [bachelor degree in French]/ to be honest I cannot get a job with my vocational degree/ …and even if you want to do some training they don't accept you/ that's why ……I continued my studies at university/

6.3 Escaping the neighborhood

Some working-class participants were motivated by the desire to escape the difficult life conditions they experienced in their underprivileged neighborhoods. Bilal (Business Administration, Balamand), the youngest son of shoemaker, grew up in the working-class neighborhood of Kobbeh in Tripoli. He graduated from the Boys Secondary public school of Kobbeh, known for its rough hyper-masculine environment and its high dropout rates. Despite his father's lack of enthusiasm for education, Bilal was determined to carve his way into a better kind

of life. Like most first-generation university students, he had to depend on himself to find his way into the uncharted territories of higher education

> My mother always encouraged and supported me/ other people at home/ don't really believe that education gets you anywhere/ but my mother always used to say/ you will make it my son/ you can do a lot/ I think it's because my father never had any education/ so he never experienced this/ and never felt the importance of it/ he would have preferred to see me working/ and to hear people call me *m'allem/* [master or teacher, informal way to address a working class male with a manual profession]

For Bilal, higher education held the promise of leaving a place where physical violence occurred on a daily basis. His account offers a glimpse into the harsh conditions that prevail in disadvantaged schools where corporal punishment is still practiced (Bahou & Zakharia, 2019). To this gloomy picture, some teachers and friends brought a glimmer of hope with their encouragement and support

> There was this teacher in grade 6/ she had seen students who were brilliant but had to drop out/ she said to me/ please/ you have to promise me that you will continue to study and leave the place you are in now/ because our school was known as "the military school"/ it wasn't exactly a pleasant experience/ because students always used to have fights/ and it was only boys/ so there was a lot a violence/ the principal used to wander around holding a stick/ he used to hit students just because he wanted to have fun/ there were a lot of wrong things/ violence/ and bullying/ a friend used to tell me/ I see ambition in your eyes/ follow your **potential**

Bilal recalls being bullied by those he called "anti-school students", who mocked his commitment to education and his respect for teachers

> Some of them bullied me/ they used to call me "the nerd"/ and made fun of me/but there were also other students who liked me/ because I helped them with their studies/

The conflict between Bilal and the "school haters" clearly resonates with the findings of British sociologist Paul Willis. In his ethnographic research on working class students in a British secondary school, Willis (1977) identified two types of students, the *lads* who embraced a counter-school culture, and the *ear'oles* who conformed to the rules of school and showed commitment to education. Bilal explains how he distanced himself from the lads who typically dropped out of school to take low-wage manual jobs, reproducing thereby their subordinate class position. To succeed in his academic enterprise, he shielded himself from their influence by systematically avoiding their gatherings and socializing with other academically oriented students. Bilal knew exactly what he did not want to become:

> Someone in school/ he was always the first in school/ he was the most brilliant/ he left in grade 6/ because he had many family problems/ I think no one stood by his side/ now he's married and has a daughter/ until now he doesn't have a stable job/ he didn't continue his education/because he used to hang out in the café a lot/ all the young man of the café were school dropouts/ it's a **culture** for them/ so they used to say what would you benefit from

> school?/ so he dropped out in grade 8 because they all did that…they work in mobile repair shops/ in bakeries/ in car wash/ mechanics/ carpenters/ they might open small groceries/ they sell bagels/ and juice and this kind of stuff/ they do deliveries on motorcycles / they may try all these/ maybe one guy will try all of them/ I see myself in another place/ successful/ and I have **potential**/ I want to fulfill this **potential**/ I see those people and I talk to them/ I know they have certain life conditions/ because I had the same conditions/ but I didn't like to hang out in the street/ because I didn't want to be influenced by this environment/if I wanted to hang out/ I would go to another different street/ with friends form high-school/ I was determined to get something completely different/ I knew that if I went along with them/ I won't reach my goal/

Moreover, Bilal identifies a critical incident that shaped his aspirations and enabled him to imagine life beyond the boundaries of his neighborhood. He was awarded in Grade 11 the Access scholarship, a two-year program offered by the American embassy to high-performing public schools students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The program that often included trips to Beirut mainly aimed at improving the English language proficiency of students and developing range of soft skills

> The program worked on our social connections/ on leadership/ our responsibility towards society/ there were many community service projects**/ I stepped out of my comfort zone**/ out of the neighborhood where I lived/ I discovered other regions/ for example there was an activity where 50 schools participated from 50 places in Lebanon/ so it was very enriching/ and there was a lot of exchange of cultures/ every region/ its background/and its characteristics/ and its special things/ so I was able to **step out** of the neighborhood/ and look at other cultures with a different eye/ so this how it changed me/

Bilal's participation in the Access program made it possible for him to "step out" see the world beyond the confines of Kobbeh. This "border-crossing" opportunity, remains beyond the reach of his working-class peers, who rarely have the chance to leave their culturally and socio-economically homogenous neighborhoods. While Bilal was able to accrue social and cultural capital through the Access Program, disadvantaged youth from Tripoli and rural Akkar are often excluded from culturally and socially enriching encounters. Their spatial immobility or "entrapment" their neighborhoods and villages severely constrains their chances of social mobility (Marzi, 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Hatipoglu, 2013) and hinders their ability to imagine another kind of life. Appadurai (2004) argues that the "capacity to aspire" is unequally distributed among different class positions as it is largely conditioned by the resources and experiences available to social agents. While the better off have the privilege to explore different possibilities and accumulate experiences, the poor have fewer opportunities to for social experimentation. This in turn reduces their capacity to question or refute the social norms that reproduce their poverty.

> The capacity to aspire is thus a navigational capacity. The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbors. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity (in turn because their

> situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures), have a more brittle horizon of aspirations (P. 69).

To sum up, for middle class participants, following an academic path was a taken for granted step, an unquestioned part of their life trajectory. By going to university, Ameen was simply conforming to his family's shared assumptions about what should be done in life "Everybody in the family went to university". The narratives of lower income students reveal different types of motivation behind the decision to study for a degree. Several lower middle-class participants internalized their parents' aspirations for social mobility, respectability and financial security. As for working class students, they saw in higher education an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty that perpetuates itself in their underprivileged neighborhoods. While middle-class participants felt the imperative to become "like their parents" and retrace their paths, first generation university goers were expected to differentiate themselves from their low-achieving parents (Walkerdine, 2003). This dis-identification with parents can potentially lead to internal conflicts and feelings of shame and alienation (Skeggs, 1997).

The "school effect" and parental strategies

I discussed in the previous section how the students' class position operated in different ways to shape their positive orientation to higher education. This section will examine the role that schools play in facilitating or hindering the students' access to competitive universities, in addition to the effect of parental intervention on students' educational outcomes. These two effects are often amalgamated as it is rather difficult to delineate the boundaries between, family, school and peers. The accounts of middle-class participants indicate that the choice of school itself is the most significant form of parental intervention. As Ray (2015) cautiously notes

> We recognise that the various influences impacting on students' choices cannot be separated out and compartmentalised. Rather, higher education applicants are located within a matrix of influences which are best represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution. (Para. 1.6)

Educational research has long highlighted the class-based family practices that contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities (Lareau, 2003a; Ball 2005; Crozier et al., 2008). These decisions, practices and behaviors are mainly conditioned by the cultural, social, and economic capitals that parents possess and their ability to accumulate and mobilize these capitals for their children's advantage. Researchers who examined parental educational styles across class positions have often depicted middle-class parents as well-informed and strategic players of the educational game (Lareaua, 2003; Ball, 2010). Middle class families, who enter the education market with considerable advantage, draw on various resources to stay ahead of the competition. These knowledgeable players of the educational game, strategically intervene to secure their children's access to the best educational opportunities. In the Lebanese parentocratic system in which the onus of education falls on parents, private schooling remains the central pillar of social reproduction. Thus, sending one's children to high-performing private schools that provide quality foreign language education remains the most significant form of middle-class parental intervention. Lebanese middle classes invest substantially in private education (Bank Med, 2012) hoping to equip their children with a set of skills and competencies valued by high-ranking

universities. In this highly stratified market, the choice of school largely depends on parental economic resources (Nimer, 2016). While better off students can afford quality private education, lower class fractions usually opt for public schools or low-fee private schools that offer a distinctively lower quality of education. The students of these under-resourced schools often grapple with a multitude of shortcomings such as unqualified teachers, obsolete pedagogical methods, limited foreign language skills, and in some cases, humiliation and corporal punishment (Bahou, 2017).The scarce research on public schools in Lebanon (Bahou, 2015) has shown that most teachers subscribe to the deficit discourse which nurtures in students a low-achiever identity. Accordingly, these schools reproduces the marginalization of disadvantaged students by reducing their opportunities to access competitive universities.

The accounts of middle-class participants illustrate the strategic thinking on middle class parents, their future- oriented thinking, and their knowledge of the inner workings of the educational system. Based on this knowledge, middle class parents actively intervene to put their children trajectory on the right track when needed. For example, Ameen attended until grade 10 a reputable Francophone private school in Tripoli. His parents, however, decided to move him to Choueifat International School (SABIS) a high-performing Anglophone school which offers quality English language education and better preparation for university transition

> I was in a French system/ in [name of school]/ until **Brevet**/ then we got the idea/ that why not switch to English/ to prepare university/ because most of the good universities now use English/ and for jobs you need English more/ so I moved to the English section of my school/ in grade 10/ then again [laughter[/ we made a decision/ we thought that Choueifat was good/ it prepares students better for university/ the teaching methods/ are better than [name of previous school]/ so I went to Choueifat /but I had to repeat a class/ so I repeated grade 10/ I did grade 11 and 12 and graduated/ The same happened to my brother/it was my parents who took the decision of course/ but they asked me/ they persuaded me/ I wasn't forced to do it/

The strategic move of Ameen's parents was informed by their knowledge of the type of skills that would facilitate his access to high-ranking American system universities. Their awareness of the importance of English for university education and labor markets led them to intervene in order to correct Ameen's educational path. This move highlights the reflexive practices of middle-class parents who constantly reevaluate their initial educational choices. Their willingness to make short-term concessions (wasting a year) in order to gain in the long term illustrates their goal-oriented thinking which contributes to their children's academic success. Moreover, Ameen's uncle, a university English language professor, offered his expertise to evaluate his nephew's language skills

> So when I went to Balamand/ I didn't have to prepare a lot/ my English improved in Choueifat a lot / I remember/ before moving/ my uncle is an English language professor/ so he gave me some sort of test/ to evaluate my English/ he told me it wasn't that good/ after I moved to Choueifat/ after two years/ my Sat score placed me in ENG203/ [the highest level in undergraduate English courses at Balamand]) /so there was a lot of improvement/

Moreover, Ameen explains how his new school prepared him for the heavy workload of university, and most importantly, for the SAT exam required by most competitive American system universities.

> Of course it was a good decision/ We had a **test** everyday/ especially in **grade 10**/ every day we had **some sort of test** or **homework**/ and some **periodical tests**/ every week **in one of the subjects**/ so you get used to tests/ it doesn't surprise you at university/ because you've been doing it for 3 years **on regular basis/** They also prepared us for SAT in Choueifat/ there was a special test/ there was a preparation for the SAT in English classes/ they tested us in SAT/ in addition to regular English classes/

Ameen's account reveals how several factors converge to contribute to a successful transition to a competitive university. First, his family economic resources enabled him to attend one of the most expensive schools in North Lebanon. As most of the members of his extended family members were highly educated, his parents also possessed valuable social capital. Thus, he benefitted from the professional expertise of his uncle who provided him the "insider knowledge" to orient himself in the education system. By attending an elite Anglophone institution, he was able to develop his English language skills and prepare for the SAT exam that was already integrated in his school curriculum. These skills and competencies that bolster the students' chances to join high-ranking universities lie at the heart of educational disparities in Lebanon. Similarly to other global contexts, English in Lebanon mediates social inequalities as access to quality language education is largely dependent among other things, on the parents' ability to enroll their children in expensive private schools. Research in the United States indicates that the SAT exam, which also requires advanced English language skills, reinforced educational inequalities by rewarding privileged students who attended better performing schools (Coleman, 2011). Boaler (2003) argued that the test legitimized inequality as language learners, students for minority ethnic and cultural groups, and low-income students usually underperformed on the test. Thus, it is intuitive that these social inequalities would be magnified in a non- native context.

Ameen's parents strategically intervened to provide him with the best educational opportunities and increase his chances to get into a competitive university. Other middle-class participants also described their parents' active involvement in their education. Georges (Business, LAU) attended a francophone private school where he studied little English. His father, who never entered university, is less involved in his education than his mother, a successful beauty center owner who holds a business degree from a private university. Georges describes his mother's active involvement in his education

> To be honest/ my father is not very educated/ he didn't get a degree/ the main part was for my mother/ my mother/ has always been/ err…/ how shall I put it/ my **manager**/ she directed the whole thing/ she gives advice/ she does not force me/ she says/ look maybe this or that university is better/ in the end I make the choice/

The "manager metaphor" used by Georges is a highly significant language choice. This metaphor has been used by several educational researchers to describe that way parents help their children accrue valuable skills and competencies valued by academic institutions. As De Wiele and

Edgerton (2016) observed, middle class parents have the tendency to be the "portfolio managers" of their children (p.196). As a competent manager, the mother of Georges mobilized all her resources to facilitate his transition to the Lebanese American University, a prestigious well-resourced institution which competes with the American University of Beirut. As the school offered little in the way of preparing students for the university, she stepped in to help her son improve his English skills and prepare for the SAT

> it was a French school/ the focus was mostly on French/ we had only two hours of English a week and the rest was all French/ so when I was in **Terminale** [grade 12]/ my English was average/ my English level was actually weak/ because I'm **French educated**/ so sometimes a tutor came to teach me/ and sometimes I worked on my own/ so I had to ask for the help of Dr. [name] / he taught me TOEFL and SAT/

By hiring a private tutor, the mother of Georges helped him acquire the skills the school couldn't offer. Thus, the family was able to convert its economic capital into a cultural capital valued by higher education institutions. This form of "shadow education", or educational activities that occur outside the formal channels of the education system, can be used either for enrichment or remedial. In both cases, these activities exacerbate social inequalities as only middle class families can purchase this competitive advantage (Stevenson and Baker, 1992; Bray 1999; Buchmann et al., 2010).

6.4.1 Elite schools as class enclaves

The stories of Georges and Ameen illustrate how knowledgeable middle-class parents mobilize their economic resources to facilitate their children's access to competitive universities. In the case of families that already possessed abundant cultural capital, some students managed the transition to an elite university without the explicit intervention of parents. Before joining the American University of Beirut, Malek (Business Administration, AUB) attended the prestigious French school Lycée Alphonse Lamartine located in a suburb of Tripoli. His parents also attended Francophone private schools, studied medicine at the American university of Beirut and specialized later in USA. Switching from the French to the American system is not uncommon among the upper middle classes, who tend to accumulated multiple cultural resources. Malek, who retraced his parents' path by joining AUB, describes a smooth transition to the American university system

> I have a **French background/ but I didn't have any problem switching to English**/ first, **I was born in the united states/ so** since I was a child, I have had a **base**/ even at school they taught us English/ so it [my English] was **relatively** good/ At home**/ TV/ music**/ even sometimes with my parents/ **I communicate in English**/ I've never studied SAT at school/ I studied it on my own**/ I scored well thank God/**

As a member of a multilingual, well- travelled family that straddles two academic cultures, Malek's transition to AUB was unencumbered by language barriers. Moreover, Malek offers a glimpse into the highly stratified field of private schools in Lebanon. He displays an awareness of the relativity of his own privilege as he compares himself to the students of elite schools in Beirut

such as the International College (IC) and the American School Community (ASC). He explains how these schools instill in their students high aspirations.

> The students in my school / we think that AUB is **somehow the top**/ IC students think that AUB is the **lower** [category]/ they try to get to stronger universities/ Mc Gill/ Harvard/ if they can't make it there/ then they go to AUB/ whereas/ We say we try AUB/ and if we don't make it/ then we go to LAU or Balamand/ they aim really high/ actually they teach them at school to **aim high**/ once someone has the **knowledge**/ **the preparation**/ they will **automatically aim high**/ **he's gonna take AUB for granted**/ **so when you take things for granted/ you aim higher than the things you have**/ I **somehow took AUB for granted**/ but not as much as they did/ when I said lower/ I didn't mean that AUB is lower in terms of education/ I meant in terms of **rankings**/ **AUB is as small fish in a big tank**

Other middle-class participants like Michel ((Balamand, Civil Engineering) shared the same perceptions about the high-flying students of elite schools in Beirut. Although Michel was generally satisfied with the private francophone school he attended in Tripoli, he expressed his admiration for IC students emphasizing the school's innovative teaching methods and the outstanding personal skills they develop in their students

> IC is the "AUB school"/ their tuition is equal to what I pay for Balamand/ these schools are on **another level**/ really **Chapeau bas**/ they[the schools] work on their personality/ they have a lot of culture/ they're not like our schools/ take this book and study!/ they enter AUB as if they're going home [humourous tone] if they don't get accepted in Harvard or Yale/ they say what can we do!/ We have to go the AUB now! [laughter]

As Malek and Michel observed, IC and ASC are known for their international standards that attract an exclusive clientele made up by the children diplomats, foreign academics and NGO staff. This exclusive population makes these institutions ideal sites for accruing valuable social capital. "Setting high expectations", preparing students to seek admission in the most selective colleges and universities" ("ASC mission statement and identity," n.d.), in addition to developing a range of soft skills ("IC mission,"n.d.) are explicitly stated goals in the mission statement of these schools. The ethos of excellence that governs these elitist institutions, nurtures in students a high-achiever identity and a strong sense of entitlement. These elite schools located near AUB, specifically prepare their students to navigate with ease American system universities in Lebanon and abroad. Due to this total alignment between family and school socialization, on the one hand, and university, on the other hand, or between *habitus* and *field,* these privileged students feel like "fish in water" when they move to prestigious American universities

> When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

Research in the American (Mc Donough, 1997) Irish (Smyth and Banks, 2012) and British (Reay, David &Ball, 2001) educational contexts examined the "school effect" to understand the impact of the institutions in shaping the perceptions and choices of students. Although the concept of "institutional habitus" has been contested by Atkinson (2011), other researchers like Thrupp

(1999) suggest that the school resources and ethos can affect students' educational outcomes independent of their class origin. Working class students may often fail not only because of their own background but also because their poorly resourced and low-performing schools do not support their success. On the other hand, working-class students who attend well-resourced middle-class schools have better chances to succeed as the school positive ethos is more favorable for their success. Their interaction with better-off peers can also boost their achievement (Coleman, 1979). In the Lebanese case, the school system operates as a selection machine which channels students to different higher education destinations. Thus, attending a disadvantaged public school or low-performing private school greatly reduces the student's chances to attend a competitive university as I will explain in the following section.

