Becoming “more better”:
A case study of affirmative action financial aid students at the University of Cape Town, South Africa

I came to UCT [the University of Cape Town] because I wanted to be famous like those two other guys. They were the first ones [in my community] ever to come to UCT and at home, they were a big deal; they were like a precedent in a way … [but] my mother, she didn’t even know there was a university; she just thought maybe it was a big waste of money paying the application fee.

- Interview response from 4th year financial aid student in the Faculty of Science

The racial dynamics of South Africa’s economic architecture are shifting. The distribution of privilege and wealth continues to reflect the designs of apartheid, and enduring unemployment and grinding poverty remain a reality for many black South Africans. However, while aggregate inequality has risen since the transition to democracy in 1994, an examination of the data shows that this is a function of increasing intra- rather than interracial disparities (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). At the centre of the state response to these dynamic shifts is a belief in the importance of education as a vehicle for socio-economic mobility. In higher education, this has prompted university administrations across the country to develop and implement affirmative action admissions policies, based either on racial quotas or differentiated entrance requirements. Despite constitutional provision for affirmative action in the new South Africa, these policies are hotly debated, with critics principally problematising the use of race as a proxy for disadvantage.

Those in favour of affirmative admissions point to the devastating legacy of an education system engineered to limit the ability of young black South Africans to acquire the social and human capital required for success in the skilled labour market. By and large, these kinds of arguments implicitly value the acquisition by young black students of Bourdieuan forms of cultural capital, what Lamont and Laureau (1988, p.156) define as, “widely shared high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials), used for social and cultural exclusion, the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources, and the latter to exclusion from high status groups.”

Working from the starting point that there are both race and class dimensions to Bourdieuan cultural capital, this study focuses on the struggles that low black income students face as they transition across class boundaries. I use this research to challenge narrow conceptions of the provision of financial aid to black students in higher education as exclusively as a means to provide redress for resource deficiencies: this view is simplistic and overlooks many of the social complexities financial constraints impose on students as they move between economic and cultural contexts. In particular, academic success is inseparable from the pressures placed on students by family and friends, who may create demands on students’ time and money, as well as colour their perspective on participation in higher education. Furthermore, this one-dimensional view is especially problematic when one considers the extent of correlated social and academic challenges faced by low-income groups – “financial exclusion” may mask a host of difficulties in adapting to the university environment. In particular, I ask: what kinds of pressures do students face even where, independent of social context, provision of aid is arguably adequate to meet the basic day-to-day costs they face?

The university as an institution embodies middle class, intellectual values. For middle and upper class students, adopting patterns of thought and behaviour appropriate to this environment are routine, while the requisite adaptation requires conscious investment by working class students. Student persistence is
determined both by the knowledge and skills with which an individual enters the university and her
capacity to adapt to a new environment. These are inevitably related: entering university is more likely to
entail a change in lifestyle and social networks for low-income students; the transition may also require
enforcing greater disconnection from one’s social background (including family, friends and the wider
community) (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009).

The provision of financial aid raises questions about the ways in which struggles to adjust to the
university environment may affect expenditures—the idea that some students actively invest in the
acquisition of the accoutrements of cultural capital in recognition of the long-term benefits this may
confer. Social psychological studies suggest that individuals may employ symbols to bolster aspects of
their identity, using material possessions, amongst other markers, to compensate for perceived
inadequacies in their self-concept (Dittmar, Beattie and Friese 1996). Similarly, in order to manage their
“otherness” students may learn to mimic the social habits of their middle and upper class peers,
concealing their backgrounds, altering manners of speech and adopting different patterns of dress
(Granfield 1991).

At the same time, receipt of such a package may also change the household’s perception of an
individual’s wealth. Some financial aid packages currently provide up to the equivalent of R40,000
(roughly $4,500 at current exchange rates of c. R9/US$) to cover student’s living expenses; a
considerable amount in an environment where the most recent income and expenditure survey in
2005/2006 found average black African household income to be a little less than R38,000 (around
R50,000 in 2011 rands) for a typical household size of 4.2 people (Stats SA 2008). This is not
insignificant given that students must continue to engage with family and friends in their home
communities. Prior ethnographic research has established that these relationships must be carefully
navigated. For many low-income black youths, the transition to adulthood entails gradual recognition of
the deeply entrenched barriers to economic mobility that exist in South Africa; the realization that their
dreams may be unattainable. The perception that an individual has achieved success may therefore
provoke resentment and ostracism from neighbours, for “playing white” (Schenk & Seekings 2010). In a
study of high school students in a low-income urban township, Ramphele (2002, p.107) notes that those
with some means of support are envied by those without and expected to share the little they have; that
one, “young person can afford to go to a better school is seen as having taken away opportunities from
others.

