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Transferring ambitions: families negotiating opportunity consumption

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TRANSFERRING AMBITIONS:
FAMILIES NEGOTIATING OPPORTUNITY CONSUMPTION

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Sheila and John Bowman, who taught me not only what it means to be a lifelong learner, but also gave me some of the most invaluable lessons that have allowed me to persevere – determination, self-reflection, and empathy. They never imagined that their focus on developing my character through ballet lessons or their “strategic” investment in my SAT tutor might lead me to spend so much time in academia, and so much time analyzing that choice! I am fortunate that they have always lovingly encouraged me to pursue my own interests and take a path less traveled in our family.
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TRANSFERRING AMBITIONS:
FAMILIES NEGOTIATING OPPORTUNITY CONSUMPTION

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I ask what types of family negotiations occur among college-bound students and their parents as they navigate the college preparation process. Through in-depth interviews with sixty-five upper, upper-middle, middle, and lower-middle-class parents and children I explore the mechanisms that are activated in the competitive pursuit of college admission. While much research focuses on the influence of the school context, I ask students and their parents about the ways that college preparations are discussed and handled at home, focusing on their approaches to activity participation, finances, and college choices. This project investigates how various forms of what Bourdieu terms capital – cultural, economic, and social – are relayed between parents and children. I find three general orientations to college preparation, which I term strategic, natural and compliant. These approaches are shaped not only by past and present class dispositions, but also by families’ expectations for the future, which consequently transfer capital in different ways. While strategizers openly engage in activities that they hope will help their chances of admission, compliers face a moral conflict between their belief in meritocracy and the demands of the process, and naturalizers try not to explicitly associate specific activity choices with college
preparation. I argue that the naturalizers, who shy away from outwardly instrumental participation instead emphasizing character development, hold the highest amounts of cultural capital, which is correspondingly rewarded by elite educational institutions. These orientations filter through respondents’ approaches to finances and choosing a college. Reflecting the tenets of their orientations, I find that some families talk about paying for college as a gift, others as a down payment, a duty, or an incentive. When faced with choosing which colleges to apply to and attend, the orientations help to explain the ways that social class resources and dispositions not only impact the extent to which families face uncertainty, but also their understandings of how to manage it. This study emphasizes that the meaning-making that occurs through the college preparation process powerfully shapes and is shaped by social class sensibilities, revealing taken-for-granted mechanisms in the reproduction of inequality.
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CHAPTER ONE

College Prep in Context:

Inequality, Social Class, and Family Life at the Edge of the Great Recession

At a time when attaining and sustaining the American Dream has never been more precarious, questions about social mobility abound. While sociologists have long interrogated this topic, our lens often tends to be singular, broken up by subfield rather than combining perspectives. In this dissertation I seek to correct this oversight by examining how the college admissions preparation process intersects with cultural, familial, economic, and educational concerns. Centering my analysis within the context of wealth inequality, I assess how middle- and upper-class families negotiate pressures to ensure their children at least maintain, or maybe even exceed, their economic status in the midst of increasing competition for college admission.

While at its foundation, the American Dream is supposed to be about merit and equality of opportunity, the path to achieving the dream is riddled with loopholes that advantage some over others. Despite its elusiveness, there is the sense that “Americans know instinctively what it [the American Dream] means – a fair chance to succeed in open competition with fellow citizens for the good things of life” (Jillson 2004:xi). Americans also tend to agree that education is the key to that “fair chance,” but still one of the central arenas where paths diverge is in education; “The paradox lies in the fact that schools are supposed to equalize opportunities across generations and to create democratic citizens out of each generation, but people naturally wish to give their own children an advantage in attaining wealth or power, and some can do it” (Hochschild and
Scovronick 2003:2). The American Dream is a powerful force, and the desire to attain it shapes day-to-day decisions within the family. This dissertation reveals how the process plays out as parents and students seek opportunities to increase their chances of attending the college of their choice, ultimately hoping to attain social mobility or social reproduction.

The path to mobility in the United States has never fulfilled the promise of equal opportunity for all; however, the wealth, income, and education gap between rich and poor has sharply increased in recent years. High levels of wealth inequality characterized the U.S. in the 19th and early 20th century, and despite equalizing somewhat after WWII, income inequality is currently at its highest point in U.S. history (Piketty and Saez 2014). Economists Piketty and Saez (2014) note that income inequality is generally accepted as part of a capitalist, ‘meritocratic’ society, thus despite recent Occupy Wall Street protests calling out the ‘one percent,’ Americans typically accept some level of inequality without question. Another piece of that acceptance is the public’s misconception; people in the United States, (and around the world), do not comprehend the actual pay gap and radically underestimate it (Kiatpongsan and Norton 2014). The reality and the discourse of inequality in the U.S. are often mismatched, which in turn has important implications for the experiences and attitudes of the families I interviewed. Despite the fact that most upper- and middle-class families will send their children to college and those children are highly likely to reproduce their parent’s class status (Morin and Motel 2012), they tend not see their advantages relative to most of the population, comparing instead only to each other (Cooper 2008). Consequently, the stress and anxiety amongst these same
families surrounding college preparation has skyrocketed in recent years. These families focus in on the dialogue about increasing competition and the need to push their children, rather than looking at the bigger picture trends that indicate based on their resources, their children will undoubtedly meet their goals.

The educational sphere is implicated in the rise of wealth and income inequality. Explanations of inequality from economists’ point of view are often based on the relationship between the development of an educated workforce and the development of technology that requires those educated workers; “depending on which process occurs faster, the inequality of labor income will either fall or rise” (Piketty and Saez 2014:842). Following WWII, the U.S. saw a jump in college attendance with the help of the G.I. Bill. Consequently, until the late 1970s the increasing participation in higher education accompanied the lowest levels of income inequality during the 20th century (Piketty and Saez 2014).

However, with cuts to spending on higher education and less systematic support for attendance, college attendance slowed in the 1980s. Economist Autor (2014) asserts that this slowdown contributed to the rise in the college wage premium. The reduced number of college-educated workers in addition to the need for a more highly educated workforce in the transformed economy led to the devaluation of low skilled labor and a high premium for the college-educated. As a result of these forces, the earnings gap between college-educated workers and high school educated workers has drastically widened in recent decades; “the average earnings of college graduates were 1.5 times those of high school graduates in 1982 but were double those of high school graduates by
2005” (Autor 2014:846), highlighting the impetus for middle-class families to insist on sending their children to college.

Though some might claim the increasing value of a college degree through the heightened college wage premium is an inevitable, innocuous part of the path of our changing economy, this increase is reflective of broader inequalities in the United States. Economists Goldin and Katz (in Autor 2014:844) found that the high wage premium attached to a college degree is a major contributor to the sharp polarization of those with and without a college degree. Since the 1980s college attendance has once again risen, partially because of the large population of college-age people at this moment but there has also undoubtedly been greater access to educational attainment for previously disadvantaged groups in the U.S. But, the overall numbers of college graduates have not kept pace with the flow in the 1960s and 1970s (Autor 2014). There are still large numbers of students without access to this higher wage premium; in 2014 there were still approximately one third of high school graduates who were not enrolled in college (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015).

Additionally, the challenges of attaining a college degree for those in lower income brackets are seen when we consider shifts in college attainment over time by looking at educational mobility from one generation to the next. Recent data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that educational mobility is dropping in industrialized nations, and the U.S. is at the bottom of that list; only about 30% of Americans have a higher level of education than their parents, while Russia tops the list at almost 60% (Porter 2014). These numbers have decreased
over time and heightened inequality: “The graduation rate of youths in the poorest fourth of the [income] distribution increased to 9 percent from 5 percent; among the richest fourth it rose to 54 percent from 36 percent” (Bailey and Dynarski in Porter 2014).

These trends all point to the concentration of wealth, income, and education in the United States. In this particular moment, rising inequality reduces social and educational mobility. Accompanying these concerns is the public discourse about the constantly rising cost of college and the greater numbers of applicants creating more competition than ever before; also commonly known as the “‘college bubble’—too many students going to college at too high a cost” (Autor 2014:847). However, public anxieties about the soaring costs and competition of attending college are not exactly accurate. Many would argue this college bubble is a myth. Despite the legitimate anxiety about the price tag of college attendance, the overarching trends noted above indicate that because of the ever-increasing gap between the college wage premium and high school degree, the expensive college degree is highly likely to payoff in the end for those who have the opportunity to attend (2014:847).

Parents are rightfully worried about soaring costs and some do not know how they will manage, but most believe it is worth the expense for their child to attend college because it is the only viable option for securing a stable class location for their child. Though some parents entertain the idea that their non-academically inclined child may not be suited for the college pathway, they know that a college degree is more likely to ensure their children maintain their elite status. Concerns of broader inequality were not often at the forefront of my interviews, but parents and students were keenly aware of the
social and economic distinctions between those who attend college and those who do not. Such awareness is particularly acute amongst college-educated parents (though with differing income levels), who hold tight to the sense of inevitability about their children’s enrollment in college no matter the cost. The effect of rising inequality on mobility was not a major concern for these families given that “when the return to education is high [as it is in the U.S.], children of better-educated parents are doubly advantaged — by their parents’ higher education and higher earnings — in attaining greater education while young and greater earnings in adulthood” (Autor 2014:848). Thus when we speak about college preparation and attainment, families who are presently planning for a pathway to higher education may have disparate financial resources to get there, but the current college-educated and college-bound population in the U.S. is filled with students who are more often than not raised in a college-educated household as well.

**Social Class and Higher Education**

Within the discipline of sociology, there is no agreement on how to accurately measure economic privilege and there is a general hesitancy to label people as elite rather than upper class (Rivera 2014). The Occupy movement popularized the label 1% to highlight the extreme wealth and control held by the top 1%, but we also know that the top 10%, even the top 20% of Americans hold drastically more wealth than the rest of the population; according to the Pew Research Center, “the upper fifth of the income distribution earn 16.7 times as much as those in the lowest fifth” (Desilver 2014). So how do we categorize those at the top in the U.S.? There are contrasting understandings and categorizations of elites within academia, but also in public discourse. Economist and
New York Times columnist Paul Krugman argues that there is not enough awareness and critique of the tremendous wealth and income garnered by the top 1% and 0.1%.

Krugman (2014) points out, “Until the Occupy movement turned the ‘1 percent’ into a catchphrase, it was all too common to hear prominent pundits and politicians speak about inequality as if it were mainly about college graduates versus the less educated, or the top fifth of the population versus the bottom 80 percent.” To be sure there is a lack of public knowledge about extreme wealth and the ways in which the superrich operate under the radar, but additionally the inequalities within other class categories such as between the upper-middle and lower-middle class are worthy of our attention. The fact that there is still a large wealth gap between that top quintile and the rest of the population also points to the general sense of class insecurity faced by many Americans.

In the context of the polarization of wealth, Shamus Khan (2012a; 2012b) asserts that elites’ power only appears to be increasing, thus they require the attention of scholars to explore the processes contributing to rising inequality. Khan (2012a; 2012b) and Rivera (2015a) both underscore that though we may think of the term ‘elite’ as associated with aristocratic notions of royalty and inherited wealth, the U.S. elite and upper class is more heterogeneous than in the past. Khan (2012a:362) defines elites as “those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource. Within this definition we can think of elites as occupying a position that provides them with access and control or as possessing resources that advantage them.” Khan notes several characteristics of the US elite: they are wealthier than at any point since WWII, and the majority work in finance, which also means that they are part of this group not just due to capital holdings
and wealth, but due to high incomes as well. Khan looks to the Forbes 400 to determine that more than a quarter of those on that list work in finance – we might think of a list like this as the “superelite” (2012a:363). But, they do not make up the entirety of what we could consider the upper class of the U.S. The elite is comprised of people of varied backgrounds, occupations, educations, cultural sensitivities and experiences; they are more international and racially diverse than in the past (2012a:363). Some are part of this group because of work they did themselves, and others inherited their position, while some have a mix of both. This shift in the makeup of the elite has led to a shift in the group’s identity as well; Khan (2012b:480) asserts that “today’s elites consider themselves as constituted by their individual talents,” and this has important implications for the path to power and the public understanding of privilege and how it operates.

Higher education’s role in creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the elite may be more crucial than previously thought, particularly because the traditional belief that education is the great equalizer has persisted over time. Michele Lamont (1992) emphasizes that the class boundary between those attending college and those who do not is a crucial and often permanent one. Of course, one way in which college-educated people reinforce this boundary is through parental guidance and the consumption of opportunities that allow their own children to become college-educated as well. The creation of social boundaries through the positioning of children is both conscious and unconscious; Lamont (1992:178) notes “exclusion is often the unintended consequence or latent effect of the definition by the upper-middle class of its values and indirectly of its group identity.” Lauren Rivera (2014) suggests that sociologists move higher education
to the forefront in the effort to define the elite. Noting that those in the top quintile of earners in the U.S are graduates of four-year colleges, Rivera argues they maintain control through their economic and political clout as elites. While income and wealth are good places to start when it comes to defining the elite, higher education is also a key marker of elite status. And because education is touted as the way to pursue social mobility in the U.S., it serves as a major institutional gatekeeper of the social class hierarchy.

