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## **Racing Towards a PhD: Academic Mobility of First-generation and Continuing-generation Graduate Students**

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### **Abstract**

**Background & study aims:** The purpose of the study is to identify factors that help doctoral students to cope with difficulties in their doctoral studies, comparing continuing-generation students, whose parents have an academic degree to first-generation students of parents without an academic degree. Previous studies demonstrate that relative to continuing-generation students, first-generation undergraduate students encounter various difficulties in their higher education studies (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020), and many experience negative emotions (Lee & Kramer, 2013). Unlike the large body of literature on first-generation undergraduates, there are fewer studies on doctoral students, particularly on first generation doctoral students (Oldfield & Conant, 2001). The study results may shed light on the mechanisms that enable disadvantaged groups to overcome social stratification barriers, helping them to succeed in achieving academic mobility, followed by social mobility.

**Theoretical framework:** The research is based on two theoretical lenses: Social reproduction theory and the anti-deficit approach. Based on Bourdieu’s (1977) social reproduction theory, cultural capital is largely acquired and accumulated in childhood. Due to the cultivation approach that middle-high socio-economic status (SES) parents adopt (Lareau, 2003), the cultural capital of the middle-high SES is adapted to the norms and expectations of the educational institutions, and more valued by them, compared to the lower SES (Warnock & Appel, 2012). As a result, continuing-generation students from middle-high SES better actualize the types of capital that they acquired in order to succeed in higher education (Lareau, 2015). In contrast, first-generation students have fewer types of “well-designed” capital that are appropriate for the field (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Yosso, 2005), and as such, they experience gaps in knowledge, language, and values between the home and the academic world (Phillips, Stephens, & Townsend, 2016), and encounter more difficulties and barriers in higher education. A different viewpoint is brought by researchers who adopt the anti-deficit approach. They critique the approach that views first-generation students as “problematic” who don’t succeed in “integrating”

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(Ngalo-Morrison, 2017) and achieving academic mobility (Davies & Rizk, 2018), due to the constant comparison to students who study full time and are supported by their well-established and educated families (Devlin, 2013). Researchers of the anti-deficit approach try to identify types of capital and other resources of students from disadvantaged groups, including first-generation students who succeed in their studies, with the goal of revealing what resources aid in their success. In line with this approach, psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2015) and intra-personal non-cognitive skills have gained increased research interest. A clear example of this is grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), which is the tendency to express interest and excitement towards a particular issue, along with the ability to invest effort over time. Types of capital that are likely to be relevant to first-generation doctoral students are aspiration capital and resistant capital, which are related to success among Black and ethnic minority communities in the United States (Yosso, 2005). In addition to the contribution of intra-personal resources, inter-personal sources of support have been examined like family capital (Gofen, 2009) and parental support (Jeynes, 2016), though there is little research in regard to higher education (Alvarez, 2020).

**Research questions:** (1) What are the perceptions of doctoral students regarding the challenges and difficulties they face during their doctoral studies? (2) What are the perceptions of doctoral students regarding the resources that aided them during their doctoral studies? (3) What are the relations - direction and strength - between the difficulties the students encounter during their studies and the resources that help them succeed? (4) Are there differences in terms of these questions between first-generation and continuing-generation students in terms of questions?

**Study design:** This mixed-methods study (Creswell & Clark, 2007) was conducted in a sequential manner. The first stage was the qualitative stage (research questions 1 and 2), followed by the quantitative stage (research questions 3 and 4).

**Sample:** The qualitative research included of 23 participants from six universities, in two distinct groups of continuing-generation and first-generation doctoral students. The quantitative study included a sample of 204 doctoral students from seven institutions, and varied areas of study and stages of study. Students were divided into three: first-generation, continuing-generation to one parent with a degree, and continuing-generation to two parents with degrees.

**Research tools and data analysis:** Thematic analysis was used in the qualitative research to analyze the semi-structured interviews. The themes that were revealed served as the basis for developing a qualitative research tool - a questionnaire - that was validated using exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. A general model and predictive models of the difficulties facing each group were revealed using structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis with the AMOS software.

