

Educational Advancement in Three Generations: East and West Germany in Comparison

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Abstract

Our article presents some of the key findings of a qualitative study that is based on biographical interviews to investigate three generations of first generation students in East and West Germany since the Second World War. Focusing on the influence of political and societal conditions on individual upward mobility through education, we developed a conceptional framework that combines Pierre Bourdieu's theory with the concept of political opportunity structure by Sidney Tarrow. This combined theoretical approach enables us to investigate the dynamics of fostering mobility by creating access to higher education. These dynamics can be described as typical opportunity structures which we explain in the article. Another important result refers to seven different structural elements that are favorable to educational advancement, e.g. changes in habitus through education, institutional incentives or a broad positive public discourse. These structural elements we could find across the different types and individual cases. Finally, that enables us to connect our findings to an international discourse on first generation students, social inequality, and higher education.

Key Words: First generation Students, Political Opportunity Structure, East and West Germany, biographical research, social inequality

Introduction

Extensive research has been done on the connection between education and social inequality. On an examination of the literature, two things stand out: First, attention has been given mainly to the barriers that hinder educational advancement. Only recently have the positive factors for success been more frequently studied (e.g. Kupfer, 2015; Spiegler, 2015). Second, most studies have dealt with individual educational choices at a micro or organizational (i.e. meso) level (for a summary see Kupfer, 2015); macro-level studies of societal factors are "rather limited" (Kupfer, 2015, 14). One example of the inclusion of societal dimensions is Diego Gambetta (1987), whose studies of educational careers in northern Italy showed, that external factors – called "push factors" – influence educational choices.

The influence of educational expansion has also been studied (e.g. Blossfeld, 1993; Henz & Maas, 1995; Shavit et al., 2007; Meschi & Scervini, 2014), as have labor market influences (e.g. Lipset & Zetterberg, 1966; Weis, 1990; Reimer, 2011). Researchers were able to show that these factors do not lead to a real decrease in social inequality, but rather shift inequality upward, in what Beck (1986, 122) calls the "elevator effect" (cf. also Goldthorpe et al., 1978; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). In contrast to these studies, which mainly deal with economic factors, a few studies have examined the influence of specific educational policies (Breen & Jonsson, 2007; Stuart, 2012; Braga et al., 2013). These studies are mostly based on quantitative data and hence do not show the actual biographical reception of the changes they investigate, nor do they take other macro structural factors into account.

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Nevertheless, non-traditional and first-generation students become more and more apparent in the research literature, e.g. in the Us-American and European countries. These studies focus on their experiences in transition to college or university and during their studies (Reay et al., 2010; Davis, 2010; Ward et al., 2012; Finnegan et al., 2014). They do not show as well how biographical reception interacts with macro structural factors.

One study (Miethe et al., 2015) has addressed precisely this shortcoming and examined how societal conditions influence individual educational advancement. Our thesis is that not only individual and family decisions and institutional barriers play a role in determining whether educational advancement takes place, but societal factors (which are not limited to economic factors) must be given greater consideration than they have up to now. The study's theoretical basis is a combination of the concept of political opportunity structure (Tarrow, 1994, Eisinger, 1973) with Bourdieu's (1986) conception. As its empirical basis the study uses a biographical approach, since this makes it possible to portray the interdependence between individual decisions and societal influences. The present article first discusses the study's theoretical conception. Next, the key findings of biographical investigation are summarized, and finally, general theoretical implications for the study of relationships between education and social inequality are presented.

1. Theoretical Conception for an Examination of the Connection between Educational Advancement and Societal Conditions

The study's theoretical approach is based on the combination of two concepts: first, Bourdieu's (1986) concept, and second, the concept of political opportunity structure (POS), also known as the political process approach (Tarrow, 1991; Eisinger, 1973).

