RESILIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION.  
IS THE POTENTIAL OF RESILIENCE FULFILLED  
OR ARE SOCIAL INEQUALITIES REINFORCED IN HIGHER EDUCATION?  

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Debrecen, 2017
Goals and topic of the thesis

In our thesis we investigate how students from a less favourable social background who have achieved great efficiency up until higher education (students with resilience potential) continue their so far resilient performance (which means that it has been successful despite disadvantages).

Recently there has been a shift of emphasis among the central problems of education. The magnitude of those who drop out from secondary school or even from primary school is modest relative to that in the distant past (Hrubos 2012a, Kozma 2014, Forray R. & Kozma 1992). In the literature, there is a considerable debate about the connection between higher education and social inequality. One the one hand, some argue that the discourse on social inequality in the current higher education which has gone through a substantial expansion has lost its validity because widely accessible education implies a broader and socially less pre-selected pool of potential students or because inequality is less prevalent in tertiary education than it is on lower levels due to academic selection (e.g., Treiman 1970, Beck 1983, Breen & Jonsson 2005, Nagy P. 2003). On the other hand, many believe that higher education provides a fertile ground for inequality, where it might accumulate, get reinforced, and spread further (e.g., Altbach 2010, Vukasovic & Sarrico 2010, Szemerszki 2009a, 2009b, Kozma 2004, Shavit et al. 2007, Lucas 2001, Polónyi 2006, 2016a, 2016b, Róbert 2000a, 2000b). This is because inequality plays a dominant role in shaping differentiation and diversification (Veroszta 2010).

In conclusion, the literature, which we review in the theoretical section of our thesis, corroborates the argument that inequality is indeed present in higher education with respect to the possibility and differentiation of entry (social differences in the inner structure of higher education), the ability not to drop out, the content of student years, and prosperity later in career. There are relatively few studies in the literature which investigate the phenomena within higher education. In our thesis we offer a glimpse at students’ everyday lives as we address the question as to how one’s family background can be traced in higher education.

Following the comparative, descriptive, and consequence-focused approach of mobility analyses, our thesis fits well into the literature which explores the underlying reasons of a phenomenon. Our goal is a deeper understanding of the “whys” and “hows”. To achieve this, we have put in the centre of our analysis students who entered higher education with outstanding performance despite their disadvantage of social background (even in regional terms), which means that at a certain stage of their academic careers, there is a noticeable
Deviation from the usual social pattern. Our investigation allows us to compare them to a control group with similarly unfavourable social background and poorer performance and to another with similar efficiency but better socio-economic conditions in the regional context. For example, we may examine the difference in attitudes of different groups of similar social background yet diverging efficiency, even in contrast to more advantaged groups. In an analogous way, we may also identify socio-economic inequality within groups which are homogenous as regards performance.

Resilience is often defined as the ability of “adapting well in the face of hardships”, that is, as an extraordinary phenomenon which occurs despite adverse circumstances. The definition provided by the International Resilience Project also emphasises this approach: “Resilience is a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity (…)” (Grotberg 1996: page not specified). In our work we employ the term to describe a sociological phenomenon (Ceglédi 2012). We regard someone as resilient if they have performed well in school even though their socio-economic characteristics would suggest otherwise. In other words, we call students with academic achievements despite disadvantages resilient. Since our thesis focuses on higher education careers and, furthermore, on factors which predict labour market outcomes, the name we use for those with disadvantages of background who have achieved remarkable success in secondary education is “students with resilience potential”. The term “potential” is valid in the context of higher education as it refers to the fact that successful entry into higher education does not necessarily bring about a thriving career path. School performance up until higher education may not continue further with the same efficiency in the following years. Studies have shown that secondary school achievements do not always imply subsequent positive outcomes in higher education and on the labour market (Rodgers 2016, Sági 2013, Benjamin 2016, Bocsi 2016, Gáti & Róbert 2013). Due to the differences between secondary and tertiary levels of education, the investigation of higher education requires a new approach towards resilience.

The literature on resilience, which we review in our thesis, consists mostly of studies which explore the “secret” of students who can be labelled resilient based on certain characteristics, or examine the reason behind their efficiency in education despite their disadvantages of background. These works offer a variety of explanations of resilience, sometimes even opposing ones, which, with the related empirical findings, provide the possibility of identifying specific issues and lead to novel questions, as well. A notable
example is the question whether resilience potential is fulfilled in higher education or remains only a mere potential due to rising social inequality.

We formed our hypotheses based on our relevant, mainly qualitative, previous findings (survey studies among resilient students, see Ceglédi 2012), and on the literature about the connection between higher education and social inequality, which we review in the theoretical section of our thesis.

