Understanding the Educational Lives of Community College Students: A Photovoice Project, a Bourdieusian Interpretation, and Habitus Dissonance Spark Theory

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Too little research exists that provides windows into the day-to-day lives of community college students. The purpose of this paper is to explicate one finding and concomitant grounded theory derived from a photovoice project aimed at understanding the educational lives of community college students. Participants saw the community college as a means to obtain a freer life, in the broadest sense. An integration of Bourdieusian thought and scholarship on role theory led to the creation of a constructivist grounded theory termed habitus dissonance spark theory, which suggests that community college enrollment is prompted by habitus dissonance, or discomfort with perceived levels of social agency, or freedom, in life. This paper outlines the finding and resultant grounded theory and its implications.

Keywords: community college students, photovoice, cultural capital, habitus

Community colleges serve almost half of all undergraduate students in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011). Moreover, Boggs (2011) noted that "because they are the largest, most accessible, and fastest-growing sector of higher education, community colleges have a substantial role to play in increasing the national level of educational attainment" (p. 2). Despite this, too little research exists that provides insights into the educational lives of community college students today. Goldrick-Rab (2010) noted: "A much more rigorous research agenda focused on community college students is needed to inform and evaluate future actions" (p. 454).

Community colleges are often perceived as being at the periphery of the American system of higher education (Dougherty, 1994). Moreover, "community colleges are perceived as offering a second-best educational experience that penalizes students intellectually, socially, occupationally, and economically when compared to those students who attend four-year

institutions" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998, p. 155). According to Grubb (1999), community colleges were developed to be subordinate to four-year institutions, and their open access mission has made them questionable. These institutions have even been referred to as "high schools with ashtrays" (Grubb, 1999, p. 210). Goldrick-Rab (2010) noted that "the role of snobbery in perpetuating community college outcomes is often neglected. Since the founding of the public 2-year sector, many have cast this sector as lesser than its counterparts" (p. 442). The media has portrayed negative images of community colleges and their students (Bourke, Major, & Harris, 2009; LaPalia, 1994). And some students have internalized these perceptions (Caporrimo, 2008). Caporrimo (2008) found that "80% of the sample [community college students] indicated agreement that a community college education is less valued by society [than a four-year institution education]" (p. 34) and concluded that "both faculty and students recognize the need for a more supportive, nurturing environment for

community college students" (p. 35).

Despite their marginalized status, community colleges are playing an increasingly important role in American higher education during these difficult economic times (Lothian, 2009). These institutions provide education at a fraction of the cost of most four-year institutions, and offer programs, certificates, diplomas, and degrees that enable students to enter directly into the workforce. As a diverse influx of recent high school graduates and displaced workers flood community college classrooms, the need to understand and best serve these students is paramount. Too little research exists that provides windows into the educational lives of community college students today. In addition, too little research exists regarding the workings of community colleges generally (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Kane & Rouse, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998).

Considering the current prominence of the community college, the lack of research in this area is a significant problem. Specifically, we must better understand the lives of community college students to best support them. This study addressed the aforementioned problem to some degree. The guiding research question for this study was: How do community college students construct their educational lives? Research in this area is critical so that students' needs may be adequately met through academic programs, pedagogical strategies, and student services. Rich qualitative research that explores the lives of community college students can assist policy makers as they make decisions related to funding, student support services, curricula, pedagogy, personnel, recruitment, retention, fundraising, lobbying, and so forth. The overarching purpose of this study was to understand how some community college students construct their educational lives. The photovoice methodology (PhotoVoice, 2011; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997) was utilized. This paper focuses on one of the four major findings of the larger study: freedom. Participants saw the community college as a means to a freer life. Habitus dissonance spark theory, a constructivist grounded theory developed from this finding, is also a point of focus.

Habitus dissonance spark theory (HDST), which is fully explained in subsequent sections of this work, can help us to better understand why individuals make the decision to enroll at the community college. Better understanding what drives individuals to enrollment may lead to a better understanding of persistence decisions among students. Moreover, faculty, student services personnel, academic advisors, and administrators may be better able to reach students pedagogically and otherwise if they are aware of students' motivations for college attendance.

It should be noted here that this paper does not include a literature review in a traditional sense. Grounded theorists often reject a full immersion into the literature prior to data collection. Despite this, through my adoption of a constructivist grounded theory analytical frame (Charmaz, 2006), my review of literature took place before, during, and after data were collected. As such, literature is inserted throughout this piece in keeping with the literature immersion process I underwent throughout the duration of the project.

Theoretical Frames

Constuctivism (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and social interactionism (Charon, 2010) were the broad frameworks for this photovoice project. Photovoice (PhotoVoice, 2011; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997), a qualitative research methodology, is a form of participatory action research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003; Whyte, 1991). By documenting aspects of their lives through photography, participants express their lives on their own terms. There are three major goals of this methodology: (a) to allow participants to document their lives through photography, (b) to raise critical consciousness among participants, and (c) to reach policy makers with the project outcomes (Wang & Burris, 1997). Three influences underlie the approach: (a) Freire's (1974/2007) work on critical consciousness building with oppressed groups, (b) feminist thought (e.g., Collins, 2009; Gilligan, 1982; Mohanty, 2003), and (c) documentary photography (e.g., Ewald, 1985, 1996, 2000; Hubbard, 1994). Versions of photovoice have been used within K-12 (e.g., Davison, Ghali, & Hawe, 2011) and higher education (e.g., Douglas, 1998; Goodhart et al., 2006; Harrington & Schibik, 2003) but not with community college students specifically. Photovoice is an innovative research methodology that endeavors to acknowledge and highlight the perspectives of marginalized groups. This method was utilized because I consider community college students to be marginalized in a whole host of ways, including the lack of attention from researchers. In addition, the use of this method was driven by the overarching research question.

