Beyond Social Mobility: Biographies, Habitus and Responses to Changing ‘Conditions of Existence’ among University Scholarship Students

Maissam Nimer
Migration Research Center, Koç Universitesi, Turkey

Abstract
Wider access to higher education at a global level has been accompanied by growing literature on experiences of social mobility often using the concept of habitus as a theoretical tool to frame responses to changes in ‘conditions of existence’. Drawing on the case study of a scholarship programme within an elite university in Lebanon, through in-depth interviews with students and university faculty and staff, this article elaborates on the typologies in responses that emerged as students position themselves in a new environment. These typologies, in contrast to the literature which presents them as a result of alterations in the habitus, appear to be related to each other and occur simultaneously within one person’s trajectory. As such, instead of viewing these responses as degrees of incorporation of each set of schemes of perceptions from both fields, the context of origin and the new social context appear to be multi-faceted, and the interaction between them is complex. I argue, along the lines of Lahire’s dispositional perspective, that the situation of contradictory experiences is not exceptional but characterizes all individuals to a certain extent, especially in the Lebanese context which is distinguished by its diversity in terms of regional and religious affiliations and in which class intersects with other types of identifications.

Keywords
Bourdieu, capitals, change, dispositions, doxa, fields, habitus, social mobility, university

Introduction
Globally, access to higher education has widened to classes that did not have access before, with the trend in massification of higher education as ‘one of the norms of modernization’ (Marginson, 2016). More and more young people are expected to continue in the field of
education to enter the ‘knowledge economy’ (Christie, 2009). As a result, worldwide participation in higher education now includes one-third of the age cohort (18–24 years) and is growing at an unprecedented rate in most middle-income and some low-income countries (Marginson, 2016). However, wider access is not accompanied by more equal social access to elite institutions, but instead has exacerbated the reproduction of inequality (Atherton, 2017; Duru-Bellat et al., 2008; Jerrim et al., 2015; Neves et al., 2016). Dubet and Duru-Bellat (2004) suggest that the principle of positive discrimination follows a logic of distributive justice by giving more to those who have less. Though positive discrimination is necessary to provide structural conditions for radical, transformative change towards equality (Noon, 2010), the resulting social mobility can influence social relationships and self-coherence (Friedman, 2016) and often results in feelings of alienation and marginality (Aries and Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991; Khan, 2011; Reay et al., 2009). Despite the growing critical literature on experiences of social mobility, which mobilizes Bourdieu’s theoretical contribution, little work has been done on understanding the responses that emerge to a change in ‘conditions of existence’ beyond social class and on explaining the variations in these responses. Moving beyond social class to analyse changes in ‘conditions of existence’ becomes even more salient in light of the context of migration and the phenomena of growing urbanization. By drawing on Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, valuation of capitals and doxa, this study takes a university scholarship programme in Lebanon as a case study in order to understand the various mechanisms through which scholarship students respond to change and illustrate the variations that emerge within groups by linking responses to individual biographies. It aims to enrich the nascent literature on the experiences of students in different contexts by adopting a dispositional perspective (Lahire, 2011), thus presenting individuals’ habitus as evolving, relational, complex and multi-faceted, and moving this analysis beyond the scope of social class.

