

What Motivates Students to
Pursue Higher Education?
Applying *Habitus* and
Rational Choice Theory to
Graduate Student Experiences

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Introduction

There has been much written about higher education in terms of student's obtaining undergraduate bachelor degrees. However, there has been little written about the pursuit of graduate degrees. Seeing that graduate students account for about one-third of all students pursuing higher education (Mullen *et al.*, 2003:143), the experiences of graduate students have been under researched. This paper will address graduate students' experiences with higher education. Not only will it discuss higher education more generally it will focus attention on the pursuit of graduate degrees. Specifically this paper will examine two major theories within the *Sociology of Education*: habitus and rational choice theory. These theories are often used when examining the reasons why students attend university to obtain undergraduate degrees. However, I will be also be applying these theories to graduate studies. I will use the experiences of my graduate student peers to illustrate the concepts and theories about attending higher education. The goal of this paper is to apply relevant theories and concepts to peoples' lived experiences about what motivated them to attend higher education in the first place and then subsequently to pursue graduate studies.

As our *Sociology of Education* course examined we are in an era of higher educational expansion. In Canada 41 % of our labour force who are 25 years and older have either a post-secondary degree or diploma (Cote & Allahar,2007:3). Higher education is expected to continue to grow. "It is likely that by 2125, post-secondary schooling will be as nearly universal as secondary schooling is today, encompassing about 90 percent of the age cohort" (Gamoran, 2001:144-5). Some go as far as to refer to this expansion as a hyper-expansion (Schofer and Meyer, 2005:900). Such an expansion should not only

effect undergraduate programs but also should trickle into higher levels of education and have an effect on graduate programs as well.

Functionalist arguments suggest that “the expansion of higher education is strongly affected by national economic development” (Schofer and Meyer, 2005:900) where higher education expands as country’s economic base develops. Functionalists also believe that as higher education grows in “core countries it aids in co-ordination and controlling relationships in the world” (Schofer and Meyer, 2005:900). However, Schofer and Meyer suggest that the expansion is not due alone to economic development.

The conflict argument is that “as education becomes important in the attainment of social status, groups and individuals compete more intensively for success in education” causing higher education to expand (Schofer and Meyer, 2005:900). Here the elite group is using education to “perpetuate the dominance of their status-group culture” (Schofer and Meyer, 2005:900). While functionalists believe the expansion is due to economic development, conflict theorists assert that higher education expands due to competition for social status. Despite which theoretical perspective we adhere to, the fact that higher education is rapidly expanding is agreed upon by all theoretical perspectives.

The expansion of higher education has had at least two interesting impacts on the education itself. Both specialization and the importance of knowledge are emphasized as shifts resulting from this growth.

The most rapid growth in higher education was in the large research-oriented universities that turned out P.h.D.'s on one hand, and in the community or junior colleges offering occupationally relevant training on the other. As higher education expanded, therefore, its traditional emphasis on a general and humane education was replaced with more stress on the preparation of *specialists*, from research scientists to x-ray technicians. (Hurn, 1993:77)

Not only has specialization been key within the new emphasis on higher education, so too is the importance of knowledge and specifically on creating new knowledge in all fields, developing competence among students, and teaching them to reason and solve problems in rational ways. "Parsons saw the expansion of the U.S. university as part of an evolutionary trend toward the greater importance of knowledge in ordering and organizing human society. Universities produce new knowledge that makes it possible for societies to increase their control over their long-term fate, and hence their adaptive capacity" (Hurn, 1993:77). It could be argued that creating *specialized knowledge*, within universities, begins in graduate school.

The fact that higher education has been and still is in an "expansion mode" remains uncontested. The enrolment statistics of colleges and universities, in Canada and in other developed countries, illustrate that more and more people are attending post-secondary education. What I am interested in examining in this paper is *why* students attend university. What motivates, influences, and persuades students, from highschool, to enter university? Furthermore, what influences their decisions to remain or return to university to complete graduate degrees?

Methodology

This paper should be seen as a pilot study into the feasibility of this as a future research topic. In order to assess this topic as a possible future research endeavour I set out to ask my peers about their experiences with higher education. I wanted to be able to tie my peers' experiences together with some of the sociological theories and concepts on this topic. My peers' experiences are used as a way of illustrating rather than *proving* or *disproving* the theories or concepts presented. Because this is a very small and narrow pilot study my findings should not be assumed to *answer* the research question but to rather test the feasibility of the research question and the theories and concepts. In addition, because this was a feasibility project I have avoided the "methodological" terminology (e.g. "interviews," "respondents", "sample" etc.) usually associated with empirical research. This has been done to avoid any ethical ramifications.

Between March 16, 2009 and April 1, 2009 I sat down and spoke with ("interviewed" if you like) ten of my graduate student peers in Sociology at the University of Waterloo.

Table 1 shows you the basic information about my peers.

Table 1: Peer Participants

	Alias	Sex	Program	Year	Age	Parent's Highest Education*
1	Leanne	F	PhD	1	29	F: BA / M: HS
2	Christie	F	PhD	1	28	F: ABD / M: BA
3	Mandy	F	MA	1	24	F: BA / M: CV
4	Becky	F	PhD	2	40	F: HS / M: HS
5	Wanda	F	MA	1	27	F: PhD / M: HS
6	Shannon	F	MA	1	26	F: BA / M: BA
6	Carol	F	PhD	4	34	F: Gr.11 / M: HS
8	Luke	M	MA	1	25	F: HS / M: HS
9	Samuel	M	PhD	2	37	F: HS / M: CV
10	Don	M	PhD	5+	33	F: CV / M: CV

* F: Father / M: Mother / HS: Highschool / C: College/Vocational Training / BA: Bachelor's Degree / MA: Master's Degree / ABD: all of a PhD but the dissertation / PhD: Doctorate Degree

As you can see from the table, I spoke with six PhD students or candidates and four first year Master's students. I spoke with three men and seven women. Each of my peers has been given an alias to ensure their anonymity in this paper. My conversations with my peer participants were audio recorded (with their permission) and I transcribed portions of our conversations. The recorded parts of the conversations (not including the pre and post friendly chats that occurred) lasted between 12 and 29 minutes. The average conversation took 21 minutes. I imported the partial transcripts into NVivo 8 and coded the conversation notes according to the relevant theories and concepts as well as additional themes that emerged during the conversations.

