Labored masculinity: Class, gender, and the educational choices and attitudes of young men of Portuguese ancestry in Toronto

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Abstract. Young men of Portuguese ancestry in Toronto continue to demonstrate low levels of academic achievement. Despite much research that focuses on masculinity to understand boys’ academic underachievement and attitudes towards schooling, the few studies on Portuguese youth in Toronto have not explored a similar connection. Specifically, this qualitative study is based on one-on-one interviews with young men of Portuguese ancestry in Toronto, and explores constructions of working-class masculinity to better understand their attitudes and choices concerning education. In this study, masculinity is understood relationally according to Raewyn Connell’s (2005) theoretical framework on gender and masculinity. Therefore, within their narratives, many participants reflect on sexuality to make sense of masculinity for themselves and their communities. Participant narratives indicate a connection between masculinity and schooling. Specifically, participants’ individual identities and understandings of prevailing notions of masculinity in their communities inform their attitudes and choices concerning education and schooling. Throughout my analysis, I use Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field (1990, 1994; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to explore how notions of masculinity and educational mobility generate considerable struggle and tension in participants’ lived experiences. This study reveals specific experiences and attitudes that impact academic achievement that are linked to class and masculinity, such as resistance to help-related educational resources and negative effects of educational mobility on ethnic identity and cultural cohesiveness, among others. I mobilize these data to construct and suggest the concept of educational deselection to explore how and when young men of Portuguese ancestry arrive at decisions to deselect education.

Keywords: Academic achievement, masculinity, class, gender, habitus; youth

Investigating constructions of masculinity among young working-class men to better understand their attitudes and choices concerning education is hardly new territory (Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001; Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Connell, 1989; Greig, 2012; Hutchings & Archer, 2001; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; McCready, 2010; Willis, 1977), and yet it remains only one factor among many in a highly complex problem of boys’ academic underachievement. In Toronto and across Canada, Portuguese youth and the children of Portuguese immigrants have consistently demonstrated lower than average rates of academic achievement since first immigrating to Canada in the 1950s (Nunes, 2003).
Most recently, reports by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) state that Portuguese-speaking students exhibit a 34% dropout rate, which placed them among the groups with the lowest rates of high school graduation and academic achievement (TDSB, 2006, 2011). Census data indicate that Portuguese respondents number 429,850 in Canada, or approximately 1.3% of the Canadian population, and approximately 3.5% of the population within the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (Statistics Canada, 2011). Despite these figures, the troubled academic trajectories of Portuguese youth and youth of Portuguese ancestry have garnered little academic attention.

Much existing educational research points to the various cultural and structural factors that inform the academic trajectories of marginalized youth. Many of these factors—including language discrimination, educational streaming, and low educational attainment among parents of Portuguese-speaking youth—are addressed in the scholarly research on Portuguese youth in Canada by Fernando Nunes and Ilda Januário (Januário, 1992, 2003; Januário, Marujo, & Nunes, n.d.; Nunes, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2008), as well as in several Master’s theses. However, despite the apparent interplay between masculinity and education, past research and community activism aimed at explaining and improving the low rates of academic achievement and graduation of Portuguese-speaking youth in Canada have neglected to follow a logic of inquiry that accounts for, and much less foregrounds, issues of masculinity. This paper extends the scholarly work on the connection between masculinity and academic (under)achievement to male youth of Portuguese ancestry, and it contributes a new lens of analysis and discourse to the existing research on these same youth by analyzing data from an interview study conducted with this population from 2010–2011.

This paper on young men of Portuguese ancestry in Toronto is divided into three sections. In the first section, I describe the study and its participants. In the second section, I discuss my conceptual and analytical frameworks. In particular, I discuss how this critical analysis mobilizes Pierre Bourdieu’s powerful conceptual tools of habitus and field. I argue that these youth make conscious and unconscious choices that either lead them to end or suspend their education, or leave them uncertain as to whether their choice to continue their schooling was right for them, which I have preliminarily termed “educational deselection” (Pereira, 2011). These experiences necessarily reflect Bourdieu’s notion of pedagogical action and symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the third section, I raise some key findings from the overall study on masculinity and young men of Portuguese ancestry. This study revealed that young men make choices about whether to end, suspend, or continue their education, and that these choices are in part informed by notions of masculinity. Finally, I conclude this paper by suggesting directions for future research, reflecting on how these findings might inform programs for these youth, and how masculinity studies and a gender relations framework must inform understandings of not only future educational trajectories of young men.
of Portuguese ancestry in Toronto, but also their career, familial, and community trajectories.

**Methodological reflections and participants**

This qualitative interview study draws on particular insights from critical ethnographic research that incorporates a critical reading and interpretation of the interview narratives shared by the participants to “apprehend the inner relations, causal processes and generative mechanisms which are often invisible to actors/participants” (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 396). The interview data include the voices of those who find themselves silenced, dismissed, or alienated from the community because of differences, particularly regarding their personal and conflicting notions of masculinity. Epistemologically, this study makes “sense” of communities by listening to the marginalized in the community, thus looking from the margins inward—towards centers of power—searching to explicate the contingencies of ruling that shape local contexts (DeVault, 1999). The young men in this study come from diverse backgrounds and many of them, for one reason or another, experience degrees of marginality within their community. Their reflections on how masculinity is performed and expressed in Toronto’s Portuguese community reveal some of the ruling relations that cement a common definition of masculinity within their community: one of breadwinner, household and community leader, stoic, emotional only when expressing anger, and never expressing vulnerability. While the participants’ narratives confirm such an understanding of masculinity, they also reveal contradictions, allowing space for other expressions of masculinity, which essentially begins to problematize the sexist or heteronormative underpinnings of this definition of masculinity. Overwhelmingly, however, the effects of this common definition of masculinity on their identities and relationships seem unrealized, denied, or not understood. Just as some qualitative methods shed light on the Western hegemonic male terrain of traditional sociological enquiry to illuminate the marginalizing experiences and methods of knowing particular to women (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995), this research also draws attention to the heteronormative and heterosexist assumptions of cultural knowledge. Admittedly, marginalizing experiences and methods of knowing particular to women are not identical to those of gay and/or gender non-conforming men, for example, but in many cases the ruling relations silencing the experiences and knowledge of both these groups operate within Toronto’s Portuguese community.

