



The Discourse of Self-Actualization under the Influence of Academic Institutional Framework and Social Background Comparing Students' Narratives in French and American Elite and Non-Elite Universities

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Abstract

When discussing important life choices, such as choice of occupation or choice of study, explanations referring to one's self-actualization, in other words to one's innermost wishes and potential rather than external constraints and expectations, appear to be highly valued within contemporary western societies. In my PhD research project, I studied the extent to which this is indeed and uniformly the case among students; asking whether this explanation is not, rather, part of a discourse that is learned within specific institutional contexts and social environments, and may thus contribute to mechanisms of inequality reproduction. To address this question, I compared narratives of students (a) in American and French universities, (b) in prestigious and less-prestigious universities and (c) from different social backgrounds. The research methods are of a qualitative nature: students' narratives were collected by means of forty-three in-depth interviews which I completed with engineering and natural sciences students from different social backgrounds in four selected universities; they were compared with the institutional incentives captured in universities' mission statements and selection processes. The interview analysis confirmed the hypothesized influence of academic institutions and social background on students' discourse (independently of their actions or experiences) and especially on their use of the apparently very personal self-actualization narrative, for issues such as their choice of study, their priorities in life or their projections for their future. In short, the prestigious American university was the only institution that intensively and successfully encouraged its students to develop a self-actualization discourse, and upper-class students had a relatively greater tendency to develop a self-actualization discourse than middle-class students when facing the same institutional incentives. These findings shed new light on the concept of self-actualization presented by humanistic psychology as the ultimate personal need and goal. Moreover, they are in line with some results of recent studies in the field of cultural psychology (Bowman, Kitayama, and Nisbett 2009; Kohn et al.

1990; Snibbe and Markus 2005) and in the field of comparative cultural sociology (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Lamont 1992, 2000); they corroborate recent findings in sociological research on students in higher education (Lamont, Kaufman, and Moody 2000; Mullen 2010); and they resonate with Basil Bernstein's socio-linguistic findings on socially distributed linguistic codes and personal constructs (1975). Considering that the self-actualization discourse may very well have become a selection criterion in western societies and particularly in the western business world, these empirical observations may be socially relevant in that they may highlight not only purely discursive differences, but also possible discursive advantages in the job market for those who master the self-actualization discourse.



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Bio Frederic Renkens is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence. His doctoral research focuses on the narratives of French and American students in natural and engineering sciences. More specifically, he is interested in the influence of different academic institutional frameworks and social backgrounds on students' recourse to a self-actualization logic in their narratives about their college time experiences, their educational choices and their professional future. During his graduate studies at the EUI, he spent eight months at the Harvard Kennedy School as a visiting research fellow. Frederic holds a Master of Research in Sociology from the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris and a Master in Engineering from the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. He has a passion for nature and outside activities.