A Class Divided: The Impact of Sociolinguistic Classism on Low-SES Filipino University Students

SOCI 361 Social Inequality

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Introduction

Education is frequently seen as a meritocratic ladder for increased social mobility. University education, in particular, can make an immense difference in attaining a good job. However, due to hidden privileges related to socioeconomic status (SES), students who seemingly possess the 'same' opportunity of a university degree do not necessarily achieve the same economic returns on education. Utilizing the concepts of *habitus*, *cultural capital*, and *social capital*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu rightfully argues that the university system reproduces class inequalities by espousing high-SES cultural practices and norms, for example, speech patterns (Jury, 2017). Therefore, the ability to succeed in university and later in the workforce is arguably based on inherited cultural and social capital, favouring students who possess high-SES *habitus* (Olivier, 2017). This 'inheritance' is rooted in economic capital (Olivier, 2017); and the relationships between the three forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural) are cyclical and intergenerational.

In the case of the Philippines, the socioeconomic hierarchy intersects with sociolinguistics to produce vast inequalities even between students attending the same university. A Filipino university student's SES (and thereby access to inherited cultural, social, and economic capital) proves to be the strongest indicator of success in university and career (Sullivan et al., 2018). This reproduction of classism in elite universities is arguably detrimental to the country's economic development as classism arguably results in poor social mobility, which hampers the development of human capital and high-quality employment productivity (Tuaño & Cruz, 2019). Hence, policy change targeting

sociolinguistic classism is necessary. Ultimately, by analyzing elite Filipino universities through the lens of Bourdieu's concepts of *cultural capital*, *habitus*, and *social capital,* it is clear that despite graduating from the same university, low-SES students will arguably receive a much lower labour return on their education compared to high-SES students due to sociolinguistic classism within the universities.