This paper draws on data collected from a Master’s thesis and pilot project¹ that included twelve males between the ages of 18–37,² living in Toronto and whose ethnic origin is Portuguese. Participants determined their ethnic origin by self-identifying as Portuguese, Portuguese-Canadian, or Canadian of Portuguese heritage. These participants were selected using several sampling techniques in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009) including: snowball sampling, which allowed the researcher to tap into participants’ social networks;
maximum variation, in order to represent a wide variation of social and identity dimensions; and convenience sampling, which became necessary when concluding data collection due to the difficulty in securing participants for this study. Naturally, low participant interest as well as deadlines for a Master’s thesis project resulted in a small sample size. While quantitative and perhaps some qualitative and mixed methods research on this topic would demand a larger sample size, because of the dearth of literature on this topic, the researcher purposefully set out to do an exploratory study that is not intended to generalize the experiences of these youth, but rather, to voice unheard narratives and educational experiences. For the purposes of this paper, and in section three below, I limit my analysis to the experiences of three participants who, due to their social, familial, and personal circumstances, provided particularly articulate and reflective narratives that resonate with and echo the experiences of the other participants.

The twelve participants in the Master’s thesis and pilot project were from various origins linked to Portugal’s mainland and island regions. Of the twelve, only one participant had one parent (mother) who was not of Portuguese ancestry, but he still considered himself Portuguese-Canadian. The participants’ diversity was also reflected in their professional and non-professional backgrounds. Some were university students or university graduates, while others were skilled/trades-laborers, working professionals, or unemployed.

Of the twelve, only one participant considered himself a high school “dropout.” Two participants were high school students at the time of their interview, although one had returned to an alternative high school program after being suspended and had not returned immediately to the education system. Seven of the participants had completed a college or university education and of those seven, three had graduate or professional post-graduate degrees. While the educational achievements of many of the participants in this study are not typically associated with marginalized individuals, other factors, identities, and aspects of their lives indicate their vulnerability. All participants are members of a minority ethnic community with statistically low levels of formal education. For example, only one participant had parents who had both graduated high school, and for another participant only his mother had completed high school. Over half of participants’ parents had completed only primary education in Portugal. Furthermore, at least four participants revealed that they identify with a sexual identity that necessarily marginalizes them within their community and in the education system.

The sampling procedures, particularly maximum variation, allowed me to select participants who identify as gay or heterosexual, and as married, common-law, or single. It is uncommon for the voices of gay, queer, or gender non-conforming men to come together with those of heterosexual men and be analyzed in relation to one another in the same study, and my aim was always to include the voices of gay and queer men in the broader discourse on masculinity in Toronto’s Portuguese community. Participants who identified as
gay and/or felt they struggled to embody a masculine identity spoke more reflectively about how masculinity influenced their lives. For whatever reason, whether due to years of conscious effort to appear straight while concealing their sexual orientation, or repeated instances of when they were made to feel other than masculine, these participants displayed an ability to draw on their experiences and knowledge to reflect on issues of masculinity in ways that heterosexual and gender conforming participants overlooked or took for granted. To this end, six participants self-identified as heterosexual, four identified as gay, one identified as queer, and another did not disclose his sexual orientation. Most importantly, whether gay or straight, a university graduate or a high school “dropout,” all twelve participants significantly contributed to this research.

Like many other qualitative research projects of similar scale and scope, this study uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews as its main data-gathering technique. These interviews do not strictly follow a questionnaire, as would a survey interview. Instead, semi-structured interviews aim to evolve, depending on the participant’s responses, while ensuring that each interview covers the main areas of inquiry laid out in the interview guide. In other words, as opposed to a strict question-and-answer format, participants were engaged in a conversation with the flexibility to spend more or less time discussing what was pertinent to them regarding experiences and perceptions of masculinity and education in their community (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interviews were one-on-one and each lasted approximately 60–80 minutes.

Having discussed this study’s methodology and the demographic data of the participants, the following section traces the theoretical concepts that inform this paper, including Raewyn Connell’s theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity and Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts of habitus and field.3 The bulk of my analysis mobilizes Bourdieu’s conceptual tools, while exploring hegemonic masculinity to understand young men’s choices concerning education. I conclude this paper by introducing the term, educational deselection, and how notions of masculinity can be better mobilized and foregrounded to continue to understand boys’ academic underachievement.

**On masculinity**

Following a period of panic concerning boys’ poor educational outcomes in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere during the 1990s (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998), subsequent studies focused on masculinity while clarifying the educational experiences and struggles of racialized, marginalized, and poor boys that lead to academic underachievement, as opposed to a crisis of underachievement for all boys (Griffin, 2000; Martino, 2008). Existing studies that explore issues of male gender within the Portuguese community in Toronto remain largely informed by the opinion of women in the community, and do not specifically address education (Giles, 2002; Noivo, 1997), leaving
the voices of these young men absent in the exploration of their own identities. Studies in Australia, England, the United States, and Canada have produced compelling evidence that links aspects of masculinity to lower levels of educational attainment and school resistance (Archer et al., 2001; Connell, 1989, 2005; Epstein, 1998; Hutchings & Archer, 2001; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Willis, 1977). These studies reveal how community expectations, cultural values and priorities, and peer pressure interact with masculinity, albeit with other factors as well, to inform the choices of young working-class men regarding educational attainment. Moreover, Archer and Yamashita (2003) suggest that the complexities and specific contexts of identities and inequalities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class inform resistance to participation in education. It is necessary, therefore, to define masculinity and explore how the above studies have linked masculinity to lower levels of educational attainment for various populations.

