



Class Privilege and  
Educational Advantage

# Educating Elites

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Edited by Adam Howard and  
Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández  
Foreword by Lois Weis  
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Adam Howard and  
Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández

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# Foreword

Lois Weis

Researchers have long argued that school outcomes, whether achievement or attainment, are linked in large part to student social class background (Coleman et al. 1966). What is most stunning, perhaps, is that in spite of the massification of the U.S. system of education during the twentieth century—a phenomenon now in evidence in a wide variety of nations (Arum, Gamoran, and Shavit 2007)—differences by social class have persisted at largely consistent levels.

Important research by Campbell, Hombro, and Mazzeo (2000), for example, suggests persistent relative class differences in achievement-related outcomes, while Hout, Raftery, and Bell (1993) indicate that class differences in attainment have remained relatively constant. In the millennium issue of *Sociology of Education*, Gamoran (2001) offers a forecast for twenty-first-century inequality, a forecast he affirmed seven years later: “To foreshadow my current findings, the updated evidence and new policies do not provide a basis for overturning the earlier conclusion that the outcomes of U.S. education will continue to be stratified by social class” (2008, 169). In view of this, *Educating Elites: Class Privilege and Educational Advantage* sheds new light on debates related to the production and maintenance of social and economic inequalities.

## EDUCATION AND THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

There is a rich literature spanning the ways that class and race stratification in families and educational institutions affect academic achievement and attainment, college-going patterns (postsecondary attendance, destinations, and

graduation rates), and linked social and economic outcomes. These include, among others:

- social and cultural capital embedded within families and the extent to which such varying forms of capital are differentially valued by schools (Ladson-Billings 1995; Lareau 2003);
- tracking (Gamoran and Mare 1989; Kelly 2008; Lee and Bryk 1988; Lucas 2001; Oakes 1985);
- high-stakes testing (McNeil 2000; Nichols and Berliner 2007);
- differential access to academic knowledge in elementary school (Anyon 1981) and to rigorous math and science courses in secondary school (Aaronson, Barrow, and Sander 2007; Burkam and Lee 2003; Oakes, Joseph, and Muir 2003; Riegle-Crumb 2006);
- drop-out and push-out patterns (Fine 1991) that contribute to pipeline constriction (Haney et al. 2005); and
- increased segregation and hypersegregation resulting from the repeal of desegregation court orders (Orfield and Lee 2005).

Based on this important body of research, it is arguably the case that the workings of K–12 institutions largely ensure that poor and working-class students, if they graduate from secondary school at all, are less well-positioned than their more privileged counterparts for college and university entrance and graduation and, by extension, for relatively stable and high-paid positions in the increasingly competitive global economy.

Factors more specifically linked to colleges and universities additionally press toward the production of current social and economic inequalities and arrangements. Changes in financial aid policies and processes, for example, make it increasingly difficult for poor, working-class, and lower-middle-income students to attend and persist in postsecondary institutions (Avery and Kane 2004; Heller 2001; Hoxby 1997). Additionally, as family incomes have not kept pace with mounting college costs, students shoulder a larger financial burden than ever before; this means financial aid becomes even more critical for the middle- and upper-middle-class students attending college in record numbers.

Concurrently, the emergence of a nationally integrated market for elite and selective colleges (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009; Hoxby 1997) rarifies admittance to elite and highly selective postsecondary institutions, thereby encouraging greater numbers of privileged students to seek entrance to the somewhat less-selective four-year sector, ultimately resulting in increased selectivity in this sector, and so on down the line (Ellwood and Kane 2000; Mortenson 2003, 2006; Thomas and Bell 2008). This means that poor

and working-class students are increasingly being locked out of state flagship universities, institutions that have offered a key mechanism for social mobility to past generations of working-class students, in particular (Thomas and Bell 2008).

Furthermore, McPherson and Schapiro (1998) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) point to specific economic and organizational changes that have encouraged colleges and universities to shift from selecting students as a charitable function to balancing full-paying students or high-merit students with low-income and first-generation college students, making it less and less possible for low-income students to attend a range of colleges and universities. On balance, then, decades of research points to an array of K–16+ educationally linked “mechanisms of exclusion” that serve, by and large, to relegate poor and working-class students to less-valued positions in the economy.

Although the evidence indicates deepening educational inequalities, important research on postsecondary access simultaneously highlights marked progress among previously underrepresented groups (Bowen and Bok 1998; Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin 2005). In spite of such progress, however, the widespread expansion of educational opportunities has, by and large, worked best for those already privileged.

But by focusing our scholarly attention disproportionately on the ways educational institutions marginalize or open up opportunities for the historically disenfranchised, we run the risk of simultaneously ignoring the ways such institutions work explicitly for the relatively privileged, as well as the ways in which privileged groups intentionally and actively work on their own behalf to create and maintain distinction.

In light of this notable gap in our research agenda, it is critically important that we broaden our scholarly imagination so as to unpack the specifically located and ongoing actions of the privileged as they work to maintain position inside what is arguably a (quantitatively) broadening opportunity structure for those historically disenfranchised. In so doing, we gain a more complete understanding of the production of relationally based social and economic inequalities.

By way of example, although the poor and working class have objectively made great strides in generalized academic achievement and attainment in the United States (Gamoran 2001; Thomas and Bell 2008), such improvement pales in comparison to that of the privileged, who exhibit a seemingly naturalized capacity to run harder and faster. And so in the following pages *Educating Elites* unpacks the “seemingly natural” aspect of the production of privilege, exhibiting in exquisite detail the day-to-day institutionally related work involved in preserving advantage. Those involved in the production of privilege (parents, children, schools, colleges, and universities) in fact work hard on a day-to-day and year-to-year basis to ensure that this happens.



Raftery and Hout's theory of "maximally maintained inequality" helps to explain the persistence of class-based inequalities, particularly with regard to the now-worldwide massification of education—or, more colloquially speaking, the opening up of educational opportunities to a broader range of students (1993; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). Under this theory, as the privileged classes are generally better positioned to grasp new opportunities than their nonprivileged counterparts, it is only when a level of attainment is saturated for the privileged group that members of the less-privileged classes have the opportunity to catch up (Gamoran 2001, 2008).

Lucas (2001) tweaks this theory by suggesting that even as quantitative distinctions fade (i.e., there is greater equality in patterns of access at any given level), inequality will be "effectively maintained" through increased differentiation within that level, a phenomenon in evidence in the United States and elsewhere (Arum, Gamoran, and Shavit 2007).

Theoretical breakthroughs related to notions of "maximally" and "effectively maintained inequality" offer an important frame for understanding the ways in which the relatively privileged are benefitted largely by macro-level changes in opportunity structure—for example, the well-documented quantitative expansion of educational opportunities.

What this theory cannot address however, is how and why this happens—in other words, the mechanisms through which observed macro-level phenomena are produced and reproduced at the lived level on a daily basis, whether by explicit work/design or by virtue of what Bourdieu refers to as *habitus*, "a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (Wacquant 1992, 18, quoting Bourdieu 1994). Although I conceptually separate *habitus* from what I call *explicit work/design*, in Bourdieu's voluminous body of scholarly work (e.g., 1970 with Passeron, 1994) the two are highly interconnected, while simultaneously moving class understandings far beyond materiality and, as I argue elsewhere, men's connections to wage labor (Weis 2004).

*Educating Elites* creates critical discussion with regard to this broad arena, spanning the work involved in maintaining advantage as well as the surrounding class habitus, which, although constructed over time, takes on a seemingly naturalized quality. Essays in the volume also address the ways in which historically elite institutions are increasingly open to formerly locked-out groups in the population, as they simultaneously preserve structurally grounded privileges now afforded to this new and more diverse group.

The intentional focus on privilege in *Educating Elites* in and of itself wedges open new ground related to the production of social structure, as the

production of broad structure can *never* be understood with sole reference to the poor and working class or, in the instance of the United States, people of color. With noteworthy exceptions (Cookson and Persell 1985; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Howard 2008; Karabel 2005; Proweller 1998), the volume's sustained focus on elites—who they are, what they have, the institutions they establish for themselves, how they and their schools transmit privilege to their children—opens important new territory.

In addition, unlike older research on elites and elite education, this volume is critically situated in current global context, thereby inevitably (although not intentionally or specifically) addressing questions related to the fundamentally new ways shifting opportunities made possible by education interact with class formation. The now-global economy and accompanying and intensifying transnational migration patterns create a context in which class will inevitably be realigned in a wide variety of nations. Given our historical moment, then, we can predict that the relatively privileged in first-wave industrialized nations will work hard and fast to maintain advantage in massively shifting global context, a phenomenon evidenced throughout chapters in this volume.

Perhaps most importantly the chapters in *Educating Elites* offer a lens through which the production of newly waged forms of class privilege in shifting global context can be studied and understood. The volume provides both evidence for such shifting elite construction as well as a template for ways to engage research on the active production of newly articulated versions of privilege (and the changing nature of institutions in which such newly articulated versions are forged) as the world context shifts markedly.

By offering a look at the contours of elite opportunities, as well as drilling down and theorizing around the ways in which outside constraints and opportunities penetrate lived consciousness and action at the micro-level, the volume invites serious consideration of the ways in which elites are both produced and simultaneously “produce themselves” in light of changing world context. *Educating Elites* is an important volume that should be read by anyone interested in the production of social structure in changing times.

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## *Chapter One*

# **Introduction: Why Study Up?**

Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández  
and Adam Howard

Education scholars, politicians, and the mass media are remarkably silent about how practices, institutions, and structures give educational advantages to influential groups. Social inequality is almost invariably explained as a problem (even the fault) of the poor and the marginalized. While some note the gross disparities in wealth and consumption that characterize modern economies, rarely are the lives of wealthy elites considered in explaining how the advantages of the few are related to the predicaments of the many.

The early works of scholars like C. W. Mills (1956) and E. Digby Baltzell (1964) offer insight into the formation of what Mills succinctly labels the *power elites* in the United States. Yet most analyses of social and political inequality tend to ignore the power relations that underlie various contexts of class privilege. This lack of attention to privileged groups is not simply a gap in the existing research but a conceptual link missing in our understanding of inequality. As anthropologist Laura Nader eloquently argues, “the consequences of not studying up as well as down are serious in terms of developing adequate theory and description” (1974, 290).

Nader’s widely cited essay makes a strong case for the importance of studying institutions and organizations in charge of enforcing the rule of law and government policies. Some sociologists and anthropologists who study organizations have followed suit, and in addition to Nader’s study the classic works of Rosabeth Kanter (1977) and Howard Becker (1961), to name only two, have been widely influential. More recently, scholars have considered the worldviews of Wall Street financiers (Ho 2005), the internal dynamics of NGOs (Markowitz 2001), and members of Internal Review Boards (Gordon 2003).

These few but critical studies shed light on the internal workings of the organizational apparatus of governmental bureaucracies and other institutions that play a critical role in the maintenance of inequality. Fewer still are

studies that illuminate the internal logic in the lives of elite groups or that consider how the “culture of affluence” is related to and perhaps implicated in the “culture of poverty.”

The lack of attention paid to privilege and the advantages of elite groups is particularly marked within educational scholarship. The gaze of educational researchers has traditionally been turned “down” toward the experiences of communities deemed at-risk, presumably with the intention of improving their plight. Indeed, theorizing about the relationship between education, culture, and society has typically emerged from the study of poor and marginalized groups in public schools. Seldom have educational researchers considered class privilege and educational advantage in their attempts to understand inequality and foment social justice through education.

The disproportionate failure of public schools—particularly those serving racialized minorities, recent immigrants, and the working poor—has been eagerly examined and explained by many critics. Yet critical lenses are seldom applied to systems, practices, and policies that work to reinforce the social, political, cultural, and economic privilege of dominant groups. Elite education, in fact, has remained virtually unmapped terrain and remains largely outside the public and scholarly gaze. Yet as Raewyn Connell and his colleagues have argued, understanding elite schools is essential to fully understanding the educational system—its relationship to society and culture—and, ultimately, its improvement (1982).

In his study of power elites, Mills (1956) asserted that elite schools are “the most important agency for transmitting the traditions of the upper social classes and regulating the admission of new wealth” (64–65). Building on Mills, Peter Cookson and Caroline Persell (1985) studied a large number of independent boarding schools through quantitative and qualitative methods. They focused on how elite schools reproduced an elite class by transmitting power and privilege. The two then argued that a combination of “philosophies, programs, and lifestyles” (4) put students through a “rite of passage” that stripped them of their sense of self and through which they developed loyalties to other members of the elite.

In chapter 2 of this volume, Cookson and Persell revisit their arguments, arguing that while much has changed in the spanning twenty-five years, elite boarding schools have adapted remarkably to those changes. And in that time a number of more personal accounts have reflected the “crucible” described by Cookson and Persell (e.g., Crosier 1991); others have offered a more complimentary perspective (e.g., Merrill 1982). Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) portraits of two elite boarding schools remain among the few studies unveiling the complexities and contradictions that make these privileged settings “good high schools.”

While the small body of literature on elite schools has addressed a range of other topics, with the few exceptions discussed below, most researchers have focused their work in ways that divert attention from the role of these institutions in reinforcing inequality. Most have not situated their research in ways that address the social, cultural, and economic divisions of the larger society. One of the few exceptions to this trend has been the work of scholars focusing on the role of higher education in reproducing class inequality. Most recently, scholars have provided historical (e.g., Karabel 2005), economic (e.g., Hoxby and National Bureau of Economic Research 2004), and ethnographic (e.g., Stevens 2007) accounts of how institutions of higher education have perpetuated and continue to perpetuate unequal access, particularly through admissions practices.

Within the context of private elite schools, the last ten years have seen a small yet important increase in attention to the education of elite groups. For instance, Amira Proweller (1998) studied students' experiences at one all-girls upper-middle-class independent school, and Michael Reichert analyzed "competing masculine identities" (2000, 262) among diverse students at an all-boys elite school. Both Proweller and Reichert found that, while reproducing elite notions of gender, elite schools adapted their curriculum and their expectations to the demands of a changing society. Nonetheless, analyzing the values and moral dimensions of elite schools, Peshkin (2001) suggests that these institutions face a crucial quandary regarding their relevance in contemporary society.

Three recent in-depth ethnographies of elite boarding schools suggest that despite this quandary, elite boarding schools continue to serve a fundamental role in the reproduction of elite status. Shamus Khan (2008) demonstrates how students internalize the necessary habitus for seamlessly progressing from one elite context to another. Similarly, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) demonstrates that despite important demographic changes in the last thirty years, the discursive practices of the elite delimit whether and how students from nonelite backgrounds can claim any legitimacy within that space. Likewise, Sarah Chase's analysis of gender performances at an elite boarding school highlights how traditional gender roles pervade how students learn to preserve their privilege (2008).

In addition to this small but growing research on private schools, researchers are also beginning to examine the experiences and perceptions of students at elite public schools (e.g., Demerath and Lynch 2002). For instance, Ellen Brantlinger's (1993) study of affluent adolescents' perspectives of their schooling experiences reveals that they actively sort complex messages about social class in thinking about their own affiliations. The students in her study emphasized individual effort and merit rather than class advantages in explaining their success in school.



Despite being segregated from the poor in virtually all aspects of their lives, these students held negative attitudes toward the poor. Similarly, Adam Howard's (2008) six-year study of affluent students at both public and private schools found that affluent students use a variety of ideological operations and frames not only to justify their advantages in schooling but also to shape and mediate their own privileged identity. He found that these operations and modes are not simply methods or competencies that affluent students know how to use in justifying their advantages, but these are also formative elements of their identities.

Peter Demerath (2003) looked specifically at how affluent students respond to their educational experiences in his study of students at one high-achieving high school. He found that not only were a large number of the students suffering from stress, but they also were willing to do whatever it took to gain an advantage over their peers.

Similarly, in a study of five students' perspectives on their experiences attending a school located in a wealthy California suburb, Denise Pope (2001) found that students commonly engaged in behaviors such as cheating. In their competitive school environment, these students learned to value winning "the game of school" above all else, even when this meant acting in violation of other values that the adults in their lives purportedly wanted to instill in them. The "kick-back culture" documented by Reba Page (1999) in her study of an affluent California high school points to how such contradictions in classroom practices unwittingly reinforce social class inequality.

Each of these contributions advances our understanding of the relationship between privilege and inequality, affluence and poverty. In particular, these works are beginning to highlight the role that cultural practices play in the production of inequality. The frameworks that these researchers provide are beginning to shift the kinds of questions asked and are shifting the scholarly myopia of always looking down. Looking at the advantages of the rich and how they go about justifying and internalizing these advantages is crucial.

For instance, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) argues that public schools constitute an important referent against which elite boarding school students construct elite identifications. He notes the critical importance of how the elites define themselves against an imagined Other, whom they deem less worthy or capable and without whom they could not declare their own distinctions. Similarly, Brantlinger (2003) found that affluent parents establish these distinctions to position their own children at the winning end of the increasingly uneven playing field of American schooling (see also Lareau 2003).

Other scholars have argued, as Zweig succinctly notes, that "class is about the power some people have over the lives of others and the power-

lessness most people experience as a result” (2000, 11). These new vistas allow us to examine and begin to understand the multiple dimensions of class inequality and the dynamics that ensure many are left behind so some can get ahead.

While these recent advances in scholarship about elite groups and education advantages represent a significant shift in how inequality is understood, there is much ground yet to cover and important questions remain to be addressed. This edited collection takes stock of the recent developments in the study of elite education by bringing together some of the most exciting new works on elite education and highlighting the important contributions already being made. The chapters in this collection also point the way forward and suggest lines of research for future work on elite education. Specifically, the chapters in this book highlight three key points that are at the heart of how we might understand the relationship between affluence and poverty in educational contexts.

First, the chapters in the book draw attention to the continued significance of class as a critical dimension of inequality in the United States. There have been important sociological debates around whether and how class matters in reproducing inequality, with forceful arguments being made for its declining (e.g., Kingston 2000) or continued (e.g., Weis 2007) significance. The authors in this book highlight two important shifts critical to understanding class and its importance.

On the one hand, the authors in this collection draw on cultural sociology in order to unravel the cultural dynamics of class distinction (for example, the work of Lamont and Fournier 1992); on the other, they draw on recent scholarship on intersectionality (like Bettie 2003; Luttrell 1997) to demonstrate how class relates to other axes of social difference, such as gender and race. By bringing together the two perspectives of intersectional analysis and cultural sociology, the authors in this book underscore the continued significance of class in the reproduction of inequality.

The chapters in this book also point toward a view of elite education not constrained within school walls. Taking as a starting point a broad definition of education that considers educational contexts and experiences beyond schools, the authors highlight the importance of understanding schools as part of a broader educational landscape. While this expanded definition is commonplace among education scholars who have moved well beyond the traditional, black-box metaphor of schooling, the conflation of *education* with *schools* continues to be widespread among social analysts. By situating schools as particular institutions within an expanded definition of education, the authors are able to underscore the relationship between educational experience and elite status.

This requires that the authors also deal with the related challenge of defining particular kinds of elite educational spaces in order to highlight the relationship between educational experience and economic status. The authors move beyond a particular “methodological individualism” that implies an understanding of eliteness situated within individuals (e.g., Kingston 2000). Instead, they address the dynamics of elite education around the organization of particular institutions and space.

By situating the analysis of elite status within particular contexts, the authors circumvent the tautological problem of identifying specific educational contexts as elite. Instead, the chapters in this collection rely on the Weberian notion of status signals to indicate that to label these contexts as elite “is to indicate that they are deemed to have high status among social groups that have the power to make such judgments” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009b, 1092).

Finally, the authors in this collection address issues of methodology of particular relevance to studying elite education. Power relations in the research enterprise have been put under a range of analytic lenses for some years now. Most educational research, however, tends to look down at communities and schools identified as deficient or as needing some sort of improvement, presumably with the purpose of identifying cures or bromides. Ethnographers and educational researchers—particularly those informed by critical (e.g., Thomas 1993), postcolonial (e.g., Tuhiwai Smith 1999), and feminist (e.g., Lather 1991) traditions—reflect continuously on the dynamics of power that manifest themselves in unique ways when the research context can be defined as elite (see also Priyadharshini 2003).

The following chapters touch on each of these issues, training the gaze of inquiry up, toward the experiences of privilege in educational environments characterized by wealth and the abundance of material resources. Each chapter provides a distinct lens through which to consider the educational experiences of elite groups and their consequences. This edited collection points the compass in new directions for research on elite education.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This edited volume has four main sections. The first section situates the exploration of elite educational environments in a historical context with a retrospective essay from scholars who have given sustained attention to the study of elites and elite schooling. As mentioned previously, in chapter 2 Peter Cookson and Caroline Persell reexamine the findings they reported more than twenty-five years ago in their widely cited book *Preparing for Power*. Although the world has undergone major economic, political, and cultural

transformation since their work was published, their review boarding-school curricula find that the processes of social reproduction seems to be well in place. Cookson and Persell offer three theories—Marxian, functionalist, and cultural—to explain why what was true for boarding schools in 1985 remains true today. They find that each theoretical lens provides unique insight into how schools have successfully accommodated their curriculum to the changes of the last two decades.

The three sections that follow Cookson and Persell's chapter are organized around different educational environments. The chapters in the second section provide analyses of educational experiences in elite schools, focusing respectively on questions of gender, race, and class in secondary-school contexts. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 shed light on the specific cultural practices grounding the production of elite subjects and their intersection with other social dynamics of exclusion. The fifth chapter provides insights into the process whereby students at elite schools make their way, often seamlessly, into elite colleges and universities.

In chapter 3 Brett Stoudt, Peter Kuriloff, Michael Reichert, and Sharon Ravitch examine how hegemonic masculinity underlies the processes through which boys at one elite independent school become members of the power elite. Through a Participatory Action Research project involving students, teachers, and administrators at this elite school, the three researchers analyzed different kinds of bullying taking place at the school. They argue that bullying has become naturalized as an acceptable form of relationship building and demonstrate how it operates as a way to establish and justify the accepted status hierarchies at the school.

These status hierarchies reproduce various forms of social exclusion and reinforce the social position of elite students. The authors demonstrate that bullying is not accidental but an outcome of a culture of competition rampant in the school, including students, teachers, and administrators alike. Indeed, the researchers show that teachers and administrators even promote subtle forms of bullying. They end their chapter by arguing that coconducting research *with* members of a school community can create unique spaces for students, faculty, and administrators to gain a clearer perspective on institutional and personal practices as well as to develop solutions for some of the destructive behaviors implicated in educating for hegemony.

Taking a close look at the narratives of students of color attending an elite boarding school in the northeastern United States, in chapter 4 Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Raygine DiAquoi argue that, despite the wide range of experiences, these students cannot avoid or forget how the institution positions them racially. Recognizing that students of color have become *a part* of the life of elite boarding schools in the United States, the chapter's

authors demonstrate the ways such students also remain *apart* from this elite setting and how racialization defines their experience. Through the stories of seven students with starkly different sociocultural backgrounds and different ways of dealing with their racial identification, the researchers illuminate the complex process by which these students, too, become members of the elite.

In chapter 5 Adam Howard examines the resistance of two affluent students who participated in a six-year qualitative study of elite schooling. Drawing on a conception of privilege as identity, Howard explores these students' conscious efforts to resist their own privilege. He concludes that privilege for these two affluent students is more than what advantages they have; it is a form of self-understanding that is constructed, reconstructed, and, at different points in their lives, even resisted, as they form their respective identities. Howard highlights the importance of identifying motivational factors that lead affluent students to resist privilege in teaching them productive lessons about themselves, others, and the world around them.

Drawing a bridge between secondary schools and higher education, in chapter 6 Shamus Khan describes the practices that enable students in elite schools to secure access to elite colleges. Khan explores the college-application process at one of the most elite boarding schools in the nation. Using ethnographic and quantitative data, Khan finds that even when background conditions are controlled (e.g., wealth, legacy status), students from this school still get into Ivy League institutions at disproportionate rates. He explores the various factors at play and the strategies that help students at this and other elite boarding schools win at the college-admissions game. He ends the chapter describing how elite schools play this game to keep their students at an advantage. Khan's chapter sets the stage for the analysis of elite status in the context of higher education.

In the third section, chapters 7 and 8 adopt distinct methodological lenses to examine the importance of higher education in the consecration of elite status in the United States. Joseph Soares begins this section by exploring how higher education in the United States remains a mechanism for the intergenerational transference of social-class status. Drawing on large-scale quantitative data from the Mellon Foundation's College and Beyond survey, Soares compares three different ways of evaluating the effect of parents' education on offspring: the status of the college attended (measured in terms of college tier), human capital (measured in terms of years of education), and credentials (measured in terms of college degree).

Soares finds that the status of the college from which parents graduated is a better predictor of the educational attainment of their offspring. Measure of attainment includes the type of high school attended, SAT scores, selection of college type, choice of major, and GPA. Soares argues that the tier measure appears to be superior at capturing stratification effects that are hidden by the

alternatives. Despite some claims to the contrary, Soares demonstrates that college education is a crucial avenue for the transference of social class status from parents to offspring through what he draws on Bourdieu to call *educational capital*, offering insights about why this may be the case.

Following Soares's study, in chapter 8 Jenny Stuber uses in-depth interviews with thirty-one upper-middle-class students attending two institutions of higher education to examine the social-class worldviews of privileged college students. More specifically she asks, How do upper-middle-class college students make sense of their own and others' social-class positions? Moreover, what are the implications associated with constructing social class in this way?

In exploring these questions, Stuber finds that privileged students construct a social-class worldview in which some class differences are highly salient and others are remote and seemingly inconsequential. She concludes that privileged students' social class worldviews suffer some troubling blind spots: They offer a partial view of the class structure and their position within it, leaving the privileged students both uninterested in and unaware of the lives of their less-advantaged peers, while focusing on fine-grained distinctions at the upper end of the class hierarchy.

Moving beyond the context of educational institutions, in chapter 9 June Newman-Graham takes us inside the world of the Natchez Garden Club, its annual pageant, and the lives of the Southern belles nurturing a tradition of elite women in leadership roles. Demonstrating the critical importance of intergenerational transfer of knowledge through what Newton-Graham terms *literacy sponsors*, she demonstrates the role of women as propagators of elite status within the context of an affluent community in the Deep South.

Keeping a focus on the educational experiences of elite young women, in chapter 10 Beth Cooper Benjamin examines discourses of status and hierarchy, ambition and selflessness, observed among a group of privileged adolescent girls and the implications for engaging this population in community service and leadership for social justice. Cooper Benjamin draws on data generated from a yearlong ethnographic study of "girls' leadership" in a Girl Scout troop in an affluent, northeastern U.S. suburb. Her study details how, when the girls in this troop confront pressure to leverage their service work to gain admission to elite universities, their desire to help others becomes co-opted and confused.

In considering the implications of this tension for privileged girls' development as socially conscious leaders, Cooper Benjamin examines intensifying middle-class anxieties surrounding college admissions. She also attends to what girls are and are not being taught about their social power and the structure of inequality, and how various cultural forces may hamper their ability to recognize their advantages and pursue social justice.

And in the concluding chapter, we the editors draw on the rest of the chapters and on the most recent work on elite education to propose several lines of inquiry that students of elite educational advantage might follow. We revisit some of the themes in this introduction and make a case for the central importance of studying elite education to better understand the educational system as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

In their 1990 edited collection, *The High Status Track*, Paul W. Kingston and Lionel S. Lewis provided the first compilation of works by scholars addressing the dynamics of elite schooling. Since then, no edited collection has returned attention to this important part of educational experience in the United States. This edited collection seeks to fill the gap in light of recent works. Scholars increasingly realize the importance of Laura Nader's invitation to study up.

While Nader's (1974) "studying up" metaphor may not be entirely adequate, there is no doubt that educational researchers have emphasized the study of poor and marginalized groups in public schools and paid scant attention to students in the most privileged educational environments. Studying the experiences of students in the most privileged educational settings informs the study of the most disadvantaged students by underscoring the importance of considering relationships and forces that are larger than the students (and the schools) themselves.

Apart from a long tradition of studying the schooling of poor students and poor urban children of color, scholars have paid relatively limited attention to the complexities of social class in shaping educational environments. This book marks a turning point in the scholarly gaze. In this volume, scholars engage in the type of complicated conversation necessary to understanding how the success of some relates to the failure of many in the educational context. Together, the chapters explore new terrain in various educational environments to begin developing understandings yet to be imagined from our current theoretical frameworks. The scholars in this volume cast their scholarly gaze upward to conceive of class within newer theoretical perspectives.

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## *Chapter Two*

# **Preparing for Power: Twenty-Five Years Later**

Peter W. Cookson Jr. and Caroline Hodges Persell

The Groton curriculum is predicated on the belief that certain qualities of mind are of major importance: precise and articulate communication; the ability to compute accurately and to reason quantitatively; a grasp of scientific approaches to problem solving; an understanding of the cultural, social, scientific, and political background of Western civilization; and the ability to reason carefully and logically and to think imaginatively and sensitively. Consequently the School puts considerable emphasis on language, mathematics, science, history, and the arts.

—Groton School Academic Mission Statement, 1981–1982

The Groton curriculum is designed to prepare students for the “active work of life” by encouraging breadth of intellectual exposure and depth of study. Beginning in the II and III Forms, with their prescribed curricula, and continuing on through the IV, V, and VI Forms, the curriculum as a whole introduces students to a wide variety of courses in the belief that this broad exposure will challenge and engage interests and capabilities that might otherwise lie dormant.

The curriculum also fosters the development of critical and disciplined thinking, precise communication and scientific analysis, creative problem solving, careful and logical thinking, and empathetic understanding of the social, scientific, and political background of Western and non-Western civilization. This curriculum plan has been and continues to be in a constant state of evolution. We feel it will enable our students to address the challenges of the twenty-first century with confidence, compassion, and sound judgment.

—Groton School Academic Mission Statement, 2009

We wrote *Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools* in 1985. That study examined the world of American boarding schools in depth; the study included over fifty boarding schools in the United States. It also included a sample of elite residential schools in England. Research included school visits; alumni, parent, student, teacher and administrator interviews; 2,500 student questionnaires; and school publications. The essential finding of the study was that elite schools play a critically important role in the reproduction of the upper class and what C. Wright Mills (1959) referred to as the power elite. Our study uncovered many of the socialization processes that are intended to transform raw upper-class recruits into active members of what E. Digby Baltzell (1964) called the Protestant establishment.

One of the hallmarks of elite schools is their durability and constancy of mission. Many of these schools are chartered—to use John Meyer's term—to produce certain types of identifiable graduates (Meyer 1970). Change comes slowly to the elite schools. The world, however, sometimes changes at lightning speed. The social, political, and economic world of the early twenty-first century is quite different from the world of the 1980s. We live in an age of globalization 3.0. The United States is no longer the unquestioned world economic leader, and the World Wide Web has made national boundaries far more porous.

The world has become more complex, more diverse, and more unpredictable. As the world has changed, what has happened to elite schools? Have they ceased to be central to the processes of upper-class reproduction? Have they changed their educational philosophies? Have their student bodies changed dramatically? Do elite schools really matter in an era of instant electronic communication and shared global power?

Much of the research underlying *Preparing for Power* was based on the assumption that the core values of elite schools could be found in their educational philosophies, since mission-driven curricula memorialize culture and transmit deep values from generation to generation (Baird 1977; Fraser 1977; Kraushaar 1972; Lambert 1968; Wakeford 1969). As is apparent from the two Groton School quotations above, elite schools have turned their eyes to the future but appear to have retained many of the traditional values that have been consistent since their founding, such as developing character and engaging in rigorous academic preparation for higher education.

In Groton's case we see that their curricular field of vision has broadened from a concentration on Western civilization solely to include non-Western civilizations. There is explicit mention of the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. Yet we also see that the core educational values expressed in the 1985 mission statement are retained. Rational, logical thinking

is still emphasized, as are the arts. What is dramatically different between the two statements is that the former has an air of boundary and finality while the latter frankly recognizes that change is inevitable and that Groton graduates must be prepared to master this new environment with “confidence, compassion, and sound judgment.”

In this chapter we examine the evolution of the elite schools over more than two decades of great social, cultural, and economic change. We are interested in how the schools have adapted to change and how these adaptations can be explained theoretically. Much of the data for this chapter is drawn from the information the schools now provide on the Internet—a great change in and of itself. In fact, the presence of ubiquitous and easily accessed real-world information has the potential for undermining the *total institution* we described in *Preparing for Power*.

Much of the information schools post on the Web is what they formerly published in their catalogues and materials for prospective students. This includes the courses offered, characteristics of the students attending, the colleges where recent graduates were accepted, and pictures of the campus and facilities. Web content is often enriched with color photos, videos, and podcasts.

While it may be more difficult for the elite to cloister itself, by no means are these schools taking their socialization responsibilities any less lightly; in fact, such ready scrutiny may even require them to redouble their efforts, often in subtle ways. Recent ethnographies of elite boarding schools suggest that the space of the schools remains as cloistered and “bubble-like” as ever (Chase 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a).

## THE REPRODUCTION OF ELITES IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

The development of character is a responsibility that rests with every member of the community. In classrooms, on playing fields, in residential houses, students grow in confidence and self-esteem and are instilled with such fundamental values as honesty, integrity, teamwork, generosity, and compassion toward others.

Choate also fosters community involvement and service as it prepares students to assume leadership roles in an ever-changing world. As part of its commitment to character formation, the school offers regular community-wide reflections on moral and spiritual issues, as well as exposure to various religious traditions.

—Choate Rosemary Hall Mission Statement, 2009

As the Choate Rosemary Hall statement eloquently makes clear, the missions of elite schools have traditionally emphasized that leadership is a responsibility of the privileged and powerful and that the schools have a special role to play in preparing students for positions of social, political, and economic importance. It is expected that a good number of graduates will be leaders of the “commanding heights” of the American power structure.

It is worth noting that the last four candidates for president were graduates of elite boarding schools: George W. Bush (Phillips Andover), John Kerry (Saint Paul’s School), John McCain (Episcopal High School), and Barack Obama (Punahou School). This is not coincidental, as many U.S. presidents and other national leaders are graduates of the country’s most elite secondary schools. This tradition of the elite schools’ relationship to upper-class institutions and positions of power has been documented extensively (Baltzell 1958, 1964; Levine 1980; McLachlan 1970; Lewis and Wanner 1979; Cookson and Persell 1985a, 1985b).

Public service, as defined by the elite schools, is still very much at the forefront of the schools’ missions. It is still the case that many graduates go on to careers in finance and government. It is at the intersection of these two sectors that critical decisions are made sometimes in plain sight, sometimes behind closed doors (Faux 2006; Rothkopf 2008). The concept of a power elite as formulated by C. Wright Mills (1959) fifty years ago still has some explanatory power when it comes to decision making at the highest levels.

The rise of the American elite boarding school and the rise of the United States as a world power came at the same historical moment, and not coincidentally. Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century the American upper class increasingly took on the role of a leadership class and increasingly saw the projection of American power as a necessary adjunct to domestic tranquility and increased economic power. This elite was political as well as social, cultural, and economic. From the end of World War II to well into the 1990s, American world dominance was often questioned but never successfully challenged. The American leadership class in effect set the tone for the world leadership class, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union.

What has changed in the last decade is the “rise of the rest.” While America’s military power remains capable of projecting force internationally, economically China, India, a united Europe, and South Asia have all risen to compete with American dominance (Walker 2009). In this new era of “globalization 3.0,” wealth is more evenly distributed around the world. In the next twenty years, China and India, for example, may surpass the United States in terms of GDP, and the United States no longer leads the world in terms of capital accumulation. This trend has been accelerated by instant

communication and the expansion of education. It has also led to greater global inequality within countries.

These observations illustrate three major and interrelated changes of the past twenty-five years—globalization, instant and ubiquitous global communication through the World Wide Web and other digital technologies, and growing domestic and international inequality. By *increasing globalization* we mean the growing flow of capital, production, labor, markets, information, and people across many more national boundaries. For the United States, the biggest growth in economic exchanges has been with China and India. International finance, production, trade, and law have grown apace, as has the increasing migration of diverse peoples. Global exchanges are enhanced by the spread of optical fiber cables, computer networks, and the capacity to put information (whether text, numbers, images, or sounds) into digital form.

The potential for much larger markets and the development of complex financial innovations, coupled with capitalist-friendly governments and tax regimes, has contributed to increasing inequality both within the United States and between the northern and southern hemispheres. Of the world's population of 6.5 billion, 4 billion live on less than \$3 a day ([www.globalissues.org](http://www.globalissues.org)). The poorest of the poor very often simply starve to death. At the same time, digital media make the poor increasingly aware of what they lack compared to others. The United States is becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse and thus more like the wider world. Given the mission of elite schools and how the world has changed in the past twenty-five years, what kinds of changes would we expect to see in the curriculum and composition of the elite boarding schools? Do we find evidence for those changes?

### THREE THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Different sociological theories suggest different types of educational changes we might expect. We can relate those expectations to observations of changes happening to the curriculum at elite schools. A *rational-functionalist* conception of stratification and educational change suggests that as the technical requirements of the economy change, leaders would need more math, science, computing, experience using the new media, cross-national experiences, and proficiency in multiple world languages (Collins 1977). Leaders might also need more social science, including politics, economics, anthropology, and sociology, to understand the changing nature of the American corporate elite, the globalization of American banking and corporate finance, multinational corporate operations, and social movements for justice and reform.

A *status culture* model of educational change would argue that elites seek to maintain their cultural distinctions, rituals of belonging, and moral discourses that establish boundaries between themselves and others (Hopper 1971; Lamont 1994). This would lead us to expect an increase in courses and experiences in the arts, a strong presence in the humanities including Greek and Latin, the continuation of expensive or esoteric sports such as squash and crew, and the perpetuation of distinctive rituals and customs in individual schools.

A *Marxian* theory of educational change would suggest that there might be more changes in pedagogy than in curricular content. If the schools are preparing future owners and managers of the means of production, they would be providing more chances for independent study, more electives, and opportunities for experience managing operations or organizations. At the same time there might be more emphasis on hierarchy and authority within the organization. Some of this might be based on grade level. These theories of educational change need not be mutually exclusive; all three may simultaneously be relevant to some degree. What may matter is their relative importance.

It is also possible that different elite schools may appeal to different segments of the class structure, with some appealing to the very rich, whose children need to be competent but not necessarily competitive on an open playing field. Others may be training the future functionaries of the very rich—their lawyers, doctors, public-relations people, and managers. Still others may be drawing more from what Basil Bernstein (1977) called the “new middle classes,” those concerned with artistic, symbolic, and control operations. A school such as Phillips Andover, with a very large international student body and many connections to the international community through programs and alumni, may have different links with the international power structure than the Hill School, which is more focused on its relation to domestic elites and members of the traditional professions.

The rational-functionalist model would predict that the student bodies of the schools might become more diverse nationally, racially, ethnically, and even in terms of social class background, if they are aiming to prepare the best and the brightest to be future leaders and assuming they operate solely on meritocratic principles. Some Marxian theorists might expect the same thing, as Marx talked about the way elites often sought to cream off the brightest and most ambitious from lower segments of the class structure in an effort to incorporate them into the dominant class rather than having them challenge it from the outside.

The status culture model would predict that student bodies might become more international but that they would tend to include mainly higher-class

members from other countries. There would, however, be little change in the class composition of students from the United States, because if there were too many from other classes it might adulterate the status culture of a school. So there would be some differences expected in the social composition of elite schools.

In the late 1950s E. Digby Baltzell (1958) identified sixteen boarding schools that “serve the sociological function of differentiating the upper classes from the rest of the population . . . and set the pace and [bear] the brunt of criticism received by the private schools” (293, 306). The sixteen schools (table 1.1) are considered to be the most elite boarding schools. They are (or *were* according to the schools today) “old, Eastern, patrician, aristocratic, and English” (McLachlan 1970, 6–8). We refer to these schools as the *select sixteen*.

More recently, Gaztambide-Fernández articulated five criteria that can be used to identify elite private boarding schools—namely (1) location in New England, (2) being founded before 1900, (3) an admissions-selectivity index of at least 35 percent, (4) endowments of at least \$100 million or combined wealth of at least \$150 million based on endowment and physical plant value, and (5) combined SATs for the class of 2007 of at least 1,800 and having the largest number of seniors admitted by at least three of the college programs ranked as most selective by Peterson’s (n.d.) online college-search guide or being included in the *Wall Street Journal* list of schools with the best college-placement success rates (2009b, 1097).

**Table 2.1. Baltzell’s Select-Sixteen Elite Boarding Schools**

<i>School</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Founded</i>
1. Phillips Academy	Andover, Mass.	1778
2. Phillips Exeter Academy	Exeter, N.H.	1783
3. Deerfield Academy	Deerfield, Mass.	1797
4. Episcopal High School	Alexandria, Va.	1839
5. Hill School	Pottstown, Penn.	1851
6. St. Paul’s School	Concord, N.H.	1856
7. St. Mark’s School	Southborough, Mass.	1865
8. Lawrenceville School	Lawrenceville, N.J.	1883
9. Groton School	Groton, Mass.	1884
10. Woodberry Forest School	Woodberry Forest, Va.	1889
11. Taft School	Watertown, Conn.	1890
12. Hotchkiss School	Lakeville, Conn.	1892
13. Choate School	Wallingford, Conn.	1896
14. St. Georges School	Newport, R.H.	1896
15. Middlesex School	Concord, Mass.	1901
16. Kent School	Kent, Conn.	1906



We agree that these are useful criteria, but they do not include the social eliteness of the students, teachers, and trustees of the schools. Both Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b) and Kahn (2008) argue that contemporary elites are relying less on social exclusion than past ones did and that the *Social Register* is no longer a particularly good indicator of elite status. Baltzell's designation of the select sixteen came from his personal experience as a member of the social elite (even though his family had declined financially).

Kahn (2008) suggests that elites have begun to fight against the suggestion that money, culture, and ties matter, stressing instead that talent, potential, and character are what matter. However, as we know from Lamont's work (2009), talent, potential, and character are socially defined traits. Failing to consider the social eliteness of a school in effect accepts the assertion that family background doesn't matter, rather than permitting an empirical test of it.

Accepting the rhetoric of merit has been an adaptive response of elites in the United States for some time. We observed evidence of it twenty-five years ago, and Kahn's work suggests it is growing stronger. That students with long-term family connections to the schools (ones we identified as "deep prep" families) still attend in significant numbers, even when their academic credentials may fall well below the school averages, suggests that meritocracy is only one of several competing ideologies in practice.

For these reasons, and because we know what the curricula were in the select-sixteen schools twenty-five years ago, we use them here as a basis for considering how today's curricula may have changed. Gaztambide-Fernández's article provides a way for readers to compare the select-sixteen schools with other elite boarding schools. Another indicator of eliteness that might be considered is the one noted by Khan, namely the elite-thirteen schools, named as such because they have the highest number of graduates in the elite business community (Khan 2008, 40).

## CURRICULUM

To analyze the curriculum, we reviewed the course offerings of all sixteen schools, which are posted on their websites. We, with the help of Maude Shephard, tabulated the number of courses offered in the arts, computer science, social sciences, globalization, languages, and philosophy, religion, and ethics. Doing this revealed that the number of art classes ranges from thirty-one to seven, with an average of eighteen per school. The number of music classes ranges from thirty to two, with an average of thirteen, and the number of theater and dance classes ranges from twenty-six to three, with an average

of nine. Of course, the number of courses a school can offer depends in part on its size.

Nevertheless, these numbers represent a huge increase in courses in the arts. Arts courses were not so numerous when we were conducting the research for *Preparing for Power* in the early 1980s, although the arts were always available as extracurricular activities. This is one of the biggest changes in their curricula in the past twenty-five years. In contrast, the arts offerings in public schools have been declining during this period. Johnson et al. (2008) write, "There is considerable agreement in the literature that arts education is in serious decline" (see also Chapman 2007; Gullatt 2007).

Another change emerging in the early 1980s was the introduction of personal computers; a number of schools had computer laboratories in those relatively early years (Persell and Cookson 1987). Today we see that all but two of the schools offer formal courses in computer science. The range of courses is seven to zero, with an average of four. A third change is the introduction of courses in Chinese. The range is twelve to zero, with an average of six, but only two schools fail to offer at least one course.

A rational-functional theorist might argue that as gender, ethnic, and national diversity has increased at these schools, we might expect them to do more to teach all students about social and cultural conditions in the United States and around the world. A status culture perspective might expect them not to increase social and behavioral science course offerings because everyone is expected to assimilate into the dominant class and status culture of the school. So we wondered if there have been big increases in the social sciences. Only four schools offer economics, with a range of seven to two classes. One school offers anthropology, one offers archaeology, and one offers sociology. Seven schools offer psychology, but nine do not. The number of psychology courses offered ranges between five and zero, with an average of one.

There was no consistent pattern within schools. Schools offering courses in one of the social or behavioral sciences were not necessarily more likely to offer courses in the other social and behavioral sciences. Yet the curricula of the most international and socially elite schools have embraced globalization, and many of the most elite schools offer courses that ask critical questions about the state of the world. Phillips Andover, for instance, offers a wide array of area studies including courses in East Asia, Central and South Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa, and the world. In addition, the curriculum includes such courses as Nuclear Power and Weapons: Proliferation and Response and Brazilian Cultural Studies.

The Groton School courses include the World and the West, International Relations, History of South Africa, Modern Latin America, Modern India,

Modern China, and the Global Village. Exeter Academy offers such courses as Peoples and Cultures of the Modern World, Global Topics in Women, Gender and Society, Global Ethics: What Is Wrong with the World?, Contemporary Latin America, Modern China, Modern Japan, Africa in the Twentieth Century, and Contemporary Middle East.

Exeter study-abroad opportunities include placements in China, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Russia, Spain, and Cape Eleuthera. Clearly in at least some of the schools it is considered important to learn about other regions and countries in the world, as befits a global citizen or business person. The endowment per student may help to finance study-abroad opportunities.

While the big increase in internationally oriented courses and study-abroad opportunities represents a change in the curriculum, other elements represent continuity. This is evident in the continuing presence of Classical Greek (offered by all but four schools) and Latin (offered by all). The number of Greek courses ranges from twelve to zero, with an average of 3.5, and the number of Latin courses ranges from fifteen to four, with an average of eight. The schools have always offered courses in philosophy, religion, and/or ethics. Today the range is nineteen to two, with an average of nine, and these numbers are somewhat higher than what we observed in the past.

The continuation of classical languages and courses in moral philosophy, as well as the growth of formal courses in the arts, is consistent with a status-culture view of curricular stability or change. Most public schools do not offer Greek, declining numbers offer Latin, and they often cut arts courses when budgets get tight. The introduction of computer science and Chinese is consistent with a functionalist argument about the technical requirements of the changing economy, as are the increasingly available study-abroad options. Overall, there is considerable evidence supporting a status-group-competition view of curricular change and some evidence that is consistent with a rational-functional view of curricular change.

## ENROLLMENT

With respect to their student bodies, virtually all the schools have students from more than half of the U.S. states (the range is twenty-four to fifty, and the average is thirty-four for the thirteen reporting data). In 2008 only one school (Exeter) had students from all fifty states. All of those reporting (Taft did not report) enroll at least some international students, with the range being between 5 and 28 percent with an average of 13 percent. The number of countries represented ranges from thirty-nine to nine, with an average of

twenty-four. This is a big increase in the enrollment of international students compared to twenty-five years ago and certainly reflects a huge difference compared to public schools, which may enroll immigrants from other countries but rarely foreign nationals who will return home.

