

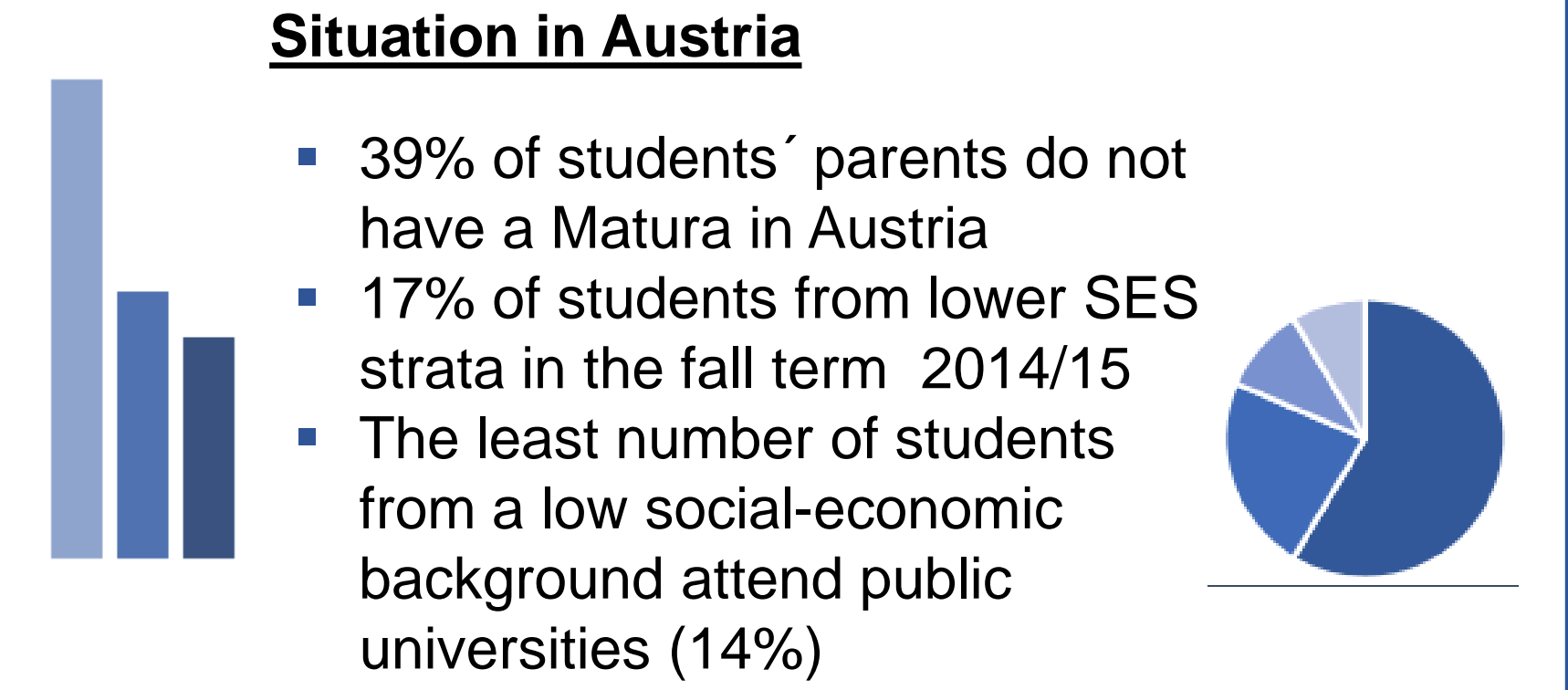
Transition and sense of belonging of working-class students in Austria

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Introduction

Background

The existence of persistent social class inequalities in access is a repeated theme of research into higher education (HE) participation. The considerable enlargement of higher education systems that has taken place in many countries since the 1950s (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2013), promised to open up access for working class students and other disadvantaged groups, however, barriers in access remained and even new forms of inequality emerged (e.g. Mayhew et al. 2004).



State of the Art

In general, there is not a plethora of literature about the experiences of working class students (Soria, 2012; Hurst, 2010). Most of the studies are from the Anglo-Saxon sphere (e.g. Basford, Fawcett & Oldfield, Reay, 2012; Bathmaker et al., etc.) and are focused on elite institutions or academics with a working class background (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Schwart, Donovan & Guido-DiBrito, 2009; etc.) Thus, examining the transition of working class students to public universities could provide new insights.

Research Question

This PhD-project aims to shed light on the experiences of working-class students when they transition to university.

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Does the social class background shape/structure the university experience of students, especially their ‘sense of belonging’.

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction theory

Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural reproduction theory describes the way in which social class is reproduced in institutions, societies, and individuals. Especially, Bourdieu’s theory of the forms of capitals is useful for understanding that students enter university with different pre-conditions. Social class is a combination of economic capital (accumulated money or wealth), social capital (network of acquaintances), and cultural capital (knowledge or familiarity with the dominant culture) (Bourdieu, 1986). An important influence is a person’s class environment or “habitus,” a “common set of subjective perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual’s expectations, attitudes, and aspirations” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.9).

There is a similarity between belonging and Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. According to Bourdieu (1979, p.171–2), our habitus fits a specific social field and as long as we remain in this field we are not necessarily aware of our habitus, but rather, it feels ‘natural’ to us. Additionally, belonging allows to understand how people can be embedded in a familiar everyday world yet feel that they do not belong there. Combining these two theoretical perspectives helps to explore working class students’ process of fitting in or remaining an outsider at the university.