Setting the Socioeconomic Context: A Sociolinguistic Hierarchy

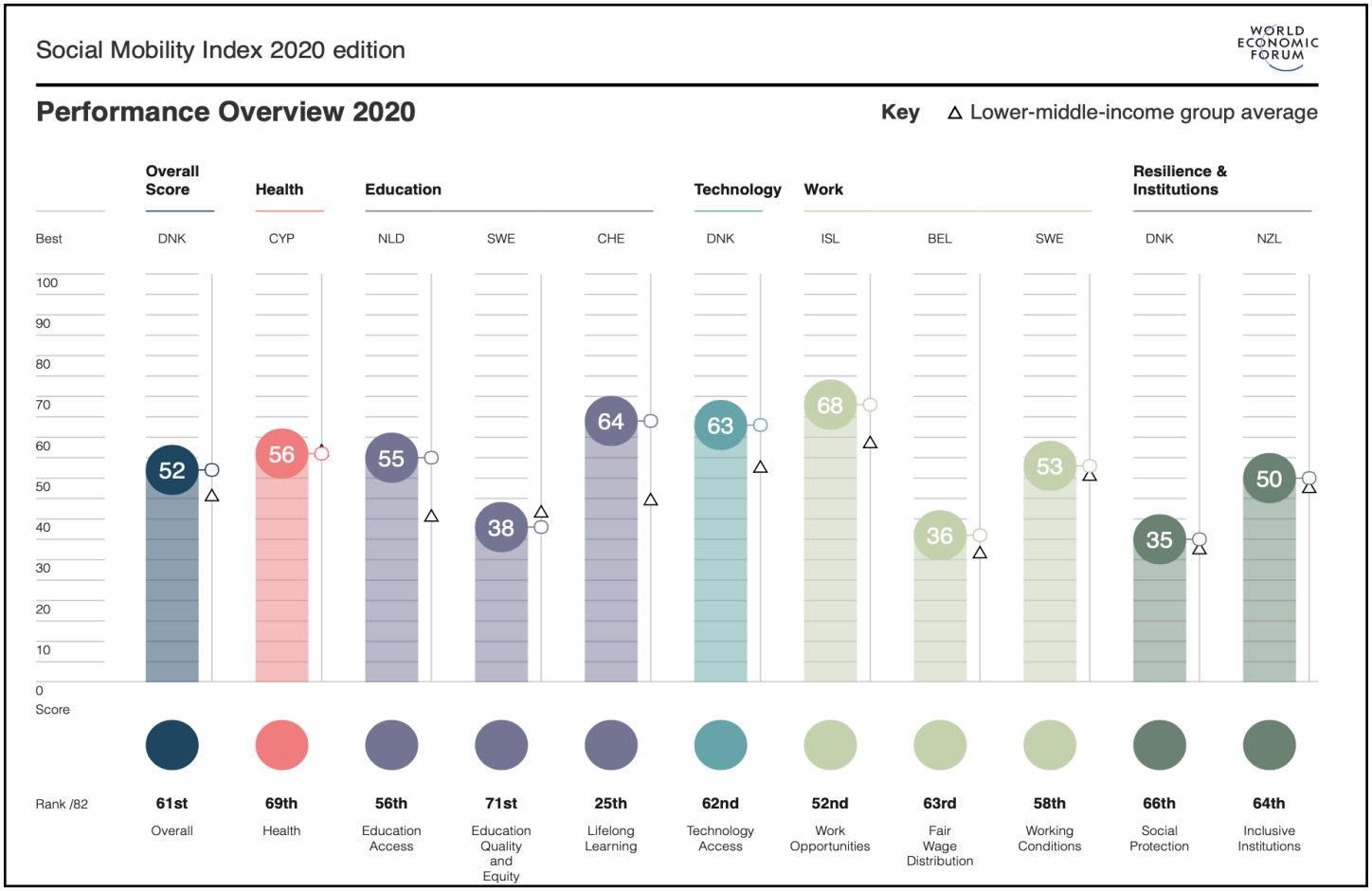

Figure 1: Social Mobility Index Performance Overview – Philippines (World Economic Forum, 2020)

To begin, a brief overview of the intricacies of the Filipino social structure is necessary as the inequalities found in wider Filipino society are reproduced at elite universities. The Philippines still suffers from vast socioeconomic inequality (Bolton & Bautista, 2004) and low social mobility, placing 61st out of 82 countries ranked by the World Economic Forum in 2020 (See Figure 1 for a breakdown of the country's overall social mobility performance). The economy is locked in a continuous struggle to progress towards high productivity activities and thereby address national poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Tuaño & Cruz, 2019). Because of the immense gulf between the "oligarchy" and the "masses," social capital is vital (Cudia, 2015, p.33). It is noted that a key social mobility strategy for Filipinos is "to build a network of family and friends who can be called upon for support in times of need…[because] Filipinos who form a large network of allies, which ideally includes a large number of influential or wealthy persons, possess great "prowess" in the community" (Abad, 2005, p.17). In fact, social connections is the only way for many Filipino people to attain employment (Cudia, 2015).

Furthermore, SES in the Philippines is demarcated both by language and race. *Mestizos de español* (Spanish-Filipinos) and *mestizos de sangley* (Chinese-Filipinos) with their pale skin and ability to speak first Spanish and then English have occupied the upmost tier in Filipino society since the Spanish ruled the Philippines, through the American colonial period, and up to the present day (Reyes, 2017). But for the scope of this case study, analysis will focus on the sociolinguistic aspect of the Filipino social hierarchy. Because Filipino society has a strong sociolinguistic facet to it, a person's speech patterns and ability to speak

certain languages generally corresponds to their socioeconomic status (Rafael, 2015). The linguistic practices practiced by the Filipino elites have evolved throughout its different colonial periods. English became the new elite language (replacing Spanish) when the Philippines fell under American rule.

Today, speaking English remains a clear signifier of elite SES (Reyes, 2017) as fluent English speakers are almost exclusively from the *mestizo* (mixed-race) elite class that dominates economic capital (Manarpaac, 2008). Speaking English is also noted to be a requirement for attaining the best jobs both locally and globally (Bernardo, 2008). These colonial-rooted linguistic practices has evolved into a distinct linguistic style colloquially called *Conyo talk*, defined as "a mélange of English, Filipino and Spanish in one sentence or paragraph with its distinctive grammar and syntax" (Garvida, 2013, p.24). Notably, the term *conyo* refers to both this distinctive speech pattern and the persona of the young, wealthy, *mestizo* youth who attends private schools and speaks *Taglish* (a mix of English and Tagalog Filipino) or the *conyo talk*. Hence, speaking and acting *conyo* is arguably a distinct form of cultural capital as it indicates belonging to the elite *mestizo* class (Reyes, 2017).