A critical understanding of masculinity requires that it be understood more broadly in relation to gender. Gender is enacted; its performance and practice is informed according to a general set of expectations based on one’s sex (Connell, 2005). Masculinity is considered a general set of gender expectations for the male sex, and hegemonic masculinity is defined by a general set of expectations for the male sex that imposes a dominant version of masculinity. In any case, these general expectations, or as Connell terms them, “role norms,” are “social facts” that are not static and necessarily shift as social norms evolve within society. This assertion is supported by the fact that some of the participants in this study defined masculinity differently for themselves, as opposed to how they perceived it to be defined in their community. However, of interest to critical researchers is which “role norms” shift and which stay constant, and with what consequences for whom. The answers to these questions may expose the tensions facing some young men in the community—particularly those who adhere less convincingly to normative notions of masculinity, for instance, gay or gender non-conforming men—while also revealing the ruling relations to which they are subjected.

One of the different ways to understand masculinity is to explore male behavior and its relationality. “Masculinity is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell, 2005, p. 71). Instead of defining masculinity as an object determined by an inventory of character types or behaviors, Connell suggests looking at masculinity as a process of interaction and relationships in which men and women live gendered lives. During this study’s pilot project, four participants defined masculinity in terms of masculine behaviors and gender roles ascribed to men and women in relation to work/labor and within the family structure. These findings are consistent with understandings of masculinity according to Portuguese immigrant women in Canada (Giles, 2002; Noivo, 1997) who define men and masculinity in terms of roles and
responsibilities, such as provider and breadwinner, instead of in terms of relationships, including fatherhood and husband/partner. Connell’s challenge is to look beyond these arrangements in which the participants regularly saw masculinity at work and instead to observe the relationships and interactions between men and women, and between men, to observe the spaces in which these interactions occurred, and to observe the ruling relations they produced to discipline the body and subject. The question is therefore how does masculinity inform the lives of young men of Portuguese ancestry in school and their educational lives outside schools, including at home and in other spaces in their community? For example, it is not uncommon for young men of Portuguese ancestry who underachieve in school, or appear to be disinterested with school, to be brought to work with their fathers.

The Portuguese community in Canada has been widely described as working-class (Giles, 2002; Nunes, 1998, 2003, 2004; Teixeira, 2006). Studies by Archer et al. (2001), Connell (1989), Francis (1999), Mac an Ghaill (1994), and Willis (1977) on working-class youth argue that issues of gender and masculinity inform attitudes of resistance to education and academic underachievement for these youth. Yet class issues alone do not explain academic underachievement among Portuguese youth in Toronto. Although this study predominantly addresses the impact of issues of masculinity on these working-class youth, I acknowledge that race and ethnicity remain salient identities and barriers for academic underachieving youth. “The normalization of particular middle-class white values within policy discourse (Gewirtz, 2001) and the collapse of ‘race’ into ‘social exclusion’ (Lewis, 2000)” (as cited in Archer & Yamashita, 2003, p. 116), while negatively affecting racialized male youth, may also negatively impact Portuguese youth in Canada. Many youth of Portuguese heritage experience identity conflict along class and racial lines. Conflict concerning race or ethnicity for these youth occurs on a systemic level, including in education, and is dependent on circumstance, “where white Portuguese (Canadians) can move from being ‘fully white’ to a marked and racialized white community in different (institutionalized) spaces” (Pacheco, 2004, p. 16). I see this study as a preliminary exploration of similar issues among Portuguese youth to better understand the rates of academic underachievement and young men’s choices to not continue their education.

Finally, and briefly, I would like to mention the challenges in discussing perceptions of masculinity for a particular community. Gender identities are produced, yet remain fluid, evolving, and heterogeneous. Neither working-class masculinity nor Black masculinity, for example, are fixed, and although useful in some instances to employ these categories, one must do so cautiously and take into account the aforementioned interconnecting factors constructing complex gender identities and masculinities. Nevertheless, as Connell (2005) asserts, role norms as social facts exist. Thus, I am cautious not to employ a deterministic analysis of masculinity and, instead, I hope to reflect on and interrogate some dimensions of masculinity as described by the participants.
On habitus and field

Habitus is likely the most cited and least appropriately employed of Bourdieu’s concepts. Far from a complete exploration of this highly complex concept, this section will draw on central aspects of habitus, as well as important contestations, specifically those most relevant to the forthcoming analysis. It is important to understand that Bourdieu intended for the concept of habitus to transcend a number of deep-rooted dichotomies while providing a useful tool for analyzing the workings of society through empirical investigation. In particular, habitus helps to resolve how social structure and individual agency can be reconciled. Bourdieu’s student, Bernard Lahire, is among those who recognize the utility of habitus while contesting a few central claims. This section will describe key aspects of habitus and Lahire’s contestations; it will also position habitus in relation to Bourdieu’s other conceptual tools, and discuss how habitus transcends different dichotomies.