Methods and Data Sources

Participants were my *former* students from one of two courses I taught at Middle West Community College (MWCC) [pseudonym]: Cultural Anthropology (ANT) or First Year Seminar (FYS). Each participant had been in one of my sections between the fall of 2009 and 2010. They were enrolled in courses (not mine) at MWCC during the time of each interview (fall of 2010 and spring of 2011). Seven students comprised the sample [see Table 1]. They were recruited via email, and participation was on a first come, first served basis. Over 20 students expressed interest in participation, but only seven persisted. Participants were asked to document various aspects of their educational lives through photographs in response to prompts, or questions. Example prompts are: What motivates you to reach your educational goals?, What is a typical day in your educational life like?, and

What obstacles do you face in achieving your educational goals? Data came from two sources: participants' photographs and transcriptions of interviews with participants. Photographs were used as elicitation devices during the interviews; participants assigned meanings to the photographs they took. Participants were given one disposable camera with 27 exposures and a list of prompts in preparation for the first interview. Cameras were returned to me, and the photos were developed prior to each interview. This process was replicated, but with different prompts, for the second interview. Each participant was interviewed twice, except Marie who was interviewed once. Thirteen interviews were conducted in total, which ranged from 27 to 80 minutes in length. A constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2003, 2005, 2006) was used for the analysis. As such, an implicit purpose of this study was to generate, or construct, substantive theory to address the paucity of theory about community college students. However, it should be noted that the determination, or construction, of the finding elucidated below preceded the construction of the grounded theory also outlined below. The interview transcriptions were coded in triplicate through the use of open (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), axial (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). A symbolic interactionist perspective (Charon, 2010) undergirded the analysis. This study was approved by the institutional review boards at MWCC and Ball State University. In addition, all participants and individuals photographed signed photo consent and release forms thus giving permission for the photos to be published.

Table 1
Participants' Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Class/ Semester	Major	Career Goal	School	Work	Children
Crispy	39	F	FYS/ Spring 2010	Nursing	Nurse	Full-Time	No	5 (living at home)
Lythria	29	F	ANT/ Fall 2009	Liberal Arts with a Focus on Psychology	Psychiatrist	Full-Time	Part-Time	2 (living at home)
Frank	45	M	FYS/ Spring 2010	Paralegal Studies	Paralegal	Full-Time	Part-Time (odd jobs)	2 (living at home) [multi-gen home]*
Marie	47	F	FYS/ Fall 2009	Physical Therapist Assisting	Physical Therapist Assistant	Full-Time	Part-Time	2 (not living at home)
San=Man	20/ 21	M	FYS/ Spring 2010	General Studies with a focus on Psychology	Psychologist	Full-Time	Part-Time	0
Louise	19	F	FYS/ Fall 2009	Biology	Marine Biologist	Full-Time	Part-Time	0 [multi-gen home]*
Baby Girl	25	F	FYS/ Fall 2010	Business Management	Business Owner	Full-Time	No	3 (not living with her)

Note. Majors are listed in language used by participants. Some of these majors may be articulated differently by MWCC. All names are pseudonyms, self-assigned by each participant.
*Multi-gen home means a participant is living in a household consisting of three generations of family members.

Throughout the duration of the project, I composed over 50 analytic memos (Charmaz, 2006). Analytic memo writing allowed me to understand my position in relation to the participants (as their former instructor), and it also allowed me to infuse personal memories and thoughts about each participant's educational life into the analysis. Qualitative researchers have discovered "*writing as a method of inquiry* to be a viable way in which to learn about themselves and their research topic" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 959, italics in original). Analytic memo writing is a critical piece of the grounded theory approach as the memos

"form the infrastructure" (Lempert, 2007/2010, p. 247) of the research process. This was particularly true for me. My memos ranged in length from less than one to 17 single-spaced pages. I created memos during every stage of the research process. These memos were reflections on meetings, emails, discussions, and other various exchanges. Memos also included analytical writings on interview transcripts, readings, theme building, and the writing process.

Charmaz (2006) stated that analytic memos are a "place for making comparisons between data and data, data and codes, codes of data and other codes, codes and category, and category and concept for articulating conjectures about these comparisons" (pp. 72-73). While I used memos for the purposes described above, I also used them to further my understanding of the contextual nature of the data. Because the past gives context to the present self as noted by Chang (2008), mining personal memory data was a critical part of my understanding of the meanings I assigned to the data as well as the grounded theories I created. Charmaz (2006) also suggested that "your memos [should] read like letters to a close friend; no need for stodgy academic prose" (p. 85). The analytic memos were conversational, informal, and nonacademic, but also rich with description.

Pillow (2003) argued for researchers to move toward "reflexivities of discomfort" (p. 188). Qualitative research can be messy and uncomfortable. As such, Pillow (2003) noted:

> Thus a reflexivity that pushes toward an unfamiliar, towards the uncomfortable, cannot be a simple story of subjects, subjectivity, and transcendence or self-indulgent tellings. A tracing of the problematics of reflexivity calls for a positioning of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions – at times even a failure of our language and practices. (p. 192)

Discomforting reflexive writing was certainly a part of this research project. I self-scrutinized with each step of the research process. Because I was a community college faculty person during the study, I had access to participants and on-campus facilities, as well as a voice with policy makers. I grappled with my roles, responsibilities, and ethical obligations as an instructor/researcher through memo writing. In sum, the analytic memos assisted my own understandings of how and why the research unfolded in the way it did, from conception to final product.

Shah and Corley (2006) noted that "qualitative researchers use formal and systematic methods for data collection and analysis to ensure that the trustworthiness of their work is unassailable" (p. 1824). The creation of a (public) work that espouses to be unassailable is quite a lofty goal, and I question whether or not a researcher can ensure and espouse trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with such totality. However, the extensive use of analytic memo writing and self-scrutiny certainly bolstered the present study's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Four major findings were generated through this project: (a) freedom, which is fully explained below; (b) roles (participants played many roles within their lives, in addition to a student role); (c) academic integration (participants were woven into the fabric of the institution through academic means, rather than social means); and (d) on process (this was a methodological theme that suggested photovoice be bifurcated with one branch focused on critical consciousness building and the other focused on reflective consciousness building). However, this paper focuses on one: freedom. Each of the participants viewed the community college as a vehicle for freedom, in the broadest sense. Participants saw the community college, attending and obtaining some credential, as a means to traverse their lives in a freer way. There were six sub-findings: (a) familial freedom (creating more life options for family members), (b) employment (gaining access to specific types of employment), (c) freedom from youth (moving toward adulthood), (d) freedom from public assistance (becoming financially self-sufficient), (e) housing, transportation, and mobility (having more options for the aforementioned), and (f) consumer freedom (being able to make a wider range of purchases). Some sub-themes have sub-themes within them, which I have termed micro-themes. Freedom, as a concept, finding, and theme, was a core category that bound the aforementioned sub-theme and micro-themes together.