6.4.2 Low-performing schools

Participants who attended public schools or low-performing private schools reported being unfamiliar with English language requirements of American system universities. Most of them attended French medium schools that offered only basic English language education. Their minimal English skills and lack of preparation for standardized tests complicated their transition to university and in some cases, excluded them from joining better ranking universities. For example, Zaynab (PreMed, Balamand), who attended a francophone private school in her village in Akkar, explains how the school allocated very little time for English and never raised the students awareness about the importance of standardized tests

> Because it was a French medium school/ we had English twice a week/ or even once/ these two classes lasted 50 minutes/ and in those 50 minutes/ we studied for 10 or 15 minutes/ And for the rest of the time/ they [students] either laughed/ or had fun with the teacher/ or did their homework/ they thought this hour was for fun/ this was difficult for me when I decided to join an American system university/ because in the last three years/ they stopped teaching us English/ they preferred to allocate this hour to other subjects included in the official exam/ but I would have preferred to take some English/ When I applied to university / I was surprised with the SAT exam/ our school never gave us any awareness about it/ I lost a whole year when I applied to Balamand/ they asked for SAT/ I said what is this test?/ I had to take intensive English courses/ I felt that I was starting English from scratch!/ it's true that we took some English / but it was very basic/ verb to be and verb to have!/ present and present continuous/ not how to write an essay or to write analysis/

As Zaynab explained, students with low English proficiency are usually placed in remedial courses which can be costly and time-consuming. This can be a demotivating experience as advanced English levels are often prerequisites for major courses. Moreover, a lack of English skills can exclude low income students from joining better ranking universities even when the student is awarded a full scholarship. This is the case of Tareq who studies Architecture at Al- Manar, a market-oriented affordable university in Tripoli. Although Tareq was admitted to BAU (Beirut Arab University), an established institution with a reputable Engineering faculty, his limited English stood in the way

> We took English in EB8 [grade 8] /we used to play in class/ now/ it's totally different/ I'm in my third year now and I say I wish I learned English/ as you know that you cannot take major courses without English/ so when I started I didn't have a clue/ although I went to take a course at a center/ hoping to be placed in a higher level/ [laughter]/ but it didn't work/ I actually applied to both BAU (Beirut Arab university) and Manar/ but I couldn't get to BAU because of language level/ I got accepted in both/ but in both universities I had to do remedial English courses/ but the English courses in BAU are more expensive than Manar/ so for example if I apply to two universities/ and I need to take a lot of intensive English courses in both/ with more than 4000 $ difference/ they [the scholarship awarding agency] wouldn't pay it/suppose I tell them I want to join Balamand/ but my English is weak/ they won't accept this/ because they will pay a fortune for English courses / it's a waste/ They can use this money for other students/

Tareq missed a precious opportunity to join a competitive architecture department due to his low English language proficiency. Along the same lines, participants in the focus group voiced their dissatisfaction about the quality of English they received in their public schools. This extract summarizes a number of issues they raised during the discussion:

> Nada: private schools give importance to languages/public schools don't give it importance
>
> Rami: We never practiced the language/ and our parents don't communicate with us in English/ the kids today know English better/ they even watch cartoons in English/ our times were different
>
> Ahmad: the teacher was fixated on verb To Be [general laughter]/ I never took it seriously/ we focused on other subjects/ we didn't even attend the class/ it was like a *Seyran*! [Arabized form of the Turkish word *Ciragan/* picnic]/ we used to bring food!
>
> Salma: because it was not assessed in the official exam!
>
> Rami: they give you vocabulary /and say to you memorize it! 50 words/ without explanation/ without practice!
>
> Ahmad: seven years of English at school/ and the teacher never discussed a topic in English with us/ we never practiced the vocab we took
>
> Nada: even teachers don't put any effort/ we knew more about the teacher's life and the presents she got from her husband than we knew about English! /she only handed out photocopies/ and even made us pay for them! [general laughter]
>
> Ahmad: If someone told me English was going to be important for university/ I would have taken it more seriously!
>
> Nada: you study French all your life/ and suddenly/ they tell you that you need English for university and work/ it's like someone starting something in KG!

In this short discussion, students identified a number of shortcomings such as unqualified teachers, outdated teaching methods, and misleading messages about the importance of English. Most of

these students were raised in monolingual families and deprived from acquiring valuable linguistic capital. In this way, public schools reinforced social inequalities and minimized the students' chances of joining better universities. Limited English skills would have an enduring effect on their communication skills and self-confidence as I will explain in the following chapters.

However, a minority of public schools students were able to develop their English language skills through the scholarships they received from international development agencies. In grade 11, Bilal enrolled in the Access program, a two-year scholarship awarded by the American embassy to outstanding public schools students. His relatively advanced English language skills enabled him to avoid remedial courses at university

> There was the micro-scholarship offered by the American embassy/ the name of the program was Access/ we used to study for this program after school/ so we had extra hours/ this program had its special curriculum and special books/ we learned English/ through practice/ so we met foreigners/ and we talked to them/ it also focused on listening and writing and grammar/ so through this program my English improved/ and later I worked on myself with movies and songs/

As the Lebanese public school system abdicates its responsibility for developing the students' foreign language skills, development agencies step in to fill the gap. This form of "cherry picking", however, legitimizes schooling inequalities as it fails to address the structural deficiencies of the Lebanese educational system. Moreover, these development agencies that operate in Lebanon subscribe to a neoliberal agenda which emphasizes individual self-development rather than collective social justice (Nimer, 2019).While these scholarships can promote the social mobility of a few disadvantaged individuals, the majority of public-school students are denied access to the cultural resources necessary for social advancement.

Finally, a number of public-school students described how their schools failed to provide any practical guidance that would help them manage the transition to higher education. While high-performing private schools have well-established connections and regular interactions with competitive universities, public schools students solely rely on their personal network to gather information about a prospective university. Thus, a weak institutional social capital can negatively affect the amount and the quality of information students receive about universities.

> When were about to choose our Baccalauréat specialty, SG (sciences generales) or SV (sciences de la vie) or whatever /nobody told us/ **par example**/ If I wanted to study architecture/ whether I should choose SV or SG or anything/ in the Baccalauréat year/ I remember that some universities like Jinan [Islamic market- oriented university in Tripoli]/ came to do marketing for some majors/ other than that there was NOTHING NOTHING!/ I can assure you/ from my own experience and my friends' experience/ so many students changed their major later on/ because they didn't know anything about it before/ no one gave them any orientation/ I didn't get the information about my major from school/ they never/never told us anything/ they don't consider themselves responsible for this at all/nobody gave any advice/ so I knew about my major from my sisters/ because my sisters

> studied at the Beaux-arts faculty [LU]/ this is the biggest problem we have in secondary [public]schools/

Participants' accounts underscore the importance of institutional ethos and practices on the way students manage the transition to higher education. Those who attended high-performing private schools were more likely to possess the necessary skills and information to successfully navigate the system. In contrast, public schools and low-performing private schools seemed to be less concerned with facilitating their students' access to university. Thus, the socio-economic status of the school remains decisive in shaping the students' path to university.

6.5 New forms of cultural capital

Participants from lower-class fractions reported a "knowledge gap" that negatively impacted their transition to university. The knowledge and the skills that enable students to successfully navigate educational markets are unequally distributed among different class positions. As Ball (1993) has noted, being an active and strategic chooser in the education market presumes the possession of the cultural code required for decoding the objects displayed" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, P.51-52). The valuable information needed to decode the market is not necessarily official and accessible for all, but can be acquired through personal social networks such as parents, friends, family members and schoolmates (Van Zanten, 2009, Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).) While conventional forms of cultural capital remain essential for educational success, the knowledge of the inner workings of the system *"connaissances des rouages"* (Draelants, 2014) is necessary to stay ahead of the competition. Thus, securing a spot in a competitive university requires an active quest for "insider's knowledge". The winners of the game are not simply "*inheritors*" of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) but "initiated" students (*initié)* who benefit from valuable insider knowledge to decipher the system

> The *initiated* students is the one who possesses the map and the compass to orient himself in the academic maze. The *initiated* is the one who can read between the lines and decode the institutional discourse… To this end, he calls on insider knowledge provided by his social network. The *initiated* is the one who can be guided, accompanied, informed by someone who went, before him, where he intends to go. In contrast, the *non-initiated*, is the one whose knowledge is reduced to the official, public information (P.413).

Draelants' definition resonates with the distinction made by Ball and Vincent (1998) between "cold knowledge" (public official accessible to all) and "hot knowledge" (or grapevine knowledge) which is "socially embedded in networks and localities and…distributed unevenly across and used differently by different social-class groups" (p.377). The decision to change schools (Ameen) or to hire private tutor (Georges) was mainly informed by their parents' knowledge of the system requirements. One has to remember, however, the interweaving of economic and cultural resources. In addition to *knowing what it takes* to stay on top, the economic resources of middle-class parents enable them *to do what it takes.* Moving a child to an elite Anglophone school or hiring a private tutor for English and SAT is the preserve of those who can afford this competitive advantage. As Buchman et.al (2010) have noted shadow education activities pertaining to university and SAT preparation constitute a form cultural capital mediated by both family income

and parental educational resources. This observation is in line the flexible definition of cultural capital suggested by Lareau (2003b)

> Our conception [of cultural capital] emphasizes micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation. These specialized skills are transmissible across generations, are subject to monopoly, and may yield advantages or ''profits.'' This conception is one that we feel to be more in keeping with Bourdieu's understanding and, more importantly, has greater potential than the dominant interpretation (p.569).

6.6 Choice of university

The well-documented affinity between middle classes and higher education has taken on new dimensions in the light of global changes in education and labor markets worldwide. The shift away from heavy industry and manual skills towards the service industry and knowledge economy in many parts of the world over the past four decades has greatly impacted the field of education. As wider participation in higher education has significantly increased the number of job seekers, graduates today strive to distinguish themselves from the crowd of applicants. This fiercely competitive new work order has heightened the anxieties of middle classes as they realize that social reproduction has become fraught with many uncertainties. The 'fear of falling' (Ehrenreich, 1990) exhorted middle classes to mobilize their different resources to guarantee their children educational advantage. For middle classes, who mainly rely on education to maintain their class position, securing a spot at a competitive university has become imperative. In *Class Warfare* Weis et al. (2014) identify college admissions as "a key site in the fight for economic and social advantage" (p.13) .In the Lebanese context, middle classes have always been engaged in the race for cosmopolitan education. This orientation can be explained by the propensity of highly educated Lebanese students to emigrate in search for better job opportunities (World Bank, 2012, Kawar & Tzannatos, 2012). As in other deeply unequal societies, the game is rigged in favor of those who possess better economic resources. While a minority of upper middle-class students gravitate towards prestigious institutions in the capital such AUB or LAU, less affluent middle-class students opt for more affordable, but still competitive private universities in the North such as Balamand, Saint-Joseph, Notre-Dame or Beirut Arab university. The majority of low-income students either enroll in the Lebanese public University (LU) or in affordable market-oriented universities that proliferated in the 1990 to meet the rising demand for American system education (Kabbanji, 2012). Despite the absence of statistical data on students' social backgrounds, it is safe to say that working class students are underrepresented in elite private universities. This access becomes possible only when these students receive full scholarships from religious charities (funded by sectarian leaders) or foreign development agencies. Although the expansion the system has widened the choices of students, it has also reinforced educational inequalities as different universities offer varying quality of education and confer on their students different degrees of prestige. In a highly stratified system where cost is perceived as an indicator of quality (Nauffal, 2004), market-oriented universities are often labelled as "shops" that "sell" university degrees. Thus, the type of institution attended positions students differently in both local and global labor markets.

6.7 Legacies and affluent middle classes

For middle-class participants who hailed from well-educated families, joining an elite university seemed like a continuation of their family traditions. These students perceived elite education as an integral part of their social identity. "Legacies" who usually enter university with abundant cultural, social and economic capitals, might be favored over others as their presence enables universities to maintain a sense of tradition (Martin & Spenner, 2008). Malek's parents both studied medicine at the Prestigious American University of Beirut. Although he assures that AUB was a free choice, his parents educational profile, and their ample economic resources predisposed him in a way to retrace his parents' path. As Bourdieu (1977) notes social agents are likely to gravitate towards the social field that match their dispositions

> Of course/ there's my parents' background/ because they're both AUB graduates/ but I am the one who chose AUB/**totally**/ actually I didn't apply to any university other than AUB/ not to Balamand or LAU or any other place/ to this extent/ thank God/ I was confident that I can be admitted/

In a way, Malek is misrecognizing the inner workings of his habitus. His choice conforms to his family *doxa*, the unquestioned assumptions about what should be and the way things are done in family. "What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying", (Bourdieu 1977, P.165–7). For Malek, any other option like LAU and Balamand was inconceivable. His confidence in being admitted stems from the high-achiever identity cultivated by his well-educated parents and reaffirmed by his elite schooling. Nevertheless, having a parent who attended an elite university does not necessarily guarantee the children's admission to the same institution due to fierce competition in high selective departments. For some students like Ameen, the failure to join a top university can be experienced as a frustrating event or a betrayal of family expectations.

> Balamand was a **second option**/ my **last resort**/ my **first option** was AUB/ I was aiming to join AUB/ my father graduated from AUB/ my uncle/ and my grandfather/ so there was an **expectation** that I would go there/

Ameen was so disappointed that he even contemplated studying abroad as any other university in Lebanon would not be worth the trouble

> I said to myself/ there's no point in studying in Lebanon unless it's AUB

"The AUB or nothing" kind of thinking reflects Ameen's sense of entitlement and high aspirations. Although Ameen half-heartedly joined the less prestigious university of Balamand, he was determined to compensate for this lack by studying for a Master's degree in Europe. Some middle class participants like Georges reported that their choice was mainly informed by the university reputation and prestige. His account underscores the importance of "reputational affects" that can have an enduring effect of students' dispositions and perceptions (Stich, 2012). By using AUB as point of reference, Georges illustrates how the reputation of one university is often construed in relation to other universities

> When I finished **Terminale** [grade 12]/ you know/ everybody aspires to join a **high-level** university/ no one likes to join a **low level** university because in the end/ they want to get

> a decent degree/ so I took a tour/ I checked Balamand/ LAU/ checked several universities/ and I found that LAU was the best choice for me/ the tuition was ok/ everything was fine/ I liked it/LAU is well-reputed university/ it's respected by all the Lebanese universities/ everybody knows that in the rankings/ I think/ it comes right behind AUB/ and we're always competing with AUB/ there is a strong competition between AUB and us on the first ranking/ but because of the history of AUB/ it has an older history/ that's why it takes the first place

Other less affluent middle-class students opted for less prestigious, but still competitive universities within their financial means. Location was also an important factor in their choice as they preferred to avoid long distance commuting or relocating to Beirut. For Michel, who lives in the Northern town of Zgharta [30 minutes by car to Balamand] the decision to join Balamand rested on a combination of factors such as accessible location, relatively affordable fees, and good reputation.

> Its' about 30 minutes from home/ and it's less expensive than AUB/ /because moving to Beirut is costly / and they [Balamand] also have a strong engineering department/

6.8 Market-oriented universities and LU

While several middle-class participants found their way into competitive private universities with varying degrees of prestige, lower income students were constrained by their meager economic resources which often directed them to the public university or affordable market-oriented universities. After her father's death, Mira (Computer Sciences, Université Libano-francaise, ULF) and her mother found themselves in a precarious financial situation as they lost their only source of income. This might explain why the quest for financial security was a recurrent theme in her interview. Because Mira attended an English-medium vocational school, she was discouraged from applying to LU where her major was taught in a mix of French and English. Therefore, Mira decided to enroll in the most affordable university that offered this major in English

> My financial situation is not good/ my father passed away three years ago/ and my mother doesn't work/ we have a simple life/ so it's the cheapest university/ and it's accredited/ I got a 30% discount/ because my father is deceased/ and I was taking grants from Miqati [Lebanese prime minister from Tripoli] /he has paid me 2000 $ so far/

Mira's choice was largely dictated by her weak economic resources. Even with the reasonable fees of ULF, Mira couldn't have continued her education without financial aid from a charity sponsored by a prominent politician. Her case illustrates how grants and scholarships for low-income students enable Lebanese politicians maintain their clientelistic practices and patronage-ridden politics. Mira ruled out any possibility than ULF as she knew that her objectives chances of enrolling at a more expensive university were too slim. Thus, aspiring for a better choice was an unreasonable idea that should be rejected right away

> Mira: I love to design video games/ but unfortunately this major is not available here/it's only in private universities/ in the area of Beirut / some people told me they have it in AUB

> / you know AUB/ nobody [laughter]/ goes there at all/ you have to be very rich/ it's very expensive!
>
> May: Have you ever thought about studying there?
>
> Mira: I don't like to think about things I know I cannot reach/ so that I don't get depressed! [laughter]

As Bourdieu (1990) has argued, our aspirations and expectations, our sense of what is unreasonable or unreasonable, likely or unlikely, are structured by our habitus which mediates the objective material conditions we live in. These material conditions shape our sense of what is possible or impossible. By refusing to imagine herself at a better university, Mira rejects what is already denied and desires what is more likely to happen.

