

## **The Interactive Relationship Between Class Identity and the College Experience: The Case of Lower Income Students**

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*To probe the role that college context plays in influencing the class-based aspects of identity for lower income students, we interviewed 30 lower income students, 15 from an elite college and 15 from a state college. Significant disparities of wealth between students at the elite college heightened awareness of class, and led to feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, deficiency, exclusion, and powerlessness among lower income students, feelings that were less prevalent among state college students. Students at both colleges acquired new forms of cultural capital and coped with class-based discontinuities between who they were before college and who they were becoming, but these issues became heightened for the elite college students.*

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Prestigious colleges and universities in the United States have become increasingly concerned that the students they are educating come disproportionately from upper-income families. The top colleges draw three-quarters of their students from the wealthiest quarter of families in America, and only three percent of students from the poorest quarter (Marx 2004). Lower-income white students in particular are underrepresented at highly selective colleges and universities, and with only 1% of white matriculants coming from families with incomes below \$22,000 with two parents who did not attend college (Bowen and Bok 1998). Apprehension is growing at elite colleges and universities that they are “reproducing social advantage instead of serving as an engine of mobility” (Leonhardt 2004). Presidents

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of elite schools argue that these schools have a “profound responsibility to help meet our national challenge of achieving equal opportunity” (Summers 2004), and that if opportunities are not increased for low income students to attend such schools, “we will neither prepare any of our students for the world, nor will we serve our role in that world” (Marx 2004). These issues, while somewhat unique to the more mass-based tradition of higher education in the United States, may well strike a similar chord in societies like Great Britain (Furlong 1992; Furlong and Cartmel 1997) that have been widening class access to colleges and universities over the past three decades.

As prestigious colleges commit themselves to seeking greater economic diversity among their student body, attention must be paid to the challenges as well as the benefits for low income students who enter elite colleges. A college education indeed broadens an individual’s employment opportunities and opportunities for self-development, but comes not without personal costs (Baxter and Britton 2001). For lower income students, many of whom represent the first generation in their family to attend college, entrance to college means an encounter with faculty and students from very different class backgrounds than their own. Baxter and Britton (p. 93) suggest the changes lower income students undergo have “significant effects on their sense of self, as well as on relations with friends and colleagues who still inhabit the ‘old’ world.”

Within the field of psychology, distinctiveness theory (McGuire 1984) predicts that a person’s distinguishing traits such as ethnicity (McGuire, McGuire, Child, and Fujioka 1978) or gender (McGuire, McGuire, and Winton 1979) will become more salient. To the variables of ethnicity, race and gender that distinctiveness theory has focused on, we would add social class. Indeed, personal accounts by working class individuals who entered college or graduate school, or became university professors document the difficulties they experience due to class-based differences (Dews and Law 1995; Hoyt 1999; Lawler 1999; Ryan and Sackrey 1984; Tokarczyk and Fay 1993). Feelings of pain, ambivalence, displacement, alienation and shame may accompany the upward social mobility that higher education offers (Granfield 1991; Lawler 1999; Ostrove 2003; Stewart and Ostrove 1993; Skeggs 1997). Identities must be renegotiated (Baxter and Britton 2001), for identities change in importance and meaning as the context changes (Deaux 1991; Markus and Kunda 1986; Stryker 1987), and identities must accommodate the new life experiences that cannot be assimilated successfully (Marcia 1994, p. 71).

In the present research we sought to understand how class-based aspects of identity shape the college experience, and how the college experience influences the class-based aspects of identity of lower income students. This interactive relationship between class-based identity and the college experience occurs within a particular social context. Thus we highlight the ways that institutional variability (i.e., the type of college one attends) shapes that relationship. It is not uncommon for students entering college to feel intimidated, uncertain of the competition and

concerned about how they will adjust to their new circumstances. But lower income students at prestigious liberal arts colleges face an additional set of challenges, as they lack the financial resources (or “economic capital”) and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) of their more affluent counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

At an elite boys’ private preparatory school (Kuriloff and Reichert 2003), white boys from blue-collar families perceived the upper class boys to have high status academically and socially, while they found themselves on the margins. They felt the wealthy students often “excluded poorer students, acted insensitively towards them, or simply failed to see them.” (p. 761). Absent a class critique, they blamed themselves for their shortcomings and feelings of inadequacy. It is possible that the white blue-collar boys also formed their own social group due to shared tastes and preferences, forming what Lamont and Lareau (1988) refer to as naturally occurring “elective affinities.” Like the working class boys in this study, we expected that lower income elite college students would experience greater social difficulties than state college students due to greater disparities in economic and cultural capital between students at the elite college than at the state college. Our interest was in examining how social context can play an important role in making salient the absence of economic and cultural capital of lower income students. One’s economic and cultural capital take on meaning within a social context, a dimension that has received insufficient attention in previous research.

The experience of a college education brings opportunities for growth and development, as students acquire more knowledge, encounter new people, ideas and values. But for lower income students an additional dimension of the growth and development that occurs is the acquisition of new forms of cultural capital that affluent students already possess. Movement between classes challenges and changes self-identities and relationships (Baxter and Britton 2001) and involves changes in judgment, taste, opinions, preferences and practices (Stewart and Ostrove 1993). Kuriloff and Reichert (2003, p. 760) document how working class boys at an elite preparatory school gradually learn to speak and dress like the highly affluent students, to develop “habits of mind and heart (a habitus) that elite schools have long believed prepare students for material success.” This research would lead us to expect that lower income students at both the elite and state college would acquire new forms of cultural capital at college, but lower income students at the elite college would experience greater changes due to exposure to many highly affluent students and to greater resources and opportunities.

As students leave the family for college and are exposed to new beliefs, values, interests and life styles, relationships with friends and family often change and are renegotiated (Karp, Holstrom, and Gray 1998). But a particular set of problems arises for lower income students due to the identity changes entailed

<sup>1</sup>We will look at cultural capital broadly to include “knowledge of or competence with ‘highbrow’ aesthetic culture” (Lareau and Weininger 2003, p. 568) as well as skills or ability that “provide access to scarce rewards” (p. 587), a perspective also followed by Lareau (2000, 2003).

in accommodating to the middle class world of the academy. Baxter and Britton (2001, p. 99) describe lower income students who go on to higher education as being “on a trajectory of class mobility, which is experienced as a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority.” This research would lead us to expect that the lower income elite college students would have to cope with greater discontinuities than would their counterparts at the state college. Thus we will examine the reciprocal relationship between students’ class-based identity and the college experience with attention to the importance of institutional context in this process.