All but one (Episcopal) of the schools report the percent of students of color attending, and this ranges from 36 percent to 13 percent, with an average of 24 percent. We do not know how they measure "color," and we suspect the category may often include significant numbers of international students. They do not report any information on the religion of students in their schools or their social class. They do, however, indicate what percent of the students receive scholarship aid and the average aid awarded. The percent aided ranges from 42 percent to 26 percent, with an average of 34 percent. This is about the same as it was twenty-five years ago, but the size of the awards is larger, given the increases in school costs.

What we do not know for sure is the social class background of the recipients; often the schools give aid to families with high cultural status who may need some financial assistance. The average award ranged from \$25,000 to \$34,000 with an average across the schools of \$29,505. In 2008, the total costs (tuition, room, and board) of the schools ranged from \$44,350 to \$36,225 with an average of \$40,676. The shortfall between the average award and the total costs ranged from \$5,275 to \$15,000, with an average of \$10,936. This means that, in general, students' families are expected to come up with significant annual contributions toward the costs. One major group of recipients of financial aid at these schools historically was the children of other private school teachers. To what degree that remains the case is not publicly known.

One question is whether, in a time of increasing inequality in the United States and worldwide, the schools are opening up opportunities to previously excluded groups or hoarding opportunities and privileges for a select group (see Tilly 1998). One major change is that all the schools are now coeducational, with the exception of the Woodberry Forest School in Virginia. About half had already made this move when we did our earlier study. This is probably the single biggest change that the schools have undergone in the past four decades, so it is interesting to notice that either the number or percent of boys and girls in a school is not always reported. When it is, we see that several have about equal numbers of girls and boys, but more have significantly more boys than girls (around 55 percent), and none report having more girls than boys. Thus, opportunities have opened for girls, although not always in equal proportions.

A second major change in the composition of the student bodies is the increased number of "students of color." There were very few twenty-five years

ago, whereas today there are substantial proportions. This represents a significant change in the racial and ethnic diversity of the schools since our study. We know from Khan's ethnographic study (2008) that at least one school (St. Paul's) used to have a minority-student dormitory where students of color and at least some international students lived together. That school no longer has a separate dorm for "diverse" students. We don't know what current practices are regarding students of color or international students.

We know less about the socioeconomic class composition of the schools today but have little reason to believe that it has changed dramatically in the ensuing decades. Given the cost of the schools, it is difficult to imagine that many working-class families can afford to send their children to these schools, even if they wanted to. Some schools (including Exeter and Andover) have been able to follow a need-blind admissions policy and support the financial needs of all the students accepted. The problem in those cases is not affordability but whether working-class students know what an elite boarding school is; whether they know about their financial aid policies; and whether they would be admitted without the requisite social and cultural capital.

## THE HIGHER-EDUCATION CONNECTION

Hoarding of privileges applies to more than access to these secondary schools. As higher education has become the only pathway to professional positions, access to selective colleges has become increasingly competitive (Stevens 2007). In 1985, we wrote about how the tremendous advantage granted to elite private-school graduates had diminished somewhat in the 1960s with the increased funneling of federal monies into higher education. Has that advantage continued to decline? We examined the data available on the colleges and universities most frequently attended by graduates of these boarding schools. Schools report the data for anywhere from one to five years, so cross-school comparisons require some care.

Harvard, Yale, and Princeton are not consistently at the top of the lists, although they are usually in the top ten. Most of the frequently attended colleges are private rather than public, with some exceptions such as the University of Virginia and University of Vermont. Universities outnumber four-year colleges. There are certain regional patterns, with schools located below the Mason-Dixon Line sending many more of their students to Southern colleges and universities. Boarding schools in the Northeast tend to send students to East Coast schools, with Stanford University being a conspicuous exception. We don't know if students attending Stanford are more likely to be from California originally.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b) provides considerable data showing that a disproportionate proportion of elite boarding school students still attend highly selective private colleges compared to students nationally. As competition for desirable slots in higher education increases, elites are likely to adapt, for example, by doing things to boost their test scores and other admissions criteria (Alon and Tienda 2007; see also Stevens 2007).

## CULTURAL ADAPTATIONS

Schools also need to adapt in the face of new technologies, particularly cell phones and the Internet. How do such technologies affect the power and control boarding schools can exercise over students? In the past, students could contact family members and outside friends either by writing letters or by using a phone that was usually located in a public space. The instantaneous communication of grief, outrage, fear, or joy to people outside the community was almost impossible. The relative absence of such communication increased the intensity of the total institution and its potential for socialization (Cookson 1982; Prescott 1970). The limited communication with the outside world operated in two directions, with less information coming in from the outside, as well as less going out. Now communication is more convenient and frequent.

However, because most boarding schools are in rural areas, without access to outside local wifi hot spots, schools can regulate the hours that Internet service is available. Most secondary schools, including public ones, filter or censor certain websites, including those offering pornography. Some also restrict access to social-networking sites such as Facebook. While we know less about how boarding schools are regulating the use of cell phones, we know usage may be limited during class time.

Today's students have been called *digital natives* because of their exposure to digital media and the Internet. Thus, a full embargo on instant electronic communication would likely spark enormous resistance as well as limit the educational potential of the Internet. Some teachers use computers as teaching tools in class, surfing the Web for information while teaching. Many of the schools are technologically sophisticated, using Whiteboards, Skype, and streaming video as a matter of routine. The schools' own websites have a very professional look to them.

Some of the distinctive boarding school rituals—such as those discussed by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández in his book *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School* (2009a)—would make great grist

for YouTube, so how do the schools seek to avert such public disclosures? Perhaps the answer to this question lies at the very heart of the elite-school-socialization experience—loyalty to one’s fellow students and school is deep and real. Moreover, any distasteful YouTube product would surely come to the attention of a school’s teachers and administrators and provoke a strong response. The elite schools are vigilant in protecting their reputations and the privacy of their students, especially socially prominent ones.

The existence and maintenance of cultural practices is a way of forging common status-group bonds among those experiencing them. The bond extends to students from other boarding schools because they can compare experiences with each other about what happened at their schools. Thus, the existence of such schools contributes to the creation of status enclaves and identities.

The legitimation of privilege requires two components—having individuals work hard enough so that they can feel they deserve what they have and keeping them separate from the rest of the world that doesn’t share their assumptions about the highly unequal distribution of rewards (Howard 2008; Kahn 2008; Prescott 1970; Rae 1981; Wakeford 1969). This was one of our key findings in *Preparing for Power*: an important—if not the most important—function of the elite schools is to socialize upper-class recruits into the operational values required for the successful exercise of power. In *Preparing for Power* we wrote, “The most potent psychic product of the prep crucible is the loss of innocence; the recognition that goodness unadorned by power is impotent in the struggle for privilege. Greatness implies the sacrifice of innocence; the cost of leadership is the acceptance of the world the way it is, not the way it ought to be” (1985, 163).

## CONCLUSION

In the twenty-five years since *Preparing for Power* was published, the world has undergone major economic, political, and cultural transformation. As we have seen, the cultural adaptation of the elite boarding schools has been complex—as one would expect given their role in society. From our review of the schools’ curricula, current student composition, contemporary connections to higher education, and internal cultures, several conclusions seem to emerge.

The schools have broadened their curricula to include the world, not just the West. In fact, at the most socially elite schools there has been a concerted effort to offer students a cosmopolitan worldview, without losing their intellectual roots in Western culture. The racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the schools has also changed in recognition of the country’s growing di-

versity, although this issue needs further research, as there are many ways of broadening a school's diversity without actually undermining its upper-class foundation (see Chase 2008; Kahn 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a; Howard 2008).

Knowing a student's ethnicity does not necessarily tell us everything about his or her class background (see chapter 5 in this volume). High-status creative families, especially if they are considered to be of celebrity status, are attractive to the elite schools. The schools' connections to higher education remain as strong as ever; the graduates of the elite schools continue to attend the most select colleges and universities. And last, the real and physical walls of the "total institution" have been at least partially breached by the new world of electronic communication. The objective is to control and master change, not be swept away by it. The incorporation of change is the hallmark of a successful elite.

Change at these elite boarding schools can be explained by a blending of the three theories noted earlier: rational-functionalist, status-culture, and Marxian theories. The adaptation of the schools in terms of using new media, teaching multiple modern languages, and generally embracing new learning technologies and a global perspective is consistent with a rational-functionalist argument; the preservation of classical languages and the basic Western intellectual canon plus the increased importance of the arts suggests the status-cultural model; and the use of the new learning technologies in the classroom seems to have Marxian overtones, as they suggest the role of the schools as training grounds for the new managerial class. The relative absence of the critical perspectives afforded by anthropology and sociology is also consistent with a strong case for the reproduction of the upper class.

From the data presented here it appears, on balance, that the status-culture model has the most explanatory power because the moral and educational cores of the schools remain remarkably stable. They are still easily identified as prep schools, their constituency is basically the same as in the past, their traditions are unflinchingly consistent, they remain a pipeline to selective colleges, and the cultural lives of the schools are continuous from the past. These findings suggest several conclusions related to the reproduction of elites. We can note that the elite schools are case studies of adaptation to change; stable upper-class institutions can absorb change without changing their fundamental structure and mission. It is also apparent that the schools continue to socialize their students for upper-class membership.

The deep socialization that we identified twenty-five years ago has not ended or even weakened; times may change, but the preparation for power remains a core mission of the schools. Perhaps a new generation of presidential candidates is being incubated by today's elite secondary schools. It



is instructive from a reproduction of elites perspective how competently and quickly elites appropriate change and weld it, so to speak, to their perceived historic mission. The more socially elite schools have seriously embraced globalism. At the same time, there is little indication that the schools will lose or abandon their historical missions any time in the near future. In short, the processes of social reproduction seem to be well in place despite the huge changes we have witnessed in the last twenty-five years. The prep-school tradition endures and no doubt will continue to endure. What was true in 1985 is still true in 2010.

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## *Chapter Three*

# **Educating for Hegemony, Researching for Change: Collaborating with Teachers and Students to Examine Bullying at an Elite Private School**

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For several years the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives (CSBGL) has collaborated with students and faculty to examine school bullying at Rockport, an American private day school for boys. Like many such schools, Rockport is a site of great privilege, serving mostly white, economically advantaged males. CSBGL was founded as a research collaborative between the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and a group of nine elite private schools ([www.csbgl.org](http://www.csbgl.org)), including Rockport. Its epistemological and methodological roots are based in an approach to the social sciences known as *participatory action research*, or PAR.

PAR refers to the critical use of research by community members to better understand and improve their own communities (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Together with CSBGL staff, school research teams define projects, develop appropriate methods, conduct the research, and then identify actions or interventions that are suggested by the findings (Kuriloff, Reichert, Stoudt, and Ravitch 2009). Grounded in research undertaken by student and faculty members at Rockport, in this chapter we examine social class and masculinity as they were enacted by boys through bullying within an elite private-school culture.

### **HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AND BULLYING IN ELITE SCHOOLS**

People in the American upper class have a disproportionate amount of power, privilege, and influence (Domhoff 2002). Those with the greatest advantages are increasingly concentrated, and the fissure between the affluent and the poor continues to widen (Rose 2007). Domhoff argued that “families can rise

and fall in the class structure, but the institutions of the upper class persist” (2002, 67–68). Elite private schooling represents one of these institutions. Many though not all students in private schools go on to become members of the power elite (e.g., politicians, CEOs, corporate leaders) (Cookson and Persell 1985). Hence these spaces remain important contributors to the (re) production of upper-class privilege (Kuriloff and Reichert 2003).

Schools help maintain and legitimate the uneven distribution of economic and sociocultural resources (Bowles and Gintis 1977). Ethnographies such as Willis’s (1977) exploration of working-class boys drew convincing links between the reproduction of socioeconomic status and the dynamic socio-cultural processes that occur in schools. Willis’s research particularly highlighted the important role certain forms of masculinity played in preparing working-class students for working-class employment on the shop floor or other manual labor. Though less studied, the shaping of particular types of “ruling” masculinities in schools has been used in the preparation for power and privilege as well (Gathorne-Hardy 1978). It is important to fill a gap in the literature by examining the ways masculinities in elite schools are associated with the reproduction of hegemony.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony, linked to class dominance, seems to most aptly describe how the dominant forms of masculinity achieved ascendancy not simply through force or violence but “through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). As Donaldson explained, “Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that appear ‘natural,’ ‘ordinary,’ ‘normal’” (1993, 645). The hegemony of preferred masculinities is less, therefore, about boys themselves or their needs and more about social contexts, like schools, which direct boys in certain favored ways. It offers them a constrained set of choices for social position, reward, recognition, and opportunity.

How elite schools direct and limit the possibilities for boys’ masculine identities is fundamental to the establishment and maintenance of hegemony. The institutionalization of man making is thorough, enlisting virtually every aspect of the schools’ social relations for this purpose. Connell and Messerschmidt argued, “Gender is made in schools and neighborhoods through peer-group structure, control of school space, dating patterns, homophobic speech, and harassment” (2005, 839). Some studies have detailed the practical consequences for boys in elite schools (Reichert and Kuriloff 2003). Their findings agree with the larger body of work on hegemonic masculinity that life under these circumstances can be “exclusive, anxiety provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent” (Donaldson 1993, 645).

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is first grounded in a system of differentiated opportunity in relation to girls and women and, second, a hierarchical organization of competing masculine identities. Boys are set against all things feminine (including homosexuality), as well as against each other in what often are contradictory experiences. From these collectively constructed representations of masculinities, boys get the message that some win and some lose, depending on one's alignment with power and prescribed norms. The ideals themselves are not static but historically situated; in fact, hegemonic masculinity is adept at reconfiguring normative masculine practice as the structure of gender relations evolves (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

A broad range of verbal and physical bullying is common among boys and represents one important way hegemonic masculinity is performed within schools (Garbarino and deLara 2003; Phoenix, Frosh, and Pattman 2003). In describing bullying at the prep schools they studied, Cookson and Persell determined that "students learn the real lessons of power and privilege from their fellow [classmates]" (1985, 130). They explained, "There are few tender mercies among boys, who establish finely graded pecking orders. Big, strong, and aggressive boys often demand deference from smaller boys and, as a group, seniors tend to band together and lord it over the rest. Violations of the pecking order may be punished physically and verbally. . . . The threat of this kind of humiliation has a sobering effect on potential mavericks or trouble-makers" (154). The two researchers argue that bullying in prep schools was an important part of upper-class training since it helped to develop a strong sense of "collective identity" while minimizing "divergent thinkers" (106). In order to better understand the socialization and (re)production of privilege it is therefore crucial to examine the masculine performances prep-school students enact through bullying.

## **THE ROCKPORT BULLYING STUDY**

The Rockport Bullying Study involved a faculty research team and a student research team from the Upper School. The faculty research team was made up of two white teachers named Mary and Sara as well as two white college counselors named Jill and Greg. The student research team was made up of four senior white boys named Paul, Steve, John, and Dave. The work by faculty and student researchers described in this chapter lasted one school year, August to June, and was conducted in close partnership with Rockport's CSBGL representative (the first author of this chapter).

The student researchers identified four types of verbal and physical bullying, which they defined broadly as ridiculing/teasing, bullying/intimidation, hazing/initiations, and fighting/physical violence (Stoudt 2007, 2009). They created an instrument using a range of closed and open-ended questions designed to address the frequency of bullying, the contextual prevalence of bullying throughout the school, emotional experiences with bullying, experiences with bullying from the standpoints of victim, observer, and perpetrator, as well as other social, cultural, or institutional factors that may have contributed to bullying. Using the instrument informally throughout the day (e.g., in the halls, cafeteria, classrooms, locker rooms), student researchers interviewed a sample of ninety-six classmates in ninth through twelfth grades.

Faculty researchers then developed an interview protocol based on the student researchers' broad conceptual understanding of bullying. The faculty research team conducted semistructured interviews with ten faculty colleagues (seven males and three females; eight teachers and two administrators). Faculty interviewees were asked about their experiences with bullying personally, their observations of bullying at Rockport, their interpretations of bullying, and what, if anything, the school should do about bullying. In addition, faculty interviewees were asked to react to some of the data collected by student researchers.

Student and faculty researchers not only worked with CSBGL to develop and carry out the research, they also collaborated to analyze the collected data together. In order to create spaces most conducive to critical and honest discussion, the student and faculty researchers analyzed their data separately over a series of meetings primarily led by the CSBGL representative. Though separate, the meetings were conducted similarly. All of the data were systematically examined, with team members taking turns to read aloud and review certain sections, stopping to discuss surprising or interesting results, reflecting on personal experiences, and summarizing the general themes that emerged.

To communicate with a broad range of the Rockport community, the student and faculty researchers collectively used a series of methods that sought out representative voices from at least three institutional levels: the students, faculty, and administrators. This chapter describes the conversations among student and faculty researchers as they grappled with these layers of data and their own experiences. Labels in parentheses are included throughout the text to help readers identify quotations:

student researcher, SR  
faculty researchers, FR  
administrators, AD

The quotations offered in the following sections exemplify the collaborative spaces that can evolve when data on one's local environment mediate and anchor the discussion.

## THE WHITE NOISE OF BULLYING

The prevalence of bullying among the students was the research project's entry point. The student and faculty researchers used the data to discuss what they eventually came to label "the white noise" of bullying because of how widespread and taken-for-granted it was at Rockport.

The student researchers suggested that bullying was something so prevalent that they always needed to be on guard. Steve (SR) felt that "it could be anything; . . . no matter who you are, you are always vulnerable, because it could be anyone who takes a shot at you . . . from any side pretty much." John (SR) felt the collected data supported Steve's (SR) statement and added that the evidence suggested bullying at Rockport was in response to behavior considered abnormal. He explained, "Well I also notice a little bit like [the students interviewed] just said—people who are different, just like anything they do different."

In addition to what bullying was like as a victim, the student researchers were able to locate in the data as well as describe from their own experiences what it was like to be a perpetrator and an observer. This was an important shift in understanding bullying not as the stereotypical representation of one dominant figure terrorizing the rest but rather behavior that everyone has potentially performed and was therefore implicated in. Paul (SR) admitted, "I'll just be glad 'cause its not me, and I'll feel, like, compelled to chime in." John (SR) described how he and his teammates prepared the room the way "we remembered our freshman year" to haze the underclassman: "We had them on their knees, hands behind their head, and we told them to close their eyes." He explained, "The whole entire time we were yelling at them, cursing at them, and if they got out of line we got all over them."

To the student researchers, verbal and physical bullying was recognized in the data and their own experiences as a frequent activity in which most were involved, not only as victim but also as observer and perpetrator. At first glance it seemed to student researchers that boys could be picked on indiscriminately for deviating in any way from the norm. However, upon closer examination the evidence revealed three important findings at Rockport: First, bullying helped to establish power and hierarchy. Second, bullying often revolved around emotional ambiguity and friendship. Third, bullying often disciplined hegemonic boundaries.



## Power and Hierarchy

The student researchers recognized the social dynamics of hazing and the way it forced younger students into the conventional norms of the peer group while establishing power and hierarchy. John (SR) explained, “Hazing is all about ranking. People feel that there has to be something that somebody has to do in order to ‘get in,’ like you can’t just jump into something.” Paul (SR) agreed, “Well, yeah, like all of us have been together, and it’s established how to behave with each other and stuff, so a person is not necessarily going to fit in right away. I think that is inherent with [hazing].”

While the student researchers’ own reflections on hazing came from one sport in particular, Dave (SR) reminded the group, based on the data, that, “to be honest with you, [hazing] is not just crew.” The research uncovered that students in wrestling, soccer, lacrosse, and theatre all had their own versions of hazing. John (SR) agreed, adding, “A lot of mine [data from interviews] stated that hazing just wasn’t sports; it was between upperclassmen and lowerclassmen everyday in the hallways too.” He gave an example from the data: “For instance, the tradition that they used to have of upperclassmen tripping lowerclassmen as they walk by in the hallways—just stuff like that.” John (SR) connected this to the power, hierarchy, and respect given to or demanded by older students. “Upperclassmen get more respect, so they can dish out whatever they want with that much ridicule, and that is the other part of the hazing thing.”

Verbal bullying also played a role in distributing power and establishing hierarchy. “When there is something that somebody can make fun of you [for],” John (SR) observed, “you have to have a witty comment. You have to be on guard to say something back so that it is not such a big deal.” He added that one of his “theories of this whole thing” was that “if a person makes a good enough comeback, that person will be at a higher position than the person would have been if he hadn’t made a comeback.” For many students, this type of witty repartee represented a sign of intelligence. Paul (SR) described “one of the leaders of the squash team” as “able to, like, really, like, say things that—they can dig at you.” He explained, “He is one of the smartest kids I know, actually, and he is so good at reading every situation and picking it out.”

Faculty researchers such as Greg (FR) also noted the relationship between verbal bullying and intelligence: “It seems like the ridiculing goes on, and the verbal bullying seems to be okay if it is within an intellectual kind of context—kind of cloaked with intellectualism.” Mike (AD), an administrator and someone who was educated at an elite private school similar to Rockport, agreed that “there is a real premium on what the kids would label appropriately sarcastic teasing.” He connected verbal banter with interpersonal skills:

“I think that is really a skill the kids would really relish. He’s able to make fun without really pissing somebody off but at the same time, you know, finding the weakness and exploiting it.”

In fact, Mike (AD) “put that in the category of emotional intelligence” and argued it may be an indicator of success at Rockport: “[Those students] who really struggle here are kids who are not verbal. . . . We have a real premium on kids who can talk the talk.” His point was recently supported by a student of color in a focus group who reported that he had found himself a social outcast at Rockport until he learned to be more verbally aggressive.

Excellence was sought after and respected at Rockport, particularly regarding intelligence, academic achievement, and ultimately attending an elite college. The connection between bullying and intelligence helped legitimize the bullying as a normal, valuable, and admirable part of social interaction. The potential for “intelligent” bullying to establish power and hierarchy was legitimated further because, though often hurtful, bullying can build friendships as well.

### **Emotional Ambiguity and Friendship**

The student researcher’s discussion around bullying revealed that fear and shame, or the threat of shame, were significant, constant, and often hurtful. Paul (SR) remembered that in cross-country “I would be worried that I was going to wear the wrong T-shirts and someone was going to call me out on the T-shirt I was wearing. Like, it was just ridiculous.” John (SR) added, “Everyone in the whole entire school can tell you one story where they were hurt and felt bad about it—where you were separated from a group, where you were an outcast, where you were shown as a deviant.” However, John (SR) recognized the more complicated tension with “teasing and fighting,” where on the one hand “you find it funny so you want to join in,” but on the other hand “if you join in you will get hurt yourself.”

Though these experiences sometimes seem violent, hurtful, and emotionally fraught, they were also ambiguously cloaked in fun, joking, and bonding. Much of what the student researchers described seemed intertwined with friendship. The student researchers acknowledged that competitive verbal bullying often existed in the classroom. However, Steve (SR) believed witty comments made in class were often so malicious (and funny) because the students were “all really close to each other and know so much about each other and, like, their everyday lives, and they take out those funny things.”

John (SR) spoke of the person taking the brunt of ridicule as the sacrificial cost for the larger advantage of classroom bonding: “But what happens is you bond. . . . The witty comments benefit the whole entire class except for one

person, and then that sort of—the bonding thing—you are adding something else to the class.” And Steve (SR) agreed, suggesting that traditional classes without ridiculing would not be as conducive to building relationships: “I went into that class probably with—good friends—with maybe less than half the kids, and, like, now, I mean, everyone is comfortable with each other.” He explained, “the environment is different, and I just feel like a really structured class wouldn’t be the same.”

The students drew meaning from bullying; they found intimacy even in the midst of aggression. Steve (SR) revealed that while the receptionist’s office was full of teasing, ridiculing, and fighting, he still felt positive about it: “When I think about being a senior and stuff, the thing that I’ll remember easiest will be, like, sitting in [the receptionist’s] office, because that is when you really get to know, like, other people.” When interviewed, Mike (AD) described the relationship between roughhousing and male friendships as “one of the ways boys show care and emotion for each other.” He explained, “Sometimes a headlock, or a head noogie, or jumping on your buddy looks incredibly violent [but] is a fancy way of saying, You’re my best friend—I love you.”

The connection between types of bullying, good fun, and social relationships was strong in our data. The potential cost, as Mary (FR) suggested, was to “perpetuate the idea that in order to bond with someone you have to first abuse them.” The tension between bonding and abuse can make normal, invisible, or even desirable a standard for social interaction that is limiting and emotionally confusing. These consequences are complex and layered because bullying can foster a sense of connection at an interpersonal level while concurrently helping to reinforce a set of hegemonic boundaries at the institutional and cultural levels.

### **Disciplining Hegemonic Boundaries**

All of the faculty researchers agreed with Jill (FR) that the “socioeconomic piece is huge—*huge*.” Sara (FR) added, “Yes, socioeconomic is much bigger here.” The importance of socioeconomic status emerged as a dominant theme in the data. It was a central part of the very fabric of the school and manifested itself in varying institutional performances related to bullying. For Sara (FR), who had attended a public school growing up, the elite standpoint of Rockport influenced the way bullying was enacted within the community: “At the public schools it’s about who’s the better football player.”

At Rockport, she believed it was about “who’s going to get in [the best college]. I mean, it’s just a whole different set of criteria about what kids are teasing others about here.” She illustrated, “We had more kids come up and

say [of another student], ‘His parents went to community college.’ You can’t say it.” Data supported Sara’s (FR) point: A student interviewee spoke of being made fun of because his father was a mailman. Dave (SR) remembered, “He got really upset when he was telling me that.”

Mary (FR) reported that one of the teachers she interviewed felt there were “a lot of [socioeconomic] class putdowns, like, ‘You’re from [a local middle-class town]; you’ll always be from [that local middle-class town].”” Mary (FR) described firsthand a recent experience: “There had been a boy in class who was a Puerto Rican kid who comes from a [poor neighborhood], which is a bad area of [a local major city]. This kid was really being teased mercilessly.” Faculty intervened by talking to the class about the bullying. Afterward, the explicit putdowns shifted in tone. Mary (FR) explained that it became “much more subtle,” and students would now say things to him like, “You’re from the ghetto. Do you own a gun?” She recalled, “We had a dress down day when they don’t have to be in a uniform, and apparently a couple of the kids said, ‘Oh, your pants don’t match; your track suit doesn’t match.””

In addition to lower socioeconomic status, other boys with marginalized identities were bullied. Dave (SR) believed, “Rockport has so many added pressures besides making sure that all of your homework is done. On top of the demands that the teachers put on you, the students subconsciously put pressures on other students.” He described pressures that “include making sure your tie is not considered a ‘gay’ tie because of its coloring or that the car you are getting out of is up to the standards of a [local wealthy] community.” He explained that on days they don’t have to wear their uniform “there is the added pressure of wearing a certain pair of jeans that won’t be considered tough enough or [worrying that] the saying on your sweatshirt is as ‘gay’ as the pink tie you wore two days ago.”

A common putdown among the students as described both by the student researchers and the faculty researchers was to call someone *gay* or *a girl*. Steve (SR) said, “It’s a word you use so much.” The faculty researchers were very aware of how often the students used it in their discourse. Greg (FR) explained, “‘You’re gay, that’s gay’—that’s something I hear all the time.” Sara (FR) agreed: “I hear that all the time—‘You’re gay,’ ‘You’re a girl.’ . . . So many teachers that we interviewed said they commonly hear that one of the biggest put downs is ‘that’s gay.’” As with socioeconomic status, the students’ use of homophobic and misogynist insults helped to define the boundaries of “normal” at Rockport. Other boundaries were also disciplined.

A student interviewee of color described what he called “casual remarks about race.” He explained, “Those remarks hurt and make me feel less a part of the group, even though they are said in a playful setting. I went through middle school with the nickname Midnight, and that was quite hurtful.” A

white student interviewee admitted that he and several others tease an African American member of the swim team: "Playing into the stereotype that blacks are extremely athletic, we ask the student, who happens to be one of the weaker members of the team, things like, 'Why aren't you fast?' and 'Why aren't you any good?'"

Indeed, student researchers noticed in the data and confirmed in their own experiences that many of the stereotypically racist comments were made as jokes. "It's just casual, some of it's stereotyping, and some of it's just, a lot of it is, like, name calling." Steve (SR) illustrated, "Last year this kid [on the basketball team] who is black and had a nickname . . . for like seven years or something. His nickname is Jolly the Coal-Man." Upon reflection Steve (SR) thought, "He must have minded. Anyone would have minded." Steve (SR) explained how these comments can be so normalized that they become unrecognizable, so much so that he admitted to participating: "Yeah, I would even call him that, and I didn't even think twice. People didn't even think twice about it, and after a while it goes away."

The data revealed that stereotypical remarks were levied not just at African Americans at Rockport but also Asian and Jewish students. Mary (FR) asked, "How about all the anti-Asian stuff [in the data]?" For example, an Asian-American student who was interviewed revealed that he "fell victim to the stereotype that Asians can't play sports, and even though I'm not very talented, I still took offense to some of the comments that I received." He acknowledged that "a lot of the comments came from upperclassmen. Most of the time, I knew they were joking, but I found myself starting to believe the stereotype and further doubted my abilities."

Mary (FR) made the point that Jewish students were made fun of as well. On several occasions, in conversation with both the student and faculty researchers, she reiterated that "there's a lot of anti-Semitism at Rockport." She implicated the history of Rockport: "If there is anything that Rockport has stood for over the years, it is anti-Semitism." The data collected after this research has continued to support Mary's observation. In the years since this study, anti-Semitic jokes and comments among the students have become even more prevalent in the work.

Mike (AD) often noticed that "kids who come new in ninth grade or seventh grade from middle-class environments can't believe some of the things that are said, which kids who have been here for a while are like, 'He's just joking.'" The students at Rockport often disciplined institutional and cultural values through the way they joked and insulted each other. The student researchers defined casual teasing about race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and sexual identity as forms of verbal bullying. Remarks that, for example, were homophobic, misogynist, anti-Semitic, or racist helped to impose the

boundaries of who's in and who's out, what's acceptable and what's unacceptable, who's "normal" and who's marginalized. These insults, what Harvey (1999) called *civilized oppression*, helped to (re)produce a local culture embedded in hegemonic values.

## FROM THE HEADMASTER ON DOWN, IT IS SYSTEMIC

As one of the first scholars to study the power elite, Mills wrote, "The vitals of a prep school are not located in the curriculum. They are located in a dozen other places, some of them queer places indeed: in the relations between boys and faculty, in who the boys are and where they come from, in a Gothic chapel or a shiny new gymnasium" (1956, 65). At Rockport bullying had clearly become a part of the students' daily masculine performances and essential to their social interactions with peers, but it was also wrapped up in other institutional practices such as the school's symbolic use of space, a competitive culture emphasizing college admittance, and well as the faculty's interactions with the boys. It became evident in the research that school bullying was not only a student problem; it was an institutional problem in which the entire community was implicated. Indeed, as Jill (FR) and the other faculty researchers ultimately concluded, "From the headmaster on down . . . it is systemic."

### Institutional Spaces

The symbolic significance of how physical space is used can contribute to indoctrinating students into a privileged lifestyle and can provide important clues about the institution's values. Mary (FR) and other faculty researchers recognized this in Rockport's use of the nearby country club for official venues. Mary (FR) described the country club's relationship to exclusionary attitudes: "I've always boycotted [the country club]. I just hate it. . . . I think they probably have one Jewish family, one Korean family, one black family." Jill (FR) argued, "It's those kinds of things in our system, I think, that if we continue to allow to go on, what message are we sending?" Mike (AD) illustrated a similar point using Richmond Hall, Rockport's main academic building: "Straight in front of you are two huge rooms dedicated to the college office. Hello, I mean, what is important to Rockport? Getting your kid into college. . . . But service learning is buried in the basement." He admitted that these "are strong implicit messages which I think often times get overlooked or just taken for granted."

The student researchers labeled the library as a space that helped to facilitate bullying because the formal curricular values conflicted with the informal

values between boys. Dave (SR) explained, “Students just don’t take the library seriously. I see people there all the time getting made fun of. Like, it can be based on a website they are looking at.” He described the learning center in the back of the library, which also included the school psychologist’s office and math tutoring, as a particular hotspot, “This kid was just getting made fun of ’cause he is walking in the learning center. They were like, ‘Oh, you idiot.’” The students’ approach to the library and the stigma they attached to the learning center came as little surprise when juxtaposed with common representations of work ethic at Rockport. Paul (SR) explained, “You have to convey that you don’t work hard.” Mary (FR) summarized the “no sweat” attitude taken on by many of the students: “You have to be really good at all these things, but you can’t show it. If you show it, then you might as well not even be good.”

The student researchers described the relevance of other spaces that facilitate bullying. The crew locker room was geographically located on the river far from the school. Steve (SR) explained that the room was “big and it’s dark, and kids are getting changed, so you can do so much stuff—like, you are so exposed.” He explained, “There are always people pushing each other, and it’s such a competitive sport anyway, so, I mean . . . it’s like a breeding ground.” John (SR) depicted the space as unsupervised: “There is absolutely nobody around. . . . This is sort of an accepted thing that, like, this is a place that is outside of school, so the rules of school don’t really apply as much there.” And the competitive culture of the sport, reinforced by the students and the coaches alike, seemed to draw from stereotypical masculine values that say, as Steve (SR) explained, “If you are soft, you just won’t—yeah, you’ll just get eaten alive.”

The conditions created by the Richmond Hall basement (where “service learning is buried”) similarly facilitated some of the bullying that existed at the expense of freshmen. Student researchers indicated that the basement was geographically removed from the main paths of the school, and faculty presence was minimal. It was labeled as “shady,” “brutal,” and “full of mold,” to the point that Dave (SR) confessed he goes “out of my way to avoid it,” and Mary (FR) said she too will “avoid it at all costs if I can.” In addition to some classrooms, it was the location of the freshman (and some sophomore) student lockers. Mary (FR) admitted, “Yeah [freshman] get the worst space.”

Giving younger students lockers in undesirable geographic spaces that are dark, moldy, and cramped sends institutional messages that further reinforce the hierarchical worth of underclassmen. John (SR) explained that the space caused overcrowding because “the lockers are designed so, like, freshman are compacted in there . . . and the teachers who are in the basement stay in their classroom.” Paul (SR) agreed, stating, “It is chaos in there when all the

freshman are in there at the same time.” Mary (FR) drew connections with the undesirable context and suggested, “That is why this is a place to be bullied.” John (SR) supported this by referencing the data: “I remember one [interviewee] commenting about how, like, there is a tradition of when you are in the basement you trip the younger kids.”

## A Competitive Culture

Faculty researchers suggested that a competitive, hierarchical, and high-stakes college-preparatory environment played a role in setting the tone for bullying. Sara (FR), like other faculty researchers, blamed the school’s competitive environment: “That is where a lot of the teasing and bullying comes in around here—it’s competition.” She argued, “Regardless if it is athletic versus nonathletic, smart kids teasing nonsmart kids, it all goes back to, ‘I’m going to get further in life; I’m going to go to the better college.’” Jill (FR) explained, “All the messages that the kids are getting are that grades are the most important things—the college thing.” She suggested that it is “this high competition that creates the anxiety, that creates the pressure, and the pressure valve is the teasing. That is how they get through it.”

Student and faculty researchers both agreed that competition was a common part of the Rockport culture and the students’ experiences. Mary (FR) noticed that it was one of the most common themes in the student-level data: “I mean, how many times did competitiveness [come up]? . . . Everybody says the word *competitive*. It must be the most frequently said word.” Paul (SR) agreed: “I mean, I think Rockport is really competitive. . . . Everyone knows how everyone is doing in classes.” “Everyone is in everybody else’s business,” Dave (SR) added. The student researchers described competition as happening “with everything” and as “everywhere,” even during leisure time as a way to organize their fun. Paul (SR) used a time when he and his friends were hanging out to illustrate this point: “It was a competition; we had a tournament. . . . We couldn’t just play; like, everybody picked their team, everybody knew their teams, knew what they were going to do, like, it was like a huge [thing].”

While in Paul’s (SR) example competition facilitated social relationships, Steve (SR) felt that “there’s too much competition” and suggested it can jeopardize friendships. He provided an example from the sport he was involved in: “The competition is—everyone is back stabbing, like friendships between—in the fall it just got so competitive between a few of my, like, really close friends, and it just, like, ruined it for a little bit.” Greg (FR) empathized with the students’ experiences of competition and admitted the faculty also experienced pressure: “This unrecognized pressure that these



kids are under—you know, I come here everyday, and my blood pressure is 220 over 100 trying to survive.”

Rockport was perceived by all the researchers and many of their informants as a highly competitive environment. In part, the intense competition was connected to its college-preparatory purpose. College was a dominant theme at Rockport, and as Jill (FR) explained, “Even the ninth graders, they are even talking about college.” Parents’ concerns about college and its relationship to socioeconomic status emerged in our discussions as an important lens to view this culture of competition. Greg (FR), one of Rockport’s college counselors, explained of parents, “They have to justify spending twenty-two grand to go here as opposed to public school.” He believed the parents say, “Well, if [my son] went to public school, he probably would have gone to [an average university], and coming here he goes to [an elite university].” “The boys always have to go a level up,” Mary (FR) added.

The “proper” secondary and undergraduate schooling can represent a cornerstone to traditional versions of success, whether it is securing a well-paying job or even finding the “right” partner. Jill (FR) remembered a “crazy mom” who said, “If he doesn’t get into a place like [one of the most elite universities in the United States], then he is going to meet the wrong woman. It will totally blow his future, because he won’t have the right network.” Greg (FR) felt that college represented to parents a “feeling of success as parents if [their sons] go to the right school.” He explained that if their sons go to an elite college as opposed to an average college they can say, “I’ve done my job; I’ve got my social status.”

For many parents, choosing private schooling is an act of class consciousness. Maintaining or improving socioeconomic privilege is a serious and expensive long-term investment with much at stake. It falls on the shoulders of students, faculty, and administration to deliver. The parental pressure recognized by faculty researchers was also heavily felt by the student researchers. Paul (SR) explained, “All [parents] care about is college. It’s the only thing they ever talk about. It’s ridiculous. They are always about college. ‘Where are you going to college?’” Steve (SR) agreed: “I seriously think parents are worse than kids.” He explained, “Parents know everything about everyone. That is kind of where it stems from. . . . Some parents know all eighty kids, and what they do on weekends, and what kind of grades they get, and it just rubs off on the kids.”

The faculty researchers had similar stories supporting Steve’s (SR) perspective. Jill (FR) remembered, “All of a sudden there was a mistake in the calculation, and a mom called and said, ‘I know for a fact this kid has a GPA less than my son’; like [she] knew this kid’s GPA.” Mary (FR) recalled, “We have parents whose kids graduate and call the college office the next year

and . . . they just really want to know who got in where. And these are the parents!”

In discussing Rockport’s competitive culture and its relationship to parents and bullying, Stan (AD) felt that as “college acceptances to the top colleges get harder and harder now, I think that pressure seeps down.” He explained that while attitudes need to change with the changing admissions environment, it is an uphill battle: “We are not talking to kids about the best schools; it’s about the best fit. To do that as a school is one thing, but to convince the parents that it is okay is another thing.”

Like Stan (AD), all of the faculty researchers and many other faculty members admitted that, from an interpersonal standpoint, they were concerned about the amount of competition and bullying at Rockport. But this school has an elite college-preparatory purpose that seems in conflict with expanding the college list from top schools to best fits. In fact, as Cookson and Persell suggested twenty-five years ago, “Parents and students are not totally divorced from reality. Where one goes to college is related to occupational and financial success” (1985, 168). Though it is increasingly becoming harder, attending elite private schools like Rockport still improves ones chances to attend top universities (Soares 2007).

## **Faculty Contributions**

From the student data and also their own interviews, faculty researchers began to discover some of the ways in which they and their colleagues contributed to the competitive culture, which is heavily based on academic performance and college acceptance. Stan (AD) called Rockport a “success-driven school” with a huge amount of competition for only “a few Ivy League slots.” He reflected, “I went to a coed public school, but I don’t recall the same sort of competition around getting into college.” He implicated “parental” academic pressure but also himself and his colleagues: “I think it is also—bottom line is we do value our college list. We are a part of it as well.”

The student researchers drew attention to how some of the teachers posted grades using Social Security numbers rather than actual names. Paul (SR) explained, “Everybody is immediately trying to figure out who every number is. You find out.” Steve (SR) agreed: “Everyone knows the numbers because it is up there all the time and it shows, it doesn’t just say your average, it shows the grades of every test and everything, so everyone knows the numbers.” This sparked Mary (FR) to interview one of the teachers who posted grades. She said that “if he had a son he wouldn’t send him here. He thinks it is too competitive.” Although after he reflected further, Mary (FR) reported him saying, “Maybe I shouldn’t be [posting grades]. . . . They all know because

everybody stands there and says, ‘Oh you did this and this,’ to see where you stand among men.”

The space Mary (FR) created in the interview for this faculty member allowed him to reflect on the classroom practices he’d taken for granted and on the ways he might have been inadvertently contributing to the competitive Rockport culture he dislikes. Other examples emerged. Mary (FR) added, “There is a teacher who, when a kid gets in early to college, she makes a pennant of that kid’s school in the colors of the school.” She believed, “That’s probably the antithesis of what you want to do. First of all it’s making college even more important, which is hard to do. . . . And it makes it seem like it is a sweepstakes with winners and losers.” Sara (FR) confirmed this practice: “It’s framed in gold, and then she puts them all around the room. . . . Putting the pendants up makes the kids feel like crap who don’t get in. Come on! What are we doing?”

Faculty researchers were also able to reflect on the ways many of them contributed to a culture of bullying at Rockport, using what they called, “quick” or “sarcastic” responses toward the students as a way to discipline the class and earn respect. Mary (FR) called it “verbal sparring” and explained that it “is currency around here. . . . I think it is one of the ways you are well regarded by students, if they see you are able to be verbally really quick and verbally—not necessarily mean—but clever.” Sara (FR) agreed and suggested that when she was first hired it was “something I felt like I had to learn how to do. To literally get control of my classroom I had to be quick because the people who aren’t are the ones who get run over by the kids.” Jill (FR) added, “Sometimes I have to turn that off on a weekend with my husband.” She illustrated, “Like, this morning I said something quick back to him, and he said, ‘You’re not in school.’ I’m like, ‘Oh my god! why did I?’ That sarcasm is actually currency around here.”

The faculty researcher elaborated on what “quick” meant and described power relationships that seemed parallel to the verbal bullying students described among their peers. Mary (FR) explained, “If a kid does something, you hit it right away. But you are clever, you’re not [nasty]—it’s on the edge. It’s a shade away from being [hurtful].” “When we say quick,” Greg (FR) added, “we are not just saying in terms of time, but it has to be a comment that stops the kid, stops the kid dead. It puts him in his place; it shows your authority over that situation.”

Sara (FR) admitted, “You’re not trying to humiliate them, but [it comes close].” They all agreed at the end of this discussion that “quickness” or “sarcasm” was an important, maybe even necessary, part of verbal dialogue at Rockport. Mary (FR) confirmed, “Sarcasm is huge. . . . Sarcasm is gold. I use it all the time.” Similarly, Jill (FR) stated, “Sarcasm is the thing around here.” And Greg (FR) added, “Sarcasm rules.”

The student researchers also recognized the way faculty contributed to both a culture of competition and a culture of bullying. The student researchers used one of their classes to exemplify how ridiculing could be closely linked to a competitive classroom culture that the teacher helped to facilitate. They described a game played by a teacher and her students, as Paul (SR) explained, to “chalk up on the board for rude comments . . . to keep a running tally, like, anytime someone does a witty thing.” John (SR) added, “It’s, like, malicious too.” Steve (SR) elaborated on this competitive classroom game of put-downs: “We’ll be in class, so, like, the teacher will be teaching, and . . . if you say something really funny, everyone is like, ‘Oh put it up, put it up,’ and then some kid will stand up. . . . Totally accepted.” Steve (SR) recalled one recent incident with a student who “tries ten times harder than anyone else. He just doesn’t get it all the time.” He explained, “When he gets picked on it’s just like, *ohhh*, like you can tell it just nails him. They say, ‘Thanks for, like, helping our curve; I’m so glad you’re in our class.’”

Dave (SR) reported that the teacher is not passive in this competition: “The teacher’s on the board too. She’s on the board a lot.” Steve (SR) added, “But hers aren’t hurtful; they are just funny. But ours are—the kids are hurtful, like, they are specific to a certain person, stuff like that. And she’s just like *ohhhhh*.” He believed, “Her justification in her mind is probably, ‘Oh they’re just friends, like they know each other and, oh, they’ll get over it.’” Paul (SR) felt like, “Yeah I think she thinks we don’t actually mean it. . . . I don’t really think kids are getting hurt.”

Mary (FR) interviewed their teacher: “She said there is a lot of vicious teasing that boys recognize, and she used the term *the soft underbellies of the boys*, and they go for them.” Mary (FR) reported, “Freshman teasing she said is particularly bad, teasing of the new kids is particularly bad. . . . She said there is a lot of teasing around grade comparing.” Mary (FR) also noted that the teacher, who is highly regarded by students and faculty as one of the best teachers in the school, felt like she “stops it when she sees it.” The student researchers did not believe their description of this classroom experience was uncommon. John (SR) said he could “name six or seven teachers [whose classes are similar to this].”

## COLLABORATING TO EXAMINE BULLYING AT AN ELITE PRIVATE SCHOOL

This chapter has thus far emphasized conclusions drawn from the data collaboratively by student researchers, faculty researchers, and the CSBGL representative. In the final section, the authors of this chapter theorize further

about how educating for hegemonic advantage is connected with bullying and how the partnership between CSBGL and Rockport has held potential for counterhegemonic change.

### **Educating for Hegemony**

Mills wrote that the private school “is the most important agency for transmitting the traditions of the upper social classes and regulating the admissions of the new wealth and talent” (1956, 64–65). Similarly, Baltzell suggested, “These private educational institutions serve the latent function of acculturating the members of the younger generation, especially those not quite to the manor born, into an upper-class style of life” (1958, 293). More than fifty years have passed since Mills and Baltzell wrote of private schools, but the evidence collected by student and faculty researchers has suggested that this purpose persists at Rockport.

Mike (AD) certainly understood part of Rockport’s mission as preparing students for privilege: “I think there is an implicit message. . . . I mean it is like, you are training these people socially in a way that they don’t even realize they are getting trained. But they are developing outlooks on life.” And the data suggested that many students were absorbing these messages. A white senior explained in a focus group, “I think not to use, like, a stereotype of a blue-collar job, but I would say that most of the kids here are not going to graduate Rockport, go to an Ivy League school, and then work at McDonald’s.”

Bullying was as much an expression of Rockport’s culture as it was a vehicle for policing and reproducing its culture. However, bullying should not be accepted as simply an unintended consequence of extreme competition or other cultural influences without closely considering the more intentional hegemonic power dynamics of elite schooling. The evidence suggested that the “white noise of bullying” was a central ingredient in Rockport’s training of its students for the power elite, an education for and legitimating of their privileged “station in life.”