In the following, I present the methodology adopted for this research and situate the studied scholarship programme at a private higher education institution – in which scholarship students form a distinctive minority – within the Lebanese context. In doing so, I highlight the emergence of a doxa – taken-for-granted assumptions that influence the dispositions and relations in social fields – based on social class, ethnic and geographical origin. I first argue that the individual responses of actors as they position themselves in the new environment are in fact not a result of a rigid confrontation between different habitus (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015), but as suggested by Mead (2016), their habitus is relational and evolves over time. Rather than distinguishing separate, mutually exclusive categories, I demonstrate that different responses appear to be related to each other and can occur simultaneously within one person’s trajectory. Second, I attribute the variations in responses among scholarship students at university to a broad array of dispositions within the habitus through socialization in their past trajectories. As such, I demonstrate that the social world is a pliable space that can be appropriated by multiple and transposable dispositions of habitus. In that, I argue similarly to Lahire (2011) that the situation of dissonance – according to which, individuals are marked by a plurality of sometimes contradictory experiences – is not exceptional but characterizes all individuals. This allows us to put into perspective and better understand the experiences of change in ‘conditions of existence’ and how these influence individuals’ feelings and social relationships as part of a continuum of experiences.
Habitus as a concept is suited to analysing crisis and change (Bourdieu, 2008 [1980]). Dispositions that constitute it are socially mounted and can be eroded, countered or even dismantled by exposure to novel external forces (Wacquant, 2016). In this study, I consider the concept of habitus as a theoretical tool to frame responses to change in ‘conditions of existence’ among underprivileged students within an elite environment as it enables us to capture their experiences. Habitus is said to guide our strategy by investing the appropriate types and amounts of capitals in a social field to achieve our objectives according to Bourdieu’s (1977) schema of practice. In that context, I demonstrate that dispositions and relations in the social field are influenced by taken-for-granted assumptions and doxa (Bourdieu, 2000 [1979]; Wallace, 2018). According to the concept of habitus, each social environment corresponds to a system of capacities and dispositions such as attitudes, perceptions, ways of talking, feeling and thinking (Bourdieu, 2008 [1980]) that mediate new experiences. It supplies the principle of ‘sociation’ as categories of judgement and conduct coming from society and ‘individuation’ as a unique trajectory and location are internalized by each person (Wacquant, 2016). However, when ‘conditions of existence’ change dramatically over the course of life, dispositions lose coherence; this leads individuals to experience a sense of internal division, which Bourdieu (2000 [1997]) calls ‘habitus clivé’ or cleft habitus. This can lead to destabilization where the individual is not a ‘fish in water’ in either context (Reay et al., 2009). Habitus is generally perceived as a non-static concept, which can be altered and adapted to new experiences, and contemporary researchers have developed concepts to describe the alteration process. Ingram (2011) discusses the concept of a ‘habitus tug’ to denote a multi-directional pull on habitus rather than a division; Holdsworth (2009) points at the possession of conflicting and multiple identities due to their location within misaligned or competing social spaces. Ingram and Abrahams (2015) take these concepts further and identify forms of ‘habitus interruptions’ in the case of social mobility. These interpretations are ‘disjunctive habitus’, whereby the habitus incorporates one or the other of the sets of schemes (as either re-confirmed or abandoned habitus), and ‘conjunctive habitus’, whereby habitus attempts to incorporate both schemes (as either reconciled or destabilized). While this model provides a rich and comprehensive illustration for a variety of responses to social mobility, I argue that, as actors position themselves in the new environment, the emerging individual responses are in fact not a result of a rigid confrontation between different habitus. Rather, these typologies appear to be related to each other and can occur simultaneously within one person’s university trajectory. Furthermore, these strategies sometimes involve the valorization of different types of capitals thus recognizing the skills and contacts mobilized by underprivileged groups to gain advantage (Wallace, 2018). Habitus thus permits a margin of tolerance for environmental inconsistencies (Canguilhem, 1989). In the face of the unexpected, one is encouraged to transpose dispositions to cope with changing situations. As such, this article aims to shed light on the empirical question brought forward by Mead (2016) of how tolerant habitus can be of volatile circumstances and to what extent habitus is capable of changing without losing its explanatory power.

Researchers (Archer, 2012; Lahire, 2011) have further questioned to what extent habitus, in its initial form, applies to the current generation, as they argue that it was tailored
to the undifferentiated society of 1960s France or traditional Algerian peasant society. In response, the dispositional perspective, proposed by Lahire, presents individuals as complex and multi-faceted. Each individual is thus a singular being that carries a habitus constituted of a complex set of internalized dispositions (Lahire, 2011). In his view, the situation of dissonance – according to which individuals are marked by a plurality of sometimes contradictory experiences – is not exceptional but characterizes all individuals to a certain extent (Lahire, 2012). In light of this perspective, instead of viewing responses as degrees of incorporation of each set of schemes of perceptions from both fields as do Ingram and Abrahams (2015), I consider, similarly to Lahire, the diversity of configurations and socialization processes within families of the same social class. I examine possible determinants to the emergence of different responses by looking at past trajectories. Patterns emerge with regard to the responses at university and can be linked to differences among scholarship students and previously constructed multiple dispositions in their trajectories. The social world is thus presented as a pliable space that can be appropriated by the transposable dispositions of habitus. This study aims to reference Lahire’s work as it is understood to imply that individuals ‘can simply swap and change their habitus and practice, pulling out dispositions in accordance to fields’ (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015: 149). While Ingram and Abrahams (2015) state that this idea is ‘too simplistic for accounting for the complexities of contradictory social experience’ (p. 149), I, instead, draw on the theoretical framework of Lahire, whereby each individual is a singular being that carries a habitus constituted of a complex set of internalized dispositions in order to provide a better understanding of these contradictory experiences.

