



**Gabriella Pusztai (2015) Pathways to Success in Higher Education. Rethinking the Social Capital Theory in the Light of Institutional Diversity. Higher Education Research and Policy (HERP), 7. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition.**

Hungarian Educational Research Journal  
2015, Vol. 5(4) 122–124  
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<http://herj.lib.unideb.hu>  
Debrecen University Press



DOI: 10.14413/herj.2015.04.12.

*Reviewed by Nafsika Alexiadou*

The challenges posed by higher education expansion, have preoccupied researchers interested in the connections between higher education systems and the economy, marketization policies and their impact on the university sector, as well as the changing nature of higher education governance. But, the focus of these studies tends to be on the macro-level of analysis of the university structures, and on the already well researched higher education systems of the Western countries with the large HE sectors (mainly, US, France, UK). Less attention has been paid to the transition societies of Central and Eastern Europe, and to students, as the main beneficiaries of university education (with notable exceptions see, Zgaga et al, 2013). This book addresses this gap and focuses on students and their use of social resources in their engagement with contemporary higher education institutions.

The volume consists of a compilation of nine research studies that have explored in depth the positionality of students in higher education institutions during a period of rapid University expansion in Central and Eastern Europe – in the border regions of Hungary, Romania and Ukraine. In particular, the focus of the book is on the socialisation of students in a changing education context, and the institutional frameworks they engage with during their studies. Departing from the linear and dualistic depictions of students as either customers or products of universities that operate in highly marketized contexts, the book takes a different model of student socialisation as its core. It places students at the centre of the analysis as active and strategic agents who make use of the institutional and social resources at their disposal, in order to advance their education and future careers. Gabriella Pusztai has managed to convey the complexity of the field of higher education and to navigate this through the interpretative insights of students as they actively engage with the world of higher education.

In the higher education context of Central and Eastern Europe, this constructivist focus on students' experiences is particularly significant, since it follows the relatively recent and unexpectedly large-scale expansion of the sector not just in numerical terms, but also

in the nature of the student population. A more diversified student population than ever before (including mature students, single parents, ethnic minority students) has contributed to the re-examination of higher education cultures and assumptions about the communities that universities serve, and hence a re-definition of their roles and functions. The focus of the book is not on university structures as such, but on the communities of students and how their needs, value systems and networks of relations interact with the institution, and shape the institutional profile.

This focus reflects to a large extent the theoretical position of the work, and aims to pose a challenge to the studies that draw on social reproduction theoretical assumptions in researching education success and failure. Theoretically, the studies rely on the concept of social capital as used by Coleman (1990), and draws on Berger & Luckmann's (1966) thesis on the socially constructed nature of social reality. Taking a clearly distancing position from the concept of social capital as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu (which is in my view, unfairly criticised as deterministic and not allowing for agency, p.23), the volume adopts the more individualistic and human-capital inspired Colemanian view of social capital. This is then operationalised in an impressive array of empirical studies around student achievement as linked to socioeconomic background and religiosity, the influence of the institutional context on student's engagement with schools and universities, and social mobility through career development.

The theoretical and methodological elaborations of the concept of social capital provide a rich and complex understanding of the applications of social capital theory, and offer insights into its potential for further research on educational contexts. Methodologically the studies use a range of sophisticated quantitative and (to a lesser degree) qualitative approaches to assess the various dimensions of achievement and success in the students' trajectory in higher education, as well as to measure the contextual variables of institutions as these connect to student's success. The findings of the research suggest that even though the degree of (dis)advantage of students is a significant factor in accessing higher education, in doing well within, and in moving on to a good career after, students from all social backgrounds use 'network resources' to achieve success. These include social capital coming from family, complex social and friendship links, and membership of voluntary and religious organisations, all of which are "instrumental in moving students towards excellence" and constitute "powerful influences (as) student success indicators" (p.163). But, this is not seen in purely individualistic terms. The book fully recognizes the constraints that students from certain social backgrounds face when they engage with selective and often hierarchical institutions of higher education. But, it also acknowledges the diversity and richness of such interactions that are not always one-directional. For instance, earlier research by the author (Pusztai, 2005) reveals that "Hungarian denominational schools favourably influence the school career of students with disadvantaged backgrounds" (p.77). Such findings are used in the current volume to extend research in the organic relationships between individuals as carriers of certain types and amounts of capital, and institutions that offer opportunities for social mobility.

And this is one of the main arguments that runs through the studies in this volume: strategically used, social capital is mobilized by individual students in their interactions with universities and in their career planning. In many instances, this is a positive strategy and the research reported here promotes the argument that social capital has the potential to compensate for limited forms of cultural and economic capital that are 'inherited' through low parental education and wealth. The implications of this argument are clear: The institutions of higher education have the responsibility to expand the possibilities and spaces for students and staff to work together, and through a focus on the educative and citizenship functions of universities, to build networks of support for educational and career success. The students themselves have the responsibility to actively take advantage of these spaces, and to engage in the social capital building project that will help them in achieving upward mobility.

Overall, the book represents a major contribution in the field of higher education research as well as policy. It offers strong arguments that draw on extensive evidence, and makes a case for developing the social functions of higher education institutions. Whatever theoretical position researchers in the field may have (following Coleman, or Bourdieu in their use of 'social capital'), this volume is a valuable resource that will stimulate discussion and challenge orthodoxies and methodological approaches in the field.