1) Successful entry. In accordance with the literature and our preliminary qualitative investigations, we hypothesise that the successful higher education entry of students with resilience potential can be attributed to atypical characteristics such as more favourable institutional, family, and individual traits relative to their family background (Blaskó 2002, Pusztai 2004a, 2009, Ceglédi 2012).

2) Differentiated entry. Previous analyses have shown that higher education in the region in question has a multi-layered structure with divisions due to social background differences. We hypothesise a similar tendency in the data which we examine in the thesis. We attempt to deepen our analysis by separating well performing and less efficient students within the groups which are defined by socio-economic background. We also hypothesise that the distribution of groups marked by entry efficiency and socio-economic background is not the same at different faculties (Róbert 2000b, Kozma 2004, Veroszta 2016b, Shavit et al. 2007, Vukasovic & Sarrico 2010, Goastellec 2010, Altbach 2010).

3) Student years. Based on the findings of previous studies (Bocsi 2013, Ceglédi 2008a, 2012, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, Ceglédi et al. 2016b) we hypothesise that the main social divide in higher education can be found where positive attitudes towards studying diverge from further opportunities available during student years. According to our hypothesis, students with resilience potential are endowed with the ability to fulfil curricular criteria obediently and mechanically (by maximising attendance in class and time spent studying, and also by studying alone, sometimes inefficiently), which is rooted in the family background. This has been a successful strategy up until higher education. During higher education years, however, the goal is to establish a competitive career potential (Sági 2013, Nyüsti 2013, Kozma 2015, Fényes 2014, Györgyi 2012, Kiss P. 2010, Bauer & Szabó 2009, Hrubos 2012a, Engler 2016, Bernstein 1996, Beck 1983). To achieve this, students must place special importance on factors which are not necessarily part of the
compulsory curriculum: making use of the possibilities offered by personal relationships towards professors and fellow students (as a source of social and relational capital) and extracurricular experience acquisition (professional and academic efficiency, language certificates, talent development). We hypothesise that during years spent in higher education, students with resilience potential lag behind those with a favourable background who show similar academic performance (beneficiaries) when it comes to the aforementioned aspects. If our hypothesis is confirmed, we can conclude that the effect of socio-economic background is increasing in higher education (Boudon 1974, Bourdieu 2003a, 2003b, Róbert 2000b, Szívós 2009, Pusztai 2016a, Nyüsti 2012a, 2014, Bocsi 2015, 2016a, Kovács K. 2014, Ceglédi 2015a, 2015b).

4) Long-term career. In accordance with the hypothesis about student years, we also hypothesise that students with resilience potential underperform beneficiaries in many areas outside and after higher education. These areas include employment while studying, determination to obtain a degree, labour market and postgraduate education strategies, and readiness to become part of the socially responsible intelligentsia. If our hypothesis is accepted, we can argue that these areas in higher education provide a possible course of action to diminish the effects of background which reappear on the labour market (Kozma 2004, Pusztai 2014, Sági 2013, Nyüsti 2013, Kolosi & Keller 2012, Galasi 2008, Galasi et al. 2004, Györgyi 2010, 2012, Berlinger & Megyeri 2015, Nagy P. 2010, Eppich & Köllő 2014, Róbert 2010b, Treiman 1970, Müller et al. 1989, Blau & Duncan 1967, Blaskó 2008a, Ganzeboom et al. 1991).

Methodology

In our study, we have analysed a student survey database compiled in the research project “Higher Education for Social Cohesion – Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross-border Area” (HURO/0901/253/2.2.2.), which was conducted by the Centre for Higher Educational Research and Development (CHERD-Hungary) and its partner institutions. Surveys were conducted on paper between March and June 2012, with an instructor present on every occasion. Students of the following institutions were surveyed: University of Debrecen, Faculty of Economics and Social Studies, Faculty of Agriculture and Engineering, and Faculty of Teacher Training of the College of Nyíregyháza, Kölcsey Ferenc Teacher
Training Institute of the Debrecen Reformed Theological University. As many as 1295 students responded. Surveys were voluntary and anonymous. We targeted both fee-paying and state-funded, full-time students who were in the 1st or 3rd year of their bachelor’s studies, in the 1st year of their master’s studies, or in the 1st or 4th year of their undivided training, which offers a master’s degree.