The interviews consisted of two open ended questions and numerous probes. First I began by asking (in differing versions): "What motivated you to attend university after highschool?" Probes included: "What was the process like?" "What types of things did you consider?" "Who influenced you?" "How did you make the decisions?" After the conversation about undergraduate degrees had been exhausted I moved into my second question (with differing versions): "What motivated you to go onto graduate school?" Here probing questions were similar: "What did you consider?" "Did anyone influence you?" "What type of things did you consider?" "Did you take time off after your undergraduate degree?" "How did you decide to continue on?" (etc.). Conversations with PhD students/candidates went into the experiences with deciding to continue after the master's degree into the PhD program.

Overall, conversations were very open-ended, unstructured and since I was interviewing Sociology students who are familiar with me *and* the methodology behind interviewing, my peers were able to give me rich descriptions with minimal probing needed. I ended all conversations with asking two closing questions. First, I asked, “if we call your time since high school your ‘higher education trajectory,’ is there anything you would change about it?” Secondly, I ended all conversations with, “What, about your schooling, are you most excited about for the future?” Interviews ended on a positive note and I thanked my peers for their time in talking with me.

Pushing, Pulling, and Jumping into Higher Education

Cote and Allahar (2007:40) discuss the push and pull factors that influence a student to attend higher education. They explain that those students who make the ‘free choice’ to attend university for the sake of learning are those who are *pulled* into university. The two factors that pull students into university are: (1) a humanitarian motive by young people who want to learn enough so they can have an impact on their society and (2) young people who want to improve their own intellect and/or personality (2007:146).

Whereas, those students who attend university because of pressures for reasons other than the pure joy of learning are being *pushed* into university. The factors that push them into university are (1) expectations by family and friends and (2) attending because they do not know what else to do (2007:145). These authors argue that students are pushed along throughout each level of education and this occurs within the university system as well (2007:40). The push and/or pull factors for attending higher education can be considered an introductory way of looking at what makes students pursue higher education.

In regards to this very discussion, Diego Gambetta (1987) wrote a book called *Were they Pushed or Did they Jump? Individual Decision Mechanisms in Education*. In his examination of the topic he looks at the push and pull factors in a different way. He lays out his push and pull factors as a student either being *pushed* into university because of a sense of habitus or rather *jumping* (being *pulled*) into university because of a calculated choice that the student has made. He poses the question: “to what extent is it more realistic to think of educational decisions as, so to speak, non-decisions, as pure individual manifestations of social forces that constrain or act ‘behind the scenes’ of agents, or whether it is rather the case the people act rationally and try to act according to what they genuinely want?” (Gambetta, 1987:2-3). It is this distinction that I wish to be the focus of my paper: were my peers pushed or did they jump into higher education and graduate studies?

Habitus

I would like to begin with the *push* side of the debate, as Gamoran (1987) does. This explanation suggests that people do **not** make rational calculated decisions to attend higher education but rather the action to attend is determined by one’s habitus. The concept of habitus was developed, at length, by Peirre Bourdieu (1984) and has since been applied to the pursuit of higher education. For Bourdieu, habitus “functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space toward the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or good which befit the occupants of that position” (Bourdieu, 1984:466). This “sense” guides our actions. He explains that, “the habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving

perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application –beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt- of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions” (Bourdieu, 1984:170). Here Bourdieu suggests that habitus is internalized and manifests itself in a systematic way in our lives. Furthermore, Bourdieu says that the “the schemes of habitus, . . . owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by will” (Bourdieu, 1984:466). Our habitus operates unconsciously directing us towards appropriate actions. Because Bourdieu is a complicated read more of his concept of habitus can be understood by looking to other theorists.

“In general, this perspective emphasizes how our social upbringing shape our preferences, and which options we may find enticing, impossible, or unacceptable. In Bourdieu’s terms, people’s past experiences and current social positions (or “habitus”) encourage them to ‘come to terms’ with their circumstances and adjust their expectations to what is ‘realistic.’” (Davies and Maldonado, 2009:165). Stevens (2008:103) defines habitus “as class-specific ways of seeing, consuming, acting, and feeling that instantiate class in sentient human subjects.” Davies and Maldonado (2009:164) elaborate: “people’s perceptions are rooted in their pre-existing dispositions and surrounding influences. This tradition de-emphasizes the strategic and calculating aspect of social actions, and instead focuses on its more habitual and instinctive qualities.” Further still, for Gambetta, “broadly speaking, it assumes that a given piece of behaviour follows from causes, either social or psychological, that are opaque to the individual consciousness

and, by acting *behind their backs*, push the agents towards a given course of action” (Gambetta, 1987:11). The theory of habitus suggests that people make unconscious decisions that *push* them towards their actions.

Based on my understanding from what I’ve read in conjunction with lecture notes, posted online from Professor Robert Keel (2009), which I have adapted, I summarize Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as follows:

- Habitus is a mental / cognitive structure used to deal with the world
- It includes internalized schemes (recipes) that are used to define, interpret, evaluate, and judge.
- Habitus is an internalized structure that reflects: class, age, gender, etc.
- It varies based on objective position in the world. The same position would create a similar habitus
- Habitus is collective, yet individualized.
- It develops over time.
- It provides the practical skills and dispositions necessary to navigate within different fields of life (such as professional life, hobbies etc.)
- Habitus guides the choices of the individual without ever being strictly reducible to prescribed or formal rules.
- It is constantly remade by these navigations and choices (including the success or failure of previous actions)
- Habitus constrains and directs thought and choice of action while does not determine them
- Habitus is adapted by people based on the changing and contradictory circumstances in which they find themselves.
- Habitus is not under conscious control. It is manifest in our everyday behaviour, it is a structure through which we operate.

Habitus in terms of the motivation for attending higher education would say that one’s decision to attend was not a cognitive decision at all. They were *pushed* into university *from behind*. For some students the decision (if you can call it that) to attend university was a habitual one. Based on my conversations, I have chosen to illustrate the concept of habitus using my peer’s experiences with their undergraduate degree. Habitus appears to

push students into pursuing an undergraduate degree more so than a graduate degree. It seems that it was a common situation, among my peers, to experience the transition from highschool to university in a habitual way.