Given their dominant position in the institution of higher education and their changing disposition, the shift in who comprises the U.S. elite has important implications for the college admission experience for people from all class backgrounds. As highlighted above, despite the expansion of higher education in the U.S. over the course of the 20th century, the wealth gap between rich and poor has only widened. Whereas in the past higher education was accessible only to those of a certain pedigree, the increase in high schools that prepared students for college in the early 20th century ultimately led to gradual diversity in the student body at colleges and universities (Karabel 2005). However, when purely academic criteria began to extend the applicant pool to “undesirables” (Jews, recent immigrants), “the trick was to devise an admissions process that would be perceived – not least by themselves – as just” (Karabel 2005:3). Thus those who were in control of these institutions were able to expand access just enough so as not to risk their position of power. The development of the SAT alongside increasing the weight of background characteristics was part of the guise to move towards meritocratic admissions not solely based on wealth (Khan 2011:8). The admissions
criteria began to reflect academic standards through the SAT, but also character references and “subjective non-academic criteria” (Karabel 2005:2). The subjective criteria included the more refined extracurricular activities that may not directly reflect financial resources, but indicate social class status, for example: tennis, piano, or travel abroad.

The subtleties in the development of “‘meritorious’ traits,” as Khan (2011:9) describes, have played a large part in re-shaping how elites identify their position in society. The fact that higher education institutions allowed people from different backgrounds (non-elites) into the fold served to mask the on-going consolidation of wealth for elites; “the paradox of open inequality shows how this project has been both a tremendous success and a tremendous failure. Who is at elite schools seems to have shifted. But the elite seem to have a firmer and firmer hold on our nation’s wealth and power” (2011:8). This move within higher education is reflective of the character of inequality in the United States today. While people point to President Obama as the clear representative of the open society we live in, they fail to acknowledge that these anomalies occur alongside the concentration of wealth within the upper classes. When higher education became more “open” and the SATs were implemented alongside the more subjective criteria for admission, the façade of equal opportunity strengthened. Because this change meant that elites could believe that they had evened the playing field to get to college, the face of and the discourse on inequality changed. Those with greater resources found ways around this “even playing field” by becoming more and more
involved with extracurricular activities that suggested their status to admissions officers (Karabel 2005).

Today the inequality inherent in this signaling process is often taken for granted as part of the admissions requirements. It has heightened the competitive aspect of admissions especially among those who fall just below ‘elites’ in the social class hierarchy – they have abundant financial resources, but perhaps not the same prestigious high school experience or pedigree needed to secure admission without proving their worth through their activities. They are not quite ‘elite’ because they do not come from generations of wealth and their families have only recently gained access to powerful institutions. Those in the upper-middle class in particular maintain a somewhat tenuous position in which they subscribe to a middle-class mentality of hard work leading to success, but they simultaneously hold enough resources to portray higher status and use that to their advantage, especially in an admissions scenario. As the dissertation will show, the families in this study hint at class status through their choices, even when they neglect to articulate these mechanisms.

**Changing Role of the Family in College Admission**

As the expectations of schools changed through the admissions process, so too did those of parents and children. Alongside rising inequality and the concentration of wealth that has affected the social class makeup of the U.S., several major cultural shifts in the 20th century have influenced the experience of families sending their children to college. The increasing focus on the values of democracy and the role of the individual within it (Robinson 2011; Coontz 2005), the notion of children as central to family life
(Stearns 2010; Zelizer 1985), and the increase in choices in educational curriculum especially in higher education (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Robinson 2011) have all contributed to the heightened efforts and subsequent anxiety and pressure surrounding college admission.

Historically, the family unit functioned without much attention to individual needs and choices because all members, along with the community, were required to pitch in to survive in pre-modern times (Cherlin 1996; Zelizer 1985). The individualistic ideals of the Enlightenment which offered the attitude that people deserve greater choice and agency endured from the late 1700s up until today (Coontz 2005; Cherlin 1996). The general belief that individuals have the right to make their own choices, but are also responsible for those choices, contributed to an increasingly individualized approach to child rearing through the 20th and early 21st century.

Within this broader shift towards an individualistic perspective, there was a complementary change that happened regarding perceptions of children’s role within the family. Whereas children were previously seen as an instrumental part of familial survival due to their physical labor and economic contributions, Zelizer (1985) finds that the death of a child was interpreted as a tragic event at the end of the 1800s, which signaled a notable shift from the previous perspective that this was just a common life occurrence. Child labor laws changed as people wanted to prevent premature death and children were increasingly seen as an emotional rather than economic asset to the family. Families became smaller and people did not have as many children. Now that children required more surveillance and involvement from parents, they became “priceless” to the
family and therefore deserved nurturing care in a distinctly different manner (Zelizer 1985). Zelizer argues that the historical process of the “sacralization” of children reveals how the social and cultural spheres interact with the economic to form complex market meanings. These delicate conceptions persist today as they influence the ways that my participants make decisions about how much money to spend when preparing their children for college. Furthermore, the rise in children’s emotional value had far-reaching implications for the role of children in the family and parenting itself. Today we can see this legacy in an attitude towards child rearing that places the burden and responsibility of children’s success into the hands of parents (Stearns 2010). Instead of holding the community, or in the case at hand, the school, accountable for children’s well-being, public discourse shifted responsibility to parents for securing their children’s future, regardless of their resources.

These developments in the U.S. during the 20th century – the centrality of the individual alongside a shift in how we think of children – shape the experiences of respondents in my analysis. These changes have meant different things to parents and to children. For children, the rise in the belief that the individual is an active agent who has the freedom to make his or her own choices influenced university curriculum to move from a prescribed educational plan towards a model in which electives could be chosen by the student (Robinson 2011). This change placed greater confidence in the college student as an independent, autonomous individual who could elect what they wanted to study. In the 1920s, college graduation rates were low and concerns about the college experience grew. Therefore, “To reduce the ‘psychic dislocation of college’” schools
continued to “giv[e] students more individualized attention” and “eventually educators were focused on the ‘whole student’” (Loss in Hoover 2014). The notion that “the individual person is increasingly culturally defined and legitimated as the primary actor of reality” (Robinson 2011:602) became a common approach in college curricula, and around the 1930s strict curriculum requirements relaxed.

As time passed, particularly after WWII as a result of the G.I. Bill, access to college also increased (Stearns 2010). The pressures surrounding college admission ramped up as more people, not just elite upper-class men, attended college in greater numbers. There was an interesting tension that emerged: although colleges espoused choice and autonomy for mature students to direct their own studies (Robinson 2011), possibly due to concerns about competition, parents (particularly middle- and upper-class parents) did not completely trust schools (Stearns 2010) and thus became more involved in guiding their child’s education from an early age to adulthood. Parental “suspicion of schools” (2010:53) and the belief that parents were responsible for ensuring their child’s educational success led to the expression of concerns in the mid-century that school caused undue stress for children. Instead, parents demanded the focus move to rewarding children for the things they did well. Behind these concerns was, as historian Stearns (2010:58) puts it, “a crucial twist on the vulnerable child motif: children might not, without parental assistance, have the natural aptitude to meet parental expectations for school success.”

Alongside apprehensions about the academic realm, attention turned to the extracurricular as another space for child development. Though children’s sports were
organized early in the 20th century, in the post WWII period, children’s involvement with other organized activities became an expected part of middle-class child rearing and thus an opportunity to become a more competitive candidate for college (Friedman 2013). These activities often necessitated parent engagement, whether parents were those who discovered the program, provided transportation, or took a leadership role (Friedman 2013). The structure of extracurricular activities places the burden of setting up the next generation for success in school and outside of school, which is why extracurricular activities still today reflect and contribute to the stratification of opportunity for children. The combination of increasingly open access to education and greater competition to get to the best colleges led to new expectations for parents who were already culturally primed to cultivate their precious, vulnerable children.

The development of the concept of “parenting” as a job to tackle with energy and involvement has been amplified in recent years. Reports, such as this one from The Economist (2014a), regularly assert that parenting makes a major difference in the lives of students: “Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution, a think-tank, concludes that it [parenting] accounts for about a third of the gap in development between rich and poor children. He argues that the ‘parenting gap’ is more important than any other.” Zelizer’s account of the rise of the ‘priceless child’ in the context of broader historical trends suggests that the concept of ‘parenting style’ and the attention that is placed on how people raise their children is a relatively new development. Sociologically speaking, parent involvement in students’ education is typically seen as an important piece of the road to success often because schools expect it (Lareau [2003] 2011). Others point out
that “intensive parenting springs from rising inequality, because parents know there’s a bigger payoff for people with lots of education and skills” (Doepke and Zilibotti in Druckerman 2014). Thus given increasing access to college and larger numbers of applicants, upper- and middle-class parents have sought ways to ensure their children’s success. For some this means signing up the child for special activities or giving them a “hook” (Aranda-Alvarado 2012), for others it could be monitoring their social life or checking that they complete all of their class assignments.

As the importance of college has grown symbolically (and concretely through earnings gaps as noted earlier), parents who have the resources to do so typically contribute in whatever ways they can, leading to what some see today as overly-involved helicopter parents who struggle with growing stress and anxiety as they try to secure their children’s future. The concept of helicopter parents is pervasive in the media; as one article begins: “Well-to-do parents fear two things: that their children will die in a freak accident, and that they will not get into Harvard” (The Economist 2014b). Driven by this intense fear, many parents react by carefully planning and micromanaging their children’s academic pursuits and extracurricular activities. Helicopter parenting is commonly understood as “hovering” and watching over children’s every move, even as they transition to adulthood (Nelson 2010). Sociologist Nelson (2010) explores the influence of social class background and the rise of technological advances on the development of parenting styles. She finds that the professional middle-class parents reflected a style she calls “parenting out of control.” This approach is informed by the term “helicopter parenting” but highlights the close intimate relationships and constant
monitoring that go hand in hand for these parents through the use of technology; for example, regular communication through cell phones and checking assignments through online systems. She finds that parents do hover, and children respond by allowing parents to remain involved by asking their advice even as they enter college and become adults (Nelson 2010). Hamilton (2016) broadens the perspective on helicopter parenting by underscoring that the expectations of school administrators, professors, and the pathway to success for students basically require heavy-handed parent involvement. In Hamilton’s (2016) longitudinal study that followed women from varied class backgrounds as they started at a large Midwestern university through the next five years, she finds that those students who did not have parental support struggled to graduate within four years or to secure a financially stable job. Those students with parents who were engaged in their academics, helped develop their networks to attain a job, or supported them financially, ended up in a more stable position as young adults. Thus the university did not provide ample support for those students without involved parents to overcome obstacles that may have come their way; parents filled in the gap and the structure assured this was the case.

Accordingly, parents have reason to continue this highly involved style, particularly those from the upper and middle classes who have the resources to do so; however, this approach draws a fair share of criticism from those within this group as well. The increasing expectations of parental involvement in children’s lives have been accompanied by a backlash from those who claim that “the problem with hyper-parenting isn’t that it’s bad for children; it’s that it’s bad for parents” (Druckerman 2014). A newer
message to parents is that they must be aware of their stress and not take on more than they can handle because “kids notice when their parents are overdoing it” (*The Economist* 2014b). There is a high cost for mothers in particular: “Between the mid-1990s and 2008, college-educated American moms began spending more than nine additional hours per week on child care; this came directly out of their leisure time” (Druckerman 2014). Others point out that the hype surrounding extracurricular involvement is unnecessary because as long as children are involved in at least some activities, they are on the right track.

Some upper-middle-class parents, like the now infamous ‘Tiger Mom’ Amy Chua, for example, are proud of their strict parenting style, which distinguishes them from helicopter parents who they would argue are focused on the wrong things. Chua (2011) emphasizes a distinction between tiger parenting and helicopter parenting:

Tiger parenting is often confused with helicopter parenting, but they could not be more different. In fact, the former eliminates the need for the latter. At its core, tiger parenting—which, if you think about it, is not that different from the traditional parenting of America's founders and pioneers—assumes strength, not weakness, in children. By contrast, helicopter parenting—which, as far as I can tell, has no historical roots and is just bad—is about parents, typically mothers, hovering over their kids and protecting them, carrying their sports bags for them and bailing them out, possibly for their whole lives.

Chua (2011) bluntly argues that helicopter parenting is a coddling style that is detrimental to children, particularly as it is juxtaposed to her disciplined and strategic approach, which “is all about raising independent, creative, courageous kids.” Tiger parenting and helicopter parenting intersect in their similar approach to activity involvement; however, at least theoretically, they differ in their perspective on their child’s independence. Chua highlights one of the touchy points of helicopter parenting – the notion that it leads to
dependent, overprotected, and spoiled children. Though some level of helicopter parenting is widely recognized amongst upper-middle-class families as the norm, the specter of the ‘helicopter parent’ as a negative stereotype looms large. Potentially because of critiques such as Chua’s, many parents are wary of fulfilling this now contentious label.