Mira was convinced that joining ULF was the best she could achieve within her scarce resources. In contrast to her resigned attitude, some participants voiced their frustration as they felt that they deserved to study at better universities. Nancy (English literature, LU) attended a reputable English-medium school in Akkar which hosts a religiously diverse middle class population. Nancy worked hard for the Baccalauréat exam hoping that her high grades would enable her to secure a full scholarship to the University of Balamand. However, her bid to join Balamand ended in bitter disappointment

> I was hoping/ to get a distinction (in the official exams)/ like everybody else/ I was dreaming of joining a private university/ so my hope was to get a scholarship/ I got 15.5 in the official exams / I was among of the ten highest averages in the North/ I took the first grade on the English exam in Lebanon 32/40 /so this helped me to join this major/ and despite all this no scholarship! [disappointed tone] / Balamand gave me a 40% scholarship for one year/ **for one year only**/ so I thought/ now I'm going to enter/ for one year/ with 40% not 100 %/ and I will have two more years to graduate/ why would I go through this and struggle?/ I said to myself let me join a university where I can settle down/ adapt/ so it does not delay my graduation/ so I decided to be here [LU]… if it [the scholarship] was 100% it would have been ok/ but **I DESERVE TO BE THERE** [at Balamand]!
>
> [frustrated tone]

Although Nancy's father owns a prosperous flower shop in the largest town of Akkar, paying the steep tuition fees of Balamand was clearly beyond his means. Her account is imbued with feelings of injustice as she felt entitled to study at a well-reputed private university. In addition to her father's enthusiasm for her education, her aspirations were shaped by the higher educational standards of her school and her exposure to religious and cultural diversity. Nancy's school organized trips to several private universities including Balamand where she had the chance to explore "the charming campus" as she described it. The encounters mentioned above increased her capacity to imagine herself studying there. Accordingly, Nancy felt that Balamand was her rightful place. As I will explain in the following chapter, this feeling of injustice will have a long lasting effect on her experience in LU.

While Nancy entertained high hopes of joining a private institution, other low-income students knew they had no other option than LU. The Lebanese University (LU) or the" people's university" attracts a mix of working-class students, lower middle class fractions, and middle classes who cannot afford private universities. However, access to LU can be quite problematic. While some faculties like sciences and humanities accept hundreds of students in the first year, other competitive departments such as engineering can be highly selective. Moreover, some majors like medicine, journalism and hospitality are not available in the North campus. This gap limits the choices of low-income students who cannot afford to move to other Lebanese regions. Before joining Balamand, Bilal resigned himself to studying hospitality in a vocational school as his desired major was only available at another LU campus located in Al- Hadath town in Mount Lebanon

> I couldn't go to the Lebanese university in Al- Hadath / because here in the North/ there is no Hospitality major in LU/ so I had to go to a vocational school/because my financial situation did not allow me to go and live in Al-Hadath/ too many expenses and lots of stuff/

Bilal's story illustrates how the student's immobility can deprive them from valuable educational opportunities. Attending a distant university is a privilege that only middle classes can afford. Moreover, his account highlights the effects of regional inequalities on students' educational outcomes. While Bilal needs to move cities to study his desired major, a student who lives in Beirut can easily commute to the LU campus in Al-Hadath. This immobility can particularly affect low income young women who belong to conservative Muslim families. In many cases, female students are not allowed to lead independent lives in Beirut. Salma (Nutrition, LIU) explains how regional inequalities interact with meager economic resources and gender norms to reproduce the disadvantage of these young women. These students often settle for less prestigious majors despite their high abilities

> We don't have all the majors in Tripoli/ let's take medicine for example/ It's available only in Beirut/ so not everybody can study it/ unless you want to do it at Balamand/ but it's very expensive there/and you know our society here/ I don't want to say it's closed-minded/ but it's conservative/ so the father says I won't send my daughter to Beirut/ and even if he wants to send her/ he has to pay accommodation, and transportation and food/ he cannot afford that/ so many girls stay here/ they study biochemistry instead of medicine/ although they have high grades/ and they're capable/ but because their fathers do not allow them/

Finally, several LU participants highlighted the rampant corruption that excludes some students from accessing selective departments at the public 9University. As in most Lebanese public institutions, clientelistic practices are common in LU (Tabar & Egan, 2016) and those who have a solid *Wasta* receive preferential treatment. Sameera applied to the Architecture department for two consecutive years before securing a seat. She describes her indignation as she realized that students with *Wasta* could get in even if they failed the entrance exams

> I thought they selected the students/ in a/ err… conscientious way/ that's what I used to think/ but when I applied for the second time/ before the entrance exam/ I was shocked/ I ran into a girl/ I knew she failed the previous year in the entrance exam/ but she was going

> to her second year!/ even worse/ when we were doing the entrance exam in the previous year/ they got her a prominent professor to help her with the sketching test/ it was so blatant/ But I couldn't do anything/ [frustrated tone]

6.9 Conclusion

This chapter examined how the students' class position influenced their transition to university. The participants' accounts highlighted the role of family social, cultural and economic capitals in shaping this transitional phase. For middle class students, higher education was a taken for granted path. They are aware that all degrees were created not equal, hence the importance of joining a reputable university. For working and lower middle class students, getting a university degree was a way of healing their parent's class injuries and fulfilling their longing for social recognition. Conversations with middle class students underscored the strategic thinking of middle class parents who possess both the financial resources and the information capital to pave their children way to the best universities. In contrast to privately school students, participants who attended public schools voiced their dissatisfaction about the low language standards, the obsolete teaching methods and the dearth of information about university admission. Conversations with low income students also illustrated how their peripheral geographical location and limited mobility restricted their educational opportunities and aspirations. This immobility or spatial entrapment can be especially detrimental for young women who are expected conform to the conservative cultural norms of their community.

Chapter 7

Building Capitals I

7.1 Introduction

I examined in the previous chapter how the class position of participants shaped their dispositions for higher education and conditioned their choice of university within the highly stratified Lebanese education system. In this chapter, I further examine the stories of participants to understand how their class position impacts the way they develop social and cultural capital during their university years. As Stevens, Armstrong and Arum (2008) have noted, higher education institutions function as "incubators" where students hone their social and cultural competencies. The cultural and social resources that students acquire during their study years can have far reaching consequences for their social mobility, their labor market outcomes, and even their marital life (Armstrong, 2007; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2006; Schwartz & Mare, 2005; Stevens, 2007). The process of developing capitals takes place not only within the classroom, but also through the extra-curricular activities that enable students to accumulate valuable experiences and widen their social networks. These enriching activities which include participation in university clubs, internships, community service, and volunteering enable students to acquire a range of marketable skills and attitudes valued by privileged classes and future employers. Several scholars have identified the extra-curricular terrain as a site of social stratification and the reproduction of social inequalities. Research in the American (Steven et al. 2008; Stuber, 2009) British (Bathmaker et al., 2016) and Canadian (Lehmann, 2012) contexts has highlighted class-based patterns of engagement in ECA as access to these enriching experiences was found to be unequally distributed among different class positions. Thus, the amount of capitals that students possess upon their enrollment largely conditions the acquisition of further capitals. While several structural barriers prevent low-income students from engaging in these activities, middle class students are more successful at accumulating extra-credential experiences and "hypermobilizing" the capitals they already possess. Moreover, they are more adept at "playing the game" and constructing themselves as employable (Bathmaker, et al., 2016; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Tackacs, 2020).

Lebanese students' accounts of their university experiences resonate with these findings as they similarly reveal class-based engagement patterns in ECA. Privately-schooled middle and upper middle-class students arrive on campus with a set of economic, cultural and social resources that favors their integration and involvement in campus social life. Conversely, lower income students often experience feelings of alienation as they encounter the middle class norms of university and interact with more privileged peers. Their meager economic resources and minimal social connections can also stand in the way of accumulating valuable experiences. Most importantly, the accounts of participants highlight the specificities of the Lebanese cultural context where class and culture intersect to shape students social lives. In the multi-confessional Lebanese society, prior exposure to social and cultural diversity seems to be an important predictor of the students' engagement on campus and their propensity to develop social and cultural capital (Nimer, 2016). In particular, their stories highlight how class, regional, and gender inequalities in peripheral

Lebanon intersect to limit the students' opportunities to develop employability skills and exclude them from well-paid jobs. Finally, although individual class position seems to be an important predictor of students' behaviour on campus, their social life is also shaped by the institutional resources available to them. While well-resourced private universities promote the employability agenda and offer their students institutionalized opportunities to engage in ECA, the Lebanese public university and market-oriented institutions lacks the financial, social and cultural resources to foster marketable skills and competencies in students.

7.2 The challenges of fitting in: cultural and financial barriers

Educational research has highlighted the importance of the cultural competencies that students possess as they embark on their academic journey. In order to navigate the ''hidden curriculum'' of academic institutions (Anyon, 1980), undergraduates deploy a set of social and cultural skills developed through different socialization contexts such as family and school. These social and cultural predispositions that shape students' interactions on campus can play a decisive role in their access to institutional resources and labor market outcomes (Calarco 2011; Carter 2005; Collier and Morgan 2008; Holland 2015; Lareau 2003; Rivera, 2015; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012; Stuber, 2011; Zweigenhaft, 1993). Several scholars have argued that class-based social and cultural dispositions structured students' engagement on campus (Steven's et al., 2007, Stuber, 2009: Bathmaker, et. al. 2016; Lehmann, 2012). Middle and upper middle class students arrive on campus with social and cultural competencies that enable them to confidently engage with authority figures and facilitate their involvement in extra-curricular activities (Calarco 2014). Thus, the alignment between their middle class habitus and the university field favors their integration on campus and allows them to fully exploit institutional resources. Conversely, working class students in higher education often experience a cultural mismatch between their cultural dispositions and their new academic environment (Lucey et al., 2010). Therefore, this misalignment between their working class culture and the middle class norms that prevail at university can create feelings of stress and alienation and prompt them to withdraw from campus life (Bergerson, 2007). Their encounter with the middle-class world of higher education can generate different responses such as confrontation, reconciliation, or reconfirmation of the older habitus (Ingram & Abrahams, 2015). In many cases, their class position could limit their ability to engage in extra-curriculars, which hinders their access to valuable skills and resources.

While research in the American context emphasized class-based patterns of interactions, the social lives of Lebanese participants seems to be shaped by both their class position and the socio-cultural norms of their confessional community. Their accounts illustrate how different identity markers such as class, gender, region and religion interact together to structure students' involvement on campus. Although Lebanese students' engagement in ECA remains underexplored, Nimr (2018) provides valuable insight into the norms that govern their social lives. Researching a group of low-income scholarship students at a private university in Beirut, Nimr found that the degree of social conservatism and prior exposure to social diversity predicted the students' involvement in campus activities. Students from metropolitan Beirut who attended multi-confessional and socially diverse schools adapted more easily to the predominant norms of university and were more likely to engage in extra-curriculars. Conversely, those who grew up in culturally homogenous

communities and rural areas of Lebanon embraced more conservative values and were less inclined to participate in social activities or make friends from different confessional belongings.

The stories of participants resonate with Nimer's findings as they equally underscore the role of socio-cultural values in shaping students' university experiences. Several low-income participants who grew up in the underprivileged neighborhoods of urban Tripoli or rural Akkar had weaker exposure to the world beyond their homogenous communities. Thus, going to university was not only an encounter with middle class norms of university and more affluent peers, but also with more liberal cultural norms, greater confessional diversity and gender mixing. In contrast, middle and upper middle class students who attended coeducational secular and Christian missionary schools reported a smoother transition to university as they were socialized into the middle class norms that prevailed at university. These well-resourced schools often use modern pedagogical methods which foster independent thinking, open dialogue and closer contact with teachers (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987). Malek (upper middle class, AUB) explained how the French Lycée, which attracts the elites of urban Tripoli and the North, gave him the opportunity to interact with students from different confessions and regions, in addition to foreign instructors. This prior exposure to social diversity, enabled him to smoothly navigate the cosmopolitan AUB social environment and confidently engage with students and professors. Despite his confidence, Malek admits that adapting to a socially diverse place like AUB can be quite challenging for "local" Tripolitans who have a limited exposure to the world beyond their city. Like many Lebanese, Malek contrasts the cosmopolitanism of AUB with the localism of Tripoli, a city often associated with conservatism and traditionalism (Abi Samra, 2011)

> From Lycée / yes of course/ I learned **communication skills**/ errr… the way you deal with people/ you know/ you grow up with your siblings and family/ but when you go to Lycée / you meet people/ you deal with different people/ from **different religions**/ from **different backgrounds**/ … there are people from France… people from Zgharta[Christian Maronite town in North Lebanon] and Kourah [religiously mixed semi-rural district in the North]/ so/ it's good/ because it prepared me for university/ at university/ you get to know people from Lebanon/ from Syria/ from Jordan/ from Iraq/ Iran/ a few people from Europe/but even inside Lebanon/ you have people from the North/ the South/ the mountain/ Akkar/ Muslims Shia Sunnis Druze Christians/ whatever/ **every sect in Lebanon/ you get to communicate with them**/ …**I have it for granted**/ **but it's somehow difficult**/ because when you come from a background where **it's all Tripoli Tripoli Tripoli**/ it's somehow difficult to communicate with others/ but for me/ Lycée paved the way a little/ and of course **I have my own communication skill**s/ I like to meet people/ so yes/ it's a plus/

What Malek describes here is a form of cultural capital that he acquired through his elite schooling (French Lycée) and family socialization. These social and cultural competences are usually the preserve of middle and upper middle classes who are more likely to study and work in socially diverse institutions where they acquire cross-sectarian and cosmopolitan social and cultural capital.

For lower income students from peripheral Lebanon, the lack of social exposure can sometimes make their transition to university more problematic. Those who have been socially confined to

the boundaries of their homogeneous towns and villages sometimes need to deploy considerable effort to overcome the cultural mismatch between their home communities and their new social environment. According to Waseem, a career advisor at the Business School of AUB, these students had fewer opportunities for social experimentation compared those who grew up in Metropolitan Beirut

> **They come from /really rural area where their only exposure to schooling was public high schools of the** *Jered* [high mountains]/**right/ but they're brilliant students/ they deserve the chance and those are the scholarships that I'm talking about/ they come from rural backgrounds/ full scholarship students/… those born in the city have more access more exposure /potential for things to diversify their experiences/ see things/ culturally/ socially/ mixing with people/ a lot of our lower socio-economic students who are on scholarship come very homogenous societies/ right/ all they've seen is/ given Lebanon break down** / only their own sect/ for example / or something like that/**as opposed to being in metropolitan Beirut** or/ or the suburbs of Beirut/ **you're interacting/Muslims and Christians and Druze/ everybody is interacting rich and poor/people from all walks of life/ there's more of a mix right? / so we work very hard with our scholarship students/ to boost their confidence/ and work on they communication skills**

As Waseem observes here, the class position of scholarship students and their peripheral geographical location intersect to create a misalignment between their habitus and field. These students go through a long process of cultural negotiations as they encounter the university middle class norms (Abrahams & Ingram, 2015) and interact with a socially diverse student population. In particular, the liberal gender norms that prevail in typical non-confessional Lebanese universities can be a destabilizing experience for some students. Several participants who grew up in socially conservative families described the "cultural shock" they experienced as they saw male and females students mixing without restrictions on campus. For example, Zaynab (lower middle class, Balamand) who wears the Islamic headscarf- like most women in her village-recalls being intrigued by the physical intimacy between male and females students at Balamand. Zaynab found herself in confusing situations when she interacted with her male peers

> The thing that shocked me the most/ was how students greeted each other/ they hug/ they kiss/ we don't have this at all!/ we don't even shake hands/ I'm not talking about people from another religion/ even Muslims do that!/ so I used to think/ how do you do this if you're Muslim!!/ so once/ in my first year/ one of my males classmates/ wanted to greet me/ so I realized he was coming towards me to kiss me/ so I kept holding his hand and tried to stay away from him as much as possible/ so now when I shake hands with someone / I usually keep a distance/ so they understand that I don't kiss

Zaynab eventually adjusted to her new environment and found a compromise (shaking hands without kissing) that allowed her to observe the conservative norms of her family without excluding herself from interactions with her male friends. Similarly, the stories of some male participants who attended single-sexed schools in low-income neighborhoods highlight the disjuncture between their conservative upbringing and the university liberal environment. For

example, Tareq (lower middle class, Manar University), who repeatedly criticized gender segregation norms during the interview, explains how the cultural mismatch between home and university can be a disconcerting experience for some students.

> Sometimes when students start university/ they find that the atmosphere is totally different/ because they didn't have this in school/ in my school boys and girls were separated / so now they skip classes /and they spend their time sitting in cafeteria flirting with girls all the time[laughter] / because they didn't experience that in schools/ this is very wrong/ because you're used to something in school/ and then you see something different in university/ for example/ now at university/ a girl might come and sit next to you/ it's normal/ but if we were used to that in school/ we wouldn't have felt the difference/

In addition to negotiating new gender norms, some working class participants in elite universities experienced emotionally taxing moments as they interacted with more privileged peers. Several participants reported feelings of shame and embarrassment as their meager financial resources excluded them from social activities organized by more affluent students. Hilal (working class, Balamand) for example, could not recall any situation where he felt overtly discriminated against because of his working class origin. However, he constantly felt under the pressure to make up endless excuses in order to "save face"

> The atmosphere [at Balamand] was very different/ the culture/ the people/ … the people at Balamand are **high class**/ and I'm coming from kobbeh [working class neighborhood [laughter]/ so they would say/ "we're going for dinner"/ "would you join us?"/ "No I can't"/ "why?"/ so I started making up excuses/ "I have to study"/I'm going to the association [Achievers]]laughter]/ first it was difficult to adapt/ for example/ they go to a different restaurant every day/ and cafés/ if I go maybe once a week/ I'll be broke for the rest of the month [laughter]/ so it was difficult at the beginning/ but then I got used to it/ and things got better because I started working part-time/

Like Hilal, many working class students cannot keep up with the middle class lifestyle of their more affluent peers as branded clothing, restaurants, and expensive smart phones remain beyond their means. Thus, they often find themselves in situations where they have to evade disclosing the truth about their financial hardships. These moments which accentuate the boundaries between working class and middle class students can sometimes leave hidden class injuries or scars with long lasting effect on students.

For some working class participants, meeting more affluent peers at university presented an opportunity to reflect on the stark inequalities between those who struggle to survive and others born "with a silver spoon in their mouth" as the Lebanese saying goes. Like many working students, Bilal sometimes juggled two part-time jobs to support his family. Thus, he shows little tolerance for the irresponsible behavior of those who took their privilege for granted.