Bourdieu's conception has been drawn upon for many years in the German-speaking countries in the sociology of education, mainly in qualitative studies aimed at explaining educational inequalities (e.g. Büchner & Brake, 2006; Lange-Vester, 2007; Spiegler, 2015). Bourdieu is less concerned with rational decisions and status transitions than decision-theory approaches (e.g. Boudon, 1974), focusing instead on how these decisions are reached, and what happens when the decision is made to start children of educationally disadvantaged classes in a higher educational path. Social milieux and the respective mechanisms by which they influence educational behavior have also been studied in the Bourdieusian tradition (cf. e.g. Vester, 2004; Kramer, 2011). This conception therefore seems better suited to the issues we are studying than the decision-theory approaches, which are likewise often used to explain the correlation between education and social inequality, but which are more strongly focused on the level of individual decisions. While the social environment, in other words the meso and macro levels, is implicitly included at the level of secondary effects (Boudon, 1974), the actual decision is nonetheless positioned at the individual level: it is individuals who make "right" or "wrong" decisions. The social environment that suggests or informs such decisions is not an object of study.

To explain the reproduction of social inequality and its persistence in spite of the social promise of equal opportunity, Bourdieu (1986) introduces the concepts of economic, social and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, a person's position in the social space – and hence the opportunities for and barriers to that person's educational advancement – are not determined one-dimensionally by economic capital, but also by cultural and social capital. The volume and structure of social actors' economic, social and cultural capital determines their place in the social space and their opportunities for a higher educational career (Bourdieu et al., 1981, 23). In Bourdieu's model of the social space, different hierarchical levels correspond not only to different social ranks, but also to differences in cultural and lifestyle factors, which represent familiarity with and time spent in the educational system (Bourdieu, 1984, 211–219). At the same time, Bourdieu also sees interaction as formed by the power interests of the society's given "dominant" group (cf. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu also gives consideration to societal conditions and field-specific effects, but without systematically mapping out their dynamic effects in relation to education and educational decisions.

To fill this gap, we refer to the political process approach, which focuses primarily, not on individual actors and decisions, but on the dynamics generated by the historic and political context. In very general terms, political opportunity structures describe actors' better or poorer opportunities to realize their own political ideas. According to this approach, a given action can have different chances of success depending on different social conditions.

According to Tarrow (1991, 651), political opportunity structures are “consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – parameters that either encourage or discourage the actions of social or political actors.” The principal variables are “the degree of openness or closedness of the political institutions, the stability or instability of political alignments, the presence or absence of allies and supporters, and divisions within the elites or their tolerance or intolerance” (Tarrow, 1991, 652). The attention here is not on individual processes of socialization, but on macro structural, that is national and international, political and economic developments which influence the educational system and the labor market. These developments can include historic events such as the Second World War, the situation on the local labor market and the resulting probability of employment commensurate with education, the succession of generations and/or elites, political or party interests, and scientific and technological developments. In other words, the reconstruction of these opportunity structures initially requires a careful historical reconstruction of the macro structural conditions. The combination of Bourdieu’s concept with that of political opportunity structure is therefore promising for a study of the correlation between education and social inequality. While Bourdieu’s concept mainly permits an examination of individual educational careers as a function of the subject’s social milieu, the POS concept permits an explicit focus on conditions of advantageous or less advantageous social policy.

Using the POS approach, we formulated three different opportunity structures for East and West Germany which describe different opportunities for successful educational advancement (for more detail see Miethe & Kleber, 2013). The 1950s in East Germany and the 1970s in West Germany are described as outstandingly favorable political opportunity structures. In these periods, reforms were realized in educational policy which led, at different times in East and West, to improved opportunities for educational advancement. The 1950s in West Germany, on the other hand, represent unfavorable opportunities for educational advancement. The 1970s in East Germany and unified Germany in the 1990s can be described as a phase of stagnation (Nath, 2000, 63) during which some of the reforms in educational policy adopted in the preceding decade continue to bear fruit (or begin to be realized), while at the same time reforms are increasingly reversed, deteriorating the POS – although it does not worsen to the level of the pre-reform period. Hence these two decades also represent unfavorable political opportunity structures. In such phases of unfavorable educational policy, successful educational advancement requires the use of much more social, economic and cultural capital than in phases of favorable opportunity structure. In other words, educational advancement is then much more difficult than in phases of favorable POS such as the East 1950s or the West 1970s.

For empirical data to reflect this theoretical conception, the methodology draws on the concept of biography. Frequent imputations notwithstanding, biography embraces more than just a microscopic level. Biographical methods proceed on the assumption that findings from individual cases can be generalized and related to social contexts. Such findings have a different character from quantifying research, of course, since the generalization that can be made is not statistically representative, but qualitative (cf. Dausien, 2014). As a “social construct”, biography always refers “to social rules, discourses and conditions” (Völter et al., 2005, 7). The reconstruction of biographies hence always includes the institutional meso- and the societal macro-level, dimensions that go beyond the micro level of the individual. Biographical reconstruction can therefore reflect which constellations of the social-political situation at a given historic moment have which function to influence action at which point in a life history – or, in terms of our question, which specific social and political conditions have proved to be advantageous in conjunction with individual, familial and life-world preconditions for educational advancement in the individual biography.