Chua is not alone in her disapproval of helicopter parenting, as Nelson (2010) points out, some psychologists are quick to warn against this behavior. In her book with journalist Abigail Moore, *The iConnected Parent: Staying Close to Your Kids in College (and Beyond) While Letting Them Grow Up* (2010), psychologist Barbara Hofer suggests that parents must back off and separate from constant monitoring. Among her claims, Hofer suggests that children may develop neuroses, be overly dependent, and unable to make decisions as a consequence of heavily involved parenting. She cautions that, “Ironically the rising tide of parental involvement is exactly the opposite of what employers want” (2010:216). In a similar tone, sociologist Staples (2013) warns against the technological side of this approach to parenting. Staples asserts that we are all participants in surveillance activities, even without meaning to, and he highlights that even behaviors such as monitoring homework assignments online take away independence and power. His argument suggests that parents who oversee their children’s every move perpetuate these unequal power relations between individuals and the state, or at the familial level, between parents and children. However, Nelson (2010:108) argues that Staples makes the assumption that “all parents eagerly (and perhaps thoughtlessly) adopt the available technologies to protect and discipline (in the
broadest sense) their children.” Nelson’s interviews reveal the opposite, as parents are very attentive to these decisions and do not take them lightly. Parents do not carelessly rely on these technologies. Moreover, parents are not always motivated by discipline as they try their best to utilize technology in ways to help and provide support to their children.

The warnings and cautions against over-involved parenting seem to miss three important features of today’s parenting: the stress and anxiety that often drives and characterizes these decisions, the fact that particularly in high school, children are not without a voice and parents must negotiate with them, and the institutional structure of schools that is complicit in encouraging heavily involved parenting (Hamilton 2016; Lareau [2003] 2011). Particularly during the college preparation process, but often earlier as well, upper- and middle-class parents feel the weight of the world is on their child’s college admission process. They often experience heightened anxiety because they cannot control the outcome. Part of this apprehension is financial, but for those without financial concerns worries about the uncertainty of admission and fears of disappointment abound.

Given the trend towards involved parenting, whether it is tiger parenting, helicopter parenting, or another variation, one of the ways parents deal with the uncertainty is by giving their children as many opportunities as they possibly can. As Nelson (2010:8) found, “they [professional middle-class parents] assume that their children are, if not perfectible, blessed with boundless potential,” and they try to give them the spaces to express that, often in order to get into a competitive college. Even
though these parents were privileged enough (in both my study and Nelson’s) to provide opportunities, this did not mitigate all of the stress involved. While scholars such as Hofer (2010) and Staples (2013) draw attention to the potential problems with these parenting approaches, Nelson (2010) instead underlines the context that shapes these decisions by pointing to the general sense of insecurity about what skills and knowledge will be useful in an unstable economy as one of the major explanations for the anxiety. For my participants, the ambiguous college admissions requirements contributed to the stress as they truly did not always know what would help their child gain admission or not. Adding another layer of complexity is the fact that the college admissions process, or “market,” is ambiguous. For instance, Mitchell Stevens (2007:275) asserts in his comprehensive study of admissions at an elite college that “the terms of admission are now quite demanding, but they nevertheless remain quite broad. There is no doubt about it, applicants made it to the College in a variety of ways,” he goes on to say, “we might view this variety of paths to admission as academic injustice, as so many forms of institutionalized cheating, but in the end I believe it simply reflects our enduring uncertainty about just what the standards for admission into America’s most privileged classes should be.” This “enduring uncertainty” has important implications for the decisions that college-bound students and their parents make as they try to cope with the unknown. When they see a straight A student, captain of the softball team, with several AP classes rejected from Harvard they find it unnerving and discouraging. Parents wonder what will look good on applications, and the process of preparing for college
necessitates this question, even for those who want to challenge this sort of instrumental approach.

**Dissertation Overview**

This dissertation examines how both parents and children work to maintain or exceed their current class status through the process of applying for college. At a time when the hype around college applications is at a fever pitch, by all appearances this is one of the most stressful moments in parents’ and children’s lives. This chapter overviews the broader societal shifts that loom in the background as families make decisions about their children’s educational trajectories. All at once they juggle the increasing instability of social class, the heightened pressure to attend a top university, and the burgeoning emphasis on the needs of children coupled with the expectation that parents must fulfill each of these needs to ensure their children find success. The choices of parents and students as they plan for their future path cannot be understood without considering these fundamental historical shifts.

Chapter Two provides the theoretical foundation of the dissertation by discussing Bourdieu’s forms of capital and the core elements surrounding social class mobility and reproduction. This chapter also touches on relevant literature on consumption and childhoods. Chapter Three is focused on the methodological approach. I describe the sample characteristics and begin a discussion of the complexities of social class categories, a theme investigated throughout the dissertation.

Chapter Four highlights the rhetorical strategies employed by parents and children as they undergo the college application process. Cutting across social class lines, the
participants demonstrate three general orientations to college preparation, which I term strategic, natural, and compliant. I find that while the dominant approach portrayed in popular discourse is strategic (similar to helicopter parents), the naturalizers and compliers show that there is more complexity to the typical portrayal. I discuss the various implications of each approach, concluding that they each transfer resources differently – providing both advantages and disadvantages for parents and children. The “future” lens plays a large role in shaping these decisions. Chapter Five focuses on the financial implications of preparing children to go to their desired college. Assuming the premise that children are often considered emotionally ‘priceless’ in the family, I consider what is acceptable for parents to spend on the college preparations. I examine how the character of the parent-child relationship impacts the financial decisions, revealing intersections between the emotional and economic realms. In Chapter Six, I explore the ways that parents and children conceptualize the choices they have ahead of them. I analyze the ways that families activate their various forms of cultural, social, and economic capital to create a discourse that idealizes the concept of choice as a way to confront and control the uncertainty of admission. I conclude the dissertation by considering the implications of these findings on our understandings of social class inequalities and the admissions process.
CHAPTER TWO

The Transfer of Capital: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Though college preparation is a frequent topic within the discipline of sociology, the decision-making processes and meaning-making that occurs within families while children are being prepared for college admittance are under examined. The subtleties of social class dynamics revealed through this experience need greater attention if we are to understand the many mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of social inequality. This project investigates how various forms of what Bourdieu (1984) terms capital – economic, cultural, and social – are relayed between parents and children during the latter’s preparation for college admission. Since the families in this study are already sufficiently equipped with the capital necessary to ensure their children will attend college, this research is concerned with how they use their capital to secure their children’s admittance to the school of their choice. In this chapter I provide an overview of the core theoretical concepts used in the dissertation and present relevant literature on consumption and childhoods.

The Transfer of Capital

In this study, I term the decisions that families make during the college preparation phase “opportunity consumption.” This phrase highlights both the increasingly market-based framework in which the educational sphere operates and the fact that these decisions reflect different conceptions of, and access to, prospects that prepare children for the future (i.e. “opportunities” are unequal and varied). The relationship between opportunity consumption and children’s actual prospects for a
successful life is complex and broad. We know that those who already have large amounts of economic, social and cultural capital are more likely to access the resources that lead to college attendance and successful jobs. However, to date scant research exists examining how those with and without means decide to consume certain opportunities, and as noted above, nor has there been attention given to the adolescents at the center of these decisions.

The forms of capital as identified by Bourdieu (1984) provide the foundation of this investigation. Bourdieu demonstrates that it is not pure economics (money and income) that impact class status, but overlooked aspects such as social capital and cultural capital also provide critical resources and power for individuals. While social capital refers to the networks and connections that people have with others, cultural capital is obtained through family and schooling and consists of the “embodied tastes” of culture and lifestyle that are inherited or acquired, for instance, taste in artwork or academic credentials (Bourdieu 1984:80). These more fluid forms of capital cannot be transferred immediately to someone like a financial transaction, but they are cultivated over time and passed on through generations, such as the spending practices I examine among families.

In this dissertation, I use the phrase “transfer of capital” broadly in order to refer to the interactive aspect of the college application process during which all forms of capital are leveraged to benefit the students. This phrase captures the subtleties that pass consciously and unconsciously between parents and students as they make decisions about their college preparations. The decision-making that goes into the consumption of
opportunities uniquely highlights the influence of different forms of capital. The process is captured by Bourdieu’s theoretical concept of “habitus,” which is an “open set of dispositions” in that it mirrors our “socially produced tastes [which] we experience as natural, personal, and individualized (just what we are)” (Schor 1998:29). The notion of “habitus” identifies the temperament, sensibilities, tastes, and outlook that people bring with them to each context (in Bourdieu’s terms “field”) and interaction they face; it is developed throughout one’s lifetime. But habitus is not only comprised of an individual’s dispositions,

It is both a ‘structured structure’ and a ‘structuring structure’. It is structured in that it is the principal mechanism for the division of social groupings according to class-based dispositions. It is a ‘structuring structure’ because it organizes agents’ perceptions and practices: habitus is both the producer and ‘the product of internalisation of the division into social classes’ (Bourdieu, 1984:170). Attempting to overcome the classic structure agency antinomy, habitus can be regarded as dynamic to the extent that it redefines itself according to new experiences as a structured structure. Yet, any change will not be dramatic, as the structuring principles tend to constrain any reorientation of habitus due to the internalized nature of dispositions (Martens, Southerton, and Scott 2004:163).

Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus to underscore the interaction of social structure and individual’s agency. As Martens et al (2004) explain, the habitus is supposed to be “dynamic,” yet its early foundations are often assumed to persist into adulthood.

Following Bourdieu’s theoretical and empirical contributions, there has been much debate about the permanence of the habitus specifically regarding the relevance of class origins in shaping parenting approaches and how that relates to social mobility (Streib 2015, 2013; Lareau [2003] 2011; DiMaggio 1982). This question is explored throughout this dissertation via an examination of the orientations to college preparations, negotiations of finances, and the ways families handle uncertainty.
Social class and the tastes that correspond to social class locations enable my analysis to operationalize the habitus concept as a component in the college preparation process. Bourdieu (1984:466) explains, “[taste] functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place,’ guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position.” These tastes and sensibilities orient people towards decisions that are appropriate given their social location. He elaborates, “It implies a practical anticipation of what the social meaning and value of the chosen practice or thing will probably be, given their distribution in social space and the practical knowledge the other agents have of the correspondence between goods and groups” (1984:466-467).

Especially relevant in this case, cultural capital is one essential component of the habitus that categorizes commodities and leads people to want certain products (or experiences) and disregard ones that are worthless in their environment (Holt 1998:4). Through these concepts, Bourdieu emphasizes that consumption and consumer desire is socially constructed through the underlying processes that transmit varieties of capital through the family, school, and work, and is in turn manifested through tastes. Consumer desire and choices are not just shaped by market dictates, but are created through influential social processes.

Although never an instantaneous transformation, the different types of capital can also be transubstantiated from one to another. This transfer is particularly relevant to my research on consumption of opportunities as people buy and invest in activities and choose colleges that reflect the amount of economic and/or cultural capital that they hold,
not only their economic resources. Holt synthesizes this Bourdieuan point, explaining that cultural capital “operates in consumption fields through a particular conversion into tastes and consumption practices” (1998:4). The resources that come with cultural capital are naturalized through the expression of people’s tastes in what they consume. Particularly for those who hold high cultural capital, choices are presented as an ordinary extension of the preferences one develops from a young age and continues to reinforce and reshape through adulthood (Holt 1998).

Furthermore, through Bourdieu’s theory of tastes (1984) he suggests that processes such as the activation of cultural capital, as seen through consumption patterns and class struggle, contribute to the reproduction of the existing social arrangement. Bourdieu demonstrates that individuals’ actions are apt to “function and change in a systematic way,” because they rely on the amount of capital available to people and on the circumstances surrounding the mechanisms of reproduction (1984:125). While he argues that people constantly “struggle for legitimation” through their behaviors and attitudes, the interface between an individual’s habitus and their capital causes differing scenarios which allow some people to assert power due to their assets, (whether these assets are economic, social or cultural wealth), while others must fight to obtain power (Swartz 1997:123). In this study, I investigate how this struggle occurs in different families. The efforts people make to transfer their capital may or may not be strategic; however, they still matter either way. These upper- and middle-class families employ several different strategies; some of which appear more likely than others to reproduce or strengthen the position of their children by setting them up for a certain life through the
construction of tastes and educational opportunities. The magnitude of this process, whereby people pursue their constructed tastes, lies in Bourdieu’s argument that the “political consequences [of this pursuit] are routinely misrecognized as disinterested practice” (Holt 1997:95), even though they serve the interests of those at the top of the social hierarchy. Bourdieu’s analysis leads him to conclude: “what the competitive struggle makes everlasting is not different conditions, but the difference between conditions” (1984:164). Schor’s more recent analysis of American consumption reaffirms this point as she argues, “consumption patterns and tastes are stratified by socioeconomic categories such as class, education, and occupation. They are a source, as well as an indicator, of social differentiation” (1998:30). Given these theoretical premises, this qualitative research reveals the often-invisible aspirations, plans, and decisions of families, along with assessing how much action they are able to take within the parameters of our social class structure and racial hierarchy to place their children on certain educational paths.