## METHOD

### Participants

We interviewed a total of 30 lower income students, including 15 students who attended a highly selective liberal arts school (labeled Little Ivy), and 15 students who attended a state college (State College), as part of a larger study of social class and identity. We recognized that age, race and gender would influence the college experience of lower income students. Given that the experiences of lower income students who are African-American, Hispanic, Asian and white may differ from one another, we decided to hold race constant and to restrict our sample to students who were white. Students at Little Ivy were all of traditional college age, so we limited our sample at State College to students of traditional age as well. The groups were equally balanced by gender.

Family incomes for all but one of the State College group were under \$50,000. One third had a father and 27% had a mother who had completed college, and 60% were first generation college students. These demographic data correlate well with entering State College students as a whole, where 43.6% of the students estimate their family incomes at below \$50,000, and another 12.9% at between \$50,000 and \$60,000, and approximately a third had a mother or father with a college degree (2002 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) institutional data). The median income is between \$60,000 and \$75,000 (2002 CIRP Institutional Summary). Parental education and family income for the Little Ivy sample was slightly higher than for the State College sample: half of the mothers and of fathers had completed college, and a third of the participants were first generation college students. Parental incomes were less than \$60,000, with half the students reporting parental incomes between \$20,000–\$49,999. These Little Ivy sample data also correlate well with the Little Ivy population of entering low income white students from families with incomes under \$60,000, where 46.3% of fathers and 52.8% of mothers have not completed college (2002 CIRP Institutional Data). Forty percent of the students at Little Ivy come from families with parental

**Table I.** Family Income and Education by Group

	Little Ivy		State college
	Affluent (%)	Lower income (%)	
Family income <sup>a</sup>			
Under \$20,000	0.0	0.0	16.7
\$20,000–\$49,999	0.0	53.3	75.0
\$50,000–\$59,999	0.0	46.7	0.0
\$60,000–\$110,000	0.0	0.0	8.3
Over \$110,000	100.0	0.0	0.0
Father completed college	100	47.0	33.3
Mother completed college	100	53.0	26.7
Neither parent Completed college	0	33.3	60.0

<sup>a</sup>Three State College students have missing data for parental income. Percentages are based on the 12 students who reported parental income.

incomes over \$150,000; the median income is between \$100,000 and \$150,000 (2002 CIRP institutional data).<sup>2</sup>

While we began our study using a simple income measure as an indicator of class, as we analyzed our sample we noted differences in parental education, differences that we would have to take into account, particularly since we are interested in the role of “cultural capital” in student adjustment and identity. Thus, we have taken into account the fact that only one-third of our Little Ivy sample is first generation, while 60% of our State College sample fits that category. (These differences should not be surprising. For low income students to make it to Little Ivy it helps having a parent or parents who have had the college experience, have the “right” vocabulary, know the differences between elite and non-elite colleges, and can help navigate the hurdles of the college application process.) Therefore we have tried to determine if the additional cultural capital (measured by parental education) that some lower income students bring to their college campuses makes a significant difference in their college experiences.

In his autobiographical study of upwardly mobile working class students, Lubrano (2004) refers to first generation college graduates from the working class as “straddlers,” as having made it into the middle class, but still possessing working class values, and a fair measure of guilt and ambivalence at achieving their new status. Lubrano simply defines non-college educated parents as working class, and their college educated children as middle class, often conflating a blue collar status with a high school diploma, and a college sheepskin with a middle class status. In this research, we will look more closely at family origin, its economic as well as its educational status, recognizing that parents may well be low income (i.e. working class) and college educated. Children from that family type may well have less “straddler” problems than those from the family type stereotyped by Lubrano.

<sup>2</sup>Data on family income and education for the three groups can be found in Table I.

## Procedure

At Little Ivy, all white first and second year students receiving financial aid whose family incomes were less than \$50,000 received a letter from the Director of Financial Aid saying they qualified for a study on identity, and were asked to contact the researchers if they were interested in participating. When this did not produce a large enough sample, a second letter went out to all white first and second year students whose parental incomes were less than \$60,000. With this second letter, a “lower income” sample was constituted. Since State College students differed very little in family income, and those incomes were comparable to the Little Ivy “lower income” sample, there was no need to draw a stratified sample, and all participants were simply recruited from compulsory social science or introductory sociology classes. On both campuses, participants received \$20 in compensation for participation in an interview, which ranged from 1–2 hours.

## Interview

Interviews were conducted by the authors, who are both white and in their mid to late 50’s. The female author is from an upper middle class family, and the male author from a working class family. Both authors conducted roughly half of the interviews at each of the schools. The interviews were conducted either in empty study rooms or faculty offices, and ranged from one to two hours. Students were interviewed in the spring semester of either their first or second year of college. A year after the initial interview we re-contacted our participants, and 60% agreed to return for a second interview, which ranged from 30 minutes to one hour.

We used semi-structured interviews because we wanted to provide the participants the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which social class had an impact on their identities, their interactions with others, and their college experiences.<sup>3</sup> This qualitative approach has had a major influence among researchers in the sociology of education, including those focused on issues of educational inequality, socialization, and identity formation (Riehl 2001). Since relatively little work has been done with college students asking them to discuss their class background,

<sup>3</sup>We asked students the following questions: What differences has social class made in the things you do? What things are made easier or harder? On a day-by-day basis, how much thought do you give to your social class? Are there contexts in which it becomes salient? Would you say your social class is expressed in the way you present yourself physically, in your clothing, hairstyle, cosmetics, the way you interact with others? Was class ever a factor in your interactions on campus? Has there ever been an incident here on campus where you felt your class position caused you to be left out, put down, dismissed, or discriminated against? Do you feel your college experiences have changed the way you see the world, the way you think about things, your attitudes, your tastes, your values? How have these changes affected your relationships with friends at home? Do you find yourself changing your language or dress when you go home? What happens if you don’t switch language or dress? Have the changes you’ve made brought you closer, or made you more distant from friends at home? How have your experiences at college affected your relationships with parents?

and since we were well aware of the often taboo strictures against discussing class (Perrucci and Wyson 2003), we wanted to provide students with a comfortable and open setting to reflect on their biographies. From the data provided by this interactive process we hoped to come up with the major themes that underline students' experiences. The ultimate objective was "to form explanations and theories that are grounded in the details, evidence, and examples of the interviews" (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 4).