In examining how students manage these connections, it is helpful to draw a conceptual distinction
between “dominant” (or what I have thus far labeled “Bourdieuian”) and “non-dominant” cultural capital.
Carter (2003, p.137) notes that cultural capital is context-specific: “its currency varies across different
social spaces where struggles for legitimation and power exist.” Implicit in the theoretical framework
delineated thus far has been the idea that the acquisition of dominant cultural capital, the high status
behaviours and signifiers that produce success in university and the labour market, is the primary
ambition of low-income students. However, it is important to recognise that students may simultaneously
aspire to maintain or acquire status within their own contexts, and may value alternative forms of non-
dominant cultural capital. Part of the challenge of this study is therefore also to better understand how
students divide their resources between the acquisition of these different forms of cultural capital, as well
as explore the extent to which these concurrent processes are complementary or conflictual.
Research site and methodology

At the centre of the affirmative admissions debate is the University of Cape Town (UCT), a traditionally white, elite institution and also the fieldwork site for my study. The UCT administration positions the institution as a world class Afropolitan university, forcefully stating the view that equity is inseparable from the achievement of excellence in its vision and mission statements. It has implemented a number of interventions to attempt create a more inclusive and enabling environment: the active recruitment of black students and affirmative admissions as outlined above; a proactive approach to changing its staff composition through the appointment of equity employment representatives on staff selection committees; and the provision of support for previously disadvantaged students through the establishment of an Academic Development unit that offers writing support and foundation courses. The university further attempts to demonstrate an awareness of cultural diversity through symbolic gestures such as the naming of buildings after important figures in the anti-apartheid struggle, and holding public events for Youth Day and Africa Day. At the same time, UCT is often criticised for being Eurocentric in terms of curricula, teaching methods, institutional norms and communication, in both its formal and informal operations (Ismail 2011). These tensions embody the spirit of the questions I seek to explore.

Restricting analysis to a single university inevitably limits the generalisability of results. However, concentrating on only one site has allowed me to develop a more in-depth understanding of the academic and social experience of students in this environment, as well as the relationship between students and the functioning of a particular financial aid office. As UCT is among the best endowed universities in the country, this study provides an important baseline for understanding the resource challenges students face even in an environment of relative institutional affluence. It is, of course, important to remain conscious of the confluence of other factors that may contribute to the struggles students experience; perhaps, for example, low-income students entering a traditionally black university may suffer more under the burden imposed by resource limitations, but this may to some extent be mediated by a greater sense of connection to their peers or the institutional culture.

Details of my methodological approach are outlined below.

Qualitative analysis: In order to better understand the experience of individuals on financial aid, I tracked a stratified random sample of 40 students from June to November 2012. All participants were recipients of funds from a state-sponsored, means-based affirmative action loan programme, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), established in 1995 to assist black students in financing their education. The sample was drawn from a complete list of financial aid students provided by UCT in order to ensure representation in proportion to enrolment by gender, faculty and home location; first year students were disproportionately sampled to facilitate investigation of the interplay between resources and student adaptation to a new environment. These students kept a daily paper diary recording any financial inflows and outflows, and were required to maintain this diary both while on campus during the semester, as well as when at home or visiting friends and family over vacation periods. This same information was transmitted daily via text message or email as a mechanism to ensure that students kept regular records.

This methodology draws on a number of studies that have used diaries to track spending patterns in the context of understanding the ways that low income households in developing countries manage their money (Collins 2004, Kamath, Ramanathan & Rathna 2009). Of course, it is important to recognize the distortions the latter may produce in creating a dynamic view of a “typical” student’s spending patterns –
one would anticipate that increased awareness of financial flows is likely to produce a better planned and more prudent budget. The results should therefore be viewed as representing a “best case scenario” for student financial management. In addition, students were asked to attend three individual meetings and one focus group session. These meetings were semi-structured, probing issues that arise from examination of the financial flows recorded in their diaries, as well as providing a forum for general discussion of the challenges students encounter in managing their resources and the process of integration into the university more broadly.