The Consumption of Opportunities

Even though Bourdieu’s ideas are frequently seen in sociological works similar to this investigation (Friedman 2013; Lareau [2003] 2011; Pugh 2009), this study adds to his theorizing by focusing on how parents and their children engage in capital transference during the process of education-related consumption. This is a move beyond Pugh’s (2009) examination of the connection between the desire to fit in, caring, and
consumption, and Friedman’s (2013) study of “competitive kid capital” which focuses on the extracurricular activities of elementary school-age children.

The class complexities that arise through these types of consumption practices are particularly salient in the household economy as families make spending decisions that influence, and are influenced by their economic, social and cultural capital. Several works specify the significance of household expenditures, particularly parents’ spending on their children (Pugh 2004; Schor 2004; Zelizer 1981, 2005). These studies touch on the intersections between the familial realm, household spending, and economy by highlighting the complex and delicate relationship between market transactions and parents and children. Zelizer (1981, 2005) extends the basic premise of economic sociology, which began as a critique of classical economics’ neglect of the social sphere, by considering how gender and class inequalities interact with the economy. She argues that the home illustrates the ways that “intimate relations and economic relations coincide” (2005:242). I extend this argument further in my analysis to explain how the household is a place where intimate relations, economic relations, social class and educational aspirations intersect. Zelizer underlines that household consumption may “seem to be nothing but practical steps to survival – for example, purchase, preparation, and consumption of food,” but these activities, “take on significance as definitions of interpersonal relations” among mothers, fathers, and children (2005:225). Zelizer offers insight about the importance of consumption in organizing the family’s relationship between money and intimacy.
Through her extensive ethnographic research on racially and socioeconomically diverse children and their parents, Pugh (2004) examines how this process unfolds. Pugh (2004:229) interviewed low-income families to see how their financial limitations impact their ability to give a “‘good enough’ childhood” to their children. She finds that within these families money comes and goes, so the children seem to interpret the accessibility of money as happening by chance. Pugh terms this “windfall childrearing” because the parents buy things for their children sporadically, when they have money available. The consumer decisions have a major impact on these children’s lives and as Pugh (2004:247) emphasizes, “how and when parents spend their money on children provide a glimpse of inequality’s future as part and parcel of constructing the childhoods that are the pathways leading to different adult lives.” Though not analyzed from an economic sociology perspective, she makes the crucial connection between these spending negotiations and their impact on the larger social structure and organization of society.

Pugh (2009) puts the focus on children and their parents’ negotiations in the context of a consumer-oriented society. She contends that these negotiations inevitably involve future planning, which she calls “pathway consumption.” Pugh (2009:178) defines “pathway consumption” as “spending on the opportunities that shape children’s trajectories…it involves a combination of aspiration and uncertainty we might identify as hope.” This refers to both consumption and investments; while consumption is typically defined as purchases that are to be immediately used, investments are purchases made with a future goal in mind, such as payments for private school. While these two terms are generally kept separate in economic analyses, the contrasting definitions reflect the
typical assumption that consumption is less important because it is a frivolous purchase made without future concerns in mind. However, it is useful to consider how investments may be a form of consumption in order to reject this “normative judgment” that diminishes the significance of consumption (2009:178). As noted, this study elaborates on this concept by focusing specifically on “opportunity consumption” which includes all instances in which parents and high school students consume as they prepare for college attendance. In contrast to Pugh (2009), I specifically look at aspects of opportunity consumption that prepare high school students for their future after graduating (attending college), rather than examining all consumer decisions of parents and children. I explore how parents and adolescents negotiate their roles in the family context, and how that impacts their consumer choices and education, potentially reshaping the terrain of cultural capital that parents pass to their children.

Child-Parent Interactions and Agency

In recent years, more attention has been drawn to the fact that children are often disregarded as significant actors in sociological literature (Pugh 2014; Cook 2008; Martens, Southerton and Scott 2004). More specifically, several consumer studies scholars (Cook 2008; Martens et al. 2004) have called for a greater focus on children as agents who should be incorporated into current theoretical formulations regarding consumption. Even with the increasing focus on children as seen in this discussion, Cook (2008:228) points out that the actor in theories of consumption (and in economics and economic sociology) is always “assumed to be an adult.” Bourdieu mentions children in
his work because they are a crucial piece of his argument about tastes and social reproduction, yet he never provides an explanation for how this process occurs. It is inferred that children are not active consumers themselves, but rather they just take in whatever is offered by their parents (Cook 2008; Martens et al. 2004). Despite the fact that young children are often direct recipients of their parents’ actions and decisions, we still need to acknowledge the “competence rather than the vulnerability of children” (Thorne 2009:25). Children are not just passive recipients who accept and follow whatever their parents or peers prescribe, but rather they have their own thoughts, dreams and desires that play a critical role in the trajectory of their lives.

Pugh (2014:71) argues that if we assume children are “passive,” “innocent,” and “universally the same,” then we underestimate their capabilities and their significant role in shaping adult’s decisions and lives. Lee’s (in Pugh 2014:77) definition of agency is helpful in broadening the typical perspective on children; “agents are not those who are independent, but those who are able to activate their networks to achieve something, who are able to use their dependence.” Lee’s explanation also points to the ways that the relative agency of parents and their children result in differing capital transfers.

In this project, the children exemplify this idea because most of them are completely dependent on their parents financially, to some extent emotionally, and even physically (e.g. transportation needs), however, they also manage to navigate the multiple and complex sources of information that they receive as they plan for their futures. And they are often encouraged to become independent, at least ostensibly, as these upper- and middle-class parents want their children to be self-actualized (Vincent and Ball 2007).
While I was surprised to find more agreement amongst the parents and children than I expected, the children did not blindly follow their often eager parents’ suggestions, but rather they assessed and considered their options as to which activities to participate in, which classes to take, colleges to apply to and whose help to enlist as they progress towards their goals. That said, they also were unable to make these decisions without parental input.

Pugh (2014) pushes this argument a step further by highlighting how critical children are to our understanding some of the timeless pursuits of sociology such as debates about the role of structure versus agency. Sociologists frequently conclude their investigations with proclamations that either the broader systemic structure or an individual’s agency determines their behavior or outcome. Pugh (2014:78) emphasizes that by bringing children to the forefront of our enquiries, we may be able to go beyond this endless deliberation:

Rather than simply following structure or acting with agency, then, people interact. By thinking about the interdependence that childhood studies makes apparent, we can see beyond the old antimonies brought on by the structure-agency debate to new questions, such as how do people come to embody which kinds of culture; why are some relations more generative of action than others; and how do people manage to resist existing inequalities embedded in their current relations.

The relationships and discussions held between parents and children at the moment in time when they are planning for the future illustrate this broader theoretical point. Parents do not solely and unilaterally decide what their children will do as they transition to adulthood, nor do children act without guidance and advice from those they depend on. As such, these interactions represent a key period when they are building relationships
and certain expectations for the future. This dissertation will show that parents’ own personal experiences – whether they attended college or not, what type of college, how they paid for college, and other factors all play a role in shaping their recommendations and aspirations for their children.

This chapter establishes the importance of the various forms of capital in parents’ and children’s decision-making about what they need to activate to achieve college admittance. The ensuing chapters illustrate the different ways that these capitals are translated into advantages through parent-child interactions involving activities, paying for college, and choosing a college.
CHAPTER THREE
Methodological Approach

This project is a study of 30 families in the New England area. The data for this study was gathered through 65 open-ended, 40-120 minute interviews with parents and high school students. I spoke with parents and their children about their college preparations during the general time period when these strategies are enacted – their sophomore, junior, and senior years. All of the households that I contacted planned for the possibility of their children attending college immediately following high school graduation.

Quantitative data is helpful in understanding broad trends and long-term correlations that we are unable to capture from one moment in time of an individual’s life. However, in this case a qualitative approach is taken given my interest in why and how parents and children make decisions about what to participate in, purchase, and activate in order to secure college admission. This methodological approach allowed me to deepen my understanding of how “basic social processes” within the family materialized in relation to the consumption of educational opportunities (Charmaz 2006:20). Going into this project, I was aware of the importance of these dynamics in a student’s life, but open to what specifically about this process was most important from the perspective of the students and parents themselves. Accordingly, an inductive approach was necessary. I began with focused, but open-ended questions in order to leave space for unanticipated patterns to emerge (see Appendices E & F for parent and student interview guides).
The guiding research questions of this dissertation began as: How do families of high-school students consume opportunities in order to attain mobility? How and why do parents make decisions about whether or not to purchase opportunities for their children? How do adolescents make decisions and/or experience the decisions that their parents make regarding their future? What do these experiences and practices tell us about middle-class culture? Given the nature of qualitative research, these questions changed as the research progressed and I went through the analytical process. Ultimately, the dissertation centers on the question: How do parents and children negotiate the consumption of opportunities as they prepare for college?

**The Sample**

I interviewed 30 households in three distinct geographical areas: one predominantly upper-middle-class suburban town, Shoretown (n=12 households), and two class-diverse (though relatively wealthy) neighboring cities, Shore City (n=15) and West City (n=3). Most of the students attended a public high school in their hometown, though two attended a charter school in Shore City, one attended a private school in West City and one attended parochial school in Shoretown. I set out to interview people in two different contexts, urban and suburban, intending to have a social class comparison. When I struggled to access social class diversity in Shore City, I reached out to a personal contact in West City and added three families to the sample.

All of the parents interviewed identify as being in or previously in a heterosexual marriage, except for three mothers who were divorced. Because of my recruitment strategies (outlined below), I was unable to control for the marriage status of families.
While the divorced parents noted the added complexity of determining college payments with the ex-spouse, this did not arise as a major theme in the interviews. In three families, I interviewed both the mother and father together. In all families, I interviewed parents and children separately, when possible in a different locale. In the 12 suburban families I only interviewed mothers; in the cities I interviewed both parents together in three families, and three fathers alone. I interviewed 18 female and 15 male students (n=33 students). I interviewed 26 mothers and six fathers (n=32 parents), (see Appendix A for further sample characteristics). Though I was able to secure gender balance among the students, I was unable to interview an equal number of mothers and fathers. It was challenging to secure more interviews with fathers. In most of the families I spoke to, the mothers were the parents who were involved in the details of managing the college application process. In one Shoretown family in which the father worked outside of the home and the mother did not, their daughter indicated that her parents had distinct visions about her future – her mother prioritized her independence and her father prioritized her job attainment. However, I was unable to interview the father and explore this dynamic further in this family or the others. The potential gender distinctions in approaches to college preparation, both as a result of parents’ gender and their children’s is an area for further research.

Between 2011 and 2013, I interviewed students who identified as being college bound who were in their sophomore, junior, and senior year of high school. While junior year is typically seen as the most active in the college preparation timeline, preparations

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1 In one family, I was unable to secure a guardian interview, however, I decided to include the student’s interview in the data analysis.
start much earlier for many middle-class families (Friedman 2013). The sophomore interviews that I conducted (seven students) took place at the end of the year when most are at least starting to think about how to prepare for college. The few seniors (three) were interviewed in September of their senior year, thus they had not yet submitted applications. Following IRB protocol, I contacted parents first and asked permission to speak with their children. I spoke to whoever was available first depending on schedules, however, after a few interviews I learned that speaking to the parents first was beneficial as they often provided additional details that I could then use to probe students to expound their responses. Thus I made the effort to interview parents first whenever possible. All names, schools, towns and activities have been changed in order to protect the identities of the participants in accordance with IRB guidelines. When necessary to protect anonymity, references to specific universities were changed to an alternative school of similar rank and type. In the same manner, the activities that certain students participated in were also changed to a similar type, e.g. piano for violin.

The sample is constrained in its socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity. The sample includes 23 white, two African-American, two biracial, three Asian immigrant families (the parents all immigrated, their children were born in U.S.). All parents except three have at least a B.A., 13 have an M.A. or higher. Approximately half of the sample (n=13 families; five in Shoretown, eight in Shore City) was experiencing the college application process for the first time with their oldest (or only) child, the rest of the sample had been through the application process at least once before. Three of the parents interviewed were unemployed at the time, three were self-described as stay at
home mothers, and five mothers worked part-time. In the two urban areas, the income range was $40K-$400K, in the suburb it was $150K to upwards of $400K. Even given the context of Massachusetts, where 39.4% of people 25 years old and above hold a bachelor’s degree or higher (compared to 28.8% in U.S.), and the median household income is ~$13K over the national median income,\(^2\) this group as a whole is above the state average and can be considered privileged (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2015).

**Conceptual Framework**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the forms of capital identified by Bourdieu provide a central foundation for this research. Bourdieu’s theoretical premise is that the forms of capital – cultural, economic, and social – which are held by individuals and passed on mainly through families and educational institutions, are key to social reproduction. I applied these concepts in order to make sense of the patterns in my data, which from the start reflected distinct practices and varied levels of knowledge and resources. In addition to expanding the social class analysis of this project, the conceptual basis of the forms of capital deepened my inquiry into what was required, and the multiplicity of events that needed to occur in order for families to feel that students were adequately prepared for college admission. The decision-making that went into families’ consumption of opportunities uniquely highlights the influence of different forms of capital.

