

The Role of Social Class in the Formation of Identity: A Study of Public and Elite Private College Students

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ABSTRACT. The authors explored the influence of social class on identity formation in an interview study of 15 lower income students and 15 affluent students from a highly selective liberal arts school and 15 lower income students from a state college. Students ranked occupational goals as 1st in importance to identity and social class as 2nd. The affluent students regarded social class as significantly more important to identity than did the lower income students, were more aware of structural factors contributing to their success, and had higher occupational aspirations. Social class was an area of exploration for half the students, with higher levels of exploration shown by the lower income private school students than by the state college students. Lower income students developed an ideology that rationalized their social class position.

Keywords: identity, self, social identity, work

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY and self-categorization theory have taught social scientists that a social group can become a part of the self (Smith, 1999; Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1982) and that knowledge of group memberships and the emotional significance that are attached to them make up an important component of the self-concept (Tajfel). In the last two decades, researchers have paid attention to

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many of the social groups that shape individuals' selves, especially sex, race or ethnicity, and sexual orientation (e.g., Bilsker, Schiedel, & Marcia, 1988; Frable, 1997; Phinney, 1990), but researchers have paid relatively little attention to social class in the understanding of the self and identity (Argyle, 1994; Frable, 1997; Lott & Bullock, 2001; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Phillips & Pittman, 2003; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). Researchers have conceptualized *class* in nonpsychological terms as a material location that is based on economic and material resources, on income, education, and occupation (Domhoff, 1967) or "as a set of differential positions on a scale of social advantage" (Ortner, 1991, p. 168), but researchers have paid relatively little attention to what social class signifies in psychological terms (Ostrove & Cole; Stewart & Ostrove, 1993; Wentworth & Peterson). Ostrove and Cole organized a recent volume of the *Journal of Social Issues* on social class in the context of education to "expand the possibilities for psychologists to see ourselves as responsible for understanding the implications of class at both the individual and group levels" (p. 678).

Social class position differentiates people's experiences and the ways in which they view and experience the world (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Phoenix & Tizard, 1996). Social class constrains "the possibilities they face and the decisions they make" (Massey, Gross, & Eggers, 1991, p. 397), and it "provides the possibilities and limits for his or her personal identity (i.e., only a certain range of possibilities will occur because of prior socialization specific to role location, or social customs and conventions)" (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 135). Although identity achievement involves choice, power and privilege are what dictates the choices that one has (Côté, 1996). Class can "shape, constrain, and mediate the development and expression of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, motives, traits, and symptoms" (Stewart & Ostrove, 1993, p. 476).

Constructing an identity involves occupational choice, but those choices are shaped by the people who are available in one's environment for identification as well as the work opportunities (Erikson, 1968). Numerous researchers have demonstrated the relationship between socioeconomic status and career aspirations (Alix & Lantz, 1973; Cook et al., 1996; MacLeod, 1995; Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Rojewski & Yang, 1997). In a study of 5th–12th graders from school districts in a rural, economically depressed area, Alix and Lantz found that high occupational aspirations varied positively with socioeconomic status. Cook et al. examined the occupational aspirations of two groups of elementary and junior high school boys: inner-city minority boys and White boys from more advantaged homes. Although race and class were confounded in that study, the researchers found that "from second grade on, the jobs boys expect to hold recreate the system of class- and race-based occupational differentiation found in the United States today. That is, economically advantaged boys disproportionately expect to be doctors or lawyers, the ghetto boys disproportionately expect to be policemen or firemen" (p. 3375). Rojewski and Yang's analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88) revealed that "the longitu-

dinal effects of socioeconomic status on occupational aspirations indicate that approximately 10% of the variance of occupational aspirations can be accounted for conceptually by this variable” (p. 402). In an extension of this study that was based on NELS: 88–94, Rojewski and Kim further demonstrated the considerable influence of socioeconomic status on occupational aspirations. MacLeod (1995) conducted an ethnographic study of the aspirations of a group of Black adolescent boys and a group of White adolescent boys living in a housing project. He argued that the fact that “many boys from both groups do not even aspire to middle-class jobs is a powerful indication of how class inequality is reproduced in American society” (p. 112).

Researchers can also approach how social class shapes the self and identity through Bourdieu’s (1977) construct of *cultural capital*, which refers broadly to “knowledge of or competence with ‘highbrow’ aesthetic culture” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 568) and to skills or ability that “provide access to scarce rewards” (p. 587). Middle class competencies and knowledge differ from those of the working class and are perceived to be superior (Lawler, 1999). From the middle class perspective, the working classes “do not *know* the right things, they do not *value* the right things, they do not *want* the right things” (Lawler, p. 11). Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 3) spoke of the “hidden injuries of class,” the conflicting and often negative judgments affecting working class identity.