**Main findings:** According to research question 1, first-generation doctoral students describe their academic path as an obstacle course. They expressed a greater number of various difficulties, including academic, economic, social, and cultural difficulties, compared to continuing-generation students, who expressed emotional difficulties. Nevertheless, no significant differences were found in the strength of the examined difficulties between the three research groups. According to research question 2, the findings show that continuing-generation students were supported by their parents' economic capital

compared to first-generation doctoral students, who experienced economic difficulties and needed extensive employment in blue collar jobs. Continuing-generation students expressed cultural capital and habitus appropriate to the field of higher education, which for them is a familiar and natural arena, compared to first-generation students who experienced culture shock when they started, and a lack of well-designed cultural capital and a feeling of otherness (research question 2). Regarding parental support, the quantitative findings present a complex picture, and contrary to expectations, this support intensifies rather than reduces the difficulties of continuing-generation doctoral students. Grit was found to be an important intra-personal resource for first-generation doctoral students as a prominent non-cognitive skill (research question 3). Despite the fact that it did not differ in strength between first-generation and continuing-generation students, it predicted (using SEM) a reduction in socio-cultural and emotional difficulties among first-generation students but not among continuing-generation to two parents with degrees. The resources that predicted a reduction in difficulties in the models for each research group included: grit and advisor's support amongst first-generation students; grit amongst continuing-generation to one parent with a degree, while parental support increased economic difficulties; advisor's support amongst continuing-generation to two parents with degrees, while parental support increased economic and emotional difficulties. These findings confirmed meaningful differences in the nature and strength of the relations between difficulties and resources in each research group (research question 4).

**Discussion:** This research presents a multidimensional picture, and supports the anti-deficit approach in regard to success of first-generation students. The study reinforces the argument that members of disadvantaged groups are not passive, rather, they express their unique resources. They activate psychological capital according to their social context, while dominant group members rely on the economic and cultural capital that they possess. Accordingly, one conclusion of the research is that psychological capital may have a significant role in the mechanism of social mobility of underprivileged groups and in predicting their success against the odds. Moreover, doctoral students pay an emotional price in their doctoral studies, which was expressed differently in each of the research groups. First-generation doctoral students pay an emotional price in exchange for their social mobility. This is evident in the ambivalent attitude of their parents and family members towards their doctoral studies and in their experience of otherness. Nevertheless, continuing-generation doctoral students also pay an emotional price for the capital that they accrued. In contrast to the expectation according to reproduction theory, which relates to capital that is accrued and passed on by parents to their children, parental support of the continuing-generation has a negative effect. This finding challenges reproduction theory, and reveals the unique relations between resources and difficulties in their studies in each social context. The study provides insight regarding the complexity of the role of the doctoral advisor for doctoral students from different backgrounds, emphasizing the awareness of graduate school faculty, particularly thesis and doctoral advisors, of the uniqueness of students from different social backgrounds, and attempts to adapt their mentoring to the varied difficulties and needs, can encourage the use of unique resources that contribute to the reduction of inequality.

**Study contribution:** From the theoretical perspective, the study's findings reinforce the anti-deficit approach and challenge the social reproduction theory. The research demonstrates that psychological capital may play a role in social stratification, as one of the mechanisms in the social mobility process of underprivileged groups. Additionally, the study reveals that continuing-generation doctoral students to one parent with a degree constitute a distinct group that uniquely deals with its difficulty, in line with their social context. This group justifies a separate research and theoretical approach. From the practical perspective, the research suggest a few possibilities that may contribute to reducing social disparities. Alongside the consideration of cognitive skills, potential directions are to encourage paying more attention to developing and activating soft skills, from school through selection and evaluation processes in higher education. Raising the awareness of policy makers and staff, developing supportive programs including offering mentoring, and attempting to adapt graduate study advisors' support of students from different backgrounds, may encourage activating resources that contribute to the reduction of inequality. Finally, from the methodological perspective, the scales that were constructed to measure social, cultural, and family capital, and those for group identity and grit, which were validated in this work, can serve as the basis for future research.