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed to permit later coding. Both authors read all the transcripts. The first author went through the transcripts and identified statements as falling into one of the following three categories: reactions to lack of cultural or economic capital; changes caused by the college experience; and ways of coping with class-based discontinuity. From those statements the first author then identified themes. The second author responded to and modified the themes identified by the first author.

## RESULTS

### **Difficulties Faced by Lower-Income Students Who Come to College Lacking the Cultural and Economic Capital of the Middle and Upper-Middle Class Students**

#### *Little Ivy*

Differences in the economic capital of the affluent and lower income students became salient to the lower income students upon arrival at college. For Rob<sup>4</sup> a moment that stood out occurred during orientation soon after he arrived at Little Ivy. In an address to new students, an administrator proudly announced that almost half the students were receiving financial aid. Rob's father had a college degree but held a blue-collar job and Rob's mother had not completed college. Rob's family had gone through some very hard times financially causing him to think of himself growing up "as the poor kid." As Rob reported:

when [the administrator] said, as if it was something impressive, 48% of the students here are on financial aid, and I thought that meant 52% of them aren't and their parents make over \$120,000 a year, which is a lot of money to me. Not only that, but it means that among the kids that are on financial aid, plenty of them, I am sure that their parents make over \$80,000 to \$90,000 a year. It hit me that I am really different here.

The economic capital of the affluent students stood out in their possessions, in their electronic equipment (e.g., large screen televisions, stereos, computers), dorm furnishings (e.g., leather couches, designer bedding), designer clothes, expensive cars, and in the money they spent on possessions (e.g., CDs, DVDs, videos, clothes), meals off campus at expensive restaurants, and vacations (e.g., to Europe,

<sup>4</sup>We have used pseudonyms throughout to protect students' confidentiality.

Caribbean resorts, family estates). For the lower income students, their lack of such possessions and the money required for such lifestyles seemed clear markers of their difference. The lower income students made many references to the possessions and lifestyles of the affluent students. Despite the fact that many of these students had a parent who had completed college, their lack of economic capital proved highly salient to them.

Carl grew up in a single parent home with his mother who had a college degree but worked as a secretary. Carl had attended a public magnet school that included students from some very wealthy backgrounds, and as Carl described himself:

I was always the different kid who didn't have the right equipment. . . . I felt I didn't have the right clothes, and I was made fun of for having dirty old holey sneakers, or just not the right clothes, especially in elementary school and middle school. . . . [At Little Ivy] I came with just clothes and a toothbrush where others came with computers, televisions, video games, etc. . . . I didn't have a winter coat. You don't need a winter coat in [my home town] and those are expensive. I didn't have the money for that. I didn't have very warm clothes at all. I didn't have a computer. I didn't think I needed a computer. I can use the ones here in the computer lab.

Allen's parents had both completed college but his father was forced into early retirement from his white-collar job, and his mother subsequently retired, so their family income had dropped significantly. Allen was struck by students who "just blow \$500 shopping on-line or something just like [on] impulse;" Marie, raised by an immigrant mother and grandmother, neither of whom had completed college, was told growing up that she was "on the low end of the spectrum" and "there's other people who are going to think that they're better than you." Marie was aware that there were "certain ways to show off you're rich, like wear little Tiffany necklaces." Many lower income students remarked on the lifestyles of the affluent students, with their BMWs, their trips abroad for spring break, and their dinners at expensive restaurants. Kate, a first generation college student with two working parents said, "I think most of my friends here are upper, upper middle, upper class. The presence of wealth is felt a lot more here than I've ever experienced."

As the lower income students discussed the ways in which they differed from the affluent students, the following themes emerged, capturing negative feelings based on class-based differences: inadequacy, inferiority, intimidation, exclusion and powerlessness.

*Inadequacy, Inferiority and Intimidation.* A number of the lower income students worried about their self-presentation and focused in particular on inadequacies of their linguistic competence, e.g., their inability to articulate their ideas clearly, deficiencies in their grammar, their regional accents (see also Baxter and Britton 2001; Granfield 1991; Skeggs 1997). These problems seemed particularly acute for the first generation students lacking in cultural capital. When speaking up in class some students worried that their speech would mark them as less intelligent than the other students. Ann, the daughter of blue collar immigrants and a first generation student, commented on her own anxiety: "In class I have all these

ideas sometimes and saying them is like, ‘What did I just say? I must have come across like an idiot!’ So I don’t think I’m very eloquent.”

The language of home was often not the language spoken in the academy. Sarah, a first generation college student whose parents worked blue-collar jobs remarked, “The people I’m used to at home are very different in just grammar.” Several lower income students became aware of their regional accents, which they found to be devalued in the college context (see Skeggs 1997). As Marie said, “I was never aware of [regional accent] before I got to [Little Ivy]. Nobody pointed it out to me and I have been to a lot of places. Here it seems to come up all the time.” Her native language was not English, and she grew up in an ethnic community in a large city. She described a discussion with a peer who declared that students at Little Ivy did not have regional accents “because educated people from the upper class wouldn’t have regional accents.” That statement gave Marie a new perspective on her self-presentation. Marie said that statement

really got me thinking, you know, do people hear the way I talk and do they think that [I am not educated and from the upper class] right away about me? Am I even aware of this? And should I be ashamed of it? And should I try to change it?

Speech, then, proved to be a marker of class background that could cause others to look down upon lower income students, an aspect of self that made them feel inadequate.