Familial Freedom

All participants were members of some type of family structure. Attending community college was a way for participants to create and secure more freedom, not just for themselves, but also for members of their families. This sub-theme is most pointedly seen through my interviews with Frank. He said: "But what does having a college degree mean to you? That was kind of easy. It means I'll be able to take care of my family, first and foremost in my mind."

Figure 1. Series of four photos by Frank.

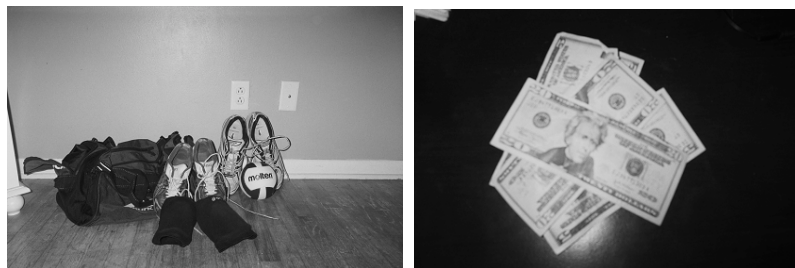*Figure 2.* Photo of a 50-dollar bill, taken by Baby Girl.

Figure 3. A photo of daughter's volleyball equipment (left) and a photo of paper money (right) by Crispy.

Frank described the images included in Figure 1:

> Okay, like I said, so this one here, having a college degree, what does it mean?—you know, my bank, that's who I bank with. Clothes on our back. Keeps us clothed. Keeps us fed. Keeps a roof over our head.

For Frank, being in college was, first and foremost, a way for him to provide for his family. His sentiments about this were overtly evident in both interviews.

Baby Girl, Crispy, and Frank spoke about increasing or maintaining opportunities for their children, and Louise spoke about creating opportunities for her niece and nephew.

About Figure 2, Baby Girl said: "I know money-wise that I'll be set [upon pursuing a higher education and receiving a degree] you know for my kids and you know just future, you know, finances."

Crispy was the mother of five children, all of whom were living at home and attending school (elementary to

high school age) during the time of her involvement in the study. Her children were able to participate in activities, but at times the activities were a financial strain. She hoped to gain more of an income so that her children could remain involved. She said this about Figure 3:

That's kind of like what [the volleyball equipment photo] is as well like kids being involved in sports and activities and it's kind of expensive and it feels like a greater financial need. And so that's one of my motivations which goes along with [paper money photo] as well for why, why I'm attending, why am I enrolled, what motivates me, what do I hope to gain, more financial—more of an income.

For Frank, perpetuating family traditions and being able to celebrate holidays were important parts of his educational pursuits.

Frank said this about Figure 4:

I've read about a lot of people that have—that are having to explain to their children why they can't have a Christmas this year. And I've still been able to swing it so that's why the Christmas tree is in there because I've still been able to swing it for my kids. [I'm] taking care of it. And having that degree

will mean that I'll keep being able to do this every year. I don't have to fight with it anymore.

Louise was a first generation college student. She was very close with niece and nephew, both young children not yet in Kindergarten.

Louise said this about Figure 5:

I'm not the only person that is doing it [pursuing a higher education] and that is something that I, that I really like is I'm carrying them [niece and nephew] with me, I'm not the only one getting it. I'm doing it for them and me. Me being number one but, um, and that's why they're here [in the photos], um, because when I get—I push through that door and I open it up for them to do the same, um, and kinda set the bar because I don't want them to feel like, you know because they live where they live or because they are part of a family who no one has made it that they can't. They don't—that's something that I had to go through, um, just kinda feeling in a dead end, like that's a dream kinda thing, and no one ever, no one in my family ever successfully got that dream to become reality. And um I don't want that for them, um, they shouldn't have to have that limitation, that feeling.
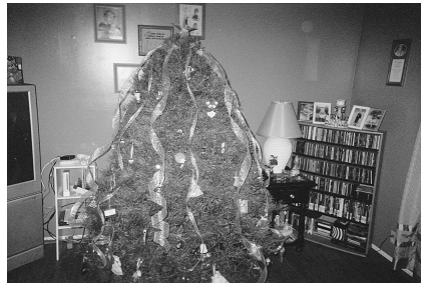

Figure 4. A photo of the family Christmas tree taken by Frank.

Figure 5. A photo of Louise's nephew.

Figure 6. Photo of a 'box-o bills' by San=Man.

Figure 7. Photo of paper money and coins by Marie.

Figure 8. Photo by San=Man.

Employment

The obtainment of a credential from a community college meant greater employment opportunities for all participants, which translated into financial freedom. Such employment opportunities would be accessible either directly after the community college experience or after the obtainment of subsequent degrees, for which their community college credential was a prerequisite. This sub-theme is made up of two micro-themes: (a) financial freedom through employment and (b) employment access.

Financial Freedom through Employment

For all participants, the community college experience meant access to employment, which in turn, meant a higher level of financial freedom. What follows is an excerpt from my conversation with San=Man about Figure 6.

And then having a degree would also mean having a better job to pay bills. And I got a big old box of bills. And it really is like a box of bills. It's like Verizon, AT&T, the hospital, doctor's offices, you know, just bills. Like I've got utility bills in there. I think I have four electric bills in there right now. They're all past due.

For Marie, there was also a keen awareness of her earning power through employment post-degree.

About Figure 7, Marie put it simply: "I'll make money when I finish. I'll be able to do that."

San=Man saw his community college experience as a way to build his career. He also acknowledged that his economic situation was manageable because he was a college student, and most college students do not have much financial freedom while attending. He commented on Figure 8:

I think what I hope to gain by going to Middle West is kind of like the same things as why I'm enrolled. Because it's like, like one thing is like career builders and you know just like I want to go farther and this is my chance. You know like, I'll be broke now, but you know all college students are generally broke so that's ok with me. I'll never really have a lot of money. So I don't mind that.