To identify students with resilience potential and their control groups, we have chosen socio-economic background variables which the literature suggests can predict academic outcomes the best (parents’ level of education, inactive or missing parents, place of residence and its socio-economic development, subjective financial status). We have also selected input indicators which are closely connected to manifest academic goals and can predict higher education efficiency well (whether during their secondary studies, students have received any award or scholarship for academic achievement at the end of a semester or academic year, or for success in academic, art, and sports competitions; whether students have been granted extra admission points due to favourable results in an academic competition, such as the National Secondary School Academic Competition, or in a sports tournament). As a first step towards creating the groups, we have listed apparent disadvantages and outcomes. Relying on Beck’s (1983) theory on how risk is radically individualised and how its combination is determined individually, students with resilience potential have been identified through multiple risk dimensions. Based on the individualisation of social risks, we have differentiated several situations, which has allowed the identification of students with resilience potential through different combinations of socio-economic variables. Thus, we have been able to recognise which students deal with disadvantages of background the most and which show the greatest efficiency. At the same time, we have utilised the opportunity provided by index formation, namely that disadvantages can appear in any combination. We have attempted to create an index which corresponds with the theory on the diversity of non-traditional groups in higher education (Pusztai 2011, Engler 2013, 2016, Tőzsér 2012, Nagy P. 2010, Hrubos 2012, Veroszta 2010, Szél 2016) as well as on multidimensional individual disadvantages (Mayer & Müller 1971, Blaskó 2002, Kovách et al. 2015, Vukasovic & Sarrico 2010, Huszár 2013a, 2013b, Kolosi & Keller 2012, Sági 2010, Ceğlédi 2017). We have attended to missing observations, created dichotomized variables and indices, standardised the data, and then conducted a cluster analysis, which has resulted in the identification of four groups. Even though we call them groups, they do not represent a real group in the social space, but the sum of students with the same label.
1) The second most efficient group, far ahead of the two less efficient ones, is that of “students with resilience potential”, which has 125 people in it. Their socio-economic background is one of the least favourable. On average, they have three disadvantages of background when they enter higher education. Our thesis focuses on them: those who enter higher education with the potential of resilience despite their social disadvantages.

2) There are twice as many “drifters” as students with resilience potential. They display the least favourable socio-economic status and have the lowest level of input efficiency. Their socio-economic background determines input efficiency to the largest extent, that is to say, their efficiency drifts inertly with the disadvantages of their background. It is important to note, however, that despite their last place in this ranking, these students have gone through the complex selection process of primary and secondary education successfully. It can be argued that they have drifted into higher education due to its rapid expansion as they would not have been likely to enter higher education based on their achievements before. We use drifters as a “mirror group” compared to students with resilience potential to determine whether the latter, who have similar socio-economic background, but greater efficiency, will outperform the former, and if so, to what extent.

3) Only 130 students have performed as well as their advantageous background would suggest. We call them “beneficiaries”. Bourdieu (1978) has argued that those who start their lives from a favourable background can be considered as winners – beneficiaries. As another “mirror group”, higher education achievements of beneficiaries can reveal the impact of socio-economic background when compared with the other efficient group, namely students with resilience potential. Insignificant differences between these groups can imply that efficiency may overwrite disadvantages of background, at least among pre-selected students.

4) The largest group comprises “indifferent prodigals”, who, as the majority of higher education students, come from a favourable socio-economic background (that is, on average, they only carry up to one disadvantage of background) and they possess almost none of the input efficiency indicators of the survey. It is possible that they only take part in higher education to maintain or avoid a descent in their social status, to preserve social prestige, or on account of its consumption value (Lipset & Zetterberg 1970). We find many names for this group in the literature: unsheltered students (Nyüsti 2013), students losing position (Miller 1960, Róbert 2002, cited by
Nyüsti 2013), students with utilitarian and system-elitist values (Veroszta 2010), students who have been disillusioned by academic values (Pusztai 2012), but indifferent prodigals are also akin to “forever young” (Szabó 2012) or “getting by” student types (Nyüsti & Ceglédi 2010). However, we must be careful when making assumptions about indifferent prodigals’ values because we only have data on their previous performance, namely that they entered higher education with low input efficiency. In our thesis, we do not aim to paint indifferent prodigals’ characters; we treat them as a control group for students with resilience potential.

The difference in scale in the number of drifters and indifferent prodigals is telling: there are almost three times as many indifferent prodigals in higher education as drifters even though the former display only slightly better efficiency. This can be regarded as evidence for the phenomenon that groups with disadvantages of background do not intend or fail to enter higher education if they lack the high achievements, whereas those with a favourable background might be forced or sent to higher education by family expectations and pressure despite their relatively low efficiency.