**Quantitative approach:** an analysis of UCT administrative data: In order to understand broad trends in the trajectory of financial aid students, I plan to conduct a regression analysis of the interaction between background variables (including race, parental wealth, income and occupation, academic performance in secondary school and secondary school resources), enrolment choices at UCT, value of financial aid provision, and student success. This analysis will be conducted for three distinct outcome variables: (1.) the probability of graduating within a two year time frame of standard degree length (between three and six years, dependent on course of study) (2.) the probability of failing one or more subjects over the course of a student’s academic career; and (3.) student GPA. Data will come from three sources:

1. UCT administrative data (2000 – 2012): includes basic demographic information, secondary school performance, students’ home and term addresses, and performance on university courses.
2. UCT financial aid data (2000 – 2012): financial aid applicants are required to submit additional documentation including information about their family income and expenditure, family asset ownership, the occupations of their two primary guardians, and household structure.
3. South African School Register of Needs (2000): a South African Department of Education dataset produced following a national survey of all schools in the country. This dataset primarily reflects schools resources – student and teacher numbers, as well as the availability of physical resources – and will be combined with UCT administrative data in order to provide a proxy for school quality.

The time frame for which this data is available will allow me to complete this analysis for at least five separate cohorts of students (i.e. students entering between 2000 and 2005). Detailed household information (2.) is only available for students who applied for financial aid, imposing a constraint on sample size and composition. Currently, around 3,000 of UCT’s almost 16,000 undergraduate students are recipients of NSFAS funding.

**Why RICSRE?**

Having completed the fieldwork for the qualitative component of my research, since returning to Stanford in January 2013, I’ve found myself looking for a sounding board to unpack the observations I made whilst getting to know the students in my sample. The essence of the problems I outline above are not fundamentally South African, but represent challenges faced by young people of colour in societies around the world. I believe that both my own research and that of my peers would be enriched by an exchange of ideas around how individuals deal with these transitions in cross-cultural settings.

The use of language provides some helpful illustrations. In the title of my proposal, “more better” is a reference to the phrase many students employ when describing their aspirations to create a better life for their families, but also to the idea that there is a hierarchy among all people; that those who are wealthier are somehow “better.” But this is not unambiguously clear – many simultaneously express contempt for
those who acquire wealth and forget their “roots.” Similarly, the ways in which students talk about their on-campus identities is complex. In general, my findings would suggest that one must at all costs avoid being a “snob,” shorthand for “acting white” whilst also assiduously avoiding the label “ghetto,” a reference to what one student described as “doing the things that black people do ... like talking loud or eating with your hands.” However, both of these words have contested meanings and emotive connotations. South African students have appropriated the word “ghetto” from American popular culture, but appear to use it in ways that differ substantially from its meaning in the US-context (for a student from a deep rural area may be more likely to be classified as “ghetto” than one who grew up in an urban township.) I hope to be able to exploring these issues within the interdisciplinary group at RICSRE. Many thanks for your consideration of my proposal.

References


DISSERTATION COMPLETION TIMELINE

January - April 2013:  Transcription of interviews and consolidation of financial diary information (qualitative research)

Consolidate and outline theoretical framework, and adjust literature review as appropriate

April – June 2013:  Coding of qualitative interview data using Atlas.ti

Write up qualitative methodology

Cleaning and preliminary analysis of administrative database in preparation for quantitative work

June – September 2013:  Review and write-up of qualitative findings

Statistical analysis of administrative database using Stata

Write up quantitative methodology

Seek out opportunities to present preliminary findings (seminars, workshops etc.)

September 2013:  Submission of draft qualitative chapters to core reading committee

Return trip to South Africa to share preliminary findings with relevant academics and administrators at the University of Cape Town (UCT)

October 2013:  Incorporate revisions based on UCT and core reading committee comments

October 2013 - January 2014:  Review and write-up of quantitative findings

January 2014:  Submission of draft quantitative chapters to core reading committee

February 2014:  Incorporate revisions based on core reading committee comments

Write summary and conclusion chapters

March 2014:  Submit draft of complete dissertation to core reading committee

Finalise and contact members of dissertation defense committee

March – April 2014:  Incorporate reading committee comments into final dissertation

April 2014:  Submit full dissertation to dissertation defense committee

Prepare and practice oral defense outline and make revisions based on comments received

May 2014:  Dissertation oral defense

May - June 2014:  Final dissertation revisions

June 2014:  Graduation