2. Results of the Biographical Study

The study used a sample oriented towards representing different qualities of opportunity structures for educational advancement. In other words, persons were studied who made their decisions for post-secondary educational careers in the 1950s, the 1970s and the 1990s in East and West Germany. Among such biographies, the study looked for “long-range advancements” (Pollak, 2010, 20). Advancement is called “long-range” if, in an intergenerational perspective, it involves an occupational advancement which steps over at least one neighboring hierarchical level, in the terms of the hierarchy of class positions described by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992). This restriction was intended to exclude “elevator effects” or educational advancements which resulted merely from the necessity of securing the family status by gradually higher qualifications in reaction to the changes in the social structure occasioned by modernization.

A total of 85 biographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983) were included in the analysis. The analysis took the form of theory-oriented case reconstructions (Miethe, 2015), a modification of Rosenthal's (1995) case reconstruction which permits stronger theory orientation throughout the analytical process. This method allows the researcher to create a typology based on case reconstructions and at the same time to elucidate structural elements. Structural elements are elements of the individual biographies which are relevant to the research question or the anticipated theory and which are found not only in a single type, but in multiple cases, although sometimes with different functions and characteristics.

2.1. Educational Advancement Opportunity Types

A type is a description of the reconstructed case structure with reference to a research question and/or an anticipated theory (cf. Wohlrab-Sahr, 1994; Oevermann, 2000). The typing in our study was aimed at determining the influence of the given opportunity structure on educational advancement. With this focus, we reconstructed four different types. The first can be described as an "Education Policy Wave". In this type, the individual's educational advancement is directly linked to favorable political opportunity structures. That is, existing structural conditions, such as the establishment and expansion of educational institutions, changes in public and academic discourse, or a situation of security in the labor market, form a stimulus for educational advancement and enrollment in a course of study. The individual consciously perceives these positive societal conditions and sees her or his educational career as a part of the resulting social changes.

In a sense, these interview subjects see themselves as "historic persons", advancing a social change, or contributing to overcome a challenge facing society, by their own educational careers. These persons are caught up, so to speak, in the momentum of historic developments, and make educational plans that they would not have anticipated without the changes taking place in their social environment. Although the individual cases involved different and complex motivations, in all of the cases classed in this type, a decisive biographical stimulus to enter higher education went hand in hand with an "education boom". Such individuals of both sexes are found in the GDR of the 1950s and in the West Germany of the 1970s, periods in which the social conditions and education policy led to an educational expansion. In spite of the very different political and social structures of the two German states at that time, we can find very similar biographical structures that were favorable to individual educational advancement.

A second type is designated as "Pragmatic Use". Representatives of this type made use of the institutions of education policy created in phases of educational reform as a matter of course. They did not consciously reflect on that fact that their use of such institutions facilitated their higher educational career. Unlike the representatives of the "Education Policy Wave", they no longer saw themselves as part of a larger social whole, but rather took the option of a higher educational career for granted. They did not perceive that such a path was made possible or facilitated by reforms in education policy, but saw their success only as an individual achievement. This type includes cases in the sample from the 1990s and from 1970s East Germany, as well as persons in 1970s West Germany who were not carried along by the momentum of the social movements and historic events.

A third type can be characterized as "Social Change". This type seems to be independent of favorable or unfavorable political opportunity structures. These cases of educational advancement are determined less by education policy conditions than by the influence of social change in opening social milieux for higher education careers as part of a family's conservation of social status. At a biographical level, processes of social and economic change can force individuals to question family traditions and to seek new occupational and educational paths in order to conserve their social status. This is called the "elevator effect" of social change. Such new options can then do more than sustain the previous social status, however: they can also facilitate "long-range" advancements. Our case reconstructions brought to light two central patterns: one is the pattern of the dissolution of social milieux through war and its aftermath (especially flight and expulsion from Germany's former eastern territories). This pattern is found in the sample from the East German 1950s. The dissolution of milieux due to flight and expulsion at the end of the war was evidently accompanied by favorable political opportunity structures in which higher education appeared as a new and realistic option. No case corresponding to this biographical constellation appeared in our sample for West Germany in the 1950s, possibly because the "expellees" from the eastern territories did not find favorable education policies in West Germany to the extent that they did in East Germany in the 1950s.