Research methodology

This research study was carried out between 2010 and 2014 in one of three comparable, selective, private universities that received the scholarship programme funded by a development agency programme. All three universities, located in a prosperous central district of Beirut, were founded by Christian missionaries during the 19th century and are considered the most prestigious universities in the city due to their seniority and the quality of their instruction. They charge high tuition fees and thus maintain a middle- to upper-class student base. The university selected for this study offered the researcher easier access to data through its central scholarship programme office, while other universities ran this scholarship programme through their student life departments.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 scholarship students (out of a total of 65) and 7 non-scholarship students chosen in a way to ensure representation based on geographical origin, gender and major of study. The interviews were repeated during students’ second year and last year of study. One of the interviewed scholarship students dropped out after three semesters. Interviews covered biographies and experiences at university among scholarship students. In addition to the interviews, I carried out many hours of systematic observations of the scholarship students, from the recruitment phase to their access to employment after university. Observations were carried out during social activities in dormitories and interactions in common spaces. Formal observations took place through participation in sessions of recruitment, orientation and training offered by the programme. My presence as a researcher was progressively
replaced by that of a mentor as I listened carefully when fellows expressed frustrations and asked for career advice. This research method allowed me to reconstruct variations in behaviour within their social context and the ‘internal plurality of actors’ (Lahire, 2011). Interviews were also conducted with instructors (n = 12), student life coordinators (n = 3), the head resident, who is in charge of running and supervising the student residence, and the university director. These interviews focused on topics such as the mission of the programme, as well as performance and adaptation of scholarship students to the programme. To facilitate fluent expression, participants were encouraged to express themselves in whichever language they felt most at ease (Arabic, English, French or a mix of those). The semi-structured interview design using a discussion guide with open-ended questions allowed for the formalization and systematization of data collection and comparison between interviews. The interviews were scheduled by email or phone a few days in advance and took place at the most convenient location for the participants: some in their dormitory rooms or in a classroom on campus, others in cafés or public spaces.

Prior to taking part in the interview, participants consented to having their interviews recorded, after having ensured them anonymity. Two students preferred not to record their interviews. In these cases, I took detailed notes of the conversation, which I then carefully reconstituted shortly after the completion of the interview.

I applied the thematic method of content analysis, detecting and isolating the most recurrent themes in interviews and comparing with other interviews. I coded each interview at least twice. The first coding was to identify general categories and themes of information contained in the responses. The second was to compare the common themes running through the transcripts with the aim of developing shared categories. I also collected information from official sources, including evaluation sheets, grades and student files.

**Formation of a distinctive minority within the university**

Habitus is particularly interesting to examine in the Lebanese context, a country with 4 million people and 18 officially recognized religious groups. In this context, financial disadvantage intersects with other variables such as cultural and religious affiliation. This can contribute to the plurality of dispositions that can exist within one person and operate as part of their habitus. As mentioned earlier, a variety of missionary universities, mostly following the American model, were founded in the 19th century. These universities, marked by high tuition fees, maintained their prestigious position at the expense of the public sector, reflecting the economically liberal orientation of the country and the lack of a centralized and structured financial aid system.