However, empirical support is lacking for the argument that social class necessarily has a negative impact on feelings of self-worth. A meta-analytic review of the literature (Twenge & Campbell, 2002) revealed that social class had only a small effect on self-esteem ($d = .15$). Membership in a low-status group does not necessarily lead to lower feelings of self-worth because people develop self-protective strategies to buffer themselves from the prejudice of others (Crocker & Major, 1989). People are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Researchers have shown that even homeless individuals, at the bottom of the status system, develop strategies to construct and affirm personal identities that provide a sense of self-worth and self-respect (Snow & Anderson, 1987). The need for positive identity may promote “selective accentuation of intergroup differences that favour the in-group” (Abrams & Hogg, 1990, p. 3). Although an important aspect of identity formation is the adoption of an ideology (Erikson, 1968) and a worldview (Arnett, 2000), researchers know little about the ideologies that members of lower classes may develop to affirm self-respect.

Social class may operate not only as an independent variable that shapes the self, but also as a domain of identity exploration. The literature on working class individuals who move into more privileged positions (e.g., entering universities or becoming university professors) suggests that social mobility has significant effects on one’s sense of self because identities must be renegotiated and that social class is an important domain of identity exploration for upwardly mobile individuals (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Dews & Law, 1995; Jones, 2003; Lawler,

1999; Ostrove, 2003; Skeggs, 1997; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). Movement between classes involves changes in judgment, taste, opinions, preferences, and practices (Stewart & Ostrove, 1993). Upwardly mobile working class individuals struggle to establish a sense of continuity between who they were and who they are becoming (Lawler; Reay, 1996), because “class is embedded in people’s history” (Lawler, p. 6) and working class childhoods go on being lived in the present (Reay). Upwardly mobile working class individuals struggle with alienation from their own pasts, families, and cultural backgrounds, yet they lack a feeling of belongingness in the middle class worlds that they have entered (Lubrano, 2004; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001).

Our goal in the present study was to examine the role that social class may play in the formation of identity, both as an independent variable that shapes identity (e.g., class position may shape choices, self-conceptions, and ideologies) and as a domain of importance and personal relevance to identity (i.e., a domain that may be actively explored). To assess identity, we drew on Marcia’s (1966, 1993) operationalization of Erikson’s (1968) construct of identity by using Marcia’s Identity Status Interview (ISI). The ISI examines the presence of identity exploration and commitment in the domains of occupation, ideology (i.e., politics and religion), and sex-role attitudes. Following the lead of researchers who have added ethnicity to the ISI as a domain of importance in studying ethnic minority adolescents (e.g., Aries & Moorehead, 1989; Phinney, 1989), we added the domain of social class to the ISI as a potential area of importance and exploration in the identity formation process. Although researchers have used Marcia’s methodology to examine identity in students from differing social class backgrounds (Morash, 1980; Munro and Adams, 1977), none have considered social class to be a domain of potential identity exploration. Phillips and Pittman (2003) theorized that the stress and limited opportunities that are associated with poverty will inhibit identity exploration, and the present research extends their theorizing to a wider spectrum of social classes. In the present research, we focused on four questions:

Research Question 1: How does social class compare to occupational goals, political and religious beliefs, and sex-role attitudes in its importance to identity? Does its importance vary depending on social class background?

Research Question 2: To what extent is the domain of social class an area of identity exploration, and does exploration vary by social class background?

Research Question 3: Is social class background related to occupational strivings?

Research Question 4: What are the ideologies that people of different social class backgrounds develop to understand class-based aspects of identity?

Method

Participants

Participants were 45 undergraduates that we drew from three groups. Each group had 15 participants. Two groups (one affluent and one lower income) of

students attended a highly selective liberal arts college (labeled *Little Ivy*). The third group, which comprised lower income students, attended a state liberal arts college (labeled *State College*). We limited participation in the study to students who were White to avoid confounding race and class. Students at Little Ivy were all of traditional college age, so we limited our sample at State College to students of traditional age. All participants were 1st- or 2nd-year students. Finally, we balanced each group by gender.

In nearly all the cases, the samples of affluent and lower income student differed not only by parental income, but also by parental education and occupation, grandparents' education, and self-perceived social class. For the vast majority of the students from all three samples, the income, education, and occupational categories tended to correlate well, but, as with social class in general, these indicators were not always consistent. The difficulties with categorizing can be exemplified by looking at two cases. A student who reported the lowest parental income had two parents who had graduated from college. Another student's subjective identification was with the "upper middle class," yet the bulk of the data that he provided suggested a lower class category. Neither of his parents had graduated from college, suggesting a status that was much more in line with the lower income students than with the affluent students. Also, his father's occupation, mechanic, fell more squarely within the lower income sample, whereas his mother's occupation, "small business owner/secretary" was more ambiguous.