Employment Access

Participants' wanted to obtain a career in which they can be happy, a job they love. For Frank, his decision to enroll in MWCC was prompted by an unanticipated fork in his career path. He was no longer able to continue doing what he had been doing, and he had to decide what to do next. He explained:

I mean, that is, that's the only reason I came to school. I already had that career in the medical field as an EMT or paramedic and then after my time in the guard and the surgeries, I've not been able to do that stuff. That is the reason I came back to school because I had to segue into a new career because I couldn't do that anymore.

Crispy entered my First Year Seminar course and MWCC with a Bachelor's degree in hand. She had a teaching license in physical education. However, after her youngest child entered school, she decided to return to higher education in order to pursue a new career. While Crispy was a teacher at heart, she felt as though nursing was a better fit:

But then I had a friend who said but you could teach that, you could make your class whatever you want you could incorporate that into your PE [physical education] class. But so I was always interested in

the body the all that stuff. But, nursing is probably a better fit for me as far as um ya, serving, helping people and you still do teaching in nursing. . . . It's about a job that's more fulfilling.

Crispy was able to reconceptualize the nursing profession as a form of teaching thereby combining the elements most important to her in a career: teaching, serving, and the human body.

Marie wanted to gain access to a career in which she had more contact with people, one in which she felt like she was positively impacting the lives of others. She captured a number of images through her photos to augment this point.

Marie said this about Figure 9:

I felt like—like, and I've kind of alluded to that, but my job is a dead end. I mean what I'm doing now is a dead end. It doesn't, it's not, it's, it's not taking me anywhere. It's not growing me in any way. . . . [Photo on right] this is a picture of my office at work because this is what I'm leaving behind when—when I, I mean I hope, I hope that it's something that I've given a lot of years to and I think I've done it very well but I'm ready to leave the typical office with the you know computer and files and all the paperwork behind and to do something that actually touches people. And, the fact that this is an empty office and there's no one in it, is kind of representative of that, of leaving it behind, but also that fact that I don't—I don't have contact with people. . . . I walk in there every day and I think that I'm not going to be doing this forever now.

Marie viewed her career at the time as a dead end and being enrolled at MWCC allowed her to view that career as temporary.

Figure 9. Two photos taken by Marie: one of a dead end sign (left) and one of her office at work (right).

Freedom from Youth

Two of the seven participants were traditional age college students (approximately 18-24 years of age): Louise was 19, and San=Man was 20 at the time of interview one and 21 at the time of interview two. Both of these participants viewed their community college experiences as a rite of passage into the next phase of their lives: adulthood. Or rather, the community college signified a departure from youth, freedom from youth. This is typical among recent high school graduates headed to the community college. Cox (2009) found: "Students fresh from high school, for instance, indicated that the transition into [community] college represented a crucial threshold to adulthood" (p. 21). Louise's comments were illustrative:

> No one helped me enroll. No one helped me do financial aid, register for my classes. I did it all on my own, and that was the first time that I had ever really done anything that big. And that would definitely be a high for me because it was kind of my passage into adulthood and taking care of things on my own and not relying on my parents. I think that was definitely a high and something that I hold in high regards because I did it on my own. And it has helped because now instead of procrastinating, because I still have a problem with that, I know I can do it, I just have to put forth the effort.

San=Man had similar comments:

> It's like we're not in high school, we're not 16 or 17 anymore and mom and dad can't make us go to school. And they can't make us do our homework so maintaining is really all on us now and I think that's really the biggest obstacle is having the—we have to be able to make the time.

Freedom from the past. Baby Girl cited her entrance into the community college as a motivator for her to maintain a drug-free life, something she had struggled with in the past. Prior to his entrance into MWCC, San=Man had been incarcerated. For San=Man, attending the community college represented a second chance, freedom from his past. He explained:

> Like there are times when like—after like I dropped out of high school when I got my GED it was like—kind of like am I going to have that chance? You know and like, with the incarceration—this is like—you know it's kind of like just sitting there like do I have that chance? You know and it's like my career options were limited but really not so much because it wasn't a violent or drug felony or anything so—you know so I wasn't so limited but it was like, damn, like can I do it? So like actually starting school and just saying well I want this degree [was the highest point in my educational journey].

Figure 10. A photo taken by Lythria.

Figure 11. A photo taken by San=Man of his residence.

Freedom from Public Assistance

Lythria expressed that having a college degree meant freedom from public assistance. In addition, it represented freedom from being labeled as an individual receiving public assistance.

About Figure 10, she said: "[Having a college degree] means getting off welfare." In addition, Frank expressed his desire to go back to work thereby relinquishing the need for unemployment benefits:

> You know I'd rather be working . . . I'd rather—I have an opportunity at a job, using some of my paralegal abilities that I've learned I guess, my knowledge. So I'll probably do [that] about next week or so I'll be leaning toward that—see if we can start that the first of the year. Yeah I'd much rather be working a regular job than doing what I'm doing right now.

Housing, Transportation, and Mobility

For most participants, attending the community college became a way to assert more control over their physical surroundings (housing), ability to get from one place to another (transportation), and prospect of relocating or moving away (mobility). San=Man photographed his home, of which he was proud. As he narrated this image, it became clear that this residence was a stepping stone to him. He expressed a desire to assert more general agency and control over the manipulation of the home. The parameters set forth by a rental agreement were something from which he sought freedom. He said this about Figure 11:

> I mean I feel like it [rented house] is an achievement because it's the biggest house I've ever moved into, but it's like, I can do better. I know like I'll move somewhere better where I can color the walls and I can have any kind of dog I want.

Crispy photographed her front steps (see Figure 12). During our interview, she pointed out the needed repairs and said this served as one motivator for her to reach her educational goals.

Increased access to reliable transportation and decreased reliance on public transportation was an important motivator for San=Man.

Figure 12. A photo taken by Cripsy of the front steps of her home.

Figure 13. Photo of the local bus station taken by San=Man.