**Defining Social Class**

Defining social class is a challenging issue in any circumstance, particularly in a study centered on an issue that is so indelibly shaped by class characteristics. One’s social class categorization may shift multiple times throughout their lifetime, making social class a somewhat fluid, dynamic identity. Despite their potential fluidity, social class categories and identities are a helpful and informative way of understanding people’s lives because of their relative stability and the powerful sensibilities that are tied to social class identity (Streib 2015; Lareau 2003 [2011]). In particular, middle class is a challenging category for social scientists in the United States to define. The majority of Americans identify in this broad category, though less so after the recent recession (Kochar and Morin 2014). Previous work in sociology often lumps together broad swaths of people into the middle class when it appears not to make a difference in the exhibited behaviors (Lareau 2003 [2011]:347). However, in this study, the nuanced gradations of middle class are highly relevant as they show (albeit slight) distinct sensibilities about what should be done to prepare for college and even after college. While income may not have been the principal factor, familiarity with higher education did have a significant impact on parent perspectives regarding how their child should prepare and what was at stake – they were decidedly less anxious.

I categorized participants based on the combination of their current household income, wealth as indicated by home ownership and estimated value of the home, occupation, their education level, and that of their parents. I was able to access this information by distributing a demographic survey at the end of each parent interview (see

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3 I estimated home value when possible by using Zillow.com. I was able to access addresses I conducted interviews in the homes of 17 of 30 families.
Appendix G). While it is illuminating to consider social class trajectories of each participant and the social class differences between spouses (Streib 2015), for the purposes of this study I categorize social class status of the family as a whole, and specify the subtle distinctions between family members when relevant. For example, Shoretown mother Anne Anderson is classified as upper class. She is upper class with high levels of economic resources, but lower levels of cultural capital. This is because she has a high household income (200K+), she owns a high-value home (home estimated at over $1M), and although she has a B.A. and is a part-time nurse’s assistant, her husband holds the title of vice president at a large healthcare company (and they planned to pay for both their children’s college education, plus living expenses). Whereas I place Abram Ellis, a father in Shore City, in the middle class because he was unemployed and his wife is a local musician. Abram does not have high levels of economic capital but he does have high levels of cultural capital. He holds an MBA from an Ivy League school and he and his wife own their home in an expensive, ‘trendy’ area of Shore City. They rent out one or two rooms at a time to students in order to supplement their income and mortgage payments. Given Abram’s high levels of cultural capital and knowledge and experience with higher education, I placed the Ellis family in the middle class rather than lower middle despite his lack of employment at the time of the interview. These examples reveal that the categories provide an organizing model, yet fluid approach to the social class of these families by considering the income, wealth, occupation, and educational experiences. They also show the relevance of the forms of capital in each assessment of social class.
Data Analysis

I transcribed twenty of the interviews and the balance was submitted to a transcription service. While transcribing the interviews myself allowed me to be close to the data, the slow pace of transcribing hindered my analytical progress, so in the interest of time I used Cabbage Tree Solutions for a rough cut of transcriptions. In order to maintain the close relationship to the data after receiving each transcription, I then listened to my interviews while editing the transcription along the way which made the process much more efficient. Prior to transcription, I wrote down my reflections immediately following each interview. These notes held important details about the location, style, dress and mannerisms of each respondent, and the reactions and feelings I had after each interview. The initial notes were invaluable to the analytical process as they kept the experience fresh in my memory when I started to make sense of the data. Later in the process, after completing most of my interviews, I used these notes to write brief memos about each parent-child pairing in order to consider my participants as not just separate entities of students versus parents, but students and parents together as family units so that I could more easily analyze the data across various families as well. This analytical step was important because looking among and across the families brings to light certain details that are missing when the data is examined in isolation. As the following analytical chapters demonstrate, adding in the familial dynamics strengthened the critical findings across students and parents.

I initially took a grounded theory approach to analyze the interviews. While I did not adhere to a strict grounded theory approach, I utilized the associated coding
techniques (Charmaz 2006). I coded my first ten interviews without using qualitative data software. I printed my initial transcripts and coded line-by-line using both in vivo and analytic codes. This preliminary analysis led me to common themes in the interviews and helped me determine a rough conceptual plan for my dissertation chapters. While the chapter topics shifted and became more focused over time, the foundational themes – choice, approaches to activities, and the financial implications remained steady throughout the analysis.

After developing these themes I began using the qualitative data software program ATLAS.ti to organize my data and deepen my analysis. I assigned both line-by-line and thematic codes to each interview through ATLAS.ti. For example, the first line-by-line codes often used participants’ own words, such as “find the perfect college,” or “I won’t have to go to community college.” Then second level codes for these responses included: “college choices and options,” “meaning of college,” and “negotiating finances-college savings.” As noted above, together with coding I reflected on various themes and meaningful findings by writing memos during the research collection and analytical phases of the project.

As the secondary analytical codes developed, I was able to combine thematic codes to form larger groupings, which ultimately shaped the main findings of the dissertation. For example, the code mentioned above, “college choices and options,” was connected to other codes that were related to the concept of “choice” such as “career–ideas,” “decisions – equal process,” “options – applying to many schools.” These codes are centered around the core concept of choices and decision-making that became
Chapter Six, which is focused on the various conceptualizations of choice held by students and their parents. These analytical codes served as the backbone of the dissertation.

The Interviews

Recruitment

I began recruitment by contacting one key informant who was a personal contact in the three locations. I connected with someone in each place who had a child in high school at the time; in Shoretown and West City my contact was a family friend and in Shore City I started contact with a former colleague. While my intention in sampling from a suburb and two neighboring cities was to access a more socioeconomically and racially diverse group of respondents, the process of snowball sampling led to a relatively homogenous group in terms of demographics. Seeking distance from my personal contacts, after making the initial contact with their suggested participants I began to snowball from there (see Appendix B for the recruitment email). Additionally, through my contact at Shoretown High I gave a presentation to a sociology class in hopes of generating interest in my project. Unfortunately this only yielded one additional family interview, thus my personal connections were the most powerful in this instance.

In Shore City, I was able to secure interviews with many students only after they saw one of their friends speaking with me at a coffee shop around the corner from their school. When they approached to say hello I had the chance to make my pitch and I secured their contact information and their parents’ information directly at that moment. Each student and parent received a $15 gift card after the interview. I had a business card
and a one-page flyer with brief information about the study to hand out to all interested students. Because of this particular day, my urban sample of students is a loose group of friends (some were closely tied, others were not) who shared some interests and shared a high-achieving approach to their schoolwork. Though this suggests the potential for bias, I kept this in mind through the analysis. With a group that was college bound from the start, I had a self-selected group of high achievers across the board, with some exceptions. As for the friendships between respondents, in some cases this helped me to confirm and understand more fully the tendencies of certain students as friends occasionally referred to each other in separate interviews.

When I did not achieve the social class and racial diversity I deemed necessary, I broadened my scope and reached out to a contact in West City who connected me with three families. These families did not end up increasing the ethnic or racial diversity of the sample, but added some social class diversity and valuable insight. I also contacted a teacher I knew at a Shore City Charter School, which resulted in one lower-middle-class and one working-class African American family.

I interviewed the majority of students from two high schools that have similar graduation rates, Shoretown High School sends 86% of students to 4-year colleges, while Shore City High School sends 93% to 4-year colleges. West City High and Shore City Charter had lower rates with 67% and 65% going to 4-year colleges, respectively. I researched each school and determined that they offered similar college preparation resources. However, Shore City Charter School had a much higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students (52%) and because it was focused on college
attendance, the institution itself offered much more specific and guided support to students and parents compared to the other high schools that assumed parents’ held a high level of knowledge about the educational landscape.

I considered pursuing additional interviews but decided that despite the relative homogeneity within the sample, my initial analysis indicated relevant and interesting patterns in the experiences of my participants. The similar demographics of most of my participants allowed me to focus on other pertinent distinctions regarding the class-cultural capital dynamic (Streib 2015; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). By focusing on a privileged college-bound group of upper- and middle-class families, I add to the rather limited research on how “class works” during the college application process for economically advantaged students and their families (Conley 2008:369). While those who are not lacking for basic resources may think their social class is less salient, in fact, class “is most virile when it is least visible,” and thus worthy of closer examination amidst more powerful groups (Conley 2008:371).

I conducted four follow-up interviews with students; one interview was with a mother and daughter together (see Appendices H & I for follow-up interview questions). Outcomes of the college applications are not the focus of this project, instead I capture the experiences of these families at one moment in time to understand the decision making process. However, these four supplemental interviews provided a helpful glimpse into how things turned out as students were accepted, rejected, and matriculated into various universities. Given the small number of follow-up interviews secured, these interviews are not emphasized in the analysis, but mentioned when pertinent. Though I
only heard back from a few respondents after following up, I was able to determine where almost all of the students ended up attending college. Most of the students had publicly accessible Facebook pages that I was able to view and note their college association. Again, outcomes are not the goal of this project, however, where relevant I do mention the type of university that students attended.

I also reached out to several other constituents to explore how cultural capital manifested during the college preparatory process for admission to college. I interviewed a guidance counselor and an English teacher at Shoretown High. I interviewed two Shore City non-profit leaders; both focused on helping low-income, underserved families save and plan for their children to attend college, primarily dealing with the financial side (FUEL and Compass Working Capital). These non-profits engage directly with students and parents to help them figure out the logistics of applying for college, financial aid and saving. Though I did not end up interviewing a large group of students who employed these types of services, learning about these programs gave me a deeper sense of the expansive gap among college-bound students from privileged and under-privileged settings. These perspectives allowed me to see the institutional barriers that many students face in the college application process. And most relevant, they showed a sharp contrast to the experiences of the majority of the families I interviewed.

Local Environment

4 The two charter school students explained similar types of resources that helped their families learn the ins and outs of applications and loans.
The context in which these families were operating was important to understand because it was central to their experiences as they prepared for college admission. The whole sample is college bound and a privileged group by any standards, but the places where participants spent their day-to-day lives differed greatly. Living in a large metropolitan area characterized by its many institutions of higher education, elite colleges and universities surrounded the families in West City and Shore City on their daily commute to and from school. The public schools that the students attended were high-performing schools with high graduation rates. The pressure to attend a top school was omnipresent, however participants who attended Shore City High School\(^5\) reported an extremely competitive environment amongst students with a greater intensity than described by students at the other schools. Given their urban location, these students often navigated public transportation on their own to arrive to and from school, and as a whole appeared to have greater independence from their parents than the Shoretown students.

Participants described the small, tight-knit community of Shoretown as both a draw to residing in the town and a frustration during the college application process. Some students and parents complained that the nature of the town added to their stress regarding the college application process because of the substantial interest people took as to which schools students applied to and where they gained acceptance. Thus the pressure surrounding college did not just happen during school and school-related activities, but also came into social settings such as car rides or visits when a friend’s

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\(^5\) Despite being a public middle and high school, this school requires all students take an entrance exam to secure their spot, adding to the competitive atmosphere of the school.
mother inquired about where the student would be applying. In contrast, the fact that Shore City and West City students lived all over the area meant that these types of conversations were more diffuse, mainly happening during school-related activities. Additionally, the demographic diversity of the city provided a contrasting context for understanding college preparation. While several of the city students knew someone personally who was not planning to attend college after high school, only one Shoretown student mentioned a friend who was not going to attend college. Though both West City and Shore City are characterized by both extreme wealth and extreme poverty, Shoretown is one of the state’s highest per-capita income towns. Driving through the upper/upper-middle-class town one is greeted by large, expensive homes with perfectly manicured lawns; one house exhibits Yale University flag flying right under the United States flag.

_Situating the Interviewer_

Interviewing is a powerful way to connect with respondents and to gain insight into how and why people act and behave in specific ways; however, face-to-face interviews are also highly influenced by the dynamic between two people and the various experiences they bring to the table. Furthermore, as with any other research methods, interviews yield a variety of results dependent upon the skill and technique of the researcher. My graduate training and previous experience conducting in-person interviews for various smaller projects helped to ensure my rigorous approach to the interview process.
My interviews addressed higher education and preparation for higher education, and because I am a white, upper-middle-class woman pursuing a PhD, respondents could safely assume that I held a high level of knowledge about higher education. And despite my initial explanation that I was not seeking to give advice, nor did I claim to hold any insider knowledge about the admissions process, some respondents wanted to hear my opinion on how they should be preparing. A few were slower to warm up to me, perhaps intimidated by their assumption of my ‘superior’ knowledge given my PhD candidate status. I was careful to reiterate my distinct role as a researcher rather than counselor. Many participants inquired about my own credentials after the interview: where did I attend undergrad, had I applied early, how many colleges had I applied to. I shared this information openly with them.