I don't think I ever really made the decision [to go to university]. I think it was just kind of assumed like when you finished highschool, you go to university. It was more a decision of where I want to go and what I want to study than should I go to university completing? Neither of my parents really pressured me into it. It was a sort of generally accepted that's what you're going to do . . . it was more sort of a broader ... maybe sort of family culture kind of idea. My older brother was in university, my older cousin was in university and it was just what you do. (Christie)

From what I remember that's pretty much what we just did. It was just assumed that you would go [to university]. There was no talk of options. In highschool there were two streams. And if you were in the higher stream, then it was automatic that you would go to university. There was no discussion of other alternatives. (Leanne)

In highschool I had already had the idea that I was going to be going to university. My parents had strongly encouraged me to go. The cousins on my mother's side had all gone to university so it was kind of expected that I would go for something. It was always expected that I was going to go. It was never an issue . . . I went to university based on the fact that it was expected of me. (Luke)

I knew since I was a kid that I would be going to university. It wasn't so much of a personal choice like "I want to go to university not college." It was more a function of my parents saying "highschool, university, marriage, job." They had a pretty set path for us. They tried to influence us as children that that's what we should be doing. And they would always tell us, me and my siblings, that it was important that as women we should be able to support ourselves even if we get married, if anything should happen they want us to be able to take care of ourselves and want us to have the best education. So going through middle school and high school I already had a plan to go to university. (Mandy)

I never considered doing anything but go to university from highschool. It was very much inculcated in our family culture that that is just what you do. You grow up, you graduate from highschool, and after highschool you go to university. So it's not something that I gave thought to. I mean I gave a lot of thought to which university, which program, that's a whole other area but the decision wasn't a really deliberate one. (Shannon)

It was never really a decision that I made. Well obviously I'm going to go to university. It was never a question of yes or no it just was what it was going to be. It was assumed by my parents, by my self, [and] by my peers. (Wanda)

These quotes highlight that several of my peers experienced the action (“decision”) to go to university after completing highschool on a habitual level. Rather than a calculated decision these people grew up with messages and were socialized into ways of thinking that lead (or *pushed*) them to unconsciously *choose* to attend university. Based on my conversations, I did not find any confirmation that my peers experienced their move into graduate school on a habitual level. The motivations to attend graduate school seem to follow along the rational choice theory described below.

Cote and Allahar (2007:121) suggest that students who come from elite families (whose financial futures are more certain) treat a university education as a stage in the life course rather than a decision to be made that is tied to future job prospects. “College is simply the next in a series of stages leading to membership in a productive society . . . college is just what one does, as automatic as sex, marriage, child rearing, and buying a house.”

Although I can not speak to the class background in which my peers grew up, the conversations with them seem to suggest a similar pattern: that highschool leads to university which leads to jobs (and sometimes marriage and a family in Mandy’s case) as part of an assumed and accepted life-path. It seems that habitus is an important way that students may experience the motivation to attend higher education, especially in terms of pursuing undergraduate degrees.

“Rational Choice Theory” - Human Capital Theory – Cost/Benefit Analysis

On the *pull* or *jump* side of the argument is the “rational choice theory” (RAT). It is one of the most important concepts to discuss when looking at the motivations for attending higher education. Generally, this theory would assert that students are *pulled* or *jump* into university of their own volition after making a calculated and informed decision. In this section of the paper I will describe the theory and then look at the factors that influenced the decision to attend grad school for my peers as a way of applying RAT in a concrete manner.

In the RAT perspective students (likely with the help of their parents, family, friends and ideally guidance counselors etc.) are said to make a choice about attending university or college based on a calculation of the costs and potential benefits. This perspective can also be called a “cost/benefit analysis,” “human capital theory,” or the “rational-intentional approach” (Gambetta, 1987:17). The analysis is not all about economic considerations but more generally that students want to maximize their returns from schooling (Davies and Hammack, 2005:93). Beattie describes human capital theory as “individuals are posited to make decisions to continue or terminate their education on the basis of the increases in income, skills, and knowledge they can expect from each additional year of education, net of the opportunity costs of staying in school, including lost wages and out-of-pocket costs, such as tuition” (Beattie, 2002:20). John Goldthorpe is a well-known Sociologist who has written much about the pursuit of higher education using a RAT approach (1996, 2008). He offers additional considerations within RAT that are discussed towards the end of this paper.

Davies and Maldonado (2009:164) assert that “people make educational decisions by calculating its costs, its anticipated benefits, their probability of success, and the attractiveness of alternative options.” This is an important consideration when discussing the motivations for attending higher education. The questions a student would pose when making such a decision might be: Will my degree/diploma pay off? How much will it cost? What type of job can I get when I am finished? Is it worth it? What are my *other* options? Some of these questions are considered below.

Conversely Gamoran (2001) suggests that with education being so accessible now, not attending university at all is hardly even a consideration. He proposes that the only cost consideration is what *type* of institution to attend. “As young people reach upper secondary education and beyond, issues of foregone income and cost also come into play. However, post secondary education is so widely accessible now that although cost may affect the type of institution in which a person enrolls, it is a less salient consideration for whether one attends post secondary schooling at all” (Gamoran, 2001:144). Fields of study and type of institution come into the equation of the costs and benefits of attending higher education.

Factors That Influence Graduate School Attendance

The conversations with my peers revealed some factors that influenced their decision to attend (or even to continue in) graduate school. Overall, I found that my peers did make more calculated decisions to attend graduate school than they did in regards to beginning university and pursuing an undergraduate degree. They did not experience the transition

to graduate school in a habitual way but rather in a more intentional manner. If students make a calculated rational choice when it comes to attending graduate school what factors into the equation? It would seem that there were many factors that motivated my peers to attend graduate school: something to do, lack of alternatives, funding and scholarships, career prospects, being smart enough, influence by others, personal enjoyment, the appeal of graduate culture, prestige and the recognition of credentials. I will examine each one as an example of what factors may become part of a cost/benefit analysis for my peers in terms of their decision to pursue or continue in graduate school.

Buying Time – “Something to Do”

One reason young people may choose to attend college or university is to give them something to do. Higher education “can be seen in part as a way of accommodating a large population that would otherwise remain idle” (Hurn, 1993:98). Young adults are seen as surplus so keeping them in school longer gives them something to do, that is seen as legitimate. Cote and Allahar (2007:131) suggest that some of the burden falls on professors. Professors “have been given the task of keeping large numbers of unemployable young people busy – providing a delay from adulthood for them” and forcing them to accommodate more and more disengaged students who do not really want to be attending higher education. Rather than being idle and too “unprepared” and “unqualified” to join the work-force, pushes some students into higher education. For my peers this idea of grad school being *something to do* to fill time came across in my conversations a few times. In addition, the idea of *buying time* to make decisions about one’s future were noted.