> One thing that annoyed be about them/ was that some of them/ **they don't value money**/ there is this guy in the microeconomics class/ he's repeating the course for the fourth time!/ I think his parents have paid so far about 7000$ for one course!/ I was like/ please /**value**

> **this**/ the effort that your parents are putting/ even if your well-off/ you have to appreciate what your parents are doing/

Financial hardships occupy a central place in the narratives of low income students. While middle and upper middle class students relied on their parents' ample economic resources, many low-income participants reported financial concerns that negatively affected their academic performance and put them under considerable stress. Thus, receiving a full scholarship is by no means the end of students' financial troubles. Many of them worked part-time and struggled to cover other expenses such as transportation, handbooks, photocopies, laptops, phone bills and home Wi-Fi. This can be particularly stressful for those enrolled in majors that require additional expenses or special equipment. Tareq (lower middle class, Manar University), who received a full scholarship from Achievers to study architecture, explains why his mother's meager salary as a school teacher can barely cover his needs.

> The problem that we face at university/ is that my major [architecture] is very costly/ you know/ we work on many computer programs / so the laptop should be very advanced / and this is something I don't have/ we need some programs/ like 3 D Max and that kind of stuff/ I don't have them because there too heavy for my laptop/every time I have a project to submit/ I go to a friend to use his laptop/ and I'm like/ for God's sake someone help me!/ it's very expensive/ so it's something between 1500 to 3000 Dollars/ it's not easy/ it's very costly/ and I've been struggling with this for a long time/ and my mother says/ let's buy one and pay in installments/ she says "no way you can stay more than 3 years without a laptop!"/ so my mother helps me a lot/ because printing projects needs a fortune/ she pays for everything/

The stories above illustrate some of challenges that lower income students encounter at university. In order to progress in their academic journey, these students sometimes need to negotiate new cultural norms, manage interactions with more privileged peers, and cope with considerable financial stress. These cultural and financial challenges were commonplace in the stories of low-income students at all universities. However, the students of the public university (LU) seemed to have a unique set of concerns arising from the many injustices inflicted upon them.

7.3 Disengagement at the "people's university"

Several scholars have identified students' engagement with authority figures as a capital accumulation strategy which enables them to access institutional support and resources. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Calarco ,2011; Erickson, McDonald& Elder 2009). Students who actively engage with professors have better opportunities to develop support networks and "extract key assets" such as recommendation letters, research assistantships, and access to their professors' professional and personal networks. Accordingly, forming mentoring relationship on campus appears to be a mechanism through which students accrue cultural and social capital (Jack, 2016). Most research in this area underscored class based differences in students' patterns of interactions emphasizing how middle class students were more adept at exploiting institutional resources and accumulating capitals. However, less attention has been paid to the role of institutional culture in shaping students engagement on campus (Gair & Mullins, 2001).

The stories of LU students illustrate how social interactions with faculty can profoundly impact students' sense of belonging, motivation and academic performance. While participants from private universities expressed different degrees of satisfaction with their academic experience, LU students overwhelmingly reported feelings of alienation, frustration and disengagement as they could not rely on any form of institutional support. Most of them portrayed their professors as distant authority figures who used authoritarian teaching styles and outdated pedagogical methods. Thus, students gave emotionally loaded accounts of their strained relationships with a rigidly bureaucratic administration and contemptuous professors. Their stories communicated feelings of distress and abandonment as they had no opportunity to seek advice, ask for guidance, or discuss their performance with their professors. Thus, these students had to cope with a stressful and unwelcoming social environment where they had little chance to extract "key assets" (Jack, 2016), let alone accrue cultural and social capital. Most importantly, LU participants explicitly framed their grievances in class terms. They viewed the many injustices inflicted on them as a form of class discrimination against those who could not afford the tuition fees of private universities. In their stories, class discrimination was closely intertwined with another form of regional discrimination against Tripoli and Northern rural areas which are often associated with poverty, backwardness, and even terrorism (Abi Samra, 2011). Thus, they repeatedly lamented the dismal treatment they received compared to their friends in private universities. Mona (middle class, LU, English Literature) is intrigued by the friendly rapport between her brother and his professors at Beirut Arab University

> I find it strange when I see my brother talking to his professors/ as if he's talking to his friends!/ we can't talk to our professors/ they're so distant/ you cannot reach them/ they would never give you their phone number/ we are the professors of the future/ why do they treat us like that? Some of them treat us in a very ugly way/ like if you are 2 minutes late/ they humiliate you/ if you give an opinion against their opinion/ they get upset/ but in literature there are many point of views/ but they don't accept/ there is no respect for students or their questions/ I think it's because we don't pay a lot/ some of them don't respect us because we don't pay/ some of them come from rich cities/ and most of our friends are from Akkar/ from villages/ so sometimes/ they look down on them/ this how is feel/ there regionalism

Along the same lines, Nancy (middle class, English literature) expresses her indignation at the violent display of privilege by some professors who overtly show their disdain for the students and for the city

> The level of arrogance is unbelievable/ there's a professor/ who says/ who do you think you are?/ she's upset because she has to come from Batroun [a coastal town in the North]/ she says "why are the roads here like that!"/ "what kind of people are you here?"/" you're so **vulgaire** [in French] in this city"/ I mean/ have some respect for us!/ she thinks she's from a **higher class**/ and she's all the time talking about her achievements instead of teaching/ she's like/ "I've been to France"/" I've been to America"/ to get my PhD/ I've been here/ I've been there/ one professor even told us/ "I don't need the job"/ "my father

> left me a fortune"/ "but I just want to do something with my time"/ so what? What's the point of talking about your fortune/ other than humiliating us?

These disdainful attitudes can be especially intimidating for working class students who already struggle on many fronts. In response to class arrogance, Khadija (working class, Sociology) takes refuge in silence fearing that her comments might antagonize her professors

> most of these professors/ they studied at private universities/ they think that the students of LU/ are the people who have no money/ people who cannot go to private universities/ This is what I feel/ I mean/ The way they look at you/ I don't know!/ and those professors also send their kids to private universities/ and their way of teaching/ they're like this is information/ if you understand then fine/ if you don't/ bang your head against the wall/ "I don't repeat anything"/ they say "I explain the lesson only once"/ some of them only read the material/ so/ I don't say a single word in class/ I try to be neutral/ because if you speak/ they humiliate you/ or pick on you/

Khadijah's withdrawal from any form of class interaction is an attempt to protect herself from public humiliation. While middle class LU students like Mona and Nancy can always rely on their private school education and their parents various resources, Khadija and her likes are in dire need of acquiring social and cultural resources. Her story illustrates how the national university, which is supposed to be a vehicle of social mobility, reproduces the disadvantage of working class students by denying them any form of institutional support and inhibiting their personal growth.

In addition to their strained rapport with professors, LU students complained about the unhelpful administration which made students feel unwelcome and showed little sensitivity to their needs. For example, Samira (lower middle class, LU) recalls with bitterness her encounter with a member of the administration who mocked her desperate attempts to join the highly selective architecture department

> On my third attempt to do the entrance exam/ there was a form to fill/ I ran into someone from the administration/ she said to me/ "you're not dead yet?"/ you're still applying?!"/ can you imagine? I swear to God/ literally/ she said it jokingly/ but she stabbed me in the heart/ I didn't answer back/ I just said I WILL ENTER this university/

Although this insensitive comment clearly left a scar on Samira, she was determined to beat all odds to reach her goal. Her story illustrates the demoralizing environment that LU students need to endure. These strained patterns of (dis)- engagement might partly explain why LU students lag behind in soft skills, despite the high academic standards of selective departments, as I will explain in the following sections.

7.4 Developing employability skills

The expansion of higher education systems around the world has fueled a state of fierce competition as increasing numbers of graduates seek a limited number of high quality professional and managerial jobs (Brown, 2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Marginson, 2016). Thus, distinguishing oneself from the crowd of applicants has become imperative for those who wish to climb the corporate ladder .To stay ahead of the game, students are expected to develop a "personal

capital" (Brown and Hesketh, 2004, p.34) which includes a set of competencies and attitudes valued in corporate settings. Thus, in addition to their academic credentials, students need to provide evidence of possessing a set of 'soft skills" or soft currencies such as problem-solving, team working, communication and self-management, in addition to certain personality traits and values such as commitment, flexibility, self-confidence and the ability to work under pressure. (Maher and Graves, 2010). Accordingly, constructing a narrative of employability requires students to package their personality and experiences in ways that conform to employers' expectations. The possession of employability skills is usually demonstrated through extracurricular activities which distinguish applicants from those who have the same academic credentials. Thus, unlocking the door of highly coveted jobs requires today much more than academic credentials. As Stuber (2009) noted, the extra-credential terrain has become another site of social stratification as access to these enriching experiences is unequally distributed among different class positions. However, before discussing how class position and institutional resources structure students' engagement in ECA, it is important to signal students' unequal access to English communication skills, which plays a decisive role in shaping their labor market outcomes and their opportunities for social advancement.

7.5 Unequal access to English communication skills

I have explained in chapter 1 and 4 how English language mediates social inequality in the highly stratified Lebanese educational system and other global contexts. As the Lebanese public education sector is known for its low language standards, high proficiency in English is usually the preserve of privately schooled middle class students. The superior language skills of privileged students facilitate their admission to high-ranking universities, favor their academic success, and enhance their labor market outcomes. While highly proficient students continue to hone their language skills at university, public school students struggle to remedy their language weaknesses. Participants who attended French-medium public schools emphasized the many challenges they faced at English-medium universities as their low proficiency negatively affected their performance in major courses. Nada (working class, LIU) felt almost cheated as she realized that she wasted her school years studying the wrong language.

> You spend all your life learning French/ and then they tell you need English for university and work and everything/ it's very difficult/you have to learn everything all over again/ it's like you are in **Petit Jardin** [KG1]/ and for jobs/ forget about French!/ I mean French is actually more difficult than English/ but it's because we didn't study English at school/

Although these students often enroll in remedial courses, their chances to develop adequate communication skills is largely dependent on the language standards of different institutions and the pedagogical practices used in both English and major courses. High ranking institutions provide their students with more opportunities to practice their communication skills and boost their self-confidence. Practices such as informal class discussions, formal debates, and PowerPoint presentations are more likely to take place in the classrooms of wealthy private institutions which pride themselves on their high language standards. Participants who attended these universities reported having more opportunities to practice their oral skills as they were regularly required to deliver oral presentations and received feedback on their performance. For Example, Ameen

(middle class, Balamand) explains how in-class presentations helped him overcome his shyness to communicate with ease and confidence.

> communication skills are very important/ especially in AUB/ I know friends who changed completely after they went there/ I also changed a lot after I enrolled in my business major/ my character changed/ like when I was in my first year/ and whenever I had to do a presentation/ I was like/ "God help me"/ I have to do a presentation now!/ especially that I'm a very selective person with the people I talk to/ but after a year at university/…when we have a group project/ I started training others for presentations/ I was like/ what's the most difficult part?/ give it to me/ I'll do it!/ I talk in front of the class/ I look at everyone/ I have no problem/ I have the **flow of ideas**/ before/ no/ I used to stress about it / it's all about practice/ 100 percent!/ because if it was character/well/ ok some people are born with it/…. but the people who were a little bit shy like me/ and now I changed/ I'm comfortable doing a presentation/ it tells you that it's about practice/

While Abdallah gave a positive assessment of his communication skills, several participants in market-oriented universities complained about the low standards and the absence of oral practice. Rami (lower middle class, LIU) could barely notice any improvement in his language skills during his three years at LIU

> I didn't feel I benefitted from English courses/ they didn't really work on our English / for example/ the first remedial course/ everybody passed it/ they were too lenient/ there was no pressure on us to work on English/ so we didn't really put effort/ they didn't really work on our **communication skills/ or presentations/**

Poor communication skills were also a major concern for LU students in general and English majors in particular as they had little opportunity to practice their oral skills in class. Not surprisingly, the absence of oral practice in class was a relief for many students who feared embarrassing themselves with their weak English. Mona (English Literature, LU) who attended a private school in Tripoli, laments the absence of oral practice explaining why her classmates refrain from speaking in public

[(Laughter]/ this question is spot on!/ We have a course/ it's called communication art/ it teaches you how to do a presentation/ but unfortunately/ we have a written exam for it!/ and this very annoying to me/…sometimes the professors ask for someone to do a presentation/ but frankly no one feels encouraged to do it/ it's not graded/ so those who do the presentations/ the professor chooses them by force [laughter]/ a PowerPoint presentation is not required/ but I personally would have preferred that it would be required and graded/ because the students are not confident in their language/ they feel/ embarrassed/ or don't know how to talk/ I think every student should do it/ it develops their language/ and the personality becomes stronger/ sometimes professors ask us to volunteer for presentations/ I always volunteer/ because I like public speaking/ I used to do that in school/ we always did PowerPoint/ but very few people do it/ the rest keep quiet/ I think they're shy because their language is not good/ so they don't like to talk in front of others/

Accordingly, the outdated pedagogical practices used in LU classrooms reproduced the language inequalities inflicted upon public school students. In contrast, public schools students who attend

higher ranking private universities seem to have more opportunities to remedy their language weaknesses and overcome their inhibitions. For example, Malek describes how scholarship students who arrive on AUB campus with little English improve their communication skills with practice and eventually acquire self-confidence

> They get over it/ they do/ because whatever your **major** is/ **engineering business biology psychology**/there are always **presentations**/ you have to speak to the class/ and this raises their **self-esteem**/ so the first time they don't do well/but the second the third the fourth time/ they'll be fine/

Most importantly, developing students communication skills in English requires a reassuring and empathetic atmosphere that enables students to overcome their "communication apprehension" (Horowitz et al., 1986) and experiment with language without being stigmatized for their limited English. Mirna, former career adviser at the Balamand Business School, explains the role of university in providing a safe experimentation space where students can develop their communication skills

> For example now I'm sending my students to a **conference**/ they're freaking out/ I said to them I know that you're afraid/ I'm not saying you're not/ but what does the university give you?/ a **safe platform**/ so that you can try/ if you don't try once/ you won't know **if you can or you cannot**/ I'm talking from my own experience/ I am a person who fears **public speaking**/ although I'm a **lecturer**/ but the class is different from the **stage**/ …but because I tried/ once and twice and thrice/ now the fear is gone/ I'm not afraid anymore/ I speak as if there's no one/

In brief, participants who attended LU and market-oriented universities had weaker opportunities to develop their English communication skills compared to the students of elite universities. In this way universities reproduce the class-based language inequalities which start with school education. Limited communication and presentation skills in English would eventually relegate these students to low-paid jobs as lucrative corporate positions remain the preserve of the highly fluent graduates of elite universities.

7.6 Institutionalized opportunities for engaging in ECA

Participants' accounts of their activities on campus underscored the role of institutional resources in shaping their university experiences. Wealth disparities among different university (Ramanthan, 2005) conditioned student's access to enriching experiences. While the students of well-resourced institutions were presented with structural opportunities to engage in ECA, their peers at LU and market-oriented universities described a less fulfilling student life. To begin with, wealthier universities possess the necessary infrastructure to host a range of extra-curricular activities as they provide their students with better campus facilities and more spaces for social interactions. These facilities which include spacious libraries, sport venues, auditoriums, cafeterias, gymnasiums and student lounges signal the upper middle class culture of these institutions and their ample material and financial resources. These signs of wealth stand in sharp contrast with the scarce resources of LU and smaller third generation universities. While AUB students spend their days on a prestigious campus overlooking the Mediterreanean, LU participants had no campus ground to

speak of. The students of the faculty of humanities (Tripoli, Kobbeh branch) lamented the desolate state of their two-story building which they jokingly compared to the Kobbeh prison located a few meters away. The building lacked the adequate spaces for hosting any kind of social events. Like other LU students, Nancy compares her unfulfilling student life to the burgeoning activities taking place at private universities.

> We don't have clubs/ just one small celebration on independence days/ most of my school friends went to private universities/ they invite me to plays sometimes/ they love to act/ so we go to see them/ I'm surprised/ I'm like/ you really have a theater at university?/ in BAU[Beirut Arab University]/ and Balamand/ they have a music room/they have bands/ they play music/ they have playgrounds/ football/ Basketball/ so they can join clubs/ they even told me that If they do well on a team/ they raise their GPA/ that's really nice/

Nancy goes on to describe with admiration the vibrant student life that her friends enjoy in other universities

> We went on a trip one time and that was it! [laughter]/ ok/ they celebrate independence day/ that's it!/ but clubs?/ no way!/ my friends in private universities/ the things they do!/ they say "today we have an open day"/ and I'm like/ what does "open day" mean?/ "this evening we have a party at university!"/ they have camp fire at the end of every semester/ and they sometimes visit orphanages / they do charity/ we don't have any of this/ I even went one day with my friend to BAU [Beirut Arab University- Tripoli campus]/ I wanted to know what that open day was like!/ I'm about to graduate and I don't know what an open day is [laughter]

Moreover, Mona explains how the dismal material conditions surrounding LU students often induce feelings of stress and depression

> In this year/ my third year I started feeling better/ in the first year I was almost depressed/ I couldn't even eat/ I don't know/ the building is so gloomy/ we don't even have a cafeteria / you can't even clean the board/ the toilets are so dirty!/ Oh my God! it takes professors 3 half an hour to start the LCD/ we don't have good equipment/ it's so cold in winter/ once the professor took us to the teacher's lounge because they have a radiator there!/ of course they have heating at the administration! [sarcastic tone]/ even using the library is not practical/ they close at two/ and they make a big fuss if you want to borrow a book! / and the library is so dusty/ I was miserable in my first year/ it took me a long of time to make friends/ but this year / I started getting used to it/

Moreover, visiting the campuses of private universities increased LU Students awareness of their disadvantage. Hanadi, who works part-time with an educational NGO had the opportunity to attend a workshop at AUB. She marvels at the impressive AUB campus noting how the university pleasant surroundings and superior facilities can enhance student's motivation

> AAAAh! [Sigh] I wish I could go to a private university!/I really wish I could study at AUB/ I attended a training **workshop** there/ It makes you love education!/ the teaching style!/ the halls!/ the technology!/ the PowerPoint/they don't use boards!/luxury!