Because many of the participants shared a similar class background to my own, my interviewing experience was largely one in which I shared several characteristics with respondents. Though sometimes I interviewed up or down, I also frequently found myself interviewing laterally: at times I could relate and connect with both student and parent experiences as I recalled similar experiences in my own family. I was a dedicated ballet dancer for most of my youth, I played sports in high school, I was part of student council, I was a good student and cared about what my college application would look like. My parents paid for my activities, they paid for an SAT tutor, and paid for college. My own privileged background mirrored that of many respondents. Thus I had to constantly practice reflexivity and consider how this may impact my analysis. While this could lead to interviewer bias in some respects, I worked to self-reflect and to use this
insider knowledge to my advantage in connecting with participants, and to quickly understand the experiences they described in order to push deeper with my questions. As Pugh (2013:53) notes, “the researcher is less like a sketch artist, or even someone who silently works in the background to produce the most appropriate lineup, but rather a thinking, reflecting person whose own experience and skills matter: perhaps, in keeping with the policework metaphor, a detective.” Researchers should not shy away from the reality that their own experiences influence their interpretations, but instead cautiously investigate the issue with this keen awareness. Furthermore, this project is motivated by my critical stance on the unequal college preparation and admission process. I had access to many of the activities that enhance this inequality and I am alarmed by the extreme privilege required to participate in the college admission process. As such I sought to understand more deeply the impetus to partake in and pay for activities that were only accessible to those who could pay; I asked about the motivations to participate and whether or not these choices were simply taken-for-granted as part of the process or whether they were agonizing decisions.

My age placed me just about halfway between the parents and students, which I would argue aided my ability to connect with both parties. I typically dressed more casually for my student interviews so as to allow students to feel more comfortable and to know that I was not an authority figure judging their actions, but rather someone they could open up to, an outlet for them to express their stress about the process. When appropriate, I interjected anecdotes about my own experience to remind students that I had been through the process not so long ago. For parent interviews, I dressed casually
though professional, and often spoke of my experience as not only a graduate student but also as a lecturer at Boston University. This served to boost parents’ respect for my position and my credibility as a knowledgeable researcher who sought to gain a deeper understanding of the college process.

*Interview Settings*

All interviews except for one were in-person and ranged from 40-120 minutes. I conducted interviews in participants’ homes, coffee shops, food courts, and a library. I was often invited into participants’ kitchens, dens, and formal living rooms. Parents welcomed me warmly and one mother had even set up a plate with cheese and crackers, interpreting her role as more of a host than someone giving me their time for my project.

I appreciated when I had access to participant homes because this gave me further insight into their class status, class sensibilities, and family dynamics. For example, the hectic pace of the Regan family of four children was easily seen as I sat at the sticky kitchen counter in the center of the home with kids entering and exiting. This made for a challenging interview, but also reassured me that Jeff was accurately describing his independence when it came to college preparations; his father was at work all day and his mother did not have the capacity to give him (her oldest child) the specific guided input that many other students received. When Irene Reynolds greeted me in workout clothes and led me to her casual den to sit comfortably rather than to her formal living room at the front of the house, it cued the fact that she was not concerned with giving me a special impression of her class status. This stood in contrast to other Shoretown mothers
Audrey Lincoln and Andrea Ullman who walked me through the heart of the house to more formal settings when we sat down together. In the cluttered, bustling Ellis household in Shore City, the father Abram had to clear a spot at the kitchen table for me to sit. There was no concern about the state of the house for a guest’s arrival. Immediately an anxious tone was set in the Ellis house; although he greeted me and was quite friendly, his wife, who did not agree to be interviewed, was in the kitchen and was concerned that I was in their home so early (10:00 AM). It was clear that they did not have a “traditional” 9-5 schedule in their household. The banter that emerged between these two through my time there revealed much tension and disagreement about where they wanted their son to attend college and how much they were willing to pay. These examples illustrate that the interviews (particularly with parents) that took place in participants’ homes had the added benefit of providing an arena for supplemental fieldwork that aided my research. The setting gave me a fuller sense of the families’ day-to-day life, relationships, values, and class sensibilities. I gained valuable insight into the family in a way that was not possible from those interviews that I conducted in public settings.

With the exception of two interviews that took place in the local library and two in a coffee shop, the suburban interviews all took place in respondents’ homes. The interviews in the two neighboring urban areas were more scattered; between parents and students, 18 respondents spoke to me in their homes, and 18 of the interviews took place in local coffee shops in various neighborhoods and I had one phone interview with a mother who was unable to meet in person due to her work schedule. Ten of these
interviews took place after school with students at the same coffee shop two blocks away from their school. This particular coffee shop was a regular ‘afterschool pit stop’ for many of these students, thus it was a comfortable, “natural” setting for these teens (Eder and Fingerson 2003:35).

**Interviewing Teenagers**

Most parent interviews lasted at least an hour and went up to two hours, whereas the student interviews were on average much shorter. My first few interviews with students were quite brief, and I realized that I was perhaps coming across as more of an authority figure rather than someone students could open up to. Following a grounded theory approach, after these interviews I reevaluated, and then shifted my style and questions to generate a more conversational interview (Charmaz 2006).

Interviewing adolescents in a way that allows them to feel comfortable and evens out the “power imbalance” is an added challenge to the interview experience (Eder and Fingerson 2003:34). I began to share a bit more about myself with students at the start and focused on showing them that I valued hearing their own opinion, not just what adults thought. I also rephrased my questions to generate more robust responses by providing examples of what other students may have said as a prompt for them. While some argue that a group setting is more conducive for open adolescent conversations (Eder and Fingerson 2003), I did not find this to be the case for my project, in which one-on-one interviews were more important. Given the highly competitive nature of college preparation, students were apt to either exaggerate or downplay the activities they were
involved in when discussing it around their peers. Students were more likely to open up to me given my outsider position once I discovered better ways to connect with the students. Additionally, some students (and parents) were more talkative than others, which at times was out of my control.

I acknowledge the power imbalance between my youth subjects, the adults, and myself. I interpret their words through my own lens, but I do not allow the reality of this inequality to prevent me from drawing conclusions and bringing light to their experiences. Participants’ voices are used throughout the dissertation to convey their own understanding of the college preparatory process. Using students’ own words enabled the dissertation to close the power imbalance between an adult researcher and adolescent respondents.

**Limitations**

The intention of this project is not to generalize, as it is limited in scope and sample size. As noted earlier, the main limitations involve the small, homogeneous sample. While the sample led me to pay close attention to, and gain deep insight into the inner workings of the upper and middle classes, there are limited participants from lower class backgrounds. Time restrictions and recruitment challenges resulted in a research design and sample that did not leave adequate space to deal with race, ethnicity, or gender in a substantive way. Nor did the recruitment process allow me to control for the individual academic achievement of the students. Thus while most of the students were very high achieving, this was not the case for all. I had a sense of the grades from student and parent responses, but no access to G.P.A.s. In addition, the unique geographic
location means that this sample is not representative of other parts of the U.S. I
conducted interviews in two cities and a town in a state with some of the highest
educational levels in the country. Unlike the majority of Americans, these families live
in communities that are surrounded by institutions of higher education thus college was
an ever-present part of their daily lives. Though unique, this setting was also beneficial
as I was interested in understanding social class anxieties and privileges- it was
informative to examine a group of high achieving youth in a generally competitive
environment.

The constraints of this project do not take away from the valuable insights gained
from the in-depth interviews. Whereas a quantitative study has the advantage of having a
broader scope, the interview experience provides a more comprehensive understanding of
how people think and why they may think in a certain way. Pugh (2013:44) points out
the benefits that come from speaking one-on-one which are distinct from other research
methods; “One feature of interviews particularly helpful to culture scholars, however, is
their capacity to excavate and interpret emotions, which serve to animate, situate and
connect the levels of consciousness.” With careful analysis, interviewers are able to
examine that which is also unspoken in order to understand the complexities in each
scenario. Thus the interview approach yields powerful connections and knowledge about
the topic at hand, even when small in number.

Initially I was worried that talking about college applications and preparations
might lead to increased anxiety for parents or students. Fortunately, for the most part,
this did not appear to be the case. Instead for some it proved to be a positive experience
in tangible ways. Several parents recounted happily that their children were more willing to talk about college preparations after our interview. Others spoke about appreciating the time to organize their thoughts on the process as we spoke. In one instance, inspired in the midst of our interview, Ellie pulled her son Jeff into the room to tell him that she was proud of all of the work he had put in to prepare his applications. Though it was not my job to counsel, I worked hard to make sure each interview ended on a more optimistic note rather than one of stress and worry.

In the next three chapters I turn to the stories shared by these parents and students. Chapter Four reveals the three main orientations to college preparation found among these participants. I explain the approaches taken by strategizers, naturalizers, and compliers as they navigate the many demands of the competitive college preparation process. And I demonstrate how the social class subtleties mentioned in this chapter actually play out in distinct conceptualizations of what is necessary for students to secure admission.
CHAPTER FOUR

Orientations to College Preparations: Strategizers, Naturalizers, and Compliers

“I feel like just like you have to have a large amount of things to be able to put on your college applications. Just like, also you don’t want to be the kid who has 50 random things that won’t get you anywhere. But maybe having like volunteer activity, things like that, or good classes to put on that I’ve actually done well in and stuff like that. And also do good on the SAT.” (Elizabeth, sophomore)

The push to participate in extracurricular activities is pervasive in the college-bound high school environment and these activities have shifted in importance over the past thirty years. Elizabeth’s concerns reveal the delicate balance that students hope to strike as they shape their applications. She was well aware of the general expectations of admissions officers, and she could not help but factor these opinions in as she chose how to spend her time. In this chapter I explore these types of nuanced understandings of the admissions process, which highlight the tension between genuine engagement and calculated involvement in extracurricular activities for college admissions.

It is a given that students will engage in some activities outside of the academic realm, but the process by which they come to choose non-academic activities to enhance their college application is not well understood. Because extracurricular activities have become a central part of college admission preparation (Karabel 2005; Kaufman and Gabler 2004; McDonough 1997; Adler and Adler 1994), I examine how students and parents conceptualize these activities to better understand their impact on how they prepare for college admission.

We know that the social class status of families has a powerful, determinative influence on the educational trajectories of children (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013;
Lareau [2003] 2011; Roksa and Potter 2011; Stevens 2007; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977[1990]); little is known about the various ways class status actually shapes students’ preparation for college applications. In this chapter, I shed light on the often subtle ways that familial decisions, discourse, and visions for their children’s future contribute to a college preparation orientation that sets students on their way to a bright educational future. While material resources certainly play a role in shaping these orientations, I argue that familial socioeconomic status does not automatically dictate how families engage in college preparations. And despite this relatively homogenous group based on SES (over 80% upper, upper-middle and middle class), their differences underscore the relevance of a more expansive definition of social class. Though convenient as an explanation, the assumption that the material resources associated with a specific class status lead to one type of approach overlooks the power of social class origins of parents (Streib 2015, 2013), their own educational experience and values, their future hopes for their children, and their children’s own subjective interest in or ability to absorb the forms of guidance that the parents provide. For the parents in this study, their own vision of what college should be, whether it was the experience they actually had or just the experience that they wanted to have and now project for their kids, strongly influenced their approach. The past and future aspirations combine to shape the families’ orientations to college preparation. Thus the “imagined future state” (Beckert 2013:220), the ideal of what a college education embodies, structures their willingness to spend, negotiate, deny, and encourage participation and investment in certain activities over others. Similarly, children often (though not always) reflected an orientation to college
preparation that mirrored their parents’ desires and vision of college, thus they engaged in activities accordingly. While it is already clear that all college-bound families must engage in comparable activities in order to be ready, the variety in the discourse and description of the meaning of these activities demonstrates the importance of social class subtleties that are shaped by both the past and future as they are consequential for the processes of social reproduction and mobility.

Theoretical Background

Though social scientists have explored the effects of social class on countless behaviors and trends, an in-depth examination of the role of social class in any instance is a slippery measure. Social class has a profound impact on an individual’s life path, and this is especially salient when we consider the parent-child relationship. Parents hold various perspectives on how to best raise their children, views that are often shaped by social class resources (Lareau [2003] 2011; Vincent and Ball 2007), but as Streib (2013:670) points out, “there remains unexplained heterogeneity in the beliefs of those who share a class position.” Streib argues that there is significant variation among parenting practices even within the same class, and one reason for this is the distinction between parents’ class origins and their class position as they enter parenthood. The cultural mobility approach (DiMaggio 1982) indicates that class origins are unlikely to have a major influence on people as they change class location because they take on many new class practices throughout their life, whereas Bourdieu and the cultural reproduction perspective conveys that these class origin beliefs are likely to remain significant throughout one’s class shifts (Streib 2013:671). Like Streib (2013), Roksa
and Potter (2011) have argued for the conceptual distinction of class origins and current position. In their examination of the effects of social class on student achievement, they look at parental class status “as a combination of their current class location and their class of origin” (Roksa and Potter 2011:302). In describing their sample, they use the terms ‘new’ versus ‘stable’ to indicate a class status change, however, this still suggests a static understanding of social class because it does not include their participants’ future aspirations (especially for their children) nor does it allow for the possibility of future class status shifts. I argue that social class is a dynamic and complex identity and characteristic, which takes shape differently depending on the context and culture. Thus while I do define social class as a combination of education, income, and occupation as a way to organize my participants, I simultaneously emphasize the flexibility of class categories by incorporating the additional complexities of children, the role of future aspirations, and the ways they impact class status and potential mobility trajectories.