So I came back from a year of volunteering and I got married right away and I didn't know what to do with myself but I knew I wanted to apply to grad school. (Shannon)

The main reason I decided to start my master's was honestly for something to do. Something to do until I made my career decision. I had come into university with the understanding I would go to law school and then when I was leaving university I had the idea that I didn't want to do law school. And I hadn't come up with a contingency plan. What would I do otherwise? . . . I would consider doing my PhD after my master's for something to do. Because, again, I haven't decided what I want to do after my master's. (Mandy)

I knew I kind of wasn't really keen on going out into the real world yet. (Christie)

I was in the honours program so we were being streamlined into applying for graduate school. And what else would I do if I stopped? I'd just sit at home. And it interested me. It excited me. When I applied I wanted to do it, I wanted to get in. When the opportunity arose I took it because there was nothing else for me to do. (Becky)

The other thing too is the longer I'm in school the longer I delay having to get married. My culture is arranged marriages. My parents would always say to me finish school, get married. And I don't believe in arranged marriages so it's always been a conflict for us. So the longer I am in school, 4 or 5 years, I don't have to deal with this situation. Then when I'm prepared to deal with this situation I will have all the credentials I need to go anywhere I want to go. (Mandy)

Attending graduate school affords some students additional time to make life or career decisions. It gives these university graduates something to do until such decisions are made.

Lack of Alternatives

In close conjunction with graduate school giving people something “legitimate” to do with their time, some of my peers experienced a lack of alternatives. A factor that may have become important during their decision process to attend graduate school was not having other options available to them.

I never ever ever ever would I have said that I wanted a PhD, I never thought I would do a PhD, especially after I wrote my master's thesis. I felt like this was over. But I felt like there was no other option. I had this HUGE student loan and no way to pay it back. (Carol)

... But reality struck that I hadn't decided on a profession so I chose the next best thing [the PhD program]. Realistically I knew I would have to do a PhD but I was still navigating through my options in terms of my career. It's very difficult b/c I didn't know what was out there that I could do. In Sociology you're really limited. So I knew that I was going to have to do a PhD. But I just wasn't sure that was the direction I wanted to take. But once I finished my thesis I felt like I had solidified in my mind what I wanted to do [the PhD]. (Leanne)

My parents had always encouraged me to always keep my options open and never close doors when you don't know what's up. So at the end of last year I was applying to teaching positions in the province and also abroad. But along with those, knowing that, well my Dad has always been keen on me going to grad school, but knowing the situation with hiring for teachers I thought I should also put in an application for grad schools so if I didn't get a teaching position I'd have another option. (Wanda)

The idea that some students may pursue graduate degrees as something to do in the face of having limited alternatives may be a factor in some student's calculations about whether to attend graduate school or not.

Economic Factors - Funding & Scholarships

In Canada, generally tuition costs remain relatively equal across universities. However, tuition can vary depending on the field of study. Professional schools, graduate professional programs such as MBA and even within undergraduate engineering programs are known to have higher tuition than general arts and science programs. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for university graduates to return to community college seeking a lower vocational designation after completing a bachelor's degree. Thus, potentially adding more costs/debts to one's educational attainment. "This illustrates how the name brand of a university can have a lesser payoff than does a lucrative field of

study in the Canadian job market” (Davies and Hammack, 2005:97). While I only spoke with arts students in Sociology, this suggests that those entering certain prestigious fields of study have more cost/benefit analysis to do because while their programs may be more expensive, it may payoff more/sooner than less prestigious and less expensive fields of study.

While RAT is not just about economic concerns they do become an important part of the cost/benefit analysis conducted by some students when considering graduate programs and *which* graduate schools. For some of my Sociology graduate student peers, what mattered most in terms of economics was access to funding (in the form of teaching assistantships (TA’s) or research assistantships (RA’s)) and access to scholarship money. This was a key factor in some of my peer’s decision to attend graduate school and specifically to attend at the University of Waterloo.

When I brought my acceptance letter into my old school they were very impressed. They couldn't believe the package because I guess they hadn't had any other students get that much money before. It might be the norm in Ontario to get that much money but it's not in the poor provinces. So they were very excited and I think that helped my decision to come here. (Becky)

Funding was a huge part of it. I was coming out with a degree but most people know now that a sociology degree without a next degree, doesn't, the jobs weren't paying anything so I knew that I was going to be funded, not a lot, but funded enough and that OSAP was still going to make up for what I wasn't funded for. So I wasn't afraid of funds anymore. Had I found a job that paid more, I wouldn't have stayed to do my master's. (Carol)

But I felt like there was no other option. I had this HUGE student loan and no way to pay it back. And so continuing to go to school kept the student loan at bay and I assumed would give me more earning potential to pay it off. I would say my main motivation for starting the PhD was money. It was really really about money. (Carol)

If I didn't have [SSHRC] funding, I don't know, I think I might still do it . . . My student loans are pretty huge so that would be a hindrance and I'm not sure what I would do with that. But having funding, definitely makes that decision easier. Like it's not a question of that, especially in this economy. If I stay here I am guaranteed funding for a couple years so that's cool. (Christie)

Funding played a part of me deciding to come to UW. (Luke)

Because I'm married I don't really have to worry about supporting myself or anything like that. I didn't have to work. If I had to go out and work then I probably wouldn't be here but I don't have to work, I have the luxury of not working. So I can be here and I enjoy it here. (Becky)

I didn't have money saved to come here so I didn't have much money and the scholarship and TA promises they were key in me coming here. (Samuel)

Here I was offered lots of funding and I could live at home and then not have to worry about rent and those kinds of things. And my partner is in Waterloo this year so that's handy. So it was a lot of outside factors that helped me decide. (Wanda)

Also, the idea of future earning potential was a factor for one peer who said,

If you get a university position of some sort, once you get tenure, you're making decent money. I mean that factors in. You haven't worked all this bloody time to make \$16 an hour or something so money is definitely a factor. (Leanne)

The economic consideration for attending graduate school (for my Sociology peers) was access to various types of funding. This played a role in some students deciding to pursue graduate studies at the University of Waterloo.

Job & Career Prospects

Cote and Allahar (2007:60) say that, in general, people will reap financial rewards from education. Those who have highschool diplomas will make more than those who do not; those with undergraduate degrees will earn more than those without etc.. We can assume they would argue that those with graduate degrees would out earn those with

undergraduate degrees. However, the problem, they say, is that students are guided to set their sights unrealistically high that their educational pursuits do not ‘pay off’ as much as they had expected them to. The authors do not say if this is the same situation for graduate degrees. Do graduate students set their expectations for job prospects and earning potential unrealistically high? This question remains unanswered. My peers seem to be under the impression that having a graduate degree will *help them out* in terms of job prospects. Below is what some of them had to say in regards to their thinking about job prospects after completing their graduate degrees. It suggests that the prospect for an enjoyable career plays a role in motivating my peers to attend and continue in graduate school.