Methodology and Research Design

Data Collection (2019-ongoing)

To address the aims of this study, a qualitative research design was chosen since it sheds light on processes and mechanisms of social reproduction on an individual level. However, the focus of this proposal is not only on the dispositions of the subjects, but also the objective chances and the societal framework are central. Moreover, the role of the institutions and the disciplinary cultures will also be investigated. Therefore, 12 problem-centered interviews with working class students in various fields of study will be conducted in Vienna.

„Do you remember your first day at the university?“

Sample

12 students from different fields of study:

- Human Medicine
- Economics and Social Sciences
- Computer Science

The sample varies additionally according to the following criteria: gender, age,(delayed) entrance to university, rural/urban origin, migration background.

Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed by using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. Data analysis will be performed by following Grounded Theory (GT) principles, more precisely Charmaz’s Constructivist GT principles. Once the interviews will be coded, the different transitions experienced by each of the young adults will be ordered and interpreted against the backdrop of its material conditions, and the theoretical background.

(Preliminary) Findings

Students’experince of sense of belonging at universities

Belonging is an intersubjective experience that necessarily involves contact to other people. Mere familiarity with a place, a group of people or a culture is not enough to gain a sense of belonging (May, 2011).

The interviewees highlighted the importance of friends to develop belonging. Ludwig already had friends from his school peer-group, who started their studies earlier and possibly transcended informational capital to him. Ralf, on the other hand, made friends with people from a political group on campus.

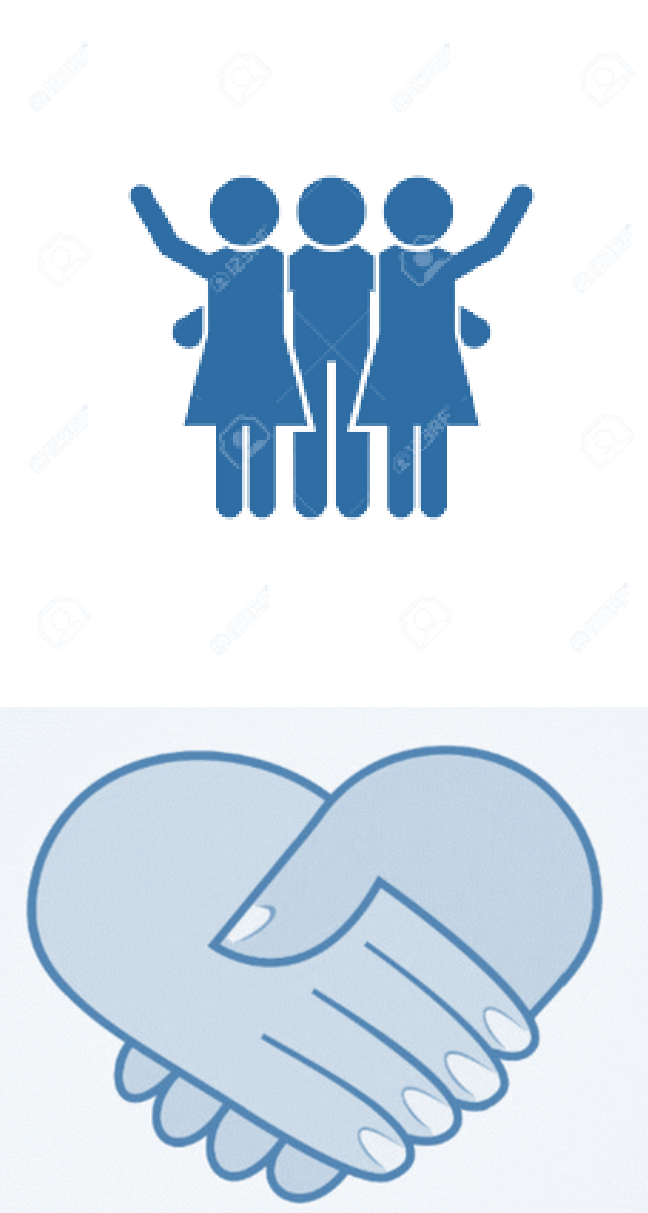
And then I had the university as a recreation space. There was.. there was this occupied room at the university. The “Uni brennt” [uni burns]- room. I spent a lot of time there and there I also met my circle of friends. (Ralf, 269)

This also highlights the need for open and consume-free spaces at universities, where students can come together and relax and/or exchange political ideas.

Research suggests that efforts to address belonging concerns at broad-access, majority-minority institutions can improve core academic outcomes for historically disadvantaged students at institutions designed to increase college accessibility (Murphy et al., 2020).

Measurements for university administrations:

- Learner-centerdness:** This means that universities should offer opportunities/spaces/places for non-traditional students to meet each other outside classes or even outside the institution. The Coffee Club (Mannay & Ward, 2020) or dialogical ‘cultural circles’ (Lathouras, 2020) are examples of such initiatives which offer open inclusive spaced and foster informal discussion, friendships and problem solving.
- Psychological interventions:** Sense of belonging interventions can improve core outcomes for disadvantaged students (Murphy et al., 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Students are asked to complete writing exercises to facilitate the personalization and internalization of the core belonging message. Greater feelings of social and academic fit were reported after the intervention.



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