About Figure 13, San=Man noted "and then, what motivates you to reach your educational goals? It's kind of like all the things that I could have—like not having to ride the bus."

The capacity to move away to a new city or state was important to Lythria, Marie, and Louise. Lythria best exemplified this particular sub-theme. She said: "As soon as I get the credentials to get a job elsewhere, I will go anywhere—well hopefully some place warmer than [state]." Lythria made a direct connection between the obtainment of credentials and the capacity to move away. As such, the community college was positioned as a "way out."

Consumer Freedom

For Crispy and Frank, the community college represented access to heightened freedom as a consumer. Frank stated this about Figure 14:

See this Camaro right here, or that one there, or that one there, or that one there? Actually my wife's the Camaro fan, I'm a Challenger fan; I like Dodge. But

I mean we got nice vehicles now. She's got a Focus; I've got a Durango. But uh I'd like to get us at least one nice sports car. You know, that midlife crisis thing that guys go through—I gots to have me a sports car.

Frank expressed a desire to purchase a "sports car" not because of its functionality but for what it represented. Crispy also photographed a car and made similar comments.

Crispy made these comments on Figure 15:

What does having a degree mean to you? This popped in my head. . . . I want a cute car. They're [car owners, this photo was taken in a parking lot] not thinking like what's the best gas mileage or that it'll work best in the snow or will it fit all my kids in there—and travel across the country in this thing. They are just like I want something cute to drive that makes me feel happy so I don't know it just kind of like exemplified like yea, they just feel happy; they feel a little bit of freedom.

Figure 14. Row of Chevy Camaros, a photo taken by Frank.

Figure 15. Photo of a Volkswagen Beetle, taken by Crispy.

Constructing Meaning and Theory
Symbolic Interactionism

At this point, it is vital to revisit one theoretical perspective that undergirded the design of and analysis with this study: symbolic interactionism. Blumer (1969) noted that symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises: (a) "human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings that the things have for them," (b) "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, social interaction that one has with one's fellows," and (c) "meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 2).

The basic mechanics of the study included the following, which took place in chronological order: I provided participants with camera and prompts, participants took photos in response to the prompts, and the participants and I engaged in an interview regarding their photos. Six of the seven participants engaged in this process twice. This three-step process can be understood through the three premises put forward by Blumer (1969). First, let us consider that "human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings that the things have for them" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Once I provided the participants with the camera and prompts, these two things became the tools of research, a means by which the participants would engage in this project. During our first meeting, participants, as a result of their interactions with me, developed these new meanings of the two things I provided them. As such, their actions toward these two things were predicated on the new meanings assigned to them. Next, let us consider that "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, social interaction that one has with one's fellows" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). The various ways in which the participants addressed each prompt was mediated through the meanings of the things they captured through photos. These meanings were constructed through social interaction, both between participants and others and within participants as they recall their various social interactions regarding the thing at hand. And finally, let us consider that "meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). This premise was evident during my interviews with participants. As they viewed their photos for the first time, they were flooded with the memories of social interactions, including their interaction with me at the time of the interview, which led to their taking of each photo, while they narrated their images in the back drop of each prompt.

Marie's photo of a dead end street sign, which is shown in Figure 9 within the findings section, provides an example. My role as the researcher was not to assign meaning to the photos. Meaning was assigned to the photos by each photographer/participant. My role, as researcher, was to analyze, interpret, and assign meaning

to participants' narrations of their photos. However, the photos were considered a data source because they are integral to contexualizing the participants' narratives. I saw the photos before the participants saw them. Viewing the photos before listening to the participants' stories about them was like watching a musical without the music. I had ideas about what the photos might mean, but these ideas were mine alone. It was only during my social interactions (interviews) with participants that the authentic meanings of the photos were created. The assignment of meaning was a joint process, led by the participants. As the two of us engaged in an interaction surrounding a photo, both of us were flooded with past social interactions and made meanings of the symbols before us. Marie linked the dead end sign to her current job. We both drew on what we knew about the figure of speech, "dead end." We both understood that dead end road signs are placed to warn drivers that certain pathways lead to nowhere. As such, Marie established meaning for her dead end sign photo within my presence in a way that we both could agree on albeit without formally doing so.

My analysis and interpretation of the interview transcripts is also illustrative of the symbolic interactionist perspective. The coding schema I employed, the findings I put forward, as well as the literature I selected through which I presented my interpretations of the findings, are all a result of my own intra-personal social interactions (i.e., calling on memories and past experiences), pseudo social interactions (i.e., interacting with various authors' ideas through reading their work), and social interactions (i.e., interacting and testing out ideas with other people about this project).

The utility of the theoretical frameworks that shaped and guided the study was apparent, as articulated above. Next, an exploration of research and theory related to the freedom theme will provide context for the concomitant grounded theory: habitus dissonance spark theory, a full elucidation of which is forthcoming.

Pierre Bourdieu, Social Class, and Community College Students

Because of their open-access admissions policies and affordable costs, community colleges have become viable destinations for many Americans, notably those of the poor and working classes and those from racial and ethnic minority groups. For many students, the community college represents an opportunity to obtain the necessary skills, knowledge, and credentials to create the potential of upward social mobility. Karabel (1977) elaborated:

Americans have not only believed in the possibility of upward mobility through education, but have also become convinced that, in a society which places considerable emphasis on credentials, the lack of the proper degrees may well be fatal to the realization of their aspirations. In recent years higher education

has obtained a virtual monopoly on entrance to middle and upper level positions in the class structure. (p. 233)

It was clear to me that all of my participants were propelled toward the community college in pursuit of a freer life, which can be recast as the pursuit of upward social mobility. This goal of upward mobility is fairly standard for community college students. Cox (2009) also found that "[community college] students explained their participation in higher education as a means to earn a decent living and reach financial stability" (p. 42).