Others have supported this point. Cookson and Persell argued in their study of elite prep schools, “What one boy described as the ‘dog-eat-dog’ elements in the boy culture provide ample opportunities to learn that survival and success do not go to the weak but to the strong, a philosophy of life well suited to managing power relations in the financial and business world” (1985, 154). New also suggested, “The social construction of such constricted [masculine] selves does indeed produce subjects who can function well in capitalistic, patriarchal organizations” (2001, 740).

Throughout the community similar sentiments were heard in the data. For example, when reflecting on the future, one student anticipated a com-

petitive, hierarchical environment comparable to Rockport's: "It's going to be like that in the outside world. . . . If you work for a big company, or a law firm, you're going to have to take the shit case before you get the big O. J. case." Within that environment, he expected to endure bullying: "You're going to have to take all the crap from the guys who have been there for awhile. It's not going to be like, 'This guy's new—alright we've got to show him the ropes, like, okay, be nice to him.'" Instead, "You're just going to be thrown in there. You're going to have to know how to make your way around."

Some of the teachers, like one of the interviewed faculty members who was also the wrestling coach, believed that to establish a "certain pecking order" through bullying was a masculine "dominance that needs to be established" as the "normal order of things," a "pack mentality" where "everybody has to seek their own level." He explained, "There are kids at the bottom of that pack who are gonna be the ones who are pushed away from the food so to speak, and it's just society. That is the way it is." The coach felt that the school should study those who are feeling picked on and then start a program that tries to "get that person to a point in his life where he has enough self-esteem to stand up to what he believes in and defend himself physically, defend himself morally, whatever the case may be."

Even within the ranks of the administration these attitudes were reflected. Mike (AD) explained that Rockport is a particular type of environment: "You are taking kids from incredibly competitive, high-driven families, and you are putting them together." It is an environment, he argued, that makes eliminating bullying very difficult. "To say that you are going to get those kids to stop snapping at, competing with, and bullying or teasing and ridiculing each other is never going to happen." He connected this with the parent's belief system: "I mean a lot of these families are firm believers in capitalism—it's sinking or swimming. It's about competition. It's about crushing the other guy." He drew on Rockport's mission to suggest that not only would bullying be difficult to get rid of, it would be undesirable to do so: "The implicit curriculum here is an elite—we are setting you up to be an elite member of society, which means recognizing this competition, which means recognizing that you've got to try and get advantages."

In addition to providing the traditional functions of schooling, Rockport is in the business of getting its students into highly ranked colleges, while indoctrinating them into an elite lifestyle, as well as training them to be proficient leaders in a capitalist economy. This requires a set of skills that may indeed be served best by learning to be adept at competition and also giving and receiving various types of bullying.

## A Need for Change

In his ethnography of an elite private school, Peshkin asked, “Is it fair? Is it just? Is it good? that we have such schools that lie a chasm beyond those that most American children attend?” (2001, 126). He asked whether schools like Rockport should be permissible and answered with concern: “To allow the college factor to dwarf all else that it does, as I believe is the case, is to cast serious doubt on the permissibility of its advantage on moral grounds” (126).

Rockport has long been recognized as one of the top schools of its kind. It gives students a strong education with many qualified teachers, intimate classrooms, and excellent resources. It is a specialist at getting its students into first-rate schools of higher education. Indeed, a college counselor at Rockport reported that 25 to 35 percent of their students are admitted to “Ivy and Ivy-equivalent schools,” while “everyone gets into a school—that’s 100 percent,” a particularly stark statistic when juxtaposed with Rockport’s neighboring urban public-school system, where only 55.5 percent of the students even graduate on time (EPE Research Center 2006).

Peshkin worried that prep-school students too often transformed “their advantage into a shield of indifference by means of which they ignore or deny the unfairness of inequality. To do so would be to live a comfortable life while sanctioning the hardship of others” (2001, 125). In this regard, some of the evidence collected at Rockport has given the authors of this chapter cause for concern. For example, Mike (AD) explained that students were not always disciplined for breaking school rules: “We don’t drag kids through the carpet for absolutely following the rules all the times. I mean it is not because we are lax.” Instead, he argued that they were implying to the students, “Hey you’re going to be in this station in life. Well, sure, you’re supposed to show up on time, but, if you don’t, people are going to wait for you, or people are going to make exceptions for you.”

Peshkin argued for private institutions that at their forefront promoted values that reflect the common good, that “leave them knowing that the suffering of the least of us is an intolerable indignity, a war being lost that should be seen as the best of all wars to win, the war for the common good” (2001, 125). CSBGL’s collaborative work on bullying at Rockport—using participatory action research (PAR)—attempted to create spaces where the common good was the framework from which the project proceeded.

## Researching for Change

The collaborative research spaces—anchored by the representative voices of other students, teachers, and administrators; of cultural processes and institutional ideologies; of mission statements and parental hopes—provided the

ingredients for a new, more critical awareness of self and context. The use of PAR attempted to develop what Deutsch (2006) referred to as “awaking the sense of injustice.” For example, John (SR) recognized that some of the elite messages Rockport conveyed to its students stood in contrast to what the data revealed: “The Rockport School is set at an elevation of high moral standards,” but “these aren’t like special people with high moral standards; they are just everyday people, like, doing what everybody else does. It is the same exact type of people . . . to like public school.”

Another example can be found in the new perspective Greg (FR) described from his participation in the study: “I mean, it sounds not like a revelation and all, but I guess to me initially it was.” He recognized the importance of our expanded definition of bullying, saying, “You have to dispel the notion that bullying is just physical, because I think if we asked anybody, nine out of ten people are going to say, ‘There’s no bullying [here]; I’ve never seen anybody pushed into the avenue.’” Greg (FR) became particularly aware of how hidden, normalized, and embedded bullying was in Rockport’s culture, “because the subtleness here—and it’s so intrinsic in our culture here, that people say they don’t recognize it as bullying. I didn’t, until we started having this conversation, but yeah it is.”

The collaboration helped the student and faculty researchers imagine alternatives and outline possibilities for intervention. The student researchers coauthored a letter addressed to faculty researchers, which they read as part of a presentation called *The Rockport Peer-Interaction Study: Eat or Be Eaten*. In it they summarized their findings and suggested such initiatives as “developing awareness and emotional intelligence in students” and a “town hall meeting” since “our data suggests that teasing/ridiculing is something that all of us have experienced or participated in to varying degrees.” They also reminded adults that “demeaning comments do in fact come from the teachers themselves from time to time” and asked “teachers to be more aware when teasing/ridiculing goes too far.”

Faculty researchers coauthored a letter in response to the student researchers, which they also read aloud as part of a presentation. Their letter promised to begin identifying and utilizing the complimentary institutional spaces already set up “such as Peer Leadership Counseling, Town Meetings, and our Upper School Advisory Program.” They agreed “to intervene through various initiatives within our community,” including raising “the issue publicly in order to make students and faculty aware of the debate” and developing “methods of sensitizing the Rockport School community regarding this issue.”

The process of PAR at Rockport is not without critique (Stoudt 2007, 2009). However, over the course of a year, the student and faculty researchers at Rockport collected compelling data of local consequence and in doing so



built institutional momentum that has since become an ongoing school-wide initiative to address bullying. Further, presentations were made internally at Rockport and at other conferences nationally and internationally. New faculty and students joined the Upper School project, while the Lower and Middle Schools also developed research teams to examine bullying. Dialogue increased not only about bullying but about how the school privileges certain, often restrictive, versions of hegemonic masculinity. Hard conversations—about difference, ignorance, stereotyping, and bullying—have become more legitimate and frequent within the school community.

PAR is a radical type of democratic pedagogy, an opportunity to perform critical citizenship locally toward goals greater than oneself. Faculty researchers were particularly clear how they began to apply the lessons from this work into their daily practices. For example, Sara (FR) acknowledged, “This study has for the first time made me think about, you know, what I’m saying in class. I actually caught myself [saying something sarcastic to a kid].” She explained, “I thought, This is exactly what this study is all about, and it is happening right in front of me.” Learning from the research and then applying it in the classroom illustrates the potential of PAR to organically change the institution by reimagining ways to interact within the community.

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## *Chapter Four*

# **A Part and Apart: Students of Color Negotiating Boundaries at an Elite Boarding School**

Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández  
and Raygine DiAquoi

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

—DuBois 1989 [1903], 3

Victor Martínez is sharply dressed in his usual khakis; an olive green turtle-neck hugs his defensive-lineman body. A straight line of hair cuts high across his forehead, perfectly trimmed, and the thin veil of a mustache makes him almost manly. A sparkling silver Swiss Army watch accentuates his casual elegance. Like many other students of color in elite boarding schools around the United States, Victor arrived at the Weston School through a minority-recruitment program. He recalls visiting the school as a prospective student, spending time with other students of color, and feeling daunted by the very idea of an elite boarding school and by Weston as one of the best and most diverse. Once at Weston, however, he says he began to wonder whether the school was in fact as diverse as he was led to believe.

During school vacations, Victor typically travels by bus or train from the spacious and elegant school campus to his family's apartment and the urban hustle of the metropolitan city where his parents are blue-collar workers. He has much to say about the contrasts between home and school, but it is his journey from one to the other that sometimes reflects the experience of negotiating his identifications as a student of color at an elite boarding school.

Victor describes traveling back to school with a female friend he describes as black:

We're in the train station . . . where she's getting something at McDonald's real quick, and I'm just standing here. And then, some other kid from Weston comes, and he's white, and he's like, "Oh, what's up?" And then, like, I started talking to him, and I'm good friends with him, and then she comes, and then, it's just, like, I feel like I have to choose. Because they both, they won't, they won't, they can't, they won't, they won't assoc—be able to associate with themselves.

Victor's uncertainty about whether these two "friends" can't or won't "associate" is telling of the difficulty in interpreting the complex dynamics that shape whether and how relationships are established. The central importance of race to Victor's interpretation of this process is evident as he continues: "I feel like a lot of it has to do with the white person being uncomfortable, and then the black person not, just not wanting to mix in with the white person. So, I think the white person would like it, if he could mix in with her, but I don't think she wants to."

In Victor's narrative, he negotiates the boundary between his relationship with white students who might "like" to associate with students of color and his close identification with black students. He begins to summarize: "and I feel like that's the case with a lot of—" but cuts himself off, pauses for a moment, and clarifies, "I don't want to just say *black people*, but for the most, people I hang out with, black people, 'cause there just aren't any Latinos here, so, I have to just cling on to, like, the closest thing." The main story, in which white people want to associate and black people don't, is modified in important ways by a subnarrative in which Victor positions himself as a character closer to black students and explains his complex relationship with white students. He laughs as he continues with a narrative coda in which both stories collide:

I like a lot of them; like, they make fun of white people. And I'm like, "Well, if you're gonna, you know, make fun of them, like, don't complain when they ask a question. Even though, if they're ignorant questions, don't complain, because all you do is separate yourself from them in a way. And although you do it rightfully so sometimes, when you just want to vent and, you know, you just want to chill out with people, you know, you can associate with, at the same time, you know . . . don't shy yourself away from them. You know, like, don't make them scared to talk to you." And in that situation I felt like I had to choose between the two, and it was hard for me to do.

Victor's use of pronouns is important for understanding how he positions himself in these two stories. He first positions black students as the *they*

(“they make fun of white people”), and then white students as the *they* (“don’t complain when they ask a question”). To resolve the presence of two *others*, he turns to the pronoun *you*, speaking about students of color while subtly including himself. Neither *they* nor *we*, plural nor singular, *you* becomes an expedient way for Victor to speak from his tenuous position as a student of color in an elite space that is defined by the supremacy of whiteness.

There is no resolution to the story, as he concludes by summarizing what the narrative was meant to illustrate: that as a student of color, Victor is precariously positioned between two worlds, one that represents a set of relationships within which he can “chill out,” and another in which he has to make sure he doesn’t “scare” white students. In this way, Victor’s narrative is illustrative of the rather complicated process by which students of color at an elite boarding school come to understand themselves as members of a school community in which their marginality is definitional to their status.

This chapter explores the ways students who identify as racial minorities make sense of and negotiate their precarious position within the context of one elite boarding school in the United States. It was not until the early 1960s that boarding schools began a concerted effort to diversify the racial makeup of their student populations (Cookson and Persell 1991). It is true that in the last four decades elite boarding schools have worked to integrate students of color. Yet Victor’s experience points to continued exclusion, and there is abundant research to suggest that he is not alone (e.g., Cole and Omari 2003; Kramer 2008).

In this chapter, we share the narratives of seven students of color at one elite boarding school to illustrate how they experience the fractured existence that DuBois (1903) described as *double-consciousness*. Of course, this experience is not unique to students of color in elite settings, as racialization is fundamental to the formation of subjects in the United States in general (Omi and Winant 1994) and to the continued exclusion of minorities from the power elite in particular (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2003). The experiences of these seven students illuminate how this process takes place in a context that is defined by privilege but where elite status is not equally distributed. Their narratives reveal the boundaries that constrain how students of color achieve elite status and the ways in which they negotiate these boundaries.

Students of color are constantly aware of their “two-ness” in this elite educational setting; while they are *a part* of this privileged world, they realize that they are also a world *apart*. This chapter disrupts the notion that today, just as in the 1970s when Lorene Cary attended another elite boarding school, “everything’s just fine, and it’s not, and we need to keep saying that, by any means possible” (1991, 75).

## SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND ELITE BOARDING SCHOOLS

This chapter draws on a larger research project that focused on how students from different sociocultural backgrounds internalize and mobilize symbolic resources to construct and enact elite identifications within the context of an elite boarding school (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a). This study paid special attention to how the construction and enactment of elite identifications is shaped by and evolves through the negotiation of symbolic boundaries, or what cultural sociologists call *boundary work* (see Lamont 2001).

Central to this sociological approach is the view that symbolic boundaries define the behaviors and identifications acceptable for individuals within specific contexts. Lamont and Molnár define symbolic boundaries as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (2002, 168). Symbolic boundaries play an important role in how individuals identify or differentiate themselves from other groups.

Schools have been important to the study of these processes of identification through symbolic boundaries. Studying youth cultural practices within public schools in particular has been central to understanding the role of schools as institutions of cultural reproduction where students learn (even as they often resist and redefine) their “proper” place in the social structure (e.g., Weis and Fine 2000).

The experiences of students of color in public urban schools have been among the central foci of this work, which has deeply shaped how race is theorized in educational research. Largely missing from this work are the experiences of students of color in contexts of affluence, particularly within the context of elite boarding schools (see Kuriloff and Reichert 2003). Because race is often confounded with class (Leonardo and Hunter 2007), scholars have rarely considered how students of color in elite educational settings experience their schooling and how they engage in processes of identification.

The larger study examined how students make meaning of their own subjective positions as “elite students” and how race, class, and gender mediate the processes through which they come to identify as elite (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a). The research explored the experiences of students who identify as minorities as well as white, who come from families across the social-class spectrum, and who embrace different gender identifications.

This ethnographic research project involved several methods of data collection and analysis, including participant observation, informal as well as semistructured narrative interviews, an online survey, and a series of student focus groups. The data was collected over two years of research fieldwork.

The first year involved more open-ended, exploratory research across the school involving different constituents, while the second year involved more focused data collection involving thirty-six students in the senior class. The selection of participants for the in-depth stage of the research focused on achieving “maximum variation” in order to capture a wide range of experiences from which to theorize elite identification (Miles and Huberman 1994). The Weston School and all the names of individuals in this chapter are pseudonyms.

In this chapter, we zero in on the experiences of students who identified as students of color or as racial minorities. As in the larger study, the students highlighted in this chapter also represent a wide range of experiences of and identifications with racial labels. Our aim was to understand how these students make sense of their experiences in an elite boarding school that is defined by whiteness as they negotiate their identification with racial labels and with other students of color. The chapter is an attempt to deepen the analysis of the experiences of students of color who “earn high marks, respect, awards” and learn to live among the white elites and to “be in their world but not of it” (Cary 1991, 59). This experience of being “in but not of” is shared by all students of color, albeit in different ways that are influenced by students’ many identifications and diverse experiences both prior and during their time at a school like Weston.

For the purpose of this chapter, an elite boarding school is defined by its character as a scholastically, historically, geographically, typologically, and demographically elite institution (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009b). The Weston School is decidedly an elite boarding school, and it is considered one of the most prestigious among them. Founded over a hundred years ago, this “independent” school offers the kind of elite curriculum described by Goodson, Cookson, and Persell (1997), two-thirds of its students come from families that can afford the full tuition, and it is located on a large and lush campus in a rural New England town.

The academic literature on elite boarding schools in the United States has focused on their role as a mechanism for upper-class cultural transmission through which students are explicitly acculturated with the dispositions that define them as part of the elite (see the introduction in chapter 1 of this book). Like other total institutions, the encompassing character of elite boarding schools has a profound effect on students’ subjectivity (Goffman 1961). “The way students claim and enact their identification as Westonian shows how the self is necessarily remade in the process of becoming elite and how students come to convince themselves that they deserve their privilege” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a, 212).



Yet this process is also profoundly marked by dynamics of internal exclusion. For students of color, this means becoming what Cookson and Persell describe as “outsiders within,” not likely to be “fully accepted by upper-class families or into upper-class culture” (1991, 220). While ostensibly encouraged to fully partake in the life of the school, students of color are often isolated at lunch tables and within affinity-group meetings. Cookson and Persell argue that this isolation is not limited to the school boundaries. Absorption into the total world of an elite boarding school ultimately works to make students of color almost unidentifiable to their home communities. As a result, they don’t seem to belong anywhere.

In her account of her experiences at the St. Paul’s School in the 1970s, Lorene Cary tells the story of going home from school during a school break: “I was with my friends but could not get the full pleasure of them. I wanted to weep with frustration” (1991, 99). Carey’s experience illustrates Cookson and Persell’s (1991) concept of being “doubly marginalized,” as she is caught between two very different worlds. Despite this insight, more recent research suggests that the experiences of students of color in elite boarding schools has not changed much in terms of their experience of marginalization (see Kramer 2008). What does appear to have changed, however, is the range of experiences that students of color bring and that shape how they understand themselves as elite students.

While it is true that black and Latino students at elite boarding schools continue to experience being marginalized, it is also true that they have become *a part* of contemporary elite boarding schools (see Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2003). This means that a single narrative of what it means to be black, Latino, or Latina can no longer capture their experiences. The increasing number of minorities from different class backgrounds, more openness and diversity in terms of gender identification, and more awareness about the experiences of students from biracial families require a renewed analysis.

Some students, in fact, come to understand themselves as being *of* this world, as the distinctions between their prior and current schooling are much less pronounced. This does not mean that students of color no longer feel *apart* from the world of elite boarding schools. Rather, they are both *a part* and *apart*, and their social and cultural background as well as their identification with other social categories largely shapes how they experience both sides of that equation.

In order to illustrate the complex processes by which students negotiate being *a part* of and *apart* from this elite boarding school, this chapter draws on data from seven students who tell very different stories about their experiences as students of color at the Weston School. We approached the analysis for this chapter through a multiple case-study approach, in which we looked

closely at the narratives of students of color representing a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. We returned to the interview data with the questions: How do these students' experiences at Weston reflect being "in but not of"? What strategies do these students articulate for navigating the spaces within and between which they negotiate their double-consciousness? We sought to explore the similarities and differences in how students of color negotiated this elite space and the ways in which they were able to construct their own elite identifications.

### **ELITE SUBJECTS, RACIAL OBJECTS: NARRATIVES OF RACIALIZATION**

Regardless of their social and cultural background, all students of color share the experience of having to construct an identification in relationship to racial labels. Whether and to what extent they choose to embrace or reject the racial labels imposed on them, all of them must contend with this "fact" (see Fanon 1967). This is not something about which they have a choice, and, therefore, the politics of identity are not something they can simply negate; it is imposed on them by the very fact that they inhabit an institution that is by definition racist. Through their differences, students share an understanding that they are both *a part* and *apart* from this elite world yet differ in their strategies for coping with their precarious position.

#### **Alex Crosby: "I didn't fit their category as black"**

Alex Crosby identifies herself as a black American, and she lives in a large city where both her parents are successful lawyers. Unlike other students of color, Alex's parents are very familiar with elite institutions: her mother was one of the first black students at another elite boarding school, and her father was one of few black students at an elite law school. Despite her mother's reluctance, she came to Weston looking for an academically challenging environment, and she discovered her love of theater. Alex is self-assured and confident in her academic skills, and she has assumed leadership roles within the theater program at the school and the extracurricular Actors' Club, or "A-Club." Her style is innocuous, often wearing carefully pressed button-down shirts, and her straightened hair is often pulled back.

Even prior to coming to Weston, Alex experienced exclusion from her black peers, who felt that she did not quite meet the requirements for being black: "because I wasn't a black girl that grew up in the inner city, that went

to a private school . . . I didn't fit their category as black." At Weston, Alex finds that she still comes up short:

I remember, someone confided in me . . . that a girl in my dorm had told her, I mean I guess a group of them had, were sitting down at lunch, like, the first weekend. And they asked, you know, "How many black girls do you have in the dorm?" And they said, "Five and a half." She had heard, I think [Julie's] father was black, her mother was white. And so my friend was like, "Oh, you mean Julie," . . . the girl in my dorm goes, "No, I mean Alex." So no one has ever come out and say, said anything, but I do know from that and from talking to other people that I'm either not really black, because I don't, whatever black culture is I, I don't fit into that, or I'm Oreo—black, you know, on the outside, white on the inside, that sort of thing.

Alex feels that all of her peers, regardless of their identification with race categories, seem to question her blackness, suggesting that she is not black enough or that she is what some students described as *incogegro*. Both at home and at school, Alex finds that she must measure herself against a narrow conception of what it means to be black. Despite her awareness, Alex still measures herself against the markers of blackness that are widely recognized by her peers. Retorting to the ways in which she has been classified at Weston, Alex balks: "I think it's completely ridiculous, because, I mean, I was born black; I'm black, like, you know, if you, if listening to rap music helps, I listen to rap music sometimes, I listen to jazz music sometimes. But then again, I listen to classical music sometimes, you know. So I think it's kind of ridiculous."

Alex insists that gauging blackness by a narrow set of signals is "ridiculous," yet she includes rap music and jazz as markers of her own identification as black. She simultaneously rejects and enacts the version of black authenticity that is imposed on her and against which she defines herself as a black person who *also* listens to classical music *and* attends an elite boarding school.

Ultimately, like all of the students at an elite boarding school like Weston, Alex finds a niche within which she can excel and demonstrate her "excellence." She decides that her commitment to theater at Weston overrides what others might deem as her required commitments to being black. She recalls her first year at Weston: "I was expected to fit in. I was expected to sit at the SAHA table. I was expected to do that by all sides. . . . I think people have just realized that that's just not Alex's thing. And I'm sorry, I can't go to SAHAS meetings because theater does their stuff on Friday nights. I can't do it. And I'm sorry, but theater is more important to me."

According to Alex, she was expected by all of the members of the Weston community to be part of the SAHAS, or the Society for African and Hispanic American Students. Such an affinity group suggests that the Weston community is welcoming and understanding of minority students and the obstacles that they might face being a part of a school like Weston. Yet it also sets students of color apart from the rest of the larger community. In deciding to identify primarily as a member of the theater community and the A-Club, Alex manages to bypass a boundary that would mark her as a black student, but she does this at the expense of being recognized as black altogether:

I remember one time [the members of the A-Club] were joking about SAHAS, and I felt like I should, I felt like I had to defend SAHAS, being the only black student in the room. . . . That was the time that I actually had to be like, “Well, hello—black student in the room.” . . . It wasn’t a bad thing, and they didn’t mean it that way, but I assure you, if there had been other black students in that room, they would have taken it that way.

Alex’s mother helps her to understand that the experience of not being accepted as adequately black by her own peers and often being the only black student in predominantly white settings is the “price of the ticket” (Baldwin 1985):

[My parents have] helped in the sense that they’re like, you know, at the end of the day, like, because you are able to talk to all different kinds of people, that’s going to be more important, because you never know who your boss is going to be, or who your friends are going to be, and who is going to help you out. . . . I mean, it’s fine to be with people that you’re familiar with, but people that don’t ever branch out, they’re not going, I mean, what’s going to happen when they enter the job market and . . . their boss isn’t, doesn’t look like them, or doesn’t talk like them?

Negotiating the boundaries of identification becomes a skill that Alex embraces as part of her future. Her successful, upper-class parents help Alex understand the importance of her fluency to negotiate spaces defined by whiteness. The repackaging of the experience as a source of future advantage still contains elements of the psychic cost of not being “black enough,” which are evident when Alex explains what she believes others might think of her as a Westonian. “I must be smart. I must be genius-like. Some people would say that. They would be saying, you know, my parents must be rich. I must be snooty. I must be stuck up. I must be sheltered. I must, uh, be an Oreo for some.”

**Laurie King: “The half-black girl from Turkey”**

When she first arrived at Weston, Laurie King distinctly remembers having her black girlfriends try to do her hair and comment, “Ugh! Okay, we don’t know what to do with this!” It wasn’t that her curly hair was difficult but that it didn’t react the same way to their treatments. “They’d try to do, like, the stuff they do with black hair, like add all these foils and do all this stuff, [and] my hair would be ‘Blagh!’ And then they’re like, ‘Alright, you got white-girl hair.’ I was like, Ugh!” She says her friends were not quite sure what to make of her physical features: “When they first met me, they were like, ‘Well, she’s not dark enough to be black, she’s too dark to be white, uh, her eyes are too big to be Latina, and she’s not Asian, we can tell she’s not Asian [because of my hair]’; so they’re like, ‘We just put you in that other category where we don’t know.’”

With one parent she identifies as white and another she describes as black, Laurie identifies herself as “the half-black girl from Turkey.” Because her parents are both international workers, Laurie has lived outside the United States, most recently in Turkey, since she was three. Her experiences as both an international and a U.S. student who chooses to self-identify as biracial complicate the idea of being doubly marginalized. As a minority student, she finds that she does not fit seamlessly into the categories available at Weston. Furthermore, she does not quite see herself as American.

When Laurie first arrived at Weston, she “hung out for the first two years mostly with the SAHAS” students. She goes on to explain that she was fully immersed in the SAHAS group and that all of her friends were a part of SAHAS. She sat for meals with SAHAS students and attended group meetings. However, there was always a hint of tension in her relationship to SAHAS because she was on the “volleyball, swimming, and lacrosse [teams], which, you know, aren’t very, like, black sports.” Laurie found herself caught between the world that she occupied with the students in SAHAS and the larger world of Weston, which was predominantly white. It is as if these two groups are both aware of each other and complicit in policing each other’s boundaries. In fact, she suggests that both black and white students at Weston reinforce the boundaries of SAHAS: “If you’re a black kid here and you don’t hang out with SAHAS, you do get a lot of heat from it, from other black students, and to some degree probably from other white students. I’m not sure, but I think there’s somewhat of an expectation, if you’re black on campus, you’re gonna hang out with SAHAS.”

Laurie’s observation about SAHAS illustrates an important tension about such affinity groups. In her first year, Laurie remembers the common refrain from older peers of color about academic expectations at Weston: “You know, there are very few of us on campus; we need to make a good impres-

sion for ourselves.” For Laurie “SAHAS is really the only place that that type of support that I would need to . . . deal with any of that came, would come from.” She believes that her “Weston experience would’ve been different if I hadn’t had that connection.” Groups like SAHAS are an important source of support for students whose admission to the school highlights their racial identification. At the same time, as Alex suggests, such groups underscore the very boundaries that limit how students come to identify as Westonians.

Because of her diverse experiences, Laurie finds that her own interests do not always neatly match up with the assumed characteristics attributed to students who belong to SAHAS. In the end, like Alex, Laurie chooses to distance herself from SAHAS and searches for other spaces within which to craft an elite identification, one that builds on her ability to cross boundaries.

There is a joke in Laurie’s dorm that she is the “resident minority,” which means that she is “on call” if any of the black or poor students in her dorm have an issue: “If there’s a problem with a black girl in the dorm, or a girl that’s poor, or—there are all these different issues that I get approached about first, like . . . if a faculty member is having trouble with a girl in the dorm, like a black girl in the dorm, that she doesn’t feel she connects with, she’ll come to me and ask me, you know, ‘What might she be thinking?’ Or ‘How does she feel about this?’”

Candidly, Laurie explains that she does not feel that she is particularly qualified to deal with the issues and students that seem to be an unofficial part of her purview because she did not grow up in either a black or a poor community in the United States. Yet she chooses not to explain to the other proctors that she is not more equipped to deal with certain issues than they are; she believes that she is the next best choice in a dorm proctored by three white females and herself.

Laurie’s words reveal the process through which she is positioned as an outsider within Weston and the limited conception of blackness that shapes her identification. Laurie both challenges the assumption that she could or should “relate” to students who are either black or poor, while also embracing her role as a boundary crosser. “I don’t know, I guess it’s good because I get to deal with more, and I get more responsibility, which I like.” While she finds the assumptions made by her peers to be “annoying,” she manages to see her experience at Weston as an asset:

I’m glad that I’m doing it and not someone else, ’cause I feel because I don’t fit into every group, I have a little part of each, so I can kind of glean off what I need to and when, if I don’t have the background in, not having money, I can go to a friend that doesn’t, and if I don’t have the background in, you know, what it feels like to be a black girl who has a teacher that doesn’t like her, I can go to a friend that’s had that, so, I think because I don’t fit anywhere, I’ve kind

of made enough connections everywhere to cover my bases in terms of helping people out.

Like Alex, Laurie sees her education as preparation for the world beyond Weston. It has been a lesson in negotiating multiple worlds and learning when to activate her different selves. She knows that she doesn't quite fit, but it is her liminal status at Weston that has allowed her to form bonds with so many different types of students. As a biracial student who has been living abroad for most of her life, Laurie also gives voice to the idea that students of color in this elite setting may not only be thinking about their isolation in local terms.

### **Charlene Rodreau: "More aware of the fact that I am black"**

Charlene Rodreau says she was tricked into coming to Weston by one of her best friends in middle school, who jokingly introduced the idea of joining a minority-recruitment program to her mother. Although Charlene's mother is a teacher, her parents were not aware of schools like Weston, perhaps because they originally came from Haiti. Indeed, Charlene confidently identifies as Haitian-American, and, unlike Alex or Laurie, she identifies strongly with the students in SAHAS.

She is also hyperaware of her outsider status as a student at Weston. She recalled many different instances of "racial confrontations" on campus. Crossing the streets surrounding Weston's serene and idyllic campus, "cars driving by would yell things or even come up face to face and say, like, really, like, racist comments." As a result, Charlene found that her thinking about being a student of color at Weston changed dramatically, making her "more aware of the fact that I am black": "It kind of just makes me more apprehensive in certain situations, I guess, like, maybe being the only black face in an all, like, all white room. It makes me more aware of that. And it won't, it won't hinder, like, conversations or anything, but . . . I will tend to respond to even the slightest hint more so than I would have before." While the "racial confrontations" that Charlene encounters on Weston's campus contribute to her heightened sensitivity to issues pertaining to race in the classroom, her insights about the social life of the school point to how this aspect of the school is also defined by whiteness.

Each year, as Charlene explains, some members of the first-year class form a very popular and tight-knit group known as the "fresh posse," a group that plays a central role in how Westonians organize themselves into social cliques. As Charlene tries to get at the essence of this group, she manages to exclude herself from the possibility of ever being a part of the fresh posse, which she says, "usually always consist of blonde—blonde, blue-eyed" girls. It "tends to be, like, those, those girls that you would see on, like, Abercrom-

bie & Fitch.” Charlene goes on to explain that the members of this first-year cadre embody the “all-American” essence.

Coming from the inner city, Charlene’s words display her distance from and limited knowledge of what it would take to be an insider in a group in which Abercrombie & Fitch is only minimally a part of a wardrobe filled with more expensive brands like Burberry and Lacoste. In Charlene’s mind, a group that is fundamentally defined as white and wealthy is the hallmark of the all-American lifestyle. Charlene stumbles in her narrative as she tries to find the words that will accurately portray this elusive group. She decides that she “couldn’t really tell you about” the group because she does not really know or understand the inner workings of the posse. Finally, Charlene concludes, “I wouldn’t be, because I’m not a part of, I don’t have blonde hair, blue eyes, nor do I have money.” She laughs as she underscores that she is “not in any of those groups.”

Charlene suggests that while students of color are a part of the Weston community, they are also apart from many aspects of Weston’s social life, and social boundaries preclude them from becoming “real” Westonians. In fact, as Alex and Laurie both suggest, to engage the broader social landscape of the school directly, students of color must distance themselves from the SAHAS, a space that would reinforce their minority status. Instead, Charlene adopts a counterintuitive approach to staking her claim on this elite space; she opens herself as a racial object to the scrutiny of white students who have questions about race:

What makes them comfortable is the fact that when they have—they’ll have a question, and it comes, it does come off as kind of ignorant. And maybe it’s ignorant, and it’s slightly racist in the fact that . . . they’re not really understanding. But they’ll feel more comfortable coming to me because I’ll sit down and tell them . . . if they come to me with a question, I’ll sit down, and I’ll answer the question to them, like, as honestly as I can instead of flying off the handle, and that kind of makes them a little less apprehensive and scared to approach me about, like, “Why do you guys do this or do that?”

Charlene’s narrative reflects Victor’s early description of the potentially complex role that students of color can play in their relationships with white students. In his narrative, Victor explains that although he may want to walk away from these kinds of discussions, he is also aware of the fact that this reaction could potentially cause white students to be fearful and close the door to communication.

He wrestles with what can be his inclination to walk away and want to vent, and a sense of responsibility to white students who want answers to questions about students of color. Because Weston is defined as a white



institution, students of color are positioned as a source of edification for their white peers (Kramer 2008), becoming themselves “*the curriculum of diversity*” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a, 166). Ironically, her willingness to make white students “comfortable” also translates into the impression that Charlene is somehow not quite black. “It happens sometimes with me,” she explains, “in a few cases where I would hang out, you know, like, a white person or something, and they’d just be like, ‘You know, you’re,’ and they’d just like let it slip, something like, ‘Oh, you’re really cool—you’re not like, you know, *them*, or the rest of *them*.’”

Positioned as a racial object, Charlene’s elite subjectivity is precariously perched on the gaze of her white peers, who expect her to teach them about being black, while insisting that she is not like “them.” And yet, like Alex and Laurie, she manages to embrace her two-ness as a critical competency for the future in the “business world” where she will “have to learn to deal” with “white coworkers or a white boss.”

### **Robert Joyce: “Having a lower opinion of black students”**

Like Alex, Robert Joyce is one of the few students at Weston who identifies as black but who did not come to the school through a minority-recruitment program. Robert’s brother attended Weston as well and graduated after Robert’s second year; both of them received substantial financial aid from the school. Robert describes himself as “a middle-class person,” and he describes his hometown as a mostly white suburban community. Observing the similarities between Weston and his former school and community, Robert says that they “are both predominantly white.” He quickly qualifies the similarity by resorting to the notion that Westonians are smart, worldly individuals: “Of course, Weston is a lot better, because the people here are a lot more aware and a lot more conscious of the world, I think, and things like that.”

Before Weston, Robert attended a magnet school for academically talented students. He notes that, although the school was “in the projects, so you could get a lot of black kids there,” the school was also “the best school in the county, so there were a lot of white kids whose parents were doctors or whatever.” He continues discussing the parallel by adding, “Of course, the black kids there were always . . . perceived as being lesser than the white kids, and thought to be a certain way, and thought to be misbehaved, or whatever. . . . I would think that there is, sort of, a parallel to that here.” He illustrates the parallel with several narratives in which other students and teachers are positioned as having “a lower opinion of black students.”

As Robert shares one story after another to illustrate his perception of racism at Weston, he continually interjects the caveat that perhaps he is just too

sensitive to the issue. “I’m a really sensitive person,” he always qualifies; “maybe I overreacted.” Observing that there are no other black students in his math class, Robert ponders, “What does the teacher think of you? You know, do they think you are as able as the other kids in the class? And, like, in several math classes, I felt like I would go to the teacher and they, the way they would answer my questions . . . it just seems like people in class would probably have a lower opinion of black students.”

Robert offers a general observation about what his white peers and teachers expect of black students. “They expect kids to, you know, dressed like they’re, you know, ghetto fabulous or whatever,” and he adds, “a lot of the black kids here actually are very respectable.” The contrast he draws between being respectable and being “ghetto fabulous” is suggestive of his own construction of blackness, and he offers his own self-critique, drawing on ideas from a recent guest lecturer at Weston:

We had Cornel West speak, and he said how we all have sort of that white supremacy ingrained in us by society. . . . I think I have my, like, white racist doubts about black kids here, too, which is bad on my part, you know . . . how black students are perceived here and if they get as much respect as a white student, you know? . . . But, I mean, but it’s not like, I don’t go around every day experiencing, like, racism on this campus or anything like that. . . . So, I mean, it’s not that bad.

Throughout both of his interviews, Robert insisted that perhaps racism was not as bad as his stories might suggest and that his interpretation might just be wrong because he was “too sensitive.” This sense of doubt about whether he was in fact experiencing or observing racism is telling, because it both reflects and compounds the disorientation that students of color feel in the context of an elite boarding school that makes claims to tolerance.

Never quite part of the institution, many students of color are also never quite sure whether their experiences of marginalization are the result of racism or their own fault. This was particularly true for students who also did not identify as part of SAHAS. Robert explains: “As for, like, the black community on campus, I mean, they are pretty supportive, but, me, I don’t really,” he pauses and vacillates about his response. Robert doesn’t feel that he can connect to SAHAS, “because I don’t come from, you know, I come from suburban . . . mostly white. And so, I don’t really feel that strong of a connection to them.”

Instead, Robert’s primary strategy for finding support at Weston has been to build strong bonds with adults on campus. Robert has a special relationship with one of the very few adult black males on campus, for whom he feels a particular affinity. To explain why his white peers have a difficult time

relating to him as a black person, Robert offers this teacher as an example: “I think a lot of people, you know, are sort of scared of him because he also is, you know, a black man who dresses well. But more than the dressing, is well-spoken, very respectable. You know, the most respectable guy ever, the most moral, trustworthy person out there. And I think people are sort of intimidated by that in a black male.”

Robert is not sure whether he “would have made it through Weston without a black advisor . . . because there are just some things I can tell him about, you know, getting play time on the lacrosse team or, you know, getting cut half-way through try outs or, you know, that sort of thing that, you know, I could tell him, but I definitely wouldn’t feel comfortable telling a white faculty.”

Ironically, while Robert feels that white faculty members might not inspire confidence, his other source of support at Weston comes from an unlikely source: older white women on the staff. These women, who hold the lowest status in the hierarchical space of an elite boarding school like Weston, were a crucial source of support for Robert. While his relationship to a black faculty member is not particularly unusual, as it reflects the importance of adult role models for black students in any school environment (Noguera 2003), his close relationship to some of the female staff in the dining hall and library staff is worth noting.

For Robert, the relationships with the staff lack the “vener” of “formality” that makes it uncomfortable for him to talk with teachers. Perhaps in part because staff have a lower status within the school, Robert feels that he can “feel really comfortable talking” with them. He describes his relationship with two older women he describes as “open-minded” and “caring”:

I talk to them a lot about just, like, people, and about life sort of. And sometimes we don’t talk, really talk about anything, just like, “How was your day?” And they’ll tell me, you know, Ms. Chelsea might tell me about, like, you know, her grandchildren or something, or Ms. Morris might tell me about, you know, she’s doing her kickboxing, trying to get certified to be an instructor. But then sometimes we talk about, like, a lot of deep things, like I talked to them both a lot about my mom, because turning eighteen . . . and becoming an adult, I sort of have a lot of clash with my mom, and I’ve talked to them a lot about that, because, I mean, as a, they just seem to really understand me.

Robert feels that it is these relationships that have made his time at Weston worthwhile. While he recognizes the excellent academic preparation he has received, “it’s the people here, that I met that have really meant the most to me, made it worthwhile.”

### **Astrid Howard: “Not the myself that I wanted to find”**

Few fashion styles are as deliberately antiestablishment as the Goth style (Hodkinson 2002). Drawing inspiration from a combination of punk and Victorian fashion, Goth’s dark and androgynous aesthetic stands in stark contrast to the pastels and the gender-specific styles of the preppy look. It is also not a style often associated with black cultural practices. When Astrid Howard began to dress “more Gothically,” it sparked rumors among other students who had also come to Weston through minority-recruitment programs. “There were so many rumors going around,” Astrid explains, “like, ‘Oh that girl is crazy, blah, blah, blah; she wears all this black and listens to rock music.’ And I just didn’t wanna deal with it, so I kind of left it behind.” For Astrid, the distancing happened within the first year of being at Weston.

In the beginning, the students from the same program “were, like, really close” and felt a sense that they had “to stick together.” But, as Astrid explains, she “just didn’t really fit in.” She adds, “I guess they are just not my type of people. . . . I don’t know, I just, I guess, I was kind of trying to find myself, and they weren’t the myself that I wanted to find.”

Dressed in red and black plaid pants with large black combat boots and a red bandana that partly reveals her previously blue-dyed hair, Astrid explains, “I don’t feel the need to act black ’cause I just sound stupid when I do. . . . I just feel like, I’m just gonna be me. Like, not black; I’m me first, ’cause I am me. Black is just something that I happened to be too, like, ‘Oh, oh yeah, that is brown skin, there. I forgot about that.’ Whatever. It’s just not a big deal.”

If the students in SAHAS were not the “myself” that she wanted to find, Astrid is also quite clear that she is not interested in the social space that Charlene describes as “the posse.” In fact, for Astrid, the posse is the opposite of the social spaces she associates with, which she describes as the “rock people” and “the anime obsession—like, weird, people.” Neither black nor preppy, Astrid still identifies as Westonian, but she has her own definition. She laughs as she explains: “I don’t know, I’m just me. I’m like a [renegade] Westonian. I’m that loud girl, sort of—no, I’m like that quiet-Westonian-that-nobody-really-knew-until-they-started-screaming-on-the-stage-in-a-rock-band sort of Westonian.”

Astrid has developed intimate relationships within her dorm, and she feels “really comfortable with my group of friends.” She talks about how they deal with race through humor: “So, we make jokes about race all the time. It’s like, ‘Oh, you know us black people, we all look alike.’ Or just, like, retarded stuff like that. And, like, we don’t take it to heart, ’cause we know we are just kidding and that we are not meaning to be, like, offensive or anything. We are just, like, playing around with it. It’s fun.”

Astrid identifies openly as a lesbian, and she describes her close relationship with her girlfriend as one of the ways she deals with the complex dynamics of race at a place like Weston, even for a student who just wants to be “me.” In fact, humor was a strategy that many Weston students used for dealing with the otherwise uncomfortable topic of race between friends, particularly in the context of the dormitories.

Brushing aside the times when students have expected her to speak to the experiences of black students in general, Astrid describes engaging the topic with her girlfriend, whom she describes as a “white Hispanic.” She notes a problem when “Hispanic people just get chunked in with black people ’cause we are all people of color. . . . I have to say we are all *minorities*, and then I feel weird doing that, too, ’cause she is really white. So, its just weird.” Astrid’s identification as black becomes definitional to her intimate relationship with her girlfriend: “She had never imagined herself dating somebody black. And I never imagined [myself] dating somebody white. But when we look at each other, I’m just not like, ‘Oh my god, you are white—what am I doing?!’ Its just like, ‘Oh you are Eve; that’s cool!’ And it’s the same thing with her. Like, we actually have conversations about it, ’cause it’s weird.”

Coming to Weston, Astrid has discovered a strong affinity for Asian culture, which she first discovered through her interest in the Japanese animation style known as *anime*. She chuckles as she continues: “Then I got more into Japanese, and then I got into Japanese music. And I got more into Japanese culture, and now I’m kind of obsessed.” She laughs at herself, perhaps somewhat self-consciously. “I like Asia in general, and so my goal is to, like, learn all the Asian languages.” Astrid embraces a particular Goth style known as Lolita, which “combines aspects of a Victorian girl’s attire with a dark gothic mood” (Miller 2004, 90).

As she talks about her future, she seems intent on distancing herself from anything that might resemble either mainstream preppy outlooks or any stereotype of a black experience, and nothing can be further from either than Japanese culture. Astrid gets most excited when she describes why Japanese culture “just makes more sense” and describes her experiences when she visited Japan and “felt really at home.”

Astrid is excited about the possibilities that studying languages and international studies in college will bring. To pursue her dream of being both a fashion designer and a musician, Astrid hopes she can become an English teacher in Japan. Or “maybe be an ambassador,” she adds nonchalantly, suggesting that, much like the rest of her Westonian peers, Astrid, too, sees herself assuming a position among future elites (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a). She suggests that this is the ticket for the cost of being the renegade Westonian.

**Frank Maxwell: “This place was designed for me”**

Proud of his Peruvian heritage, Frank Maxwell identifies himself as Hispanic. “When you walk into my room, the first thing you see is my Peruvian flag,” he describes. Unlike the other students featured in this chapter, however, Frank says that he has “never had any negative experiences associated with being Hispanic.” He also notes that he is “not convinced everybody knows that I am,” underscoring that his identification as Hispanic “doesn’t come up in the context of class.” Even when his friends notice the flag hanging on his wall, “they just ask me what flag it is, and I tell them it’s Peruvian; that’s usually everything.” And unlike the rest of the students whose experiences are discussed above, Frank feels a strong and positive connection with Weston, and he is direct and explicit about his feelings. “I feel like this place was designed for me,” he explains; “it’s been everything I needed.”

Frank describes visiting Weston for the first time as a child, accompanied by his father, a Weston alumnus of the 1970s. They were attending an alumni reunion, and Frank says he found the place “magical.” “There’s something about this place in the spring, where just the brick and the grass and the, I don’t know, the way it looks.” Frank describes the decision of attending Weston as “entirely” his own, and he underscores that his parents did not want him to attend. Both of his parents attended boarding schools—his father, who is not Hispanic, attended Weston, and his mother, the daughter of Peruvian diplomats, attended a Swiss boarding school—and “neither of them associate it with it being particularly happy,” Frank notes. Despite his parents continued apprehension, Frank insists Weston was “custom-built” for him; “there’s not a better place on Earth.”

His brown corduroys and light blue Oxford, accentuated with a black and red striped tie, are typical of his preppy style. His disheveled dark brown hair and his starkly pale skin carry none of the stereotypical physical features that might mark him as a student of color.

While many people don’t know that he identifies as Hispanic, he says it does come up a lot with other students of color. Indeed, he says that being Hispanic is “something I like to be known, ’cause I really do not like to be,” he pauses to think about his explanation and continues, “personally, I do not like to be grouped into that white group.” Instead, Frank believes that being identified as Hispanic allows him “to maneuver anywhere I can” and not be “pegged” as just another of the many “Connecticut WASP-y kids with a lot of money.” Frank says these stereotypically preppy kids come to Weston and become part of a mass of “rich white boys from Connecticut” who are “not interesting anymore.” Being Hispanic makes Frank interesting. Rather than having to reject stereotypes about being Hispanic, Frank feels he has to

work against the assumption that he is just another of the many “rich white boys from Connecticut.”