Lower income students, and in particular first generation students, came to view their own parents through a new lens as they compared their parents to the parents of the affluent students, and the differences seemed associated with deficiency. Their parents had less education, and their parents’ occupations held less status and prestige. Sarah spoke of having a hard time telling people about her dad’s blue-collar job as a mechanic “when they say [their] father is a doctor, or [their] father is a writer.” She described her parents as “not like” Little Ivy in “their level of education, the way they speak,” and confessed that “it was always kind of weird for them to come here. It seemed like they didn’t belong.”

The education and skills of the parents of the affluent students enabled them to be resources for their children in ways that the parents of the lower income students were not. According to Ann, a first generation student, “People on my floor talk about their mothers being professors and editing their papers, and part of me is just like ‘I feel awful, why couldn’t I have had that?’”

While many of the affluent students had taken numerous trips abroad and within the United States while growing up, most of the lower income students had not had such experiences. As Mark, who had one parent who had completed college, stated, “My personal experience is very narrow really. I grew up in a rural county. I went to high school in a small city but I’ve never had the experience of a major city like New York or Chicago or anything like that.” Marie noted that:

Most of the kids in high school that I would have known definitely had never left the country. I think that in one class [at Little Ivy], I think it was French, they went around the

classroom and most everybody had been to France. If you had asked that question at my high school it wouldn't have been like that at all.

Such occurrences reminded lower income students that they were outsiders from a culture and set of experiences shared by other students. In addition, lower income students felt inferior because the cultural practice of travel abroad helps affluent students with the acquisition of foreign language skills, while they lacked this capital.

Several lower income students spoke of feeling intimidated by the wealthy students, especially by those who had attended prep schools, bastions of social privilege to which most lower income students had no access, and which provided a breeding they had not acquired. Some were made anxious more generally by the possession of wealth, which to them signaled superiority. As Paul admitted, "I feel intimidated by money. This is like psychology. Rich people are better. Rich people are successful. I don't have money so I'm not successful. That's generally how I think of it to an extent. It's required a lot of conscious effort to overcome the initial hesitancy." Despite the fact that Paul's parents had graduate degrees, they had worked low wage jobs, and Paul recalled: "My parents fought every single day about money for every single day of my life until they were divorced."

Lower income students, and in particular first generation students, became conscious of the advantages their affluent peers possessed by being rich in economic and cultural capital (e.g., linguistic competence, opportunities to travel widely, parental resources). Their contrasting lack of capital caused feelings of inferiority and intimidation.

*Exclusion.* Many lower income students felt their class backgrounds made it difficult for them to connect to the wealthy students. While the first generation students were more likely to express feelings of inadequacy, inferiority and intimidation, feelings of exclusion were not exclusive to first generation lower income students. As Rob phrased it:

I would love to be friends with [wealthy students], but I do feel I am excluded based on class . . . One of the first nights I got here I tried to meet people. There was a party in my dorm on the second floor. I didn't realize it was a rich white kids' party. Everyone was giving me one-word answers, turning their face and that made me feel kind of crummy that night.

It was not just that more affluent students failed to include them; the lower income students often found it difficult to bridge the gulf. For Paul, simply knowing he was around wealthier people caused him to be "deaf and dumb." He went on to say:

There is just such immaterial knowledge. [Wealthy students] know that they make up a certain subset of the population, and that they have a certain niche, and it fosters in them a really unique bond between each other and excludes you. They can be totally friendly with me, not hostile or anything like that, but it excludes me in ways. It's attitude and personality. The way you react to everything. The way that we look at a sporting event on television, like a basketball game. I know a lot about basketball and I enjoy it. I am like this passive fan

where my roommate and his friends talk about prior games that they have been to, players they have met, training in a gym with one player on the opposing team. Just being part of that and feeling much more involved in that team or event in a way that I wasn't.

This experience of being marginalized has been noted by other researchers in studies of elite boys' (Kuriloff and Reichert 2003) and elite girls' preparatory schools (Horvat and Antonio 1999). Like the social geography of the elite boys preparatory school studied by Kuriloff and Reichert (2003, p. 760) where an exclusive "center" existed made up of upper class students with lower income and non-white students on the margins, so too at Little Ivy there appeared to be an unspoken "center" from which many lower income students felt excluded. The exclusion felt by lower income students also resembles the experience of African American girls in a predominantly white, elite, all-girls preparatory school. The African American girls at that school felt they were outsiders, that they did not fit or belong and were not recognized as full members of the school community (Horvat and Antonio 1999).

Some of the tastes and preferences of the lower income students differed from those of the wealthy students, and led to their exclusion. Peter grew up in a blue-collar family, and remembers living on food stamps for several years. Despite the fact that his mother later achieved a graduate degree and currently works as a scientist, Peter reported feeling "slightly left out when they talk about skiing, musicals, etc., because I haven't been exposed to that. . . . I like classical music once in a while, but I don't enjoy it or I wouldn't choose to go to the opera. I'd go bowling ten times instead." Wealth and leisure give one the opportunity to explore the arts and intellectual realms not directly relevant to job opportunities, and many lower income students have developed different preferences and values based on necessity. These preferences may lead to self-exclusion (Lamont and Lareau 1988).

The ongoing lifestyles of the affluent students required resources that the lower income students did not possess, and that also led to their exclusion. Lower income students could not afford to accompany their friends on trips abroad for spring break, or to go to dinners at high priced restaurants. So, too, the African American girls at the predominantly white, elite, preparatory school studied by Horovot and Antonio (1999) could not afford to accompany the affluent girls to their frequent lunches off campus. Some Little Ivy students reported that they never went out to eat, or if they accompanied others to restaurants, they hid their lack of resources by not ordering anything. While the cultural signals of the affluent students may have been sent unconsciously, the unintended consequences remained.

*Powerlessness.* One lower income student spoke of being rendered powerless socially because of his lack of economic resources, a requirement for shaping social life. Carl described:

the system of drinking [at Little Ivy], that you host and you provide and nobody ever gives you any money towards it. You host and people get some sort of power by buying the keg.

People who have a lot of money to throw lots of parties and have provided all the resources of alcohol and marijuana, and people get a sense of power from that.

While lower income students might be included in these parties, the organization of social life required resources they did not possess.