> [Laughter]/ the campus is so beautiful/ they tell me even the president and the staff live on campus/ I've seen Beirut Arab university/ they have a modern building/ but AUB!/ The history!/

In addition to wealth disparities, students' attitudes towards ECA were also shaped by institutional discourses circulating on campus (Binder et. al, 2016)). Wealthier private universities that followed the employability agenda invested heavily in students' clubs, regularly hosted athletic, cultural and social events, and integrated volunteering by into the curriculum. Therefore, the students of high-ranking universities internalized the imperative of distinguishing themselves through extra-curricular activities. Malek (upper middle class, AUB) displays an accurate knowledge of employers' expectations explaining how the rules of the game have changed.

> I used to think that having a high **GPA** was enough to get in company/ but this turned out to be wrong/ employers look for **skills** not only **GPA**/**par example**/ if I have a **GPA of 4**/ and zero internships/ and another applicant has a lower **GPA** but 1,2,3,4 **internships**/ of course they will prefer him/ they look at your experiences more than grades/ they want someone with good **communication skills**/ someone good at **team work**/ someone who can work in a **stressful environment**/ so whatever you put on your **CV is a plus**/ for example/ some students learn **coding** on their own/ **so you have to work on your skills**/ now I'm learning **coding** on my own/ and I'm also studying for the **CFA** [certified financial analyst]/ some people take **online courses**/ other learn a new language/ because it's important if you apply to the **UNDP** [United Nations Development Program]/ they always ask/ do you know **Spanish** do you know **Italian**/ so whatever you do/ it's a plus/ the most important thing is that they don't see a gap in your CV/ like a certain period of time in which you did nothing/ this is VERY VERY VERY bad/….. if they ask you and you tell them/ for example/ I wasn't doing anything during that year/ it's an automatic X [cancelled]/ you have to be **active**/ you have be **productive**/ you have to keep learning/ **so they take the technical skills for granted**/ …also volunteer work/ because it shows the employer that you can work for a cause with no money/ it shows that you're a hard worker/ for example/ **Children Cancer Center**/ **UNDP**/ **Red Cross**/ also AUB students volunteer in other countries/ they travel to/ teach English/ help the poor

Like most students at Elite universities, Malek has internalized the imperative of accumulating extra-curricular experiences to build an impressive CV. Along the same lines, Zaynab seems to be aware that her participation in ECA is a privilege that her friends at LU cannot access. While Balamand provided structural opportunities for CV enhancing activities, LU students could not count on any form of institutional support. Thus, the burden of developing employability skills fell entirely on them

> At university we have **clubs and events**/ especially the **club fair**/ they help you to find your interests/ for example in the **photography club**/ they take you to a certain **activity**/ so it gives you **access** to things/ others cannot have **access** to this thing/ I know this from experience/ when I meet with friends from outside the university/ we meet every now and then/ so when I tell them that at Balamand/ we have a certain **event/** they say "we don't have this"/ these things build your confidence/ and the **community fair**/ students help

> **NGO's**/ I found this very useful for the **CV**/ so what do I write on my **CV?** /I write that I volunteered with **NGOs**/ that I worked with the **social club**/ others at LU don't have this opportunity/ unless they personally take the initiative/ so it's their own work/ because some universities don't raise awareness about the importance of volunteering/ they don't distribute leaflets/ so here [Balamand] they work on the students/ but for LU students/ everything is more difficult/ they have to do everything on their own
>
> On the **CV** they like to see the **experience** in your life/ someone might have higher grades than another applicant/ but maybe the one with lower grades/ is more **sociable**/ or has done many **activities**/ or has more **experiences**/ because today/ they care about **field work**/ so they don't want someone who only studies/ but maybe does not know how to deal with people or talk to them/

The accounts of participants clearly underline the importance of institutional resources in boosting students' employability skills. However, the existence of structural opportunities for engaging in ECA does not mean that all students equally benefit from them. Students' class background and the socio-cultural norms they adhere to remain decisive in shaping their social interactions. The case of Achievers' scholars, or the "privileged poor" (Jack, 2015) illustrates how social and cultural barriers prevented some students from participating in the extra-curricular activities offered by the association. Like other associations that embrace a neoliberal human development agenda, Achievers strives to develop the employability skills of its scholars. The association offers a range of activities, workshops and community service projects to develop leadership skills in students. Moreover, the association attempts to expand students' social network by regularly hosting businessmen, entrepreneurs, political figures and foreign ambassadors. At first sight, these activities seem to represent valuable opportunities to build an impressive CV. Hilal, for example, shares a long list of skills he acquired from his experience in Achievers

> I learned in the association how to write a **CV** / I have an **official certificate from Microsoft**/ I can train for **word, excel, PowerPoint**/ I know how to write **emails**/ they organize a lot of **workshops** in the association/ I am the **assistant of the kitchen director**/ the kitchen that employs widows from Jabal Mohsen and Tebbaneh [working class neighborhoods in Tripoli] / so I learned many skills through volunteering in the association/ we did a **composting** project/ for leftovers of vegetables of the market/ in the association/leadership is a big thing /for example I led a **linkage project**/ between small companies that needed workers and job seekers/ and I was a **copartner in the composting project**/ I wrote the **reports**/ I talked to the vegetable traders/ I supervised those who were chopping the vegetables/ we also had a **GIS training**[geographic information system]/ we did the map with the Lebanese army/ and I was also responsible for this project/

Hilal enthusiastically engaged in the Extra-curricular activities organized by Achievers. It is important to note, however, that before receiving a scholarship from Achievers, he had already participated in the Access program of the American embassy. The program enabled him to improve his English language skills and develop a set of social and cultural competences. This was not the case for his working class peers who struggled with English and had weaker social exposure. Scholars who participated in the focus group interview underscored the financial constraints and

restrictive gender norms that negatively affected their engagement in the association activities. ECA. Fadi (working class, LIU) for example, explained how his shyness and low proficiency in English discouraged him from engaging with the foreign guests who visited the association. Participating in activities was particularly challenging for female students as their conservative families granted them less freedom and autonomy than their male siblings. In the following section, I will discuss the societal expectations and gender norms that impede female students' participation in ECA.

7.7 Gender and social life

Despite Lebanon's reputation as the most liberal country in the Arab world, patriarchal gender norms still prevail in the Lebanese society (Tlaiss, 2014). The lives of Lebanese women are still governed by restrictive gender norms which hinder their social and economic advancement. Female students' accounts of their social lives at university highlighted gendered patterns of socialization that severely limited their opportunities to accrue cultural and social capital. Young women who grew up in conservative families observed strict gender norms that granted them less autonomy and control over their time. These conservative socio-cultural values prompted them to spend more time at home, participate in household chores and avoid mixing with males. Moreover, these young women were expected to prioritize marriage life over their career aspirations. These gendered patterns of socialization were also identified by Nimer's (2018) who explored the social lives of a group of low-income females students at a private university in Beirut. Nimer found that students who adhered to conservative social norms were less engaged in extra-curricular activities. In particular, Nimer highlighted how regional and gender identities intersected to shape the social lives of these young women. Students who belonged to homogenous rural communities were less likely to be involved in social activities and tended to socialize with peers from the same confessional group. Conversely, those who grew up in metropolitan Beirut had more exposure to social and confessional diversity. Thus, they tended to be more involved in student life and adapted more quickly to the university predominant norms. In another Arab context, Al Kayyali (2017) explores the structural barriers that hinder Emirati female students' participation in extra-curricular activities. Her study illustrates how young Emirati women negotiated restrictive cultural norms that limited their exposure to the world beyond their communities and prevented them from developing employability skills.

The stories of female participants highlighted the role of gender norms in shaping their social lives. For young rural women, venturing into the uncharted water of higher education was a daunting experience. The road to university was paved with many anxieties as these students had limited exposure to the world beyond their village. For Khadija (working class, LU) who commutes for between her village in Dennieh and LU in Kobbeh, mixing with male passengers on public transportation is constant source of stress

> In the morning when I go to university/ I go with drivers I know from the village/ the drivers of the buses/ but sometimes/ especially in winter/ I return to the village with a **service** [shared taxi, French word] late in afternoon/ so I don't know the driver/ so I always keep a knife with me/ thank God/ no one has ever harassed me/ but still

Moreover, Khadija has little control over her time as she is always consumed by domestic responsibilities, which barely leaves her any time for social activities

> I wake at 5 to get to LU at 8/ and when I come back I have so much to do at home/ you know/ because I'm the eldest girl/ and we're nine brothers and sisters/ so I have many responsibilities/ especially that my mother underwent surgery lately/ when I arrive in afternoon after my classes/ I 'm so tired and sleepy/ so first I have to sleep a little/ and then I do some housework/ and then I have to study/

Thus, Khadija stands at the intersection of multiple forms of inequality. Her father's financial troubles ruined her plan to enroll in an affordable third-generation private university. Thus, she ended up in LU where she feels miserable and alienated. Moreover, the remote location of her village and her domestic responsibilities leave little room for enriching social encounters.

Along the same lines, other female participants reported spending most of their time at home, which favored their academic success but seriously limited their experience of the world (Nimer, 2018). Mira (lower middle class, ULF), who lives with her mother in coastal village near Tripoli, described herself as a "nerd". She seemed to be totally absorbed in her studies and had no desire to socialize with other girls.

> The other girls think I live in another world [laughter]/ I don't like to go out/ I don't like to hangout/ I don't like to mingle a lot/ I like to talk to people at university though/ I don't like to waste my time/ I'm a homebody/ most of the time I'm on my laptop/ in my shell [laughter] [*mutaqwqi'ah*, inside the shell/ closed off]

The "shell" metaphor that Mira used accurately describes the protective family bubble that isolates young women from the outside world. While discussing her future plans, Mira ruled out the possibility of leading an independent life in Beirut, even though she was aware that her "immobility" will limit her opportunities to find a rewarding job

> in Tripoli/ the maximum salary is 600 $/ if you kill yourself/ they give you 600 $/ so someone advised me to find something in Beirut/ and you know the situation of Beirut/ you cannot go if you're a girl to Beirut/ I take a bus from Tripoli to Kalamoun [her village]/ one million person harass me/ this is very difficult/ so imagine from Tripoli to Beirut/It's very difficult/ [silence]/ and parents don't agree/ my mother says/ you're my only daughter/ it's not easy/ it's not easy to go to Beirut/ and the traffic/ you know the traffic and stuff/ and being a girl on your own/ It's very difficult/ you know /you cannot walk out on you parents

The story of Mira illustrates the gender norms that prevent young women from flying the nest and the anxieties of Lebanese women who often experience sexual harassment in public spaces (Human Rights Watch, 2021). But despite her resignation to family authority, Mira betrays just a small dose of envy when she tells the story of a friend who defied the social norms of her conservative village.

> Mira: I have a friend who works in Beirut/ she gets 1500$ / she rents a small apartment/ she works [giggles] as a receptionist in a night club/ she's from the village/ she studies agricultural engineering at LU/ and she's making money/ and she's doing really fine!/
>
> May: Would you like to do the same?
>
> Mira: [Bursts in laughter]/of course not!/she doesn't have a problem with that/ she's very **cool**/ and she said to me / go to Beirut/ you'll find 100 jobs/ with insurance for you/ and for you parents/ but my mother/ may God protect her/ doesn't allow me to go/ but think of it/ she's right/ sometimes I have classes in in the afternoon/ so I have to take a bus/ from Tripoli to kalamoun/ it's just a hop away/ during the whole trip I am in state of **terror**/ so many men follow me/ when I get down on the highway/ I always get harassed/…. but if I had too/ I would move to Beirut/ I will adapt/ because at the end of the day/ you need the money/ but my mother/ may god protect her is standing in the way [laughter]

Mira's ambivalent attitude reflects the dilemma of reconciling cultural norms with women's economic and social advancement. Other female participants experienced pressure from their families to prioritize marriage over post-graduate studies or career ambitions. Their families encouraged them to take "feminine" jobs in sectors that conformed to traditional gender roles. Many young women internalize the necessity of marriage as staying unmarried is a stigma that should be avoided at all costs. Nancy (middle class, LU) explains how she's constantly resisting her mother pressure to "settle down" and start a family. Interestingly, her story illustrates how mothers who received limited education perpetuate the gender inequalities that excluded them in the first place.

> My mother says/ "enough!"/" stop studying"/ "take you bachelor degree and start teaching"/ "I want to see you married"/ and that kind of stuff/ I understand her/ she's not educated/ she doesn't keep up with new developments in life/ but because my father has been to many places/ and has many friends whose children are educated/ so he says/ "no!"/ "Nancy is going to be a **professor"**/ "she's not just going to be a teacher"/ so we're always arguing about this/ she says "you will be a spinster"/ and I say to her/ "for God's sake!"/ "why would I become a spinster" [laughter]/ "I'm not even 21!"

Furthermore, some female participants had to cope with the demoralizing attitudes of some family members and relatives who deliberately belittled their academic achievement. For example, Zaynab recounts how she was reminded by a relative that women belonged in the kitchen no matter how much education they had.

> My cousin/ she's one year younger than me/ she got engaged/ so once she was taking a walk with her fiancé/ and I was studying on our terrace/ so I greeted them/ so her fiancé said to me/ "keep studying" [mocking tone]/ "in the end you will hang your degree above the kitchen sink"/ [silence]/ do you see this mentality?! [indignant tone]/ my cousin was a good student/ he took her out of school/ because he thinks that after engagement/ she should only live for him/ …I really blame those people who deprive girls from their right/ let her prove herself! /you [addressing the fiancé] should be with her not against her/ you should support her/

Zaynab's critical stance towards the patriarchal mentality that prevailed in her village was also shared by some male participants. Tareq, who seemed to be aware of his privileges as a male, reflects on the many social restrictions that his sister had to endure when she was student. These restrictions that limited her experience of the world became even tighter when she got engaged as her fiancé had full control over her time.

> My older sister went to LIU university/ she did not participate in any activities/…I saw the difference between her and me/ she didn't make friends/ so she finished and graduated/ but it's as if she never did anything/ especially/ as I told you/ let's say/ having male friends/ this is considered unacceptable/ and she also got engaged/ so for her fiancé/ wasn't ok with her having friends/ so she was not allowed to go wherever she wanted/ only from university to home and from home to university/

While Tareq's sister successfully completed her studies, restrictive gender norms impeded her ability to accumulate valuable experiences. Conservative parents usually frown upon activities that involve spending unsupervised time away from the family and mixing with opposite sex. Therefore, these young women have fewer opportunities to develop employability skills, which can undermine their employment prospects and relegate them to low-paid jobs. These cultural constraints (Jamali, Sidani &Safiedine, 2005; Tlaiss, 2014) could partly explain why women who constitute 52% of the university student population remain underrepresented in the labor force (26.3%) and occupy less than 5% of senior management positions.

7.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the stories of participants to understand how their class position impacts the way they develop social and cultural capital during their university years. My conversations with working class students have highlighted the cultural and financial challenges that they face in navigating a middle class environment, keeping up with the lifestyle of their middle class peers and adapting to more liberal gender norms. Their feelings of inadequacy contrast with the ease with which privately educated students managed this transition as they were more exposed to social diversity in their schools. Those who attended wealthier private universities reported a friendlier rapport with academic figures which enabled them to widen their network and acquire cultural capital. These well-resourced institutions also offered more structural opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities and used more modern English language communication skills practices which enable students to practice their English in the classroom. In contrast, LU students' accounts highlighted the absence of a fulfilling student life on campus. Strained relationship with academic authority figures, and obsolete language teaching methods weakened their opportunity to acquire social and cultural capital. Conversations with female students also highlighted how gender norms could restrict women opportunities to engage in ECA as their families had tight control over their time and activities. Overall, students who attended better ranking universities had more opportunities to develop employability skills. This unequal access to marketable skills among students attending different institutions can seriously impact their occupational outcomes and orient them to different career paths as I will explain in the following chapter.

Chapter 8

Building Capitals II

(Access to Labor Market Opportunities)

8.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored how the participants' class position interacted with other identity markers to shape the way they developed social and cultural capital during their university years. This chapter will focus on the forms capitals that mediate students' access to labor market opportunities. To this end, I will examine the structures of inequality that shape students' occupational outcomes in urban Tripoli and its rural surroundings. Students' reflections on the Lebanese and global job market highlighted four factors that influenced their career orientation. First, participants underscored the regional inequalities that hindered their access to the labor market due to the concentration of economic activity in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Moreover, their accounts shed light on the role that institutional cultures and resources played in steering students towards certain career pathways. As opposed to the LU and small market-oriented universities, elite institutions seemed to possess the cultural, financial and organizational resources that developed students' job hunting skills and supported their access to the most rewarding jobs. Third, I will discuss the phenomenon of "Wasta" or "the Lebanese economy of favors", a major source of unequal occupational outcomes (Tabar &Egan, 2016). Finally, I will explore the views of a group of Human Resources officers to identify the desirable attributes they look for in job applicants. Conversations with representatives of globally-oriented companies reveal a preference for middle-class cultural dispositions possessed by the graduates of elite universities, which excludes students of less prestigious institutions from highly rewarding jobs.

8.2 The Geography of Opportunities in North Lebanon

In recent years, some American scholars have used the concept of "geography of opportunity" to describe the inequitable access to opportunities across geographic spaces (Green, 2015). These scholars maintain that the place where people live shapes their access to different forms of opportunities (Briggs, 2005; Galster & Killen 1995; Tate, 2008). In the American context, several studies have shown that the neighborhood where people live can impact their social mobility, educational attainment, occupational and health outcomes, and other life chances. (Briggs & Wilson, 2005; Rothwell & Massey, 2015). The concept that was initially introduced by Galster and Killen (1995) in their research on housing inequalities in the USA has been widely used across several disciplines including Public Policy, Social Work, Sociology and Law. The concept has also helped educational researchers understand how the neighborhood cultural resources (or the lack thereof) such as libraries bookstores and museums can impact children's educational outcomes (Milner, 2013). Along the same lines, Jocson and Thorne-Wallington (2013) note how the absence of accessible colleges can deprive working class communities from higher education and hinder their social mobility, as opposed to their middle class peers who can afford to study at distant universities. While admitting that social class remains the strongest predictor of life chances, this line of research sheds light on the interplay of class and place in shaping students'

career orientation. In their research on British youth in the creative industries, Allen and Hollingworth (2013) highlighted "the spatial component of class". They suggest that the geographical proximity to a creative center like London enabled students to access relevant social and cultural capitals and nurtured their aspirations. Accordingly, the social and cultural resources of a place can steer young people into certain career paths. Young people's aspirations are shaped by objective conditions which affect their sense of what is they can or cannot achieve.