Affluent sample. We recruited affluent students at Little Ivy from an introductory psychology class. This group self-reported family income of at least \$110,000 with several respondents answering over \$250,000. They all reported their class identity as at least upper middle class with several choosing upper class. In a pattern that sociologists have noted for about 40 years (Marger, 2005), those students objectively on the top of the income or wealth pyramid identified downward as upper middle class or middle class, whereas those students with low incomes more likely presented themselves as middle class. In an essay on teaching at Little Ivy, Dizard (1991) reported that although the majority of Little Ivy students came from the wealthiest 5–10% of U.S. families, they tended to subjectively identify as slightly above middle class to upper middle class.

Although one may question self-reported family income and subjective class standing when they occur by themselves, the educational backgrounds and occupational levels of the parents of this group help solidify their affluent, solidly upper middle class (if not upper class) objective class status. Both parents of all the students were college graduates, and in fact most parents had graduate or professional degrees. More than half of the parents had graduated from elite liberal arts colleges much like Little Ivy, including four who had preceded their children at Little Ivy. In fact, 13 of the 15 students in this group were at least the third generation of their family to attend college, most claiming at least two grandparents who were college graduates. Occupationally, the parents (in most cases both fathers and mothers)

held solid professional and managerial positions, including that of attorney, investment banker, director of a scientific lab, and corporate vice president.

Lower income Little Ivy sample. We recruited lower income students at Little Ivy via the director of financial aid, who sent letters to all 1st- and 2nd-year White students receiving financial aid whose parental incomes were under \$50,000, telling them that they qualified for a study of identity. When this procedure did not produce enough students, we raised the income level to \$60,000. On subjective social class, 6 students described themselves as middle class, 5 described themselves as lower middle class, 2 described themselves as working class, 1 self-described as lower class, and 1 self-described as upper middle class (in an aforementioned case). On educational background, this sample differed significantly from the affluent group. Only half of their mothers and fathers had completed college, and a third of this group comprised first generation college students. Most had none or only one grandparent who had graduated from college. Occupationally, their parents generally held blue-collar (e.g., truck driver, mechanic, taxi driver, waitress, bricklayer) or middle level white-collar positions (e.g., high school teacher, graphic designer).

State College sample. We recruited State College students from introductory social science or sociology classes. In the State College group, all but 1 student reported parental incomes under \$50,000. Of all the State College students, 8 self-reported their class as middle class, 4 self-reported their class as working class, 2 self-reported it as lower middle class, 1 self-reported it as low-to-lower class, and 0 self-reported it as upper middle class or higher class. Only about a third of these students had a mother or father who had completed college, and 60% were first generation college students. Almost none had grandparents who had graduated from college. Occupationally, their parents were comparable to the lower income Little Ivy students' parents, although the State College students were more solidly blue collar. On the whole, researchers should consider this group as somewhat lower in objective social class than the lower income Little Ivy sample.

Procedure

Both authors conducted interviews at both schools. Before the interviews, participants read and signed informed consent forms. Interviews ranged from 1 hr to 2 hr in length and were tape recorded for later coding. Participants received \$20 for participation. After payment, debriefing consisted of informing participants that the central focus of the study was social class and identity.

Measures

The late adolescent college form of Marcia's Identity Status Interview (ISI; Marcia & Archer, 1993) served as the basis of a structured identity interview.

Marcia (1966) designed the ISI to determine whether individuals fall into one of four identity statuses: *achieved*, *moratorium*, *foreclosed*, or *diffused*. Researchers determine identity status by two variables: whether the person has undergone a period of exploration and whether a commitment has been made. Individuals who have undergone a period of exploration and made occupational and ideological commitments are *identity achieved*. Those who are still in a period of exploration and have not made commitments are *identity moratorium*. Those who have made commitments without examination of the values and goals that have been endorsed by parents and parent surrogates are *identity foreclosed*. Those who have no clear direction in terms of occupation or ideology and have not actively explored these areas are *identity diffused*.

The interview included questions in the domains traditionally assessed: vocational plans, religious beliefs, political beliefs, and sex-role attitudes (Marcia & Archer, 1993). We added a fifth domain, social class, to the interview to parallel the other four areas of the interview. In the section on social class, we asked participants what differences social class had made in their lives, whether class was something that they discussed with their parents, whether they had questioned or changed their ideas about social class and their class identity, what started them thinking about these questions, and whether they expected their ideas on the role of social class in their lives to change at all. Both authors coded responses in each domain into one of the four identity statuses: achieved, moratorium, foreclosed, or diffused. Interrater reliability (Cohen's Kappa) was .72. According to the interview protocol (Marcia & Archer), at the end of each section we asked participants to rate how important that domain was in their life on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*extremely important*).

We added two additional questions to the interview to assess the ideologies that individuals developed to deal with their class position and to understand their place in society: (a) "What would you say the major factors are that lead to a person's success in the United States?" (b) "Suppose it were possible for you and your family to be born all over again, would you want to be born in the same social class or a different social class?"

Results

Question 1: How Does Social Class Compare to Occupational Goals, Political and Religious Beliefs, and Sex-Role Attitudes in Its Importance to Identity? Does Its Importance Vary Depending on Social Class Background?