Cultural Capital and Classism: *Habitus* in Elite Filipino Universities

Having established the significance of inherited capital in Filipino society, the basis of this case study is arguably cultural capital, in that a lack of cultural capital in universities can result in barriers to acquiring social capital and then economic capital. Firstly, when low-SES students arrive at elite universities, they are already lacking in economic capital. This lack of

economic resources often translates into not having the private, high school education that socializes children with the correct *cultural capital*; defined by Zembylas (2007) as behaviours and attitudes that signal high-SES status. Also, students who do not grow up in a high-SES family are much less likely to be exposed to the *conyo talk* at home – since this linguistic tradition is the exclusive domain of elite *mestizo* families. This takes the form of not speaking in the *conyo* style/Taglish; which results in their exclusion in the elite university environment by other students.

The few lower-SES students that attend the elite, *conyo*-dominated universities face continual repercussions due to their sociolinguistic status (Reyes, 2017). Generally, low-SES students grow up speaking Filipino (not English or Taglish) and subsequently suffer classist exclusion (Jury, 2017). Furthermore, low-SES students are also perceived as less-capable than their high-SES peers (Jury, 2017), which results in them being even less respected by their classmates. This also leads to what amounts to what Brameld (1972) labels a self-fulfilling prophecy: viewed as inferior, the perceptions of their peers impact low-SES students' mental health and they perform according to these perceptions (which may be lower than their actual capabilities).

But while they are rejected by their wealthier peers, low-SES students are constantly immersed in the elite university environment –"where Filipinos *are* conyo, where Filipinos *become* conyo" (Reyes, 2017, p.215). In this environment, they are constantly being pressured to somewhat assimilate and become *conyo* (rejecting their low-SES roots in the process) while simultaneously being excluded and snubbed due by their elitist peers. In this

sense, they are caught between two worlds; increasingly alienated from both their family backgrounds and their new environment. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is a useful tool in analyzing this tension since there is an acute correlation between the concepts of cultural capital and *habitus* (Olivier, 2017). *Habitus* can be considered as a "compass in people's lives" that people use to navigate social structures and cultural practices (Olivier, 2017, p.2).

Growing up in an entirely different world than their wealthier peers, low-SES students struggle with *habitus*, due to the conflict between their roots and their new environment at elite universities. In the case of low-SES students at elite universities, the low-SES *habitus* they grew up in did not instil in them the cultural capital necessary for them to fit in and succeed in the elite universities (i.e., the *conyo* talk). This aligns with Bourdieu's argument that because the education system "reproduces and legitimates class differences and inequalities" in that the ability to display the cultural capital signals of the upper class is essential to succeed in the top universities (Olivier, 2017, p.3). Ultimately, continuous inner struggle within low-SES students to make sense of their identity as people both within and without the elite university environment results in dampened academic performance and added psychological stress (Jury, 2017).

The Intergenerational Poverty Trap: Social Capital and Labour Returns on Education

Secondly, the classist exclusion stemming from a deficiency in cultural capital negatively impacts not only low-SES students' mental health and academic performance, but also their ability to develop invaluable *social capital*, defined as social/professional networks

(Abad, 2005), in university. Aside from providing students with the technical skills and credentials required for good jobs, universities also pay an integral role in acquainting students with the right social connections. As noted earlier, social networks are key to success in the Filipino job market (Cudia, 2015). In fact, the most documented social network in the country are "kin-based networks" which "centre on family and household arrangements that operate to provide social and economic support to its members" (Abad, 2005, p.6). Therefore, high-SES students unsurprisingly have more access to the vital type of career-boosting social capital necessary to attain good jobs (Cudia, 2015) since they have already inherited social capital from their families and then continue to develop their own in university among their high-SES peers. In fact, 50% of the sample obtained in a Filipino employment study reported to have gotten information about their present jobs from their social networks – rather than advertisements or job boards (Cudia, 2015).

Subsequently, if low-SES students are constantly excluded and snubbed by their wealthier and better-connected peers due to their cultural capital barriers, their ability to develop social capital is substantially less than richer students. Additionally, for low-SES students with poor social capital at home, an elite university may have seemed to be the place to 'make up' for such a deficiency; but with cultural capital barriers preventing them from forming such connections, they arguably leave university will little better social capital than they started with. Low-SES students already possess less social capital than their high-SES peers, since wealthier students have the benefit of having privileged family and friends with better connections (Cudia, 2015). This lack of social capital is a devastating blow to low-

SES students' future economic capital potential and social mobility within the Filipino economy as a whole. Both the technical knowledge and social capital from education is deeply correlated to social mobility as it promotes better job opportunities (Cudia, 2015). So when low-SES enter the workforce with less labour returns on their education than their high-SES peers in terms of economic capital, a cyclical and intergenerational pattern of social inequality emerges (see Figure 2).