Bourdieu defines habitus as a “structured and structuring structure” (1994, p. 170). Abstract as this description may read, it exhibits the complexity of this concept with remarkable simplicity. First, habitus is “structured” by one’s past and present circumstances. In particular, Bourdieu placed significant emphasis on how early socialization fundamentally and enduringly shapes habitus; a claim Lahire contests because context and current circumstances ought not to be outweighed by early socialization when analyzing social practices. Second, habitus is “structuring” because it shapes present and future practices, but exactly how remains a matter of debate. According to Bourdieu our practices and choices are unconsciously informed by habitus. Lahire, however, places less emphasis on the unconscious effect habitus has on our choices and greater importance on agency. In part this is because, unlike Bourdieu, Lahire considers our experiences during early socialization to be increasingly heterogeneous, suggesting that the settings in which Bourdieu gathered his data were more homogeneous. For the purposes of this discussion, it is enough to assert that Lahire considers the effects habitus has on our practices and choices to be less unconscious and increasingly contextual and individual. Lastly, habitus is “structure” in that it represents a systematically ordered set of dispositions that generate certain perceptions, appreciations, and practices (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Groups of people from the same ethnicity or geographical region often share similar, although not identical habituses or dispositional sets, which differ from those of others. Already we can see how, by defining habitus in this way, Bourdieu captures the dichotomies that he aims to disturb. Before exploring these dichotomies, I must first relate habitus to some of Bourdieu’s other conceptual tools: field and capital.

Bourdieu does not imply that habitus dictates our lives. Habitus is a structured (but not unchanging) set of dispositions; ways of acting, feeling, thinking, and being, which are informed by history and are in relation with field and capital. Field, in particular, is the other half of “an unconscious relationship” that informs practice, which is the product of this relationship between
dispositions (habitus) and one’s position (capital) temporally within a given social arena (field) (Maton, 2008, p. 51). In other words, the structured and structuring structure we now know as habitus, informs our choices and actions, thoughts and beliefs in specific ways (but not necessarily identical ways in every circumstance), depending on our individual position(s) in given contexts, spaces, and places. Bourdieu visually represented this relationship as follows: ((habitus)(capital)) + field = practice (as cited in Maton, 2008, p. 51). Essential to understanding habitus therefore is the fact that, in a way, it is evolving, but according to Bourdieu, and contested by Lahire, habitus remains highly influenced by early socialization while being a product of our history and to a lesser degree our current context. Far from a complete exploration of the inter-workings of Bourdieu’s conceptual tools, this brief paragraph illustrates how habitus is not set or fixed, but evolves while being influenced by highly enduring factors. For the purposes of the forthcoming analysis, it is necessary to briefly expand on Bourdieu’s concept of field.

Field refers to the various microcosms in which we live. We all exist and act in multiple fields, each with its own rules and regularities or prescribed and enforced norms. Enforcing these norms in each field establishes a structured space of positions; a sort of hierarchical structure with gatekeeper(s) concerned with preserving things as they are, or, using Bourdieu’s terms, preserving an existing distribution of capital. This structure also manifests a struggle to disrupt things as they are, making each field at once a “force field” of lasting and enforced norms, and a “battlefield” for capital and position within the hierarchy, as well as to disrupt the existing distribution of capital according to the enforced norms. A field emerges, develops, changes, and sometimes perishes, based on maintaining its own “criteria of evaluation” despite influences from neighboring and intruding fields. This is known as its degree of autonomy. A field therefore depends on individuals acting according to its rules and norms to remain autonomous. Fields, like habitus, are useful conceptual tools for thinking about and discussing how practical knowledge is communicated and maintained among group members, and habitus is useful in particular for understanding how practical knowledge gets embodied.

Habitus can also serve to transcend several dichotomies such as structure and agency, objective and subjective, and social and individual. As noted by Maton (2008, p. 53), habitus links the social and individual in that one’s unique experiences can sometimes be shared in their structure with others in the same social group (class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, etc.). Habitus also bridges the objective and the subjective, the inner and outer realities. According to Bourdieu, habitus is “a socialized subjectivity” and “the social embodied” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 127–128). Habitus transcends the dichotomy of the social and the individual, the objective and the subjective by “bringing together objective social structure and subjective personal experiences” (Maton, 2008, p. 53). Lastly, as a structured and structuring structure, habitus helps reconcile the structure and agency dichotomy by illustrating that
our practices are neither random nor entirely predetermined. To discuss the agency in our practices, Bourdieu uses the analogy of a game and notions of strategy. Each social field, including society in general, represents a field of struggles where, through time and experience, we cumulatively acquire a “feel for the game.” According to Bourdieu (1994, p. 63), “the habitus as the feel for the game is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature.” This means that our practices and choices are not necessarily conscious or rational calculations, but are often unconsciously informed by habitus. Lahire (2011), on the contrary, believes that in fact our choices and actions are not necessarily unconscious, but that we make these based on an inner logic that depends on context and a habitus that is durable, transferable, and transposable. “The present thus defines and delimits what of the embodied past can be actualized. . . . A change of context (professional, conjugal, familial, friendly, religious, political . . .) is a change in the forces that act on us” (Lahire, 2011, p. 56). Context, and the role this plays in informing one’s habitus, is the factor Lahire draws attention to when exploring one’s actions in relation to his/her habitus and socialization.

When analyzing young men’s choices concerning education, it is necessary to consider their present context within schooling and the field of education more broadly, as well as social class and familial context. There is evidence, beyond educational statistics, to suggest that the Portuguese in Canada are not achieving class mobility through education. Their relatively low socio-economic status is often overlooked as a result of their high levels of home ownership (Teixeira, 2006). To further contextualize the working-class field in relation to the Portuguese in Canada, Gomes’s (2008) qualitative thesis study revealed that Portuguese youth in Toronto considered traditional Portuguese values to include family, hard work, home ownership, income/money, traditional gender roles, and cultural retention through endogamy.6 These values can be located in various statistics on Portuguese youth in relation to education. Portuguese youth are among those who work the longest part-time hours, which leaves fewer hours to dedicate to homework or extra-curricular activities (Nunes, 2004). Meanwhile, young men see the consequences of dropping out of school mitigated by their families (Nunes, 2008). Youth continue to live at home after dropping out of school and, in many cases, access jobs via informal networks through the community, especially in the construction industry. Given this context, it is reasonable to explore the conflicting tensions these fields impose on the youth who inhabit them. For the young men of Portuguese ancestry in this study, the habitus they develop in the education system frequently conflicts with the working-class field and its players. The following section explores field-habitus interplay from the narratives of the participants.