Across the total sample, participants rated occupational goals as most important to identity ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 0.84$), followed by social class ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.23$), sex roles ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.51$), politics ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.51$), and religion, which received the lowest importance ratings ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 2.06$). We

calculated a one-way analysis of variance to compare the three groups (affluent Little Ivy, lower income Little Ivy, lower income State College) on ratings of the importance of social class to identity. We found significant differences between the groups, $F(2, 42) = 3.94$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Fisher least significant differences (LSD) tests revealed that the affluent Little Ivy students ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.96$) rated social class as significantly more important to identity than did both the State College students ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.14$) and the lower income Little Ivy students ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.33$). The two lower income groups did not differ significantly from each other.

The affluent students seemed well aware of the role that their economically privileged status had played in forming their identities and of the accrued benefits that shaped the self. As one affluent student said, "I could say that if I was born into a completely different class, my life would probably be completely different. So to that extent, [social class] has been completely important." The affluent students recognized that their class status was related to the quality of education that they had received (see Fine & Burns, 2003). Affluence had given them access to excellent schooling at either private schools or public schools that were well funded. One student reported that at her public high school, \$14,000 of tax money per student went into the school, an amount at the high end of public school per capita spending (Kozol, 2005). The affluent students realized their educational opportunities had put them on a different path in life: for example, "There's a big difference between the track you're put on by going to [Little Ivy], and the track you're put on by going to [a state school]." They also spoke of their opportunities to travel. For example, one student said,

I think [my social class position] certainly opened up so many opportunities to me that I wouldn't have had if I'd come from another background. I mean especially things like spending time in Europe.... I did an exchange program in France. My family's been to Europe a couple of times. You know we've gone on other various trips, like to Hawaii.

Affluence had opened up opportunities for them to develop skills and interests (e.g., "[My social class] has allowed me to do things that I am interested in regardless of financial restraints").

The lower income students were more likely than the affluent students to push class aside in their conception of their own identities (Seider & Aries, 2004). As one lower income Little Ivy student stated,

I don't think that [social class] played a part in my life, that it's made me not be able to do things that I want. I don't think my life would have been significantly different if I had all the money in the world.

Other lower income Little Ivy students echoed similar themes: one student claimed, "I don't feel like it has made such a big difference to me. I have had enough"; another said,

I don't think social class had any influence. I just always took advantage of any opportunities that I was given. I guess I have more of an appreciation for certain opportunities. We never had an extreme amount of money, but I always had what I needed and mostly what I wanted. I was pretty spoiled.

Likewise, the responses of State College students downplayed the importance of social class. One State College student said, "I don't think social class had any influence." Other State College students made similar responses. For example, a student commented, "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". Another said,

I don't really see [class] as having made a difference. I don't, but that's just because I've been through it. I don't know what it's like to be poor or what it's like to be rich I think that's the only reason that [social class] didn't affect me was because I never got the spoils of being rich, and I never really had the want of being poor.

Question 2: To What Extent Is the Domain of Social Class an Area of Identity Exploration, and Does Exploration Vary by Social Class Background?

Students who had undergone a period of exploration of the meaning of social class to identity are found in both the achieved status and the moratorium status. Significant differences emerged between the three groups in the percentage of students for whom social class was a domain of exploration, $\chi^2(2, N = 44) = 10.20, p = .006$, Cramér's $V = .48$. The highest degree of exploration in the realm of social class was among lower income Little Ivy students (78.6%), the lowest degree by State College students (26.7%), with affluent Little Ivy students in the middle (53.3%). Post hoc comparisons with a series of chi-square tests (with continuity correction) on each of the pairs with a Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = .017$) showed that the two lower income groups significantly differed from each other, $\chi^2(1, N = 29) = 7.96, p = .005$, Cramér's $V = .59$.

In response to questions about whether they had ever questioned or changed their ideas about social class or their class identity, the following responses from State College students were typical: "No"; "I don't think so"; and "No, not really. I never really put much thought into it." The percentage of State College students (26.7%) who were in diffusion in regard to social class was twice that of the affluent Little Ivy students (13.3%) and three times that of the lower income Little Ivy students (7.1%). A few State College students had given considerable thought to the role that social class had played in their lives, but such responses were infrequent. For example, one student said,

When I was younger, I was naive: You had the poor, you had us, and then you had the rest. Now I can see things on a deeper level, the more I look. Deeper that I can see reasons, the socialization, how people grew up, how people learn. I can see there are barriers in terms of social class as to how far you can go. You have rights to go

anywhere you want in America the land of opportunity, but if you are raised in a very poor neighborhood and a very poor family you don't learn, "Oh, I am going to go on to college"; you learn that I am going to grow up and get a job so that I can survive.