The second pattern that of disappearing occupational traditions in the course of economic processes of modernization was found in all of the West German samples. A fourth type, characterized as "Institutional Processing", refers to favorable conditions for educational advancement that are primarily provided by an institution.

In these cases, an institution (such as a church or the SED, the East German communist party) primarily supports an occupational career within the institution, but its supportive structures provide suitable conditions for educational advancement and hence an incentive for persons from non-academic backgrounds. The institution's attraction stems from its frequent ability to offer a high degree of occupational and financial security. The description of this type as "processing" denotes the individuals' successive recruitment and occupational functionalization for the institution's purposes. At the same time, however, this usurpation is not directly reflected in the experience of the individuals concerned: they experience their educational and occupational career as a voluntary one, and it can indeed have emancipatory aspects. The "Institutional Processing" type develops relatively independently of the given political opportunity structure, since the institutions provide their own specialized opportunity structures. Accordingly, persons classed under this type are found in the sample in all the periods and in both parts of Germany.

Another interesting finding of our study is that the reconstructed types are not bound primarily to the different social orders of East and West Germany: on the contrary, there are broad parallels between East and West German educational biographies. Although our interview subjects mentioned different historic events as relevant to their personal educational and occupational careers, and although there are also system-specific details in the biographies (such as the political supervision of studies in the GDR), at the structural level the typological differences outweigh the East or West German particularities. Regardless of whether the biographies belong to an East or a West German sample, structural parallels exist between persons in either country who completed their education under favorable or unfavorable opportunity structures.

The four types reconstructed in our study point to different functions of POS. The influence of POS is especially visible in the type "Education Policy Wave", since this type occurs particularly during phases of promotive educational policy. Characteristically, education policies which are aimed specifically at reducing social inequality and which lead to structural changes in education exert a visible attraction on actors. Persons of the type "Pragmatic Use" also benefit from the effects of a favorable POS, although subjectively they do not perceive that structure as relevant. In contrast, the type "Social Change" is primarily linked, not to reforms in education policy, but to processes of societal change. Representatives of this type may have to complete their educational career, or parts of it, in times of unfavorable educational policy structures. In this type, societal and economic changes give rise to an educational advancement that must take place even under unfavorable educational opportunity structures. Before we discuss these findings in the light of the theoretical conception introduced above, we present some of the structural elements discerned in the reconstructed biographies.

2.2. Structural Elements Favorable to Educational Advancement

The reconstruction of structural elements is based on a comparative analysis that begins upon completion of the first reconstructed individual case (Bohnsack, 1993). The relevant factors reconstructed in the individual case are then traced further through the inclusion of global analyses (cf. Rosenthal, 2005, 92–3; Miethe, 2007, 261–2). The goal of this analysis is to discover general statements in regard to the research question which are not visible in a single type, but across several types. Several such structural elements came to light which were relevant in different degrees and in different combinations to different individual cases. These elements are presented below.

Broad Positive Public Discourse

The biographies studied show that the social discourse in which an individual's educational advancement is framed has an important function. The phases of promotive education policy in East and West Germany are characterized by a positive public discourse which created a consciousness of the need to reduce social inequality. The subject was present both in education policy and in the media, and left its mark on public discourse. The protagonists of educational advancement in the two German states in this phase were able to pursue their careers in an atmosphere characterized by support and recognition. Such recognition and the accompanying feeling of acceptance go beyond formal acknowledgement of achievement, addressing the whole person rather than just certain aspects.

In the interviews, individuals mainly mentioned the feeling of having a basic "right to higher education" rather than being stereotyped by deficits to be remedied, although they still had much to learn.