The ability to maneuver is important because it is one of the markers of status that define what it means to be Westonian, what some students, in an ironic twist to Frank’s rejection of whiteness, called the “vanilla kids” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a). It is important to note that in this instance being a person of color rather than a constraint is perceived by Frank as an asset, a way to distance himself from the “rich white boys,” not as an obstacle he must overcome. Indeed, whether he even “counts” as a student of color is something he would rather leave for others to decide. When he describes the few students of color among the seniors in his class, he notes, “It’s me, and I’m half, so, you can count me—you don’t have to count me—whatever you want.”

For Frank, students of color stand to gain the most from coming to Weston, and he is surprised by the suggestion that students of color must sacrifice a great deal in order to experience some amount of success at a place like Weston. For Frank, in fact, “Weston brings up these minority kids,” *these* suggesting that perhaps he is not one of *them*. Instead, he offers an example of a student of color he considers highly successful for winning prestigious awards and going on to a prestigious and highly selective university. He attributes this student’s success to Weston: “I think it’s the minority kids that have the most to gain from here, thus far. . . . I think they [students of color] *can* reach the top, and I think if you reach the top at Weston here, you can go anywhere. I mean, if you make it *through* Weston, you can do anything.”

### “INCOGNEGRO”: STUDENTS OF COLOR BECOMING ELITE

When Laurie King observes that students of color who do not affiliate with SAHAS “get a lot of heat” from other students of color, she is not exaggerating. In the Fall 2003 issue of *Heritage*, the SAHAS biannual newsletter, the editors reprinted an essay written by an anonymous member of Weston’s class of 1997. “This editorial,” the essay begins, “is directed at those incognito Negroes on every college and prep-school campus who feel themselves superior to the rest of the Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean populations.” The author accuses these “incognegroes” of not seeing themselves “as integral to the uplift of your people; in fact you do not feel that there is such as thing as ‘your people.’”

Speaking in harsh tones to those who might drive a “fancy car,” wear clothes from J. Crew or Polo, listen to the music of Aerosmith or The Police, or “date only white people romantically,” the author admonishes anyone who

in any way takes any distance from the stereotypes of being black. While the “Incognegro” essay relies on an essentialist notion of what it means to be black and borders on reductionism, it makes two passing points that are worth considering in relationship to the narratives presented in this essay.

First, the author briefly notes, “Of course, all of us have a little incognito Negro in us, evidenced by the fact that we attend the school we do.” Because to be a student at Weston is by default to be white, being a student of color at Weston is by default to be incognegro (or an Oreo, as Alex had explained). Second, the anonymous author points out that while incognegroes may choose to keep a distance from other students of color, white students will give constant reminders that they are, in fact, nonwhite: “What will you do when your friends mispronounce your name? . . . What will you do when you are called on to be the ambassador of your entire race on a matter concerning a ‘black’ issue?” Whether students of color identify strongly, loosely, or not at all with categories of race, the culture of a historically white institution requires all of them to be, in the words of Charlene, “more aware of the fact” that they are not white.

The stories of the seven students presented in this chapter illustrate that the process of becoming elite is directly influenced by discourses of race and by racism as an institutional force. Students of color who come to the elite world of a school like Weston are very aware of their racial identifications and the loose and incoherent seams holding their worlds together. Caught precariously between these worlds, students of color feel that they belong nowhere.

Sharing the difficulty of embarking on a journey that is incompatible with the identification that her peers at home embrace, Charlene explains that when she goes home she is told that she “dress[es] white” and “talk[s] white.” She wonders, “Why can’t you have an educated black per—you know, why is that, why is that an oxymoron [for some people], an educated black person?” At the same time, at Weston, Charlene and the other students in this chapter are constantly reminded that they are neither white nor black enough—they “are not like *them*.”

There are also important differences in the ways that each of these seven students makes meaning of the Weston experience and highlights the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect with each other. There are important class distinctions between students of color who arrive at Weston through minority-recruitment programs—which tend to draw students like Victor, Charlene, and Astrid, all of whom come from working-class families—and students from upper-class or upwardly mobile families, like Alex, Robert, and Frank. For the former, a group like SAHAS can be a crucial source of social and emotional support, while at the same time it can be a constraint, as it requires students to embrace a narrow conception of what it means to be black or else face indictment for going incognegro.



For Astrid, both her sexuality and her interest in forms of cultural practice that are not stereotypically black seem to require that she distance herself from SAHAS and search for other sources of support.

Upper-class students of color, like Alex and Frank, seem to contend with the possibility of bypassing racial identifications altogether. Yet only Frank, as a male student whose light skin and ample cultural capital allow him to maneuver the Westonian space with ease, has a great deal of flexibility and “breathing room” at a place like Weston. Frank’s deliberate choice to hang his flag is as much an attempt to claim his maternal history as it is a form of “distinction”—his own particular way of becoming elite without being confused with the rest of the wealthy white boys that define the Westonian norm. As a black female, and despite her upper-class status, Alex has far fewer options in the Westonian social landscape, and even in her preferred space of the theater she must contend with the fact of her blackness.

This double-consciousness that DuBois describes as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (1903, 3) is evident in all of the narratives shared in this chapter, regardless of how much or how little a student’s subjective experience reflects dominant stereotypes. What is crucial is that, as students at an elite boarding school, all of these students are also able to see their status as students of color as an asset, because their situation ultimately requires that they learn to move fluidly between multiple contexts and identifications.

The recurring theme among the narratives of these students is that the experience of not fully belonging or fitting in at Weston will equip them with competencies that will serve them well outside of school as they are placed in similarly elite environments where they will likely remain on the periphery, even as they navigate the center. To help her understand that her experience is the ticket to success, Alex’s parents ask her, “People that don’t ever branch out . . . what’s going to happen when they enter the job market and . . . their boss isn’t, doesn’t look like them, or doesn’t talk like them?”

As if it were a mantra among the students of color at Weston, the importance of being able to negotiate many different groups and boundaries is repeated by all of the students. This is ultimately what makes them members of this elite group of students, all of whom value the ability to negotiate many different contexts and cross many different boundaries. What differentiates students of color is that they must contend with their status as racial objects and fulfill the burden of being the “curriculum of diversity,” as both Victor and Charlene underscore.

In his essay “The Fact of Blackness” Frantz Fanon declares, “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled

with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects” (1967, 109). Like Fanon, students of color at elite boarding schools must live with the fact that they are subjective incognegroes. Unable to ever escape the gaze of white supremacy, these students find themselves in an impossible quandary: incapable of ever being, to borrow Astrid’s words, “just me” and always haunted by the specter of their blackness even as they do become “Westonians.”

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## *Chapter Five*

# **Stepping Outside Class: Affluent Students Resisting Privilege**

Adam Howard

For over two decades, scholars have greatly increased our understanding of how privilege shapes lived experience and human practice. This body of work has examined how race, gender, and sexuality are intimately and inextricably linked to power and power differences. Privilege, then, has been perceived as the advantages one group has over other groups, advantages that are granted not because of one has done or not done but because of the social category (or categories) to which one belongs.

Peggy McIntosh's (1988) groundbreaking work on white and male privilege is rightly celebrated because she provides both a personal narrative and a theoretical framework to encourage reflection and conversation. In her well-known essay on what she calls the "invisible knapsack" of privilege, McIntosh argues that one way of understanding how privilege works—and how it is kept invisible—is to examine the way we think about inequality. She claims that we typically think of inequality from the perspective of the one who suffers the consequences of subordination or oppression, not the one who receives the benefits; hence, those who receive privilege are not in our focus.

As she challenged the established view of inequality, McIntosh challenges the privileged to "open their invisible knapsacks," which contain all of the benefits from their social, cultural, and economic positions. She challenges the privileged to then take a critical look at all the various (and often unconscious) ways they enjoy the benefits and advantages that others do not.

We begin to confront privilege, according to McIntosh, by becoming aware of unearned advantage and conferred dominance and by understanding how social locations (e.g., schools, workplaces, and communities) create and maintain privilege for certain groups (e.g., the white, heterosexual, male,

and affluent). McIntosh argues that the more aware people are of their privilege, the more they can contribute to changing themselves and the privileged locations that they occupy. Because privilege is rooted primarily in social systems, change does not happen only when individuals change; locations such as schools and workplaces that support privilege must change as well. Certain people, of course, need to change in order to do the work necessary to bring about institutional change, but it is insufficient for individuals simply to change.

Over the past twenty-two years since its publication, McIntosh's work has paved the way for others to examine the complex ways in which privilege works through memberships (e.g., Wise 2002), representations (e.g., Mantsios 2003), actions (e.g., Johnson 2001), and language (e.g., Kleinman and Ezzell 2003) to re-create itself, thereby perpetuating structures of domination and subordination (e.g., Jensen 2005). Although changing these structures of domination and subordination is impossible without a critical awareness of how privilege works, there has been little attention given to what motivates privileged individuals to change systems that benefit them more often than not.

What motivates such individuals to resist privilege? What factors lead them to develop a critical awareness of the privileges that grant them advantages in life and to act on that awareness? Why would they want to give up their privilege and advantages? In what ways do they give up their privilege and advantages?

In this chapter, I explore these questions through the perspectives of two affluent students, Claire and Galvin (pseudonyms, as are all names of people and places in this chapter). These students participated in a larger six-year, multisite ethnographic study of the *lessons* students at elite schools are taught about their place in the world, their relationships with others, and who they are (Howard 2008). The findings of the larger study highlighted what educators, students, and families at elite schools valued most in education. These values guided ways of knowing and doing that both created high standards for their educational programs and reinforced privilege as a collective identity.

More so than the other affluent students in this larger study, Claire and Galvin were somewhat aware of their privilege and as a result wished to use this awareness to promote social justice. They also showed more interest in openly discussing their privileged life and schooling circumstances than the other students. Their willingness to discuss these issues so extensively and their desire to actively work toward rejecting privileged ways of knowing and doing provided the opportunity for our in-depth exploration.

## PRIVILEGE AS IDENTITY

To explore the ways that affluent students like Galvin and Claire resist privilege, I move beyond the conception of privilege as a commodity, which has dominated this body of scholarship up to now. Privilege, in other words, has been understood, by and large, extrinsically, as something individuals have or possess (that is, as something that can fit into a “knapsack”—invisible or otherwise).

Privilege has also been understood to be something individuals experience rather than something that is more intrinsic, something that reveals who a person is or who has become in a fundamental sense. Though privilege as commodity has generated a useful understanding of privilege as a source of the advantage of some over others, this narrow definition has ultimately fallen short in providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the pervasive nature of privilege as it is woven into the fabric of people’s lived experience.

To construct a more useful framework for exploring the perspectives and experiences of Claire and Galvin and the ways they resist privilege, I articulate *privilege as identity*—as a particular sense of self-understanding. Understood this way, privilege becomes a lens through which an individual understands self and self in relation to others. This means that values, perceptions, appreciations, and actions are shaped, created, re-created, and maintained through this lens of privilege.

Guided by this understanding of privilege as identity, I focus on how individuals understand themselves and their place in the world, looking particularly at social class privilege (i.e., the privileged identity of the affluent). This view of privilege is less concerned with the advantages that affluent individuals have than with how they understand themselves and their place in the world. To think about privilege in this way is not to deny or diminish the importance of advantages that certain individuals and groups have over others but, rather, underlines the relationship between advantages and identity formation.

Although there is an important connection between what advantages individuals have and their identity (that is, how their advantages in life fashion a particular sense of self), I situate privilege in a more comprehensive framework to explore the ways Galvin and Claire make sense of who they are, who they want to become, and their immediate world. This approach to privilege is especially useful in exploring the ways that wealthy individuals like Galvin and Claire resist privileged perceptions of self. It allows us to form better understandings of not only *what* they are resisting but also *why* they resist.

## FINDING CONNECTIONS

I first met Claire and Galvin during my fieldwork at Bredvik School, a private, nonsectarian, coeducational school located in the heart of the most exclusive and affluent community of a midsize, Midwestern city. Bredvik was known by local residents as the school for children from families with old, established wealth. Claire and Galvin were no exceptions. Both of them were from “old money” families.

In fact, Galvin came from one of the wealthiest families not only at Bredvik but in the United States. Galvin entered Bredvik in the ninth grade and as of our study was about to begin his senior year. His family had lived all over the United States following his father’s career path to his current position as CEO of an international company. Galvin’s father was constantly traveling and came home only a couple of weekends each month. His mother traveled with him at times. However, she spent most of her time taking care of their several homes and of Galvin, their only child.

Claire was a Bredvik alumna who, when we spoke, had just completed her second year at a selective liberal arts college in the Northeast. She was one of the few African Americans at Bredvik during her years of attendance from kindergarten through high school. Claire came from a well-respected and accomplished family. Her mother was a nationally known writer and consultant and had received numerous awards, including honorary doctorates, for her work. Her father retired early after a very successful career as a civil engineer and then worked as a part-time consultant. Both of her parents were involved in high-profile volunteer positions at Bredvik and in various communities throughout the city. Although not nearly as wealthy as Galvin’s family, the wealth of Claire’s family had been passed down for several generations, which established their old-money status.

I met Claire and Galvin while they worked for a summer in Pathways, one of Bredvik’s community-service programs. This program is an academically intensive six-week program held each summer at Bredvik for economically disadvantaged sixth- and seventh-grade students. The program aims to prepare these students for, and to help them get into, college-preparatory high schools. The students who attend the program live in communities throughout the city and are mostly African American. The program is tuition free and provides students with transportation, breakfast and lunch, books, and supplies such as binders, pencils, and paper. The program also covers the cost of several field trips that students go on during the summer and provides transportation for parents who want to visit the program. Sixty students attend the program each year.

All of the teachers in the Pathways program are high school and undergraduate college students. The program had eighteen staff members working during the summer I did my fieldwork; ten of them were Bredvik students, and the others came from top colleges across the Midwest and Northeast (e.g., Brown, Harvard, etc.). Generally, the college students are mostly education majors and have been recruited by Pathways to expand the knowledge base of the staff and to take on leadership roles in the program.

During the summer, staff members teach one of four core academic subjects offered to students—math, science, language arts, and history. The staff are also responsible for developing curricula and creating lesson plans for their classes, as well as keeping in contact with their students' parents. The program provides multiple opportunities for staff members to experience what it's like to be a teacher in order to encourage pursuits in the field of education. Staff members are paid a small stipend for the summer, meant to defray the cost of driving to and from the program every day; it isn't meant to remunerate the staff for their work or time, since teaching at Pathways is considered community service. A significant number of staff members even donate their stipends back to the program.

Pathways is just one of the several opportunities for Bredvik students to serve the community. In the classroom, several Bredvik teachers use service-learning activities to connect academic content with various social problems in the local community and to create hands-on learning experiences for students. These activities extend beyond the confines of the classroom to integrate curriculum with participation in thoughtfully organized community-service activities.

Outside the classroom context, Bredvik students participate in a variety of service activities facilitated by the school's full-time director of community service, such as raising money for charities and volunteering at local service programs. Additionally, Bredvik suspended classes for a week during the school year of my fieldwork to have all students participate in well-organized service activities throughout the city. Although Bredvik does not require students to participate in service, they emphasize the importance of service to support their stated mission of preparing students to become participating citizens and responsible leaders.

Claire and Galvin participated in service projects, through their involvement with Pathways, for different reasons than most Bredvik students; the program meant much more to them. Claire began working for Pathways after her junior year of high school to "deal with" Bredvik better. She explained this to other teachers in the program during a training session. She further explained to her fellow teachers that she wanted to work at Pathways because



it was the only program offered at the school designed to serve primarily African American students. As one of the few students of color at Bredvik, Claire had consistently felt like an outsider in the school community, and her involvement in this program seemed like an opportunity for her to change that.

Galvin began working for Pathways just before his junior year. During this same training session, Galvin told a group of his peers that he became involved in the program because he wanted to make a difference in the lives of the disadvantaged students who attended the program. He acknowledged that he had “a very different life than the kids [in the program] and a lot of advantages they don’t have.” He added that he had been “fortunate to have anything I want in my life and want[ed] to give back.” As with Claire, one of Galvin’s primary reasons for participating in Pathways, though, was to deal with his disconnection from Bredvik’s school community.

Both Claire and Galvin described themselves as “outsiders” within Bredvik and hoped their involvement in Pathways would allow them to find some way to connect with their school community. At the same time, the program also offered them opportunities to step outside of Bredvik’s culture and to establish what Galvin called “real connections” with others. As outsiders within Bredvik’s community, they looked forward to the possibility of finding a space at Bredvik where they could be, as Galvin described, “myself and be accepted,” or, as Claire put it, “not ignored for who you are.”

To maintain these “real connections” during the school year, both of them continued to volunteer their time with Pathways students outside the program: They regularly tutored and mentored their charges and also helped with the recruitment of teachers and students and with the preparations for the next summer session. For Claire and Galvin, their involvement went beyond the requirements of participating in Pathways and outstripped Bredvik’s informal requirement that students undertake service work; rather, their lives became more meaningful through their service at Pathways, a meaning they failed to find within Bredvik’s privileged world. Pathways filled a void.

### **AN OUTSIDER WITHIN**

Claire claimed that when she was a student at Bredvik she “never fit in with others.” She echoed the findings of myriad researchers commenting on the experiences of African Americans at predominantly white academic institutions (e.g., Proweller 1999) by asserting that she remained an “outsider within” (Collins 1986), even though she had been a student at Bredvik for thirteen years. Claire explained, “Being practically the only black person in

school for thirteen years makes you stand out from everybody. You never quite fit in no matter what. It doesn't matter who your family is, how much money you have, or if you have all the right stuff to fit in—you still don't." She further explained, "They always saw me as different. No matter how I acted . . . or how much money my family has . . . I am still black. I was always on the fringes at Bredvik."

Even though she was relegated to the status of outsider in the white world of Bredvik, she claimed that she never wanted to fit in with the community. She felt that she did not share a lot in common with other Bredvik students and wasn't interested in forming relationships with most of them. She believed that she contributed to her status as outsider because, as she explained, "It wasn't worth doing what I would have needed to do to fit in with that crowd. I just wasn't willing to give up who I am to be liked by [members of the Bredvik community]." She said that she often intentionally emphasized her differences from other Bredvik students to make sure they knew that she was not one of them.

Claire admitted that she frequently expressed "radical" beliefs and displayed "bizarre" behaviors at Bredvik to make herself more of an "outsider." She believed that it would have compromised her beliefs and sense of self if she had attempted to fit in at Bredvik. Furthermore, even if she had been like others in the community, she felt that this would not have automatically equated acceptance. As an African American in a world dominated by whites, she believed that she would have remained an outsider within the Bredvik community.

Galvin, a white male, did not face the same challenges that Claire encountered at Bredvik. More specifically, his racial identity did not refract him as Other in Bredvik's white culture. However, like Claire, he claimed that he was an outsider in the school community. He described himself as a "loner" at Bredvik. He had a couple of friends but typically socialized with them only during the school day. He did not usually attend social events or go out on the weekends. He loved sports but didn't like that Bredvik students were required to play them. Galvin did not regularly participate in extracurricular activities offered at school except for Pathways. He described his experiences in school as "lonely," but "I deal with it."

Like Claire, Galvin made a conscious effort to separate himself from those within his school community. He claimed, "I've never wanted to fit in [at Bredvik], and because I don't want to [fit in], I don't. I'm, like, there but not really there. I'm invisible to most people, which is fine by me." He said that being "invisible" did not bother him because, as he explained, "I would have to be something that I'm not in order to be accepted. I'm just not like that.

I'm not going to be something and act a certain way to get along with people here." Galvin claimed that he was not willing to change in order to fit into the community. His lack of social networks with adults and peers at Bredvik occurred, in part, because he positioned himself as independent.

He also believed that he was relegated an outsider because he openly acknowledged the racism in Bredvik's community and his own white privilege. He credits this surprising awareness and openness to a diversity training he attended early in his high school years. Even though white students at Bredvik typically did not avoid talking about and dealing with racial issues, most students selectively engaged with these issues in ways that protected their privilege.

Galvin claimed that he took every opportunity he could find to talk about racial issues and privilege. He said that as a result he was chastised at Bredvik by those who believed he should adhere to class-based norms of civility and propriety governing conversations about these topics. Galvin reported that he was seen as deviant or bad for overstepping the bounds and talking about race. And his efforts specifically to discuss these issues in a *straightforward* manner further cemented his status as a Bredvik outsider.

Both Claire and Galvin became involved in Pathways exactly because of the program's commitment to addressing just such issues. More specifically, Claire believed that the program offered the Bredvik community opportunities to engage in discussions of race and class. From Claire's perspective, simply the presence of sixty disadvantaged students of color on the Bredvik campus each summer made it impossible to hide racial and class issues within the school community. She believed that when Bredvik students encountered individuals different from themselves, often for the first time in their lives, they were forced to reckon with these issues. Such encounters offered the Bredvik students a unique opportunity to question their own privilege and acknowledge the disadvantages of others outside their own cultural group.

Similarly, when Galvin first heard about the Pathways program he remembered thinking it would be a "wake-up call" for the school community and so decided to participate to help raise awareness of social justice issues at Bredvik. He explained, "They couldn't sweep the fact that not everybody has the same opportunities we do [at Bredvik] under the rug. I had high hopes for the program. I thought it would have us take on some important [racial and class issues]. The school just wasn't talking about diversity, but they were actually doing something about it."

Both Galvin and Claire believed that by starting a program like Pathways the school was demonstrating a commitment being more critically responsive and responsible to those outside the Bredvik community. The two became involved in the program to support this commitment and believed that Path-

ways offered them the space and support they needed to resist the privilege that was deeply woven into the fabric of Bredvik's culture.

## STUDENT RESISTANCE

Student resistance has been theorized elaborately by several scholars (e.g., Giroux 1983; McFadden 1995). In this body of work, resistance theorists have recognized the various ways students contest the ideological, social, political, and economic forces imposed on them in a variety of settings such as schools. These theorists contend that students who contest these forces develop their own meaning systems to respond to the interface between these influences and their own lived experiences.

While examining anthropological studies of schools and classrooms to develop a theory of resistance, Giroux found that poor students often behaved "badly" as an expression of resistance. These students knew, on some level, that the price of this rebellion meant that their schools limited their privileged status. Therefore, this resistance to unjustly awarded privilege, in Giroux's view, is essentially a healthy rebellion against an oppressive system, healthy because it is rooted in "moral and political indignation" (1983, 289), not individual psychological problems such as lack of self-discipline and laziness. Giroux insisted that oppositional behavior be critically examined and resistance mined for its broader significance.

Although some researchers and theorists have argued that resistance "is not a working-class specialty" (Bernstein 1994, 104), resistance literature up to this point has focused almost entirely on the resistance of oppressed groups to the status quo. Some have argued that this limited study becomes more about understanding failure than understanding students' conscious rejection of the dominant ideology and of unjust societal systems and structures (e.g., McFadden 1995).

Galvin and Claire's conscious efforts to resist privilege, therefore, provide an opportunity to extend the scope of this scholarship. This is not to suggest that affluent students face the same consequences for their resistance as members of oppressed groups. Resistance did not lead to failure for Galvin and Claire, as research on resistance has demonstrated happens most often for working-class children (e.g., Willis 1977). Quite the contrary, both of the subjects were successful students at Bredvik. Claire entered college directly after graduating from Bredvik with no problems, and Galvin gathered the necessary credentials to gain acceptance to a selective college. That said, as is often the case with oppressed groups, Galvin and Claire's resistance provide some insight into how they understood themselves, others, and the world around them.

## RESISTING PRIVILEGE

Galvin and Claire claimed that, like most private schools, Bredvik wanted students to develop a purposeful identification with the school culture (see Cookson and Persell 1985). They believed that Bredvik placed tremendous pressure on students to give up significant parts of themselves in order to develop this connection. They claimed that they resisted giving up who they were for a culture that preserved privilege. Galvin explained, “People don’t respond too well to you being an individual here. They think something is up if you don’t fit in. They can’t imagine that some of us don’t want to fit in. They frame it as having pride in the school, but it’s something else. . . . It’s about keeping up a front and keeping this place the same.”

Claire added, “It’s like a country club. There are benefits to being a member, and everyone is extremely interested in keeping those benefits.” Although Claire was not specific about the benefits that Bredvik offered its “members,” she elaborated on this point by saying, “It has to do with the extreme wealth that’s here and very powerful people [at Bredvik]. The school embraces that [wealth and power].” Similar to Galvin, she did acknowledge a couple of these benefits offered to Bredvik students, such as obtaining the credentials necessary to gain admission to a highly selective college. Galvin also pointed out the social networks that students have access to that “set you up for life.” For the most part, however, they were vague in their discussions about the specific benefits of membership in Bredvik’s community.

Although both of them acknowledged that they had benefited from attending Bredvik, they felt not only disconnected from this culture, as discussed previously in this chapter, but also strongly disagreed with what it represented and valued. Galvin even claimed that he found hardly any aspect of the culture worth respecting. “Bredvik stands for everything that I stand against and nothing that I respect too much,” he explained. Claire felt similarly, explaining that the culture ran counter to what she considered “what’s best about people . . . [and] what people should be like.”

Both of them claimed, however, that few escape valves existed for them to express their feelings of frustration and anger. Claire elaborated, saying, “You’re trapped in a world where there’s no way to express your true feelings. You keep it bottled up inside you and feel like you can burst at any moment.” Like Galvin, she believed that Pathways “allowed me to escape this little world” and “to find a way to express how pissed off I was at how things are [at Bredvik].” Claire reported that she could talk openly about her feelings about Bredvik’s culture with participants in the program.

Similarly, Galvin felt that he could be “himself” at the program and, as he explained, “[didn’t] have to watch what I say. I can be honest about my feel-

ings [toward Bredvik].” Although Galvin had a “difficult time pinpointing what makes me feel so comfortable [at Pathways],” he went on to say that “it has to do with what the program is about. The program isn’t like the rest of Bredvik. It’s about something entirely different.” Because of this difference, Pathways offered a space for both of them to express their conflicts with Bredvik’s culture. They were not just simply complaining about Bredvik in this space (even though they admitted that they complained often) but, rather, had also found a way (an escape valve) to step outside the privileged ways of knowing and doing that pervaded this culture. For Galvin and Claire, Pathways allowed them to resist privilege.

In describing their conflicts with Bredvik’s culture, Claire and Galvin emphasized the sense of “oblivious entitlement” of most students (Horvat and Antonio 1999). As Claire explained, “It’s that selfishness and it’s the all-about-me attitude. It’s that attitude that ‘I don’t care about others’ or most of the time ‘I don’t even acknowledge others outside my little world.’ They barely care about people in their *own* world, let alone people who aren’t. All they care about is themselves.” She also believed that most Bredvik students “expect the world to be handed to them on a silver platter. When it isn’t, then they go ape shit. They expect to get their way no matter what.”

In similar ways, Galvin believed that most Bredvik students “[couldn’t] care less about anybody except themselves . . . [and] expect to get what they want.” He went on to point out that most of the time for students “things go the way they want. Their whole world makes sure of it.” Galvin believed that this sense of entitlement and selfishness was normal for the culture of affluence. Like Claire, he believed that students get what they want not only at Bredvik but also in other spheres of their lives. When I asked them if they enjoyed these similar benefits of affluence, they didn’t respond at length. Galvin simply explained, “I guess if I wanted [to get everything that I wanted] then I could, but that’s not me.” He attempted to distance himself from his own privileged circumstances. Claire offered a similar response that avoided acknowledging her life and schooling advantages.

Even though Galvin’s family was one of the wealthiest at Bredvik, he maintained that wealth “[creates] a separation from most people.” He added, “No one gets to know you for who you are. They only look at how much money you have, and that’s all they care about. They just see the surface and nothing else.” He claimed that he did not “flaunt” his family’s wealth around people at his school or elsewhere. He admitted, though, that “they all know how much money my family has, and there’s no escaping that image that you’re like everyone else who’s got money. They think you don’t care about others and all you care about is your money. They think you’re stuck

up until they get to know you. But most of the time people don't even try to get to know you."

He said that at times he had tried to hide his family's wealth, explaining, "I never take anybody to my house or have them meet my parents. They know where I'm from, so it doesn't matter if I take them [to my house] or not. They know [that my family is wealthy], but I don't want them to see it." He believed that markers of affluence stood in the way of developing "real" relationships with people outside his socioeconomic class. These same markers also complicated relationships with individuals within his class. He claimed that when other affluent people discovered his family's wealth from these class markers they expected him to act and think in particular ways that contradicted his true self. He added, "They wanted me to be like them . . . [even though] I was nothing like them."

Claire, on the other hand, did not care when others became aware of her family's wealth; however, like Galvin, she reported that she found it difficult to develop close relationships with members of her own class. She claimed that her values ran counter to those that pervaded the culture of affluence. As Claire explained, "I just can't relate to people who all they can think about is themselves." Both of them claimed that they did not hold the kinds of values needed to develop close relationships with most other wealthy individuals. They also maintained that they formed closer relationships with people outside their class position when they had chances to build these relationships. Like most other Bredvik students, they had little contact with people different from themselves in their class-segregated home and school communities.

In fact, Claire and Galvin spent most of their lives during high school clustered in insulated, class-segregated communities. Isolation was fairly consistent in the various spheres of their lives. Consequently, they had little contact with the life circumstances of others different from themselves until they became involved in Pathways. The program offered them the context for developing relationships with individuals outside their own social class group.

Galvin and Claire explained that Pathways provided them these opportunities to develop close relationships not only with individuals outside their own class but also with other like-minded affluent people. Even though they believed some Bredvik students participated in the program mainly for the perks that come with doing service (e.g., acknowledgement for their good deeds, varying the extracurricular activities that would help them get into good colleges), Claire and Galvin believed that most Pathways participants were "truly faithful" to the purposes of the program and helping others. As Claire explained, "Most of [the participants at Pathways] aren't like, 'Look what I'm doing.' This is a whole lot of work, so if they're only interested in being in the spotlight, there are a hell of a lot easier ways to be the center of

attention. Most are truly faithful to what the program is about. They're truly interested in helping others."

According to Galvin and Claire, the participants' genuine interest in helping others ran counter to the selfishness of most Bredvik students. The two also believed that most participants held some level of commitment to social justice that the program offered them to act on. For Claire and Galvin, their commitment to social justice was a driving force for not only becoming involved in the program but also resisting the privileged culture of Bredvik and, to some degree, their own privilege.

In looking at the ways these two resisted privilege, it is important to note that they were not giving up, and made no effort to give up, their advantages. In fact, they acknowledged that they benefited from their life and schooling advantages. Their success in school, for example, demonstrated that they benefited greatly from the advantages of their class position. Privilege, for Claire and Galvin, was more than the advantages they enjoyed; it was an identity shaped by entitlement, materialism, greed, competition, and selfishness. But as they constructed their own senses of self, they consciously rejected these values. The logic of their resistance was grounded in a struggle against, rather than submission to, privileged ways of knowing and doing.

## IDENTIFYING MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

Claire and Galvin seemed to understand the concept of and had a desire for social justice. But attending Bredvik and even participating in Pathways did not provide significant opportunities to deepen their critical understanding of and orientation to social justice. At school, the lessons they learned reinforced privileged ways of knowing and doing. In Pathways, they were not provided the cultural tools and resources necessary to cultivating a deeper level of critical awareness.

In the Pathways training, for example, participants weren't encouraged to form a critical awareness of how their own lives and schooling advantages relate to the disadvantages of the students they were working with. Participants weren't shown how to question, problematize, and analyze their own privilege. Rather, Claire and Galvin were left on their own to develop strategies for resisting privilege. But their efforts were insufficient to free them from the larger determinations that positioned them in the world.

As students construct their senses of self, educators are critical to offering alternatives to privileged ways of knowing and doing. However, simply sharing new ideas and new ways of thinking and doing with privileged students does not always bring about change. As researcher and educator Kevin



Kumashiro points out, “Students come to school not as blank slates but as individuals who are already invested in their thoughts, beliefs, and desires” (2002, 73). Most often, students come to school with a well-established sense of self that continuously influences how they think and understand and what they know and decide not to know. Thus, the problem is not merely a lack of knowledge but a rejection of that new knowledge.

Understanding exactly what motivates students like Galvin and Claire to move beyond privilege and its proscriptions helps us understand how to encourage other students to do the same. For Galvin and Claire, motivation to resist stemmed from developing more meaningful relationships with others different from themselves, finding more meaning in their lives, gaining positive life experiences, being acknowledged for their involvement in service, and establishing connections with their school community

Presumably there are countless motives to resist privilege. By examining the sources of motivation of particular students, educators can better support students like Galvin and Claire who wish to move beyond privilege. Educators can teach these students more positive and productive lessons about themselves, others, and the world around them than the lessons inherent in valuing selfishness, greed, and materialism. And as such educators can provide all students an alternative to privilege.

## TEN YEARS LATER

As I worked on this chapter and revisited my conversations with Claire and Galvin, I became increasingly interested in finding out what directions they had taken in life. I successfully tracked them down on Facebook. Fortunately, they both accepted my friend request, and we spent a couple of weeks writing messages back and forth, catching up on their lives over the past ten years.

Claire hasn’t changed much; she is still committed to the education of disadvantaged youth. She works tirelessly as a public school teacher in the city where Bredvik is located. She lives close to the school where she teaches in a very different community than the one where her parents continue to live. The middle school where she teaches is much like the other schools in the city. The city’s school district has buildings with nearly a billion dollars worth of deferred maintenance, one of the lowest average expenditures per student in the state, and a 50 percent dropout rate. She teaches students who are expected to drop out of school or not even make it to high school. Claire is trying to elevate her students’ “leveled aspirations” (MacLeod 1987).

She remains committed to making a difference in her students’ lives and advocates for them in any way possible. As a result, her work frequently

extends beyond the walls of her classroom. She makes frequent home visits to meet parents; she is involved in community service that directly benefits her students' communities; and she stays after school to tutor and mentor students. In many ways, she remains committed to the goals of social justice that she articulated when I first met her.

Galvin's path in life, however, has taken a different direction than the one he imagined as a high school student. He entered college with the intent of becoming a high school English teacher. At that point in his life, he wanted to find a teaching job after college at a public school with predominantly disadvantaged students. He worked for Pathways two more summers and was well on his way to realizing his original professional goal. However, after his second year of college, he began working in a management position for his father's company.

Immediately after graduating college, he worked full-time for that company instead of becoming a teacher and continued to do so until he began a MBA program at an elite institution. When I contacted him he had just completed his graduate degree and was about to start working in an executive position at another company. He ended up following a career path similar to the one his father had taken. And like his father Galvin hopes to one day become a CEO.

Galvin shared a few reasons for why his plans had changed. For one, he wanted to prove to "the rest of the world"—and from what I gathered especially his father—that he could reach a level of professional success to be self-sufficient. He did not want to rely on his family's wealth to support him financially for the rest of his life; in his words, he wanted "to make it on my own." He felt that teaching would not provide him this level of independence.

He further explained his career decisions by pointing out the low pay of teachers and even the low status teaching has in the larger society. Galvin's explanations reflected the kind of anxiety about maintaining his class privilege that many other affluent individuals experience (see, for example, Luthar and Becker 2002). His life choices since leaving high school, therefore, have been primarily about protecting his privileged class position. This certainly came as a surprise to me; the Galvin I talked to now seemed very different from the young man I knew ten years ago who had looked for every opportunity to resist that very privileged position.

So why did Galvin and Claire end up taking such different paths in life when they had once been so similarly committed to stepping outside privileged ways of knowing and doing? There are presumably numerous factors. Perhaps one answer lies in the different gender expectations placed on Galvin and Claire by their families. Both of their families reinforced conventional and stereotypical gendered "storylines" (Enciso 1998) for their adult lives. This was most evident to me in Galvin's relationship with his father. His

father expected Galvin to gain his independence and have power and status in his career. Galvin was expected to follow the masculine storyline of being a provider for his future wife and children. And Galvin eventually accepted and conformed to these expectations.

In our exchanges Claire did not provide much information about the role her family played in her career decisions, which indicates that she didn't experience the same familial pressures to gain independence, power, and status as had Galvin. She simply said that her family is proud of her. Given the feminization of the teaching profession in the United States (e.g., Blount 2005), Claire's career choice may have as much to do with following gender expectations as her continued commitment to resisting privileged ways of knowing and doing.

The different paths that Claire and Galvin have taken in their adult lives point out the medley of forces at play in constructing their senses of self and respective identities. Identities, however, are neither imposed nor stable. Individuals do not perform prescribed parts in enacting their identities. As many have argued (see, for example, Apple 1995), economic, social, and cultural forces are imposed on people. But these forces are translated into different values and forms as individuals construct their identities. And so the complex interactions of different individuals with these different forces results in significantly varied identities. Thus, privilege for affluent individuals like Galvin and Claire is constructed, reconstructed, and, at different points in their lives, even resisted as they shape their respective identities.

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## *Chapter Six*

# **Getting In: How Elite Schools Play the College Game**

Shamus Rahman Khan

I was first introduced to elite boarding schools as a potential student in 1993. Beautiful, rich, brimming with power and influence, these places are seductive to ambitious families and children. And the schools know it. While walking the grounds of one of these schools, our tour guide smugly told my parents and me that “the headmaster here used to gather together the senior class and hand them three sheets of paper. On the top of one was written ‘Harvard,’ another ‘Yale,’ the third ‘Princeton.’ As these papers were circulated among the senior class, boys would write their name on one of the lists. This is how they were accepted into college. It’s different now, but not that much.” This story was not true, of course, but at the time I thought it was. It represents the view of what it used to mean to go to a boarding school. Such schooling was part of belonging to an elite club, where membership resulted in a lifetime of educational, financial, and social privilege.

I heard a very similar story, over ten years later, at another boarding school where I had begun teaching as part of an ethnographic research project on inequality. The former head of college admissions told me that as late as the 1980s Harvard would come to the school to interview students (importantly, Harvard came to them). “We used to put the Harvard admissions folks up at [a house on campus]. We’d fill the place up with booze. They’d interview our kids and make decisions that weekend. We always had someone in the room when they made their decisions.” I could never confirm this story either. I suspect it is part reality, part fantasy. Yet the idea that elite boarding schools have unparalleled access to top colleges and an advocate in the room continues today. As college-admissions processes have become more and more competitive, so have colleges become more and more competitive with one another for cherished rankings (Stevens 2007); elite high schools play on this competitiveness.

In this chapter I tell a story of how elite boarding schools play the college-admissions game, outlining how such schools continue to get comparatively under-qualified students into the top colleges and universities in the United States. Today, such a feat is not as simple as the stories that begin this chapter indicate it used to be. The world has changed considerably in the last forty years; with these changes have come transformations in how elites can acquire access to the highest institutions for their students. Our new, more open society is filled with examples of elite institutions—from schools to businesses to the presidency—that have welcomed members who for much of our history have been excluded.

In puzzling through the story I tell, I will be driven by a core question within my discipline of sociology: how are advantages transferred from one generation to the next in a society that regards such systematic advantages as problematic and even actively challenges them? That is, how is it that elites still enjoy advantages when the exclusionary, “club-like” aspects of membership seem to be less and less prominent?

This chapter proceeds in three steps. First, I give a sense of the advantages that elite boarding school graduates enjoy, from access to elite colleges to future earnings. The point here is to establish that such schooling matters for future life chances and then to outline how we might explain why such schooling matters. Second, I examine the shifts in elite colleges from bastions of the white upper class to diverse institutions. In looking at the college admissions process we see what kinds of diversity are valued and how they are achieved. Through this discussion we will see how increasingly competitive college rankings has affected what colleges do in their admissions process.

Third and finally, I outline how elite boarding schools play the college-admissions game. I examine how these schools have responded to both the shifting of elite colleges into diverse institutions as well as the increased pressures on colleges to maintain high rankings through low admissions rates. In the end, I hope to show both how radically the world has changed from that depicted in the stories that opened this chapter—where elite high school students could expect blind admission to top colleges—and also how things have remained somewhat the same—elite boarding schools still enjoy and instill advantages into their students.

## **THE ELITE HIGH SCHOOL ADVANTAGE**

Since at least the 1930s, scholars have shown a robust and consistent advantage to elite schooling, and in particular to attending an elite boarding school. There is a reason why people want to go to Harvard, and it is not because

a student will better understand Plato upon graduation than if they had attended, say, the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Put simply, going to Harvard matters because if you go to Harvard you will have a better chance of becoming rich than if you go to a less highly esteemed school.

There are, of course, exceptions—there always are—but they are few: the safe money remains on the reward to elite schooling (Brewer and Ehrenberg 1999; Thomas 2003). The question of why Harvard and its peers matter is a trickier one. The school is notoriously hard to get into, so it could simply be the case that the reason Harvard graduates are richer is that they are the best of the best. We expect our best to do better than our second best. So it should come as no surprise that they do.

Though a fairly good answer, it is not a great one. One of the better predictors for getting into elite schools is having rich parents, and rich parents tend to have children who grow up to be rich (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Massey et al. 2006). So it could be that Harvard does not do much at all; it simply happens to be where rich people try to send their children, and rich people want their children to be around other rich children. This is certainly true; one need only look at how segregated the homes of the rich and poor are to see it (Massey and Denton 1998). But the problem with this explanation, of course, is that not everyone who attends an elite college is rich. This is increasingly the case, and those who aren't rich who go to elite schools also end up being richer (Thomas 2003). Here we might ask, What is it that students from elite colleges are learning or developing at these schools that helps them out so much?

My answer, drawing on a long tradition in sociology, is that it is not what you learn in classes but how you know it, who you meet as you begin to know it, and what knowing it from an elite institution means to others as opposed to knowing it from a nonelite institution. This is to say that culture, social ties, and status symbols all matter. The inequality that emerges through schooling emerges in part from the cultural traits that students develop at elite schools. These help to show other elites who are making admissions (and, soon, hiring) decisions that a student belongs in an elite environment. Having people who culturally “fit” matters, and one of the best ways to fit in elite environments is to spend time within them (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Inequality also emerges from the social connections that develop from spending time with other elites (or soon to be elites). Such connections assist individuals in gaining information about opportunities and access to positions (Grannovetter 1974). And, finally, inequality emerges because status symbols matter. To say “I graduated from Harvard” impresses, regardless of how one ever did at that school. All of this is to say that culture, social ties, and status symbols are a kind of capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1996). They are like bills in



your wallet—you have more or less of them, and they can be used as investments in your future.

What elite schools do, then, is not just teach students a particular curriculum in a particular way. Rather, they help transfer certain qualities into students—culture, ties, and symbolic markers—that advantage them throughout their lives. Up until this point we have thought through this argument by talking about an Ivy League school, one that most of us are familiar with. However, the point can be even more dramatic when we look at elite high schools—elite boarding schools in particular. This is a world less well known, but one that is incredibly important to understanding the depths of advantages that an elite education can provide.

In order to understand the advantages of such elite schooling, I will draw on my own work at an elite boarding school (Khan, forthcoming). For the purposes of this chapter, I will simply call my alma mater “The School.” The School where I studied is a member of the “select sixteen”—the top preparatory boarding schools in the country. Graduates from The School are most likely to attend Harvard (meaning that each year more graduates from The School attend Harvard than any other college), followed by Brown, University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Yale, Cornell, Princeton, and Stanford. Students from The School are admitted to these institutions at a rate well above three times the national average.

In recent years, more than 30 percent of the students in every graduating class attended an Ivy League institution; and around 80 percent attended the top thirty colleges and universities in the nation. The School’s per-pupil expenditure is approximately ten times the national average at a stunning \$70,000 per student. It has one of the largest endowments of any educational institution in the country (nearly \$1 million per pupil). The School has buildings designed by famous architects, a sports complex that would be the envy of most professional gyms, a campus that resembles more of an estate than a school, a student-teacher ratio of around 5:1, and many faculty who hold advanced degrees. The School is the kind of educational institution many might dream of, and, for the privileged few, it is a reality.

Though rare, The School is not unique. There are other schools like it. Many are in the Northeast, and most are boarding schools. But throughout the nation, primarily near wealthy enclaves, there are a couple dozen schools that have an almost unimaginable opulence and are able to transfer enormous advantages onto their students. If one takes a cursory look at the student bodies of these schools there can be no doubt that the adolescents that populate them are already privileged. Yet the students are not all boys from wealthy white families. The School, for example, is coeducational, and there is considerable racial and economic diversity.

The school is relatively diverse racially; the student body is 30 percent students of color. It is much less diverse in terms of class background: while 33 percent of the students receive a significant amount of financial aid, the tuition of almost \$40,000 makes clear that 66 percent of the students are from families capable of paying what for almost all U.S. families would be unfathomable for one year of high school. But at least racially, like the elite colleges they feed these schools are beginning to look less and less like an exclusive yacht club and more and more like diverse communities.

There is considerable evidence that elite high schools do something for their students—something even greater than what elite colleges do. The evidence here is surprising. Otherwise equivalent students from top boarding schools are more likely than non-boarding school students to get into elite colleges, but once there they do less well in college than their non-boarding school peers (Lewis and Wanner 1979). But after college, though they have no greater educational or occupational attainment, they have greater earnings and a higher likelihood of holding positions of power (Seltzer 1948; Zweigenhaft 1993; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1991). The results are robust even when we control for students' background (Lewis and Wanner 1979).

In short, these schools are managing to get less-qualified students into college, and even though these students are out-performed academically in college, they still manage to out-earn their college peers (within their respective professions). Espenshade, Hale, and Chung (2005) argue for a “frog pond effect”—where going to a highly competitive school might otherwise *decrease* your likelihood of admission to a top college because there are so many other attractive candidates to colleges in your competitive school. However, Espenshade's later work (2009, with Radford) shows that one of the strongest predictors of getting into a college, public or private, is attending one of the top seventy-two high schools in the nation. This advantage is even more dramatic the more elite the school is.

There is considerable work showing that institutions like boarding schools matter enormously in the production and maintenance of elites (Baltzell 1989 [1958]; Cookson and Persell 1985; Domhoff 1998; Levine 1980; Seltzer 1948; Useem and Karabel 1986; Zweigenhaft 1993).

Exactly *how* elite boarding schools matter is less clear, but recent work is beginning to fill in the picture (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan, forthcoming). These explanations draw on what I described above in relationship to Harvard: Elite boarding schools are highly concentrated environments—much more so than colleges. The experiences at these institutions are intense, and the culture, ties, and symbolic markers developed within them are that much stronger, denser, and more developed than in larger, more amorphous colleges. Instead of being surrounded by thousands of other students, those at

elite boarding schools are often among several hundred. Previous work has even characterized them as “total institutions,” controlling every aspect of the students’ lives (Cookson and Persell 1985). And so the cultural, social, and symbolic advantages a student develops at a place like Harvard are magnified in elite boarding schools.

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on one piece of the explanation for why such elite schooling matters. And that piece is how students from these schools get into elite colleges at such astonishing rates. In order to generate this explanation I turn briefly to how colleges accept students in an increasingly competitive environment.

### WHAT DO COLLEGES DO?

Mitchell Stevens’s (2007) work *Creating a Class* wonderfully recounts how a college creates an incoming freshman class. While working at an elite liberal arts college, Stevens explored how admissions officers made decisions about applicants. Important to what Stevens finds is that colleges are not looking to pick one kind of student again and again—say, for instance, outstanding academic performers. Instead, they are looking to assemble a group of students whose individual stories say something interesting and where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The goal of admissions officers is to create a dynamic group where these different “interesting characters” interact with one another while in school to make the environment that much richer for all.