This chapter speaks to the embodied social class beliefs exhibited by parents through their expectations about what college will be like for their kids, their expression of educational values through their preparatory choices, and to the likelihood parents will transfer this belief as one component of a set of cultural dispositions to their children. During the college application process, parents and students activate different forms (and amounts) of economic, social, and cultural capital in accordance with their class habitus. Even though these families often engaged in similar preparations, they spoke about these preparations in distinct ways that reflected different dispositions and levels of cultural capital. Lamont and Lareau (1988:158) emphasize Bourdieu’s point that “most signals
are sent *unconsciously* because they are learned through family socialization, and incorporated as dispositions, or *habitus.*” The subtle preference for certain activities over others, and an emphasis on competition rather than skill development is revealed through families’ preparation decisions. These dispositions are frequently “unconscious” thus “routinely misrecognized as disinterested practice” (Holt 1997:95) during the college preparation process, which functions as a social mobility project.

The following discussion focuses on various elements of cultural capital that are activated by the families as they prepare for college applications. Lamont and Lareau (1988:156) argue that Bourdieu uses cultural capital in various ways, “cultural capital is alternatively an informal academic standard, a class attribute, a basis for social selection, and a resource for power which is salient as an indicator/basis of class position.” They find one of the most compelling arguments to be “the idea of cultural capital as a *basis for exclusion* from jobs, resources, and high status groups.” Their recharged definition is “cultural capital as *institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion*” (1988:156). In the case of preparing to secure college admission, cultural capital is used to gain access to an exclusive institution. In her study of high school seniors’ college choices, McDonough (1997:9) treats “college education as a status resource or symbolic good in our society,” and she notes that, “cultural capital is of no intrinsic value. Its utility comes in using, manipulating, and investing it for socially valued and difficult-to-secure purposes and resources.” In this analysis, cultural capital is
defined broadly as the various skills, knowledge, and experiences leveraged by parents and students in the college process.

I focus this discussion on the varying levels of cultural capital and the ways that it is activated. Following Holt (1998, 1997), I consider a spectrum of “high cultural capital” to “low cultural capital” as it is expressed through participants’ discourse on their preparations. On the “high cultural capital” end, economic resources are abundant so “the material value of cultural objects is taken for granted: instead taste becomes a realm of self-expression,” and reflects a “distance from necessity” (Holt 1997:109-110). Cultural capital is accordingly more favorably valued when it is “‘difficult’ and so can only be consumed by those few who have acquired the ability to do so” (Holt 1997:101). In contrast, “low cultural capital” more likely reflects financial restraints, which in turn leads to appreciation of the “functional or practical,” “virtuoso skills that achieve utilitarian ends evoke praise” (1997:109). While the extremes of this spectrum are influenced by economic capital, I argue that there is more fluidity between economic and cultural capital in the middle – hence the variety in approaches amongst my largely upper-middle and middle class sample. Though only touched on by Holt (1997:104) in the context of style expression, there is also a significant “middle-brow habitus” that fits into the spectrum of cultural capital. We can apply this to the case of college preparation activities, as it is another form of expression. This “middle-brow habitus,” or mid-level of capital reveals “a very studied approach” that is not fully valued by elites who hold high levels of cultural capital because it is seen as “overly-eager.”
Parenting Beliefs: Shaped by Past, Present, and Future

Parents, particularly those with at least middle-class origins and above who hold a college education, often have clear ideas about what they want for their children in the future. Friedman’s (2013) research on competitive activities among elementary school children shows that the heightened rivalry in some of these activities was in part driven by parents’ desire to have their child succeed in an activity that down the line would aid their college admission. Friedman’s analysis centers on the current class resources of the parents and touches on the forward-thinking character of many of their decisions. Chin and Phillips (2004) also focus on the means of parents at the time that they enact their parenting decisions in their discussion of the ways that childrearing leads to class reproduction. Streib’s (2015) analysis of cross-class marriage partners shows that the cultural resources that parents bring to their marriages and parenting approaches are strongly influential and shaped by both past and present experiences. Though parenting is just one aspect of Streib’s (2015) project, The Power of the Past, she explores the significance of class origins in forming parenting beliefs. For example, Streib discusses the distinct beliefs that white-collar origin versus blue-collar origin mothers in particular had about how their children would turn out. Despite currently sharing similar class status, the expectations between these two groups look quite different in the present due to their own upbringing and class origins. While white-collar mothers anticipated being “perfect parents,” and expected that “carefully considered parenting strategies would shape their highly malleable children” (2015:148), blue-collar mothers had not made plans as to what their children would become. While this data is based on a sample of all
white, heterosexual, married U.S. citizens, we can imagine that other intersecting identities among people of the same class standing would impact their future expectations as well. Streib frames these particular findings in order to emphasize the role of class origins, an area that is often neglected in the mobility and reproduction research.

Despite the plethora of work on parenting and social class, the subtleties of how and in what ways social class impacts parenting requires elaboration given the complexities and often-debatable understandings of social class definitions. Following the foundation set by Lareau’s ([2003] 2011) seminal work, Unequal Childhoods, Hamilton (2016:12) confirms through her interviews with the parents of young white women who all attended the same Midwestern university for the first year, that parenting approaches and actions are tied to social class; “college is now a parenting project, cut – in broad strokes – by class distinctions.” Speaking with parents when their daughters were at the point of graduating college, in Parenting to a Degree, Hamilton (2016) received a retrospective account of the parents’ role up to that point, focused mainly on the college experience. Similar to my findings, Hamilton encountered five distinct visions of college among these parents that were central to the ways that they were involved (or not) with their daughter’s educational trajectory. Given that these interviews focused on reflections of past experiences (though easily verified by Hamilton’s in depth knowledge of the daughters’ lives⁶), she argues that the parents’ explanations “suggest that visions of college were both motivators and sense-making tools” (Hamilton

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⁶ This book, mainly about the parents, builds on previous work focused solely on the lives of the women while they attended college. Hamilton holds intimate knowledge of the parents and children due to this prior experience (see Armstrong & Hamilton 2013).
2016:38). Hamilton discusses six visions of college held by parents: college as career building, a social experience, a mobility pathway, an adult experience, a hybridized vision and a “cultivation of excellence” frame. She shows that the various class backgrounds, educational experiences, and current economic resources combine to create these visions. For some, the vision matched the approach to parenting, but this was not always the case. Due to the timing of these interviews, the focus is on the influence of the current and past experiences of these parents on their daughter’s trajectories. The future is also implied here, as for example, parents who wanted a social experience for their daughters, labeled “pink helicopters,” encouraged their daughters to follow career paths and social lives in college that would also allow them to express ‘traditional’ femininity and seek a path to finding a husband and family. The future was part of the story, but those students were already launching into that future state.

For my families who were not yet at the point of admission, the “imagined futures” (Beckert 2013) conjured up by parents and their children held much significance for their decisions during this forward-looking period in their lives. Building on this literature, I assert that not only do social class origins and current resources shape parenting practices and social mobility or reproduction of the children, but that the “imagined future” plans for college admission and beyond that parents and students envision are also crucial. Though shaped by current and past class standing, beliefs about the future can take on their own meaning, particularly when applied to the aspirations that parents have for their children. The role of “imagined futures” in shaping the educational and social class objectives of families is another mechanism to further our understanding
of the processes of social class reproduction and mobility (Beckert 2013). Hamilton’s sample is based on families united by the shared experience of their daughters attending the same large state flagship university; in contrast I examine families clustered around a metropolitan area whose children all ended up at very different universities. I cannot make broad claims based in longitudinal data; however, I add another element to Hamilton’s discussion of the connection between the ideal vision of college and parenting approaches by showing the power of aspirational thinking. The visions of college that parents hold at the time of college preparation lead students to engage in different types of preparatory activities, and, ultimately, to understand their own educational experience in ways that often match up with their parents’. Students are, at the very least, impacted by their parents’ vision of what college should look like. Hamilton argues that the university experience is unable to level out enduring social class inequalities, and this study affirms that these deeply-rooted classed experiences are shaped and prodded in the early stages as Lareau ([2003] 2011) and Friedman (2013) show, and are also activated through the future-focused process of preparing to fill out the college application.

**Orientations to College Preparations**

Like Hamilton (2016), I did not see hyper-intensive parenting happening without reason; the general messages given to parents by high school teachers and university administrators, their peers, their children, and the media indicate that children need help to navigate the complexities of college preparations. In contrast to the general impression of helicopter parents and the millennial generation often characterized as selfish, privileged, and entitled (Hoover 2014), these parents (and kids) are not purely status-
obsessed people seeking to climb the social and educational ladder no matter the financial, emotional, or physical cost. The parents and college-bound kids in this sample are driven to succeed, but they use discretion when deciding which activities and investments they will engage with, and most do not fall into this competitive, over-bearing stereotype.

Among the upper, upper-middle, middle, and lower-middle-class families that I interviewed, three main orientations towards college preparations emerged that characterize my participants. I find that while most parents embodied a ‘strategic’ approach to their children’s college preparations, many were ‘compliers’ following basic requirements, and still others reflected a ‘naturalizer’ outlook that emphasizes character development. The children demonstrated similar types of approaches, however, the children fell into more than one category at times and their orientations were not quite as clearly delineated. For example, the large majority of children were strategizers, however, they often reflected either a compliant or character development outlook in addition to their strategic orientation. In many ways, it was nearly impossible for the students not to reveal a strategic orientation because they had to plan for applications. However, there were exceptions, as some students were extremely laid back or disinterested in the whole process. Table 1 gives a brief overview of the distinguishing characteristics of the various groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation to College Prep</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Class Origin &amp; Education Background</th>
<th>Educational Values</th>
<th>Future Aspirations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategizer</strong></td>
<td>Deliberate planning and participation in activities with college in mind</td>
<td>Mix of upper, upper-middle class with high economic but lower cultural capital, &amp; middle, lower-middle class with high cultural capital, low economic capital; 6 immigrant parents undergrad outside U.S.</td>
<td>Work hard in school to get a good job; College as pathway to job success; Meritocratic with a boost</td>
<td>Job success, via training in chosen college major or tailored graduate program; Financially driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*16 parents, 21 students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Naturalizer</strong></td>
<td>Activities with the purpose of character development</td>
<td>Upper &amp; upper-middle class; high economic and cultural capital; grandparents all at least B.A.</td>
<td>Learn from every opportunity; College is pathway to lifelong learning; Belief in purity of meritocracy</td>
<td>Develop into worldly, knowledgeable people with skills that will serve them in any career; Graduate school is part of vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*5 parents, 5 students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complier</strong></td>
<td>Follow process guidelines, reluctant to participate in ‘extras’</td>
<td>Mix of upper, upper-middle and lower-middle class, like strategizers mix of high and low cultural capital (5 parents went through process with older children)</td>
<td>Belief in hard work and a meritocratic education system, critical of unfair advantage; Focused on academics</td>
<td>Career success without sacrificing happiness; Explore passions in college to find fulfilling career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*11 parents, 7 students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: * These are rough numbers as some parents and students fell into two categories, however, these estimates are used to give a sense of which group was most numerous for the sample.
At the outset of this project I expected to see clear class lines or clear contextual/geographical delineations based on the location in the various approaches, instead, the distinct orientations had subtle social class characteristics and were shaped by the class resources at parents’ and students’ disposal, but not always in obvious ways. For example, strategizers spanned the class spectrum of this particular project; with those from the upper class to the lower-middle class revealing calculated plans and strategic spending to guide their child towards their desired college. The strategizers came from a mix of class origins, some had parents who had both attended college while others had parents who only graduated from high school. However, social class resources played a role in shaping the types of strategies employed by parents and students, as there were some who were financially strategic in order to maximize their limited economic resources, others who were curating a strong candidate regardless of the economic cost, and some who were compensating for academic shortcomings. There was similar range in the compliant group. In the case of those who were compliant with the demands of the college application process, some parents had a very high level of education and their parents graduated from four-year colleges as well, while others were going through the process with their second child so they had less need for strategy, or they were from a less privileged class background with less knowledge of the higher education landscape so they went with the flow (three compliers had parents who did not attend college). Despite the class variation in the strategizer and complier groups, those who revealed a purely “natural” orientation towards college preparation came from an upper- or upper-middle-class background. They all had the financial resources, degrees from competitive
universities, and except for one, had parents who had graduated from four-year colleges. Their class position was secure and it was less important that their children find a lucrative job at the outset. The only group that was clearly united by current social class location was the natural approach.

It is important to note that these three major orientations are ideal types that capture the defining characteristics of the people who fell into them, however, I do not claim that all participants strictly matched one of these categories and there was overlap among the orientation types. Irene is an example of someone who fits into both a compliant and strategic frame. Irene was strategic in her decision to enroll her son in a competitive sports team geared towards recruitment, but she downplayed the relevance of it, feeling unsure and doubtful that it would do much for her son’s ability to get into school. She hoped that it would help, but she had a more cynical, compliant frame of mind, rather than a strategic one. Despite this strategic move, I categorize Irene as a complier based on my discussion with her in which her tone was more compliant, ambivalent, and frustrated, rather than overtly strategic and calculating.