Individual Educational Careers as Collective Advancement

Another structural element found mainly in phases of favorable POS is the individual's perception of his or her educational career as a collective achievement. Although educational decisions continue to be made in the individual or family context, the realization of these decisions is experienced as a collective process. In a sense, the protagonists of educational advancement experience themselves as part of a larger social process which they share with others. They are "carried along", so to speak, by the force of an education policy wave, and so have the confidence to take further steps that they would hardly have dared alone. The feeling of being able to master a higher educational career, not alone, but together with others, does not necessarily result from the fact that persons from non-academic backgrounds may actually be in the majority in an educational environment. Rather, the feeling of community results from the positive social discourse described above, which prompts individuals to show themselves publicly as protagonists of educational advancement. Their resulting public visibility can lead them to meet other persons of a similar social background and so escape isolation.

Importance of Social Movements

For many persons in the sample from the West German 1970s, an involvement in social movements was an important factor favoring educational advancement on several levels at once: first, participation in a social movement, such as the women's movement or the antinuclear movement was at the same time an opportunity for integration in a collective. In addition, social movements can also have other functions that are advantageous for educational advancement. For example, social movements are places of informal learning, and can stimulate identity-building processes that give individuals the confidence to start a course of higher education. They also provide social capital, and thus permit an experience of continuity on transitions between one status and another, as for example from secondary school to university (cp. also Pike & Kuh, 2005). Finally, the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s changed the colleges and universities and the cultural codes accepted there so that the protagonists of educational advancement felt less "foreign" in them (cf. Rose, 1989; Chaffe, 1992).

Use of New, Nearby Educational Institutions

For many of the individuals studied, the creation of new educational institutions near them, such as comprehensive schools and colleges in economically underdeveloped areas, was a significant factor influencing their decision to enter higher education. Conversely, we found that the lack of such institutions prevents or delays higher educational careers. For the East German sample, vocational training institutions offering the *Abitur* leaving certificate proved to be particularly favorable, since this combination allows students to earn a qualification giving access to higher education near their homes, while at the same time earning a vocational qualification that offers a high degree of security.³

Changes in Habitus through Education

Once a person has begun a higher educational career, the biography shows changes in habitus that prevent a return to the milieu of origin. This aspect of changes in habitus is often described in the literature as psychological issues (Gupton et al., 2009; Barrio-Sotillo et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010). These studies emphasize that separation from their prior social environment is necessary for their transition to the college/university environment and to overcome the perceived discrepancies.

In correspondence with our own results, we can say that it is mostly not a matter of rational choice but a matter of socialization: Through socialization in the institutions of higher education, the protagonists' habitus changes as they come to accept new cultural and social codes as values in themselves which they no longer want to give up.

The result is practically a necessity of continuing on the path begun, since it is the only one that allows them to make full use of the potential they have developed. One interview subject, for example, obtained her *Abitur* with the initial intention of finding a better vocational apprenticeship. Once she had the upper secondary leaving certificate, however, she was no longer satisfied with that biographical plan and she enrolled in an institution of higher education.

³ This factor can also be quantified, since studies on vocational training leading to the *Abitur* have shown that the number of persons from lower social classes in this educational path was always much greater than in upper secondary schools (cf. Rommel & Lischka, 1987, 22).

Importance of Institutional Incentives

Institutions of educational policy are structures of potential incentives for the protagonists of educational advancement. In the phases of educational reform in East and West Germany, new institutions were created, such as the Braunschweig-Kolleg, the Hessen-Kolleg and combined universities and polytechnics in West Germany, and worker-and-peasant faculties and vocational training with *Abitur* in East Germany. The very existence of such institutions allowed persons to develop higher educational ambitions. Moreover, the fact that such institutions – at least in the phases of reform in education policy – offer special students financial programs (cp. also Braga et al., 2013) as well as were specifically aimed at candidates for educational advancement, and this target group felt itself addressed by them, further reinforced their influence.

Life-world Connection of Institutions

Institutions are always particularly influential for protagonists of educational advancement when they permit continuity with such persons' life-worlds. There may be continuity between the life-world and the course of study as a whole – for example, a course of study in Protestant theology would have higher acceptance in a proletarian, protestant milieu than other possible courses of study. Other institutions also prove advantageous, however, which offer the protagonists of educational advancement a life-world continuity in the otherwise unfamiliar academic milieu of the university. Depending on the students' life-world experience and/or prior political influences, various institutions such as students' religious communities, traditional students' associations, and political or labor-oriented student groups may perform such a "bridge function" between the students' prior life experience and the initially unfamiliar higher educational institutions.