Once I finished my MA I pretty much knew I would stay in Academia. But during my MA, one minute I thought I would go into the private sector and the next that I would stay in the academic setting. I was torn: work for the government, find some wonderful job out there. But reality struck that I hadn't decided on a profession so I chose the next best thing [the PhD program]. Now my goal is to struggle through the PhD program and become a professor I guess. I want to teach, I hate the research part. I would rather teach than research. Personally I think that's where the emphasis should be placed but that's my own opinion. But that's where I'm going with this. (Leanne)

I see myself being able to get a PhD and then pursuing a non-academic field such a policy work or working for a think-tank, a policy based think-tank. (Luke)

After my Master's I'd like to do my PhD if I can. I'd at least like to and see if I have what it takes to be a professor, to do the writing, and to do the conference presentations and all the stuff that goes with it. At the end of the day I love teaching, I like being in front of groups of people, I like reading, I like writing. And so it just seems like being a professor would be a good fit in many ways. And I love university culture. (Shannon)

But I have this inferiority complex that I would never be considered for a faculty position but of course I'll apply for faculty positions and hopefully I will

get one. Now that I'm here.... that's what you do with a degree in sociology isn't it? (Becky)

And if I like it, I can stick with it, go onto the PhD, hopefully get a professorship and then there is my job. (Mandy)

I thought this seems like a good career choice. Again, it was the intrinsic value of being able to explore the types of questions about human behaviour I was interested in. It was a chance to continue on with that exploration. But then I also knew the instrumental value that having a PhD and then perhaps becoming a university professor was a pretty darn good gig. You had lots of flexible time, you're paid well, you're not paid high, but you're paid well. And you have one of the most secure occupations, or secure jobs in the world. You rarely hear of faculty members, who are tenure track being laid off or fired, or universities closing for that matter. So it was a mix of both intrinsic and instrumental reasons for pursuing the PhD. I think it's more the intrinsic over the other. (Don)

While it may not have been their goal at the outset, these peers are mostly pursuing graduate students with the idea of professorship as an enjoyable and/or positive and/or feasible career prospect. This was likely a factor that they took into consideration for attending graduate school or for remaining in their graduate program.

Cote and Allahar (2007:17) suggest that “PhDs are degrees that certifies them [the degree holders] primarily as researchers, not as teachers.” I find it interesting that among my peers who did mention it (as Leanna and Shannon did above), that teaching *is* seen as their main goal with the professorship career. Samuel concurs:

I eventually realized that I gotta promote more critical thinking skills than what is taught in highschool. So I thought maybe I'd be better off suited teaching at university. So this whole PhD was a long-term goal and it revolves around teaching. And having experience, practical experience. That was very important to me. It's all about doing my own curriculum and making up my own courses. (Samuel)

Conversely, for Don, being able to conduct research motivates him into pursuing a career as a professor.

I didn't go and do my PhD just so I can teach. I think teaching is fantastic, exciting and thrilled (etc.) but teaching is not the only thing I went to get a PhD for. I don't want to be a position where I am only teaching. The research part is of the utmost importance. (Don)

Whether the importance and preference lies within teaching or within researching, some of my peers articulated that job and career prospects were taken into consideration when deciding to pursue graduate studies.

Assurance of “Primary Effects” – Being Smart Enough

In regards to the choice to attend higher education or not it is important to note the impact of “primary” and “secondary effects” to the decision making process. Boudon (Goldthorpe, 1996:490) suggests that “primary effects” involve the basic ability to perform and achieve in school. He suggests that while sometimes these “primary effects” will effect one’s decision to pursue higher education (just not being ‘smart’ enough) it is the “secondary effects” that have the greatest impact on one pursuing higher education (see also Goldthorpe, 2007:80). “Secondary effects” are explained as the “effects that come into play as children reach the various transitions or branching points comprised by the educational system and that condition the choices they make. . . Boudon sees the choices in question as being determined via the evaluation that children and their parents make of the costs and benefits of, and the chances of success in, the different options they might pursue” (Goldthorpe, 1996:490). Goldthorpe goes on to explain that these “secondary effects” are greatly impacted by the social position of the youngster and his or her family.

As will be elaborated on later in this paper, my peer conversations did not discuss social positions so I am not able to assess the more important “secondary effects” of Goldthorpe’s discussion. However, what is interesting here is that some of my peers did mention these “primary effects” as motivations for entering into or continuing in graduate school. Entrance into, and completion of graduate school, to some of my peers, is seen as confirming their intellectual ability.

“I knew I wanted to apply to grad school. I had no confidence in my ability to get in. I didn't think I'd be able to. Being away from school for a year confirmed it for me because I missed school so much. So I put in my application and I found out that I was accepted into the grad program. I did not think I would get in, this is the only place I applied. I didn't think I was smart until I got in. It honestly didn't. (Shannon)

I was always, I mean, I did well in school but I always felt like I shouldn't have gotten the marks I did so I was kind of like I'm not smart enough to do my master's it had never occurred to me as something I could do . . . I think partially that once that door had been opened in mind, in terms of 'maybe I could do it' then I kind of wanted to see if I could. Sort of that challenge. And if the profs think I can then obviously I'm not completely inept . . . to test myself? Can I do it? Can I get through it? . . I think now I want to prove to myself that I can do it. I will definitely feel like a very distinct sense of accomplishment which I don't think I really felt with my BA. (Christie)

I never dreamt that I'd actually do well and get into grad school and then I didn't even really have a concept of what grad school was. I had a vague idea. I guess I didn't expect that I would be eligible. And so when I was eligible, I wanted to do it for that reason. (Becky)

The “primary effects” involved in deciding to attend graduate school suggest that students need the intellectual capacity to meet the requirements of the program. My peers’ experiences illustrate that some felt entrance into a graduate program confirmed their intellectual ability. Being accepted and having their aptitude confirmed may have

played a role in some deciding to actually pursue the graduate program into which they were accepted.

Influence by Others

As already suggested, Cote and Allahar (2007:145) consider the influence of family and friends as a factor that *pushes* students into university. This seems to be happening at the graduate level too and is perhaps even more effective here because professors also join-in with family and friends to influence students into attending graduate programs. My peers were influenced to apply for or attend graduate school by their friends or peers, their parents or family members, and/or their professors.