By contrast, lower income Little Ivy students had given a great deal of thought to class-based aspects of their identities. Lower income students at Little Ivy found themselves surrounded by students from predominantly affluent families, whereas such students at State College found themselves surrounded by students from class backgrounds similar to their own. Many of the lower income Little Ivy students had given considerable thought to how their world view was influenced by their class backgrounds. One student reported,

I've never been with people who are as wealthy as some people here. And it just made me, it just made me realize that people are different, and they have this whole other outlook on life. I'd say [the wealthy students] have no clue as to what 90% of the people in this country live with.

Another talked about the conflicts that were raised by coming to Little Ivy:

I will say 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, you know, 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 mindset.

Many lower income Little Ivy students felt their class-based identity was in flux. One student reported, "I think I'm part of a different social class than I came in here with, I was socialized to be part of." Another was struggling with class membership: "I say at this point in my life, I am kind of trying to figure out what I want to be as far as class wise." A third student had come to terms with class origins but thought that "My class is always going change as I grow older and get into a profession. That's going to bring up whole new issues about class, because I'll potentially be in a different class than my parents were. So it's always going to be an issue."

For some students, their thinking about social class had led to a sense of clarity on their social class position:

I think that I've come to terms with who I am in my social class. And I mean, if I, I can't imagine myself falling below where I am now. I mean I can see myself maybe, you know, moving up some. But in terms of how important it is, or I'm happy like where I am. I can't imagine it changing dramatically.

Half of the affluent students had explored questions of social class and class-based aspects of their identities. Some affluent families had taught their children to be aware of class differences and their obligations to give back. Some affluent students gained an awareness of social class through exposure to people from different class backgrounds either at Little Ivy (e.g., "I get to see people from dif-

ferent backgrounds, and I can see that there are differences, and it is a significant aspect of society.”). Volunteer work made some

more conscious of the problems of people who are poor, what they have to deal with It made me think not everyone has what I have, and like I should be a lot more thankful for it. I should be thankful for the family situation I have. I think it just made me think of what they would have to deal with every day, sort of, and like what you could maybe do to change that.

For some students, academic studies exposed them to the importance of class to identity:

The more that I learn about separations of the wealthiest 1% and the poorest 1% in the country, it makes you sort of doubt the American Dream at this point. You can't get a good job if you don't have an education, and you cannot get the education that you need from a public high school any more.

Finally, for some wealthy students, thoughts about their affluence made them uncomfortable and guilty. One student spoke of having developed

sort of a negative idea of affluence in general Just the fact that I saw people buying stuff that they didn't need and flaunting their wealth in the forms of SUVs and stuff like that. I just thought that a lot of it was just such a waste and that really a lot of people could make much better use of their money by not having it.

Another reported,

I mean I am so grateful for what I have. I'm so grateful to being born there. But I'm also on some level uncomfortable with it. Not like I want anything else, and not like I don't think everyone should be born at the same level, but there is definitely a discomfort zone.

Question 3: Is Class Background Related to Occupational Strivings?

Through the section of the ISI that concerns occupational goals, we asked students to speak about their occupational aspirations. We coded occupational aspirations for the presence or absence of occupations that required a doctorate or professional degree. A chi-square test revealed significant differences between the three groups, $\chi^2(2, N = 44) = 8.65, p = .013$, Cramér's $V = .44$. Two thirds of the affluent Little Ivy students aspired to occupations requiring a doctorate or professional degree, whereas one third of the lower income Little Ivy students did, and 14.3% of the State College students did. Post hoc comparisons with a series of chi-square tests (with continuity correction) on each of the pairs and with a Bonferroni correction showed that the affluent and State College groups differed significantly from each other, $\chi^2(1, N = 29) = 6.17, p = .013$, Cramér's $V = .53$.

The aspirations of the affluent students are consistent with the educational and occupational levels of their parents. The affluent group's occupational goals tended to be occupations that would award them much more power, income, and status than those of either of the lower income groups. For example, 60% of this group expected to be lawyers, and 20% expected to be physicians (Seider & Aries, 2004, pg. 12). The lower income Little Ivy group anticipated occupations that would elevate them over their parents, because one third wanted to teach, and 20% wanted to practice law or medicine. The State College group's reach was not as high, although their goals would bring them above their parents in status and income. They tended to be vaguer about their goals and also to focus on entry-level positions in professions such as teaching and counseling.

Approximately half the students in each group were in moratorium, in the midst of an exploration of occupational identity: affluent Little Ivy, 46.7%; lower income Little Ivy, 53.3%; State College, 42.9%. Few were in diffusion: affluent Little Ivy, 6.7%; lower income Little Ivy, 0.0%; State College, 7.1%. The affluent Little Ivy students showed the highest levels of foreclosure in the domain of occupation (26.7%), whereas the lower income students showed little evidence of foreclosure in this area (lower income Little Ivy, 6.7%; State College, 0.0%). Both lower income groups showed more evidence of achievement in the domain of occupation (lower income Little Ivy, 40%; State College, 50%) than did the affluent group (20%) and were more likely to have made occupational choices before entering college.