Economic, cultural, and social capital. To bring context to this theme, freedom, an application of Pierre Bourdieu's notions of capital is helpful. While a number of other scholars have used his work as an analytical frame (e.g., Walpole, 2003) and applied his work to college-going (e.g., Tierney, 1999) and the community college sphere specifically (e.g., Valadez, 1993), this application will be unique. Bourdieu, a French sociologist, argued that social class is far more complex and far-reaching than a simple calculation of an individual's monetary worth. Rather, he asserted that cultural processes are critical to the understanding of social stratification (Bourdieu, 1984). Income levels are not universal indicators of social class, nor are money or wealth the only ways in which class status is maintained. The concept of social class is immeasurably multifarious. Levels within social class or caste hierarchies (e.g., lower, middle-, and upper-class) are differentiated by an abundance of factors, many of which are irrespective of money or wealth. According to Bourdieu (2007), there are three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Class membership is based upon the obtainment and preservation of the various forms of capital. As such, an individual's (e.g., community college student) actions cannot be wholly understood outside of the larger class-based structural context (Lin, 2001).

While economic capital is rather self-explanatory, the concepts of cultural and social capital require further explanation. Cultural capital exists in three forms: the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states. The embodied state refers to dispositions of the mind and body, which may include manners, attitudes, postures, and gestures. It requires a great deal of socialization for an individual to acquire embodied cultural capital; it is the least easily transmitted and also the least visibly recognized.

The objectified state refers to access to and ownership of objects, or cultural goods, such as machines, technology, and art. Economic capital is a prerequisite for the acquisition of such cultural goods. However, cultural capital in its embodied state is a prerequisite for certain appropriations of such cultural goods. In sum, securing cultural capital in its objectified state first requires economic capital, and to fully mobilize cultural capital in its objectified state, some level of embodied cultural capital is necessary.

Finally, the institutionalized state refers to the obtainment of various qualifications, and specifically, academic qualifications such as certificates, diplomas, and degrees. In essence, institutions recognize the cultural capital of individuals by granting credentials. The more scarce the credential, the more cultural capital associated with that credential (Bourdieu, 2007).

Social capital refers to an individual's association with social groups, which provides "each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 88). The amount of social capital available to an individual depends on his or her social connections as well as the capital, in all its forms, had by those with whom the individually is socially connected. Belonging to specific social groups can be orchestrated by the individual (e.g., joining a country club) and can also be by default (e.g., being born into a family). Group membership is initiated and maintained, both consciously and unconsciously, by the back and forth transmission of capital in its various forms. Some examples are money, gifts, information, correspondence, and affirmation. According to Lin (2001), Bourdieu postulated that social capital was the mechanism by which the dominant class maintains its position within the overall social hierarchy.

Conversions. Throughout the course of an individual's life, the various forms of capital are converted into other forms of capital. These conversion decisions are predicated on an individual weighing the outcomes of such decisions. The individual must assess the level of risk and potential returns associated with conversions. Bourdieu (2007) stated that:

economic capital is at the root of all other types of capital and that these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital, never entirely reducible to that definition, produce their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal (not least from their possessors) the fact that economic capital is at their root, in other words – but only in the last analysis – at the root of their effects. (p. 91)

Essentially, he has stated that all attempts at conversion are, at their core, a means to amass additional economic capital. Even the conversion of economic capital to cultural or social capital is a means through which the individual seeks to ascertain, more or less in the long term, more economic capital, which may entail a series of very complex and calculated conversions of capital. For example, the decision to enroll in postsecondary education requires the individual to relinquish economic capital in some way (pay tuition, sacrifice time spent at work) to gain some level of cultural capital, and perhaps also some level of social capital. Over time, gained cultural and social capital can be

converted into economic capital through an employment opportunity that was obtained through the attractiveness of an individual's credentials, interview performance, or relationship with existing employee(s) within the hiring entity (i.e., cultural and social capital).

Habitus. Bourdieu's notion of habitus aims to encapsulate the "ways in which individual actions and societal structures are linked" (Perna & Titus, 2005, p. 490). An individual's perception of social agency is grounded in class membership, in addition to a variety of other variables such as, but not limited to, gender and race (Dika & Singh, 2002). Habitus refers to internalized normative inclinations about what individual actions are possible, acceptable, and appropriate in any given situation based on the individual's sense of his or her placement within the given social structure (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Horvat, 2001; McDonough, 1997). In other words,

> an agent's habitus is an active residue or sediment of his past that functions within his present, shaping his perception, thought, and action and thereby molding social practice in a regular way. It consists in dispositions, schemas, forms of know-how and competence. (Crossley, 2001, p. 83)

The individual's actions, attitudes, and even thoughts, conform to the societal and external expectations placed upon his or her based possessed levels of capital and accordant social class position. Habitus, then, is the individual's perception, or frame of mind, about his or her social agency which literally dictates the individual's life course. It is the individual's embodied representation of a perceived place in the world. And as such, habitus implies that the expectations of the individual for him or herself and the expectations of society for that individual are or become somewhat isomorphic.

Habitus dissonance sparks. For each one of the participants involved in this study, there existed enough habitus dissonance (e.g., Costello, 2005, however I use the phrase dissimilarly here), or dissatisfaction with their present levels of social agency, to mobilize each of them in the direction of the community college as a gateway to a freer life (i.e., upward social mobility). This finding was not unique as Valadez (1993) found that "[students] perceived the community college as their opportunity to rise out of poverty and to attain the essential skills for entering high paying professions" (p. 36). Moreover, Bryant (2001) noted that "community colleges offer opportunity and access, providing students with social mobility as well as the chance to flourish academically and personally" (p. 89). Community colleges tout themselves, and are touted by others, as places of opportunity. All participants of the present study viewed some level of community college credential as institutionalized cultural capital, which could, in time, be converted to economic capital through access to

employment, which could expand the participants' habitus. As is evidenced by the various sub-themes under the major freedom theme, participants viewed economic capital not as an end in and of itself. Rather, what they were all seeking was an increase in habitus, which in most every case was dependent on greater levels of economic capital.