In my 3rd year I had a room mate who was a master's student who was very driven and a good friend of mine. And he convinced me that I belonged in graduate school . . . He was very insistent. He kept repeating it, you're actually a grad student but you just don't know it yet. (Luke)

My sister in law is a corporate lawyer and she went through university with four kids and she convinced me that I could get a student loan and live more comfortably while bettering my life and I could still keep my job at the bar and that's really why I applied in the first part. She encouraged me, I was 22 when I applied, she explained to me what student loans were. I didn't realize that student loans took into account that you had kids and she explained to me that you get way more than that. I always wanted to go to university but it didn't seem feasible anymore because I had a baby. But she was like you can do this, you're smart enough. (Carol)

A couple of my professors were telling me I'd be an idiot to not apply for the master's b/c they said I'd be perfect for it. So I applied for jobs and for the master's. I never thought I would do it. It was one professor specifically who encouraged me and pushed me. (Carol)

My father, being a professor had always said "you should always think about grad school blah blah blah." My parents had always encouraged me to always keep my options open and never close doors when you don't know what's up. (Wanda)

I actually was at a scholarship reception thing and one of the administrative assistants from the dept was talking to me and she was like 'we didn't get your application for your master's' and I was like 'nope, because I'm not doing it' However, at this reception I got talking to all these people in the dept about doing the master's and I was like 'master's really? no, I'm not a grad school kind of person'. I talked to [prof's name] about it and he was telling me what it was like..... and he worked at convincing me. So profs and others were very encouraging that I could do it . . . It was all this flattery too. So then I was like "If they think I could [do it], maybe I can. (Christie)

[At the end of my undergrad] my professor convinced me to present a term paper at a conference so I jumped in a car and drove down to Illinois and for 3 days ate, slept, and breathed graduate work. I was with other grad students and they were like 'do it, do it, you should go into grad school.' But I had already missed the deadlines for applying. They convinced me to still try applying. After doing my presentation, I had [a well-known person in the field] come up to me and tell me I had a great study that it showed a lot of promise. He asked me if I was planning to do graduate studies. So it was an 8-hour drive home and I had 8 hours to think about it. And plus I had the other grad students talking to me about it for 8 hours. So I got home and I said I'm just going to give this a shot so I applied. (Mandy)

My peers' experiences with various people in their lives illustrates that it was not only family and friends that attempt to influence students into attending graduate school but it is also the encouragement of respected professors who may have influence their decision to pursue these studies. Such influences seem to be a motivating factor for some students to apply for acceptance into, and to attend, graduate school.

Personal Enjoyment

Cote and Allahar (2007:27) suggest that people used to go to graduate school because they felt a particular discipline was their calling but they say that this is less the case with the current generation. They write that, "without the intrinsic motivation associated with a vocation, they need to rely on external factors, like a more highly structured

programme and more handholding from faculty members” (Cote and Allahar, 2007:27).

While speaking with my peers I found that the passion for the topic or discipline, while not the only factor affecting their decision to attend graduate school, did play a role for some. It would seem that some of my peers do have an intrinsic motivation for pursuing graduate degrees.

I enjoy doing this kind of work. It's really fun for me. Why wouldn't I do it?
(Becky)

In my fourth year I had to an upper year seminar class and started to really enjoy it and I was sitting there thinking 'This is the first time I have ever really enjoyed a formal education setting like this so if this is what it looks like from here on out why am I leaving now, if I really like this?' (Christy)

What other jobs can you do where you can sit around and pursue your own interests? That's pretty cool. (Leanne)

I just thought grad studies sounds great because it allows me to pursue these questions that I'm interested in. I just knew that the material we were reading really excited me. And I thought that I want this to continue. It was the intrinsic value of being able to explore the types of questions about human behaviour I was interested in. Grad school was a chance to continue on with that exploration. I don't really understand how people can do this job without really loving the material or the questions they are asking. (Don)

I've always had an intrinsic motivation to learn. I thought if I really like to learn so much I should apply to grad school. (Shannon)

Some of my peers articulated a genuine interest and enjoyment in the subject matter and some recognized that being able to pursue one's own interests, as we can, as a worthwhile consideration.

Appeal of Graduate Culture

In addition to enjoying the field of study (Sociology in this case), some of my peers were further lured into graduate studies because the graduate lifestyle appealed to them. If I were doing a larger study, with more research questions, it would have been interesting to investigate what exactly a “graduate culture” is, what it includes, and what specifically is appealing about it. However, the point here is that an apparent “grad culture” was seen as a positive aspect about deciding to become a graduate student by two of my peers.

I knew I wanted to be a grad school somewhere. I liked the idea of being able to read and talk about ideas. To be in a place where intelligence is respected. ‘Grad school culture’ I suppose would be a good way of putting it. That is very appealing to me. (Shannon)

My roommate was very insistent. He kept repeating it, "you're actually a grad student but you just don't know it yet." I already had research interests at the time and he started working with me on my papers and just talking to his friends I sort of saw what the graduate life was like. He let me see all his papers and everything he was doing. It was partly the graduate lifestyle and partly that I really started to enjoy doing my own independent research projects that influenced me to apply. (Luke)

Prestige & High Esteem

Some PhD students recognized that they were partly motivated to attend graduate school or to continue in their programs because of a sense of high esteem or prestige awarded to doctorate degree holders.

I'm excited that I'm here I guess. And that I'm actually sticking it out. There are times when I think "holy ****, I'm going to be a PhD!" Whoa! That's kinda weird. Like a first year drop out, I hate school, I'm never going back to school, blah blah blah, and yeah. I tease my brother and sister about that, ‘you're going to have to call me Doctor!’ (Christie)

What percentage of people are in a PhD program? Nevermind globally, but just within Canada. It's an honour and a responsibility. I'm lucky to be chosen and it's a responsibility to do well . . . I think there are all kinds of people who would want to sit in my chair and aren't in it because they can't do it. And I

don't mean intellectually. I mean because they just have different resources or their marriage couldn't handle being a different city or province etc.. (Becky)

I knew I wanted to teach. I had thrown around the idea of applying for teacher's college but that's a different thing all together than teaching at university. I wanted something with a little more enlightenment or prestige I guess, I don't know. . . I like mingling with people of the higher echelon . . . [here] you learn more than the average person. (Leanne)

Graduate degrees, especially PhD degrees, seem to afford the degree holder a perceived level of prestige and esteem that perhaps warrants a special kind of respect. I think more research needs to be done in this area to better understand how it relates and impacts my research question. Does perceived prestige really play a role in students attending graduate school? If so, what sociological concept would help explain this?

Recognizing the Value in Credentials - "Credentialism"

Another motivation for attending higher education and even graduate school may be competition and credentialism. These two aspects, especially when put together, suggest that students may see a need to pursue a graduate degree in order to *keep up* with the *need* (in relative terms) for credentials in the labour market. Even if a specific credential is not necessary *needed* (in absolute terms) for the position more and more the bar / or standard / or minimum is being raised making it "impossible" to get a "good" job without some type of credential.