These admissions officers also “take care” of the different interest groups on campus, from the development office who must raise money to keep the college running (and, importantly, maintain its financial prestige) to the athletics department. What we might take away from Stevens’s story is that through the process of admissions schools seek out those students who can increase institutional prestige as cheaply as possible. They do this by satisfying a variety of interest groups: from those to whom diversity matters to those to whom financial well-being does. From athletes to scholars, activists to legacies, oboe players to chess club members, colleges look to create a wide-ranging student body “interesting” both to inside and out. Each class of admitted students helps construct a narrative for the college; it is the story the college tells about itself.

Colleges want to be able to talk about how their students represent the range of faces and experiences of our diverse world, from the kid who is from a rural potato-farming family in Idaho to the one who climbed Kilimanjaro last summer. Anyone who has sat through a college orientation process knows this story well; a common aspect of such orientations is to have the

dean of Admissions stand up and tell the incoming class just how diverse, fascinating, and qualified their peers are. But as we shall soon see, there are ways that this diversity advantages students from elite schools.

Though we might think that this rejection of a single academic standard in favor of an “interesting class” is something that helps boost diversity, historically the practice was more nefarious. Jerome Karabel’s (2006) work on admissions to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton shows how these schools chose to give up on pure academic performance as standards for admission and instead focus on something more varied, ambiguous, and amorphous as “character.” In his careful historical study of the personal writings of admissions officers and college deans and presidents, Karabel found that the move away from academic standards to character was motivated by a deep anti-Semitism. In the early twentieth century, across the East Coast the children of Jewish migrants were academically thriving, and their success was allowing them access to the most prominent schools in the nation. Young Jewish men were outperforming many of the children of America’s most established and wealthy families.

The schools that had served as training grounds for such legacies and as adolescent homes for such wealth largely despised the increasing presence of Jews and sought to exclude them. The solution, settled upon by Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, was to begin to de-emphasize academic credentials and focus instead on those personal traits that overwhelmingly underscored the values, orientations, and sensitivities typical of established WASP families.

Gradually, “a good or interesting character” was introduced to the college-admissions process. Sports took on an increased importance (particularly those sports like crew and squash, which were favored by the elite). For applicants, engaging in unique activities created advantages in the admissions process. The Ivy League’s strategy was largely successful, since “interesting character” tended to be defined by what WASPs liked to do (and tended to do) and for other non-WASPs these character traits were costly to acquire. These schools had found a way to exclude the advancing members of society and protect the powerful.

Today, schools across the nation continue to focus on character. As Stevens shows, creating a college class is to admit a set of young men and women with “interesting” characters. What was once rooted in exclusion is now mobilized to celebrate the triumph of diversity in the higher levels of educational institutions. It would be intellectually dishonest to deny that elite schools are far more diverse than they once were (Espenshade and Radford 2009). But as we explore in the following, what counts as diversity matters; while they have become more racially diverse, elite colleges have also become populated by wealthier student bodies.

Important to my story, elite boarding schools have adapted to these changes. This character-based selection continues to help students from elite schools because they are given more opportunities to develop “interesting characters” through the wide range of activities that form a central part to their everyday schooling. School resources make such interesting aspects a mundane part of what such elite schools do, and they thereby are able to advantage themselves in the application process.

In order to understand my argument, I ask that we imagine what the process of admission into college is like—both from the perspective of colleges and from the perspective of elite boarding schools. For colleges, Mitchell Stevens (2007) is a useful guide. The thing to remember is that colleges are pressured from all sides: coaches, teachers, the development office, the office of diversity, trustees, etc. At the top colleges in our nation there is the drive to accept the best of the best. And “the best” is defined differently by competing constituencies on campus.

This challenge for colleges is an opportunity for elite boarding schools, as many of these pressures advantage students from such schools. Athletes from these schools tend to have extremely strong academic qualifications (not the best, but very strong ones). They can be admitted without worrying about their failing out or lowering standards. Many students from elite boarding schools are fantastically rich. They can be expected to give a considerable amount of money.

And elite boarding schools are increasingly diverse. The minority students are particularly attractive, as they have proven that they know how to navigate an elite school. For them, the worries of adjusting to life at the Ivy League are not as great as they might be for a student from a poorer public school. But the really interesting story, and the one that will remind us of those boys simply writing down their names in order to be accepted into top colleges, lies within concerns over those increasingly important rankings.

One of the key aspects of a college’s ranking is its yield—how many of the students who are accepted actually attend a university. The higher the yield, the higher the ranking (in part because an increase in the yield means a decrease in the acceptance rate). Yet when colleges look at outstanding students—and there are many of them—there is a challenge: These outstanding students will also be outstanding to all competitor schools. A student who is going to get into Harvard is very likely to also get into Princeton or Yale or Stanford; in short, it is extremely unlikely that she will just get into one school. So admissions officers at top colleges are presented with a challenge: how do they know that the students accepted to their college will attend their school? There are lots of “equivalent” schools out there that the students are also likely to get into.

One answer used to be to offer an early admissions process, where students fully committed to a college if accepted before the normal application process. This eliminated a lot of the uncertainty. But it was hardly fail-safe, as the majority of a college class would not be accepted early. And importantly, these programs have become less and less popular as they have been revealed as mechanisms for rich students to increase their chances of admission.

This is where the college counselor from an elite boarding school steps in. These counselors are likely to be one of many people in their office. They have the luxury of getting to know all the students whose college applications they are assisting. Unlike in many schools where a placement advisor might be responsible for several hundred students, they are only responsible for about forty. Their job is to make these students (and particularly their parents) happy, guiding them to the best college that they can attend and where they will be happy. But for the counselors there is the pressure of making sure their school seems worth it—that sending children away from home, annually paying some \$40,000-plus, really does aid students in the college process.

College counselors at elite boarding schools want to get as many kids into Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and other top schools as possible. Unlike many high schools, they have lots of good students—about a third of a graduating class will go to the Ivy League, and, as noted earlier, almost all of them will go to the top thirty colleges and universities in the nation. But there's a problem: some of students are slightly better than others. These better students will likely get into every school, and this will lower the chances of "second best" students getting into top schools.

If a student gets into Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, they can only go to one of these schools. By getting into all three, they reduce their classmates chances of getting into top colleges. No student, no matter how good, is guaranteed admission to a top school, and counselors can't fall on a solution where they limit where your best students apply. So what do they do?

Luckily, the problem for elite boarding schools matches up quite nicely with the problem faced by elite colleges. Schools play on this matching. Counselors talk to their students about where they really want to go, and then they talk to colleges. So let's say that at one elite boarding school there are two very strong students—Susan and Billy. Susan is probably going to get in everywhere; she is the best of the best. Billy might get into some top colleges, but his success is less certain. Billy really wants to go to Yale. Susan really wants to go to Harvard. Here is an opportunity for all the players involved, and under this simple scenario we can begin to see how the admissions game works.

First, the college counselor calls Harvard. They talk about all the kids they have applying. Harvard has already looked at the files and is interested in

some but not all of the students from the elite boarding school. The school provides Harvard with valuable information about its applicants. It affirms decisions that it thinks are correct, pushes Harvard toward students it thinks they have passed over too quickly, and reveals the preferences of the students who really want to go to Harvard (so Harvard knows they will attend if admitted). Harvard is getting something valuable here: information about students. This information isn't just about whether they will attend; it's about each student's character—who they are, a sense of the kid that goes far deeper than the file. This helps Harvard, but it also helps students from elite boarding schools, as the additional information gives these students a richer presence in the minds of college-admissions officers.

There is a give-and-take to these conversations, built upon a long relationship between elite boarding schools and colleges. The relationships and conversations are ongoing. On both ends of the telephone there is an attempt to get the “right” students into the “right” colleges (like matchmaking), while also solving some of the problems we've seen confronting both the colleges and the elite boarding schools: getting kids in and keeping yields high.

In Susan and Billy's case, the counselor makes sure Harvard knows that they should accept her (she's a truly great student). In this discussion the counselor will reveal to Harvard that they are Susan's first choice. After years of dealing with this elite boarding school, Harvard knows they can trust this information. If the school is lying, there are real consequences. Harvard might stop taking these telephone calls and ignore the information provided. They may even start accepting fewer students from the school, thinking it is less than honest. But both the elite boarding school and Harvard have an incentive to continue with a strong, honest relationship. Boarding schools need to get students into top schools; Harvard needs to make sure that its yield is low and its class is made up of outstanding students. Before the conversation about Susan ends, the counselor asks for confirmation that Susan will be accepted and might tell Harvard to look seriously at Billy (he has yet to be accepted anywhere).

The next step for the counselor is to call Yale. The task here is simple: work on Yale for Billy. The counselor tells Yale how great Billy is—the interesting things he has done, how he has the kind of character Yale wants. If Yale asks about Susan, they are told, “You really want Billy.” Yale realizes that Susan will not come to Yale—the counselor may even explicitly tell them she is going to Harvard. Yale rejects Susan and takes Billy. One of the delicate challenges is to make Yale not feel like they are getting a second-best student. In a moment we will see the solution to this challenge: at elite boarding schools there are many “best” students. Susan may be the best at some things, but Billy others, and in conversations with Yale the counselor conveys this.

But the counselor's work is not yet done. He still has one more call to make: to quickly get on the phone with Harvard again and tell them not to think about Billy any more; he's going to Yale. This helps Harvard and Yale keep their yields high and their acceptance rates low, and it strengthens the position of the elite boarding school in these top colleges' eyes; it's the kind of high school that gets students into the very best colleges in the nation.

Through this work the college-admissions office has very likely increased the number of students from their school who will get into top colleges. This has happened in three ways: (1) matchmaking, (2) giving more information about students to make them more attractive (giving a fuller sense of their "interesting character"), and (3) keeping the profile of the school high by building upon the reputation of the school as a place that "gets kids in." For Harvard and Yale, this process has helped them increase their yield (lowering their acceptance rate), making their schools continue to seem like they're incredibly desirable.

This game only works if the college counselor at the high school has lots of students to trade on (many students are poised to be accepted to top schools), long-term relationships with schools (their information is known to be reliable and they can be sanctioned for bad information), and the colleges in question have an interest in taking these phone calls to increase their yield and get better information about some of the students applying.

The days of sending a list of the names of students who should be accepted are long gone; today it is a negotiation. This negotiation helps get more kids in from elite boarding schools, those who, as the literature shows, are often less academically qualified than their peers from public schools. It's important to remember for a moment Stevens's (2007) and Karabel's (2006) work. While it often surprises parents who are working incredibly hard to get their kids to work incredibly hard at their schoolwork, most top colleges are not structured to take the best academic achievers. They want students who meet a minimum threshold but are also "interesting," displaying the varied kinds of characters that will create a colorful class.

Elite high schools are thus not willing to just rely on these negotiations and hope for the best. They are also structured to make sure their students are as likely as possible to get into the top colleges in the nation. They do this by working hard to develop in them an "interesting character."

## **HOW ELITE SCHOOLS ARE STRUCTURED TO WIN**

It may seem silly to point this out, but by definition only 5 percent of any one class can be in the top 5 percent. Even the best high schools cannot



convince top colleges that they should accept students who are not at the top of their graduating classes. From our example above, Yale's worries about getting students who are anything but the best turn into real pressures on both students and elite high schools. How, then, do these schools evaluate most of their class in the top 5 percent? How do they get so many kids into our nation's top colleges when all these colleges only want those at the top? There seems to be an impossible math going on here. Most elite colleges only want students at the top of their high school classes, but elite boarding schools seem to get almost *all* of their students into elite colleges. How is it that the bottom 50 percent of these high school classes are still getting into outstanding colleges?

The first part of the answer is simple. Even the "bottom" students of these classes are very good. At my school, the average SAT score was around 1,390 out of 1,600. That's a very high average indeed. But we also cannot underestimate the status-consciousness of most elite colleges; almost none feel they are "second best" and would bristle at the idea of taking students who were simply mediocre in their high school, no matter how good that high school is. And so elite schools find a way to make sure that even the students at the "bottom" of their classes aren't really at the bottom.

The seemingly impossible math suddenly becomes possible when we realize that there are lots of 5 percents. We typically think of the top of a class as being an academic category: who has the highest grades. But we should recall, if only quickly, Karabel's work on the triumph of "character" and the decline of academic standards as *the* standard for admission. Grades now create a baseline, a minimum that a student must attain to be considered for acceptance to a top college. But grades are not all that matters. In fact, they are only a small part of it. Beyond grades, there are other dimensions on which to compete.

And if we quickly recall the work of Mitchell Stevens, we will know that it is most often these dimensions upon which college admissions officers accept applicants. There are sports, arts, community activism, quirky interests or activities, and extreme wealth—a whole host of arenas for success. If you can get almost all of your students above a basic bar—high enough grades and board scores—and then create lots of different arenas in high school life for them to do well, then suddenly you have lots of "best" students. Almost all of your graduating class will be in the top 5 percent. You have made the impossible possible.

This gives us a different way to read what is happening with the schooling of students at elite boarding schools. No matter how good, academically, their students are, the top 5 to 10 percent will always only be 5 or 10 percent of the student body. But if all your students can have qualifications equivalent

to the top 5 or 10 percent of most high schools and they have something else special—they can really row, or play the oboe or squash, or are a special violinist or painter or mathematician, or they write interesting fiction, or you can argue that they have an interesting philosophical mind or will give a lot of money to the college, or will be a successful student who is from a poor, nonwhite family—then suddenly your students become that much more interesting to colleges. You have lots of 5 percents, and most of your students fit in somewhere among those percents.

The key here is that resources really matter. You can only create many areas for your students to succeed if you have the money to invest in getting them all above a basic bar and then still have some left over to pay for many areas wherein students cultivate diverse interests. On a budget of \$7,000 per pupil, most high schools cannot create music, painting, photography, sculpture, and dance programs; they cannot have seemingly countless clubs for students to join, from literary, philosophical, and language societies to science teams that build robots and observe the heavens from their own observatory.

Most high schools have trouble covering a basic curriculum with their budgets; they cannot support the development of “interesting” tastes and experiences. But on budgets of some \$50,000 to \$70,000 per pupil, elite boarding schools can. Everyone can find a place to be the best at something, and everyone can develop a notable character. So when college counselors get on the phone, they have an interesting story to tell about almost every student—a story that colleges want to hear (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan, forthcoming).

What might seem a fairly homogeneous group (at least 60 percent of students from elite high schools come from wealthy families—often those wealthy enough to pay over \$40,000 per year for high school) suddenly becomes a diverse one. Students have different interests and activities. They represent a wide range of areas, from future scientists to poets. They have achieved in an enormous number of ways. They are interesting. They come from all over the country and the world. Everyone is the best at something. Where they were the same, they are now different. And these differences allow colleges to accept students from what is a fairly narrow range of students, economically, and think of them as being enormously varied.

## CONCLUSION

The elite schools of our nation are far more diverse than they used to be. But it matters how we think of “diversity.” If we think in terms of class, our top

colleges are filled with many rich students, and there are hardly any poor ones there. As Andrew Delbanco noted in 2007,

Ninety percent of Harvard students come from families earning more than the median national income of \$55,000, and Harvard's dean of Admissions was quoted in the *Crimson* a few months earlier defining "middle-income" Harvard families as those earning between \$110,000 and \$200,000. . . . It is hardly surprising that lots of rich kids go to America's richest colleges. It has always been so. But today's students are richer on average than their predecessors. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, in a sample of eleven prestigious colleges, the percentage of students from families in the bottom quartile of national family income remained roughly steady—around 10 percent. During the same period the percentage of students from the top quartile rose sharply, from a little more than one-third to fully half. If the upscale shops and restaurants near campus are any indication, the trend has continued if not accelerated. And if the sample is broadened to include the top 150 colleges, the percentage of students from the bottom quartile drops to 3 percent. (Delbanco 2007; figures from Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin 2004)

These numbers paint a rather stark picture of what is going on within our elite educational institutions today. These schools are reverting to what they once were: increasingly places for the rich. This is curious, of course. And the reason it's curious is that these institutions seem so much more diverse than they once were. They seem to have heeded the call to open their doors to those who were excluded and begun to be a more accurate representation of our increasingly open, diverse, social world. They seem less and less club-like, particularly because they spend so much of their time telling us just how diverse they are and how hard they are working to make the advantages associated with their institutions available to all.

I think we can puzzle together an answer from some of the insights generated in this chapter. The triumph of individual stories among applicants—showing that they have each developed a unique character that is worth having as part of a class—has also created the appearance of diverse variety, wherein there is enormous homogeneity. As the work of William Bowen points out, most colleges are filled with the children of rich families. They may all do interesting things, from playing the Irish tin whistle to starting a local land mine advocacy group to hiking the Andes. But these diverse experiences do not mean that students represent the United States. If only 3 percent of college students at the top one hundred schools come from the bottom 25 percent of American earners, we cannot claim that these colleges represent the range of young adults in our nation.

The strong ties between elite high schools and elite colleges are a major part of this story. As the literature has repeatedly shown, these high schools

still manage to get comparatively underqualified students into elite colleges. They do this by deploying their resources to help turn considerable economic homogeneity into a diversity of stories that appeal to colleges. These different stories also help almost every student at an elite prep school be “the best.”

Unlike schools with limited resources, where students must compete with one another on a single ranking system (grades), elite schools can use their resources to make sure that there are seemingly countless areas in which their students can excel. Every student is a special talent. And because these elite high schools have many students that elite colleges might be interested in, and because these colleges have an incentive to reduce their admission rate, elite colleges and high schools negotiate with one another over students, resulting in a greater number of students going to top colleges than would otherwise be accepted in the absence of such negotiations.

Early in this chapter I drew upon the work of other scholars to point out why elite schooling matters. Those explanations were cultural, social, and symbolic capital. We can see all of these forces at play in the picture I have just painted of the admissions process.

Culturally, students from elite high schools develop the set of interesting traits that colleges select upon. Socially, the ties that their schools have to elite institutions aid in a negotiation process that helps get comparatively less-qualified elite high school students into elite colleges. And symbolically, going to an elite high school still matters—colleges are willing to take their calls and select students from such institutions because those institutions matter, symbolically, for them. Kids from elite high schools get into elite colleges not because they “know” something the rest of us do not. Instead they can draw upon the social, cultural, and symbolic resources they develop within one elite institution in order to gain access to another.

Though they may not be simply writing their names on the top of a sheet of paper to get into top colleges, students from elite boarding schools are still having a comparatively easy time getting into our nation’s top colleges. In the process, those who historically were never allowed to even attend such schools now may apply, but they still find themselves largely outside their walls.

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## *Chapter Seven*

# **The Effects of Parents' College Tier on Their Offspring's Educational Attainments**

Joseph A. Soares

Does it really matter where one goes to college? Many parents worry about selecting the right type of school for their offspring, all the way from kindergarten to college. And at least by high school most college-bound youth join in their parents' obsessive search for the perfect place. Their mental turmoil is more stirred than calmed by the ratings industry, from *Barron's* to the *U.S. News and World Report*. Not making matters any easier, admissions staff, high school counselors, and even some faculty will intimate that much, if not all, of a young student's future is at stake in the choice. The right college, applicants are told, will incalculably enrich one's life—and by implication a poor choice will leave one's intellectual, moral, and cultural sensibilities malnourished.

Are those claims anything other than advertising hype and folklore? Does one learn more at a small, private liberal arts college, such as Swarthmore, than at a large public university, such as Penn State? Will one meet more interesting and creative people or make more connections that promise to advance one's career at Stanford University than at the University of California at Berkeley? If one goes to North Carolina State rather than Wake Forest University, one's degree may be less prestigious, but will prospective graduate school programs or employers care?

If admissions counselors, friends, and family members have insisted that choice of college is crucial, the social-scientific literature on college effects has been happy to contradict that folktale. For decades, social scientists have said that being a college graduate matters, but graduating from any particular campus isn't relevant to anything beyond which bumper stickers decorate one's fender.

Social scientists were so confident that educational attainment, not the particular college, matters most that for nearly half a century we have explored the effects of education on various outcomes using either one of two measures: a human capital variable (Becker 1964), calculated as total number of years of schooling (OECD 1997; Sewell 1971), or a status variable, evaluated as type of credential (Faia 1981). As statistical measures of parents' and children's educational attainments, both the years variable and the credential variable have worked marvelously well.

Veritably hundreds of studies using one or the other have been published by sociologists and economists showing statistically significant results, such as the intuitive finding that the more years of education one has the higher one's income, and the counterintuitive claim that level of degree (such as bachelor's or master's) matters more than the type of college attended (for instance, a private liberal arts college versus a public university).

But what if the social-scientific literature is wrong? What if the choice between a Swarthmore and a Penn State really affects nontrivial outcomes? And what if prestigious colleges are one way social privileges are passed along within families?

## ECONOMISTS' FINDINGS ON COLLEGE TIER EFFECTS

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the scholarly consensus that particular colleges did not matter was increasingly challenged by a number of economists (see Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg 1996; Dale and Krueger 2002) who had found that lifetime-earning differences correlated with college tier. Graduates from higher-tier colleges earn more money than graduates from lower-tier colleges, even when one controls for academic ability, as measured by grades and test scores. Most participants in this scholarly discussion think of college tiers as corresponding, more or less, to the categories displayed in *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, which cluster colleges into six tiers ranging from most competitive to noncompetitive (Fine 1964, 1966).

The news that income correlated to college tier had not spread very far within academia when the ever-speedy economists moved on to the next logical issue: the question of causal mechanism. If college tier income disparities are real, what causes them? Is there something about top-tier colleges (their resources, external social networks, and social prestige) that matters to the lifetime earnings of their graduates? Or are top-tier colleges simply better than their rivals at capturing the best talent in the applicant pool? Plainly put, does a person of excellent ability have to attend Princeton to be a top income earner, or would that person do just as well with a degree from Rutgers?

Separate from the ongoing controversy among economists as to just how a graduate's college tier correlates with lifetime earnings is the broader question of whether tiers matter in other spheres of life. Do college tiers influence leisure activities and social or political attitudes? And, perhaps most importantly, are there tier effects on educational attainments? The key question pursued in this chapter heretofore unasked by sociologists is whether there are college tier effects in the educational patterns of families. Social scientists extensively rely on the number of years a parent has gone to school or else rely on credential status in statistical regressions to predict the offspring's academic attainments. What insights would be provided by replacing those measures with examination of the parents' college tiers?

### COLLEGE TIER EFFECTS ON FAMILY EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL

To explore the effects of tier stratification on families, it may help to focus not on human capital (economically relevant educational experiences) or on degree status but on the transmission of academically relevant skills and attitudes that can be accumulated in the family. Such a focus would posit the possibility of college effects that matter to the performance and choices of individuals and their offspring. In order to review the intersection of college tier and family practices, we can borrow from the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu (1984, 1996) articulated for France a theory of an academic "field of power"—that is, a way of capturing college tier stratification. He situates his review of the academic field between a social pole and a science pole of power (see Mullen, Goyette, and Soares 2003). Bourdieu's theory of academic fields was tied to his analysis of different forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and educational. But Bourdieu and those who work in his tradition trained their attention on cultural capital, not on the aspect most relevant to academic institutional stratification, academic or educational capital.

In *The State Nobility* (1996) Bourdieu explicitly theorized that the institutional field of education in France was structured into a hierarchy, with *grandes ecoles* at the top; he linked the value of academic or educational capital to the relative position of its site of production, a particular institution within a national stratification system. But he did not elaborate on the inequalities of academic capital beyond the hierarchical distinction between elite and nonelite colleges (Bourdieu 1996; Soares 2007). And so in the following I have systematically applied his concept of academic or educational capital as a *college tier* variable that expresses positional field distinctions.



This chapter examines a student's educational capital rather than just college tier effects since college tier is transmitted by the parents. I hypothesize that educational capital can be accumulated and passed on within the family. For our purposes, educational capital is a family-level measure of the parent's college tier. The impact of a particular college is being evaluated first by locating its structural position in the hierarchy of college ranks and then by tracing its effects on the educational patterns of parental offspring. I am looking here at one parental-input measure of educational capital—college tier—on various offspring outputs.

If top-tier colleges provide their graduates with more educational capital than lower-tier colleges, then a tier may derive its value from its relation to the cognitive capacities and insider information that facilitate the reproduction of a family's educational class position. I hypothesize that a family's educational capital helps its youths to score well on standardized tests and gives them distinct attitudes and preferences for their college experience.

In sum, if human capital is a way of thinking about the economically relevant skills and knowledge that one acquires in school (such as applied math) and cultural capital is about familiarity with dominant-class cultural tastes (such as classical music and ballet), then educational capital is a way to classify the skills and information that are relevant to successfully navigating one's way through school and college. Educational capital, then, is less about math or Mozart than it is about the attitudes, goals, and skills acquired from drawing on one's mother's or father's college tier experience.

### **COMPARATIVE TESTS OF EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL, HUMAN CAPITAL, AND CREDENTIAL VARIABLES**

To test for educational capital effects on families, in the following I explore six educational outcomes: Does a parent's college tier have statistically significant effects on the type of high school attended by his children? Does it matter to that child's SAT scores? Does it influence the type of college she attends? Are there any correlations with the child's athletic status? Does it affect the child's choice of major? And does it correlate with their college grade point average (GPA)?

In addition, I perform a comparative test on each of these outcomes to see if I can find statistically significant results using the two alternative measures: a human capital years-of-schooling variable and a credential variable on college degree. In sum, I ask what information is lost or gained by the use of an educational capital measure of parental college tier over a human capital or

credential measure in relation to type of high school, test scores, choice of college and major, being an athlete, and GPA.

## THE DATA

There have been practical barriers to the investigation of college-tier family payoffs. We simply have not had the data. While we have had information on the specific colleges attended by graduates since the 1970s (Hoxby and Terry 1999), there is not one nationally representative dataset with information on the particular colleges that parents attended. The U.S. Census, the General Social Survey, the American Freshman National Norms Survey, and studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics—including NELS—do not collect data on the particular colleges attended by parents.

There is now, however, one source for parent and child college identification information—the Mellon Foundation's *College and Beyond* (C&B) data. The Mellon Foundation built the C&B database to appraise the effects of race-sensitive admissions at very selective colleges and universities. As Bowen and Bok explain, "the complete institutional data file contains admissions and transcript records of 93,660 full-time students who entered thirty-four colleges and universities in the fall of 1951, 1976, and 1989" (1998, 291).

Enabling me to test for the effects that parents' colleges had on their children, the Mellon Foundation had added to its database whenever it could the unique institutional identification codes assigned by the Department of Education—the Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) numbers—for the particular colleges and universities attended by the parents of the students. Reliable FICE identifiers for parents' colleges or universities were available in the C&B data for undergraduates who began college in 1989 at six institutions. The total number of individual undergraduates at our six C&B colleges in the 1989 cohort was 4,302.

For the families with children in one of those six C&B colleges, I can determine whether or not a parent went to college and, if so, which college that parent attended. While the parents in the study may have attended college anywhere in the world, their children attended only one of six elite colleges. I have FICE status information on at least one parent for 91 percent of the data, and it was possible to assign an educational status to most of the remaining 9 percent by the combination of two other sources of information in the data: a question asked of offspring of the highest level of education completed by each parent, and by legacy status records. If neither parent completed college,

or if either went to the same college as the offspring, it was possible to assign a college-tier status to the youth in the data.

The limitations of the C&B database are obvious and significant: Those institutions are not representative of higher education in the United States as a whole, and consequently one cannot be certain, based on this work, that college tiers in general have the effects found here. One can only know with confidence that within the sector of elite institutions students and their families display these characteristics.

One can, however, be guardedly optimistic that findings from the C&B data can be replicated in the general population because Dale and Krueger (2002) found that to be the case. In addition, the statistical patterns and qualities of elite college students and their families are worth knowing in their own right, as Hearn (1991) and others note. Significant findings in this study would represent at least one more reason, in addition to those provided by the economists cited here, to include questions on the precise colleges attended by parents in future NELS-type surveys.

This work should be viewed as a partial test of educational capital measured as college tier. It would take a national dataset, such as NELS, updated with full particulars on parents' colleges to definitively determine whether or not the relationships found here are representative of relationships across the United States or are merely artifacts of the selection effects of elite colleges. Given the academic accomplishments of the youth in the C&B data, it is reasonable to assume that the statistical models presented in the following text will underestimate the true magnitude of the effects of educational capital. Everyone in the C&B study got into a highly selective college, so their test scores are within a narrower range than the scores of a random sample of U.S. high school students.

The performance gap between youth from families with top-tier educational capital over youth whose parents went to low-tier colleges is minimized by the composition of this sample. I expect that a NELS-type study with educational capital variables would produce larger statistical effects than the C&B data.

## VARIABLES

### **Control Variables**

To measure family socioeconomic status (SES), the data include information on parental occupations, family income, and parental college and postgraduate degrees. As for parental occupation, the Mellon Foundation coded father's and mother's jobs into fifty-one separate categories based on the student's

answer to the question, “During your senior year in high school . . . what kind of work was your father [mother] doing—that is, what was his [her] occupation at that time? Please be as specific as possible, including any area of specialization. Example: High school teacher—math” (Bowen and Bok 1998, 331). I ran all fifty-one of their occupational categories as “dummy variables” (variables coded as 0 or 1) and also ran them recoded into twenty-one economically similar clusters. Nothing produced significantly different results on our dependent variables from the use of just two dummy variables coded as father worked in a profession or not, mother worked in a profession or not.

In all of the regressions presented here, the occupational control variables for parents will be professional father or not, professional mother or not. Information on total annual family income was taken from college records. For those cases without income data, I followed the procedure detailed by Dale and Krueger (2002) to attribute an income score to the observation. As a final control variable on parents, there is a dummy variable for having a postgraduate degree of any sort.

Control dummy variables for the youths in the dataset are sex (female or male) and racial or ethnic identification (white, black, Hispanic, Asian-American, and other).

## Dependent Variables

Information for my dependent variables (high school type, SAT score, college type, athletic status, college major, and GPA) was all taken from admission’s files and official transcripts provided by the participating colleges to the Mellon Foundation. Type of high school was coded as three dummy variables: public, private, or religious. The exact combined SAT score, “SATCOMB,” was recorded by the Mellon Foundation from each student’s college application. And each student’s college type was determined from institutional records and classified as three dummy variables: women’s college, liberal arts college, and research university. Using Shulman and Bowen’s (2001) definition of an athlete for this database, I coded a dummy variable, *athlete*, as 1 if the student was on a sports team or received a varsity or junior varsity award. College major information was taken from institutional records.

I read Bourdieu’s (1984, 1996) findings on the relation between types of academic subjects and types of educational and cultural capital to suggest in the U.S. context an association between traditional liberal arts majors and high levels of educational capital, on the one hand, and between practical-business subjects and low levels of educational capital, on the other. Consequently I have created two dummy variables out of two clusters of majors, one at the traditional humanities end and another at a practical business end of

the spectrum. The clusters were three arts majors—history, philosophy, and classics—which I grouped as a traditional-humanities dummy variable; and I aggregated two majors—economics and business—as a practical-business dummy variable. GPAs on a four-point scale (0 to 4.0) were all taken from official transcripts.

## Test Variables

Parents' education, coded as educational capital, human capital, and credential status, are the test variables in this study. Educational capital was measured as four dummy variables: parents with tier 1 degrees, parents with tier 2 degrees, parents with tier 3 degrees, and parents without college degrees. As other researchers on college tiers have pointed out, over the years the relative ranking of any particular college has hardly changed (Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg 1996; Ehrenberg 2000; Hoxby 1998). Nonetheless, to capture information relevant to the time period when the parents in this data were of college age, I used the third edition of *Barron's*, published in 1966.

Following the example of other researchers before me, I collapsed *Barron's* six categories into three (Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg 1996; Dale and Krueger 2002): I collapsed "most competitive" and "highly competitive" into tier 1; "very competitive" was kept as tier 2; and the rest was coded as tier 3. Finally, students' parents who did not graduate from or even attend college were coded as nongraduates.

On the alternative logics of measurement to educational capital, the human capital variable was coded as the total years of a parent's schooling as reported in their child's college application. When degrees rather than years were reported, they were translated as twelve years for high school graduates, sixteen years for college graduates, and twenty years for postgraduates. If a parent had some college but not a degree, the years variable was coded as 14. The credential variable was coded as a dummy variable: the students whose parents had college degrees in contrast to those whose parents were without.

In all cases, the family's educational status for each observation in the 1989 cohort was derived from whichever parent had the highest level. For example, with the educational capital categories, if either parent attended a tier 1 college, the family was given a tier 1 status; and for the human capital variable, if the father had a postgraduate degree the family was given a score of 20 (years).

This coding decision was due not only to a desire to simplify what could otherwise have become a very messy range of classifications for each youth (such as tier 1 father and nongraduate mother, or tier 2 father with a tier 1 mother); we also coded this way because educational information on both

parents was far from complete. The evaluation of separate gender effects based on if and where mother and father each received a degree will have to wait for a more comprehensive dataset than this one. By assigning a family's educational status based on one parent's attainments, I could classify 100 percent of the data.

## ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Simple descriptive statistics were run to gather basic snapshots of the distribution of our control, test, and dependent variables. But the important statistical work here was done by thirty-three regression models, using in turn measures of either educational capital, human capital, or the college degree credential to see which provided better results in predicting high school type, SAT score, type of college attended, athlete status, college major selected, and GPA earned. Rather than present thirty-three tables, one for each regression model, in this chapter only one table of results will be shown displaying just information on the test variables and dependent variables.

I appreciate that it is unconventional to summarize findings in one table, but thirty-three separate regression tables would have been too unwieldy. The point is to see if tier effects show up statistically more often than rival means of measuring the effects that parents' education have on their children—and one table accomplishes that.

## FINDINGS

### Descriptive Statistics

All of our descriptive statistics in table 7.1 are organized by four levels of parental educational capital. The educational capital categories represent an ordinal scale, with tier 1 college-educated parents at the top and parents without college at the bottom.

Tier 1 and tier 2 families are 26 percent of the total data, while tier 3 college-educated parents are the majority at 59 percent, and youths whose parents either did not attend or did not finish college are 14 percent of the data. The category that should have the most educational capital, families with tier 1 parents, was distinguished from the others in many respects. Families with tier 1 parents had the highest percentage of postgraduate degrees and professional occupations. More of their offspring attended private high school, scored higher on the SAT, became college athletes, majored in

**Table 7.1. Background Demographics and Institutional Distribution, Six Institutions, 1989**

<i>1989 College and Beyond Data: 6 institutions in the sample</i>	<i>Tier 1 College Parents</i>	<i>Tier 2 College Parents</i>	<i>Tier 3 College Parents</i>	<i>Parents w/o College Degrees</i>	<i>Total Data</i>
<b>Mean family income \$</b>	62,065	58,482	57,311	37,971	56,196
<b>Racial/ethnic groups</b>					
% white	91	91	69	55	72
% black	3	4	7	18	8
% Hispanic	2	1	5	16	6
% Asian	5	4	19	11	14
<b>% of parents w/ postgraduate degree</b>	44	35	32	0	30
<b>% Professional father</b>	47	37	37	3	34
<b>% Professional mother</b>	21	14	13	1	13
<b>High school type</b>					
% public school	56	59	64	61	62
% private school	40	39	31	29	33
% religious school	3	1	3	6	4
<b>SAT combined mean score</b>	1346	1317	1303	1238	1303
<b>Institutional type</b>					
% women's college	14	21	23	24	21
% liberal arts college	15	26	14	21	16
% research university	70	52	62	54	62
<b>% Athlete</b>	14	7	9	8	9
<b>% Major in economics or business</b>	5	4	9	7	8
<b>% Major in history, philosophy, classics</b>	17	11	11	9	12
<b>GPA mean score</b>	3.37	3.31	3.29	3.11	3.28
<b>% of total database</b>	20	06	59	14	100
<b>Total number in database</b>	846	269	2,563	624	4,302

*Note:* The figures in the cumulative categories have been rounded and so may not sum to 100 percent.

a traditional humanities subject, and had the highest GPA in college than did the offspring in any other family category.

Students with tier 1 or 2 parents were overwhelmingly white. Race-sensitive admissions at the elite colleges in our sample appear to have contributed to a very sizable racial and ethnic minority presence in the category of parents without degrees, and Asian students were overly represented in the tier 3 group.

On SAT scores, there is a 108-point gap between youths with tier 1 educated parents and youths whose parents received no college education. Youths whose parents graduated from a top-tier college, in contrast to a third-tier college, had a forty-three-point advantage. And tier 2 offspring had a mere fourteen-point lead over tier 3 families.

The relation of college tier to college cumulative GPA worked the same way as the SAT across our four education capital categories. Those with tier 1 educated parents had the highest GPAs, and youth whose parents held no college degree were in last place.

### **Regression Analyses on SAT and GPA**

To test for the academic performance payoff of educational capital while holding other things constant, multiple regression models were run with SAT scores and cumulative GPA as two dependent outcomes. On SAT scores I controlled for race, gender, family income, parents with postgraduate degrees, parental occupations, type of high school attended, and athletic status (since being an athlete does not start the first day of college). On GPA I added controls for type of college attended as well as dummy variables for each undergraduate major. My hypothesis was that educational capital, measured as parents' college tier, would have statistically significant and positive effects on SAT and GPA scores. Of my four categories, tier 1 and tier 2 parental offspring should have performed better than tier 3 parental college youths, who should have in turn performed better than youths whose parents held no college degrees.

### **Multiple Regression Findings**

Table 7.2 shows the results of my three contrasting models on each outcome—one with the educational capital variables, one with a linear variable for years of parents' education, and one with the credential dummy variable on parents with or without college degrees. With all of the control variables in the model I found results across the board on SAT scores. College-tier, years-of-schooling, and degree-status test variables all produce significant results.



**Table 7.2. Regression Results Showing All Test Variables and All Dependent Variables. Control Variables Not Shown**

1989 College and Beyond Data: Test variables right, outcome variables below parameter estimate with direction and level of statistical significance in cells	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Parents w/o	Years of	
	College Parents	College Parents	College Parents	College Degrees	Parents Formal Schooling	
<b>SAT combined</b>	34.61***	11.98	reference category	-26.49***	5.219 ***	31.94***
<b>GPA</b>	0.0182	0.0001	reference category	-0.0653**	0.00622 (0.057 sig.)	0.0676**
<b>Odds ratios and level of statistical significance in cells</b>						
<b>High school type</b>						
public school	0.732***	0.809	reference category	0.900	1.023	1.049
private school	1.428***	1.389*	reference category	0.837	1.009	1.285*
religious school	0.942	0.414 (.08 sig.)	reference category	2.686***	0.892*	0.354***
<b>Institutional type</b>						
women's college	0.428***	0.716	reference category	0.887	1.021	1.007
liberal arts college	1.480**	2.441***	reference category	0.549***	1.247***	2.079***
research university	1.206	0.583*	reference category	1.820***	0.893***	0.544***
<b>Athlete</b>	1.113	0.652	reference category	1.694*	0.943 (0.0507 sig.)	0.585*
<b>Major in economics or business</b>	0.631*	0.450*	reference category	0.651*	0.935*	1.41
<b>Major in history, philosophy, classics</b>	1.309*	0.836	reference category	1.055	0.974	0.976

\* Means significant at the 0.05 level; \*\* significant at the 0.001 level; \*\*\* significant at the 0.0001 level.

College tier matters to combined SAT score for those with tier 1 parents and to those whose parents have no college degree, while it had no effect on our absent reference category, those with third-tier college-educated parents. Youth with a tier 1 parent score thirty-five points higher on the SAT than do youth whose parents graduated from a tier 3 college. The offspring of tier 2 parents do not show any statistically significant effects in comparison with our reference group. But I found significant results for students whose parent did not attend or did not graduate from college. Their scores were on average twenty-six SAT points lower than our third-tier reference category. In comparison with the descriptive results in table 7.1, which showed a sixty-five-point gap between youths with tier 3 college-educated parents and youths whose parents held no college degree, the regression analysis closes that gap to twenty-six points. Using control variables, the distance between those two categories is much reduced.

In a separate regression model, the years-of-schooling human capital variable also comes through at a level of statistical significance equal to our tier 1 variable (0.0001). Each year of parental education corresponded to an increase of five points on the SAT. And the credential variable, college degree, shows very similar results to our tier 1 variable. In this data, having a parent with a college degree predicted an SAT score thirty-two points higher than those of students from families without a parent with a degree.

The human capital variables do not register as statistically significant when one controls for college type and major, and one is looking at GPAs at the time of graduation. The educational capital variables, however, do detect one statistically significant result: Even though the variation in the range of GPA scores is not very large, if neither parent graduated from college, one's grades suffer slightly. Obviously, if the no-degree educational capital category comes through as statistically significant, then the credential variable would as well, and at a similar level of magnitude.

## **Logistic Regressions**

Leaving behind the continuous dependent variables (SAT and GPA), I ran twenty-seven logistic regression models to evaluate the effects of educational capital, human capital, and credential status on nine dichotomous outcomes: attending a public high school or not, a private high school or not, or a religious high school or not; matriculating at a women's college or not, a liberal arts college or not, or a research university or not, being a college athlete or not; majoring in business or economics or not, or in history, philosophy, or classics or not. All of my demographic control variables were used for these regressions. In addition, when I looked at college type, I included type of

high school and SAT scores. When examining both athletic status and college major, I included high school type, SAT score, and college type as controls in the model.

From table 7.2, one can see many more statistically significant findings from the educational capital model than the human capital model, but the credential variable also performs very well. First, regarding type of high school, the number of years of schooling these students' parents had matters only to making one slightly less likely to attend a religious school than our reference category, whereas the educational capital variables offer us five statistically significant results and the credential models give us two relevant findings. If one's parents graduated from a tier 1 college or a tier 2 college, one is respectively 1.42 or 1.38 times more likely than our third-tier offspring to have attended a private high school. Also, youths from tier 1 families would only be 73 percent as likely as progeny of tier 3 college-educated parents to have attended a public high school.

Regarding religious high schools, tiers 1 and 2 do not matter, but if a student's parents did not attend or did not graduate from college, that student is 2.68 times more likely than third-tier offspring to have attended a religious school. The credential model shows that college graduates, in comparison with nongraduates, are 1.28 times more likely to have attended private schools and only 35 percent as likely to have enrolled in religious high schools.

As for type of college, every model turns up significant correlations for each of our test variables when the dependent dummy variable is attendance at a liberal arts college. If a parent attended a tier 1 or 2 college, one would be respectively 1.48 times or 2.44 times more likely than third-tier-educated parents' offspring to go to a liberal arts college. And having parents without a college degree matters negatively, depressing one's odds to 55 percent of that of tier 3 offspring. The reverse meant that the credential variable, families with college-degree-holding parents, indicated that students were 2.08 times more likely to embrace a liberal arts venue.

The human capital years-of-education variable also came through very well. For each year of formal schooling a student increases his or her odds of matriculating at a liberal arts college 1.25 times. Liberal arts colleges display our most impressive results correlating the effects parents' education has on the direction taken by their offspring. All of our measures show that the more highly educated one's parents the more likely one is to take the liberal arts college route.

The difference between our reference category, third-tier offspring, and the others does matter to matriculation at research universities. The tier 2 variable comes through significantly and predicts that those youth are only 58 percent as likely as the reference group to attend research universities.

Research universities appear to be the main stairway of educational upward mobility for youth from nongraduate families; students whose parents held no college degree were 1.82 times more likely than tier 3 youth to be enrolled in a research university. Both the human capital measure and the credential measure were highly significant and negative.

The more years of education one's parents have, and if one's parents had a college degree, the less likely one is to attend a research university. Finally, after restricting our sample to women only to test for effects on attending a women's college, the only variable that matters is having tier 1 parents. These students are 43 percent as likely as tier 3 offspring to opt for a single-sex college.

The number of years a student's parents have attended school does not predict athlete status in college, while our two opposite variables—parents without and parents with college degrees—do. Youth with parents lacking college degrees increased their comparative odds of being an athlete by 1.69 times over tier 3 families, and the credential model provided similar information. Youth with college-credentialed parents were 58 percent as likely as their less privileged peers of going out for athletics. Youths from families without degrees or any educational capital pursue sports at college more than any other group.

Finally, regarding choice of college major, the human capital measure and the credential measure do not capture any statistically significant results, while all of our educational capital measures do. The progeny of tier 1 and tier 2 parents and of parents without college degrees are significantly less likely than our third-tier category to major in business or economics. Youth from third-tier families embrace economically relevant majors to a greater extent than any of the others. And tier 1 youth are 1.3 times more likely to major in a traditional arts subject than are third-tier youths. It appears that tier 1 families are more successful at nurturing offspring who pursue a liberal arts approach to the curriculum than are families in our third-tier reference group.

## CONCLUSION

The human capital measure—years of education received by the parents—has simplicity going for it. It is easy to employ and interpret. Its parsimony, however, comes at an information cost. With reference to our eleven outcomes in table 7.2, the human capital measure provided significant results five times, suggesting that parents' education matters to those things and not to others. The credential variable performed better than did human capital, producing seven significant findings; between the two variables, knowing whether a

parent has a college degree tells us more than just how many years of formal education a parent had. Our educational capital measure, however, provided the most information, capturing statistically significant results on all of our dependent variables. In total, educational capital gave us eighteen separate findings significant at the 0.05 level or higher that correlated parents' college tier with educational outcomes for their children.

No matter how implausible, it is possible that these results are due to selection effects by elite institutions. Perhaps Princeton and Stanford, for example, both have separate standards for admissions depending on one's parent's education that would generate these SAT differences; or perhaps it is all due to gene pools (Feldman, Otto, and Christiansen 2000) and intermarriages between top-tier-educated individuals. And perhaps the Mellon data are inadequate even as a preliminary test of these characteristics. But unless one of those possibilities is true, then what we have here is the first evidence of a transmittable nexus between a family's educational performance and a particular college tier.

College tiers not only correspond to income differences among college graduates, as economists have shown, but they also correlate to educational outcomes for offspring. Tier 1 parents tend to send their children to private schools, have offspring with high SAT scores even when income and occupation are controlled, and send their children to liberal arts colleges where the students will then eschew economics in favor of history.

I have used here the concept of educational capital to explore the possibility that some crucial effects of education are dependent on institutional context. By definition the alternatives—both the years-of-education and the credential variables—are unable to capture those effects. As long as social scientists do not have data on parents' precise colleges of attendance and graduation, we will continue to rely on a years-of-education human capital measures or on a degree credential measure, both of which will systematically underestimate the effects of stratification within higher education.

We need to gather specific information on parents' college experience by conducting, for example, a follow-up survey of the parents in NELS before the question can be settled as to whether or not there definitely are family educational capital effects. If educational capital works in a national dataset as well as it works here, then with it researchers should be able to reveal hidden dimensions of the unequal institutional effects of education on families across a wide range of outcomes.

Higher education in the United States has become a mechanism for the production of inequality as well as social opportunity. Family socioeconomic status privileges appear to be passed along through the stratification of higher education into seven distinct tiers with different social class compositions

and occupational destinations. The top tiers draw overwhelmingly from the top income groups (Soares 2007), and their graduates accumulate a lifetime income premium worth more than \$1 million over bottom-tier graduates (Hoxby 1998). The full extent of elite educational reproduction in the United States, however, is unknown.