The scholarship programme examined here provides a group of underprivileged students access to ‘quality’ higher education in one of the private American-style universities by covering tuition fees and living expenses. To be eligible, students have obtained at least a slightly above average grade in high school and passed an English proficiency test. The selection process also aims to ensure geographical representation to give residents of peripheral rural regions, who are usually underrepresented in these types of universities, better chances to access such schools. Without this scholarship, its beneficiaries would not have been able to afford to study at the university they are attending.
Scholarship students thus encounter a new and contradictory social environment at the university in terms of their social and geographical origin. First, scholarship students appear to be from a less privileged social background than the other students at the host university. While scholarship students are all from public schools (an essential selection criteria), known in Lebanon as ‘schools for the poor’ (Bahous and Nabhani, 2008), the large majority of the other students at university (more than 90%) were from a diversity of private schools with variable tuition fees. Furthermore, while non-scholarship students had chosen to enrol at this university, it did not figure in the initial choices of the scholarship students prior to receiving the scholarship. Most of them indicated in their interview that had they not received the scholarship, they would have enrolled at the Lebanese University (the only public university) or in some cases in the new private ‘market-oriented’ universities with reduced tuition fees. Second, there was a gap in terms of geographical origin between scholarship and non-scholarship students. The proportion of scholarship students from rural origins (51%) was significantly higher than that of non-scholarship students (8%) in 2012–2013. As such, the scholarship programme (through its regional quotas) allowed students from rural origin to access a private university that otherwise they would not have been able to access. There is a strong geographical divide in Lebanon; peripheral regions are much less developed than the capital, Beirut, and its surroundings, where educational opportunities and commercial activities are concentrated. This leads to differences in terms of dispositions, attitudes and behaviours (i.e. habitus) between individuals from urban and rural settings, especially as these tend to intersect with social inequalities. Scholarship students are thus placed in a different category and perceived by others according to certain doxa that influence relations that form in the social field and lead to further alienation. Urban students manifested a sense of superiority, jokingly referring to qualifying scholarship students as ‘villagers in the city [kurawi fil day’a]’, an expression that came up in the interviews. The social and geographical gap put the scholarship students in a different category and resulted in differences between scholarship and non-scholarship students in terms of perceived originary habitus. The university director explains,

They (the scholarship students) originate from a different social background than the other students at university, (which manifests) in terms of style of life of the family, standards of life, parents’ occupation, clothing fashion and parents’ expectations of their children. Their presence created for all of the students a distinct and different social category.

Furthermore, the arrival of a new, relatively large (n = 65), ‘privileged’ group of students at the university, which is rather small, attracted attention and aroused a feeling of jealousy by non-scholarship students. It created a significant ‘minority of privileged students’ according to the university director. The scholarship students were recognizable, not only through their way of dressing and behaving but also their way of talking. The Beirut dialect (mixed with some words in French and English) is considered a mark of social distinction. A non-scholarship student, Amalia, noticed a difference in the dialect or accent of the scholarship students and remarked, ‘Some of them, when they speak Arabic, I do not understand them’. Similarly to the findings of Aries and Seider (2005), speech proved to be a marker of class background. Non-scholarship students would
designate and label scholarship students by the name of the funding agency or by the name of the programme. Student club representatives reported that when the number of scholarship students in a club was high, the other students would desert it, explaining to student life coordinators that the club had become ‘too [name of the programme]’. The beneficiaries of the program were assumed to be of lower class, from villages and conservative backgrounds. A non-scholarship student described the reaction of others towards a scholarship student in the classroom as follows:

The other students think that this one is different, for instance Amira, no one goes and sits next to her.

Simultaneously, the social segregation between scholarship students and the others was exacerbated by certain administrative decisions. To meet the need for intensive English courses, the university opened a separate section in the afternoon and required only scholarship students to register for it. This was interpreted by some scholarship students as discrimination. Radwan, expressed it as follows:

Maybe it’s because we’re scholarship students we are considered second class, we have no choice but to be here . . . but we are paying them too, we should be treated like the others.

In addition, the recipients of the scholarship were provided with accommodation in a special dormitory building on campus. One of the scholarship students, Stephanie, whose family had undergone a drop in social status, approached the scholarship office asking for an entrance to the dormitory that does not go through the campus: the reason being that she was embarrassed of her and other scholarship students being seen bringing in bags on Monday morning in front of all the other university students. Doxa influences the way in which relations and perceptions are formed in the social field. These experiences are not dissimilar to those of other disadvantaged students in elite higher education institutions who ‘lack social fit’ (Reay et al., 2009, 2010). However, in the Lebanese context, social class differences also intersect with differences such as geographical origin, exposure to the American type of curriculum, dialect and foreign language proficiency (here English). In response to the emergence of a doxa that influenced dispositions and relations in social fields, differences emerged in terms of responses to change of context among scholarship students.