Credentialism as explained by Davies and Hammack (2005:92) suggests that as the job market tightens a large supply of graduates creates a surplus of educated workers. As more people obtain the requisite level of credential needed the value of the credential declines. This means that over time more credentials are needed to attain a certain

occupational level that in previous years could be obtained with fewer credentials. Davies and Hammack suggest that this occurred decades ago with the highschool diploma becoming the baseline for even entry level positions but now it is more often a bachelor's degree that is required as a baseline credential for entry level positions. Perhaps a graduate degree will become a baseline requirement at some point in the near future.

Cote and Allahar (2007:25) talk about credentialism and write that, "credentialism encompasses both (a) the belief that preparation for the workplace is best undertaken through formal education and (b) the practice that results, whereby it is virtually impossible to secure a job without some sort of credential." This may lead students to attend higher education in order to obtain a credential seen as *necessary* to compete in the labour market. Some of my peers see the benefit of the additional credential as opening doors, job training, and increasing one's employability.

Well the master's opens up a few more doors that the bachelor's doesn't.
(Mandy)

Having a job at the end motivates me. This is the means to the end. You have a job at the end of it, hopefully, if you can find a position. You at least have a credential. If you can't find a job in a university, the government is always looking for people with PhDs. There is a practical side, which is immediate employment, and there is also the opportunity side of things, that it opens your doors a little more, I would hope. (Leanne)

I knew that it [having an MA] does sort of bump you up on the management ladder, generally speaking, when you do go for jobs. But I don't think I'm ever going to be in those kind of jobs so that wasn't so important to me. I'm more concerned that it [an MA] would make me over-qualified for jobs I want.
(Christie)

While I think the MA is great for giving you a start to it. I want a firm grounding, that a PhD would provide, in terms of giving me real research skills that I could actually market. I look at it as job training. A combination of credentials, having a Dr., in front of my name would help in terms of getting a job in the field I'm looking at. (Luke)

It seems that some of my peers recognize the importance of additional credentials and this may have impacted their decision to obtain graduate credentials. Carol illustrates the idea that credentials may be even more important in a discipline like Sociology. She says,

I was coming out with a degree but most people know now that a Sociology degree without a next degree, doesn't work, the jobs weren't paying anything unless you have a graduate degree too. (Carol)

Here she suggests that perhaps in certain disciplines, like Sociology, advanced graduate credentials are required to secure better paying jobs. It has been suggested that "students in arts and science fields are more likely to pursue graduate education than are those in professional fields" (Mullen *et al.*, 2003:146). Perhaps the BA, in some disciplines, is no longer enough to compete as the literature may predict.

Overall, my peers seem to have made rational choices when entering graduate school. They seemed to consider the benefits and costs to pursuing a graduate degree. It appears that there are several common factors that became part of the equation of their cost/benefit analysis which include: something to do, lack of alternatives, funding and scholarships, career prospects, being smart enough, influence by others, personal enjoyment, the appeal of graduate culture, prestige and the recognition of credentials.

This suggests to me that while students enter graduate school for different reasons and with different goals in mind, that they do make the choice to pursue graduate degrees at a rational level.

Outside my Findings – Mobility & Social Position

During my conversations with peers I did not focus on social mobility nor the class position in which they were raised. I did not ask my peers if they grew up in working class families, middle class families, or upper class families nor considered how this may have affected their motivation for attending graduate school. However, this is a major consideration within the *Sociology of Education*. The social stratification of educational attainment is a very important topic that I over looked. Because “educational decision making remains conditioned by the class situations in which it takes place, and that this is likely to lead to differing evaluations of benefits, as well as costs” (Goldthorpe, 2007:37), I would say that this was a large omission on my part. I even knew the importance of social class to education attainment and educational outcomes before speaking with my peers so I should have made a point of discussing this with them all. I learnt from this oversight to include this as a focus of conversations in future research I may conduct on this topic. However, even without being able to illustrate the concepts using my peer’s experiences, I can still relay the importance of these ideas by using the literature.

Mobility

One motivation for attending post-secondary education may be a desire for social mobility. The “status attainment tradition” examines the idea of people striving for upward mobility. This means that people, generally, want to have the same “lifestyle”

(SES) as the family of origin in which they were raised, if not better. Therefore, people will take steps to avoid downward mobility such as acquiring more formal education if necessary. Breen and Goldthorpe suggest the theory of ‘relative risk aversion’: “people are primarily motivated to minimize the risk of downward social mobility, and that they are indifferent between upward and no mobility” (Mastekaasa, 2006:440). Avoiding downward mobility is key to Goldthorpe. He says,

One may suppose that, in viewing education as an investment good, the chief concern of families in more advantaged class positions is that their children should obtain qualifications sufficient to preserve an intergenerational stability of class position or, at the very least, to guard against any decisive downward mobility. Thus, parents within the salariat will be more likely than others to encourage their children to go on from school into higher education of some kind. (Goldthorpe, 2007:37)

Rational choice theory (RAT) has been examined above and it becomes important here again because Goldthorpe discusses the link between economists who use RAT and how it fits and does not fit within sociology. What emerges from this comparison is what Goldthorpe (2007:73) refers to as the Breen-Goldthorpe theory or model (BG theory).

From here I take the following as salient to the mobility question: “the idea that the cost-benefit evaluations that are involved in educational choices extend to the calculation of expected lifetime earnings, as economists would assume, is rejected as being too unrealistic . . . instead of aiming to maximise their expected lifetime earnings, they will seek, as first priority, to minimise their risk of downward mobility” (Goldthorpe, 2007:76). The idea presented here is that students may choose to attend higher education as it is seen as the most effective way to avoid downward mobility by attempting to

remain in the same, if not a better, social position as their parents. Do students attend graduate school as a way to maintain or better their social position?

Parents also play a role in attempting to provide “a better life” for their children and often this is seen to be related to educational attainment. “The overwhelming majority (more than 80%) of Canadian parents from even the lowest income and educational categories expect their children to attend college or university” (Davies and Maldonado, 2009:159). Of course, the resources available to families plays a role in outcomes. For example, families who can afford to will, “promote their children’s educational interests by choosing places of residence with high-quality schools” (Gamoran, 2001:144). The reason that parents matter in the education equation is that parental achievement does predict, at least in part, a child’s success in school (Mullen *et al.*, 2003). I included the education attainment levels of my peers’ parents in Table 1 which shows that in all but one case (Wanda), my peers are working to obtain more education than their parents.