The conversion of capital. Each participant's habitus dissonance spark, or trigger of the habitus dissonance, led to the conversion of economic capital (in some form) to gain entrance into the community college. This entrance was a springboard for the obtainment of cultural and social capital. These new forms of capital could then be converted back to a greater level of economic capital which leads, ideally, to habitus expansion. Crossley (2001) said:

> [Bourdieu] emphasizes the role of both competence and improvisation in his account of habitus. The schemas of the habitus function like an underlying grammar that allows for a multitude of innovative forms of expression, [Bourdieu] argues. Social agents are like players in a game, actively pursuing their ends with skill and competence, but always doing so within the bounds of the game. What this analogy with games also serves to bring out, moreover, is the strategic element that enters into habitual action and that . . . Bourdieu has observed in his own fieldwork. Habituses predispose agents to act in particular ways without reducing them to cultural dopes or inhibiting their strategic capacities. Like game-playing skills, the structures of the habitus facilitate the competent pursuit of specified goals. (p. 84)

This game-play metaphor provided by Crossley helps to shed light on the fact that the participants of this study were not simply automatons within the social structure where they each exercised their habitus; they were not mere cogs in a social machine. Rather, they each possessed the skill and competence to recognize their situations and take the necessary steps to create change within those situations, a change which they perceived as being positive. Enrollment in the community college was a game-changing action. It ought to be noted, however, that the enrollment decisions were all within the bounds of each participants' game. The outward movement of participants' habitus boundaries is addressed next through an exploration of what led to participants' decisions to enroll.

Habitus dissonance spark effects. The participants' habitus dissonance spark(s) led them to enroll in the community college to alleviate the felt dissonance. Each participant had a unique habitus dissonance spark. For some participants, a series of small sparks culminated in their decision to enroll. Examples of habitus dissonance sparks for participants include: recognizing the lack of access to optimal employment,

resenting a reliance on public transportation, feeling tethered to a specific physical location (home, town), feeling condemned by past actions, or sensing that a family member had a constrained sense of habitus.

As seen in Figure 16, the individual's (i.e., participant's) habitus is bound by the internal oval within the larger oval representing the societal structure. As the habitus dissonance spark "works on" the individual, there becomes a need to move the boundaries of the individual's habitus outward so that the individual may express agency within a larger portion of the society in which the individual is bound. The participants in this study bumped against and challenged their habitus boundaries through their enrollment at the community college. One unique feature of this study is the way in which participants' freedom-seeking orientations to the community college were captured through photos. Because of this, tacit features of this Bourdieusian theoretical overlay of the freedom theme are more

apparent and visceral. Consumers of this work can literally "see" the habitus dissonance sparks unique to each participant: San=Man's image of the bus station, Marie's image of her desk at work, Frank's image of his family's Christmas tree, and Crispy's image of her daughter's volleyball equipment.

As seen in Figure 17, individuals (i.e., participants) hoped to obtain a freer life through the obtainment of their educational goals. The figure illustrates a "freer life" as an enlargement of habitus. Along their educational journeys, participants actively push the boundaries of their habiti out toward the boundaries of their societal sphere(s). Many participants, all of whom had not yet reached their ultimate educational goals during the course of data collection, were able to build cultural and social capital through the course of their time at MWCC. As such, they are able to move slightly more freely around within the area of their society, which has its own set of boundaries.
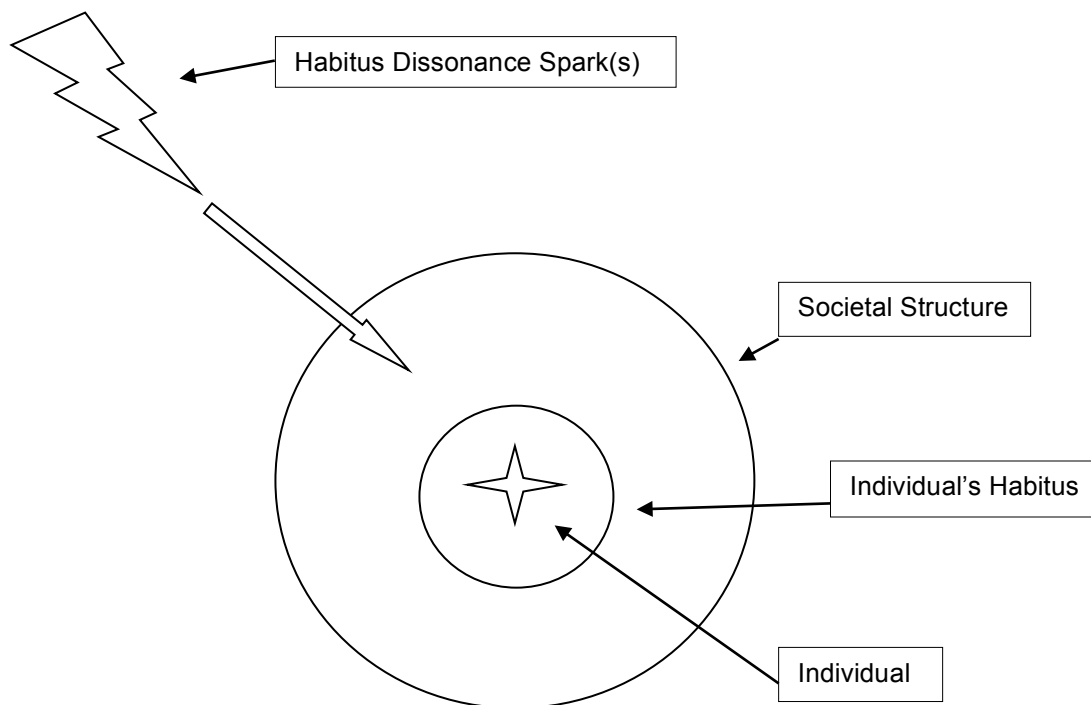

Figure 16. The initial habitus dissonance spark. This model provides a visual of the individual's initial interaction with the habitus dissonance spark.
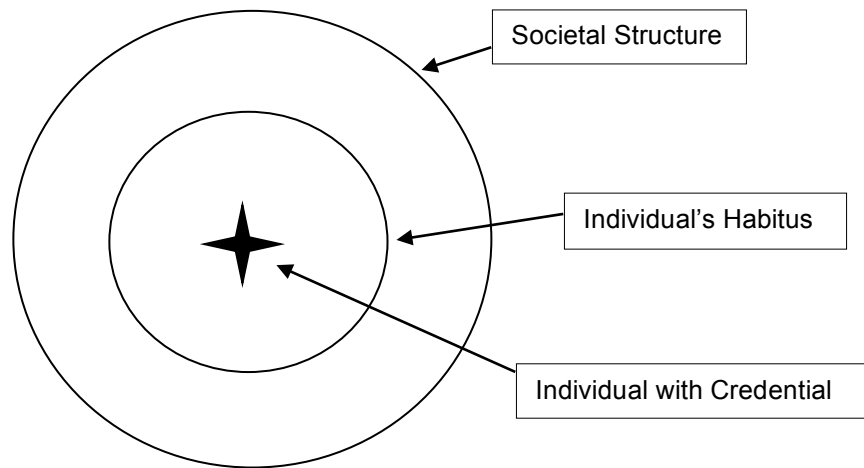
Figure 17. Envisioned outcome of enrollment at the community college. This model provides a visual of the participants' intended outcome of the decision to enroll at the community college in an effort to ameliorate their habitus dissonance: an enlarged habitus.