Lower income students also felt greater powerlessness relative to the affluent students in determining their own futures. The affluent students could plan on future careers that required graduate degrees without having to worry about the costs of further education, while the lower income students felt constrained by their financial need. Karen, a second generation college student, had planned to go to graduate school, but her father had recently gone on disability and faced a future of expensive medical care. She said: "It makes me feel that these financial concerns are shaping my future goals and not necessarily shaping the rest of [the other students' goals]."

However, class-based difference did not always bring feelings of inadequacy, intimidation and exclusion for the lower income students. Friendships did, in fact, develop across class lines. Marie felt that "people at [Little Ivy] do a pretty good job of hiding [class]. It has surprised me to discover that some of my friends do have a lot of money." Several times students referred to the ways in which others might display or "perform" a class identity different than their own, a phenomenon noted by Bettie (2000). As Carl, a Little Ivy student, put it, "It's hard to tell who's from that background, because class is something that you can hide. You can perform your identity and pretend to be part of another class. So it's really hard to tell." When asked whether there had ever been an incident on campus where they felt left out or put down due to their class position, for half the students no incident came immediately to mind.

### *State College*

Because our State College sample was not surrounded by highly affluent students, class-based differences did not generally seem salient to them. The State College students did not make comments about markedly different material possessions from other students, and made no mention of students who went out to expensive dinners, made extravagant purchases, or took trips abroad for spring break. They did not seem particularly aware of their speech (e.g., ability to express themselves, grammar, or regional accents); most had not gone out of state to college and thus were not in contact with students speaking in different regional accents. They had less reason to feel excluded and intimidated, and never mentioned feeling powerless. In the few instances where working class students at State College spoke of interactions with more affluent students, they were cognizant, however, of being judged as less adequate. Chris, a first generation college student whose father was disabled and often unemployed, and whose mother was unemployed due to illness, spoke of having a roommate from an

“upper-level class” who, because of his money, “thinks he’s just way better than everyone.”

While many State College students volunteered that their clothes reflected their social class position, they did not see their clothes as a marker differentiating them from other students on campus. Many State College students spoke of not having “a lot of new clothes,” or designer clothes. Elena, a second-generation student said, “I don’t really dress in name brand clothes. I go to Goodwill a lot.” Craig, a first generation student, reported, “I don’t wear Gucci or Armani or what not.” While their clothes marked their exclusion from the affluent classes, they did not symbolize their exclusion from other students on campus.

### **New Forms of Capital that Lower Income Students Develop at College**

#### *Little Ivy*

Since coming to college, many Little Ivy students described changes that had occurred in their language, dress, and behavior, in their self-confidence and self-respect, and in their understanding of their position in the world.

#### **Language, Dress, Behavior**

Regardless of the educational level of their parents, the experience of being at Little Ivy was marked for lower income students by the assimilation of aspects of speech, attire and behavior commonly associated with the middle and upper classes, a process reported on earlier among lower income boys at an elite boarding school (Kuriloff and Reichert 2003). As Carl remarked:

Part of what [Little Ivy] does is socialize people into the wealthy elite. And so I dress differently. I speak differently. I’m more articulate than [my mother]. . . . My education has given me the ability to adjust to situations rationally. . . . Freshman year it was people telling me on my floor, friends of mine, what to wear, how to dress, how to act in certain social circumstances. And there’s this whole culture that goes along with [Little Ivy] that’s very different from my friends at the state university and that culture. And so there is a tension between who I have been and who I want to be. I think I’m part of a different social class than I came in here with, I was socialized to be part of.

The changes were motivated, in part, by students’ desires to win acceptance in this new environment. Rob spoke of being highly aware of “people’s criticisms, the desire to fit in and please people.” Sarah commented, “I would probably say that people of my class would say that I look kind of preppy or probably not in their social class. I think I kind of try to fit in to what a [Little Ivy] student is like to some extent.”

The speech style of lower income students showed evidence of convergence to that of their higher income counterparts, consistent with the predictions of speech

accommodation theory that individuals may move to another's speech style to evoke social approval, and that subordinates tend to show greater convergence to the speech style of superiors (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, and Johnson 1987). Naomi, the daughter of college educated immigrant parents, for example, described herself as using "intellectual SAT word speak."

### **Self-Confidence, Self-Respect and Position in the World**

Perhaps the most significant changes that accompanied the acquisition of middle class cultural capital were the attainment of new forms of self-confidence and self-respect that came along with diminished feelings of difference, inadequacy and exclusion. Based on their academic performance, some students in fact recognized that their academic talents measured up to that of the affluent students. Rob, who spoke of feelings of inferiority when he initially arrived on campus, discovered that his academic work was equal to that of other students. He noted with pride that he no longer thought of himself "as less capable than anyone on this campus." Peter came to realize also that "poor people are just rich people without a lot of money."

Little Ivy opened up opportunities that put lower income students on a new trajectory into society. Several lower income students spoke of feeling they inhabited a new position in relation to the world around them. Peter recognized that "I am one of the people that might be making big decisions in the future." Paul reported having "more self respect and optimism. I don't use drugs. I look more up instead of down." Reflecting on how things might have been different had he gone to a state college, Allen said, "I think that my ambitions and prospects would probably be a lot less than they are now. There wouldn't be as much opportunity to get into medical school; there wouldn't be connections with the alumni. . . . I would be thinking a lot more practical in a state college." It is interesting to note that the increased feelings of self-confidence are more frequently voiced by students who had a parent who graduated from college, who arrived at Little Ivy with more cultural capital than their first generation lower income counterparts.

#### *State College*

State College students had less to say about the acquisition of new forms of cultural capital (e.g., changes in language, dress or behavior) although some students articulated these changes. Tom, whose parents both had college degrees, knew that his "vocabulary has grown as a side effect of all that I've learned at college. I think I talk with bigger words." Tom went on to say, "I feel that I can present myself decently well now in a situation where I would need to." Craig, a first generation student, noted the changes that had occurred in the way he constructed an argument. His opinions were now grounded in knowledge he had

acquired.

Me and my dad sometimes if we get into a discussion, we almost always have different opinions on the subject. And I feel my opinion comes more from my education in college than from anything else. I feel everything I opinionate is from what I've learned from courses I've taken, and I think it's different for him. I think he makes his opinions based on his experiences.