A cultured habitus: Education within working-class families

For working-class youth, schooling presents a set of experiences that reconstructs their dispositions in ways that shift one’s habitus towards what
Bourdieu terms “a cultured habitus” (as cited in Reay, 2004, p. 434). As young people become more “educated” their habituses become more “cultured,” informing their dispositions and how they relate to others, or how they struggle to relate to, for example, those from their working-class communities: their parents, siblings, and friends, among others. Tensions arise when competing habituses, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, cause confusion or conflict externally with those around us or internally within ourselves. The following examples illustrate these “internal” and “external” tensions.

Mario is 28 and the youngest of four brothers of Portuguese ancestry, all of whom earned professional university degrees. Mario has tremendous respect for his brothers and parents who emigrated from continental Portugal, but he is bothered by what he sees as “insecurity” in his parents, specifically his father, who feels inferior to his educated sons because he lacks the formal education to validate his skills and intelligence. Mario shares the following typical exchange while dining at his parents’ home to explain how he has come to this conclusion:

I don’t know if it’s isolated to my dad, but there’s this insecurity with maybe parents, you know, I’m working at a construction site. Do I want [my kid] being not quote unquote smarter than me, being more educated? And there’s definitely that, my dad, even when we talk now, like we’re all professionals and my dad is like, (with a macho inflection in his voice) ‘Ah, I know business, I know business. I can keep up with you guys, blah, blah, blah.’ And it’s like, dad, we know you’re smart. We’re not trying to bring you down or anything. But, he feels like he has to be, you know, proving this or trying to put us down, not intentionally, he’s just insecure about it. So maybe there’s also that with other Portuguese parents. Like, they don’t want their kids getting to another stratosphere that they’re not at, or another level, and they kinda poke and nudge and hold them back. I don’t know if that’s the case, but I’ve definitely felt that with my dad. He’s always trying to overcompensate for, you know, making comments like, ‘ah, you know, just because I work here doesn’t mean I’m not smarter.’ And I’m like, dad, we know you’re smart. We know you had to do what you had to do. But you know, my dad could have easily gone to school and done something else, but he didn’t have that opportunity, he had to work, and that’s just how it was, and we all recognize it. But, he definitely has a little chip on his shoulder about that, that comes out here and there when we’re having discussions, you know. We’re having canon discussions or law discussions, and my dad will put his thoughts in, but he’ll be so aggressive about it, you know, because he feels insecure or not confident, that we’re laughing at him behind his back. We’re not; he just has this little chip about it.

The internal and external conflicts described in this passage illustrate competing habituses. The external conflict, which takes place at his parents’ home, resembling a working-class field, is between Mario and his father, who mobilizes his capital to exert power over his sons to maintain the distribution of capital that places him in a position of power over them. If their habituses were truly dissimilar, Mario, and his brothers, would likely not respond by reassuring his father of his intelligence. Although Mario’s education has considerably influenced his “cultured” habitus, he not only remains understanding of
the insecurity his father experiences, but is sympathetic towards it, despite his father’s attempt to dismiss his sons’ specialized knowledge. I argue that in this instance, Mario experiences a “field-habitus clash” (Maton, 2008, p. 59).

Bourdieu notes that those achieving social mobility are likely to experience field-habitus clash (Maton, 2008; Wacquant, 1998). Despite a few verbal jabs from his father, Mario admits that both his parents are very supportive of his and his brothers’ academic success. Why, then, does this conflict repeatedly arise? The habitus that would produce a “field-habitus match” between Mario, his brothers, and his father, is precisely that which all these men experienced in their early socialization within the family. Education, which has the effect of reducing the weight of what is abandoned to inherited dispositions, restructures Mario’s and his brothers’ habituses in a way that clashes with his father’s habitus. I do not imply that this is unique to Portuguese families in Canada, but I do suggest it remains common.

Given the importance of education for Mario and his family, the “degree” of field-habitus clash Mario experienced in his adolescence was relatively low (Maton, 2008). Not to dismiss the tension this clash brings to Mario’s relationship with his father, but, a greater degree of clash, particularly during Mario’s youth, may have changed his professional trajectory. As Maton (2008, p. 58) states, “our material conditions of existence . . . in turn shape our unconscious sense of the possible, probable and, crucially, desirable for us.” When the degree of field-habitus clash is greater, academic trajectories can be altered and resistance to the unimaginable fostered. Alternatively, one may abandon a field in which field-habitus clash is consistent, rendering it unbearable to remain in.

Carlos is a 30-year-old health researcher who emigrated with his parents from continental Portugal 21 years ago. He shared the following account that illustrates an intolerable degree of field-habitus clash, which is especially connected to notions of masculinity.

As a young child, instead of playing with trucks, I would play school. I would be a teacher. I would have my table and my imaginary pupils and stuff like that. My father would come in and slash the books off the table and say: *(with intense anger)* ‘No! Don’t do that! Go and do that!’ And he did this repeatedly until it came to a point where he had enough. He knew that I was going to be persistent and I was not going to lose that one happy moment in my life. And so, because of small things that I did, they learned quite quickly that I would be different from their [other] children so they treated me differently.