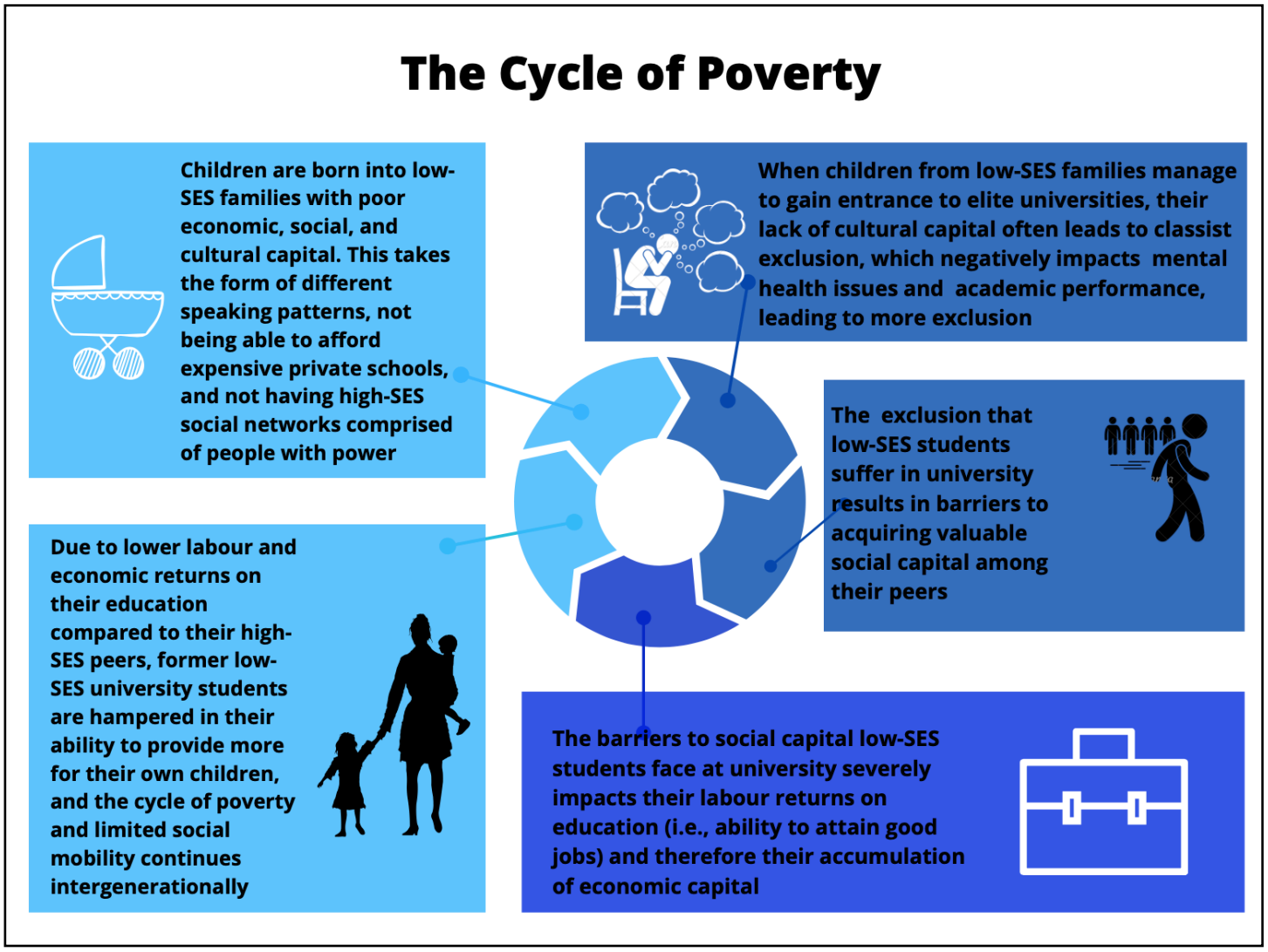

Figure 2: The Cycle of Poverty

Policy Recommendations: Cultural Change and Bridging the Capital Divide

Fundamentally, the sociolinguistic-based classist practices in elite universities arguably translates into a cyclical pattern of deficiencies in economic, cultural, and social capital reinforcing each other; perpetuating significant gaps between socioeconomic classes both in the education experience itself, and the labour returns on education (e.g., psychological issues, weak professional network, etc.). In the long term, this implies serious challenges in the career prospects of the bulk of the future work force. Ultimately, the highest labour returns on education (the best jobs) will remain in the hands of high-SES youth who hold a monopoly of economic capital and can afford the pricey education and language training that inculcates them with the cultural capital of *conyo talk* (Manarpaac, 2008). This results in intergenerational socioeconomic inequality and poor social mobility in the country that negatively impacts the country's economic development as a whole (Tuaño & Cruz, 2019).

Therefore, it is essential that low-SES students attending the top private universities should receive additional support in order to perform to their full potential and receive the complete benefits of an elite university education. University management and the Filipino Department of Education must invest in extra programs and opportunities for low-SES university students to surpass these cultural and social barriers and meet their high-SES peers on a more equitable playing field. Furthermore, cultural change to break down the classist culture in elite universities is also needed, because providing low-SES students with

financial remedies only helps them to conform to the very system that would otherwise exclude them.

In terms of subverting barriers to acquiring cultural and thereby social and economic capital, additional funding in elite universities should be provided by the government to launch special programs that help bridge the cultural capital gap. Since the root of the gap is based on sociolinguistic stratification, remedial English classes would help (Manarpaac, 2008). Counselling to help low-SES students adjust to university culture is also essential (Jury, 2017). Financial support should also be given to support the mental and physical well-being of low-SES students (Farnen, 2007). Additionally, professional networking/career-building should be implemented at elite universities that target low-SES students to help remedy the social capital inequality (Cudia, 2015). With that said, efforts to bridge over the SES gap may not necessarily fix the problem of classicism.