**Responses to change of context among scholarship students**

Responses that emerged in this study closely match those identified by Ingram and Abrahams (2015). These are categorized as either disjunctive habitus, when the habitus incorporates one or the other of the sets of schemes (re-confirmed or abandoned habitus), or conjunctive habitus, where habitus attempts to incorporate both schemes (reconciled or destabilized). In such an understanding, an agent operates in two fields that are not wholly aligned. In this article, rather than distinguishing separate mutually exclusive ‘habitus interruptions typologies’, I argue that individual responses that emerge as actors
position themselves in a new environment are in fact not a result of a rigid confrontation between different habitus, but that different responses appear to be related to each other and can occur simultaneously within one person’s trajectory. These responses are based on observations and interview statements that reflect how students respond to change.

A large majority of scholarship students reacted by keeping a low profile. This involved limiting their interactions at university and clustering among other students who share the same social background, sectarian affiliation or level of religious practice. Many instructors, student life representatives and the dormitory head resident reported that scholarship students only socialize with each other. In addition, in order to make themselves less visible and avoid re-activating stigma, scholarship students also appeared to have reduced participation in classes. As the host university adopts a concept of liberal arts education, it encourages active methods of teaching, dialogue and participation in small classes. According to their instructors, the scholarship students were described as being ‘shyer’ than the others as they participated less. In many cases, according to instructors, the scholarship students came to ask their questions during office hours instead of doing it in class. Their weak level of English, a marker of social status in Lebanon, contributed to their low participation in class. Fida, a psychology student, who succeeded brilliantly at university, veiled, in the suburb of Beirut, described the difficulties she faced due to language despite the fact that she was from an Anglophone school:

I came to university, they all speak in English . . . but me, I was not fluent . . . I did not participate, though there were many times I would have liked to participate, things I would have liked to talk about, comment, but I would shut up in class.

Ingram and Abrahams (2015) denote these responses as ‘re-confirming their habitus of origin’, at the expense of the one they encountered in the new social environment. In other words, this involves rejecting the new social environment and not internalizing its structures. I demonstrate, in the following, that these responses can lead to other responses valorizing different types of capitals (Wallace, 2018).

Other scholarship students, rather than isolating themselves, responded by hiding indicators of their diversity, which Ingram and Abrahams (2015) qualify as ‘abandoned habitus’. Several students changed their way of dressing to conform to the predominant dress code. An English instructor, who knew them since the first semester, noted the evolution among some of them in the way they dressed. Young men started to pay more attention to brands often bought in counterfeit, for instance, Polo shirts and Converse shoes, whereas young women started going in groups to buy clothes from the main commercial street near the university, spending a large part of their monthly stipend to follow the fashion at university. Many also used this opportunity to undergo aesthetic modifications, such as re-doing their nose through cosmetic surgery or putting on braces. As noted by Skeggs (1997), the body itself is marked, and investing in bodies can be seen as a form of cultural capital for working-class women. In addition, ‘clothing enables an identification of the other and an identification with the other’ (p. 85). She interprets these investments as an act of resistance to social classification. Adaptation also took place through familiarization with American pop culture. According to the
head resident, students started listening to songs in English and watching American movies. In addition, changes occurred in the way students speak. Some of them adapted their regional accent to conform to others and speak in the Beirut accent not to ‘stand out’. Rabih, for instance, from a village in Mount Lebanon, states,

I do not want, on purpose, I do not want to change the dialect of my region . . . but, for instance, if I want to go to Mrs. F. (administration), I will not tell her ‘kif ḥelek’ (how are you – said with an accent from his village).

Others tried to work on their accent in English, which in Lebanon is a status symbol. Eskandar, from a village in the East of Lebanon, despite having gone to an Anglophone school, explains that he was sometimes ‘ashamed in front of others’ because of his accent. He asked for help with pronunciation from his roommate, originally from Beirut. Cases of scholarship students such as Fida and Eskandar show scholarship students’ adaptation to the requirements of the new social context. Here, this is associated with a higher level of attrition as individuals attempt to occupy positions that they are not otherwise disposed to occupy (Bourdieu, 2000 [1979]).