Carlos, who identifies as gay, performed gender roles typically associated with females. As a result, his position within the working-class field was entirely dominated both emotionally, as his account illustrates, and physically: “I was beaten by my two brothers and my parents never said anything. As a boy, my father would say: ‘that’s gonna make you a man.’” Carlos’s circumstances throughout his adolescence were undoubtedly extreme, but defiantly pursuing
education and abandoning his family and culture for a period of time remained a choice despite the emotional and physical abuse he endured. Contingent on the degree, therefore, field-habitus clash can radically inform choice and behavior. With respect to the young men of Portuguese ancestry in this study, education—specifically the disparity in levels of education between working-class fathers and their sons—proved to be a trigger for field-habitus clash and the arising familial conflict.

**Struggling in masculine silence: Resistance to help in the educational field**

In the field of education, young men of Portuguese ancestry struggle in silence. Bruno, a 28-year-old gay man struggling in the entertainment industry, is the only university graduate in his family. His parents immigrated to Toronto from the island of São Miguel, Azores. The following exchange illustrates the relationship between masculinity and help-seeking behavior.

D: Was there anything that you struggled with in school?
B: In elementary school, no. To be honest, I pretty much did extremely well in all my subjects. When I got to high school I started to struggle with Math, but when that was the case I dropped it after grade 10 anyways. Actually no, no I kept going with it, but I copied all my friend’s stuff. I didn’t really take the course, and I cheated like crazy in that class. But Math would be the one subject I had the most difficulty with. The ones I excelled the most in would be English and History.
D: Ok. So did you ever, in those subjects that you did struggle, in the Math, you say that you managed to make it through by borrowing knowledge from others. . .
B: Oh trust me it was cheating all the way.
D: But did you ever think about asking for help. . .
B: No, now that I think about it
D: . . .or talking to the teacher about struggling?
B: No.
D: How come?
B: Revelation, I never thought about that. I just never asked for help, I just thought I’d be able to do it on my own. Even when I knew I wasn’t able to do it on my own, I still would never approach the teacher for help.
D: Do you think that it’s perhaps part of masculinity to. . .
B: To try and do it yourself.
D: . . .not show one’s weaknesses and maybe not ask for help?
B: Yeah, I would definitely think so. I think you’re expected to do it yourself. No matter how difficult it is, you find a way to do it.
D: And when it comes to school, and you can’t find a way to do it. . .
B: I found a way. I cheated.

In many ways Bruno is lucky. As he admits, school never posed a challenge he could not overcome when left to his own devices, even if it meant cheating to pass. When faced with difficulty, Bruno persevered and found a way to get through it; however, his initial response to how he solved the problem of struggling in Math is of particular interest and it is symptomatic of what Bourdieu terms “symbolic domination” and “symbolic violence.” A critical aspect of Field Theory is Bourdieu’s explanation of how social
hierarchies of power and inequalities are maintained by means other than physical force. His realization was that systems of oppression, intended to exclude and reduce, are at the root of symbolic domination, and horrifically, education constitutes such a system (as cited in Schubert, 2008). The result of these forms of domination is symbolic violence, which is the insidious imposition of meaning or knowledge on the subordinate subject, intended to maintain hierarchies of power, and which is understood as universal or even natural. In practice, symbolic violence is illustrated by teachers’ generally low expectations of boys of Portuguese ancestry in school and the resultingly low expectations those boys and their parents have for their educational trajectories.

Bruno’s instinct to recall an event as he did (i.e., his response that he dropped the Math course in which he was struggling) may reveal a common, even default response learned as a result of symbolic domination. A few moments later in the same interview, Bruno says the following:

Yeah, I think that’s probably what leads so many Portuguese males, especially males, to drop out of school. Because, at least I found with my friends, they would never approach the teacher for help. It wasn’t just a ‘me’ thing, it was just a lot of males just never did. They would rather do it on their own, if they can’t do it on their own, then find something else to do, because clearly school isn’t something that you’re going to excel in. So find something that you are going to do well in.

As many scholars argue, systems of domination operate in the educational field, and consequently inform the habituses of the dominated in that field, for example, working-class youth. In fact, systems of domination operate in all fields. Inherent to a field is a competition for distribution of capital in which some individuals dominate and others are subordinate, or leave the field altogether. The problem lies in the fact that education is supposedly the great equalizer, yet this field continues to oppress. This appears particularly to be the case for boys of Portuguese ancestry in Toronto, and elsewhere, who, as Bruno claims, “find something else to do, because clearly school isn’t something that [they’re] going to excel in.”

The effects of generations of symbolic violence, along with a history of state depleted education in Portugal, are that violated subjects come to internalize this dominated subjectivity, in this case related to education, which informs a working-class habitus across generations. The son, whose immediate response to struggling in school is to find another life pursuit because he is not going to excel academically, is informed by a working-class habitus. The father, whose immediate response is to find his academically struggling son a job on the construction site, is informed by a habitus reconstructed by, among other experiences, symbolic violence within the educational field. Not all parents or children in all communities respond in this way. If in fact they did, even fewer racially and ethnically diverse individuals would achieve upward class mobility and occupy positions of influence.
Educational deselection: Who chooses to drop out?