We do not know how much intergenerational privilege is transmitted via college tiers. Social scientists have systematically underestimated elite educational reproduction because we measure educational attainments as years or degrees and not in terms of college tier. We can and should do better by getting the U.S. Census and the General Social Survey, and other data collection efforts, to ask questions about the particular colleges family members attend. Then social science would finally be able to say definitively how much a particular college may matter to one's entire family.

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## *Chapter Eight*

# **Class Dismissed? The Social-Class Worldviews of Privileged College Students**

Jenny M. Stuber

When I set out in the fall of 2003 to study how college students think about social class I was expecting to hear a set of sociologically predictable tales. I was prepared to listen to upper-middle-class students narrate their college experiences with a palpable sense of entitlement (Lareau 2003); I expected that these students would exude an air of superiority as they drew distinctions between themselves and those on the lower rungs of the class ladder (Lamont 1992). Imagine my surprise, then, when Mollie Weinstein (all of the names used herein are pseudonyms), a trendy sophomore from the Los Angeles area, had this to say in reference to some of the social dynamics in her Big State residence hall: “Like, I only own seven items from Juicy Couture [a brand of leisure clothing popular at the time] as opposed to these two girls down the hallway, who have, like, a hundred. Literally, their moms work for Juicy Couture; they have every imaginable item. So, yeah, some of the girls on the floor point out that I have all these Juicy items, and I have to prove to them [her middle-class floor mates] that I’m on their level.”

That Mollie would seek to distance herself from students she perceives to be more privileged than she is and would attempt to align herself with young women from more modest class backgrounds stands in stark contrast to the existing sociological literature, where privileged persons are depicted as making distinctions between themselves and those below them in the stratification order (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002).

Mollie’s comment—and others like it—prompted me to ask a simple, but sociologically relevant, question: How do white, upper-middle-class college students make sense of social class? In this chapter I examine their discursive repertoires and use these repertoires to construct a picture of their social class worldviews (Frankenberg 1993). Despite the absence in the United States of a



common vocabulary for talking about social class, I found that upper-middle-class college students discussed the topic with relative ease. At the same time, they provided complex and seemingly contradictory accounts. Throughout, they offered a social class worldview characterized by significant class “blind spots,” where they appear uninterested in and unaware of the lives of their less-advantaged peers, on the one hand, while paying considerable attention to those at the top of the social hierarchy, on the other.

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: WHY SOCIAL-CLASS TALK MATTERS**

Understanding how people make sense of social class is critical for understanding how class inequalities get reproduced. For many years, studies of social reproduction focused on structural processes and unequal access to economic and political resources (Domhoff 1990; Mills 1956; Useem 1984). Since the late 1960s, however, theorists have increasingly focused on the cultural underpinnings of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977/1990; Willis 1977). Where some researchers emphasized the convergence of culture and action in processes of social reproduction (Burawoy 1979; Fantasia 1988, 1995; Thompson 1968), others examined the reproductive power of discourse (Thompson 1984, 1990), arguing that language either is action or shapes action in ways that reproduce social inequality.

For critical theorists, because the discursive and material dimensions of society are inextricably linked, cultural constructions of social class are important as they partially structure the class system (Gramsci 1990; Mouffe 1979). Frankenberg emphasizes this point in her analysis of the reproductive power of whiteness, focusing on the power of “discursive repertoires” to “reinforce, contradict, conceal, explain, or ‘explain away’ the materiality of social inequality” (1993, 2). Symbolic interactionists similarly emphasize the importance of language in the social construction of reality, arguing that symbolic understandings are important because it is on the basis of these understandings that people act (Blumer 1969). From this perspective, terms like *race*, *class*, and *gender* represent routinized forms of thought, speech, and action that create and maintain relations of domination and subordination (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Cultural sociologists use the concept of symbolic boundaries as an analytic tool to make sense of how people think and talk about concepts like social class. Symbolic boundaries are the conceptual distinctions made by actors to categorize objects, people, and practices (Lamont and Molnar 2002); they are structures of thought that inform the cultural categories that guide social ac-

tion (Lamont and Fournier 1992). Because symbolic boundaries “constitute a system of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social acts,” they “not only create groups; they also potentially produce inequality” (Lamont 1992, 12). Thus, symbolic boundaries are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the construction of social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002)—boundaries with real, objective force.

In this chapter I examine the social class worldviews of individuals within a particular context—the college campus. Schools are a rich site for conducting research because they are a place where students learn about roles, social boundaries, and group memberships and develop a sense of identity with respect to race, gender, and class. It is also useful to look at social class understandings within a particular setting because dynamics of inclusion and exclusion take place in specific social contexts and in interaction with concrete others. Upper-middle-class college students are an especially important group to study because they are positioned to become the next generation of “gatekeepers”; hence their worldviews may provide a window into future processes of social reproduction.

I conducted my research at Big State University and Benton College. Big State is a public, flagship university, and Benton College is a small, private liberal arts college; both are located in the same Midwestern state, about an hour apart. These institutions have student bodies that are similar demographically (largely white, middle class, and residents of the Midwest), yet the schools differ in terms of size, selectivity, and cost of attendance. While class diversity exists on both campuses, it is likely that Benton students are more privileged, on average. Benton, however, offers more generous financial aid and has a history of recruiting and supporting first-generation and lower-income students. While Big State is a public institution with lower admissions standards, it draws a significant and highly visible segment of students from out of state, including those from wealthy suburbs in the Midwest, New Jersey, and New York.

My insights and analyses are based on in-depth interviews conducted with thirty-three upper-middle-class college students during the 2003–2004 school year. Initially, I randomly selected potential respondents from a list of each school’s student body and e-mailed them an invitation to participate in the study. Later, I used snowball sampling to recruit additional respondents. In each case I used a set of screening questions to determine whether or not the potential participant fit the definition of an “upper-middle-class student.” I defined students as upper-middle class if both of their parents had completed at least a four-year degree and if the primary wage earner held a job in a higher-skilled, higher-paying professional or managerial occupation. Of these respondents, eighteen were female and fifteen were male; with the exception

of one biracial student, they were all white, of traditional age (nineteen to twenty-one), and were either sophomores or juniors at the time of the interview.

Each respondent participated in two interviews, lasting an average of 165 minutes. I used in-depth interviews because they provide detailed insights into the meanings that people attach to their lived experiences. As part of a larger project on social class and higher education, students were asked questions dealing with a wide array of topics. At times I used open-ended questions, such as “Do you think that social class matters?” so as not to presuppose whether and how class matters for these students. At other times I strategically used more directive questions to probe the boundaries of these students’ constructions and explore how shifting frames might impact their utterances. Each interview was taped and transcribed verbatim. I coded the data using ATLAS.ti, a software program that analyzes qualitative data.

### CLASS IS IN SESSION: HOW UPPER-MIDDLE-CLASS STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN CLASS POSITIONS

Upper-middle-class students constructed their own class privilege using complex and contradictory discourses. On the one hand, these students offered frank and forthright acknowledgments of their privilege: in an objective sense, they *recognized* the advantages afforded by their class position. In other instances, however, many of these same students *misrecognized* their privilege. That is, they offered explanations for their privilege that obscured the economic and structural nature of their advantage. Finally, upper-middle-class students *relativized* their privilege by comparing their advantages to those they perceived to be above them in the class hierarchy. This detailed and relentless focus on the top of the status hierarchy, I argue, has important implications for the reproduction of social inequality.

#### The Recognition of Privilege

In many ways, upper-middle-class students spoke accurately about their class privilege. Although many had a hazy understanding of how much money their parents earned, they had a relatively easy time placing themselves within the class system. In response to a forced-choice question, twenty-nine of these thirty-three students identified as upper or upper-middle class, with only four identifying as middle class. When students did not know or would not divulge their parents’ income, they found other ways to express their privilege. Big State’s Phillip Merrick—a boyish but acerbic young man—claimed that he

did not know how much money his parents earned but cleverly indicated that it was sufficient to send two children to college out of state: “I never applied for any financial aid because they would laugh at me and throw it back in my face.”

Virtually every one of these students indicated at some point during our conversations that they knew their lives were not typical. They described themselves as “lucky” to be able to attend the college of their choice and “blessed” to be able to participate in activities like Greek life and study abroad. When asked how their class background had impacted their college experiences, many upper-middle-class students gave responses like Mark Mason gave, a gregarious, dreadlocked music major at Big State:

I think it’s just afforded more opportunities. If my parents didn’t have the money to send me to Vienna [for study abroad], obviously I couldn’t go. If they couldn’t afford to buy me my own instruments, you know, I could have still gotten them, but they wouldn’t have been as good. I couldn’t have gone on the ski trip that I went on. Just little extra things like that, that make a good college experience great. I’m very, very lucky that I have those extra little experiences. I’m very thankful for my parents.

Many upper-middle-class students grew up receiving explicit messages from their parents that they should not take their privileges for granted. A polished and articulate Benton College sophomore, Jordana Lindolm had traveled extensively abroad and grew up participating in a number of costly extracurricular activities. She said her parents were “very good at making sure that we were aware that we were very lucky and that not everyone is as lucky as we are. I was also taught to appreciate that my parents had worked very hard for everything they had earned. They wanted to make sure that we knew that there were other people out there who didn’t have as much and that we had the ability—and almost the obligation—to help them.” Like many of her peers, Jordana put this lesson into practice by doing community service during high school and college. Infused with an air of *noblesse oblige*, Jordana—like the majority of upper-middle-class students—recognized her social class privileges.

### **The Misrecognition of Privilege**

At other points during our conversations, students used discourses that obscured the economic foundations of their privilege. Instead, they attributed their unique experiences to particular behaviors and values rather than opportunities made possible by economic resources. Although these students do not impugn the values of others, their utterances suggest that anyone who

holds the right values can have the same experiences. As such, they *misrecognize*—using the vocabulary of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1977])—the social processes in which they are embedded, effectively legitimating the structure of inequality.

Often, the tendency for upper-middle-class students to attribute their privileges to cultural factors emerged when I began asking them about how they ended up at Big State or Benton College. Many said that they were able to enroll in the college of their choice because their parents hold a particular set of values—namely, that they think education is important. Maggie Glazer, a Benton College sophomore, varsity athlete, and sorority member, had this to say when asked whether her parents were concerned about financing a college education for two children: “Well, not really. My parents are really for higher education, and they basically said ‘You can go wherever you want.’ We do have help with some scholarships, but they pretty much do whatever they can to make it work, because they feel that it’s really important.”

For Maggie, attending a private college is made possible by the fact that her parents are “really for higher education” and they think “it’s really important.” Although Maggie noted that her parents did have to modify their spending behaviors by “cut[ting] back a bit,” she does not frame her college options in terms of her family’s economic resources. Rather, she focuses on how their values make such opportunities possible.

In elaborating the paths by which they arrived at their respective college or university, privileged students discussed how their parents, given their value for education, have enacted a set of behaviors that have enabled their college attendance. These students characterized their parents as “responsible,” “thrifty,” “on top of things,” and “forward-thinking.” In describing her path to Big State, Carrie Kennedy, a sporty young woman who was heavily involved in a campus Christian group, said this about her parents’ financial strategies: “My parents haven’t had to take out any loans or anything for my college because they’d been, like, sort of planning and saving since I was born. But I think it’s mainly that my parents have been so responsible with financial management and, like, thrifty in how they use their money. I don’t think they make more than most people . . . but I think they use their money more wisely.” For Carrie, her privileges stem not so much from the fact that her parents have money in the first place but that her parents act responsibly with the money they do have.

The misrecognition of privilege is also apparent when these students spoke about the experiences they have had on campus. Approximately 35 percent of these students work for pay, putting in an average of eight hours per week. Among the 65 percent without jobs, about half framed their not working as a reflection of their parents’ value for education. For example,

when asked if she worked during the school year, Alissa Brennan, a Benton College sophomore, stated simply, “My parents prefer that I focus on school.” In the turn of a phrase, not working becomes a parental “preference.” Although it is surely the case that her parents’ economic resources make this preference possible, these college students employed discourses in which cultural dispositions are largely disconnected from the material foundations that make them possible.

My goal is not to deny the significance of choices and behaviors in shaping one’s class position and class experiences; indeed, choices and behaviors matter greatly, as virtually no one’s privilege occurs automatically. Attending an expensive college is not guaranteed; certainly such opportunities may not exist absent the parental choices described by these students. It is important to recognize, however, that the same behaviors may not produce the same experiences for a lower-income child. His or her parents could be equally responsible and thrifty, but the exigencies of their financial situation are unlikely to allow them to express their value for higher education in the same way. The values, choices, and behaviors described by these students are made possible by their family’s material circumstances. Yet by not framing them as such, these students provide a simple—and partial—understanding of the origins of their class privilege.

### **The Relativization of Privilege**

For these upper-middle-class college students, additional details of their social class worldviews came to light through their focus on class distinctions at the top of the stratification order. By marking distinctions between themselves and those they saw as more privileged than themselves, these students relativized their class privilege: they spoke in ways that effectively minimized their privilege and allowed them to claim the moral high ground. Ultimately, these discursive strategies have important implications for the reproduction of class inequality.

In sketching the social class landscape, privileged students provided remarkably detailed insights into the lives of other privileged students. Big State’s Stacey Sandefer, for example, described at length the lives of her privileged sorority sisters, providing detailed information about their parents’ occupations and commenting that one “gets at least \$100 put in her bank account a week—just for whatever” and another has “probably nine hundred pairs of blue jeans and can use her parents’ credit card for everything she ever wanted.”

The detailed accounting of collegiate privilege is vividly illustrated by the comparison David Gold made between of the girls he grew up with and those

he encountered at Big State. According to this Jewish student of journalism from an affluent Cleveland suburb, “There’s a difference between the girls that went to my high school and the New York girls I’ve met here. The girls from home were like, ‘I have to wear Tiffany’s,’ and girls from the East Coast are like, ‘I have to wear Tiffany’s and Prada and Gucci.’” For David, there is a fundamental difference between young women who wear merely Tiffany jewelry, and those who accompany their Tiffany jewelry with a Prada purse and Gucci sunglasses.

Privileged students frequently used cars to map the social class landscape. Erika Douglas, an upbeat and articulate Big State sophomore, placed herself within the “upper part of the kids on campus . . . but not so much that [she is] driving a BMW around or anything like that.” Instead, this native of an exclusive Detroit suburb tools around campus in her “little Jeep Wrangler.” Chad Bush spoke at length about those “other” students who drive around in Mercedes, Lexuses, and the like, but when asked what kind of car he drives, this lanky Big State sophomore replied somewhat sheepishly, “I drive a Jeep. It’s my baby.”

Stories of Spring Break destinations followed a similar pattern. A handful of students commented, for example, that they “only” went to Florida, where they rented a cheap hotel room, while some of their peers went to Mexico or the Caribbean, where they stayed in a friend’s time-share. Indeed, a majority of upper-middle-class students uttered some version of the phrase “I *only* have” a particular type of car, or “I *just* went” to such and such destination for Spring Break. For upper-middle-class students, a Jeep is fundamentally different from a Lexus, just as the difference between a trip to Florida and a trip to Mexico are incommensurable.

Although it is epistemologically risky to claim that students engage in this discursive strategy in order to minimize their class privilege, this is a consequence of their talk. This is evident in Mollie Weinstein’s response to my question about how the students at Big State compare to the students with whom she went to high school. This California native, who was using a trust fund to pay for her Big State education, replied:

*Mollie:* [Big State students are] much more image conscious. I didn’t even know what a Coach [brand] bag was until I came to this campus. I just didn’t think that so many people were so rich and so beautiful and so skinny.

*Jenny:* But you don’t identify with that?

*Mollie:* I’m not that rich, that’s the thing. My mom won’t get me Gucci sunglasses.

*Jenny:* But I can see that you have some Tiffany jewelry on.

*Mollie*: Yeah, but I don't have a real Prada purse or a Coach purse, and that's what makes me different. I don't really feel that spoiled. I mean, I can get my mom to do whatever I want her to do, but it's at a lower level, I feel, than some people.

Later, when asked to compare her class background to other students on campus, Mollie said, "I just have always had that idea that everybody else is richer than me. I don't really want to not accept that, 'cause I've sort of accepted it for so long." Together, these statements illustrate the complex and intertwined logics that animate upper-middle-class students' social class worldviews. While Mollie does recognize that she is privileged, she simultaneously downplays this privilege by claiming that she is not "that rich" or "that spoiled." Although Mollie minimizes her privilege by comparing herself to students she perceives as having even greater privilege, in stating that she wants to believe that "everybody else is richer" she subtly shows that she might, at the end of the day, understand that she is not actually that "deprived."

The tendency to downplay and deny one's class privilege suggests some interesting comparisons to the dynamics of white privilege (e.g., Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1988). As with white privilege, these students employ a cultural frame that enables them to focus on the ways they are not privileged and downplay the ways in which they are. Yet while we often treat race (white/nonwhite) and gender as binary categories (male/female), the gradational nature of social class provides greater space for claims of *relative* deprivation; it provides an opportunity to claim a lack of privilege and plenty of room to overlook the ways in which one might be privileged or be held accountable for her or his privilege. Moreover, while "passing" exists with respect to race, gender, and class, it is possible that a person's race or gender is relatively more difficult to conceal, making it more difficult to deny such disadvantage.

This relativizing strategy is curious in light of these students' tendency, elsewhere, to acknowledge their privilege. It seems, however, not so much a contradiction in their worldviews as it is a shifting of frames. In the "big picture," upper-middle-class students clearly recognize their privilege; yet when they use their college peers as a point of reference—which is natural, given their day-to-day experiences—they seemed more likely to reflect on the ways in which they may lack privilege.

A second consequence of comparing themselves to other privileged peers is that the distinctions made by these upper-middle-class students allowed them to claim the moral high ground. In relativizing their privilege, they characterized other privileged students as snobby, high-maintenance, materialistic, and elitist. While they may own the same stuff, these students argued, they have a better relationship to their possessions than their more



“materialistic” peers. This sentiment is captured by Big State sophomore Peter Ashbaugh, an affable business major: “I mean, I have that kind of stuff as well [North Face brand jackets and backpacks], but I guess I just don’t value it as high as other people do.” Although she arrived at the interview wearing a silver Tiffany charm necklace, Big State student Stacey Sandefer was quick to distinguish herself from sorority sisters who think that “if you don’t have Tiffany’s you are not cool.”

In various ways, these students asserted that there is a right way and a wrong way to relate to one’s possessions. The right way, it seems, is not to flaunt one’s possessions but to treat them in a manner that is at once respectful and detached. In several instances, the interview context itself provided the opportunity for this logic to emerge. My conversation with Emily Chase began with her striking a bond with me, the interviewer, over the fact that we were wearing the same pair of silver Tiffany stud earrings. Later in the interview, however, Emily described her roommates as “snobs,” as she recounted a trip she took with them to Florida, where she was annoyed by the fact that they wanted to spend “four out of five days shopping.”

When I asked Emily about the seeming paradox between her enthusiasm for the fact that we owned the same Tiffany earrings and her characterization of her roommates as “snobs,” this attractive, clean-cut young woman replied, “I don’t. . . I guess maybe it’s just the attitude I get from them, like, ‘Oh, you *have* to have that!’ For me, it’s just that I like nice things. I may have these \$50 Tiffany earrings that I got as a gift, but I appreciate what I get. I kind of see that maybe they don’t have that same kind of appreciation.”

In general, the students I talked to condemned others for being “flashy” and feeling the need to “show off” how wealthy they are. Like Stacey, Emily suggests that one should appreciate his or her possessions, but not to the point of fetishizing them. Interestingly, no one ever “fessed up” to being one of these allegedly materialistic students. The flashy, materialistic student, then, becomes a mythical figure, a trope that effectively conceals one’s own privilege.

From a sociological perspective, people come to understand their position in the social order by taking account of their immediate environment and those with whom they interact in that setting. Within school settings, class identity is “mediated” by the local context, such that a student’s “identity may depend to some extent on the socioeconomic characteristics of the school . . . and his or her relative socioeconomic status within [it]” (Eckert 1989, 41). As such, the tendency for upper-middle-class students to relativize their privilege and define themselves in contrast to those they see as higher up may make sense.

Benton College, in particular, is inhabited by a student body that is largely middle to upper-middle class. Although the class composition of the Big

State student body is ostensibly more diverse, students from different class backgrounds tend to segregate themselves, so that much of their day-to-day interaction centers on students from similar class backgrounds. Given this particular point of reference, it should not be surprising that these students would relativize their class privilege by comparing themselves to those they viewed as the “truly” advantaged.

As they construct their social class worldviews, upper-middle-class students made few references to people on the lower rungs of the class ladder. They made little mention of those students who do not own a car at all or who cannot go on spring break anywhere but must return home to earn money for school. The casting of attention upward has implications for the reproduction of social inequality. It suggests, as I show in the next section, that there are significant blind spots in these students’ social class worldviews, wherein they appear unaware of or uninterested in those who occupy lower positions on the socioeconomic ladder. If such individuals do not exist in the minds of privileged individuals, it may be difficult to cultivate in them an awareness of the struggles of other students on campus or beyond the campus walls.

### **CLASS DISMISSED: HOW UPPER-MIDDLE-CLASS STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE CLASS POSITION OF LESS-ADVANTAGED STUDENTS**

Social class worldviews are constructed both through understandings of one’s own class position and through understandings of the class positions of others. When mapping the broader class structure, upper-middle-class students had a hard time seeing disadvantage in their midst. While they were adept at reading the status cues of other privileged students, they seemed unable to decode the cues of their less-privileged peers.

Moreover, to the extent that upper-middle-class students were aware of less-advantaged students, they did not feel that their differences were problematic or meaningful. In short, these students seemed both uninterested in the lives of the less privileged and literally unaware of their existence. These students’ discourses reveal, then, a class structure in which the upper reaches of the class hierarchy are painted in rich detail, while the lower reaches are painted either impressionistically or with crude brush strokes.

#### **Impressionistic Images of the Lower Classes**

Although upper-middle-class students provided anemic descriptions of their less-privileged peers, they could characterize them when asked. When doing

so, they referred not to specific individuals, as they typically did when talking about their advantaged peers, but offered vague and hackneyed images of the lower classes. Nearly half of these students suggested, for example, that you could identify a member of the lower classes by their speech and demeanor. Blake Bechtall of Benton College, for example, painted this colorful image of students from “blue-collar” backgrounds: they “don’t tend to get as good of grades, and when they talk they speak with more slang. And just the way they carry themselves. I don’t know, they’re not the most proper people, you know? You don’t see them, like, they don’t sit in the perfect upright position; they’re kind of slouching but, you know, that kind of thing.”

Fellow Bentonite Austin Murphy echoed this point, noting that you can detect a person’s social-class background from the content of their speech. This traditionally good-looking New York native said, “The ones who make rude or, like, snide remarks, you can tell whether they’re sophisticated or whether they’re a little more, not necessarily back country but, like, rural, I guess.” Note that Austin uses “rural” to capture the lower reaches of the class hierarchy. Big State’s Erika Douglas gave this description when asked about whether she was aware of less-privileged students on campus: “There’s a few girls in my econ class that are, they don’t really dress themselves that well. I mean, their pants are a little bit too tight, and their gut is hanging out. . . . They don’t usually take as active a role in the classroom. I usually see them just sort of getting by.”

That these students were able to construct images of their less-privileged peers when asked is not to say that they spoke about them freely or spontaneously or that they were able to elaborate on these images with rich detail or concrete illustrations. Indeed, they seemed to have little insight into the lives of less-privileged students. This is evident in the words of Big State’s Abbie Kohn, an energetic young Jewish woman who had little awareness of class diversity within her sorority: “I know that there are girls in my house who have jobs. There’s, like, scholarships, and stuff like that, so I know there are girls who are in a different financial situation than me. I don’t know if there are kids whose parents didn’t go to college or not. I’m sure there are.” Despite these general impressions, Abbie was unable to provide specific details of who such students were or what their lives were like.

Benton College’s Brooke Marshall made a similar point. When asked to describe the class composition of her sorority, this soft-spoken economics major replied, “I know a few girls who come from, like, the inner city. But I don’t really know that much about them.” While my queries into class dynamics within Greek organizations may capture a very partial glimpse into these students’ awareness of class differences, for many of them Greek involvement requires a considerable amount of time and psychic energy; as

such, it serves as an especially important site for learning about social differences. These students, moreover, did not provide any greater awareness of class differences within other settings (academic, extracurricular, social) on campus. Thus, even when they are in the presence of less-advantaged students—in the classroom, for example—upper-middle-class students garner little insight into their experiences.

### **“You Can’t Really Tell”: The Literal Invisibility of Class Differences**

Although upper-middle-class students were adept at marking class distinctions at the top of the hierarchy, these same students claimed that other forms of class difference are literally invisible. Students like Big State’s Phillip Merrick commented that “it’s hard to tell” what a person’s social class background is; or, as Benton’s Brooke Marshall put it, “I don’t really size people up ’cause it’s not obvious; the differences are not obvious because everyone is so similar.” The indeterminacy of social class is also evident in the words of Benton’s James Rice: “It’s not something you can figure out in, like, a week or a month or two. But if you hang out with someone for a year and a half, or if they’re your roommate, you can tell. . . . ’Cause you learn more about their family and the things they have and stuff like that.” For students like James, social class is a subtle thing, something that only becomes visible over time.

How is it that upper-middle-class students appear to be incredibly astute observers of social class on the one hand and virtually ignorant of its cues and consequences on the other? Perhaps these students think that it is politically incorrect to observe, much less criticize, the existence of those on the lower end of the class hierarchy. This possibility is evident in the words of Benton College’s Alissa Brennan, a quiet young woman with a slight build: “It’s [social class differences] not something you want to be conscious of, and you don’t want other people to be conscious of it, either. I think they’re probably also afraid some of these rich people are going to come in here and judge them because they’re from a poor background.” These students, then, may feel freer to observe and criticize those near the top of the social class ladder but feel the need to censor themselves when considering the lives of those perched on the lower rungs.

A second possibility is that these students truly do have a difficult time discerning class differences when they cast their gaze downward. Indeed, several students claimed that class distinctions at the top are simply easier to identify. As Big State’s Mollie Weinstein put it [emphasis added]: “What you *don’t* wear doesn’t necessarily mark you [as a member of a particular social

class], but what you *do* wear does mark you. I couldn't say that somebody *wasn't* rich because they weren't wearing certain things—like a certain kind of purse—but if they do have a certain purse, that definitely marks them [as a wealthier student].”

As illustrated above, many of these students were rather skilled at decoding social class signifiers in the form of high-status, luxury consumer goods. In fact, the sorority systems on both campuses were sensitive to this and adopted a policy that barred young sorority aspirants from wearing clothing with visible labels during formal rush (recruitment) events. This echoes the findings of Julie Bettie (2003) and Shauna Pomerantz (2008), who documented the elaborate strategies used by adolescent women to mark their identities with clothing and accessories. I argue, however, that the proliferation of midtier retailers like Express, Gap, and Old Navy has blurred the visible markers of class difference, making it relatively easy for members of the lower- and working-classes to “pass” as members of the middle class. Thus, the lack of reliable signifiers may render lower- and working-class students effectively invisible.

### **“It Costs a Lot to Go to College”: The Assumed Invisibility of Class Differences**

Although upper-middle-class students claimed a lack of familiarity with the lives of their less-privileged peers, they did recognize some social class diversity on campus. Erika Douglas, for example, asserted that “there’s probably a lot” of class diversity at Big State due to “the fact that it’s a publicly funded school.” Fellow student Phillip Merrick echoed, “I think there’s a wide range of socioeconomic classes on this campus—some people are here on loans, and other people, like, never see a bill or have to worry about their ATM balance.” Yet a handful of these students asserted that the high cost of higher education simply priced some people out of the college market altogether. This assumption is embedded in Alissa Brennan’s comment that “just the fact that they go to Benton, which costs, like, \$30,000 a year, I think most people, you know, have to have considerable amount of money to be able to afford it.”

A similar logic pervades the words of Big State’s Peter Ashbaugh, a young man who grew up in an exclusive Midwestern suburb. Here, he responds to a question about the presence of class diversity on campus: “You’re not going to be real poor, because you’re not going to be able to go to college if you have nothing, you know. I mean, like, if you’re on welfare or something, maybe you could get a scholarship, but that doesn’t seem real common to be here—people that just come from absolute dirt. So, there’s definitely diver-

sity, but there's not going to be, like, total extreme, to the bottom. There's extreme to the top, I know that." What is interesting about Peter's comment is that while he does recognize the presence of class diversity on campus, his notion that one would have to "come from absolute dirt" to be considered lower income is so extreme that it effectively renders such students invisible.

Other upper-middle-class students used similarly hyperbolic language to characterize the lower classes, scoffing at the notion that real class differences might exist on campus. Big State's Nick Wrede put his personal stamp on this sentiment by saying, "the difference I see is extremely wealthy and wealthy enough so you can go to college. That's the main difference I see. I don't ever see somebody who can't pay for food, or something like that. They're not wealthy, but they can pay for school." Elsewhere, Nick effectively erased whatever class differences might exist by declaring, "no one's walking around in rags." It is not surprising that privileged students would fail to recognize the presence of less-privileged students if—like Nick—they hold such extreme images.

### **"I Don't Think People Really Talk about It": The Silence of Social Class**

Cross-class relationships present a particularly valuable context for understanding how upper-middle-class students construct the class position of those situated on the lower rungs of the class ladder; indeed, virtually every privileged student mentioned having at least one cross-class relationship, whether a relatively superficial one, like the sorority women described earlier, or a deeper, more substantial one, like those who had a best friend or romantic partner from a different class background. Despite the intimacy of these relationships, social class differences remained largely outside of these students' awareness. A common refrain among these students was that within their friendship circles class differences are unimportant.

Benton College's Thad Farmer hailed from an old-money Southern community and had the air of a laid-back, dilettante ski bum. He knew that some of his fraternity brothers "have work study and are on scholarships," but in his experience "they don't seem to make a very big deal out of it. They're not like, 'Woe is me!'" Fellow Bentonite Jordana Lindholm similarly claimed that social-class differences are not an issue on campus, commenting, "You know that some students are in these programs [for underrepresented college students], but you don't really think about it. They don't bring it up; you don't bring it up. They look the same as you. I guess I've never found it to be that big of an issue."

It is unlikely that upper-middle-class students were consciously evading this issue. In fact, they seemed quite sincere when asserting that "no one ever

really talks about social class” and that “no one makes a big deal out of it.” As part of a larger project, I interviewed lower- and working-class students on these campuses as well. These students corroborated the sentiments of their privileged peers, indicating that they rarely initiated conversations about social class. According to Benton College’s Derek Bryant, a studious working-class sophomore, social class differences never “really becomes an issue” within his friendship circle because both parties will “try to change the subject” if it does arise. Thus, if lower- or working-class students rarely feel compelled to talk about their class backgrounds, it is not surprising that upper-middle-class students would remain unaware of the less-privileged students in their midst.

Five young women spoke explicitly about their romantic relationships with young men from less-privileged backgrounds. These young women have had a unique opportunity to learn about students who are less well-off. How these experiences may have impacted their social class worldviews, however, is unclear. These young women were aware of the ways in which their boyfriends’ lives were different from their own, saying that their boyfriends came from “completely different backgrounds,” some of whom “had a hard time growing up.” Rarely, though, did this experience seem to translate into deeper understandings of the less privileged.

Compared to her lower-middle-class boyfriend, Benton College’s Rachel Thomas had considerable privileges: she was able to travel to London and the Czech Republic during her sophomore year and celebrated her boyfriend’s birthday by buying him tickets to a professional football game. Yet when asked if the difference in their class backgrounds had an impact on their relationship, this theatrical young woman with a raspy voice replied, “It’s an issue, but it’s not a bad issue. It’s just kind of, it’s there, and if we have to deal with it, we’ll have to deal with it, but I don’t think it’s really there.” Thus, Rachel is aware of social class differences but did not construct these differences as particularly meaningful; at the same time, she seemed hesitant to consider more fully the meaning of social class and how it might impact her relationships.

If there are any “outliers” among these students, perhaps it is Big State’s “Karen Stevens.” An unpretentious Midwest native with a dentist father and occupational therapist mother, Karen began dating Seth during her freshman year. When they began dating, Seth spoke extensively about his abusive father and his family’s unstable economic situation. Karen said that he tried to “prepare” her for her first visit to his hometown but that his efforts were unnecessary: “It wasn’t bad; it wasn’t like the worst thing possible. It was just normal for the town. Everyone lived in a trailer, so I was just like, Okay, what’s the big deal?”

Hearing her rather *laissez-faire* response, I pressed Karen to elaborate, asking her if she felt that she and her boyfriend “come from different worlds.” She replied, “I don’t know. I think that we do come from totally different places, but there’s so many things that are the same—just like the basics—so I don’t think that really matters. Just because we come from two different worlds doesn’t really mean that the two different worlds can’t come together.”

With a first-year roommate from a lower-income family and a boyfriend from a conflict-ridden working-class family, Karen says that her college experiences have “opened [her] eyes” to class differences. Coming from a town where “everyone was the same,” she says: “I’m more aware of it now, but it doesn’t really impact me or influence me in any way. I just kind of take it in stride and go with it.” While these experiences do not seem to have elicited from Karen a profound, structural critique of social inequality, they have changed her views on a more intimate, day-to-day level. Ultimately, her experiences suggest that students who do begin to see and hear their less-privileged peers can develop a richer, more dignified understanding of their lives.

### **“I Still Don’t Notice It on Campus”: Looking Elsewhere to See Class Differences**

Although upper-middle-class students were generally blind to the existence of lower income persons on campus, they were not blind to the existence of class disadvantage in society more generally. For some, class inequalities were something they learned about not by interacting with students from different backgrounds but by engaging with academic materials in the classroom. When asked about the extent to which she was aware of class differences in her daily life, Benton College’s Brooke Marshall replied, “Not really so much through direct contact. We talked about this in my econ class, this idea that we’re all ‘cloud minders’—that we’re so wealthy we live above, like we don’t really notice people in lower classes directly, but just like on TV, through the news, what you read.”

Fellow Bentonite Andrea Barnett similarly framed social class disadvantage as an academic matter. When asked about her awareness of social class differences in daily life, this sporty Midwest native replied,

We focused quite a bit on socioeconomic diversity in my sociology class last year, where we were looking at education in the United States. In our high school, our biggest gripe was that we don’t have enough parking spaces, instead of the elementary school students in East St. Louis, where sewage was coming through their school. I guess I didn’t realize how bad it was in some places. I wasn’t really aware of it before. So, like, it’s definitely come up more and more through classes, but I still don’t notice it on campus.



For upper-middle-class students like these, insight into class difference and the significance of class inequality was not something they gleaned from firsthand experiences; often, their understandings were largely theoretical in nature.

For a small handful of students, social-class lessons were learned in the workplace. While working at a dining hall on campus, Benton's Andi Arvidson came in contact with lower-income adults from the surrounding community. Andi, a religious young woman who chose to have a job, found these interactions endearing: "They're just fun people; they're so friendly and just nondiscriminating. . . . My roommate from last year, she does not talk to them and they don't really like her. They think she's stuck up, and she thinks they're hicks." For a couple of young men, it was at their summer jobs that they got up close and personal with the working class. When asked what he learned from his summer laboring on a construction site, Phillip Merrick—whose father was lead counsel for the contracting firm—said, "Definitely graduate from college and don't do that for the rest of your life. . . . They get paid hourly and don't even have benefits."

Other students received a social class education by doing volunteer work out in the community. Benton's James Rice, for example, was struck by the class differences he observed while tutoring in a local elementary school: "The fact that kids in the second grade couldn't read that well, to me that's just un-thought of. Like the girl I read to had no front teeth. That experience was kind of earth-shattering. It kind of makes you realize, 'Oh, yeah, I'm at Benton; I am lucky.' You know that stuff is out there, but until you actually tangibly see it, you don't really know it." It is possible that some of James's college classmates grew up in circumstances not too different from the student he tutored; as young adults, however, the most obvious signs of their disadvantage seem to have disappeared. Thus, for James, it is only in the surrounding community that he is able to "tangibly see" class disadvantage.

When asked about the presence of lower-income students on campus, Big State's Stacey Sandefer similarly shifted her gaze to the surrounding community: "I don't find a lot of people like that on campus. But, like, going to the grocery store is an experience. The lifestyle is just completely different here than it is from my hometown. There's people that go out in pajamas and stuff like that—like adults—and I would never see that in my hometown." While Andi came away from her interactions with the working-classes with positive impressions, Stacey suggests a sense of surprise, if not judgment. What is common in these students' comments, however, is the suggestion that in order to generate insights into the lives of the lower classes one must look outside of the immediate environment. The belief that class inequalities exist elsewhere further conceals those lower- and working-class students with whom they share a campus.

## CONCLUSION

Researchers argue that how people talk about social class has important consequences for the class structure. The present research contributes to this tradition by exploring the social class worldviews of upper-middle-class college students. While these upper-middle-class students readily acknowledged their objective class advantages, their understandings of class privilege became more complex and contradictory when other narrative tasks came into play. By drawing social boundaries at the top of the social hierarchy, these students effectively minimize their own privilege and claim the moral high ground. This same focus makes it difficult for these students to develop an awareness of students on campus who may be less privileged. Throughout, privileged students construct a social class worldview in which some class differences are highly salient and others are remote and seemingly inconsequential.

Although the discursive strategies of upper-middle-class students may be troubling, it is important to bear in mind that this is their reality. Their social class worldviews reflect the fact that they are surrounded by other privileged students and because less-privileged students are not doing much to raise their class consciousness. These are not, in my view, malevolent individuals who willfully deny their class privileges or ignore the plight of others. Indeed, many privileged students showed a concern for social injustices, and many were involved in community service. Moreover, if we take these narratives at face value, they can be construed positively in that they suggest that social class may matter less for these social actors than is often assumed. Perhaps these privileged college students are not especially conscious of class differences and hence not particularly adept at orchestrating processes of social exclusion.

Although hopeful, the above point may also be naïve. Taken as a whole, privileged students' social class worldviews suggest some troubling blind spots. With respect to their tendency to attribute their privilege to cultural factors, upper-middle-class students demonstrate a partial understanding of the ways in which their lives are shaped by social class. By focusing on the ways in which choices, behaviors, and values shape their life experiences, these students miss the extent to which these very choices, behaviors, and values are enabled by access to economic resources. Their logic also suggests that students who work during the academic year or who have not "chosen" to take advantage of study abroad do not have the same values and that sharing in these experiences may be as simple as adopting the right values and behaviors.

In addition, while these students display an awareness of the relative nature of social class and class privilege, their sense of relativity seems to move only in one direction. Never did these students spontaneously or explicitly compare themselves to those who have less; rarely was their attention directed

downward. Upper-middle-class students' understandings of class privilege exist, then, in a complex space wherein they both recognize the objective advantages they do have ("I'm really lucky to be able to go to a school like this") and deny the possibility that they are that privileged after all ("I'm not *that* rich"). This focus on distinctions on the top of the social class or status hierarchy, moreover, is accompanied by claims that social class in general, and class disadvantage in particular, are either invisible or inconsequential.

For Karl Marx, the ideas of the ruling classes are the ruling ideas. In order to ascertain the ideas of the ruling classes, it is necessary to gaze upward. Here, we find that class inequality is not simply a problem of the lower classes; it is also a problem that generates and is generated by the dominant classes—in some ways justified by their social class worldviews. Nor is it simply a problem of the unequal distribution of economic resources; it is also sustained by symbolic processes. Privileged college students are poised to become the next generation's "ruling class." While the college experience liberalizes their perspectives and hones their abilities to analyze social problems, the social worlds of their college campuses may also limit the possibility of developing worldviews characterized by nuanced, critical understandings of the class structure.

This social class worldview of these privileged students coalesces into a picture that suggests some possible consequences for the reproduction of social inequality. The virtual invisibility of working-class students may have negative consequences in that it limits class consciousness and reinforces the notion that class does not matter. To the extent that individuals are unaware of social inequality or the dynamics of social class, they may be less receptive to social changes—whether on campus or in society as a whole—aimed at ameliorating such inequalities.

Similarly, by focusing their attention at the top of the class and status hierarchy, these individuals effectively minimize, if not deny, their own class privilege. As they move into adulthood, this may produce feelings of economic insecurity, as if they are continually striving, but never able, to achieve their peers' level of material success. Although this may allow them to claim a moral victory—in that they are not as materialistic or superficial as others in their reference group—they may also conclude that they cannot bear an increase in property or income taxes, that they cannot make sacrifices that would redistribute downward the economic or material advantages they do have.

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## *Chapter Nine*

# **Pageantry, Pedagogy, and Pandorea: Literacies of the Southern Belle**

June Newman-Graham

Her period in the cocoon of debdom is brief but intended to stamp her for life. Modern girls need not model themselves on sheltered vestal virgins of a previous generation, but they need to be prepared to lift off for their launch in society.

—Catherine Clinton 2007, 91

In a critical rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood designed to serve as a template for all girls of this class and social circle, the young Queen must pledge her family's values, aspirations, and pretensions, charted by men, instilled by other women. Smiling, no matter what, she must demonstrate both the ritual competence and emotional management intended to ease her transition into an elegant, courteous, and compliant upper-class wife.

—John F. Kasson 2007, 157

When I first came to Natchez, Mississippi, a sleepy little town in the Deep South, I found it charming and quaint. Rows of townhomes with perfectly manicured gardens lined the one-way streets. Antique shops filled downtown along with small cafés. I was a young teenager, there with my mother for the town's annual tour of homes. Years later the town would draw me back as I wanted to study reading clubs in the South among the modern-day Southern belles—wealthy white women who upheld the values of the Old South. This made Natchez the perfect place because the town's claim to fame is that it is *the* place where the Old South lives on. Poised and graceful, the women who guided us through the town's famous homes drew me in and won me over with their Southern hospitality.

When I returned to Natchez as a researcher, I began peeling back the layers of the town's social and political milieu. I found myself in casual conversations, making connections, and what I thought was headway to accessing the privileged world of the Natchez elite—that is, until I offered my home for a private book-club meeting of one of the more elite social clubs in Natchez. The response from my would-be guests was most revealing.

The women, members of the club, asked me how many place settings of china I had and what flatware pattern I used. I was stunned when one of them mentioned that all twenty members usually had a formal place setting with silver serving pieces at such parties. I was from a middle-class family, an “out-of-towner,” suddenly aware of just how out of place I was: I was not wealthy; I was not of their status; and I certainly did not have twenty place settings of china and silver. I quickly realized that gaining access and establishing rapport as a researcher with the elite, Southern women I intended to study would be complicated by class, status, and social structures. It was then that I realized I would not be studying reading clubs as much as I would be studying class and its structures, nuances, and living intricacies.

As much as I felt like an outsider among these wealthy women, I also had a deep longing to obtain the status that made them powerful in that small town. I knew that the women of this club had single-handedly saved the town from ruin in the 1930s, and because of that they were revered as keepers of Southern culture. How was it that these ostensibly docile Southern belles came to be unspoken officials whose mere words had the power to make things happen? What did it mean for women to be the saviors? How had wealth allowed them the kind of access and privilege that was typically hindered by their gender? What did it mean that these women remained superficially passive and unassuming belles? How were they negotiating and navigating the complex terrain of wealth, privilege, and sexism?

My research sought to shed light on these questions by considering how the privileged society of the Natchez Garden Club of the 1930s, '40s, '50s, and '60s constructed Southern history and identity by engaging in particular kinds of elite education. The larger study that informs this chapter examines the many types of literacy practices that the Natchez Garden Club endorses. While the larger study does address the reading and writing practices of the club as well as their historical and cultural literacies, this chapter explores the social literacies of the club by asking the following question: how does an examination of the Natchez Garden Club and the social literacies that they sponsor through their club activities illuminate understandings of the “Southern belle” as a select group of Southern, white, privileged women?

This chapter considers the intricate—often obscured from public view—pedagogies of the Southern belle as a particular archetype of Southern

women. It considers the literacies of raising, rearing, and reifying social position(s), tradition, and ways of knowing in the Natchez Garden Club, a socially, politically, and financially privileged women's club in the U.S. South. I contend that the education of the Southern belle within the Natchez Garden Club (hereafter referred to simply as *the club*) involves forms of pedagogy and literacy development designed to "uphold the power and privilege of [her own] class in the social order of things."

I argue that the club's activities, with its membership of elite, Southern women, give "meaning within a class framework that they themselves construct . . . and perpetuate the social-organizations forms and patterns of cultural life" (Ostrander 1984, 3–4). This club specifically engages in (re)constructing pedagogy and literacies through particular practices of Southern pageantry and social engagement. The chapter examines the intersections of class and gender in the context of this site of privilege and the ways in which learning and literacy are mobilized therein in ways that protect and ensure that privilege.

To begin, I offer a brief introduction to Southern studies and a historical rendering of the Natchez Garden Club and its activities. I then consider the social literacies of the Southern belle, offering a reading of the mannerisms and customs that allow these women access to privilege and power, exploring the complex and complicated intricacies of social, political, and personal learning that are part of being affiliated with the elite group. I then go into a discussion of the methods used to explore the social literacies of the women of the Natchez Garden Club. I conclude with findings and thoughts about the importance and relevance of exploring the education of elite groups and social organizations, especially the Natchez Garden Club.

## THE SOUTHERN BELLE AND SOUTHERN STUDIES

In the U.S. South, there is a plant called *Pandorea*. It is known locally simply as the "Southern belle." The floriferous plant is characterized by tubular blooms that face upward and outward. It arches gracefully and branches freely among its dense, dark green leaves. Blooming in early spring, the plant continuously flowers during periods of warm temperatures. Not unlike its botanical namesake, the Southern belle woman is a polished and complex flower on display amid dense foliage. She is a spectacle for all to see, and she leads a life impenetrably wrought with contradictions of wealth and servitude, independence and subservience, education and ignorance.

While many assume there is not much beyond the superficial posturing and poise of such a woman, in fact, her role, her education, and her place in



society are complex, purposeful, and significant—significant in that she, the Southern belle, is not only born into her privilege but educated to embody and protect the ways of Southern living and privilege that she is taught from birth.

Despite their importance, the women of the U.S. South have remained peripheral to the study of women in education and in society more generally. In fact, doing Southern studies, one quickly realizes that history was, and still is, often written from a Northeastern bias. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese criticizes historians, saying, “The tendency to generalize the experiences of the women of one region to cover that of all American women has obscured essential differences of class and race” (1988, 40). The standard stories of women’s education are often exclusive to the Northeastern perspective.

Many who study education and its history may be familiar with and quickly recognize the names of Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, and Catherine Beecher, whose work was located primarily in the Northern states. Although their contributions to the education of women are significant, theirs are often the only stories recounted. Scholars have almost exclusively focused on the North as a region that is representative of the rest of the country despite very distinct historical, cultural, social, and political differences. In particular, the U.S. South has a legacy defined much by its relationship with patriarchy and slavery, which it depended on and fought for during the American Civil War. Even after the war these issues lingered heavily in the minds of many of the people who lived and continue to live there today. Indeed, they are critical referents for understanding the social literacies of the contemporary Southern belle.