While Ingram and Abrahams identify two subcategories of ‘conjunctive habitus’ – the first, ‘destabilized habitus’, whereby individuals are in confrontation with their context of origin, and the second ‘reconciled habitus’, whereby individuals negotiate the distance and adapt to both contexts – I show that these subcategories of ‘conjunctive habitus’ are often a consequence of the previously described subcategories of ‘disjunctive habitus’ and examine their mechanism of action. Those who had conformed to dominant norms were more likely to become further alienated from their group of origin as time progressed. Several researchers identified a disconnection from backgrounds of origin among working-class students at elite universities (Friedman, 2016; Jetten et al., 2008). Here, Nisrine, for instance, a student in mathematics from a Druze village in Mount Lebanon who had lived a very sheltered and reserved life before coming to university, expresses this as follows:

Sometimes (I feel that) my ideas have opened up, sometimes in the village they say, ‘no you cannot do this’, now I reply, ‘why not?’

Another student, Mahmoud, from the predominantly Muslim Shiite in the southern suburbs of Beirut, where the anti-American sentiment is high, says,

My younger brother teases me saying that I had now become an American spy and that they have to watch out in front of me.

These students tended to move away from their homes upon graduating. In fact, both Nisrine and Mahmoud left for jobs outside of Lebanon.

Finally, individuals who displayed the ability to successfully move across different spaces valorized different types of capitals that do not necessitate mimicking the dominant cultural capital (Wallace, 2018). The strategies of mobilizing an array of skills and contacts by underprivileged groups to gain advantage often go unrecognized (Yosso,
Several scholarship students proudly reclaimed and affirmed their difference in origin through their participation in class. A scholarship student was said to take ‘pride’ talking about her experience in public school, and by doing so, according to her instructor, ‘enriched the discussions in class’. She thus mobilized the capital that makes her unique, namely being the only student from the public education system, in order to gain advantage in her academic trajectory. Some individuals, as mentioned earlier, formed homogeneous social networks based on their similarities and socialized among each other. They mobilized their social capital to face the commonly held doxas within the university regarding the social standing of scholarship students. Layla, for instance, gives the example of the move to university:

The hardest thing was that I’d left all my friends, but thankfully Esma was with me and Radwan (both from the same area of origin). We were not friends before; we knew each other by name.

Esma also says, ‘now we became friends . . . as a result, I never felt bothered by the atmosphere’. These friendships allowed students to overcome the transition to a new social environment and facilitated their groupwork. Layla says,

We were first, Esma, Radwan and me, since we were already friends and even close friends, we can work together. Then Radwan decided to talk to girls that were in the same field of study as him and told them to join our group.

Amira participated in organizations that planned informative events on campus during religious holidays to familiarize others with her cultural practices. Through these events, she was able to develop a network of friends outside of the scholarship programme. Identifying with non-scholarship students on another level allowed her to step out of the boundaries of the scholarship group. In other situations, some scholarship students combined strong connections and loyalties to family and friends from home with newly acquired university dispositions by transmitting their acquired experiences and competencies to members of their family. For instance, they helped siblings apply to the same type of scholarship programme in other universities or encouraged them to apply to associations that they had become familiar with while at university through their extracurricular involvement. They also planned ways to help their relatives benefit from the skills learned in their programme. They considered their trajectory as a channel of social mobility for them and for their family. Esma, for instance, who studies biology and is from a village in Mount Lebanon, indicates,

My parents think of opening a shop, I went through the whole process (in training at university) . . . now I can take over the financial aspect to help them.

Some transmitted competencies in English. Eskandar, the same young man who struggled with English, as mentioned earlier, reported helping his siblings in English. In addition, scholarship students such as Rabih, mentioned earlier, adopted a balancing strategy, whereby, he would change dialect when in Beirut but in the presence of other individuals from his region would revert to the regional dialect.
To conclude, the scholarship students faced new forms of sociability in a new social environment at university, as they acquired a particular status compared to the majority of students. As demonstrated in the examples above, these responses were neither exclusive nor consistent from start to finish; they occurred simultaneously, and scholarship students sometimes gave varied responses throughout their university experience. These responses also involved valorizing different types of capitals. This highlights the complexity of navigating change with the recognition that habitus is not static.