To speak of school dropout in terms of choice is to appear unaware, or worse, in denial of the oppressive systems and policies that under-support and stream marginalize youth in our schools and the educational field in general (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992). Having raised the negative effects of symbolic domination and violence in the previous section, I trust that I neither appear unaware nor in denial that significant barriers exist to academic success for marginalized youth. Despite the fact that seven of the twelve participants in this study chose to continue with their education, nearly all of them expressed a wide variety of reasons that left them uncertain about whether pursuing education was the right path. Mario expressed that, with the exception of his oldest brother, education distanced him and his brothers from their Portuguese identity, and that this distance has impeded his and his other brothers’ ability to connect with their father and oldest brother. Mario admits that his brothers, not including his eldest, “feel like they need to associate more with their Canadian side—they don’t think their Portuguese side is going to help them as much in their fields.” Carlos commented that his appetite for formal education garnered him no respect from his parents, and that he was regularly compared with his older brother who paid little attention to school and exhibited masculine characteristics that Carlos did not. Despite excelling in school, Bruno remarked that other aspects of his adolescence generated the praise he desired from his parents, such as buying his first house. Schooling was all fine and well, but not having yielded a six-figure income, it was regarded as a waste of time. Without suggesting that their early socialization was entirely and exclusively filled with negative messages about education and schooling, how can we make sense of the conflict in relation to education that each of these participants reported?

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus suggests that their choices were informed by early socialization, and indeed this may be the case, but it is not the only factor informing choice. The debate between Bourdieu and Lahire, characterized by (un)conscious workings of habitus on our actions, is not an “either-or” debate. Notwithstanding structural and systemic oppression in the educational field, some element of choice coexists at the nexus of academic underachievement. The narratives explored in this paper, which deal with the effects of the educational field on family relationships and academic achievement, suggest that participants’ contexts and habituses both consciously and unconsciously inform the choices of these young men of Portuguese ancestry in ways that reveal educational deselection. The remainder of this paper will introduce the concept of educational deselection and how I bring Bourdieu’s and Lahire’s writings to bear on this concept.

Bruno’s reflection that his friends would never approach the teacher for help in school suggests that an attitudinal resistance towards help, in school at the very least, is not confined to the participants in this study. There was an understanding among the participants in this study that men do things on their
own, with specific exceptions for renovation jobs and generally anything physical that requires skilled or multiple hands. According to Bruno—and, in Bruno’s opinion, his friends—school work is understood as one of those things young Portuguese-Canadian men are expected to do on their own, which is further complicated because more than one participant expressed a sense that some young men are “cut out” for school and others are not. These findings indicate that habitus and context inform young men’s choices to select or deselect education. Habitus acts to inform the attitude of resistance to help-related resources in school, and more generally self-reliance, which directly informs participants’ perceptions of masculinity. On the other hand, elements of participants’ narratives that reveal context, specifically related to the educational field, illustrate the symbolic violence that is internalized by these youth, who believe that some youth are, and others are not “cut out” for school. In fact, most participants noted that, more often than not, people, including parents and especially teachers, expect Portuguese-Canadian youth to fall into the latter category. This example illustrates potential conscious and unconscious influences on youths’ choices to deselect education. Habitus works to inform unconscious notions of self-reliance that prevent youth from accessing academic help in school, and symbolic violence further reinforces educational deselection by imposing on these youth a seemingly natural order that they are not “cut out” for school, with which they consciously comply.

The consciousness that context imbues on habitus, which ultimately informs choice and behavior, is heightened in instances of field-habitus clash. It is not coincidental that Bourdieu referred to participants occupying a position between worlds as the greatest informants because they see things that for others remain unconscious (Bourdieu, 1999; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Mario is one such informant, having struggled through the field-habitus clash between his “cultured” and working-class habituses. Agents such as Mario have at their disposal dispositional sets that provide a variety of, but not unlimited, actions for a given context. In no way, however, does this diminish their struggle for capital in either field. In other words, one’s location in-between worlds, or in-between habituses, raises one’s consciousness that ultimately informs one’s behaviors, actions, and choices, as competing habituses will raise one’s consciousness. From his “cultured” habitus that is highly influenced by precisely the education that his father lacks, Mario is able to sympathize with his father’s insecurity surrounding his lack of education and resulting limited opportunities. Mario never deselected education for a variety of reasons, which I explore in other work (Pereira, 2011), but the tension and conflict his academic training raises between him and his father leaves him wondering if he made the right decision in pursuing education. A person in-between worlds can contemplate this tension, whereas someone who does not experience a field-habitus clash may be less likely to resist or question dropping out of school, or educational deselection.
Finally, comparing the experiences of the participants in this study with literature on other ethno-racialized youth reveals that race occupies varying levels of saliency for different groups of youth. Nearly all the participants in this study did not consider themselves racialized\(^8\) and did not identify as “people of color.” This differs vastly from, for instance, studies on Black youth (Dei, 1997; Hernandez-Ramdwar, 2009; James, 2009; James & Taylor, 2010; McCready, 2010; McKenzie, 2009; Smith & Lalonde, 2003) or Somali youth (Bigelow, 2009; Zine, 2008), whose participants articulate an awareness of the saliency of race in their lives as well as in individual and collective identities. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, many of the young men in this study acknowledged that teachers, more often than not, considered Portuguese-Canadian youth, particularly males, not to be “cut out” for school. What might this suggest about race and racialization within and about the Portuguese community in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada and the United States? How are male youth of Portuguese ancestry marginalized in ways that have not been named as a result of language that does not reflect their identities and geographic origins? These questions demand further comparative research into the lives and experiences of youth of Portuguese ancestry and other ethno-racialized populations.