Applying this spatial lens to Lebanon can shed light on the unequal distribution of labor market opportunities across Lebanese regions. The socio-economic disparities among different Lebanese regions are well-documented. As I have explained previously in this thesis, Tripoli, the capital of the North, is among the poorest cities on the Mediterranean (UNDP, 2009). In addition, it is also an area of low educational attainment (Tfaily, Hassan and Kulcycki, 2013) with the highest illiteracy rates in the country (12.42 %) and the highest number of students who drop out after the elementary school (43%). Moreover, the civil conflict between the Sunni residents of Bab Al-Tebbaneh and the Alawi minority of Jabal Mohsen (2011-2015) added to the plight of the city contributing to its reputation as a dangerous place. These dire economic circumstances mean that the students who wish to continue their life in the North and other peripheral area will be presented with fewer rewarding job opportunities compared to those who reside in central Lebanon. Scarce research on Lebanese graduates' transition to the labor market has shown that students in Beirut found first jobs in half the time young people took in peripheral regions like Bekaa (Chaaban, 2008). Majed the director of the Business department in ULF (Université Libano-Francaise), a small market-oriented university in Tripoli, recounts with frustration his attempts to help students find training opportunities and jobs, presciently warning about an imminent economic collapse

> The job market is a **fantasme!** [in French]/ you should change your PhD topic/ tell your supervisor/ there is no data!/we're on the brink of a DISASTER/they say/ Tripoli is the economic capital of the north/ [smirk]/ rhetoric won't solve the problem/ [they say] Tripoli is the economic capital!/ it's a morphine injection for the patient/ the patient will never recover/ Tripoli economic capital!/ All of it is rhetoric and propaganda/ [smirk] do you know that the French are not allowed to come?/ it's Tripoli's reputation/ capital is a coward!/ the international fair is dying!/ there's nothing/ Bahsas [industrial zone at the entrance of Tripoli] used be to be full of factories/ now all the engineers/ their wildest ambition is to teach a course!/
>
> It's all about kissing hands [a Lebanese expression that means begging] / we have a hard time finding **stage** [in French, training]/ there is no industry/there are few places and universities fight over them!/ There are 3 companies/ ten banks and 20 universities! They [students] say find me training/ where can I find you one?/ there's nothing!/the education is good/ but there are no companies!/ a bankrupt state/ nothing! we have a director general for the railways/ but we have no railways nor trains!

Even when opportunities arise in Beirut, taking the trip to the capital is beyond students' means.

> May: Why don't they look for training in Beirut?

> Majed: They don't go [to Beirut] because of the transportation expenses/ the companies are not ready to pay transportation/ maybe there are [opportunities] in Beirut/ but who is ready to go to Beirut?/ with the traffic and they don't pay anything/ many of them need to work to pay their tuition/

Most participants shared Majed's concerns about the scarcity of training and job opportunities in the North. They were aware that their geographical location puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers who lived closer to Beirut. Rami (mechanical engineering, LIU) laments the absence of industrial activity in North, which reduced his chances to apply what he learned in college.

> Let me tell you one thing/ two of my friends/ from outside the area of Tripoli/ one of them is from Chekka [a coastal town 25 kilometers away south from Tripoli]/ the other is from Jbeil [Byblos, a coastal town 45 km south from Tripoli]/ they found a [part-time] job opportunity/ why? because for the first one / there was a company close to his home /so he applied/ so it's your location from Beirut/ so if you're closer to Beirut/ it's easier/ and he can study and work at the same time/ for us/it's difficult/ you will spend your day on the road because of the traffic/ and then you have the transportation cost/ and we don't have companies here for mechanical engineering/ if you want to do training/ the maximum you will do is to change the oil of the car!/

Other students like Tareq (Manar University, Architecture) pointed out the political instability that discourages companies from investing in Tripoli, which added to the plight of a historically neglected region of Lebanon.

> The situation is bad in the North/ the North is neglected/ there is no / companies don't want to come here/ the situation is not stable/ there are always clashes/ arms/

Moreover, students voiced their concerns about the relatively modest salaries that fresh graduates get in Tripoli area compared to Beirut. Mira, who rejected idea of moving to the capital for work was aware that staying in the North will not be a financially rewarding option.

> The salaries here are very low/ maximum 600 $/ even you kill yourself working/ you have to go to Beirut to get something better/ and they all want experience/ so it's very difficult

Another major problem highlighted by the scholars of Achievers was the oversupply of university graduate compared to the small Lebanese economy which fails to accommodate a range of specializations. Students also laid the blame on the absence of state planning and the selfishness of the Lebanese political class

> Ahmad (LIU): there are too many graduates/ take LIU for example/ they have 9 campuses all over Lebanon/ every year they dump all these graduates every year/ how will they find work?
>
> Nada: it's the state problem/ they have to create opportunities/ they [the government/politicians] live on our expense!
>
> Salma: we don't have industries/ if we had industries/ there would be more job opportunities

> Nada: politicians!/ none of them care about creating opportunities for young people/ they only think about their own interest!
>
> Rami: and we keep voting for the same people!

The limited job opportunities and students' inability to find employment related to their majors encouraged many of them to work for local and foreign NGOs operating in the North such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). However, the job opportunities offered by these organizations cannot compensate for the absence sustainable socio-economic development in Tripoli and the North. As Bilal puts it,

> Most of the graduates I know couldn't find jobs/ so they're working with NGO's/ if NGOs leave everybody will stay at home! [laughter]

In addition, several female participants pointed out discrimination against women who wore headscarves. While wearing a headscarf could be well-perceived in certain conservative work environments (teaching at an Islamic school for example), many businesses prefer the absence of religious symbols as they wish to present a secular modern image in order attract a religiously mixed clientele. Hanadi, who worked part-time at a lawyer's office in her third year, describes her feelings of inadequacy during her encounters with some clients. She felt her Hijab was associated with an inferior class position.

> It's depressing/… they make you feel that you don't belong here/ that you're **vulgaire [in French]**/…you're not **classe [in French]**

Similarly, Mira objects against the negative perceptions of hijabi job applicants hinting that less able female candidates are sometimes hired only because of their fashionable looks.

> They told me they don't hire hijabis/…I don't understand what the problem is/ if you look at me/ I am neat/ I look good/ I look polite/ clean /that's the most important thing!
>
> May: why do you think they don't hire someone who wears a headscarf?
>
> Mira: I don't know! /maybe because she's too covered! [sarcastic tone] / why don't people accept it? It's a piece of cloth around your head!/…. People like me don't get the job!
>
> May: who gets it then?
>
> Mira: the sassy girl [giggles]/this is the reality!/ the frivolous/ the playful/ she'll find a job like that [snaps fingers, a gesture that means quickly]/ I have a friend who found a job in a second/ as a secretary/ I don't know why/ maybe because of the image of the company /she has no experience and hasn't even graduated yet/ and she's not bright/ and she admitted that they hired her because of her looks/ …full make-up/ short skirts/ but that's life!/ what can we do! [laughter]

While most participants across social classes voiced their frustration at the scarce job opportunities in the North, middle class participants in particular expressed their concerns about the difficulty of accruing valuable social capital in a peripheral city like Tripoli. These students, who had the privilege of spending time in the capital and other Lebanese regions, contrasted the

parochial and provincial character of Tripoli with the cosmopolitan 'vibe' of Beirut. In their discourse, Beirut was portrayed as a cosmopolitan hub that offered enriching social and professional encounters. Ameen, for example, was aware that exposure to social diversity in the capital was crucial to expand one's network and acquire valuable connections

> In Beirut/ yes/ you will have more opportunities/ yesterday I was in Beirut/ you really feel that you're in different country/ … I haven't seen a tourist in Tripoli for ages! / I went to the downtown [in Beirut]/ the downtown is full of tourists/ in Tripoli it's always the same people/because Beirut is central/ you meet with people from Jezzin [region in South Lebanon]/ Jbeil/ Mount- Lebanon/ the South/ you meet all of them/ you study with them/ you get to know new people/ and sometimes foreigners/ especially in AUB because it's **highly-ranked** /it's **international**/ so it attracts a lot of people/ so you make contacts/
>
> Tripoli is in a world apart/ you see the same people/ and they're getting fewer/ the population is getting smaller/ ...they leave and nobody comes back!

Abdallah's discourse on Tripoli conveys a sense of remoteness, stagnation and exclusion from the world. His perceptions of Tripoli clearly resonate with the way young people in other global contexts perceive their peripheral location. For example, Farrugia (2016) notes how Australian youth in rural Australia depicted their rural localities as a place in which 'nothing happens' (Farrugia, Smyth, and Harrison 2014; Vanderbeck & Dunkley, 2003). In contrast, cities were depicted as sites of "accumulation and flow", places where one can acquire and develop valuable capitals (Vandereck& Dunkly, 2003). For most middle class participants, working in a peripheral city fails to meet their cosmopolitan ambitions and their aspirations to join transnational labor markets. As Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) have noted, the migration or relocation of these students eventually leads to the perpetuation of regional inequalities drawing the line between the between 'mobile cosmopolitans' participating in global economic and cultural flows, and marginalized locals who settle for less rewarding jobs.

8.3 The role of institutions in students' career orientation

Although educational research has identified social class as a major predictor of occupational outcomes, several scholars have highlighted the role of institutions in transforming students' social identity and shaping their career path. For the proponents of an institutional approach to occupational outcomes, college campuses do not necessarily reproduce students' earlier dispositions. Institutional cultures can impact students' self- esteem (Khan 2011), social life (Stuber, 2011), political views (Binder & Wood, 2014) and their racial identities (Willie-LeBreton, 2003). Thus, higher education institutions have the power to transform students' perceptions, emotions, aspirations and choices. This line of research perceives the career orientation of students as the result of the interaction between their social class position and the educational institutional settings.

Participants' stories reflected significant disparities in the institutional resources available at their universities. These resources, along with the dominant discourses on campus, affected their confidence, their knowledge of labor market and their job expectations. Their accounts illustrate how well- resourced private universities can pave students' paths toward the most rewarding jobs.

Conversely, the students of under-resourced universities had to manage their transition to work without much guidance or help.

To begin with, the students of elite universities reported that they received assistance from career advising centers. These centers, which are nonexistent in LU and small market-oriented universities, provide students with a range of services such as CV writing, interview training workshops and information about internships and job vacancies. Georges (Business, LAU) describes how the career service office supports students in their transition to work

> If I show you my university mail now, you will see that they [career center] send emails about internships/ they help us write a good CV at the career center/ they prepare you for interviews/ they won't take you by the hand/ but they tell you about opportunities/ they ask you to send your CV if you're interested/ they say there is an internship here/ apply if you're interested/

Along with the opportunity to develop job related skills, other participants like Zaynab (Balamand, Biology) underscored another type of institutional resources that enabled them to accrue social capital. Zaynab (Biology, Balamand), explains how her work as an assistant at the public relations office on campus enabled her to engage with the faculty and administration, extend her network and introduce herself to potential employers. As Jack (2015) noted, access to the professional network of academic authority figures can offer students valuable opportunities to develop social and cultural capital. Zaynab, who seems to be aware of this privilege, recounts how she extended her network at Balamand. She explains why her friends at LU are unlikely to develop useful social capital.

> I used to think that Balamand was only about prestige/ because the tuition is high/ but no/ if you're a balamand graduate and you apply for a job/ you get it/ because at Balamand/ you get to know people/ you meet a professor/ a dean/ you form a relationship/ they help you get where you want/it's different from LU/ LU students/they're always in a hassle/ /struggling to find a job/ because they were only studying all the time/ they did not interact with people in their university/ I liked it at Balamand/ I formed many relationships with people/ especially that I worked in the Public relation office/ they always choose me for ushering/ they rely on me/ once a professor told me you are the mayor of Balamand [mayor: a person who knows many people] / wherever I go I meet people I know/ it boosted my confidence/through these connections/ I attended conferences/ and met people from outside the university/ you from a relationship with them/ they tell you once you finish/ apply for this post/ so they show you the way / you're the first person who comes to their mind/

Zaynab is aware that her access to institutional support and resources enabled her to establish connections that could potentially enhance her employment opportunities. Her perception of LU students was widely shared by LU students themselves who lamented the lack of any institutional support or resources that could help them find their way in the labor market. Students also complained about the lack of information available to them about events, workshops or competitions that could help them gain experience, or connect them with potential employers.

Samira (LU, Architecture) criticizes LU staff and administration for failing to provide students with useful information.

> They [LU students] leave university without knowing about any opportunity/ or any scholarship/ because here/ they [professors and administration] too lazy to do anything/ to contact anyone/ they never help you find opportunities/ this is my fourth year at university/and I can't recall a single time when they said to us/ there this scholarship so why don't you apply/ imagine!/ sometimes we hear about competitions that take place between BAB [Beirut Arab University] ,Balamand and other universities at the order of the engineers/ and we don't know about it!/ can you imagine!/ [indignant tone] because the head of department is too busy for these things [mocking tone]/so we miss the opportunities/ and we go and attend/ but we don't get the information from them/ we hear about it from other people!

Furthermore, strong partnerships between elite universities and both local and global businesses offered student valuable opportunities to gain experience and accrue social capital. These well-resourced universities possess the adequate infrastructure to organize career fairs and recruiting events which enable students to establish direct contact with potential employers. Samer, a career at the AUB Business faculty describes the recruitment frenzy that takes place at the end of summer every year. This event which hosts prestigious local and global companies involves a series of ativities which give students a glimpse into the corporate world and offer them the opportunity to rub shoulders with top executives.

> So…/ the local ones/ the big local ones/ the banks/…you have Khateeb and Alami,[leading engineering company]/ Dar Al Handasa [leading engineering company]/these are the big local companies /we have Fattal group/ Transmed/..local, multinational/… you have KPMG/ you have Unilever/ Mckenzie/... they all have their different recruitment calendars/ so the fall is usually/ when all consulting companies come/ and they're all competing with each other to come earlier [laughter]/ to the point that we have companies that want to come in August 28!/ first day of university!/ [laughter] …and I tell them the students haven't arrived yet!/ all of these guys will come …and they wanna hire/ and we have presentations/ competitions/ workshops/ cases/ cracking the case/ and from that/ there is a selection that is occurring at the same time

As Samer pointed out, AUB students have valuable exposure which can eventually expand their professional network and steer them towards rewarding jobs. This rich institutional social capital that AUB accrued over 140 years clearly contrasts with the meager resources of young market-oriented universities. These institutions lack the adequate infra-structure and the symbolic capital of high ranking private universities. Even when these universities possess adequate resources, their peripheral location can also hinder the students' ability to extend their professional network. For example, Mirna, a former career advisor at the University of Balamand, recounts how she strived to expand the young university social network using the social capital that she acquired as an AUB graduate. Mirna believes that Beirut is the only place where students can really accumulate social capital.

> Now the situation has changed/ now it's gradually getting better/ but I'm talking about the time when I first started/ I used to get very upset/ I'm an **AUB** student/ where did I get my

> **network**? not from here/ I am from the North/ but if I were raised and grew up and lived in the North/ I wouldn't have the **network**/ I got the **network** because I was in Beirut/… the **network** are my friends/ for example the current minister of economy/ …. studied with me at AUB/…so all my acquaintances/ helped in the beginning of my journey at Balamand /now the road is open and we [Balamand university] became better/… so yes the **network** is in Beirut/…one of my **concerns**/ was to bring people to us

Along with exploiting rich institutional resources, elite university students' also internalized discourses of excellence exhorting them to seek rewarding jobs in prestigious global companies and lucrative professions. These institutions practice a form of "career funneling" (Binder, et al, 2016) encouraging students to join the ranks of the occupational elite (Katchadourian and Boli, 1994). The accounts of students in elite universities illustrate how dominant discourses on campus shaped the way they perceive the market as they learn to draw the boundaries between ''high-status'' and ''ordinary'' . Malek (Business, AUB) describes the stratification of labor market destinations and the place that graduates of different universities occupy in the occupational hierarchy. He seems to know exactly where he belongs.

> Let's divide the market by two/ first you have/ and excuse me for the term/ I don't mean they're inferior/ **the lower end market and the higher end market/ the higher end market** is what we looking for/ LAU/ AUB/ Balamand/ also USJ (Université Saint-Joseph)/ the lower **end market** is for the small Lebanese universities/ ULF,AUT, LIU/ so the higher end market is all the international companies/ they've been in the market for many years/ they do **professional business**/ this is what we look for/ so for these companies/ **it's very competitive**/ when they have **vacancy** for 5 people/ hundreds apply/ first of all the degree is very important/ from which university/ as far as I know/ there is always a **priority** for AUB students/ then LAU and Balamand/ so if someone a from small universities apply/ unless he's **REALLY REALLY OUTSTANDING**/ I don't think he will get in/it's a shame/ really/ so they end up in stock/ like Zara/Mango/ they work as **sales representatives**/ they work as **accountants** in relatively small companies/ **local** Lebanese companies/

The above description of the labor market stratification reflects how different institutions steer student towards different career destinations. Malek also draws the boundaries between the "locals" who settle for modest jobs and mobile cosmopolitans who eye transnational job markets. Students in elite institutions are also expected to follow the path of their high- flying peers. Thus, they feel the imperative to measure up to other graduates who joined prestigious companies. Georges is intent on finding a "good job" following the example of other LAU (Lebanese-American University) graduates, who confidently turn down low-status jobs.

> I have friends who graduated/ by they haven't found a job yet/ because they're looking for something specific/ for example/ nothing less than 1500 $ as a start/ because they're LAU graduates after all/ I have another friend who got a job in JP Morgan in Dubai/ starting salary 6000$/ and he only has BS/ he doesn't even have his masters/ I don't want to say it's luck/ I think it's mainly about competence/ if you have a good CV/ you will stay 1,2,3 months without a job/ but believe me the door will open/ / I would like to work for a

financial consultance company/ hopefully in Dubai/ I'd like to become a CEO/ or maybe one level below the CEO/ honestly/ if I have my internships /and a good CV/ of course it depends on my **performance** in the company/ but if I'm performing well/ why not have ambition?