Habitus dissonance spark(s) and role accumulation. Participants took on the role of student (role accumulation) in an attempt to secure a freer life (alleviation of habitus dissonance). In a sense, participants' have upheld Sieber's (1974) ideas about role accumulation—that the accumulation of roles has distinct benefits. In fact, Sieber argued that role accumulation, rather than role strain (see Goode, 1960), could be the glue which holds societies together. He noted that "since it is obvious that humans are not incapacitated by role strain, and that society is not characterized by disorder, some process must be adduced by role theorists to account for the absence of social havoc and psychological dismay" (Sieber, 1974, p. 568). None of the participants would have taken on the role of student if they did not perceive a direct (and usually future) benefit. And, this makes good sense as Sieber (1974) reminded that "before entering into discussions of mechanisms that combat role strain, it would be well to ask whether multiplicity of roles actually creates more strain than gratification, or more potential for disturbance than potential for stability" (p. 568). However, the accumulation of another role did cause some level of strain within each participant. Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) noted: "An adult's decision to return to [or enroll into] a community college to expand his or her education is clearly stress-producing event" (p. 290).

There is always some level of pain or grief associated with change. However, that strain, from the start of their educational journeys to the time of data collection, had not been painful enough for participants to terminate their student roles. Among participants, these habitus dissonance sparks both initiated the decision to accumulate another role and have sustained the management of that new role. As such, the habitus dissonance sparks served both as catalysts and motivators.

A Constructivist Grounded Theory: Habitus Dissonance Spark Theory

Recent trends in the social, political, and economic landscapes of the United States have resulted in various agencies advocating for a more educated citizenry. As such, there is a distinct push for individuals to enter, persist, and obtain a credential from a community college. This push has come in the form of the Obama Administration's American Graduation Initiative (Brandon, 2009) and the Lumina Foundation's Goal 2025 initiative (Lumina Foundation, 2010). Goode (1960) asserted that role strains provide the glue that binds society together. Sieber (1974) contended that "we would suggest that the larger social order is determined moreso by the efforts of individuals to acquire and enjoy the normal, net benefits of role accumulation" (p. 569). So, from Sieber's perspective, role accumulation efforts bind together society. He said: "The demand for equality seems to include a desire for access to the profits and pleasures of role accumulation" (Sieber, 1974, p. 577). Role accumulation is necessary to meet the goals set forth by the Obama administration's American Graduation

Initiative and the Lumina Foundation's Goal 2025 initiative. More people in US society will have to accumulate another role, the student role.

Habitus dissonance spark theory (HDST), a constructivist grounded theory derived from this study, provides scholars with an important theoretical framework in at least two ways. First, scholars can use HDST heuristically to build research projects that aim to better understand students' decisions to enroll in the community college. In addition, attrition can be explored through this theoretical frame as well. Second, HDST provides scholars with a mechanism of interpretation to analyze data generated from such research projects. In sum, HDST asserts that individuals are propelled toward community college enrollment due to habitus dissonance, a discomfort in levels of perceived agency. The spark(s) of habitus dissonance is multifarious and can include a number of things. Once the dissonance reaches a certain point, the individual makes the decision to accumulate another role in an attempt to alleviate the dissonance. In the cases of all participants, the role of community college student was accumulated. While role accumulation may be difficult to manage, the perceived (future) benefits outweigh any accumulation strains. An individual's decision to convert economic capital into cultural and social capital through community college enrollment, with the eventual hopes of converting the new capital into higher levels of economic capital, also seem worth the strain.

Conclusion

It is my assertion that the use of the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997) was successful in addressing the overarching research question: How do community college students construct their educational lives? Through an understanding of the freedom theme and the theoretical interpretation exhibited here, enrollment and persistence impetuses are made overt. Additionally, HDST, along with additional applications of Bourdieusian thought regarding community college students, can help to further unearth the largely contested question of whether or not community colleges promote social mobility or replicate and reinforce the existing class-based stratified society. Perhaps this work can serve as a catalyst for other researchers to continue to delve into this line of inquiry. HDST may be a starting point for such exploration. There may be cases where the habitus dissonance is so extreme for those in poor or working classes that it evolves from motivational to overwhelming and draining. This may be a cause for why students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to complete college.

It could also be argued that what I have termed habitus dissonance sparks are actually versions of environmental push and pull factors (Nora, Barlow, &

Crisp, 2005). There are multiple environmental factors that push and pull students toward and away from college such as employment and parenthood. Each of these factors can influence how students experience integration with the college environment. I postulate that environmental push and pull factors did impact the participants of the present study. But it was their internal reactions, sentiments, and perceptions of those external factors which ultimately led to their enrollment (and persistence, since each students was in semester two at the time of each interview, at least) decisions. It was not the environmental push and pull factors alone, irrespective of the students' reactions to them. For example, not having access to optimal employment was identified as a habitus dissonance spark. This "factor" alone was not enough to "push" students toward the community college. I argue that the habitus dissonance it created in the student was what actually moved the student toward enrollment. Further work on HDST and its connection (or disconnection) to environmental push and pull factors is imperative.

Further research on this grounded theory is imperative. Only through scrutiny will HDST be moved toward or away from formal theory, one that has some level of applicability beyond the data within which it is presently grounded. I encourage other researchers to engage in such work.

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