Some of the affluent students based occupational goals on identifications with family members. One student, whose father and older brother were lawyers, stated that "I'm just imagining, based on my personality and my family history, I'm sure I'll go to law school at some time." An economics major who was interested in law and investment banking decided on his major before college "because of my parents; my dad is an investment banker." When considering occupational goals, this student thought, "Maybe law school. Maybe go into the side of business my dad is in." One of the affluent group's most progressive and politically active students, a political science major, anticipated working in politics for an elected official or a think tank. He already had experience working for a candidate and may want to be one himself someday. As he put it, "Bill Bradley was told from age 10 he was supposed to be president. I wasn't told that, but it was one of those things all along that I wanted to do."

The lower income Little Ivy students' occupational aspirations tended to focus on teaching and mostly on college teaching. Most were very engaged with their academic work, enjoyed and appreciated their classes, and wanted to go on to graduate school and to teach at the college or university level. When asked what she would enjoy about being an academic, one student responded, "I love teaching. I love working with people who are passionate about what they want to do and want to learn." Like most of the Little Ivy students, no matter their economic background, she showed no doubts that she would achieve her degree goals. One

student, who was less certain of his occupational goals, nonetheless tried to connect various possibilities to his strong interests. An accomplished musician who had been playing an instrument since the age of 5 years, he indicated that his ideal goal would be to be able to make a living by “playing music and performing.” He also had plans for graduate school in English and for teaching high school English, depending on how his music career would go.

On the whole, the lower income State College students seemed less certain of their occupational goals and were less likely to see graduate school as an option in the near future. One student who really loved theater but was not able to break into it in college talked about a business major. At that point, he could not articulate what his focus would be in that area. When he was asked whether his parents had plans for him regarding an occupation, he answered, “No, my dad told me never to be a truck driver because that is what he is, but they never told me to be a lawyer.” In fact, a Cooperative Institutional Research Program (Higher Education Research Institute, 1999) survey among 1st-year students at the state college revealed that more male students chose “police officer” than “lawyer” as a career goal. As compared with men, 1st-year women more frequently chose entry-level careers in education and human services, bypassing additional education for advanced work or management positions in those areas (Seider, 2002). Pressure from family members and additional economic concerns worked to focus many of the students’ attention to occupations that they could fill soon after graduation. However, one psychology major did not fit that pattern. He very much enjoyed psychological research (“I took a psychology course in high school in my junior year, and I just loved it so much that I want to pursue it”) and had some opportunities to work in a lab at the college. Very knowledgeable about graduate school and opportunities in the field, he seemed confident that he would go on and receive his doctorate. What differentiated this student from most at the state college was the educational background of his family; both parents had completed graduate school and both had taught at the high school and college levels.

Question 4. What Are the Ideologies That People of Different Social Class Backgrounds Develop to Understand Class-Based Aspects of Identity?

We coded answers to the question “What would you say the major factors are that lead to a person’s success in the United States?” for the presence or absence of two types of responses: personal factors (i.e., hard work, motivation, determination) and structural factors (i.e., social class position, opportunities, connections, education). Chi-square tests comparing the three groups on the presence or absence of personal factors revealed no significant differences between the groups, $\chi^2(2, N = 43) = 2.60, ns$, Cramér’s $V = .25$. Approximately three quarters of students in each group named personal factors as important to success. However, significant differences emerged in whether students mentioned structural variables as major

determinants of success, $\chi^2(2, N = 43) = 9.73, p = .008$, Cramér's $V = .48$. Ninety-three percent of affluent Little Ivy students, 69.2% of lower income Little Ivy, and 40% of State College students noted the importance of structural factors to success. Post hoc comparisons with a series of chi-square tests (with continuity correction) on each of the pairs with a Bonferroni correction showed the difference between the affluent and State College groups to be significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 7.35, p = .007$, Cramér's $V = .57$.

When asked, "Suppose it were possible for you and your family to be born all over again, would you want to be born in the same social class or a different social class?" the affluent students (92%) were more likely to say the same social class than the lower income students, $\chi^2(2, N = 41) = 4.70, p = .095$, Cramér's $V = .34$. However, 69% of lower income Little Ivy students and 57% of State College students said the same social class. One lower income Little Ivy student said,

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 for seeing the world from.

A second lower income Little Ivy student also wanted "definitely" to be born in the same class.

It doesn't matter how much money you have or anything like that.... You know, whatever doesn't kill you only makes you ... stronger.... I wouldn't want to live this really posh life and be really spoiled and have whatever I want. You know, I wouldn't appreciate anything. It wouldn't be special to me.

Also typical of the lower income students was a third lower income Little Ivy student, who felt that his lower income status helped him to learn "to value the dollar, learn ... how to work hard. I also learned that if I do work hard and I do make money and stuff, what I can get from it."