**Understanding responses through biographical trajectories**

Instead of viewing the variations in responses as degrees of incorporation of each set of schemes of perceptions from both fields or as a result of a rigid confrontation between different habitus, I argue that individual responses that emerge as actors position themselves in the new environment are in fact due to the fact that habitus is not rigid but changes over time. I consider, similarly to Lahire, the diversity of configurations and socialization processes within families of the same social class and suggest that responses can be explained through differences in past trajectories including experience with diversity (in terms of religious and social origin) and the level of conservativeness of their context of origin. By highlighting the patterns that emerge, I illustrate the multiplicity of dispositions of habitus and present the social world as a pliable space.

Based on the findings of this study, experience with social diversity and stigma among students appeared, first, to play a role in students’ habitus. Most scholarship students had changed schools several times during their trajectory. The frequency and type of change, in terms of culture, religion, social class and degree of conservativeness, varied from one trajectory to the other and reflected on the way in which scholarship students experienced university. It is through these changes that some students constructed dispositions to adaptability to new social environments and to various types of stigma. The sectarian structure is an integral part of Lebanese society; it infiltrates all domains, including social life, culture, symbolism and ideology (Traboulsi, 2014). Each sectarian group has its own cultural specificities. Randa, Druze, tells of her transition from a school in which all the other students were Druze to another school in which there were also Muslim Sunni and Shiite students and in which she faced stigma and had to adapt. She says,

> Our accent, they would make fun of us. You should think of how to talk to them, the others.

She thus developed adaptation strategies to face stigmatization, which she was able to mobilize once at university. She played an active role in several organizations and made friends among a diversity of students, maintaining a balance between her life at university and her context of origin. However, in certain distant regions of Lebanon characterized by sectarian or political homogeneity, individuals rarely interact with individuals from other communities. For instance, some students had spent the totality of their school years without having met any members from other communities until they started university. Nadine, from a homogeneous Christian village in Mount Lebanon, described having been ‘very shocked’ by the number of veiled young women at university. Similarly, in the case of Amira, her homogeneous, conservative Muslim Shiite village
sharply contrasted with the mixed environment at university. At university, both of them reacted by clustering with peers of similar sectarian background and degrees of religious practice. Some scholarship students, who had attended prestigious private schools earlier in their trajectory, reported having experienced stigma related to social origin. It is common in Lebanon for families to try to give their children a ‘good base’ in a private school and keep them there as long as financially possible and then move them to a public school. For instance, Nagy, whose father is a teacher in a public school in a village in the North, attended a private school in which ‘there were many rich students’. He always felt like he did not belong. He recalls particular instances of feeling stigmatized:

We were in school. They [the administrators] would come into the classroom and would say out loud ‘look, you, your father did not pay’, so the person would feel . . . you know.

Radwan also experienced stigmatization due to social status in the past. His father is an employee at the local municipality. He started his trajectory in a private school then went to public school for his secondary studies. He describes his experience as follows:

There is something in the private school. I mean, the person feels the class privilege. I mean, for example, we enrolled. It is not that we don’t have any money, a normal amount. But you feel that him [the student next to you] . . . he has a lot.

He developed strategies to deal with his perceived inadequacy. Feeling stigmatized, he felt that he had to achieve more than others:

We converted it into a competition in grades. You feel that those who have money, you feel that it’s ok, they study just to pass. We have to study and succeed.

Those who had changed schools (especially in Beirut) thus developed different dispositions to university than those who had not and were more likely to display the ability to successfully move across different spaces, valorizing different types of capitals.