We have compared the four groups by variance analysis and cross tabulation. We have identified under- and overrepresented cells using adjusted standardised residuals (Agresti 2002). In necessary cases, we have employed data reduction. We have identified the underlying structure of the phenomena revealed by continuous and multiple item variables using factor analysis.

**Findings**

First, our hypothesis about the resilience of entry cannot be confirmed unambiguously. Compared to the higher education entry motives of beneficiaries, we have found that students with resilience potential possess traits from the family and secondary school which strengthen their prospects of pursuing further studies only slightly. It is clear that they fall behind beneficiaries and, often, indifferent prodigals in aspects which determine development and prosperity in the future: enjoying the benefits of 6 or 8 year secondary schools, attending shadow education, relatives who read frequently, parents’ intellectual commitment, university degrees in the family and the required financial background to enter higher education, as well as certain elements of psychological resilience necessary to be part of the intelligentsia or act as a leader. However, in comparison to the average composition of higher education, students
with resilience potential seem to perform in an unusual environment better than their socio-economic background would suggest, and the forces which drive them to higher education are remarkably different. From this perspective, the atypical reasons behind the higher education entry of students with resilience potential include their parents’ caring attitude (which is an important force in itself, even without the intellectual dimension – e.g., Reay et al. 2009, Pusztai 2004b, Ceglédi 2012), a not overly damaged family structure, mothers who read frequently, private classes, friends’ inspiring examples, advice and pressure from parents and teachers, reading habits, certain elements of psychological resilience, and the realisation that networking is a relevant entry motivation. In conclusion, we can observe an extensive support network which comprises the main components described in the literature about resilience: family, peers, teachers, and individual traits.

Our second hypothesis about the multi-layered structure of higher education has been confirmed, although our conclusions cannot be generalised due to the relatively low number of observations. Only the most talented of students with disadvantages of background can enter higher education in the fields of medicine, economics, and pharmacology (they are students with resilience potential), but compared to beneficiaries, their presence is modest. The fields of law and rural development are neutral in this regard. Students with resilience potential are overrepresented at university faculties of natural sciences, mostly at the expense of indifferent prodigals. The multi-layered structure can also be traced in the choices between college and university: students with resilience potential often opt for college education.

Third, our hypothesis about the differences in student years has been confirmed. Students with resilience potential overperform beneficiaries in academic commitment, and are equally receptive to extracurricular activities in close connection with the manifest goals of higher education, but fall behind when it comes to making use of the advantages of higher education which are characteristically capitalised by intellectuals. Students with resilience potential are often not able to break through the “ceiling” set by beneficiaries as regards certain indices of academic and professional efficiency, language certificates, and personal relationships with professors and fellow students. Beneficiaries display a performance which can only be expected of those who have entered higher education with similar results. The fact that students with resilience potential lag behind them may be a clear sign of social inequality in higher education.

According to our fourth hypothesis, careers outside and after university or college are also influenced by social inequality within higher education. We have found a significant
division between attitudes and actual opportunities. Whereas students with resilience potential show attitudes which are characteristic of a successful person, their limited opportunities imply that social inequality is also prevalent outside and after higher education. Based on their attitudes, they can be described as citizens and employees who are conscious of their intellectual role, possess stable morals, and are open to the norms of their potential workplace. Their scarce opportunities are evidenced by the fact that during their student years, they rarely seek employment in the field of their studies; instead, they endeavour in different lines of work, often to earn money or to help out in the family business. This does not necessarily result in reduced success in the future as there may be many advantages of employment which is not in close connection with one’s field of studies. Surprisingly, students with resilience potential do volunteer work more frequently than others, which is a clearly beneficial addition to higher education in terms of skill acquisition and networking. Postgraduate programmes are less attractive for students with resilience potential, which may be an indication that they are not committed to lifelong learning or realise that their prospects are limited.

In conclusion, our findings underline that resilience demonstrated before entering higher education remains a mere potential because students with resilience potential make use of higher education only through curricular channels and are not able to break through the ceiling set by beneficiaries with respect to the various meaningful activities which student years offer. Social inequality is reinforced in higher education.
List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian books (4)

Foreign language Hungarian books (1)

Foreign language international books (1)
Hungarian book chapters (14)


In: Határtalan oktatáskutatás : Tanulmányok a 75 éves Kozma Tamás tiszteletére. Szerk.:  
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Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

List of other publications

Hungarian books (2)

Hungarian book chapters (7)


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Foreign language international book chapters (2)
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Other journal articles (2)


50. Németh, N. V., Ceglédi, T.: Pusztaí's "Region and Education III: Education and Church in 
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The Candidate’s publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on 
the basis of Web of Science, Scopus and Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) databases.

15 December, 2017