8.4 *Wasta* and career opportunities

One of the major themes that dominated students' discussion of their job prospects was *Wasta* (in Arabic *medium* or *mediator*) or the clandestine exchange of favors widely practiced in Lebanon. This common social practice involves using connections to obtain social goods that should be accessed through meritocratic principles. Using *Wasta*, or requesting favors from influential connections will afford a person a preferential treatment as opposed to those who lack this form of social capital. These requested favors often involve bending the rules with impunity, skipping tedious bureaucratic processes or getting a precious piece of information that would lead to some social or economic benefits (Barnett et al, 2013). Unlike other forms of social capital, *Wasta* needs to be activated. In other words, a Lebanese can have valuable connections but deliberately choose not to request any favors and be treated on equal footing with other citizens. In a family-based society like Lebanon, *Wasta* is often part of familial social capital (Tlaiss and kauser, 2011) which can be converted to economic and cultural benefits. Thus, prestigious and wealthy families, whose members usually occupy influential positions, are more likely to have powerful connections (Cunningham and Sarayah, 1993). Although these corrupt and nepotistic practices are not exclusive to Lebanon, the Lebanese Wasta is embedded in the Lebanese sectarian clientelist system where all public appointments are made through a system of sectarian allotment. This system which breeds rampant corruption and nepotism entrenches social inequalities undermining the principles of meritocratic appointment and drawing the boundaries between those who have and those who do not have *Wasta*. Egan and Tabar (2016) identify *Wasta* as a social reproduction mechanism that enables the Lebanese elites to reproduce their social position and accumulate economic and social capital. The Lebanese public university, where sectarian hiring practices are the norm, remains the best example of *Wasta* in the Lebanese public sector. In particular, *Wasta* plays a determinant role in the career advancement of individuals. As the small Lebanese economy fails to accommodate the oversupply of university graduates, finding a job can be a challenging endeavor. The soaring levels of youth unemployment (Kawar and Tzannatos, 2013) explains why highly educated young Lebanese regularly leave Lebanon seeking better job opportunities elsewhere (Gonzalez et al, 2008). The scarce data on youth transition to the labor market indicates that the majority find work through family and personal connections, (Kasparian, 2003, AUB, 2010, Nasser & Abou chedid ,2006) hence the importance of having *Wasta* to secure employment.

The majority of participants identified *Wasta* as a major source of inequality that permeates all aspects of the Lebanese society. For some participants, especially those in public higher education, *Wasta* practices were palpable even before their transition to the labor market. Sameera (LU, Achitecture) describes the clientelist practices that take place inside the classroom, explaining how students receive special treatment when they have the same political affiliation of their professors. This form of clientelism breeds sectarian animosity between students and feelings of injustice among those who lack this form of social capital.

> if your **papa** is well connected/ and he calls the director/ they will fix your grade/ and they don't hide it/ it's in your face/ it's a circus/the professors are divided/ Gamma'a Islamia/ [Muslim brotherhood]/ some of them follow Frangieh [Christian Maronite leader from North Lebanon]/… for example/ when I see [name of a professor affiliated with a Christian Maronite sectarian leader]/ giving special treatment to [name of a student who belongs to same confessional community of the professor] over Samira/ of course I will hate him!/ and you see the Gama'a Islamiya students/ who are very religious [Mocking tone]/ getting better grades despite their weaknesses/… a girl fails the whole year/ and then succeeds!/ There are people who pass without attending/ some professors sit you without 5 minutes [during projects corrections] / and with others 30 minutes/ I am someone who doesn't keep quiet/ I don't have *Wasta*/ but I cannot keep quiet/ I have to say something/ but it you speak up/ it's over for you/ the professor will pick on you/ and what's even worse is that nothing protects you/ not even the director/ he would say sorry it's not in my hands

For Samira, Lebanese public education is the embodiment of the Lebanese sectarian clientelism which permeates the LU bureaucracy

> The Lebanese university is **mini-lebanon**/ all the things that happen in the government/ happen here exactly the same/ at the end of the day/ they're taking their salary/ and they're fine/ whether they teach you or not/

Along the same lines, the scholars of Achievers unanimously identified *Wasta* as the most important factor in getting a job noting that graduates often need to mobilize a political *Wasta* for permanent jobs and placements.

> Ahmad : if you want to get the job/ your father should be the friend of the manager [general laughter]
>
> Nada: one hundred percent!/ unless there is Wasta/ it won't work!/ even our teachers at school were appointed by Wasta!/
>
> Tareq: I have a friend doing electrical engineering/ so he's looking for training / he told me he applied to 17 companies/ but couldn't get anything/ he wants to do it in the power plant of Deir Ammar [village in Akkar where the power plant is located])/ they told him you need the *Wasta* of an MP to get it/ just for one month training/ imagine!/ an MP!
>
> Rami: of course you need *Wasta*/ if you want in job in the government/ you have to contact 100 person/ everybody is affiliated to a party or a sect/ so who will get the job? it's known!/ *Wasta* is everywhere/ whether you're competent or not/ I have a friend who graduated/ he killed himself applying for jobs/ but couldn't find a job/ now he's teaching at a center/ he gets 200 000 Liras [130 $ & pre-2019]/ better than sitting there doing nothing!

Wasta was a particularly concerning issue for lower middle class students. Public sector are generally coveted by lower middle classes due the compensation package they offer such as education, health insurance and pension funds (Chaaban & Gebara, 2007). Mira who was hoping to secure some of these advantages shares the bitter experience of being rejected when she applied to the Security General Department

> The most upsetting thing for me/ was when I applied to the Security General last year/ so the first thing people said to me/ how are you going to apply and you wear a headscarf?/ I said they do accept girls with headscarves/ then they told me you're a Sunni/ everything is about sect/ you will never make it/ I said I am good/ I'm the first in my university/ and all my grades are A and A plus/…..I passed all the tests/ when we got to the last exam/ the written one/ I knew from an insider that I got 14 over 20/ and what did this person tell me?/ they passed someone who got 9/ and failed me because I had no *Wasta*/.. then they told me to pay 40 000 $ to pass/ I told them if had 40 000 $ I wouldn't have applied in the first place![laughter]/ That was my first-time failure/you feel the bitterness here/ …. I'm good/ they have to take me/ they take someone who scored below the average/ why?/ ...it's not fair/ there's bitterness here/

While all participants acknowledged *Wasta* in the public office, some students contested the idea that the private sector was more meritocratic. Abdallah displays an awareness of the hidden recruitment processes that give some applicants an advantage over others. Although these private firms claim their commitment to meritoractic appointment and their openness to applicants from different backgrounds, students can be overtly excluded if they have no connections in the company.

> `I don't want to be unfair to these companies/ but it's all about *Wasta*/ no discussion!/ errr I'm not trying to **stereotype**/ but it's known for example/ you can't get a job in a bank without *Wasta*/ now *Wasta* is a broad term/ and it became a Lebanese concept/ but it involves several kinds/ It could be a phone call/ it could be/ "give this person the priority"/ there is also political *Wasta* and we saw this before elections/ so I will go to X/ and say I will vote for you but give my son a job/ and there was a scandal after elections/ they hired about 50 000 people that the government didn't need/ …but also in private companies/ maybe the CEO or the HR owes him favors/ I even have friends who got internships with *Wasta*/ there are important companies/ foreign companies/ and they say we have standards/ so we don't accept that/… a close friend told me that his father talked to someone/ who is the lawyer of the company/ …so he has connections there/ so he was supposed to do his internship in summer/ so they accepted him/ and they even changed the schedule of another intern to accommodate him/ so he used his *Wasta*/ so it opens doors/ it facilitates things.

Abdallah is aware of the importance of *Wasta* in unlocking doors in both public and private sectors. Knowing that the game is rigged, however, does not dissuade middle class students from playing it as these students possess plenty of resources to compete. Although George admits that appointments in private firms do not always follow meritocratic principles, he believes that many graduates fully deserve the high status jobs they got thanks to their competence and hard work.

> Yes there is *Wasta* In Lebanon/ and other places/To be honest/ … I don't want to deny that/yes it plays a role/ because sometimes/ someone comes/with a Wasta/ maybe he doesn't have good GPA [grade point average]/ or maybe his father knows the CEO/ so this helps him get a good internship/ and even a good job!/ … you know/it's not always **fair**/ sometimes it' **unfair**/ but we should not keep saying it's unfair/ we have to admit that some people have a good GPA and they get accepted/ …we cannot always see the negative side

> / if I am your friend/ and you owe me favors/ these things happen/ but we cannot deny that some people are working on themselves and they have good GPA/ and they're studying day and night to get the good jobs.

The students' accounts underline the unequal distribution of valuable social capital among different social classes. While all participants were aware of the importance of getting some form of training before graduation, only 3 middle class participants were able to secure internships through family connections. Despite the peculiarities of the Lebanese sectarian clientelism, students' experiences in looking for internships resonate with the findings of research in other global contexts. As Bathmaker et al (2016) have noted in their research on inequality in British higher education, middle-class students were more successful that their working class peers in exploiting family social capital to gain access to internships particularly in areas that require powerful *Wasta* like banking. Majed explains how the lack of social capital of some low-income students, especially those from rural origin, excludes them for training and employment opportunities.

> he's [the student] a peasant from Akkar!/ he doesn't have connections!/ nobody knows him!/ he's "cut off a tree"![a Lebanese idiom that means he has no relatives, no friends]/ totally cut off!/ / it's all about connections/ 80% of it is connections/ connections open the door/ if he's a loser they will fire him/ but if he doesn't have connections/ he can never get in/

It is important to note however, that in order to reap the benefits of *Wasta,* the students should be willing to mobilize this form of social capital. Interestingly, some working class students like Hilal rejected *Wasta* even though they reported having useful connections.

> I hate *Wasta*/ I hate the **concept** itself/ I can use it/ but I don't want to/ my aunt works with the [name of an influential business man] Foundation / and I met a lot of people through Achievers[the scholarship program]/ but I don't want to use it/ it's not right.

This commitment to the principles of meritocracy by working class students could be explained by their desire to prove themselves and legitimize their success in a middle class field. Belonging to an underprivileged community could explain the need to reject *Wasta* in order to prove one's worth and competence. Thus, 'honour' and "respectability" occupy a central place in these communities system of values (Hey, 2005; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). While the middle classes find no fault in exploiting their social capital to get ahead, some working class students might shun away from *Wasta* as it could undermine the legitimacy of their achievement. In committing to meritocratic principles, Hilal embraces a "purist" attitude (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) believing that his objective qualifications should be enough to secure a job.

8.5 Discrimination in recruitment processes

Scholars who have studied recruitment processes underscore employers' preference for middle class cultural dispositions and personality traits. Rivera's research on recruitment in elite American firms (2011, 2012) illustrates how these prestigious institutions tend to select students who possess specific dispositional characteristics developed through extra-curricular activities and middle class

concerted cultivation .Extracurriculars such as study abroad, internships, and volunteering enable students to acquire a range of soft skills which facilitate their inclusion in the cultural world of upper middle classes. Accordingly, the students of elite institution learn to embody their privilege through their physical appearance, sense of dress, manners and styles of communication. (Khan 2011). As several scholars have noted (Granovetter, 1995; Jackall, 1988; Kingston and Clawson, 1990;) gatekeepers, who regulate the access of applicants to high-status jobs, often look for upper middle class cultural markers. In the Lebanese context, conversations with Human Resources officers revealed similar class-based selection processes as most employers explicitly expressed their preference for elite university graduates who have the right "personality package". Fadi, HR of Khatib and Alami, a leading Lebanese engineering company explains the personality traits they look for in candidates.

> Of course we look for **top universities**/ AUB [American University of Beirut]/ LAU[Lebanese-American University]/ USJ [Université Saint-joseph]/ Balamand/ we want to see what makes the applicant special/ can they work with a **team?**/ do they have a **team spirit**? / We like people who did **social work**/ for example/ **Red cross**/ **volunteer** for the civil defense/ and of course/ good **communication skills**/ **fluent English**/ **French**/ even **Spanish is a plus**/ we look for certain **characters**/ people who/ wherever you throw them/ they land on their feet/ as we say in Lebanon/ **motivated**/ **enthusiastic**/ **entrepreneurial**/ and this is why we have **a behavioral interview.**

Similarly, Natalie, HR assistant in KPMG, a leading auditing and consultancy global company, admits that the students of non-elite universities are usually excluded from the selection process.

> **Well/ first/ we look at their GPA/ and where they've done their internships/ so this is important/ we like people who can work under pressure/team players/ people with good soft skills/ someone who can make an impact/ and also/ their activities/ like volunteering/ Red Cross/ Scouts/ we look at their personality/ how they deal with people/their exposure to diversity/ We target class A universities/ AUB/ LAU/ Balamand/ because they have soft skills/ they put them under challenge because they participate in competition/ so it's unlikely that we hire from LU or the other smaller universities/ they don't have the right package.**

Some HR officers explicitly used a classist discourse highlighting the importance of class background and "good manners". Nabil, HR assistant at a leading global insurance company describes the profile of successful applicants.

> We prefer AUB/ LAU/ USJ/ you see/ it's about the quality of people/ the quality of the education they get/ their parents paid a fortune for their education/ so they come from certain environment/ background/ and the way they talk/ the way they behave/ their manners/

The accounts of recruitment officers in globally- oriented companies highlight the importance of middle class cultural dispositions for the workplace. As Rivera (2011) has noted, gatekeepers often look for cultural traits that mirror their own. This "cultural homophily" explains why recruiters who graduated from top universities tend to select the graduates of their alma mater. Michel

(Balamand, Civil engineering) describes the social closure that takes place in top engineering firms.

> Their university [AUB] helps them a lot with jobs/ they push them to Khateeb and Alami and [leading engineering company], Dar al Handasa [leading engineering company]/ so it's well- known/ that if am an engineering graduate from AUB/ I will be on the top of the priority list/ because the university already has a name/ and the quality to the graduates is well known/ anyway/ Dar al Handasa and these big companies/ they were founded by AUB graduates/ so it's normal that they prefer them/

For educators and career advisors, "packaging the self" to display traits that employers appreciate seems be to highly recommended. Mirna, former career advisor at the Business faculty of Balamand explains how she encourages her students to research the preferences of their prospective employers before they go for interviews. Her account highlights the importance of the embodied cultural capital of job applicants.

> it's just normal for an employer/ to hire the people he feels comfortable with/ it's not / it's not wrong/ **it's natural**/ /I mean I even tell students/ when they go for an **interview**/ **mimic your employer**/ imitate him/ have an idea about him/ so that he feels at ease with you/ comfortable with you/ so that he accepts you and takes you/ at the end of the day he is the one who makes the decision/ it's not wrong/
>
> May: Who would the employer feel comfortable with?
>
> Mirna: with someone who resembles him [shrugs shoulders]/ that's how things are!/what can I do?!/ [shrugs shoulders]/ this is human nature/ there's also the **body language** thing/… without being aware of it/ **we read the body** unintentionally/ we don't need to be **body language experts** to read the **body language** of a person/ you either feel comfortable with them or you don't.

Like other educators, Mirna encourages her students to market themselves by displaying skills and attitudes valued by employers. Thus, finding employment in a highly competitive market becomes a matter of branding oneself, or marketing one's personal qualities, a strategy popularized by the personal branding movement in the late nineties (Lair et al, 2005). Along these lines, non-professional activities such as hobbies, pleasure and cultural consumption have become a sort of investment that helps job seekers to construct an impressive CV and distinguish themselves from the rest of the applicants. For Cremin (2003), this instrumentalization of life experiences amounts to a "commodification of personality" as workers today are exhorted to produce a life narrative that aligns with the corporate ethos. Accordingly, workers engage in a sort of "reflexive exploitation of the self" as they internalize the necessity shape their selves in accordance with corporate norms. These personal traits and soft skills desired by employers are often possessed by middle class students, which explains the exclusion of applicants who do not fit the social middle class profile. Majed shares an anecdote that illustrates the cultural challenges that these students face when looking for training opportunities.

> I found an internship for a student in Jounieh [Christian town 40 km from Tripoli]. He came to see me wearing a Deshdasha [a cloak that Muslim men wear] and a long beard/ I said I won't send you there!/ you will give me headache!/ would you shave your beard? He said no!/ would you wear a suit Alafranca [modern]?/ no!/he doesn't know how to behave/ even if he shaves his beard and takes off his Deshdasha/ he would still be the same person/
>
> They won't take these students in Beirut/ they don't know languages/ the guy coming from Akkar and Dennieh/ [I say to him] write me a report/ he doesn't know!/ the basis is not the university/ it's the school education/ because they're poor/ they come from public schools/ they don't know how to behave!

Fadi, Carol and Nabeel, who happen to be AUB graduate themselves, fully embraced the "soft skills" discourse. Their views, however, were contested by Lara, the HR of a Retail company based in Beirut. While Lara, a Lebanese University graduate, admits that LU students have weak soft skills, she challenges the common belief that elite universities graduates are the best candidates.

> The other day/ I interviewed a student from the Arab Open University [market oriented university in Beirut]/ I was really impressed/ so yes/ I think it's unfair/ I think HRs should do something to change this mentality/ the name of the university is not the only thing/ I graduated from the Lebanese University/ and they didn't focus on soft skills/ but I worked on myself/ but I also have a good background/ I went to a private school/

Although Lara graduated from LU, her private schooling and middle class upbringing compensated for the soft skills she couldn't acquire at her university. The injustice that she highlights in her account caused a great deal of frustration among the students of low-status universities. During the focus group discussion, Ahmad vehemently rejected discrimination against the students of less prestigious universities before another participant questions the quality of education they are receiving in market-oriented universities.