Slightly more than half of the State College sample echoed the responses of the lower income Little Ivy students. "I think I would like to stay the same. I think that the experiences that I have had and where I come from all ... have ... influenced my character." Added another, "I like being in the middle class. Because if I was born in a higher class, I would probably end up being a little more spoiled." However, nearly half of the group would have liked to have been born in a higher class. One student, who left no doubt about his wishes, put it this way: "I'd want to be rich. I'd want to see what it's like.... I just want money, and people might think it's greedy ..., but you know, I just want to have money to do what I want." Another student responded in a more subtle manner:

I think it would be nicer to have more money. It seems like you would have more opportunities. But I don't know if that would make me any happier. But I think you'd be able to do more ... like take trips ..., like have nicer things, be able to pay for a better school.

Finally, one student replied, “Probably [a] different [class], a little higher up the chain, middle class. It just would be easier for everyone—no worries at all.”

Nearly all the affluent Little Ivy students would have wanted to be born in the same class. They generally recognized their privilege, but also stated that they would do good work, taking advantage of their comfortable status. As one student put it,

You can be in the upper class and still teach your kids, as my parents taught me, that there is a level of difference and that you need to respect and not discriminate based on that level of difference. But be aware of it. Given the opportunities ... I was given, I wouldn't trade for anything. But also if you can make yourself aware of the differences, than it's worth it. That you can make a difference then, because you can use your knowledge and the power or money you have, to do something about it.

Discussion

The present data reveal that social class plays an important role both as an independent variable that shapes the formation of identity and as a domain of identity exploration. When asked to rate the importance of five domains of identity—occupational goals, political beliefs, religious beliefs, sex-role attitudes, and social class—college students gave occupational goals the highest ratings and social class the next highest ratings. However, affluent students perceived social class as significantly more important to identity than did the lower income students from both private and state colleges. The affluent students were well aware of the educational benefits that had accrued from their economically privileged status and of the opportunities that they had to travel and pursue their interests. The lower income students were more likely to downplay class in their conception of their own identities than were the affluent students (Seider & Aries, 2004). It is striking that social class held lower salience for the lower income students, who had been given the least capital. Just as some Blacks have social identities that accord only minor significance to race (Cross, Strauss, & Fhagen-Smith, 1999), some lower income students appeared to have social identities that accorded low significance to social class.

Social class was an area of exploration for half the affluent students, contributing to their understanding of the advantages that their social class position had given them. Exposure to people of different social classes either at Little Ivy or through volunteer work, coursework that addressed unequal distributions of wealth in this society, and reflections on their own privileged position all contributed to this exploration. By contrast, and consistent with their lower ratings of the importance of social class to identity, almost three quarters of State College students indicated no exploration or questioning of the domain of social class and instead showed the highest level of diffusion in this domain. However, of particular interest is the finding that social class was an area of identity exploration for three quarters of the lower income Little Ivy students. These lower

income private college students were three times more likely to have explored the domain of social class than the State College students, despite the fact that they rated social class as similar in importance to identity. The data suggest that social class becomes an important area of exploration when individuals encounter people from very different social class backgrounds (Aries & Seider, 2005; Ostrove, 2003). The lower income Little Ivy students were exposed to a majority of students who were highly affluent and whose class backgrounds diverged widely from their own, making their own class backgrounds salient (consistent with distinctiveness theory: McGuire, 1984) and pushing them to think about their class status and to find a rationalization for how things had turned out. The State College students, who were in a more homogeneous setting where they were surrounded by other working class students, had less stimulation to think about class-based aspects of their identities. The exploration of social class by the lower income elite college students led not to anger or resentment, but to ideologies to rationalize their class status, as we will discuss later in this article.

The data support previous findings that class position limits occupational strivings (Cook et al., 1996; MacLeod, 1995; Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Rojewski & Yang, 1997). Erikson (1968) held that during childhood, individuals develop a set of expectations about what they will be as an adult, and the people available to them for identification shape those expectations. In the present study, it was the affluent Little Ivy students who aspired to occupations that require a doctorate or professional degree and that would lead to greater income, power, or prestige. Two thirds of the group expected to be lawyers, physicians, or college professors. Some of the affluent students based these occupational goals on identifications with family members. The aspirations of the affluent students were consistent with the educational and occupational levels of their parents.

There were no doctors or lawyers among the parents of the lower income students. From the lower income Little Ivy group, the modal occupational expectation centered on teaching at the college and high school levels, with a minority of students considering law or medicine. Neither law, medicine, nor college professorship appeared as an aspiration of any State College student; instead such students emphasized teaching and counseling. Researchers may well account for the "lower" aspirations of the State College students by their somewhat lower economic status and their lack of cultural capital as compared with those of the lower income Little Ivy students. Further, the fact that the lower income Little Ivy students were indeed at Little Ivy and recognized the avenues that their privileged status opened for them more than likely raised their confidence in their ability to move much higher than did their parents. However, it is notable that the lower income Little Ivy students' choice of occupations (teaching, particularly at the college level) rested considerably on their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments, factors that they did have control over. Their more affluent classmates had disproportionately chosen occupations such as law and politics, positions they are well familiar with given their families' standings and positions, which relied more

on the social capital that they and their families already possessed. For the lower income students, to choose those occupations and to hope to move upward in them would represent a much less certain gamble for the future. Given their class statuses and differential social and cultural capital, all of the students' aspirations seem well within the range of their respective groups and provide evidence for the reproduction of social class (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod, 1995).