Explicit statements about increased self-confidence and self-respect were lacking, although such feelings are implicit in the above statements.

### **Coping with Class-Based Discontinuity**

For some students the discontinuity between their pre-college careers and their college experiences proved difficult, but many students successfully found ways to cope with the shift. The changes that had occurred made it hard for a number of students to maintain connections with family and friends at home. Others found the college experience allowed aspects of self to flourish for the first time. Many students found ways to compartmentalize old and new aspects of self so that they could coexist. Some were able to bring new aspects of self into their old relationships. Many class-based aspects of self were not repudiated. Rather, the college experience led to increased pride among lower income students in their class-based characteristics.

#### *Little Ivy*

*Maintaining Prior Relationships.* Some students spoke of discontinuities with friends at home due to their acquisition of middle class cultural capital. The educational opportunity afforded to them changed students' perceptions of the world and their place in it. Broader options had opened to them; they had developed new priorities, perspectives, values, and greater engagement with an intellectual world. Yet some students found it difficult to bridge the gap and bring new aspects of self into their old relationships.

Marie remarked, "My friends who stayed home and went to local college really didn't have this kind of eye opening experience that I had coming here. I can't even describe it to them, so there is a sort of difference between us as I have this new perspective on things." Rob remarked, "Since my priorities have sort of changed, I feel maybe a degree of separation with some friends because their priorities are different. As far as my priorities go, there are not a lot of people [at home] who share the same kind of desires." Carl spoke of being "ripped" from his home community and put in a "totally new environment, all these new experiences, all these new ideas, new people, new social interactions." He said,

I sometimes have to think about my values and how I want to live in the world because I am confronted with this multiplicity of social interactions. Now I have the options to choose.

How am I going to live? A lot of my friends at home have never been pushed to think about that. My education is very central to my identity, and the more educated I get, the more difficult it is to share certain parts of me and certain sides of me. I can't talk to my friends about a book.

Carl added that he maintained his relationships to friends at home by mostly going out to drink with them.

For some students a certain distance from friends and family had previously existed before coming to Little Ivy because their intelligence, knowledge, and tastes had already set them apart. They had more intellectual interests than their friends and family members; they were more academically focused. For those students the college experience enabled this aspect of self to fully flourish. As Ann, a first generation student of immigrant parents put it, "I mean I grew up in a family where you can't talk to my mother about anything. Talk to her about books and she'll be like, 'I'm bored.' You know, so I wanted something more. I felt like I wanted something better. I wanted to do something different." The voices of these students echo Lawler's (1999, p. 9) description of women who moved from working to middle class and had constructed "a narrative of class mobility in which becoming middle class is an actualization of the 'real self.'"

For some students, it was not clear whether they would be able to maintain their connections to parents and friends. Marie, for example, said, "I think that [my mother and I] are going to keep growing farther and farther apart." Thinking about distance from friends at home, Allen said, "There is a greater distance; our lives are beginning to take shape in a direction. I am not really upset about it. I really loved coming to college. I just didn't want to be home. I never looked back."

While most of the lower income students experienced difficulties maintaining prior relationships, a few did not attribute the difficulties to their college experience. Sarah drifted away from friends at home, but said, "I think that we weren't true friends to begin with. They were the kind of people you hang out with in high school." Paul experienced a certain distance from friends, but that had always been true. "I was always the smart one."

*Avoiding Judgments.* A number of lower income students struggled with avoiding judgments of those they had left behind. These feelings emerged regardless of whether their parents were college educated. These judgments appeared to accompany the acquisition of new knowledge and the development of a more critical perspective. Paul worried that the college experience had made him look down upon "dumb people. It has probably made me an intolerant person." Naomi commented that being around "so many intellectual people" makes it easy for her to forget that everyone is not like Little Ivy professors and students, and she worried "you fall into sort of a trap" of being judgmental that she tried to avoid. "I try to stay away from a superior role."

Students also struggled over negative judgments of their parents and over feelings of betrayal. New opportunities have opened up to them, and some would no longer consider following their parents' footsteps in the occupational world.

Marie said, “Now that I have been at [Little Ivy] I can’t imagine being a nanny now that I will have this degree.” Sarah admitted that,

it was difficult coming here, in that it’s a very different world from home, and I definitely felt like I didn’t want to betray my parents as far as looking on that kind of income level as inferior or trying to change myself completely from that and trying to assimilate completely into the more wealthy kind of mind set.

Their parents, too, worried about them becoming judgmental. Allen noted, “My mom seems to think that I am becoming in her words ‘a snob.’”

*Coping Strategies.* Lower income students used a number of strategies to cope with the discontinuities between former and newly acquired aspects of self. Some students compartmentalized different parts of the self, keeping them separate but allowing them to co-exist. They described code switching as they moved back and forth from home to college, i.e., using different modes of speech in each setting. They noted they faced criticism for using too large a vocabulary when talking with people at home. As Allen said, “If I use a big word, it’s like ‘Oh, Mr. Smarty Pants over here.’ I try not to show off my vocabulary.”

At home regional accents reappeared in speech, and speech became less articulate. Allen noted changes in his speech when he returned home. “I think my speech pattern probably changes a bit. I probably use less eloquent language and I probably put on more of a [home town] accent. Here I certainly don’t talk that way at all.” Lower income students spoke of changes both in the style of speech, the use of “a more slang way of speaking,” as Carl put it, and a focus on different topics of conversation. Code switching helped them to manage the tensions between past and present aspects of self, and appeared to be carried out unconsciously.

Some students integrated the new aspects of self into their home settings, reporting that their language or dress did not change as they moved from Little Ivy to their home setting. Karen, for example, described returning home for Christmas and being aware that her clothing was “really different from the way they dress. It was preppy. I was aware of the difference but didn’t switch my clothing.”