Second, the degree of traditionalism and conservatism varies across Lebanon and reflects on the level of parental control over students’ social activities prior to university. Esma, for instance, from a conservative family in a Druze village in Mount Lebanon, only participated in family outings such as ‘walks in the village’ before university. Her father, employed in a religious court and wearing the traditional clothes, would not allow the girls to go out with friends, whereas her brother was free to go around. At university, her parents had an agreement with a driver from the village to drop her and pick her up every day. The protectiveness of her family affected her sense of autonomous sociability at university. The level of parents’ control over students’ socializing was more relaxed in the case of Nancy, a Christian Maronite student from a less conservative family in Beirut, who had more opportunities to go out with her friends in secondary school. Religious practice also incurred a certain level of control in some instances. Nassima, from a Muslim Shiite village in the South of Lebanon, is veiled. She considers herself a believer and feels that her religious practice contributed to her academic success, as it permitted for ‘fewer distractions’. It led to restrictions that translated into self-discipline in her daily life. Family background was certainly reflected in terms of the responses to change
of condition at university among scholarship students: the scholarship students (such as Esma and Nassima) who were subjected to a significant level of familial control tended to respond by clustering with peers from similar backgrounds or distancing themselves from their families upon entering university. Students (such as Nancy) who were allowed relative freedom to socialize were able to negotiate their position, develop adaptation strategies and socialize at university with different types of students in terms of religious sect, age and sex.

Conclusion

This scholarship programme, through a principle of redistributive justice, aimed to compensate for social inequalities by selecting students based on financial need, ensuring gender and geographical representation. This study of students in the scholarship programme, drawing on Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, valuation of capitals and doxa, allowed for a better understanding of the experiences of change of ‘conditions of existence’ at the micro level. It shed light on the variations in responses that emerge within groups and linked them to individual biographies, thus presenting habitus as evolving, relational, complex and multi-faceted. It studied variations in responses that emerge in changing ‘conditions of existence’, a phenomenon that is growing in importance, whether in terms of class, ethnic or geographic origin. In this way, it demonstrates that the situation of dissonance – according to which individuals are marked by a plurality of sometimes contradictory experiences – is not exceptional but characterizes all individuals to a certain extent. As such, these findings advance understandings and utilizations of Bourdieu’s work on habitus particularly in the context of education. They show how scholarship students formed a distinctive minority within a private higher education institution in Lebanon and how the resulting doxa that emerged influenced their relations in the social field. As a result, individual responses emerged, and these appeared to be related to each other through individuals’ university trajectory and to be determined by the past trajectories of scholarship students. While some of my findings echo other works examining working-class university students in elite settings, the Lebanese context offers a rich context to delve into based on the variations in students’ biographies, as Lebanese society is characterized by its diversity in terms of regional/religious affiliations and class. As such, these data further enrich Eurocentric discussions on education by going beyond the working-class/upper-class dichotomy and social mobility (Bourdieu, 2000 [1979]; Ingram, 2011; Reay et al., 2009, 2010). In that sense, this study expands on a concept, that is, habitus, that was argued to have been made for analysing the undifferentiated society of 1960s France or traditional Algerian peasant society. It highlights the role of factors within the biographical trajectories that differentiate scholarship students, all from comparable underprivileged backgrounds, from the majority of students in private universities. In fact, it appeared that, within this group, those who had previously experienced diversity (social, geographical and religious), namely those from cities, were more likely to have learned to develop coping strategies to reconcile their big move to a new context. In contrast, individuals from conservative families (especially women) tended to cluster with peers from the same background. Instead of considering destabilization as a result of the encounter of habitus with a new and contradictory social context
and viewing these responses as degrees of incorporation of each set of schemes of perceptions from both fields, as do Ingram and Abrahams (2015), I consider both the context of origin and the new social context as multi-faceted and the interaction between them as complex. These findings call for exploring the variety of possible interactions in different national settings, beyond the scope of social class only, to further delve into the complexity of responses to change in the context of education.

**Author's note**

Participants’ names used in this article are pseudonyms, and the names of concerned institutions are confidential.

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**ORCID iD**

Maissam Nimer [https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9594-3463](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9594-3463)

**Notes**

1. ‘Sect’ refers to 18 recognized religious groups by the Lebanese constitution.
2. Public schools in Lebanon do not offer all grades within the same school, some go up to 6th grade others up to 9th grade at which point students have to go to another school.

**References**


Author biography

Maissam Nimer is a postdoctoral researcher working on migration, education and gender with a regional focus on the Middle East and Turkey, affiliated with the Migration Research Center, Koç University, and Istanbul Policy Center at Sabanci University. She also teaches as adjunct faculty at Galatasaray University.

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