Southern belles have been traditionally viewed by other Southerners as wealthy, upper-class white women who are descendents of plantation culture. In many ways the modern-day Southern belle reinstitutes the same systems that held others in lower-class positions. The education that Southern belles receive is often clouded by rosy visions of the poor being content with their station in life. Southern belles are frequently proud of their heritage and often join in local club activities to continue their reign of power in the community. Besides the widespread clubs, such as the Junior League, the Southern belles often align themselves in local organizations such as garden clubs.

While the formal educational experiences of women in the South are often glossed over, even less acknowledged are sites of education beyond the formal institution of school (Blair 1980; Fox-Genovese 1988). Social clubs, benevolent societies, and religious or spiritual organizations offer rich cases for consideration and have long served as important entities in the educational experiences of women. In her landmark text *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined*, Karen J. Blair (1980) acknowledges the intricate and significant efforts of clubs toward education, reform, and social

movement. She discusses the complex networking that goes on between clubs and government, including extensive letter writing and speaking engagements organized by club women.

Behind the scenes, women work to influence political and educational activities by gently nudging their influential and wealthy husbands to support the clubs' causes. While Blair recognizes the clubs as sites of education and learning, she fails to give attention and focus to the uniqueness of the experiences of Southern women within clubs. Yet these types of social organizations proliferated and served vital roles as keepers of Southern culture, especially following the Civil War.

### THE NATCHEZ GARDEN CLUB

The Natchez Garden Club of Natchez, Mississippi, was organized in 1928. The early objective centered on agriculture as a means of beautifying Natchez's Southern landscapes. At the beginning of the Great Depression, in 1931, under the leadership of club president Katherine Miller, the Natchez Garden Club was set to host the annual convention of the Mississippi State Confederation of Garden Clubs (Cooper 2006). As hostesses, the club women were to welcome fellow clubs to their area by giving private tours of local gardens that showed off the town's beautiful live oaks, azaleas, and camellias.

Organized to take place on March 19 through 21, the club had made all necessary arrangements when an unexpected event changed all of the plans. A late frost came, destroying all of Natchez's spring blossoms. Quickly, the club women met to discuss their options for presenting themselves and their beloved Natchez at their best. There had been a show of homes for residents of Natchez for many years, and Miller saw this as an alternative and suggested that the Garden Club members open up their homes for a showing (Cooper 2006).

Many of these women were descendants of Natchez's early wealthy elite, and their homes were in fact the same residences that plantation owners had built and in which they had lived. These homes offered not only grandiose views of Southern opulence but also gave the event historical significance. Members consented and set off to organize their homes, an elaborate process of preparation that included setting tables with fine china and linens, polishing silver, and arranging centerpieces.

When the March date arrived, eighty federation members gathered in the town and were given a guide of the twenty homes that were open for public tour and viewing. Taking the guests through their homes, the Natchez club women shared the historic past of the homes, showed rare antiques, and retold

the families' stories. The tour of homes proved to be a great success among federation members, who eagerly shared their experiences with others back home and elsewhere in the state.

Inquiries about the show of homes came to the club from all over the region, and Miller, seeing an opportunity for increased visibility, income, and access to social capital, proposed that the club consider hosting a tour of homes the following spring as well. Using her charm and sensibilities, she swayed the business community and city leaders to join with the club in their efforts to engage and energize the local economy. In the midst of the Great Depression, the town was suffering, so the club responded by organizing and hosting the first official Spring Pilgrimage in 1932 to enliven the town, its local economy, and its place in Southern society and history.

In March 1932, over the course of six days, the club opened twenty-six homes to the public. The private residences of the wealthy elite had become public spectacles for tourists. Moreover, the leader persuaded the club ladies hosting the open-house tours to don hoopskirts so that they could enhance the feel of the Old South. The Southern belle had to put on a show in order to maintain an income that would support their lifestyles, as the tour money was funneled back to the home owners.

In addition to the show of homes, the club organized a parade through downtown and put on a pageant that depicted scenes of life from the antebellum period. The pilgrimage was so successful that it was extemporaneously extended an additional day. Tourists came to see how these elite families in the town of Natchez had lived for generations. The families' wealth stood in direct opposition to the state of most families who were struggling in the middle of the Great Depression. Yet it also stood as a sign of Southern grandeur and pride, something many tourists would have been eager to witness and endorse.

Reviews of the event reported that tourists had spent over \$50,000 in local restaurants, hotels, and souvenir shops (Cooper 2006). The increased tourist revenue came at a crucial time for Natchez. It provided badly needed funds for architectural restoration to many of the homes and businesses, as well as restored grandeur and pride to many of the old families who had been heading toward financial decay. And thus began the annual tradition, expanded to a four-week affair and publicized all over the country. Miller herself was responsible for much of the advertising, as she and Edith Wyatt Moore toured the country giving lectures and advertising Natchez's unique Southern character.

Miller's work at establishing the pilgrimage that celebrates Natchez's Southern heritage is captured in her 1938 book, *Natchez of Long Ago and the Pilgrimage*. Composed of many pictures and brief commentaries, the

text shares Miller's views of the specific social meanings and purposes that came from the club's work. Images within the work present a tender vision of Southern life with exquisitely dressed women, aristocratic men, and majestic mansions. The portrayal of Southern life and living is one of gentility, nobility, wealth, and entitlement. It conveys the Lost Cause movement, which sought to bring white society in the South to the defense of the cause of the Confederate States of America, clearly. Like the club, those who contributed to this movement portray the Confederacy's cause as noble and the Confederacy's leadership as representative of old-fashioned chivalry and benevolence.

Also noteworthy is Miller's tendency to promote segregation between blacks and whites. It is important to note that in this particular text there is only one picture that represents black life at a time when black bodies were very present in the life of the South. This single image offers a depiction of house servants and barefooted "piccaninny" (Miller 1938, 37). The striking contrast between the overwhelming number of white faces represented and the scarcity of black bodies reinforces (in a concrete way) a privilege based not only on class but also race.

As many scholars explain that it is essential in all work to call attention to the "invisible" positioning of whites and whiteness above other races and postulate the potential impact of this privileging on both nonwhites and whites (Delgado and Stefancic 1997; McIntosh 1990; McIntyre 1997). While a wealth of research addresses the intersections of race and class, especially in Southern studies, race is not a central focus of this chapter. And while many rightly argue that the two cannot ever be held independent of one another, this chapter foregrounds the construct of class and deals with race as secondary.

By leaving out the entire story, images, and text of the history and presence of black bodies in the South, the club reifies its own whiteness and privilege, leaving the reader of the text to see only the pageantry and polished activity of the South. While published in 1938, this text and the images therein suggest that there were (and one could argue remain) perceived and real material differences between people that prevented any significant interaction or mobility among classes or races.

Ultimately, Miller's work as the founder and force behind the club's pilgrimage helped to challenge the community's perception that women's place was strictly in the home and encouraged their work as advocates and visible social workers. The editor of the *Natchez Democrat* wrote of the club women's newly realized abilities, acknowledging that by virtue of their "intelligence, enthusiasm, culture, and appreciative viewpoint" the women of the Natchez Garden Club had done the town "a great community service" (Cooper 2006). Davis (2001) adds to this in his analysis of women in Natchez, noting the critical role that elite women played in enforcing class structures:

“White women of Natchez found within the pilgrimage a unique public repository for preserving history, heritage, and the culture. Southern society expected white women to be unblemished paragons of moral rectitude, and by example and nurturance they gave assurance to the perpetuation of the dominant culture’s values” (74).

The club women “enlarged their circle of influence outside the family, developed and applied organizing and business skills, and in some instances expanded their political activities, especially on issues dealing with tourism or the community’s appearance” (Davis 2001, 74). This duality—on the one hand an act of community service and on the other an act of reifying social privilege, racial division, and class structure—supports Ostrander’s assertion that an “upper-class woman’s roles function well in not only achieving influence and benefits for herself and her class but also in preventing moves toward a society that would take away some of her elite influence and benefits” (1984, 23).

The club portrayed a world that was warm and welcoming, a picture of hospitality to all groups of people. Yet, while it is certainly true that visitors to the pilgrimage could observe and participate in the pageantry, participation in the club’s most private activities was limited to only those within the circle of privilege. In private, the circle was much more closed. Wealthy families in Natchez were even known to intermarry so that their money would not defuse over time.

What remains even today is a group of elite, Southern women who project (and protect) an idealized image of a Southern belle—a dutiful servant to the cause(s) of the Old South with its Lost Cause mentality yet intuitive and cunning enough to raise money and wield political power. In order to maintain its power, however, the club has had to constantly restructure itself by calling on younger generations to fill in as members moved on. In yet another strategic move, the club women turned to young women, training them in and through the language of pageantry. It is here that the critical connection between education and the role of women in the reproduction of elite status becomes transparent in the social literacies of the Southern belle.

## **SOCIAL LITERACIES OF A SOUTHERN BELLE**

While in this era of standardization literacy is recognized largely as the ability to read and write, there are competing understandings of what it means to become literate. In 1996, the New London Group introduced the concept of *multiliteracies*. They argue that “the multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today call[s] for

a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language-based approaches” (60). More broadly, literacy also encompasses the social means of interacting with others.

Paulo Freire (2003/1970) drew attention to the issues surrounding social literacy. He complicated the notion that gaining literacy is as simple as learning to read and write. Instead Freire points out that social literacy carries with it cultural and political capital that cannot be transferred easily. One must know how to behave in various social settings and have the ability to “read” in order to engage in situations that are culturally unique. In short, the concept of literacy is much more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. It involves particular forms of knowledge and specific ways of being in and engaging with the world (New London Group 1996).

In the South there are distinctive social manners and customs. For instance, one could be rejected for not referring to another as “ma’am” or “sir,” which is a sign of respect in the South. Over the years, the club has become an integral and irreplaceable structural presence in the hidden world of Natchez’s wealthy youth and their acculturation and socialization. The club is the center of Natchez society, and young people of the town often attend parties and events that the club promotes. Deborah Brandt points to these structural and personal influences as a type of education through her notion of literacy sponsorship. She writes, “sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (2001, 556). She explains that literacy sponsorship teaches that throughout the ages learning has always “required permission, sanction, assistance, [and] coercion” (556). While typically we may think of teachers as sponsors, Brandt suggests that sponsors may be older relatives, religious leaders, and social affiliations. In the Natchez Garden Club, the members serve these roles as sponsors to the young, wealthy women of Natchez.

Brandt further contends that we tend to think of sponsors as older, richer, and more knowledgeable: “They [the sponsors] lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association” (557). This is certainly the case for many elite women’s clubs who, in endorsing young people, have expectations that those youth will return as credible, contributive members of the club to promote its agenda and legacy.

The legacy of the club is carried from one generation to the next and remains virtually unchanged since its inception. The same families that took part in the club years ago form its membership today. There is an expectation that the queen of the pageant will come back to participate in the club’s

activities when she matures, assuming that her social and cultural associations remain ever fixed with the club's membership agenda.

There is, of course, a danger in this, as Brandt indicates: "In whatever form, sponsors deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access to what they have. Of course, the sponsored can be oblivious to or innovative with this ideological burden" (2001, 557). She offers the example of little league players with logos on the backs of their jerseys. While they may not notice the logos they wear, they are in fact endorsing a product, company, or ideology. Similarly, wearing the crown becomes an endorsement of the white elitism that the club promotes. While young girls and women being acculturated into society may be unaware of the consequences and complexities of participation, by the very nature of their participation they serve to reinforce the social structures and exclusivity of the elite class.

Brandt makes the argument that despite being perceived as open, innovative, and charitable, "sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners" (2001, 556). Because literacy sponsors exert power over those they sponsor, how and when they use that power becomes of crucial concern. But it is often the case that "literacy takes its shape from the interests of its sponsors" (558). Literacy—in this case cultural and social literacy—becomes a coveted mark of power, influence, and exclusivity. A marker of opportunities granted and opportunities denied, literacy practices trail along histories of "ascending power or waning worth, legitimacy, or marginality" (8).

The Natchez Garden Club has engaged in education through sponsorship over many decades now. From one generation to the next, it has consistently served as an agent through which pedagogies of privilege are taught and learned. Assent to one of the power positions in the club is tied to genealogy and privilege, access and class, and social expectations. Socialized and schooled through pageants and parties, young women learn poise and the social graces necessary to befall Natchez high society. While this education in ways of wealth and privilege is not always or necessarily explicit or evident to the young women who participate in the pageant, it is subtly realized through the sponsored activities in which the club's mothers, daughters, and women engage.

### **PEARLS, PANTSUITS, AND POSITIONALITY: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CLUB**

After finally getting permission to hand out my surveys at the club's regular monthly meeting, I was thrilled; I thought I was in. I prepared myself for the

event. I bought a nice black pantsuit and a pair of black flats. I put on my pearls, of course, and I drove my way up the mansion's long driveway. As soon as I parked I realized my error: this was not the occasion for a pantsuit. The club women were dressed in lovely day dresses with coordinating hats; some even had gloves. Sheepishly, I approached the president, who was elegant in her ivory lacy. She welcomed me and offered me the first ten minutes of the meeting. Soon I was standing in front of the women with all their regalia in my drab suit and inwardly knowing that I would never be "in."

I had a feeling of rejection, one that I struggled with for the entirety of my study. Why did I feel the need to belong with these women? Was the romance of wealth enticing me, or was it that the power the club played on the lacking I felt in my own position as a middle-class housewife? Ashamed at feeling this longing, I denied it for much of my time researching. Instead I tried to look at the women in a disconnected way. I realize now, however, that I will always be caught up in this web of power: I was the researcher passing judgment without even a second thought as to how I was part of a privileged world of academia.

After making entry into the club, I planned on doing case studies of several of the women, so I first conducted a survey at the club's regular meeting. I was given a few moments to introduce myself and tell them about my intended study. Then I distributed surveys to the general membership of the club. Questions asked each woman about the date she joined the club and about any committees she may have served on, including writing or textbook committees, as well as any other leadership roles in which she served. I asked if any of the women had served on the royal court during the past pilgrimages or whether they had hosted any home tours. In total I received seventy-eight survey responses, which I also collected at the club's meeting.

Once the survey was conducted, I selected nine women out of the seventy-eight who responded to the survey for in-depth questioning. In addition to this, I sought women who were involved in committee work. Women who helped write the pageant or pilgrimage house tours were also considered important informants. Lastly, I included multiple generations of one family so that I could observe how knowledge has been shaped and passed down through time.

I conducted three semistructured interviews with each participant to gain a historical perspective from members that had particular knowledge of the time period that I was studying and in relation to the literacy practices that the club promotes. The first interview focused on the biographical background of the women and how they came to the club. The next interview concentrated on the pilgrimage and their roles in it through the years. Lastly, the third interview was directed at the club's activities outside of the pilgrimage, such



as their work on textbook committees and sponsorship of essay contests at local high schools.

The information for this chapter came primarily from the first two interviews. Each interview lasted about forty-five minutes. I chose interviews as part of my case study methodology because, as Patton (1990) explains, beyond the information that we could gather through observation, interviews help us understand what the participant is thinking and what is therefore unobservable. As Patton suggests, I was interested in the perspectives of the women in the Garden Club as well as past events.

Other data collected included relevant documents, such as written correspondence between women of the Natchez Garden Club and tourist information on the pilgrimage and pageant. These documents were drawn from libraries as well as private collections housed by the club and club members who allowed access to them. The documents that I examined included public records like newspaper articles, personal documents such as letters, and physical artifacts including pageant memorabilia and tourism brochures—including Katherine Miller’s own book, *Natchez of Long Ago and the Pilgrimage*.

Finally, in addition to surveys, interviews, and document analysis, observations were conducted of the pilgrimage and Garden Home Tours. This allowed me firsthand knowledge of the phenomena relevant to this study and to gain a historical background of the club, their activities, and the rhetoric they employ.

### PAGEANTRY AND PRIDE: THE HISTORIC NATCHEZ PAGEANT

The club’s current president, Mrs. Elizabeth Knight (all names are pseudonyms), provided a general description of the pageant. “Twice a year the Natchez Garden Club sponsors the Historic Natchez Pageant [hereafter referred to as *the pageant*] which takes place during the biannual pilgrimage. The show is held in the city auditorium where there is room to host approximately a thousand guests for each performance three nights a week for an entire month.” The pageant depicts some of the scenes of the Old South through nine brief vignettes.

As one of the more popular events of the pilgrimage, tourists flock to see the “romance, grandeur, chivalry, and wealth” of Natchez through depictions of Southern belles in hoopskirts and young Confederate soldiers decorated in full uniform (Historic Natchez Pageant 2006). The pageant acts as a form of teaching—a pedagogy that seeks to (re)construct and (re)present the supposed “charming way of life” that the people of Natchez enjoyed prior to the

“War Between the States” and promote it as a more sophisticated and desirable existence.

The show begins with a presentation of flags representing the various national powers that occupied the area during its early colonial beginnings, with a representative Native American flag followed by the French, British, and Spanish flags. Finally, guests rise out of their seats as the sound of “Dixie” hails the Confederate flag, borne by triumphant flag bearers. The flag then takes its place at the head of the auditorium while a chorus sings Confederate anthems. Eventually, the audience takes their seats as the flag is lowered to make way for the American flag—the only flag that holds a place above the Confederate at the pageant.

Ms. Thelma Tullos, a member since 1946, discussed the coveted role that honors Jefferson Davis, the only president of the Confederate States of America, and his Natchez bride, Varina Howell. “The site of their wedding, Natchez’s own home, The Briars, is depicted as a place of honor in American history.” Tullos was proud to report of her great-granddaughter’s debut alongside other children as young as age three leaping around maypoles. She beamed with pride stating, “This will be the fourth generation in the pilgrimage within my family.” Floods of actors also relish in the pleasures of picnics at Concord and dance the polka. Several acts continue to valorize the war as they represent soirees at Jefferson Military College and a Confederate Farwell Ball.

All of these images of Southern men and women paint a glorious picture of a past that involves no personal trepidation about the town’s dependence on slave labor. Not one black resident of Natchez participates (and very few attend—if any) in the modern pageant. As one of the more frank members of the club shared, “early pageants did however include a single depiction of black life. That one scene showed slaves happily singing as they worked out from a large plantation home in the field. Under pressure during the fight for civil rights, the Garden Club chose to exclude this scene from the pageant all together.” This direct omission highlights not only the club’s desire to erase part of their troubled legacy of slavery and racism but also serves as a purposeful effort to maintain a sympathetic following that supports the idea of “*noblesse oblige*—the idea that the upper classes are better than the other and therefore entitled to their high position” (Goldstone 1974, 123, as cited in Ostrander 1984, 25).

Ostrander (1984) also contends that it was the upper-class woman’s “duty” to teach, guide, and lead. She quotes Goldstone, who argues that “it is her role of socializer of the next generation of upper-class people that does the most to perpetuate class distinctions” (1974, 123). To these ends, another prominent feature of the pageant is its involvement of children and youth. It

is a club tradition to have members' children and grandchildren take part in the pageantry. Through these activities, children progress through a process of grooming that begins with participation as a maypole dancer very early in their lives and eventually (and ideally) leads to a confirmed place on the pageant's royal court. As one young pageant queen explains, "I started off young in the pageant. I was a maypole dancer, but I always wanted to be queen. We all did."

The royal court represents the club and is headed by a king and queen, but it is clear to all that it is the queen who truly reigns as the symbolic embodiment of the pilgrimage. When she is formally presented, everyone participating in the pageant bows while the king stands back. She is likely to have followed in her mother's footsteps as queen and must meet a specific and idealized set of criteria that deem her refined and fit to represent Natchez, the club, and the South; she has become the ultimate Southern belle.

All entrants to the court must be students who are recognized for their academic achievement as well as their civic involvement, but it is one's family lineage that ultimately serves to solidify a position of royalty. And it is the mothers of the participants who ultimately must invest themselves in the process. As one of the mothers I interviewed pointed out when I asked how one becomes queen,

*TS:* Well I think it was . . . really you get points for working.

*JN-G:* She worked or you worked? I know there was some work on your part.

*TS:* Yes [pointing to herself]. It is the mothers who do the work [laughs].

Indeed, mothers work hard to give their daughters the opportunity to be queen, knowing that with the title comes a great deal of respect for her family among the other wealthy elites in Natchez. The young inductees are introduced to society at an exclusively private ball where club members honor their outstanding character with a private meeting of the club president and a presentation and procession to the music of "Dixie."

The queen is at the center of the biannual festivities. While she is never given direct instructions on how to act, former queen Mrs. Stephanie Wall explains, "It was just understood what your responsibilities were: be respectful and represent the club in a perfect way. It is that Southern charm that we don't necessarily teach, we learn throughout our entire lives." Her words are poignant and provide unyielding evidence of the power of the learning occurring in complex and complicated ways. These social literacies are learned and taught in subtle but nonetheless powerful and, ultimately, very prescriptive ways.

The queen's duties include attending luncheons as well as dinner parties and lectures hosted by the club. As Ms. Tullos explains, "the young women

invest so much time in these parties and in the pageant shows, which last up to a month. Most queens take off a semester from college so that they can devote themselves full time to service as the queen.”

Ms. Tullos was president, and later her daughter was selected to be queen. She talks about her daughter’s queenship, stating that her daughter “was at Ole Miss. No, she was at William and Mary for two years and then transferred to Ole Miss [University of Mississippi]. And she came home to be queen. . . . No, well, let me think, ah, she took a semester off, because at that time they did the [pageant] the entire month.” This reinforces how important the educational experience of the club is to the young ladies who take part in the activities.

Of course, the luxury of taking off an entire semester in order to attend parties and participate in the shows is not one afforded to just anyone. Additionally, the cost of being queen includes the high price of the elaborate period-style gown that is required for one’s place in the show. In return for her *sacrifices*, the labor, time, and expense, the queen ensures not only her place in Natchez society but also her children’s place—for they are ensured access to the club’s activities, elite social status, and privileges of the affluent not afforded to those outside of the court. The social literacies required to be queen and to earn a permanent place among the Southern belles of Natchez requires more than learning to comport like a queen. It also requires learning the proper manners for “keeping house.”

## KEEPING HOUSE

In addition to participating in the pageant the queen is often included in the club’s show of homes along with other members of the royal court, including preteen girls who may eventually become queens. The young women are situated beside older members of the club to offer histories of the homes as well as stories about the town’s grand past for tourists who come from all over the country to see both the pageant and the show of homes. In the act of telling these stories to the audience, the young women of Natchez learn the proper narratives and the ways of presenting them to the outside world. During this event, the young women are literally “keeping house” by cleaning and caring for the houses’ appearances while at the same time positioning themselves as historic authorities amongst the Natchez elite.

In addition they are maintaining the household in a particular sense of internal stability and image to the outside world. This concept relates to family dynamics as well as to how a family or the club interacts with their community. Their place as hostesses in these grand mansions helps increase the

likelihood that if they are not already queen they someday will be. Serving as a young hostesses becomes the stepping stones to their place in Natchez's history. The eldest member I interviewed explained that the queenship is passed from one generation to the next and that queens are more likely to become presidents of the club. As former queen Holly Hunt explains, "Most queens are expected to go on in the club. You know, to become president."

While many modern women (and men) think the appeal of "keeping house" has long past with the feminist movement, this is not necessarily the case. In the company of hostesses, young girls are likely to find role models in older women who have greatly impacted the community through their civic service in the club. One younger member of the club emphasizes, "People, now-a-days, think keeping house isn't in fashion. But it is important. We have to have our best faces on."

Because of the inherent exclusivity of the club's activities and lineage, it is not uncommon that the elder grandmother figures are the same women who are charter members of the club and served as an important part of Miller's legacy that saved the town from economic ruin. These women who lead visitors on home tours are the gatekeepers who hold on to wealth and power through their practices in the club. "Keeping house" has become as much about keeping one's own home as it has become about keeping the legacy of the club alive and well.

Another interviewee explained that increasingly, as the "middle generation of the club choose to hold jobs such as interior designers [that] prevent them from serving as hostesses, the club looks to the younger women to take the lead from the generations that came before." They are filling in where their mothers do not, creating a significant generational gap among the club's active and central membership. It is not uncommon to have elder women who are in their seventies serving alongside young women who are in their early teens. Between them are mothers with professional careers who are unable to devote much time to the club.

While passive observers might consider this generational gap unimportant, even trivial, its significance to the sustainability and presence of the club cannot be overlooked. The club rests on these young women for their continuation and future success as cultural purveyors. The young women become puppeteers for a privileged world they might not even understand because of their young age. With young girls in their teens, it is difficult for anyone to expect that they will know the full weight of the pilgrimage, of what it represents and fails to represent. In one sense, it shows the loyalty that the young women have to the club. But also the gap allows the club to continue even as the women in the middle pursue professional careers. Social literacies are

passed from grandmothers to adolescent, who then go to work, only to return later in life to the full service of the club.

### **PONDERING THE PANDOREA: WHY THE EDUCATION OF A SOUTHERN BELLE?**

As I leave one of my final interviews, I drive through the various neighborhoods of Natchez. The first are the wealthy estates that are lined with live oaks. In front of many of the homes flies a blue flag that symbolizes that a queen of the pilgrimage lives there. It is a mark of distinction. It lets everyone in town know that royalty lives on in Natchez. Further out the homes decrease in size and no blue flags fly. Finally, I am driving through a neighborhood with small quarters stacked almost on top of one another. It feels like these small homes are hundreds of miles apart from the grand mansions of the wealthy Natchezians. It strikes me that in fact they are worlds apart from the oak-lined streets that house the town's wealthy elites, though in reality they are less than a mile apart.

Without considering how people—in this case elite, Southern, white women—are educated beyond the classroom, researchers and educators unproductively limit their conceptions of education. They overlook integral and significant processes of socialization, acculturation, and reification of inequitable structures in and beyond traditional schooling. Much is learned in spaces not typically conceived of as “educational,” particularly in spaces like the club. These spaces prove ultimately very important to social and educational experiences and opportunities.

Of the women in her studies Ostrander noted,

the women themselves are clear that they could not have gotten to their board chairs through paid positions in the occupational structure. A woman well known in the community for her activities in the circles of power of business, banking, academia, and culture said frankly, “I was able to get higher in volunteerism than I would have as a paid employee. I am able to direct procedure and get involved in the power structure.” (1984, 31)

The same can be said of the women of the Natchez Garden Club.

For elite women like those of the club in Natchez, volunteerism and service to the organization serve not only their own personal satisfaction, but such activities also work to reinforce the power of class—a woman who volunteers does not need the income and can give of herself to service in ways that working-class women cannot. Make no mistake, the women of the club

work hard and deserve recognition for the hours spent in planning, executing, and supporting local businesses and promoting the city's tourist industry. However, the underlying motives of "elite control" and maintenance of social systems and structures must be problematized (Ostrander 1984).

The desire and ability to establish community institutions for the "protection" of class values is both a purpose and outcome of "individuals combin[ing] to a collective class effort toward power and privilege" (Ostrander 1984, 35). Organizations and clubs like the group in Natchez work both tacitly and inconspicuously to screen for access thereby limiting and controlling power and influence. While her realm of influence may be limited by dutiful subservience to her husband and his career, the elite woman works in creative and calculating ways to sustain and protect her identity as poised, polished, and productive. Moreover, working as literacy sponsors and gatekeepers to social and cultural knowledge, senior members ensure the passing on of sacred traditions and ideas about living and learning.

Traditions are strongly upheld by the club. From the pageant to the tour of homes, the stories of the club are circulated, and expectations for young women are set. As Ms. Tullos states, "Poise and social graces are import for our children to learn." These beliefs and customs become the curriculum that dictates how the future club members will be enculturated to Southern ways of being and doing among the wealthy. As Brandt articulates, "Literacy is also a productive resource, a means of production and reproduction, including a means by which legacies of human experience move from past to future and by which, for many, identities are made and sustained" (2001, 6).

When considered in context, the women of the Natchez Garden Club (and others in elite social clubs like them) are dynamic and complex. They are much more than the pretty flowers adorning the Southern family's Christmas card or the silent, subservient sisters married to the powerful entrepreneur down the road. They are immersed and involved in society in meaningful and important ways, and their access to privilege and power is remarkable. But more importantly, it is in these activities that ultimately the members of the club support the structure and reinforcement of cultural practices that (re)produce inequity and protect their own privilege.

The elite Southern woman justifies her participation as service and explains the exclusivity in terms of her own "earned" access. She is "educated" by the women who came before her in ways of hoop skirts and pageantry, and she is keenly aware that the rituals and practices of the club must be maintained and continued. As she has engaged in "the lived experience and lived meanings of these performances, [she has absorbed and adopted] these ways of knowing and doing" (Howard and EnglandKennedy 2006, 362).

Like a debutante, the queen goes through a significant rite of passage that demonstrates a longing for American royalty (Marling 2004). The social literacies developed throughout the period of “debdom” and service in (and to) the club forms “socially constituted systems of cognitively and motivating structures that form the ideas, beliefs, dispositions, and sense of possible actions and choices with which one views and acts in the world” (Kasson 2007, 156). The Southern belle is both motivated and constrained by the possibilities of her life of privilege and access. Her education beyond the walls of formal schooling has as much to do with her success or failure in life as do the lessons in reading, writing, and arithmetic—maybe even more.

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## Chapter Ten

# On Not Seeming Like You Want Anything: Privileged Girls' Dilemmas of Ambition and Selflessness

Beth Cooper Benjamin

At sixteen, Rory Gilmore's dream is to attend Harvard University. As the precocious lead in the television series *Gilmore Girls*, Rory resembles the brainy, brunette version of the perfect girl. In the show's pilot, admission to a storied prep school transports her from the folksy modesty of the Connecticut town where she lives with her young, single mother into a world of formality, privilege, and power.

In a subsequent episode, Rory arrives for a volunteer stint with a home-building charity and runs into her classmate and archrival, Paris Geller, whose Ivy League ambitions are focused with laser-beam intensity, aggressive strategizing, and the fear of being bested by Rory. At the construction site, Rory receives a frightening college-admissions reality check from the worldly Paris, who has been compulsively amassing service activities to round out her own impeccable academic record. A voracious volunteer since the fourth grade (manning a suicide hotline! training seeing-eye dogs! teaching sign language!), Paris explains to a wide-eyed Rory that everyone who applies to Harvard has a stellar academic record: "It's the extras that put you over the top" in the Ivy League (Sherman-Palladino 2001).

In her single-mindedness, Paris makes no effort to hide the motive behind her community involvement. It's all just part of preparing to submit one's self to the Ivy League gatekeepers, one of the few social institutions privileged children are raised to fear (Stevens 2008). On the other hand, such unapologetic self-interest in the performance of charity also appears unseemly. Rory arrives home that day in a panic, fearing that she will never make up enough extracurricular points in time for her application.

Yet even in her fevered state, Rory finds Paris's approach morally suspect. Anxiously explaining to her boyfriend why she needs to cancel their plans, Rory snaps, "I can't hang out or kick back. I need to find a retarded kid and

teach him how to play softball. Oh, God, listen to me. I am horrible. I am underqualified and horrible.” Rory’s self-recrimination conveys dual fears: first, of not measuring up to Harvard’s standards, and second, that self-promotion is corrupting her. Even Paris feels the need to edit the image she’s projecting, explaining to a classmate in a later episode, “You know I ultimately do all these things for the good of mankind, right? Sometimes I don’t think I come off that way.”

Over a year of participant observation with Troop 19 (a pseudonym, as are all names of people and places in this research), a combined junior high and high school Girl Scout troop in the affluent, Northeastern U.S. suburb of Litchfield, I found strong parallels between the fictional lives of Rory and Paris and the very real girls I came to know. Like their TV counterparts, the Troop 19 girls evince a strong preoccupation with forms of relative status and distinction, particularly under the spell that college admissions casts over the Litchfield community. And like Paris and Rory, they too feel ambivalent about receiving (or appearing to desire) personal benefit or public recognition for their service activities.

On the one hand, girls in Troop 19 crave markers of status and success and are keenly aware of their community’s expectation that they distinguish themselves through individual achievement. On the other, they condemn the desire for status and distinction as selfish self-promotion and express skepticism about one another’s motives. They insist that distinctions and awards should be the natural outcome of troop service and regular participation, not the result of girls’ self-interested effort.

For their TV counterparts this is an ironic and ultimately humorous contradiction, but for the Troop 19 girls the dilemma is very real. The girls’ preoccupation with status emerges in their concerns about popularity and the security of their friendships and in measuring their claims to authority and social class privilege. But despite their interest in advancing along a slew of social hierarchies, the girls are also uncomfortable with what it means to benefit personally from their troop participation and service work. Discussions about their passions and commitments lead, surprisingly, to questions and judgments of motive. And yet they know that recognition for their accomplishments holds the key to the college realm and the community’s approval.

I came to Troop 19 and Litchfield to study the development of adolescent girls in affluent communities. In so doing, I sought to illuminate the normative invisibility of whiteness and especially class privilege in upper-middle-class suburbia and to trace how this inflects particular gender-role expectations for young women. Thus I identify the social class context of my research site with the term *professional middle class*, which was coined by Ehrenreich in her 1989 analysis of middle-class class consciousness, *Fear of Falling*.

Briefly, the professional middle class is comprised of individuals whose economic and social status is based on education rather than ownership of capital. The professional middle class is distinct from the broader middle class in that their work focuses on mental or conceptual labor, they work in “guildlike” occupations requiring extensive study and credentialing, and typically the peer and professional networks that develop in these educational settings foster a sense of class cohesion. In Litchfield, the professional middle class is comparable in financial terms to what is elsewhere named the upper-middle class.

Unlike Veblen’s leisure class (1899/1994), the professional middle class has little tangible capital, only its knowledge and the authority conferred by its credentials. Such assets are distinct from the ruling class’s wealth and power because they can’t be “hoarded against hard times, preserved beyond the lifetime of an individual, or, of course, bequeathed” (Ehrenreich 1989, 15). Despite their structural advantages, children of the professional middle class must also recement their status through disciplined individual study.

There is thus a strange duality to the professional middle class. On the one hand, its members are socialized to perform leisure and to consume in ways that demonstrate their status and their financial resources. On the other, their status is also dependent on their disciplined (mental) labor through an extensive period of study and training—a life very much in contrast to the idea of leisure (though Veblen might argue that the professional middle class’ extended education and training, as mental and not manual labor are in fact performances of conspicuous leisure).

Both sides of this duality are evident among the Troop 19 girls. They are exquisitely aware of their economic and educational advantages, especially when the troop’s many community-service opportunities bring them into closer proximity with economic inequality. They also relish the benefits of their privilege, from fashionable clothes to expensive hobbies (e.g., rock climbing, whitewater rafting) to international travel. At the same time, a pre-occupation with achieving individual distinction—mindful of the specter of college admissions—is evident even by seventh and eighth grade.

These girls know they must give careful consideration to how they spend their “free” time. Heather—an eighth grader and active troop participant—assesses the college-admissions cache of various extracurricular activities including Girl Scouting’s top honors, the Silver (for middle schoolers) and Gold (for high schoolers) awards:

I heard that, um, our band teacher told us that if two people are applying for Harvard and one took band and the other didn’t, then the one that took band would get in, and it’s the same way with Girl Scouts I think, that if two people are applying for the same school, and you have Girl Scouts on your résumé, you’ve done that for how many years, and you have a Silver Award [or even

if you don't have] a Silver Award, but you've done a lot of work, then [that's] probably gonna get you into school [over] the other person.

Though this calculus is important to Heather, she and her classmates insist that the admissions boost is only an “added bonus” and not a deciding factor in their troop participation. Some older Girl Scouts are more openly mercenary. Erica and Hilary, high school freshmen and close friends, admit that college casts a longer shadow over how they choose to spend their time. “You can't say that's not a part of it,” Erica confesses in the double-negative, a fittingly awkward and distancing parallel to Hilary's sheepish assessment that—while accurate—this amounts to “a semi-shallow reason” for joining or remaining in the troop.

Implicit in these statements about participation in Girl Scouts rest the hallmarks of middle-class suburban cultural identity more broadly: *avoidance* (of direct confrontation), *anxiety* (about maintaining one's status), and *guilt* (about benefiting from unearned advantages). The Troop 19 girls have their ears cocked for opportunities that might distinguish them from their peers. At the same time, younger girls especially are careful to avoid the suggestion that their activities are chosen based on the college admissions “profit motive.” After the transition to high school, girls may be more willing to acknowledge this strategy, yet even their confessions demonstrate guilt over engaging in what they perceive as rather crass (and implicitly unfeminine) self-promotion.

And all of it—information gathering with the band teacher, comparing gathered and overheard notes with one's peers, the fine-grain distinctions (band versus Girl Scouts, awards versus years of participation), the “eyes on the prize” focus—all of it pulses with the anxiety of an outcome of great consequence that cannot be satisfactorily predicted and won't be known for years more to come.

## LITCHFIELD AND TROOP 19

As if designed by Hollywood location scouts in search of the quintessential Northeastern small town, Litchfield is nestled in a wooded valley along the path of a lazy river whose banks are dotted with public parkland and jogging trails. The town center features upscale chain stores and local boutiques, chic restaurants, vintage-looking pizza parlors and ice cream shops, and a handsome modern train station that ferries commuters to the nearby city. The town is also home to a private college whose presence adds to Litchfield's prestige.

The data presented here were gathered via participant observation and individual and focus group interviews over the 2003–2004 school year. The

larger study examined how “girls’ leadership”—a buzzword among girls, “troop moms” (mothers who volunteer as troop assistants), and troop leaders—was defined and practiced in this community and what that might tell us about the intersection of femininity, whiteness, and class privilege in girls’ lives. This chapter examines the Troop 19 girls’ discourse of status, personal gain, and public recognition.

By *discourse*, I refer not to the sociolinguistic study of the structure of language but rather to an *interpretive* form of discourse analysis in the tradition of anthropology and cultural studies and, more specifically, feminist studies in education (Harris 2004). In this tradition, *discourse* signifies something closer to ideology than to text itself. As such, discourses are like invisible gases—real and material, with properties and measurable effects—yet elusive, identifiable only through the traces they leave (largely via written and spoken texts).

By any measure, Litchfield is an affluent community. Among the town’s roughly twenty-six thousand residents, the median household income in a 2004 report was just under \$110,000 (the mean household income was close to \$150,000); the median home value was estimated at more than \$750,000. Fewer than 5 percent of the town’s residents fall below the poverty line. Owner-occupied dwellings account for 74 percent of the town’s residences, while only 4.7 percent of Litchfield residences are listed as subsidized housing. Eighty-five percent of residents are employed in white-collar professions, and three-quarters of residents twenty-five years and older have earned at least a bachelors degree. Approximately nine out of ten Litchfield residents are white, with Asians (roughly 1,700 residents, or 6.4 percent) as the largest racial or ethnic minority.

Litchfield boasts a thriving Girl Scouting program, with several troops operating at each of the town’s public elementary schools, each of which feeds into Troop 19, the combined, town-wide sixth-through-twelfth-grade troop. The troop is quite large by Girl Scout standards, with more than forty girls registered. Key to the troop’s size and longevity is its flexible structure; registration does not require regular attendance. Girls with scheduling conflicts or specific interests can limit their involvement accordingly. Therefore, attendance at most troop meetings during my study ranged between twenty and twenty-five girls. Both participation and enrollment tended toward the younger end of the troop’s age range, with sixth through eighth grade girls predominating.

## THE ADMISSIONS GAME

The Litchfield girls’ attention to status and hierarchy, and their ambivalence about desiring and receiving personal benefits for service activities in Troop

19, reflect the broader context of secondary schooling in professional-middle-class communities. As in many towns with the same socioeconomic profile, here academic distinction and college admission are a constant preoccupation.

The Litchfield school district ranks in the top 5 percent statewide (as measured by student performance on the state's standardized assessment exams). In the class of 2004, over 90 percent of Litchfield High School's graduates went on to a four-year college. Between two-year colleges and other education and training programs, postsecondary matriculation was effectively 100 percent. Both girls and parents cite the quality of Litchfield's schools as the major reason they choose to reside there. The community takes great pride in the aspirations and accomplishments of its students. Yet the oft-cited record of achievement does little to ease intense and widespread anxiety that the town's educational resources will prove insufficient advantage.

Together, increasing competition over college admission and an education system that privileges rote performance on high-stakes exams over engagement with academic content both produce a host of unintended consequences. Arguing that "we get what we bargain for," Pope (2003) describes how students, parents, and personnel at a suburban California public high school negotiate the demands of a credential-obsessed education system and the human values (e.g., honesty, diligence, integrity) that we as a society intend schooling to produce in our children. The students study hard and want to feel that their successes are earned, the natural outcome of a meritocratic American education system. Yet they worry that scholastic merit isn't necessarily enough to get them to their goals.

Students in Pope's study employ questionable strategies (e.g., copying one another's homework, hiding activities from peers to thwart competition, finishing other assignments during class time) to enhance their GPAs. Families invest in SAT prep courses, private tutoring, and college consultants. Some even purchase high-priced application essays from online brokers "guaranteeing" Ivy League admission (Pope 2003).

A similar escalation is now apparent in the scale and impact of high school students' community-service activities. This may be both a product of expanded high school service requirements and also a strategy by which students can distinguish their applications (Williams 2005). Admissions officers and students are reluctant to associate a personal-profit motive with what they characterize as altruistic civic participation. But the mere fact that students often highlight such activities on their college applications obscures any clear line between selflessness and self-interest and in turn contributes to an atmosphere of admissions hysteria among the professional middle class. "Examples of over-the-top public service," as a *New York Times* story put it,

“can put a competitive pressure on other families who believe colleges are watching” (Williams 2005, 17).

Meanwhile, colleges’ student bodies are increasingly female, a trend that reverses the historic overrepresentation of young men in college admissions (Peter and Horn 2005). Data suggest that much of this gender gap represents increasing attendance by minority women, women over the age of forty, and single mothers, not traditional-age, middle-class, or affluent white girls. While women represented 56 percent of the overall undergraduate population in 2001, for instance, they were 62 percent of African American undergraduates, outnumbering African American men nearly two-to-one. In the popular media the phenomenon has been cited as an impending crisis for young (white, privileged) men, ignoring race and age distinctions in the data. But of course, this trend may instead reflect the success of gender-equity initiatives and cultural shifts that have supported girls’ increased career aspirations and educational attainment.

Additionally, some argue that gender parity in elite universities (where students are typically young, white, and affluent) is being sustained by artificial and unofficial policies. Describing this admissions conundrum as an unanticipated consequence of the women’s movement, Britz (2006) argues that girls applying to elite schools are increasingly being held to a higher standard than their male peers, all in an effort to maintain an even gender balance in enrollment. The conventional wisdom that both male and female students prefer gender-balanced colleges results in a kind of informal affirmative-action program for young white men. In effect, elite girls are now punished for surpassing the boys, another violation of middle-class students’ faith in meritocracy (Brown 1999).

Private colleges, which are increasingly run like for-profit corporations, have been unwilling to bet against market research claiming that their bottom line will suffer if they allow female students to predominate. The stakes here seem so high and the margin of error so seemingly (and differentially) narrow that the question becomes unavoidable: what is an enlightened college counselor or parent or student or Girl Scout troop leader to do?

## STATUS AND HIERARCHY

In her comparative study of middle- and working-class white girls’ anger, Brown finds middle-class girls particularly “preoccupied with where they fit in the social and material hierarchy of school and society” (1999, 72). In Troop 19, preoccupation with status emerges in an array of forms. Often it can be found in the girls’ language. Describing her classmates and her troop



leaders, eighth grader Tara evokes royalty, describing eighth-grade girls as “princesses,” Mrs. Stein as the “queen” of the troop.

When Tara is put in charge of organizing lunch at an encampment (a week-end trip to a Girl Scout summer camp), she reports that Mrs. Stein has nicknamed her the “Hot Dog Queen.” In our interview, she occasionally adopts a British accent, lending an air of self-conscious privilege and authority to her speech. Alternately, asked to describe her troop leaders’ roles, Tara shifts to a simile of corporate hierarchy, describing Mrs. Stein as the “public face of the company.” Further, she labels Mrs. Stein as the CEO and Mrs. Nyland as the president or vice CEO of the troop.

In addition to comparing the troop leaders’ positions to those of corporate executives, Tara struggles to define their roles relative to each other. Rather than distinguishing between them according to what each actually does, she characterizes them instead in terms of their relative prestige and power. Mrs. Nyland, by this measure, while still in a position of authority, is nonetheless a step below Mrs. Stein. Finally, it is striking that Tara’s similes—royalty and corporate leadership—are hierarchies connoting great social and economic privilege.

Age and the authority it confers within the troop provide another example of girls’ attention to status. Girls were fascinated by the question of my age (though I was twenty-eight when I began my research, their estimates ranged as low as high school) as well as my marital status, suggesting a concern about where to place me in the hierarchy of Girl Scout and maternal authority in the troop. The girls were also keenly aware of age differences among their peers and corresponding authority or power in the troop.

Girls generally value Troop 19’s unusual age range. Younger girls feel that they gain vicarious coolness through their relationships with older Girl Scouts. “You always like knowing older people,” explains Erin, a sixth grader who enjoys feeling connected to her tenth-grade brother’s friends in the troop and relishes the opportunity to get “the scoop” on his social life. Seventh grader Christine enjoys the opportunity to exercise authority over younger girls. Describing her pleasure in running an event for younger Girl Scouts, she says, “it just kind of feels like you’re in charge, and that’s cool because you don’t get to be in charge at school, or at home your parents are in charge pretty much, or teachers.”

Not surprisingly, age and its privileges also breed resentment and antipathy. Older girls mock the younger girls’ immaturity. Younger ones express frustration with the older girls’ confidence that they can defy adults’ instructions with impunity. Eighth grader Charlotte confesses, “Sometimes I don’t feel like I get treated with respect” by older troop members. As in Brown’s (1999) Acadia, middle-class girls feel particular anger toward those (e.g.,

boys or popular kids) whose greater privilege garner them special treatment from adults.

Of all the girls, Tara is particularly preoccupied with adult status. She takes on responsibilities well beyond her age mates and carefully tracks her relationships with her troop leaders, evaluating the authority they confer upon her. Because she both feels this dynamic intently and also reflects articulately on it, shedding unique light on these phenomena, I focus my analysis here on her case.

In an interview during the encampment, I ask how Tara's experience in Troop 19 compares to that of her elementary school Girl Scout troops. She responds that it's different because "there's more of a hierarchy," though the troop is grouped both "by how mature you are and how old you are." Citing the example of a seventh grader whose maturity has led troop leaders to group her with the eighth graders, Tara concludes that in the troop "it's kind of like you earn, like, you work your way up by how well you know the leaders and how much of a leader you are and how willing you are just to selflessly participate."

Teasing apart age from maturity as sources of status has great significance for Tara. While others see the troop hierarchy as a straightforward developmental arc, Tara describes something closer to a business model, wherein "you work your way up" through social networking ("how well you know the leaders"), job performance ("how much of a leader you are"), and contributions to the greater good ("how willing you are just to selflessly participate"). Themes of selfless service to the troop and demonstrating leadership ability surface in conversations with other girls, but the idea of getting in good with the troop leaders is something of which Tara alone indicates awareness and in which she may be the only one invested.