*Pride in Class-Based Character Traits.* Membership in a low-status group does not necessarily lead to lowered feelings of self-worth because people develop self-protective strategies to buffer self-esteem (Crocker and Major 1989). Snow and Anderson (1987), for example, examined the strategies homeless individuals, at the bottom of the status system, develop to construct and affirm personal identities that provide a sense of self-worth, dignity and self-respect. One strategy used by the homeless was “embracement,” which entailed “an avowal of implied social identities” (p. 1354). Although lower income students did take on aspects of middle class culture, parts of their class backgrounds remained firmly rooted in their identities and were affirmed with pride. Just as the homeless accepted and asserted their street role identities, so too did the lower income students affirm aspects of their class identities. In fact, many of our lower income students expressed pride in the character traits their class backgrounds had given them, particularly when they

contrasted themselves to some of the very affluent students, a phenomenon also noted among lower income college women by Ostrove and Long (2001). Lower income students did not want to take on all aspects of the upper middle class.

The lower income students, regardless of the level of education of their parents, highlighted the positive virtues gained from their class position, enabling them to feel the self-respect and dignity that derived from their class backgrounds. They expressed gratitude for the character traits they attributed to their class experience: they had become independent and self-reliant, had learned to appreciate things because they had been given less, and they could understand and empathize with a broad range of humanity. They came to affirm and value these aspects of their identities. In this regard, these students possessed the same “moral order” as did the working class men interviewed by Lamont (2000) in the early 1990s. As Rob remarked, “When we didn’t have money it was really hard. I am not upset with anything that has happened in my life. If anything, I think it has made me a better person. Having my experiences has been an advantage.”

*Independence and Self-Reliance.* Many lower income students seemed shocked by the lack of independence and self-reliance that some of their affluent counterparts exhibited. Marie remarked,

I remember, especially as a freshman, that people didn’t know how to open up bank accounts, didn’t know how to do their own laundry, didn’t ever cook for themselves back home. People get into car accidents here and their parents pay for it. That would never have happened back home. People pay for their own car crashes. You took more responsibility for your own actions whereas here Mom and Dad can come in and fix them.

Mike, a first generation college student with a blue-collar father and a lower level white-collar mother, said,

My roommate, basically his whole life has been centered on [the upper east side of Manhattan]. The only trips they make are to [the Hamptons] or up to Westchester. Watching him here, he is so helpless. He admits it himself. He can’t do a darn thing. In our freshman year he would wash his clothes and took them wet from the washing machine and put them in his laundry bag and just left them there. He had no idea.

*Appreciation.* While lower income students did not possess a lot of material resources, they learned to curb their desires, and to appreciate what they did have. According to Peter, “From a very early age I understood that we didn’t have very much so I didn’t want much. I never missed anything.” They felt that if they made a purchase they appreciated it more because they worked hard to get it. Allen felt that his class background made him value opportunities more. “I kind of latch on to them, like I don’t want to lose this. I don’t know, I just feel like I treat them with more care than somebody else would.”

*Understanding and Empathy.* The lower income students felt that their class upbringing had given them the ability to understand, relate to and empathize with a broad range of individuals, qualities they believed some of the affluent students lacked. Naomi felt “almost grateful that I haven’t had a really very easy childhood

economically” because it made her “appreciate the struggles that people have.” Sarah referred to her ability to “adapt to situations more easily, or understand different kinds of people . . . [with] the background that I have, as opposed to kids growing up that kind of have everything. It’s harder for them to really understand other people I think sometimes.” Marie was stunned when others in her tutoring seminar

were worrying about how to relate to kids in [a nearby economically depressed city]. How do I get along with these kids? That shocked me. Do you think they are aliens or something? These are kids: be natural, make them laugh. Maybe I still don’t see myself as a [Little Ivy] kid.

Peter realized that many of the affluent students had a very different outlook on life than he did, and felt that “they have no clue as to what 90% of the people in this country live with.”

The lower income Little Ivy students had worked minimum wage summer jobs (e.g., waitress, toll collector). They identified and empathized with workers on campus; they knew what working such jobs entailed. At Little Ivy they encountered some affluent students who would not have ever considered working such “inferior” jobs, and who showed insensitivity to people in these positions. Kate had been a waitress in the summers, one of the few opportunities available to her in her hometown.

I remember one of my first experiences [at Little Ivy] with a kid that lived upstairs from me, and [his family vacationed] where I live in the summer. He went to summer there all through his life. And I waitressed at this little restaurant, and he had been coming in apparently. One day he came down and he said, “Haven’t you ever thought of getting a real job?” And I just kind of looked at him like, I’m not even going to listen to you because he’s working at this big firm or something in New York city and in [my state], I’m sure you’re aware, you don’t have those opportunities.

Marie felt embarrassed when she saw the workers in the dining hall wiping the tables and cleaning up after the students. She was not accustomed to being waited upon, cleaned up after, and did not share a sense of entitlement to these services. While many other students seemed oblivious to the services that were being performed for them, she identified with the workers’ position, and felt embarrassed by her superior status relative to these workers. “It makes me ashamed that we didn’t clean up after ourselves. They are sort of degraded doing this work and I wonder if some of the other kids feel that way, if they have ever been in that position.”

### *State College*

Like their Little Ivy counterparts, some State College students struggled with bridging differences in knowledge, modes of thinking, perspectives, and priorities as they moved between college and home, and they, too, seemed concerned about

making critical judgments of those they have left behind. Craig said,

Not to downgrade [my parents] or anything, it's just that nobody ever went to college. I think I know too much for them and they don't understand my point of view because they don't know where I'm coming from, and what I've been exposed to through school. From my opinion, they might just be scared to start talking to me because they might just feel inferior. They might think I'm a little cocky about that opinion.

Aspects of who he had become were left out in his relationship to his parents. As with Little Ivy students, one solution to these tensions was to compartmentalize, and express different aspects of self with parents and professors. Craig sought out professors to talk over ideas he could not discuss with his family.

For the most part, however, the State College students talked less of difficulties in bridging the gap between home and school than did the Little Ivy students. While Little Ivy students all lived on campus, as did almost all of the State College students we interviewed, the State College students lived closer to home, and remained more connected to their childhood friends. Most did not speak of a new social distance from friends at home. Few of the State College students spoke of shifts in language or dress as they moved from college to home. Students who spoke of code-switching referred primarily to age-based aspects of speech. They spoke primarily of not being as "well-spoken" among friends or cleaning up their language when speaking with younger siblings.