3. Summary and Theoretical Conclusions

What can we deduce from the empirical findings of the study presented here? First of all, the biographies studied show that the different political opportunity structures clearly influence both educational decisions and further educational careers. Particularly strong is the influence of POS in the biographical type "Education Policy Wave". This influence occurs particularly in phases of promotive education policy, accompanied by changes in social discourse and the creation of new educational institutions which function as incentives. We may assume that many of the persons classed under this type would not have undertaken an extensive educational path without such educational reforms. The type "Pragmatic Use" also benefits directly from the educational institutions created in phases of promotive educational reform, although subjectively these individuals do not connect their own biography with the given opportunity structure, and understand their educational career simply as an individual achievement.

In contrast to these two types, the type "Social Change" is primarily linked, not to reforms in education policy, but to processes of societal change. These processes provoke educational advancement under favorable or unfavorable education policy opportunity structures. The relevant factors in this type are changes at the macro level which are not necessarily directly related to the educational system, and yet can contribute to changing educational decisions.

A comparison of these three types shows that the concept of POS as developed in social movement research is not specific enough to explain educational careers. The conception developed in social movement research focuses primarily on processes of negotiation between political actors, which may or may not lead to reforms. The attention is on identifying the conditions that increase the opportunities for realizing changes. The focus on social movements necessitates the perspective of collective actors in interaction with societal conditions. As a result, the POS concept is well suited to represent different phases in education policy in regard to opportunities for higher education. It permits a specific focus on relevant factors and hence a grasp of favorable and unfavorable opportunity structures for educational advancement (cf. Miethe & Kleber, 2013).

When the concept is applied to individual educational careers, however, it proves to be insufficiently nuanced. First, there is a need to distinguish between the opportunity structures in education policy and those in the overall society. These two opportunity structures influence the individuals and their milieux, changing them indirectly so that, while the stimulus for a higher educational career comes (in whole or in part) from outside, the decision is usually perceived as an act of the individual or the family.

Casting a glance at the type “Institutional Processes”, we find a need for more conceptual distinctions. This type is relatively independent of opportunity structures in education policy and in society, since the recruiting and promotive structures are provided by institutions. The relevant factors here can be described as institutional or subject-specific opportunity structures. These may act as very specific stimuli for higher educational careers even when the opportunity structures in education policy and in the society overall are rather unfavorable.

Hence the concept of POS can be useful in studying individual educational careers if it is modified to distinguish between societal, education policy and institutional or subject-specific opportunity structures. Furthermore, in our study we have shown that opportunity structures do not describe fixed states, but are subject to continuous change – which must be reconstructed in the analysis – and to various subjective interpretations by the protagonists. At the same time, they are not passive, but lead in turn to changes in social milieux and traditional notions of education. Consequently, opportunity structures are never static, but always changing over time. They must therefore be perceived as processes, which necessitate an exact analysis of the given historic situation.

Although opportunity structure is not the only factor influencing educational careers, they should be given more attention in research than they have received to date. Our study has shown that important factors include not only the contextual factors studied up to now, such as scholastic institutional, regional or labor market factors, but also structural factors. Processes of milieu dissolution after the end of the Second World War, for example, and the resulting processes of flight and expulsion are critical. Milieu dissolutions that can induce higher education decisions are thus not only dependent on modernization processes, and do not serve only to maintain an existing status, but can also directly promote long-range advancement.

As our study shows, public discourse is also important, and the critical question in this connection is whether an educational advancement can be experienced as an individual path or as embedded in a larger social and/or peer context. We have also shown that social movements can have an advantageous influence on educational advancement. Social movements exert this influence, first, by permitting educational processes within the movement it at various levels, and second, by changing the cultural codes of the colleges and universities. The findings our study also illustrate the importance for protagonists of educational advancement of “bridge institutions” which can generate life-world continuity between the individual's milieu of origin and higher educational institutions.

Opportunity structures, whether in society or education policy, or specific to institutions or subjects, are relevant factors for successful educational advancement – although in regard to an issue such as the origin of educational inequality, which results from a “complex interaction of different influences” (Becker, 2009, 117), the opportunity structures identified and the structural factors mentioned in our study are not the only relevant influences. Nonetheless, they are far more important than assumed in the research to date, and should be systematically accounted for as an integral, processual dimension in any study of the connections between education and social inequality.

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