On a path of (re)discovery: Framing masculinity to understand the choices of young men of Portuguese ancestry in Toronto

Research on academic underachievement in working-class communities remains relevant to this discussion. Bourdieu’s work offers useful tools and a meaningful lens through which to study the cultural and structural factors contributing to academic underachievement for these youth. Studies such as Nunes’s (1998) national needs assessment of the Portuguese community in Canada reveal many of these factors, including discrimination, economic and social conditions, as well as cultural values and expectations such as marriage, family, and home ownership, that contribute to youth educational underachievement. However, masculinity as a direct contributing factor to the educational trajectories of young men of Portuguese ancestry and how it informs their educational choices remains unexplored in studies on this population. With this paper, I seek to assert that these young men engage in complex processes to make choices about whether to end, suspend, or continue their education, and that these choices are both consciously and unconsciously partially informed by their perceptions of masculinity. Moreover, unlike past findings on minority youth academic underachievement and dropout (Connell, 1989; Ogbu, 1978, 1991; Willis, 1977), the choices made by the young men interviewed for this study do not appear to come from—nor do the participants consequently develop—an oppositional disposition or resistance to schooling.\(^9\) As Bruno put it, they just “find something else to do.”
Instead, masculinity plays a role in how these participants see their identities (mis)matching with certain educational trajectories. As a result, participants questioned the educational trajectories they chose. Of the twelve participants, the two who dropped out of school both regretted their decision, and the youngest of them was planning to return. Others questioned if continuing or completing their education was the right decision and whether they were further ahead in life as a result of completing their education. Many participants reflected on years of lost wages, the high cost of education resulting in debt for some, delaying the purchase of a home, or postponing marriage and raising a family. Very often, however, their uncertainty about having prioritized education focused on their parents’ disappointment that they were not earning a six-figure salary, which, not surprisingly, also informed notions of masculinity. As well as contributing to an understanding of educational trajectories nuanced in masculinity, this study alludes to how a masculinity and gender-relations framework is useful and could be employed to better understand Portuguese male youths’ career trajectories, familial relations, and community integration more generally.

This paper initiated an exploration and dialogue of masculinity as a factor contributing to boys’ academic underachievement and educational trajectories in Toronto’s Portuguese community in an attempt to widen the lens of investigation. The majority of the participants in this study achieved some level of academic success—in contrast to the one-in-three Portuguese-speaking youth in the Toronto District School Board who do not complete high school—yet their narratives nevertheless exposed an overall tension between academic success and other notions of success in their ethnic community; notions of success that are necessarily tied to notions of masculinity. While it is logical, given the working-class status of their community, to employ a class-based analysis to understand their experiences, I have critically analyzed hegemonic masculinity in relation to this class-based perspective to differently understand their experiences. As their narratives reveal, perceptions of masculinity can inform attitudes towards schooling and decisions concerning one’s educational trajectory. Thus far, attempts to understand the underachievement phenomenon facing Toronto’s Portuguese community have not produced or contributed to a considerable and sustainable solution. Future research must therefore continue to include a gender lens, with a focus on masculinities, to investigate boys’ underachievement, and specifically, which boys (under)achieve.

Whether high levels of academic underachievement even exist among Portuguese-speaking youth is debated within Toronto’s Portuguese community and ultimately divides many of its members. As a result, it is difficult to argue the need for a gender and masculinities analysis of an issue that many consider to not exist. In addition to studying academic underachievement through a lens of masculinities, I have also worked in Toronto’s Portuguese community as a critically engaged volunteer. Through my experiences in a tutoring program
targeting Portuguese youth in Toronto, the program staff and I have observed that fewer male students participate in the program and virtually no male students participate in organized field trips to college and university campuses. While these observations may indicate necessary structural or programmatic changes to this particular tutoring program, they may also suggest that many male youth have found something else to do, a decision, as this study indicates, that may be informed by their habitus and perceptions of masculinity. Investigating these questions with a singular class-based framework will continue to yield incomplete results that would be strengthened by a critical framing of gender and masculinities. Such knowledge can inform new and innovative ways of not only responding to the current and future educational and career needs of Portuguese youth, but also of ushering in a rediscovery of these under-researched youth.

Notes
1 The pilot project was conducted through an intensive course on qualitative methodologies that involved research design and data collection using a qualitative methodology covered in the course. Given the course-related time restrictions (January-April 2010), the pilot project included interviews with four male participants, between 19 and 24 years of age, on themes of masculinity and sexuality in Toronto’s Portuguese community. The research towards the Master’s thesis added eight interviews for a total of twelve participants.
2 For this study, I did not recruit boys enrolled in schools for several pragmatic reasons, including the following: time restrictions, ethical considerations when working with minors and requiring additional consent from parents, access to youth, and the general difficulty of finding interested participants. By recruiting more mature participants between the ages of 18–37, the sample did not involve a sensitive population and the interviews were more reflexive. This allowed participants to revisit their educational experiences and reflect on how masculinity may have affected their academic achievement and their attitudes towards schooling and education.
3 While habitus has its origins in the works of Marcel Mauss, Edmund Husserl, Max Weber, and Norbert Elias, Bourdieu’s conceptual articulation and use of habitus are commonly cited in literature on education, among other fields.
4 Within the context of this paper, an extensive review of the literature on masculinity is not possible. However, in addition to the seminal works of Connell (1989, 2005), see also the work of Archer & Yamashita (2003), Greig (2012), James (2009), and McCready (2010), among others, on how masculinity intersects with different social categories.
5 The unpublished Master’s theses by Gomes (2008) and Pacheco (2004) also highlight the ethno-racial tensions and marginalization experienced by Portuguese-Canadian youth.
7 Participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms to protect their privacy and to remain anonymous.
8 Some participants in this study occupied a non-White/White dichotomy which they used to their advantage, depending on the circumstances, to differentiate themselves and their culture from dominant society, highlighting their uniqueness and cultural and ethnic pride. See also the sources provided in endnote 5.
9 Adding to this claim are the voices of superintendents and other administrators included on the Portuguese-speaking Advisory Committee of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) who insist that Portuguese youth in TDSB schools are generally well behaved and polite in class and do not cause trouble in school.
References


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