In the same interview, Tara explains that the benefit to being treated like an adult in the troop is that "I get to know more stuff. I feel less naïve about things, because they're more likely to clue me in. . . . I just get to know more things that, like, complete the picture." She recalls a camping trip where troop leaders gave her a symbolic promotion, saying, "You're going as an adult, because we don't have enough [adults]." She remembers sleeping with the adults and, more memorably, being offered coffee, "which was fun." When she tried it, however, Tara "thought it was disgusting. . . . I was like, 'I'll have a hot chocolate, thanks.'"

Despite being unimpressed with this particular perk of adulthood, she concludes that with adult status "I can have a better relationship with the leaders, [one] that's less uneven. . . . It's like I have a completely different relationship with each of the leaders while [I'm] still able to be with my friends." By her own description, Tara has built a personal connection with each of her troop

leaders, yet she's avoided being so adult-identified that she is alienated from her peers. She is flattered to be offered coffee but feels free to pooh-pooh it and revert to hot chocolate.

Though Tara suggests that she has forged a pretty sweet deal, there is something unmistakably jaded about her premature acceptance of the constraints of adulthood. When I offer that she has "the best of both worlds," Tara shifts quickly to the downside. "Yeah," she responds, "but it's not always terrific. I mean, come on, Beth, aren't there times when you'd rather not do what you have to do as, as an adult, and do something else?" Feeling odd about commiserating with a fourteen-year-old, I nonetheless laugh and concur. "I know," she says. "So, I mean, would I stay a kid if I could? Probably, but I'm not that naïve, so I can't."

Elsewhere in the interview she speaks at greater length about the costs of her status:

I kind of figured that with being an adult there's some stuff that you have to sacrifice almost. Like, not completely . . . but there's still some sort of added responsibility, like with knowledge or with power or something. So I kind of feel like it wasn't more important for me to do what I wanted, exactly, because I would probably get to at some point, but it was more important for me to help people who would help more people, and that was kind of the purpose of what we were supposed to be doing today.

Deferring gratification is a crucial capacity for professional-middle-class children, who must endure lengthy training in order to replicate their parents' class status (Ehrenreich 1989). It is also the trade-off for Tara, who in return for organizing lunch at the encampment gains an ineffable "knowledge or . . . power or something."

At fourteen, Tara is capable of demonstrating great maturity. Yet her preoccupation with ranking and comparison belies an unspoken insecurity running beneath it. Her repeated invocation of the word *naïve* belies this anxiety as well. As Tara's status rises, so do the stakes for losing it. Frequently invoked by her peers as the quintessential "good Girl Scout," Tara's heavy investment in her individual distinction is reflected in her unusually candid critiques of other girls' capabilities and maturity. While the status she has cultivated keeps potential rivals at bay and garners plentiful affirmation from adults, it also threatens to isolate her from her peers, reflecting the double-edged sword of good-girl-ness.

Ultimately, Tara's fear of appearing naïve may be as much about the judgment of her peers as well as it is about her troop leaders. While knowing enough to "complete the picture" means that she can feel more equal to the adults, it also offers protection for her status and reputation among the girls.

The promised benefits of being a good girl (e.g., good grades, community pride, a sense of safety) are deeply and powerfully seductive, especially when the relational costs of resistance and defiance—not to mention mere vulnerability—are so threateningly high (Brown 1999; *Girls Incorporated* 2006).

Implicit in the girls' preoccupation with status and hierarchy is a blind faith in meritocracy, a belief that playing by the community's rules and earning academic, athletic, and extracurricular distinctions is the path to success and the transmission of class advantage. But as Ostrander (1984) argues, class privilege is also embedded with gender subordination. For girls, attaining status via individual distinction directly conflicts with the demands of femininity, which encourage girls to prioritize relationships and, if necessary, sacrifice their own ambitions for the sake of others (Brown 1999, 2003; see also chapter 9 in this volume by June Newman-Graham).

By this same measure, girls equate distinction with assertiveness and self-promotion, which they view as relational threats. Yet because of the rewards they receive for playing by the rules, privileged girls and women may be especially reluctant to endorse or even see the need for resistance, since challenging their "gender-subordinate position . . . would seem to challenge the superiority of the class and the advantages that come from it" (Ostrander 1984, 152). Could they resist this double-bind and still get into Harvard?

## PERSONAL GAIN AND RECOGNITION

Class privilege and gender subordination also feed girls' ambivalence about desiring and receiving recognition for their troop activities. Some girls express skepticism of others' motives for troop participation, while others resist taking credit at all. Occasionally, girls are open about their desire for recognition. Each instance, however, suggests the same underlying anxiety about status and pressure to achieve.

### Desiring Recognition

In a small focus group, Erica speaks about her commitment to service work and how it influences her choice to continue in Girl Scouts:

Someone said that [Girl Scouts] was good for college . . . [and I thought], "Wow, I'm an A/B student, I'm not a straight-A student, and I'm on Honor Roll, but I'm not High Honors, and it's not like my SAT scores are going to be flying through the roof. It's not like I am in that direction, because that's not what I'm about. I'm not about that kind of thing. . . . I'm so into community service; [Girl Scouts] is a place where I could share that and get some credit for it. 'Cause, you know, if I'm gonna do it, why not get some credit?"

Erica's decision to pursue credit for her community service through Girl Scouting involves a complex calculus with narrow, but loaded, status distinctions: A/B but not straight-A, Honor Roll but not High Honors. While considerable forethought about college applications is clearly expected of her, like Rory Gilmore she seeks to distance herself from the kind of self-interest and competition it demands. She is loath for her strategic self-promotion to be seen as a reflection of who she is. "That's not what I'm about," she protests; "I'm not about that kind of thing."

Tara feels resentful when troop mom Mrs. Loring tries to attribute equal credit to her own daughter, Alexandra, for a fund-raising letter that Tara has written by herself. In addition, Tara admits to me that she was also angry at troop leader Mrs. Stein, whom she learned (indirectly, of course) had endorsed this plan by assuming Tara's willing complicity. Informed that Mrs. Stein was sure Tara wouldn't mind humoring Mrs. Loring, Tara tells me that in fact "I *did* mind, because, like, I had done the work. I didn't think Mrs. Loring should get credit, I didn't think Alexandra should get credit, and . . . Alexandra [was] going to be credited for participating in the fashion show anyway." Tara notes that this white lie also appeared in a letter concerning the Savannah trip, in which Tara recalls girls were asked to send payment for the trip to Alexandra. "Like, why Alexandra?" Tara asks, exasperated.

Alexandra's name on the fund-raising letter is an affront to Tara's faith in meritocracy. Despite playing by the rules, Tara has been denied proper credit for her work. Likewise, the letter violates the rules of fairness, as Tara is dubious that Alexandra (who struggles with learning disabilities) would be put in a position of responsibility for large sums of money. In fact, Tara indicates that she finds it patronizing for troop leaders to indulge Alexandra with distinctions she has not earned. Tara's sense of meritocratic fairness (and constant gauging of status points) leads her further to note that Alexandra was sure to receive legitimate credit anyway as a participant in the fashion show.

Perhaps most significantly Tara is offended by her troop leader's complicity in this incident through her confidence that Tara would happily tolerate the white lie. The indirectness, back-channel communication, and the expectation that one tolerate expedient falsehoods all bespeak the professional-middle-class moral minimalism in Troop 19 as well as a feminine complicity in a meritocracy that falls short of its promises (Brown 1999; Kenny 2000).

### Resisting Recognition

While Erica and Tara desire acknowledgment for their service to the troop and the community, Megan holds a strong and principled aversion to receiv-

ing the Gold Award for her community service. In an interview, Megan states clearly that the work itself was always her reward. And yet, she explains,

All these people, . . . especially my mom, were pressuring me to make it a Gold Award project. And I didn't like that idea, 'cause it kinda made it seem like, "Oh, I'm just doing this for credit or recognition." And I didn't want it to be like that. Like, I just wanted, you know, I didn't want to turn it into a big thing; it was just something I was doing for, you know, these kids and, like, myself. And it just seemed wrong to kind of make it a whole, like, "Yay, let's honor me, I'm so special." You know, it just seemed really petty and stupid, and I hated the whole concept, and mom and this other woman who's really nice pressured me into, or, somehow I got duped into [laughs] making it a Gold Award. And I still feel really guilty about it, 'cause . . . it wasn't about . . . honoring *me* in any way, it was about helping these kids [and] getting the community involved.

From Megan's continued misgivings, it appears that the troop leaders were less than successful at convincing her that public acknowledgment need not compromise her own integrity or that of her project. Not only does Megan remember finding the idea of pursuing the Gold Award "petty and stupid," months later she sees herself as having been "duped" into it. She still reports feeling "really guilty" about allowing the focus to be shifted toward herself. She continues to view the spotlight and the public stage as morally suspect, capable of providing only selfish ego gratification and likely to diminish the value and the impact of service to others.

This attitude reflects the influence of both social class privilege and feminine convention. The class-based dilemma that girls like Megan face in reaping personal benefits for their service work is obvious. Any compensation they receive threatens to reveal the class-maintenance function that persists unnamed within the troop's program of community service. Thus the desire for recognition is anathema to Megan, who does not imagine—indeed, she rejects the premise of the question—a form of acknowledgment or personal benefit that would feel like a legitimate celebration of her considerable effort and accomplishment.

Yet Megan's reluctance to seek credit for her service project also reflects a feminine prescription that valorizes women's selflessness, expecting them always to subvert their own needs for the benefit of others and to think not of their own gain (Gilligan 1982; Miller 1976/1986). While this feminine moral judgment also contains a seed of truth—it is, certainly, a moral and social good to be concerned with the welfare of others—its association with a single gender and its inherent devaluing of women's own interests and needs transforms a comment on right action into a tool of patriarchal domination.

## Policing Personal Gain

In other instances, girls exhibit both sides of this tension between personal gain and public recognition. Girls in Troop 19 frequently express appreciation for the flexible structure of the troop and its minimal requirements for enrollment. The privilege of this flexibility, made possible both by the larger size of the troop as well as by the girls' own development (e.g., they're capable of pursuing interests independently, rather than as a whole troop), means that girls can choose for themselves what to participate in and what to pass up.

Girls' statements about what constitutes proper participation in the troop, however, contradict this stated appreciation for individual choice. During a focus group with six Cadette Girl Scouts, sixth grader Erin mentions that two classmates whom she's told about the troop's planned trip to Japan now want to join. Swiftly, the girls begin to complain that it would be unfair to current members if newcomers were permitted to come on the trip. Seventh grader Abby summarizes: "I know, [it] is so mean, 'cause, like, they can go to no meetings and then they can, like, go to Japan."

A clear set of concerns begins to emerge. Erin, jumping off of the questions about trip requirements, states her frustration with an unnamed girl in the troop: "I know somebody who just showed up, like, I knew her, but I didn't know she was even in the troop, and then she just showed up for the [troop's annual fashion-show fund-raiser]. I really think that Girl Scouts need to come to more of the meetings, like, to know what's going on. . . . Just don't show up expecting to, like, have a big role if you aren't gonna participate in the real Girl Scouts."

To Erin, any girl whose Girl Scout participation is limited solely to the troop's marquee events is suspect. Depicting "big roles" in high-profile troop events as a privilege, not a right of membership, Erin implies that such events bear little resemblance to the "real Girl Scouts," presumably the mundane work that goes on at regular meetings and behind the scenes at the troop's more exciting functions.

Ostrander (1984) argues that upper-class women regulate access to privileged status and other benefits (such as elite club membership) through the rigid review and control of admissions requirements. Exclusivity ensures that membership remains desirable and that outsiders will continue striving for access, which in turn reaffirms the status of the insiders. Here these professional-middle-class girls accomplish the same result by invoking meritocracy and a sense of (feminine) duty. Coveted privileges, they suggest, should be earned through modesty and selfless service to the troop, not awarded to those who demonstrate ambition and drive or who ask directly for what they want—acts that circumvent the rules of troop meritocracy.

Valorizing this route to status, eighth grader Carol pays credit to her classmate Tara (who is not in the focus group) for her contributions to the troop's well-being, arguing that "Tara did . . . at least more than half of the work for the fashion show," and others readily agree. Carol also credits her classmate Anne for coordinating the annual canned-food drive (which Anne modestly claims "was actually easy"). Erin, the most emphatic on this point, reenters the conversation to drive home the unfairness of this distribution of troop labor: "[It was] just like Carol said. . . . Tara did, like, half of the fashion show. I think more people need to participate so Tara won't have this whole thing. I'm not saying it was a bad thing, but more people I think really need to—I think there's a ton of people in Girl Scouts and only like a dozen show up for a meeting."

Erin is active in the troop, though as a sixth grader, she has less seniority and far less responsibility than Tara, two years her senior, has taken on. Her own regular attendance at meetings suggests that Erin sees herself as part of the solution rather than the problem, yet she indicates no intention to displace Tara from her status and authority, only to supply her with more ample and enthusiastic support. Others in the focus group are quick to agree with Erin.

Active participation in the troop, particularly in leadership roles, is a badge of honor and a mark of peer status. Yet it is also a source of bitterness and resentment, characterized by drudgery and dullness. Girls are unusually and openly hostile toward those they perceive as benefiting unfairly from others' labor. Like the middle-class girls Brown observes, these Troop 19 girls complain bitterly in private but seek no public audience for their grievances, nor do they confront the girls they perceive to be taking unfair advantage. "Because nice girls do not publicly criticize the unearned privileges and attentions of others," Brown explains, "they watch in disbelief as others take center stage" (1999, 86).

For her own part, Tara tended to agree with the focus group's assessment (although it was clear to me that she also took great satisfaction from her experience with the fashion show). In our interview at the encampment, she responds to my question about what she would like to change about the Girl Scouts or her troop in particular: "I don't know. It's kind of like what [Mrs. Nyland] told me. 'Twenty percent of the people do 80 percent of the work.' And I don't know if you can change that. Like, today I felt like Sophie and I cooked lunch [for everyone], and, you know, you were there; it was really intense 'cause people were not very happy about how this all was going, and, like, it wasn't our fault." Although she's not sure it is possible to change this dynamic, Tara agrees with the focus group that the burden of responsibility for troop activities rests heavily on her own shoulders.



Some in the focus group are more concerned with the motives behind girls' participation than in their relative contributions to the common good. The privacy of the focus group is a rare arena where the girls freely levy judgment against others without betraying any obvious fear of appearing "mean." Anne, who more often than other girls is openly critical of her peers, states her strong disapproval of a girl she believes is only involved in the troop for her own benefit: "I know someone who was doing Girl Scouts just so . . . she can earn the Silver Award and the Gold Award so she can put it on her college applications." I ask her if that's a bad thing, and she responds, excitedly, "I think that's a bad thing, because that's not what Girl Scouts does. It's more like, 'Oh, you got the Girl Scout [award]. Now we'll take you into the college.'"

Her objection surprises me, first and foremost because age-level awards carry extensive requirements, many of which necessitate direct service to the troop. Girls earn leadership hours for facilitating troop meetings and giving presentations, for hosting troop events, and for other troop-focused service. They earn requisite volunteer hours through troop-based service activities. Many find ready-made award projects in the form of annual troop events in need of girl organizers. Finally, badge requirements are often readily satisfied through various contributions to troop life (e.g., staffing a Girl Scout information table at a community event). For a girl to earn these awards without contributing mightily to the vitality of the troop in the process is so unlikely that it would almost be an accomplishment itself. Why then does Anne find this motive for personal gain so suspicious?

When I pursue the issue further, Anne is unmoved: "But that's all she's doing, though. She's not doing anything else with the troop. She's not helping the troop." Another girl agrees, stating plainly, "Right. She's just doing it for her own gain." Working up a head of steam now, Anne continues: "And when she comes to meetings, she just, like, sits, goes in the corner, and talks to her friends. And she gets really mad at me when I ask her to do something to help the troop."

Earning a Silver or Gold is generally considered admirable but not if a girl's own benefit is her primary motive for involvement in the troop. Yet how would these girls claim to know a troopmate's reasons for participating? For Anne, the proof lies in the girl's general willingness to help out, to prioritize the greater good of the group over her own entertainment or reward—in other words, her willingness to support the perceived troop meritocracy by acting like a nice, self-sacrificing, good girl. Far from resisting the much maligned "goody two-shoes" image of Girl Scouts, this focus group seems wholeheartedly in this case to endorse it.

As I have noted, Troop 19 girls are keenly aware of the expectation that they will leverage their troop activities to distinguish themselves from their peers (against whom, over the course of high school, they are increasingly pitted). Nonetheless, they conclude that “just doing it for [one’s] own gain” is not acceptable. Within this judgment of motive lies something even more particular and peculiar, an injunction against the *desire* for recognition, beyond the question of how justly it is pursued. I wonder if, on some level, this is an attempt to moderate the intensity of competition imposed on them in the community. Yet it becomes in practice an ever-more invasive form of peer policing whereby girls punish other girls for violating white, professional-middle-class, feminine conventions. Even *wanting* more, let alone asking for or directly pursuing it, must be restrained.

Girls’ individual interviews provide yet another version of this discourse, one even more in keeping with the white, professional-middle-class, feminine constraints of niceness and meanness (Brown 2003; Simmons 2002). Ninth grader Rebecca asserts that participating only in the so-called fun parts of Troop 19 is *less rewarding* than participating more fully. Erin states, in effect, that it’s those girls’ “sour grapes,” their loss for not getting more involved.

In the focus group, girls expressed frustration at how those dedicated to troop service are taken advantage of by those who participate only in high-profile activities, reaping the benefits of others’ labors. In Rebecca and Erin’s version, the victim is the casual participant who loses out on the richer experience of more-active engagement in the troop. Though the objection is framed in terms of what girls lose out through superficial participation, I suspect that this is a whitewash, an attempt to be critical without getting nailed for being mean. I imagine that their true sentiments run much closer to those expressed by Abby, who claims frankly that such self-interested participation is unfair and dishonorable.

Notably, Carol (who dominates the focus group overall) is silent during much of the exchange about service to the troop. The same girl who labels herself “the worst Girl Scout” for her cagey avoidance of service activities is uncharacteristically quiet when this moral imperative is raised. Eventually, she reenters the conversation by reframing the entire conversation in terms of an apparent non sequitur: defining the Girl Scouts’ greater purpose as the promotion of girls’ independence. She even casts the troop’s holiday shopping excursion as an opportunity for the girls to exercise their growing independence by navigating the retail arcade without supervision. This is like nothing I’d heard from adults in Troop 19, but it does echo an argument promoted by the marketing industry to encourage consumption in the expanding youth market (Schor 2004).

Similarly, when she returns to the issue of Tara's heavy burden as a girl leader, Carol treats it not as an issue of communitarianism (as the others define it) but as evidence of the girls' development and capacity for "independent" activity. The value of taking on responsibility, for Carol, lies in its symbolism as a mark of achievement and ability. Though individual development is a form of personal gain, Carol's framework is consistent with the individualizing tendency of the middle class and may therefore appear less off-putting (Brown 1999).

In a separate focus group, ninth graders Erica and Hilary—who have acknowledged their self-interest in remaining Girl Scouts—confess that all the girls on the previous summer's trip to Greece had confided to each other their intention to quit the troop upon their return once the reward of the trip itself had passed. (None, incidentally, actually quit.) As competition over college and future success becomes more salient with the transition to high school, girls may find it increasingly valid to choose an activity based largely on its individual payoff. That said, Megan's continued discomfort over receiving the Gold Award suggests that a developmental trajectory alone cannot fully account for—nor, of course, does it easily resolve—the girls' concerns about personal gain and public recognition.

## CONCLUSION

The girls in Troop 19 are deeply—and appropriately—ambivalent about participating in the competition the professional middle class has set up for them. They know that at one point they wanted to be Girl Scouts. They remember asking their moms about Brownies or visiting Troop 19 in the fifth grade and looking forward to transitioning to a town-wide, multiage troop. Yet through the course of middle and high school, their sense of this free choice is slowly co-opted.

Girls begin to claim various positions on what constitute legitimate reasons or ways to participate in Girl Scouts. While they laud the flexibility of the troop for allowing them to choose what they want to take part in, they disparage girls whom they perceive as benefiting personally without contributing labor behind the scenes. For Megan, agreeing to accept public credit for her service work leaves her feeling coerced, believing that any focus on her is a corruption of her project and a distortion of her motives. Despite resisting the image of Girl Scouts as "goody-goodies," Troop 19 girls are nonetheless ambivalent about what constitutes a good Girl Scout. As young leaders, most are reluctant to claim credit for their accomplishments yet equally reluctant to ignore the drumbeat drawing them on toward the promise of professional-

middle-class success and the pride of their parents, troop leaders, and community.

In the best-selling novel *Prep* (Sittenfeld 2005), Lee Fiora recalls feeling astonished upon discovering that what she had learned at her affluent boarding school about the unseemliness of ambition was actually poor preparation for adult success. To become class prefect at the Ault School, Lee explains,

You weren't allowed to simply run for election. Instead, you had to be nominated, but it would be tacky and transparent to have your close friends nominate you, so basically that meant you had to wait for a nomination to fall from the sky, and then to be seconded. And once you got nominated, you never gave a speech or put up posters. In fact, the word *campaigning* was used as an accusation, not unlike *ass-kissing*. This desperate aversion to seeming like you wanted anything, or worse, going after it, stayed with me for years after I left Ault. (249)

After she graduates from college, Lee's father worries that she does not express enthusiasm in job interviews, and she is baffled: "Enthusiasm was a thing you were *supposed* to show? But wasn't it a little disgusting, didn't it seem the same as greed and neediness?"

The girls in Troop 19 are learning the same "desperate aversion to seeming like [they want] anything." In addition, literature on relational aggression suggests that girls may also be reluctant to embrace ambition if it demands the kind of aggression they associate with meanness. Like the girls documented by Rachel Simmons (2002), the fictional Lee suggests that far beyond the intensity of the college-admissions crush, girls' reluctance to demonstrate desire and ambition (particularly, of course, when these feelings are authentic) might stymie their development and leadership well into adulthood.

What would it mean for the girls in Troop 19 to resist the terms of goodness and success that the Litchfield community prescribes for them? Surely it must be difficult for them to imagine an alternative. In addition, as I concluded from the larger study from which this chapter was adapted, adult advisors tend to inadvertently reinforce this bind by encouraging girls to achieve distinctions while simultaneously praising their modesty, selflessness, and lack of desire for recognition (Benjamin 2006). To help girls become leaders in resisting these narrow constraints of feminine and privileged goodness will require adult leaders to examine honestly their own investment in these cultural norms that underlie the reproduction of their privilege.

To take seriously the girls' earnest desire to be of service, I ask, What might girls' leadership for social justice look like in an affluent community? Invoking Heifetz's definition of leadership as "influencing a community to face its problems" (1994, 14), I offer two pressing issues that the girls in Troop 19 are well-positioned to lead their community in facing.

First, hooks (2000) writes that solidarity with the poor requires a commitment to “living simply.” This does not mean living without luxuries but instead demands that we confront our material lust. Privileged white, suburban, adolescent girls are aggressively targeted and groomed by marketers for a lifetime of consumption. As women, they will be the presumptive decision-makers in family spending; having been raised with economic advantage, they will have been taught to discern and desire an endless array of luxury items (Friedan 1963; Schor 2004). All this, plus growing concern about climate change and environmental issues, positions them to be true leaders in the collective resistance against unsustainable material consumption.

Second, concern about college admissions in communities like Litchfield has reached a fever pitch. Privileged girls may be especially vulnerable to this pressure, as they are increasingly the casualties of colleges’ informal white-male affirmative-action policies (Britz 2006). While the real-world stakes in this admissions contest are admittedly high, there is nonetheless still space for girls to practice collective resistance and, if nothing else, lead their community by calling attention to the problem. What could it mean for the girls in Troop 19 to say, collectively, that they will not participate in undermining each other for the sake of their own advancement? Positioned at the center of this phenomenon, the Litchfield girls could demand that the community attend and respond to the unintended consequences of class anxiety on its children’s identities, choices, and intimate friendships.

The road these questions may lead them down is one the residents of Litchfield would surely prefer not to travel. These privileged girls’ dilemmas of ambition and selflessness, status, and hierarchy call into question the very foundations of their unearned advantages. But if we want to prepare these girls to be effective leaders, adults must be willing to hear their concerns and support them in struggling with the real ethical dilemmas their privilege has wrought.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

# **Conclusion: Outlining a Research Agenda on Elite Education**

Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández  
and Adam Howard

Imagine: Your local public high school has a student-to-teacher ratio of five to one, with an average class size of nine. Classes are generally seminars characterized by dialogue and debate in which every student has a chance to participate and contribute to the learning process in active and generative ways. Students have access to impressive facilities, like a student center with study halls and game rooms, and an impressive library with over ten thousand volumes and access to online databases and research resources. The recently unveiled science center is a massive seventy-thousand-square-foot facility, with marine tanks, an impressive computer science center, and modern chemistry labs.

Imagine: The only standardized tests students take at your local high school are the SAT and other college-entrance examinations, for which they receive extensive preparation with dedicated tutors. A team of guidance counselors helps every student individually to define their postgraduation plans. For some, a team of career counselors ensures that students have ample access to internships and volunteer opportunities through which they can garner the necessary experience for entering the workforce. For others, an elaborate college-placement program helps them choose college programs, prepare applications, and gather the necessary documents for demonstrating their academic strengths and the extracurricular activities at which they are deemed the best.

Imagine: Teachers in your local district are given sabbaticals every five years and scholarships to further their studies and pursue academic interests of their own. The school art center has a gallery that rivals the local museum, a ceramics room, and a large loft for teaching sculpture. The old gymnasium has been renovated and expanded into an athletic complex with two state-of-the-art hockey rinks, five basketball courts, ten tennis courts, and two



swimming pools. An adjacent expanse of land is dedicated to baseball, soccer, football, and track-and-field, and there are interscholastic teams in almost every sport imaginable, from lacrosse to ultimate Frisbee.

Every single student in your district has access to this school—for free. Imagine.

While many of us might desire such extraordinary educational opportunities to be available to every child (certainly our own), the picture would be easy to dismiss as improbable, especially in a society that accepts that fomenting war and protecting its bankers is more important than properly educating its youth, where working two jobs is no guarantee of a home, while not working at all is no impediment to extreme wealth. Yet the picture briefly painted above is every bit real. At elite private as well as some elite public schools, a miniscule fraction of the school-aged population in the United States enjoys the privileges of an education that is not accessible to the vast majority.

To the large majority of our society, educational settings like elite boarding schools are not just improbable, they are unimaginable. Even for the few who are fully aware that such settings exist (and perhaps send their own children to places like it) the idea that access to such opportunities ought to be available to everyone regardless of income or background would seem unlikely, perhaps even undesirable.

Despite the lofty rhetoric of not leaving any children behind, public schools remain sorely underfunded, and as Jonathan Kozol (2005) has amply demonstrated, some children—mostly brown and poor—go to school under conditions that border on inhumanity.

As Lois Weis argues in the foreword to this volume, education continues to be a fundamental mechanism through which this inequality is reproduced and, to a large extent, justified. Yet educational researchers have largely ignored the educational experiences of the elite. This has produced a dangerous myopia that not only obfuscates the role of education in producing inequality but effectively veils the critical role of educational advantage for producing elite status.

In the context of this book, *elite status* is largely delineated by and often equated with social class. We acknowledge that there are many ways of defining *elite* that are always dependent on the context and the object of analysis. Indeed, “the term *elite* is always defined relative to a particular reference group and set of sometimes more- and sometimes less-defined criteria” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009b, 1091). In this book, the terms *elites* and *elite groups* are used to refer to those social groups that have attained a degree of financial affluence and who are able to mobilize economic, social, and cultural resources in order to secure access to particular kinds of educational experience.

We recognize that the debates about the meaning—and even the existence—of social class as a category are interminable (e.g., Kingston 2000; Weis 2007). However, as editors we have chosen not to narrow the definition of what counts as elite social status. Instead, we have deliberately allowed the authors of each chapter to engage and define elite status in the terms that are most relevant to their research context and questions. Rather than narrowing the definition of class in a way that might further obfuscate the importance of elite status, we sought to offer a broad perspective that would illuminate a range of issues related to the education of elites.

With the present realities and the uncertainties of the global economy, the need for class-based analyses of schooling and curriculum could not be more pressing. There has been a wealth of theoretical and empirical work on the relationship between social class and schooling in the past forty years. Yet this line of work is only beginning to reflect broad changes in the global economy, and, as several scholars have argued, these new conditions require new approaches and frameworks for understanding the current complexities of social class (e.g., Weis 2007).

However, few scholars have offered alternative perspectives for talking and thinking about class. In fact, as Robertson observes, social class has been confounded by

profound economic, political, and intellectual changes marking our time. . . . The shift in employment and investment from production to consumption, together with the new intellectual currents centered around . . . identity politics and the individualism of neoliberalism, have all worked to challenge the sovereignty of class and dislodge it as a fundamental analytical tool in social theory. . . . It has become unfashionable in academic circles to talk about class, as if class suddenly no longer mattered and the historic concerns of class theorists—such as inequality—have disappeared. (2000, 19)

How do we revive conversations about and explorations of class? The time is obviously ripe to look for new explanatory frameworks and new ways to generate conversations about social class and schooling. The past and present approaches to understanding social class in schooling need to be reconceived within newer theoretical perspectives in order to revive conversations about class in educational scholarship (Van Galen and Noblit 2007). As we argued in the introduction to this volume, one possible way of reviving these conversations is to turn our scholarly gazes upward. Although some researchers have studied up, important questions about elite educational environments within and outside the schooling context remain. The contributors in this book explore some of these questions and offer some new possibilities for thinking and engaging in conversations about class and education.

## CLASS LESSONS

The chapters in this book illustrate the continued importance of social class and how elite educational environments, both in and outside the schooling context, work to reinforce and regenerate class privilege. The chapters shed light into the dynamics of varied educational settings, including different kinds of institutions from K–12 schools to colleges, different kinds of environments like Girl Scout troops and summer programs, and different regions of the United States—from the Deep South to the Midwest and New England. While each chapter takes a different approach to defining the research context or population as *elite*, the research collectively points to several lessons about social class and elite status.

The chapters underscore and help us to further understand that *elite class status* is transferred from one generation to the next through a range of mechanisms, can be both hidden and visible, is experienced in both material and subjective terms, is related to the marginalization and oppression of others, and intersects with and is inflected by other categories of identification. These lessons provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of the central role of education in the production of social class in general and elite status in particular.

### **Elite Class Status Is Transferred from One Generation to the Next through a Range of Mechanisms**

In his chapter on the effects of parental educational capital on the academic trajectories and achievement of offspring, Joseph Soares adds nuance to the conclusion that elite status is transferred from one generation to the next. This insight is often challenged on the basis of a methodological individualism that demands evidence of how precisely this process works at the level of the family (Kingston 2000). In response, some of the chapters in this book clearly illustrate the cultural mechanisms through which different kinds of capital and elite status are transferred from one generation to the next.

Intergenerational transfer is clearly illustrated in June Newman-Graham's chapter through the contexts that the women of the Natchez Garden Club create to teach younger Southern belles elite class values, mannerisms, and customs in order to facilitate how younger women access privilege and power. This elite educational environment supports the structures and reinforces the cultural practices that protect the class interests of this particular local elite. Looking at the role of elite boarding schools in transmitting power and privilege, Shamus Kahn's study reveals the mechanisms through which these elite institutions facilitate the kinds

of cultural, social, and symbolic capital that give their students an advantage in the college-admissions process. His study shows us how privileged students use the resources they develop within one elite institution in order to gain access to another.

### **Elite Class Privilege Can Be Both Hidden and Visible**

Class privilege manifests itself in ways that are often taken for granted and become naturalized, remaining simultaneously hidden while also evident in elite educational environments. Privilege is the ever-present “elephant in the room” that pervades students’ educational experiences in elite settings but that is usually unacknowledged. The exclusivity of elite educational contexts also allows privilege to be both hidden and visible, perhaps noticed but unspoken. The chapters reveal that affluent students are often clustered in class-segregated communities and a sense of isolation is consistent across the various spheres of their privileged lives. Those with class privilege have little contact with the life and educational circumstances of those different from themselves, particularly those with less social status.

Jenny Stuber points out how the relative isolation of privileged students shapes their perception of others deemed either below or above a particular class group. She observes how upper-middle-class students are able to recognize nuanced class distinctions among those who are like themselves or perceived to be wealthier, while they tend to ignore or miss distinctions among peers from lower social class groups. The relative in/visibility of others constrains whether and in what ways students appear to be conscious of class differences, while it reinforces the notion that class and privilege do not matter.

The taken-for-granted nature of privilege within elite educational environments keeps class privilege unspoken and frequently justified. This is also evident in the chapter by Brett Stoudt, Peter Kuriloff, Michael Reichert, and Sharon Ravitch. The more the participants unearth the dynamics of masculinity in this elite boys school, the more privilege becomes self-evident.

Likewise, Adam Howard illustrates how privilege comes in and out of view in the lives of the two participants in his study. He observes that while both students have an analysis of many aspects of their privileged lives, they also take much for granted, and these privileges ultimately shape—albeit to starkly different ends—their individual careers. Together, the chapters point to the ways in which privilege is continuously justified by common sense views held by groups of people, whether they benefit or suffer the consequences of the unequal distribution of resources.

### **Elite Class Status Is Experienced in Both Material and Subjective Terms**

When exploring how social class shapes educational phenomena, researchers have traditionally focused primarily on the economic aspects of class. This body of scholarship has largely disregarded the social and cultural elements that give social class meaning. As the studies in this book illustrate, class is much more than economic factors reveal; class is a lived and developing process.

This is clearly seen in Adam Howard's study of two affluent students' resistance to privilege. Privilege, for these two students, is more than what advantages they have; it is a form of self-understanding that is constructed, reconstructed, and, at different points in their lives, even resisted. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Raygine DiAquoi similarly explore the complex process by which students of color negotiate institutional forces to become members of the elite. Although this elite status is influenced by material conditions of the educational context, each student comes to terms with this status in different ways.

The contributors examine some of the social and cultural aspects of class to draw attention to the complicated processes involved in the cultural production of unequal power relations. They expose some of the contours of the social and cultural elements of class. We revisit this theme in the implications section of this chapter.

### **Elite Class Status Is Related to the Marginalization and Oppression of Others**

The studies in this collection reveal how the successes of a few relate to the failures of many. As elites mobilize their material and symbolic resources to create closure, they produce circumstances of ostensible scarcity and produce boundaries that ensure the value of and access to what Soares calls *educational capital*. Khan's discussion of the strategies through which elite boarding schools enable their students to gain admission to elite universities is illustrative. While students in most other schools must strive to obtain a spot at the top of their class, students at elite schools are almost guaranteed opportunities to be the best at something.

The role that marginalized and oppressed communities play in the constitution of elite subjectivities is also evidenced in the way privileged students talk about service. Beth Benjamin's chapter illustrates the important role that service to others plays in the confirmation and internationalization of elite status. Howard's participants embrace service as a way to distance themselves from

their own status, while at the time embracing service underscores the very privileges that make their service a manifestation of their elite positions.

Likewise, for the students of color in the chapter by Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquoi, their own identification with nonwhite communities becomes an important source for how they come to construct particular elite identifications. In short, elite status and privilege can only exist in relationship to nonelite status and lack of privilege, and both constitute each other.

### **Elite Class Status Intersects with and Is Inflected by Other Categories of Identification**

Several of the studies in this book reveal the critical ways in which social class interacts and intersects with other social categories of identification and subjective positions. Stoudt, Kuriloff, Reichert, and Ravitch explore how elite masculinities are enacted in ways that enforce heteronormative gender norms. While Stoudt and his colleagues show the important role that a narrow conception of masculinity plays in the production of privilege, Newman-Graham shows the role of elite femininity in the consolidation of elite status among Southern belles (see also Chase 2008). Benjamin's chapter similarly highlights how relationships among elite girls both reflect and depart from relational patterns that have become normalized among young women.

Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquoi's study reveals how race and class interact through the complex process by which students of color at an elite boarding school have become *a part* of the life of the institution while simultaneously remaining *apart* from it. The divergent paths that the participants in Howard's study have taken following their college degrees also suggests that both gender and race inflect the ways individuals experience and respond to the consequences and demands on their elite status.

The five aspects of elite status described above point to a more nuanced conception of social class and open the doors for a more robust exploration of elite education. They set the stage for the growth of a renewed research agenda on the education of elites.

### **LOOKING AHEAD: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In this section, we offer some reflections about various implications that the chapters in this book might have for future research that considers the education of elites. Given the range of topics and approaches to the subject of elite schooling represented in these chapters, it is probable—in fact, likely—that

different readers will draw different implications and ideas for their own work. The comments that follow are intended to suggest future possibilities in the study of elites. We begin by discussing some questions related to “macro structural dynamics” and follow by expanding on four topics identified in a recent review of the literature on elite boarding schools: resources and opportunities, curriculum and pedagogy, subjectivity, and methodology (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009b).

### **Macro Structural Dynamics**

In his chapter on the effect of educational capital on academic achievement and college prospects, Joseph Soares directs our attention to the processes through which parents pass social class status to their offspring through means beyond economic capital. Soares notes the importance of collecting more data about educational capital beyond “years of schooling” and “credential type” in order to gain a more nuanced picture of the sorts of educational experiences that actually influence the transference of status. He concludes that it is not just how long and for what kind of degree someone attended postsecondary education, but where and what kind of educational capital one accumulates that makes a difference in the future success of offspring.

We need a better understanding of these macro social dynamics. Whether and how this particular kind of “capital” translates into other kinds of elite status remains an open question. Soares’s chapter underscores that despite the appearance of a more democratic and inclusive system of higher education, inequalities persist in ways that benefit those who have already accumulated educational capital. But how precisely does this process take place in action?

Khan’s chapter begins to illuminate the processes by which college admissions ensures precisely what Soares documents in terms of enabling the passage from elite boarding schools to elite universities, even in a context of increased “diversity.” Khan’s work complements the important contributions of Mitchell Stevens (2007) to our understanding of how selective admissions operates to advantage those who already enjoy class privilege. While both Khan and Stevens offer a description of the process by which educational capital is transferred, further analyses of the effects of these processes on wealth distribution are necessary.

It has been some time since anyone considered the effect of attending an elite boarding school or other kinds of elite private schools on future success, whether academic or economic, and employment (see Useem and Karabel 1986). In addition, we need much better data and models for establishing the effect of attending elite public schools on future social class status.

It would also be interesting to explore how different kinds of elites accumulate different kinds of educational capital. For instance, are there differences between the educational capital of the Southern elites families documented in Newman-Graham's chapter and the young women in the chapter by Benjamin? What is the difference between the educational capital of women and that of men, and how does this shape offspring? In short, much more research is necessary to get a clearer picture of the relationships between the educational variables that influence and the extent to which they determine elite status.

### **Resources and Opportunities**

One of the insights that the chapters in this book highlight is that having access to resources and opportunities matters not only in terms of "effects" on future status but also in terms of the kinds of educational experiences that elites enjoy. Having access to a broad range of resources and opportunities is a critical aspect of the educational experiences of elites and one that appears to make a considerable difference in how elites are oriented toward their future.

In their respective ethnographies of elite boarding schools, both Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) and Khan (forthcoming) find that the feeling of endless space and opportunities provides students with a sense that they can "find a niche" to be "the best of the best." In chapter 6 of this book, Khan demonstrates the key role that this expansive range of opportunities plays in the admissions game. Because top colleges are looking for top students, elite boarding schools have the resources to provide ample opportunities for everyone to be "the top" at something. "Everyone can find a place to be the best at something, and everyone can develop a notable character. So when college counselors get on the phone, they have an interesting story to tell about almost every student—a story that colleges want to hear" (109).

One kind of experience that has become increasingly important as an area of distinction for elite students is service learning. In the chapters by Benjamin and Howard we find examples of different ways in which service plays a role in the education of elites and the apparent contradictions embedded in the notion of service learning. Recent work on service learning is beginning to address questions of privilege and the extent to which service operates as a form of charity that ends up underscoring inequality without addressing larger questions of justice (e.g., Swaminathan, 2007). Further research into the ways in which service learning and civil-engagement activities operate as learning opportunities for elite students are further needed.

We need to better understand the processes by which some parents are able to achieve closure around resources that are ostensibly public but that



end up unequally distributed along social class boundaries. For example, what is the effect of parental involvement, fund-raising, and other resources in the substantial differences between different kinds of public schools? The research on school choice demonstrates that parents with the most resources have the most room for making choices that they feel will advantage their children. Yet we don't know how these choices are related to different kinds of elite status or how they translate into "success"—academic, economic, or otherwise—for their children.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

In their retrospective chapter, Cookson and Persell assert that the explicit curriculum available to students in elite boarding schools is substantively different from what is available to the large majority of students in U.S. schools. They underscore the point that differences in the actual content that different kinds of schools deliver through courses matters for how they prepare students to assume particular social roles. This is not a new finding yet is one that requires further attention and nuance.

Since Anyon's (1981) classic study of the differences in curriculum between affluent and working-class schools, little attention has been paid to how the explicit curriculum itself is evidence of gross inequality. Anyon also pointed to the role of different kinds of pedagogy and was one of the first to illustrate that differences in how students are taught matter for class distinctions. Future research might revisit Anyon's earlier study and document how differences in the curriculum available at different kinds of schools shape educational inequality.

In her chapter on the education of the Southern belle, June Newman-Graham contributes to the discussion about pedagogies of privilege by describing the process by which elite women gain the necessary literacies for fulfilling their role as keepers of white Southern grandeur and history. Like Newman-Graham, Benjamin demonstrates the importance that pedagogy has for producing particular ways of seeing the world that correspond with elite status.

Indeed, these pedagogical engagements are not just significant in terms of what and how students in elite educational settings come to learn but also in how they come to understand themselves as subjects. Yet the notion of a pedagogy of privilege needs further attention (Margolin 1996). If we take the insight that pedagogy is a fundamental way by which social class codes are communicated or taught as a starting point (e.g., Bernstein 1971), the details of what this actually entails need further documentation. In particular, we need to better understand how pedagogical approaches accomplish or play a role in the production of particular elite subjectivities.

## **Subjectivity**

One of the key insights from recent work on social class is that class status is not simply defined by or related to material wealth but it is, rather, fundamentally a subjective experience. As Luttrell argues, “the power of social class is hidden in notions of and feelings about individual worth, dignity, and respectability” (2007, 62). Luttrell argues that social class works from the outside in, through public discourses and ideologies, and from the inside out, through the articulation of internalized elite identifications. The chapters in this volume further this point by underscoring how social class shapes subjective positions and both enables and constrains how individuals fashion a particular self.

Several of the chapters in this book deal with how those who have social-class privilege make sense of their extraordinary fortune and how they either come to terms with that privilege or develop elaborate ways to either ignore or recast their status. Howard provides two contrasting examples of how two students seek to distance themselves from their social class as a way of dealing with the anxiety that elite status produces. Both students follow distinct paths, one sustaining a commitment to relinquishing status, the other ending up embracing his elite status. Stuber offers examples of the elaborate discourses through which elite students try to downplay their status. The college students in her chapter avoid talking about their own privilege by establishing comparisons with those who have even more economic resources, while largely ignoring, downplaying, or subtly justifying differences with those who have less.

These insights are crucial to enhancing our understanding of elite social-class status as a subjective position. The internal experiences of class status are crucial for understanding how status is transferred, internalized, and justified and how psychic processes work to keep privilege hidden or assumed. This work requires a rethinking of the methodologies that are traditionally used for studying educational phenomena. Indeed, some of the chapters point to fascinating methodological questions and opportunities for furthering the study of elites in education.

## **Methodology**

Doing work on elites is not easy, and a range of methodological challenges as well as opportunities are evident in the chapters in this book. Because many of these challenges have been discussed elsewhere (Hertz and Imber 1995; Walford 1994), we want to focus here on some of the opportunities and successful strategies suggested in these chapters. Soares’s chapter points to important kinds of data that large-scale surveys should be collecting with

regards to college attendance. His findings suggest the promise that such data might hold for our understanding of how elites pass on educational privilege across generations.

Cookson and Persell take advantage of the enormous amount of resources and information now available publically through the Internet. As the Internet becomes increasingly important as a way to recruit students and disseminate information, it provides researchers with more access to information about elite schools. Course catalogues, virtual tours, testimonials, recruitment materials, statistical information, and other kinds of institutional descriptors now make it a lot easier to access information that was previously more difficult to attain. Social networking sites like Facebook (originally started as a site for Harvard students and alumni) provide an untapped source of access to students that can bypass the carefully guarded gates of elite educational institutions.

Perhaps the most innovative methodological approach comes from the chapter by Stoudt and colleagues. Participatory action research, or PAR, has emerged as an important methodology for engaging marginalized groups in the process of doing research into and finding solutions for their self-identified problems. Stoudt and his colleagues innovatively engage the same methodology in a context of affluence and privilege. They demonstrate the critical role that it can play not only in bringing elites into view for scholars but also in exposing the ironies of elite status to the very people that inhabit those spaces.

Engaging participatory action research in elite educational settings is an innovative and promising approach to the study of elites. It also points to the possibilities of developing projects that might bring together elite and marginalized groups into a research process in which they might learn a lot about each other and about their interdependence.

## **CONCLUSION: TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF ELITE EDUCATION**

The study of elites in the United States has been a long time coming, and we hope that it is here to stay. While a more sustained scholarly engagement with the study of elites has been slow to evolve, we are enthusiastic about the breadth of new work and the emergence of new possibilities. Several new important works on elite colleges and universities (e.g., Soares 2007; Stevens 2007), on elite private and public schools (e.g., Chase 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a; Howard 2008; Khan, forthcoming), and on the role of parenting and family dynamics (e.g., Lareau 2003) are beginning

to reveal this world and contribute to our understanding of elite schooling. The chapters in this book further contribute to this body of literature, underscoring the continued importance of elite class status in the reproduction of inequality.

Increasingly, the implications of this work point to a fundamental ethical question that challenges educators in all contexts: is the role of educators to interrupt or to further participate in the process of reproducing inequality? The research reveals the fallacy behind the myth that it is possible to leave no children behind. Indeed, whether we're talking about those without health insurance, those without homes, or those stricken by natural disaster, it should be obvious that in the United States the rule is more than apparent that those who have always gotten ahead stay ahead and those who haven't always stay behind.

The chapters in this book take us through a wide gamut of educational contexts to illustrate that inequality is pervasive and that advantage yields more advantage. Whether this is the kind of future we—as educators—desire is a question we must ask honestly and on which we must act decisively. If what the chapters in this book reveal seems fair and justifiable, then it must be made obvious or explicit, not hidden behind the rhetoric of social justice and equality. The mythologies of choice, equity, and access must be abandoned. If, on the other hand, what these chapters reveal seems troubling and fundamentally unjust, we must act proactively not only to expose it explicitly but also to point to the inherent injustice. In either case, the project of the new sociology of elite education must be to reveal what is hidden about social class, whether to explain why things are fair as they are or to fundamentally transform them.

It would be disingenuous to try to suggest that we, as editors of this book, do not have a position on this matter, and this concluding chapter should make our position obvious. Unearned educational advantage is fundamentally antidemocratic and unjust. Interrupting it requires understanding it, making it explicit, and calling it by its name. The more we know about the education of the elite, then the more opportunities we have to imagine how things might be different by making the hidden character of elite education visible. Indeed, to recall Paulo Freire's (1998) fundamental insight about literacy, it is when we begin to name injustice that we begin to create the process of change.

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