While many lower income Little Ivy students expressed pride in their class-based aspects of self, which derived from a comparison with affluent students who lacked their independence, self-reliance, empathy and understanding, these types of comments did not emerge in the interviews with the State College students. The latter expressed an acceptance of their class position, and pride in the character traits it had given them, but their pride derived from comparing themselves with a generalized concept of those who were more affluent, and those who had less than they did.

Many State College students developed an ideology that enabled them to push class aside in its importance to their identities (Seider and Aries 2004). The material resources and lifestyles of upper-middle class and upper class students were absent from their environment, and for most of the state college students, class was not something they seemed concerned about. Rusty, a first generation college student, went so far as to say, "I don't think about [social class]. It's not been a factor in my life so I don't know where it could come in to being important."

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our interviews with lower income students revealed that the type of college one attends differentially influences the relationship between class identity and the college experience. Lower income students at a prestigious private college faced more class-related challenges and difficulties than students at the state college, despite the fact that they came to college with greater cultural capital than the state

college students. The disparities of wealth between students at the prestigious college heightened awareness of social class, whereas greater homogeneity in class backgrounds at the state college made class less salient. The differences between the college experiences of the elite and state college students cannot be explained by differences in residential versus commuting status, as 80% of the state college students were living on campus as were 100% of the elite college students. While previous work has documented the difficulties working-class students face in a range of university settings (e.g., Dews and Law 1995; Granfield 1991; Hoyt 1999; Lawler 1999; Ostrove 2003; Ryan and Sackrey 1984; Stewart and Ostrove 1993; Tokarczyk and Fay 1993), our direct comparison of elite and state college students demonstrates the importance of social context (i.e., of the type of institution one attends) in shaping the class-based experience of identity for lower income students and in understanding the meaning that cultural capital may have for individuals.

The first generation students who entered the elite college with the least cultural capital evidenced the greatest initial feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, and deficiency. As to the issue of exclusion and powerlessness, lower income students at the elite college displayed roughly similar feelings regardless of the educational background of their parents. Our study points to the importance of looking at both economic and cultural capital in an analysis of social class in a college setting. Simply differentiating students by family income or parental “collar” (Lubrano 2004) ignores the attitudes, skills, and levels of confidence that distinguish adolescents within similar income brackets. Upwardly mobile second-generation students may still be subject to the “hidden injuries of class” (Sennett and Cobb 1972), but their added cultural capital helps them to buffer the class issues they face and lessens the conflict within their “straddler” (Lubrano 2004) identities. Perhaps that is why the students at the elite college with a college educated parent showed the greatest gains in self-confidence and self-respect.

Our data also highlight the importance of returning to Bourdieu’s original definition of cultural capital as encompassing not just “highbrow” aesthetic culture, but also skills and abilities (Lareau and Weinger 2003). When speaking of their lack of cultural capital, students at the elite college referred to competencies and “immaterial knowledge” such as not possessing the “right” linguistic skills, the proper forms of dress, knowledge of how to act in certain social situations, and the strategies and contacts used to procure summer jobs. These were important aspects of cultural capital that differentiated them from affluent students upon entry to college.

Lower income students at both schools, regardless of the educational backgrounds of their parents, struggled with class-based discontinuities between their pre-college identities and their evolving identities. They spoke of acquiring new ways of dressing, speaking and behaving. They worried, for example, about how to be different from parents and friends at home without being judgmental. These

issues were heightened for the elite college students who had moved further from home, and whose anticipated college degrees put them on a trajectory for greater upward mobility. Our work supports the contention that individuals employ strategies to construct and affirm positive identities to yield self-respect (Crocker and Major 1989; Lamont 2000; Snow and Anderson 1987). Where discontinuities existed, many lower income students developed mechanisms to cope with them, and some lower income students felt the college experience enabled aspects of self to flourish for the first time (see also Lawler 1999; Ostrove 2003). Strikingly, the college experience led to a reaffirmation of many class-based aspects of self. In comparing themselves to the highly affluent students, the lower income elite college students felt increased appreciation for the character traits that their class background had given them, traits such as independence, self-reliance, understanding and empathy for others (see Skeggs 1997). Clearly a tension existed as they took pride in their class-based characteristics that differentiated them from the affluent students, yet at the same time engaged in assimilative behavior. Class seemed less salient to the state college students, and they appeared less likely to see social class as important to their identities.

The findings of this study have important implications for faculty and administrators at prestigious colleges and universities, where disparities in wealth among students are great. As these schools commit themselves to recruiting more low-income students, and to counteracting the reproduction of social advantage, attention must be paid to how to best support and incorporate lower income students into the life of these campuses. The problems are particularly acute for first generation students, most lacking in cultural capital, who experience the greatest degree of inadequacy, inferiority and intimidation. Research has demonstrated that when racial minority students make the change from home to a residential college, they seek new bases of support for their ethnic identities by linking themselves with people who share their ethnicity and engaging in ethnic practices and activities (Ethier and Deaux 1994; Saylor and Aries 1999). So, too, lower income students will need to find new bases of support and to develop a class analysis of their experience by linking themselves with others who share their class backgrounds.

Ethnic organizations have been well established on many college campuses, enabling minority students to identify others who share their ethnicity. But lower income students have a more difficult time identifying other lower income students to help find a new base of support for their identities. For African-American boys at an elite preparatory school who found themselves on the margins of the social geography, the existence of the Black Student Alliance (BSA) enabled them to examine and voice their collective concerns, and to develop strategies to cope with race and class dynamics (Kuriloff and Reichert 2003). Kaufman (2001) notes, "unlike blacks or Latinos on campus, poor and working-class white students are largely invisible. There are no special programs for them, no easily identifiable professors they can seek out, no student groups to help them belong." Ironically

enough, our research demonstrates that for low income students to move from the margins and to become fully integrated into elite colleges and universities, those institutions may need to nurture and support working-class-based clubs or organizations, in the same way that they have fostered the development of similar groups based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race. Beyond that, institutions of higher education must create a climate where class can be acknowledged and openly discussed (see Ostrove 2003).

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