> Ahmad: but if you have the skills and they don't take you just because you come from a certain university/ this means there is something wrong with the employers! [Indignant tone]
>
> Rami: but is your university really teaching you the skills?
>
> [General silence]
>
> Nada: so we're back to the money issue! At the end of the day, we know who goes to AUB/ you get the skills that you pay for! [shrugs shoulders]

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the structures of inequality that mediate students' career orientation and access to labor market opportunities. Students in urban Tripoli and its rural surroundings voiced their frustration at the scarce job opportunities in a historically neglected region of Lebanon. Many of them perceived Tripoli as a provincial and isolated place where they had little opportunity to accrue valuable social capital. While most low-income participants were willing to look for a

job in the North after graduation, middle class students in elite universities aspired to become mobile global citizens. Students' accounts of their university experience highlighted the role of institutional culture and resources in steering them towards different career paths. As opposed to LU and small market-oriented universities, elite institutions seemed to possess various forms of resources that prepared their students for the labor market transition and developed their job related skills and attitudes. Unequal distribution of different valuable forms of capital is further entrenched by *Wasta*, a form of social capital embedded in the Lebanese system of sectarian clientelism. Participants unanimously underscored the importance of *Wasta* for finding employment and career advancement in both public and private sectors. Finally, conversations with Human Resources officers at globally-oriented companies revealed a clear preference for candidates who possessed middle class cultural dispositions. Therefore, the gatekeepers' tendency to select candidates who display upper middle class cultural markers contributes to the social closure taking place at high-status positions.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research has been to explore how the class position of a group of Lebanese university students shaped their experience in higher education. To this end, I analyzed conversations with 15 participants in from North Lebanon to gain an understanding of the structural inequalities that prevail in the Lebanese educational system. My research started with a discussion about the relevance of class, a literature review of research on educational inequalities, and this was followed by a reflection of the new student/ worker subjectivity produced by the neoliberal restructuring of higher education. I proceeded then to explain my methodology justifying my adherence to a critical realist and a critical interpretivist theoretical framework. This was followed by three chapters discussing the interview data I collected from 15 semi-structured interviews and one focus group. In this concluding chapter, I draw together the main findings of this study. First, I return to answer the research questions I announced in my methodology chapter. I also reflect on the limitations of my study before ending with a discussion of the implications of this research for educators and policy makers.

9.2 Revisiting Research Questions

The initial question that guided this study was: How does the students' class position shape their experience of higher education?

For the sake of analysis, I decided to break down my inquiry into 3 stages: (1) school-university transition, (2) engagement on campus, and (3) Pre-graduation career orientation. Thus, I came up with 3 sets questions related to each stage.

1. *What was their motivation to pursue higher education? To what extent were parents involved in this transition? How did their class position affect their choice of university? How did other identity markers shape these choices?*

9.2.1 Motivation to pursue higher education

Conversations with students from different class backgrounds revealed different motivation to pursue higher education. Several students from lower middle class backgrounds, such as Hanadi and Zaynab, came from aspirational families eager to spare their children the class injuries they personally suffered due their low educational attainment. (Rondini, 2016, Senett & Cob, 1972) Some working class student like Bilal, hoped to carve out for themselves a better future than their peers, who dropped out of school to take low-paying jobs. Mira, whose life was marked by financial hardships believed that a university degree would secure the economic stability her parents could never achieve. Her degree was thus perceived as an "insurance policy" (Brown, 1990, p.77) against the unpleasant surprises of life.

For middle class students, such as Ameen, Malek, Georges and Michel, higher education was a taken for granted path, as other choices were inconceivable. (Bourdieu, 2000; Atkinson, 2014).They internalized the imperative to retrace the path of their university educated parents. In

addition to maintaining their family social status, they hoped to secure a lucrative job by joining high-ranking universities.

9.2.3 Middle class concerted cultivation

While most working class students had to rely on themselves to navigate the uncharted waters of higher education, the stories of middle class participants illustrated how their parents mobilized different forms of resources to offer their children the best educational opportunities (Lareau, 2003; Bathmaker et al, 2016, Ball & Vincent, 2015). Private schooling which provides quality foreign language education remains the most significant form of Lebanese middle-class investment in education. Ameen's parents' strategically intervened to get him back on track by moving him to an elite British system School. The "Manager" metaphor that Georges used to describe his mother's involvement in his education illustrates the hands-on approach of middle parents in educational matters (De Wiele and Edgerton, 2016). His mother seems to possess both the knowledge and the economic resources to hire a private tutor to secure her son's admission to an elite university. The stories of Ameen and Georges illustrate the role of middle class "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003) in supporting children's access to the best educational opportunities.

9.2.4 The school effect

Private schooling with its high language standards and the cultural capital it generates remains a defining feature of the Lebanese middle class. Privately schooled participants reported being more prepared by their schools to take standardized tests such as SAT, IELTS and TOEFL. They also noted how the up-to-date teaching practices of their schools fostered their confidence and communication skills. Their social exposure to diversity in private co-educational schools translated into more ease in transitioning to the university. In contrast, most working class students who attended public schools described how their schools failed to provide any practical guidance for their transition to higher education. They had weak access to information about admission requirements and virtually no preparation for standardized tests. In this way, public schools reinforced social inequalities and minimized the students' chances of joining better universities, even when students received scholarships.

9.2.5 Economic capital and mobility

The accounts of participants revealed that university choice was largely determined by family economic resources. Working and lower middle class students in Lebanon are usually left with two options: affordable market-oriented universities, or the Lebanese public university. Unless they manage to join the well-reputed and extremely selective departments of LU, degrees from these universities will relegate them to an inferior position in the labor market. A minority of public schools students makes it to elite private education through scholarships offered by NGOs such as Achievers (Hilal, Bilal, Tareq) , sectarian charities, or thanks to the educational benefits of their parents employment (the army in the case of Zaynab). Middle class participants internalized the imperative of joining well-reputed private universities in order to secure high status jobs. Their ample economic resources enabled them to cover the hefty tuition fees of private universities, in addition to the cost of moving to the capital (Malek, AUB) or commuting to another Lebanese town (Georges, LAU, Byblos). Thus, these students had the opportunity to move beyond the

confines of their hometown and gain social exposure that could potentially help them accrue social and cultural capital. Their accounts suggest that middle class advantage can compensate for inequalities produced by their peripheral location. Thus, mobility itself appears to be a valuable capital that could be converted into other forms of capitals (Kaufman, 2004). In contrast, regional inequalities intersected with weak economic resources to restrict the choices of working class students. Their spatial immobility or "entrapment" their neighborhoods and villages could hinder their access to educational opportunities (Marzi, 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Hatipoglu, 2013, Allen and Hollingworth, 2013). Bilal, for example, could not afford to move to another Lebanese region to study Hospitality at the Lebanese University and had to settle for vocational education to study his major of choice. The interplay between weak economic resources, conservative social norms and regional inequalities can contribute to the spatial "immobility" of some female students depriving them from better educational opportunities. These young women often find themselves at the intersection of multiple forms of inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989).

2. *How did student's class position affect their acquisition of social and cultural capital and their involvement in extracurricular activities? What was the role of higher education institutions in providing these opportunities? What other identity markers interacted with class to shape the acquisition of soft skills?*

9.2.6 Engagement on campus

Conversations with participants revealed that their social lives and their ability to develop cultural and social capital were shaped by their class position, the socio-cultural norms of their confessional community and the type of the institutions they attended. Several working class and lower middle class students faced the cultural challenges of fitting in to a middle class environment (Ray, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). This new environment was particularly challenging for students who came from low-income homogeneous neighborhoods as they tried to adapt to the more relaxed gender norms that prevailed at university. Moreover, participants from low income families reported being under tremendous financial pressure even when they were awarded full scholarships. In addition to the challenges of navigating a middle class environment, sources of additional stress included paying for transportation, books, projects, laptops and so on. These accounts contrast with privately schooled middle and upper middle class students who seem to arrive on campus with economic, cultural and social resources that facilitate their integration and involvement in campus social life (Bathmaker, et al, 2016). Their previous exposure to social diversity resulted in a smoother transition to university. Thus, it can be argued that in the Lebanese multi-confessional social context, exposure to social diversity and socialization into the liberal social norms that prevail in cosmopolitan educational settings constitute a form of cultural capital valued in higher education and corporate settings. This form of cultural capital can be a major source of inequality.

Students' accounts also suggest that the type of the institution they attended played a crucial role in their ability to participate in ECA. Wealthier universities possess the adequate infrastructure and the financial resources to host a range of social, cultural and athletic activities. As these competitive universities embraced the employability agenda, their students displayed an awareness of the importance of soft skills and extra-curricular activities that "look good" on their CVs. In

contrast, market-oriented universities had fewer material resources and facilities to invest in these activities which were virtually absent at the public university (LU). Conversations with students revealed that the Lebanese public university and market-oriented institutions lacked the financial, social and cultural resources to foster marketable skills and competencies in students.

Engagement with academic authority figures was also a defining feature of participants' university experience (Jack, 2015) .While the students of private universities expressed different degrees of satisfaction with their university life, LU students overwhelmingly reported feelings of alienation, frustration and disengagement as they could not rely on any form of institutional support. Most of them portrayed their professors as distant authority figures who used authoritarian teaching styles and outdated pedagogical methods. These students gave emotionally loaded accounts of their strained relationships with a rigidly bureaucratic administration and contemptuous professors, recounting multiple forms of symbolic violence they were subjected to. They embraced a "survivor" identity describing their journey as an ordeal they had to endure. In contrast, students in wealthier private universities reported a more meaningful engagement with academic figures and viewed mentorship relationship as an opportunity to hone their soft skills and widen their network. Furthermore, students in private universities reported having more opportunities to develop communication skills. LU students acknowledged this major deficiency citing outdated teaching practices which reproduced the language inequalities inflicted upon public school students.

9.2.7 Gender and ECA

Female students' accounts of their social lives at university suggest that conservative socio-cultural norms represent a significant barrier to engaging in extra-curricular activities and developing employability skills. (Nimr, 2016,). Muslim females hailing from low income conservative families were expected to play traditional gender roles by spending most of their time at home, participating in household chores and limiting interactions with males (Tlaiss, 2014). Moreover, these young women were expected to prioritize marriage life over their career aspirations. These norms can prevail in both urban and rural settings. The case of Khadija, in particular, illustrates the intersection of several forms of inequalities: weak economic resources, restrictive socio-cultural norms and remote geographical location. Some female participants encountered negative attitudes that belittled their academic achievement reminding of their place in a patriarchal society: "you will hang your degree above the kitchen sink" as the relative of Zaynab has sarcastically observed.

3. *How does the students' class position shape their career prospects? What role do different higher education institutions play in fostering better opportunities? What role does Wasta play in the Lebanese labor market? How do other identity markers such as geographical location and gender affect their career opportunities?*

9.2.8 Regional inequalities

Participants across class position underscored the scarcity of job opportunities in the North citing political instability and the concentration of economic activity in central Lebanon. Mobile middle class students were particularly aware that Tripoli's peripheral location could potentially prevent

them from accruing social capital and extending their network. Students like Ameen contrasted the parochial character of Tripoli to the cosmopolitanism of Beirut and its social diversity. While most working class students were inclined to give the North a chance, middle class students in elite universities aimed higher, aspiring to find jobs in leading companies in Beirut or migrating to join global labor markets. These different orientations were rooted in different institutional cultures and resources. These resources, along with the dominant discourses on campus played an important role in steering students towards certain career pathways. As opposed to the LU and small market oriented universities, high-ranking private universities seemed to possess the cultural, financial and organizational resources that developed students' job hunting skills and increased their knowledge of the market. Moreover, the students at these elite institutions internalized discourses of excellence and high achievement which exhorted them to seek rewarding jobs in prestigious global companies and lucrative professions. These institutions practice a form of "career funneling" (Binder, et al, 2016) encouraging students to join the ranks of the occupational elite.

Students in LU and market-oriented universities reported the absence of these supportive structures. They were expected to manage the transition to the labor market on their own. The different ethos that governs these institutions draws the boundaries between the "locals" who settle for modest jobs and mobile cosmopolitans who covet lucrative job opportunities in transnational job markets.

9.2.9 *Wasta*

Participants acknowledged *Wasta,* the clandestine exchange of favors widely practiced in Lebanon as a major source of inequality (Tabar & Egan, 2016). This practice which has become a sort of Lebanese "common sense" involves using connections to obtain social goods that should be accessed through meritocratic principles. Using *Wasta*, or requesting favors from influential connections, will afford a person a preferential treatment as opposed to those who lack this form of social capital. This practice is embedded in the Lebanese sectarian clientelist system "where a small politically connected elite appropriates the bulk of economic surplus and redistributes it through communal clientelism" (Bauman, 2015, p.105). Those who occupy the top of the social ladder generally possess a higher volume of this form of social capital. (Tlaiss and kauser, 2014; Cunnigham and Saraya, 1993). Students identified *Wasta* as a decisive factor in finding job in both public and private sectors. While all participants acknowledged *Wasta* as a form of injustice, working class and lower middle class students in particular expressed their frustration at this corrupt social practice which excluded them form public sector jobs. Their stories illustrate how the Lebanese sectarian patronage system perpetuates social inequalities through different forms of nepotistic practices.

9.2.10 Career advisors and Gatekeepers' perceptions

Conversations with career advisors in high-ranking private universities revealed their total alignment with the neoliberal employability agenda. Both Mirna (Balamand) and Samer (AUB) embraced the soft skills discourse citing entrepreneurial attitudes as the key attributes desirable in the workplace. Mirna even suggested that job applicants should mirror their potential employers

attitudes during interviews, “Mimick your [potential] employer so that they take you”. Thus, packaging the self to align with corporate values has become another form of “common sense” in education (Holborow, 2012). Mirna’s advice to her students clearly resonates with the views expressed by the Human Resources officers of leading Lebanese companies. Their portrayal of the ideal worker revealed class-based selection processes. With the exception of Lara, who contested educational hierarchies, all of them explicitly expressed their preference for elite university graduates claiming that these students usually possess superior soft skills and the right “personality package”. The accounts of recruitment officers in globally oriented companies highlight the importance of middle class cultural dispositions for the workplace. As Rivera (2011) has noted, gatekeepers often look for cultural traits that mirror their own. This “cultural homophily” could explain why recruiters who graduated from top universities such as AUB and LAU tend to select the graduates of their alma mater and exclude applicants from less prestigious universities. The HR’s perceptions of the ideal worker validate the observations of Michel about the social closure that takes place in top engineering firms.

9.3 Limitation of the study

The findings of the study have to be seen in the light of several limitations. One shortcoming that I would like to acknowledge is the small number of participants. I have used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure maximum diversity for the sample in terms of social class, gender and religion. I believe, however, that a larger sample with more diverse profiles and a different combinations of identity markers would have added a wider perspective and allowed more comparisons in the analysis. Unfortunately, from 2019 onwards, it became increasingly difficult to recruit more participants due to the political circumstances the country was going through.

Another problem I would like to highlight is that some academic majors were underrepresented in the study. For example, including creative industries majors would have further enriched the analysis due to the relevance of class origin in these domains. Moreover, I need to acknowledge that the stories of the LU participants are specific to the North Branch of the Lebanese University. Although I believe that the majority of LU students in Lebanon face the same type of challenges, participants from other branches or departments may present a different account of their university experience. Conducting this study in central locations like the capital Beirut, or in a region with higher socio-economic standards may have yielded different results.

The third limitation to this study is related to the data collection method. Although I believe that semi-structured interviews gave me meaningful insights into how inequalities are produced in Lebanese higher education, other ethnographic methods ethnographic such as diaries and observations of the material life conditions of students would have produced a richer and more nuanced analysis. Finally, an examination of students’ trajectories through longitudinal studies would be of great benefit to assess their labor market outcomes validating or (refuting) the assumptions of this study.

9.4 Implications for research

As I explained in chapter 5, this study subscribes to a critical action framework committed to a social justice agenda. Thus, one of its aims it to revive the class debate in a society consumed by sectarian identity politics. Despite growing social inequalities in Lebanon (ESCWA, 2022), social class is still underexplored in the Lebanese educational research and Lebanese sociology in general. Similar studies that examine how inequalities are produced in the Lebanese educational system can inform educational policy makers willing to implement a social justice agenda. These studies underscore the urgency of reforming the public education system which reproduces the disadvantage of working class students. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of integrating social class awareness into teacher development programs. This integration can help teachers understand and recognize the invisible challenges that working class students face in higher education. As most faculty members belong to middle class, a lack of awareness of these challenges can result in misunderstandings misconceptions and frustration on both sides of the learning process. Thus, a better understanding of the challenges that underprivileged students face can lead to more meaningful teacher-student interactions in the context of a pedagogy of inclusion, respect, and appreciation of the non-recognized forms of cultural capitals that these students possess. This issue is especially relevant to English language classrooms where social inequalities clearly manifest themselves.

9.5 Final note

I have tried in this thesis to shed light on the structures of inequality that shaped the life of a group Lebanese university students from North Lebanon. Most of my data was collected before the compounded crises that struck Lebanon starting 2019. The severe economic crisis, followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, had a devastating effect on the Lebanese Education sector (World Bank, 2021). As the most economically vulnerable region of Lebanon, the North has been witnessing soaring poverty and unemployment rates (Middle East Monitor, 2001). Unfortunately, the inequalities I have highlighted in this study have been tremendously magnified by the new realities imposed by these crises. I hope that this study will be a useful resource for researchers who wish to re-examine educational inequalities in the light of these recent changes.

Appendix A

Questionnaire for Students

Name:
University:
Major:
Year of Study:
School:
Father's profession:
Father's Educational Attainment:
Mother's profession;
Mother's Educational attainment:
Place of Residence:
Phone number:
Email:

الإسم:
الجامعة:
الإختصاص:
السنة الدراسية:
المدرسة:
مهنة الأب:
تحصيل الأب العلمي:
مهنة الأم:
تحصيل الأم العلمي:
مكان السكن:
رقم الهاتف:
الإيميل:

Appendix B

Themes covered in semi-structured interviews

School experience (satisfaction, teaching practices, foreign languages, preparation for university enrollment)
Motivation to pursue higher education
Parental involvement
Choice of university and major
The challenges of school-university transition
English language at university
Social life at university and extra-curricular activities
Relationships with academic figures
Career orientation
Wasta

Appendix C
Transcription conventions

/	brief pause
…	omission of part of the excerpt
“ ”	direct quotation
Bold	foreign word in French or English
[…..]	adding information, explanation, tone, gesture
Capital letters	emphasized words

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