More education translates to increased success within the labour market. Even in 1967 Blau and Duncan’s classic American Occupational Structure gave definitive statistical evidence

... that formal education mediates the intergenerational transmission of labor market position between fathers and sons. How much school sons completed was partly— but not entirely—a function of their fathers’ income and education. Furthermore, the amount of school sons completed had direct effects on their own labor market positions. This and much subsequent research provided consistent empirical support for the large, and historically expanding, role of formal education in the distribution of social rewards. (Stevens, 2008:100)

Not only does education lead to greater chances in the labour market but how much schooling one (males in this case) obtains is a function of parent's (fathers' in this case) income and education. Your family of origin plays an important part of determining how much education you will obtain and how much social mobility you will experience. Collins argues that "different groups will seek to improve their position by obtaining more education for their children than they themselves had in the past" (Hurn, 1993:87). Again, it is stressed that parents desire more education for their children as they recognize the social rewards that come from increased educational attainment. This status competition is more true for the United States than in other countries. (Hurn, 1993:88).

In terms of doctoral education and social mobility it is interesting to note that Mastekaasa (2006:449) suggests that "individuals seem to choose doctoral education if this is necessary to obtain access to the same type of occupation as their parents." Overall, one motivation for attending higher education, even graduate school, may be the desire for upward mobility, ensuring one's social and economic place within society is at least the same as, if not higher than, one's parents.' This idea does not really come across with my peers' experiences. However, it is reflected within my own experience. My mother has a Master's of Education and has been the Superintendent of a private school overseas for many years. She is highly respected, has a very comfortable job, and a financially lucrative career. It could be said that I am pursuing my PhD in order for me to attain the same occupational level, if not better, than her. The avoidance of downward mobility is

an important concept put forth by Goldthorpe (2007:76) and one that should be considered when examining what motivates students to attend graduate school.

Social Position

Goldthorpe (1996, 2007) takes rational choice theory (RAT) one step further by examining what role social position plays in RAT. He starts with his understanding of RAT. In his version of RAT, he assumes that actors have goals and they have numerous methods available to them for meeting their goals so that in the course of choosing their action, they tend, at least to some degree, to weigh the probable costs and potentials benefits (Goldthorpe, 2007:26). He assumes that actors can act autonomously as opposed to “unthinkingly following social norms or giving unreflecting expression to cultural values” (Goldthorpe, 1996:485). He says that the focus of this perspective is how actors pursue their goals using the resources available to them, adapting to opportunities presented to them, and characterizing their situation (Goldthorpe, 1996:486; Goldthorpe, 2007:26). While this is Goldthorpe’s understanding of RAT he takes it a step further by examining social position.

For Goldthorpe one’s class position becomes part of the equation too because one is only able to make decisions based on the options available to them within their class position. As Goldthorpe says, “their actions directed towards these goals are conditioned by the distribution of resources, opportunities and constraints that the class structure as a whole entails” (Goldthorpe, 1996:486). Aspirations for higher education need to be assessed in relative terms. In other words, such aspirations are “relative to the class positions in which the individuals are presently located. From this standpoint, for example,

aspirations to attend university of children of working-class and of service-class origins would not be treated as being on the same level; rather, the former would be regarded as having the higher aspirations” (Goldthorpe, 1996:489-90) (see also Goldthorpe, 2007:31). When pursuing a goal from different class backgrounds the “social distance” to achieving that goal will be different. Different opportunities and constraints are considered when evaluating the probably costs and benefits of higher education depending which social class you are located within (196:490).

Goldthorpe suggests that as the cost of education becomes less influential, the perceived benefits for higher education will rise, “thus the tendency will be for the children of all class backgrounds alike to continue in education for as far as their abilities will take them.” This could result in even higher education standards for those in the upper classes as they attempt to maintain an advantage. (Goldthorpe, 1996:494). The idea of the upper class needing more education to keep their superior place in society is echoed by Mullen *et al.* (2003:144). Were my peers motivated to attend graduate school based on their social class?

For Goldthorpe, “the focus of RAT is on how actors come to choose particular courses of action in pursuit of their goals, using the resources and they command and adapting to the opportunities and constraints that characterise their situation” (Goldthorpe, 2007:26-7).

Because I did not examine the social position of my peers I am unable to comment on how their life experiences and specifically their motivations to attend graduate school

were impacted by their social position. Future research that may stem from this pilot study should ensure it examines this important intersection.

Conclusion

The expansion of higher education has led to a plethora of theories into what caused it. Among those theories and concepts emerges the question of what motivates students to attend higher education in the first place? This paper has looked at possible theories and concepts that may answer that question. Through conversation with my graduate studies peers I was able to illustrate two main relevant theories in regards to what motivates students to pursue higher education. I illustrated Bourdeu's concept of habitus to suggest that some students attend university, especially in the pursuit of undergraduate degrees, on a habitual level. This means that rather than making a calculated decision where costs and benefits are considered the individual makes an unconscious choice that is a function of their upbringing and socialization that guides (or *pushes*) them into a course of action. The majority of my peers were guided by their internal compass, or their habitus, into attending university after highschool and pursuing an undergraduate degree.

While obtaining an undergraduate degree may be motivated through a sense of habitus, graduate degrees seem to be sought on a more rational choice level. Rational choice theory (RAT) suggests that actors are aware of their options and make calculated decisions by weighing the costs and benefits of a given action. In terms of education, the perceived costs and benefits can be numerous. This paper has examined several factors students may consider when making a rational choice about attending graduate school.

This paper has illustrated numerous considerations. Graduate school may be seen as something to do to fill time and avoid making other life choices. It may be pursued due to a perceived lack of alternatives. Graduate degrees may be seen as increasing one's career prospects. Acceptance into such programs may, for some, confirm intellectual competence, and provide one with a sense of prestige and accomplishment. Some people may be lured into graduate programs based on a perceived graduate lifestyle or enjoyable graduate culture. Graduate school may be sought due to influence and encouragement from others people such as family, friends, and professors. Some people may pursue graduate degrees due to an intrinsic interest in the topic or field of study. The financial side of equation becomes important when students consider the funding and scholarships available to them in graduate school. Furthermore, graduate students may recognize the importance of credentials and may take this into consideration when making a rational choice about attending graduate school. On the whole, the motivations for attending graduate school and pursuing graduate degrees, at least in Sociology, appear to be quite varied but do seem to be sought on a rational level where the costs and benefits are considered.

While this paper and pilot project has laid some of the theoretical ground-work for an inquiry into what motivates students to attend graduate school it also leaves many unanswered questions. Some theorists, namely Goldthorpe, suggest that avoiding downward mobility and one's social position are key factors when discussing RAT. Future research into this topic should include a close examination of how both of these

things intersect with other factors affecting one's ability to make a rational choice about attending graduate school.

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