In the area of occupational goals, 93% of both lower income groups had already explored identity, whereas two thirds of the affluent Little Ivy students had. For lower income students, many of whom were the first generation to go to college, new areas of study and occupational horizons had opened up to them for the first time, and they had been encouraged to explore new interests. Yet, despite the new opportunities that had opened up to them, their aspirations remained lower than those of the affluent students.

The students' responses to the question of whether—if they could be born again—they would want to be born in the same social class revealed the ideologies that the students developed to understand class-based aspects of identity and to protect themselves from the injuries of class inequalities. It is not surprising that the affluent students were more likely to say that they would want to be born in the same social class than were the lower income students. However, it was somewhat unexpected that two thirds of the lower income Little Ivy students and slightly over half of the State College students also would choose to be born again in the same social class. Many of the lower income students protected themselves from the injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) and downplayed the importance of money by emphasizing the positive aspects of their class upbringing. Many lower income students would want no change in class position because they valued the character traits that they believe they had developed by virtue of the economic struggles of their family. In fact, the lower income students from both schools seemed remarkably similar in this regard. They highlighted the positive virtues that they derived from their class position. They showed pride in their resourcefulness, having learned to find ways to get what they needed. They saw themselves as more independent because they could not rely on their parents. They appreciated what they had and exhibited the motivation to succeed and to take advantage of opportunities. Also, Ostrove and Long (2001) found that lower income college women expressed pride in their social class, despite the difficulties that it posed in their lives. However, it is important to note that nearly half of the State College students wanted more money, more opportunities to travel and to buy things, and access to better schooling.

Erikson (1968, p. 190) argued that adolescents need to find an ideology that "later can serve as rationalizations for what has come about." The lower income students had developed an ideology that rationalized and minimized the disadvantages they had faced. The data support the contention that members of groups with less power or status develop self-protective strategies and navigate a route to positive identity (Crocker & Major, 1989; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Turner et al., 1987). The data help to explain the finding that social class is unrelated to self-esteem (Twenge

& Campbell, 2002). Lower income students seem to have protected themselves both through the lower salience they accord to social class in its importance to identity and in the positive view that they develop of members of their social class.

The students' beliefs about the criteria for success in the United States revealed further information about their ideologies about class. Three quarters of all students focused on personal character traits such as motivation, hard work, and determination as important to success, accepting the ideology of the American Dream. However, the elite students were significantly more likely than the state college students to cite structural factors—for example, individuals' position in society, the opportunities available to them, and the connections they can make—as important to a person's success. Thus the elite college students, who had been given more opportunities, had more awareness of the importance of these opportunities for success. The state college students seemed less aware that they have not been given the same chances for entrée into positions of power and wealth. Rather than articulating any anger toward any structural inequalities, the state college students interpreted their present status and life style as a success.

Lower income students also used the self-protective strategy of positioning themselves in the middle of the social structure and, therefore, as privileged in relation to the poor. Thus, their class position could be seen as an advantage. It kept them from being spoiled like the rich, but they had not struggled like the poor. They had things easier than those below them and had made it to college. They ignored the privileges of the upper class and seemed neither envious nor jealous of those who had been given more. As one State College student put it, "I think the only reason that [social class] didn't affect me was because I never got the spoils of being rich and I never really had the want of being poor."

Researchers should keep in mind the historical period in which these interviews were done, a time of conservative ascendancy in the United States, a time when social programs to aid the poor were being cut, a time when unions and the working class were under attack, and a time when relatively little class mobility was occurring. Thus, the finding that both lower income groups showed a contentment with their statuses, a rationalization of their position, and a lack of anger or jealousy toward the upper class or the more affluent students may well be a reflection of the times and a reaction that could change if the political climate changes (see Perrucci & Wysong, 2003).

Because of the nature of the sample, researchers should note several important limitations of the present study. Students who attend college come from better educated families with higher incomes than do those that do not attend college, and the sample excluded individuals who grew up in poverty. Because the lower income students in this study were upwardly mobile, they were likely to have different perspectives and identity statuses than lower income young adults who went directly into the workforce. For example, it is likely that individuals who do not make it to college would show less evidence of exploration (Morash, 1980; Phillips & Pittman, 2003). Although our sample allowed us to examine

the influence of social class on the perspectives of White college students, future researchers need to pursue the interactions of sex, race or ethnicity, and social class because “social identities are always experienced in conjunction with each other” (Ostrove & Cole, 2003, p. 681; see also Bettie, 2000; Cole & Omari, 2003). We hope that the present exploratory study has shed some light on the role that social class plays in higher education and that it will stimulate further research on class-based aspects of identity.

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