While additional support to help students acquire their lack of economic, social, and cultural capital may be helpful in the short term, the issue needs to be addressed at it's very root in order to attain long-term success. Giving low-SES students runs the risk of encouraging students to simply assimilate to the arguably toxic, snobbish culture of elite universities and forsake their more humble roots in the process. It fails to acknowledge the different (and not necessarily invaluable) sets of cultural and social capital they possess. The culture of classicism in elite universities must also be addressed.

In terms of the cultural change needed, mandatory programs that emphasize community-building and the importance of education in relation to social mobility should be

implemented for all students; so that high-SES students can become more comfortable with their low-SES peers and reduce classism. Cultural change that challenges the colonially rooted ideas of sociolinguistics is needed in elite schools that favour wealthy students. Finally, strict anti-bullying programming that protects low-SES students from classicism and disciplines high-SES students of such behaviour. Overall, a balance between instant, shorter-term solutions and a slower but long-term cultural shift must be implemented.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that barriers to cultural capital have serious, long-term impacts on the social mobility of the bulk of the Filipino labour force. Since low-SES students struggle to display the cultural capital (i.e., *conyo* talk) that would help facilitate their acceptance into the elite university environment, their ability to perform academically and acquire the social capital necessary for obtaining good jobs is negatively impacted. As a result, their future career prospects and potential to accumulate economic capital are also negatively impacted.

Clearly, graduating from the same elite university is not a straight path to professional success and elevation up the social ladder. Underlying factors revolving around inherited economic, cultural, and social capital pose significant barriers to low-SES' students labour returns on education. A lack of economic capital, results in a lack of cultural capital, which leads to a lack of social capital, which leads back to a lack of economic capital in a continual, reinforcing cycle that crosses generations. Hence, policy change that assists low-SES

students in overcoming barriers to cultural, social, and economic capital while also targeting colonially rooted classism must be implemented.

Considering the continuous struggle of the Filipino economy against poverty, addressing the reproduction of class inequality in universities is an extremely important issue. It is only by investing in the future of the country's labour force that wider, socioeconomic issues can be dealt with. Essentially, unless the deep stratifications of Filipino society reflected in elite universities are addressed, Filipino university education largely remains a mirage of meritocratic equality to the detriment of the nation.

Word Count: 2,609

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