Additionally, two major factors that distinguish the three orientations amongst the parents in particular is the interpretation of meritocracy (the varying ideas of what is required to be worthy of admission), and the articulation of future aspirations. I argue that these factors reflect the subtle distinctions in the cultural capital held by each family.

The following discussion provides examples of how the vision of college that parents hold for their children leads to subtle differences in their approaches. Behind that vision are also distinct interpretations of what it means to achieve admission based on
merit, which in turn reflect differing degrees of cultural capital as defined above. Given
that meritocracy is generally accepted to be an inherent part of the United States
education system (Khan 2011; Karabel 2005), all families showed ways in which they
believed in the role of merit in achieving admission, but they displayed differing
interpretations as to what they considered to be appropriate meritocratic behavior. This
variety in experiences and visions for the future is unexpected in college-bound families
who are often assumed to follow the same prescription to get their children into college.

**Meticulously planned: Strategic approaches and the career-minded vision of college**

Strategic parents have concerns about prestige, status, and the future of their kids;
however, their open awareness and candor about these issues indicate the ways their
cultural capital is distinct from that of naturalizers and compliers. Cultural capital,
according to Bourdieu’s definition is an entity that has gradations, with certain “widely
shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors,
goods and credentials)” (Lamont and Lareau 1988:156). It is through the comparison of
the different approaches that we start to understand the subtle degrees of cultural capital.
High cultural capital derives value from being elusive and it is often “structured by an
ideology of meritocracy” (Holt 1997:111). The general critique of the strategizer
approach by other respondents and the public at large shows discomfort with ‘schemers’
who challenge the idea of merit and the ‘natural’ achievement of skills, as they expose
the effort and calculation involved in their approach, thus reflecting the fervent desire for
achievement tied to lower levels cultural capital (Holt 1997).
Strategic parents are less likely to hold college degrees from Ivy League institutions or selective colleges, and they are less likely to have had a “classically-defined” liberal arts education (with the exception of 3 parents). Though they included a mix of full-time workers, part-time workers, and parents who did not work outside the home, they were more likely than the other groups to hold jobs that require specific job skills. Fifteen parents and twenty-one students fell into this category. Strategic students often were the children of strategic parents as they followed their lead, however, some strategic students ended up being more mindful of what they needed to plan to gain admission because their parents were compliers and thus relaxed in their approach – in these instances the students filled the void. In addition, strategic students’ words reveal less confidence in their academic abilities and extracurricular preparation; they felt pressure to “amp” up their resumes to secure admission. The individual academic performance of the students in this study was not a main focus, nor did it end up being a meaningful variable across the board. However, in some cases, the intensity of the strategies was due to that aforementioned concern with lower grades. Interestingly, the children of strategizer parents were not Ivy-bound, thus the strategies were not a result of extreme aspirations. In addition, for some parents, their sense of what was possible for their child given their abilities did shape their future plans.

Though all of the parents and students across the board strategized to some degree as they planned to apply to college in that they organized ahead and were often

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7 I did not actually collect or ask for academic records, however, I verified the general grades by asking both students and parents (separately) about academic performance. I gained accounts of whether students were struggling or not and whether they were “A, B, C” students on average, etc. I asked about what classes they were taking including the level.
intentional about the things they participated in, they did not all discuss and frame their strategies in a tactical manner. The openness about planning ahead versus calculating specific ways or engaging in specific activities with college in mind came to be a clear difference between strategizers and other parents, also reflecting the different degrees of cultural capital. As discussed later, others reveal reluctance, discomfort, even denial regarding the intentionality behind certain acts related to college admission preparation. However, strategizers were not uncomfortable with this equation, and the tone of our interviews was at times a planning session for these parents – a way to review all of the items they either had their child enrolled in or wanted to enroll them in. Some strategic parents even looked to me for advice on their plans, curious if I thought they were doing “the right things” to secure admission. For example, mother Lesley, a school psychologist, asks, “…She doesn’t have that many interests to say she has on her college application and even that, just skiing, it’s a fun thing and it’s something to say that you’re interested in what you do which I think would help, don’t you think?” This instance also illustrates the strategizer attitude that there may need to be a boost or push in order for the students’ worthiness to be seen by admissions officers.

Besides their openness with their tactics, the other unifying element was that these parents had very specific ideas about what their child should get out of a college education. They were not focused solely on a “liberal arts education” defined by a broad swath of skills and disciplines, but rather preferred that their child had a clear idea of their major before attending and with that, a career path that college would confirm and prepare them for in the future. As seen in Table 1, the strategizers come from upper- and
lower-middle-class backgrounds, thus the intention behind the tactics looked slightly different despite converging in a shared end goal of a productive college experience that prepares the students for a clear career path. For those from middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, the strategic approach was employed in order for the student to be a strong candidate to receive scholarships. This strategy also reflects low cultural capital because it emphasizes the “practical” over the academic. For upper- and upper-middle-class families the strategic approach was centered on helping the students get into the best school possible to prepare them for a career that would lead to economic success. Despite the high economic resources, this attitude still reflects lower cultural capital among these participants in their emphasis on career and function over the experiential side. The two diverging approaches were united by their shared concern with class security – those from wealthier backgrounds wanted to ensure their children at least reproduced their class status, and those from more unstable economic backgrounds wanted to ensure future financial gain and possible mobility for their children.

Sarah epitomized the strategic approach and in doing so she pushed the boundaries of what would be considered meritocratic admission by naturalizers and compliers. Though her own parents did not attend college, Sarah experienced upward mobility to join the upper class; she is employed as a nurse in addition to owning a business with her husband, who also works as a financial advisor for a large bank. She was unwavering in her awareness that her son, who was not a straight A student, would need to do some extra things in order to be noticed by college admissions and she did not have financial restrictions to get in the way. At the time of our interview, he was a
sophomore, and Sarah explained, “Right now it’s more what classes are gonna look good. What will make you look a little different from the other kids?” She went on:

A lot of boys plays hockey. So you need something different. What I’m having him do— all my kids, I make them do a mission trip. So they have to do a church mission trip…they both won in student council but I just didn’t like the way the whole thing was going there and if a kid’s on student council, what does that mean? Nothing.

She also sent her son to an expensive leadership camp in New York over the summer, saying, “That should be a little different on his application because everybody doesn’t do it…” In fact, Sarah wanted to ensure that not everyone from her son’s high school did this – so much so that she told another one of my interviewee’s, Jan, who has a son the same age, not to mention it to anyone. Jan explained this conversation to me:

She [Sarah] said, oh it [the leadership camp] was fabulous, but don’t tell anybody because I’m trying to make him different than everybody else for his college application. Don’t tell anybody about it. That kind of stuff just drives me nuts. Like you’ve gotta be kidding.

Jan continued: It was such… I could not believe it. ‘Don’t tell anybody about this program.’ I said well, I get the letters for it…She wants her son to be different. She says you know, everybody does the church programs. I thought what… this is going to make her son different, set him apart from everybody else.

While Jan was flabbergasted by this request, Sarah thought it perfectly natural to give her son that competitive edge, no matter how it came across. Though at the extreme end of strategizers, she shows the “whatever it takes” attitude towards admission and was unfettered by worries of whether or not these extra activities made her son any less meritorious. In her viewpoint, going above and beyond, and perhaps outside the lines
according to some, was all part of the process because otherwise these skills may be overlooked by admissions.

Sarah holds upper-class status and a degree in nursing. She knew at a young age that she wanted to go to school to be a nurse, and although she says she did not do anything special to prepare herself for college, she attended college with a specific career path in mind. Sarah holds high economic capital and to an extent holds valuable cultural capital given her professional degree, however, she did not attend a high status Ivy League school, nor was she in a liberal arts profession. It seems that this track and mindset greatly influenced her perspective on her children’s college attendance as well.

Sarah also saw college as a place to develop “life skills” such as doing laundry, and was less focused on the high cultural capital development that can transpire in the college setting.

Though I interviewed Sarah’s son, Eric, her daughter had just undergone the college process a few months prior and thus was present in Sarah’s thoughts. She explained her exasperation with her daughter’s lack of direction in contrast to her son:

It’s hard to have a child when they say they don’t know what they want to do so that opens up too many colleges. I needed – she didn’t know what to even look for in a college…I really want my daughter to go into the business track but she’s saying no again because she still doesn’t know. She’s saying no. She applied to the arts and sciences. If she goes there and after a year decides she wants to be a business major, she’s already missed a year and she needs to – she would buy herself an extra year because now she has to take some of those [courses].

To Sarah, it was wasteful financially and time-wise for her daughter to take liberal arts track classes that would not end up leading her towards a more ‘practical’ major such as business, which could lead to a career. As discussed earlier, Sarah was thrilled that her
son showed interest at a young age in business, which is also why she went to great lengths to foster this interest by sending him to leadership camp.

Eric embodied this approach, likely in part due to his youth (he was only a sophomore at the time of the interview), but also due to the options that his family provided. Eric explained, “I went on this trip that was about business kind of and I liked it and I think I want to own my own business when I’m older…I don’t know. I want something of my own but – at first I wanted a restaurant but that’s too difficult so I just want like my own store or something…like a chain of something.” Eric had exposure to business not only at the camp, but also from the local family business. These concrete factors shaped Eric’s (and his mother’s) methodical approach to college and career planning. Eric discussed the specific, targeted nature of his college search in the same way: “I want to go into business so we’ve only looked schools that have a business program but other than that we haven’t looked about anything out there about the schools.”

Similar to Sarah (and a friend of Sarah’s), Sheila is an involved, upper-middle-class, part-time nursery school teacher. She told me from the start, “I’m always mindful of what would look good on a college application.” She had a deliberate approach to preparing her son. She hired a private college counselor and she pushed her son to enroll in AP classes. She encouraged him and explained to me:

You’ve got to stick with it because it’d be good on a college application. You got to do this because it’d be good on a college application. So sort of kind of grooming him for that to be the best that he can be. But I feel he’s been a really good student and he has a lot to offer and he’s got the extracurricular activities and he’s doing a lot of things that are much different than I did.
While Sheila’s purposeful and costly preparations may seem over the top, these actions came from her conviction that her son, Kevin, deserved the best chance. Sheila justified her approach by clarifying: “I feel completely overwhelmed about how the process has changed, how competitive it is now. I feel he’s sort of in a different bracket than my husband and I was. A much better student than we were. I feel we owe it to him to do the best we can for him. To make the most of his gifts.” Though both of Sheila’s parents had achieved graduate degrees, Sheila’s words reflect some insecurity regarding her son’s future. For Sheila, the instrumental approach comes from the belief that her son has talents that should be rewarded in admission to a good college, reflecting how the complicated emotions involved in the parent-child relationship affect the college process. Also, Sheila’s words clearly demonstrate her steadfast belief that her son must be recognized for his ability, to the point that she was willing to step in to help that process. Thus Sheila’s actions show the notion that for the application process to be meritocratic it would require a boost – he was a good student who deserved to be recognized. She takes a “studied approach” that reveals middle cultural capital (Holt 1997:104) as it challenges the high cultural capital value of meritocracy.

Kevin already had a specific major picked out, biomedical engineering, which Sheila fully supported. Thus they did not seek the “liberal arts” educational experience, but focused on a track in which most classes would already be laid out for Kevin. She was concerned, like Sarah, that spending time in other classes would be inefficient, as it would not be working toward the end goal. She explained this as she told me about their
college visit to Holy Cross, which does not have a biomedical engineering major but partners with Columbia to move towards the degree in five years:

I have heard you get a bachelor’s in the declared major that you have at Holy Cross. So you get a bachelors…in biology or whatever, and you get a bachelors from Columbia in engineering so you’ll get two bachelors.

She went on: We want him to see Northeastern but I looked up but they don’t even have bio engineering which would be good so it’s sort of a waste.

Like Eric, Kevin (a junior at the time) followed his parent’s lead, not only for his activity choices but also in utilizing his college experience to pursue a specific career. He explained, “I think that they [parents] push me in sports, which is mainly crew which is good because if I slacked off in crew, it wouldn’t be worth it. And my being good in crew is just another thing to have on your resume.” Kevin was involved in several different clubs and extracurricular activities, and he visited his top school for an overnight. Showing a bit more maturity than Eric, Kevin expressed a clear narrative about his desire to become a biomedical engineer. He distinguished that this was not because his parents told him to pick this career as a moneymaker, but because it was something he was fascinated by; “And I wasn’t doing it – I've never thought okay I want to create something and I want to make a lot of money off of it… That’d be so awesome to do something like that. I realized engineering was where I wanted to go.” Kevin described himself as “super determined,” and through his mindful approach to applying to college and preparing for the future he certainly reflected that. He was grateful that his parents hired a private college counselor to aid in his preparations, and he did not see this as an unfair advantage. Like his mother, Eric showed a similar notion of “merit” with support being an appropriate approach.
Kevin and Eric provide examples of students who embodied the strategic approach to college in large part because of the strategic framework enacted by their involved parents. Kevin and Eric both appeared to be agreeable kids and their words indicate that they were absorbing the capital that their parents pushed for them. As others have noted (Streib 2013; Lareau [2003] 2011), there may be only certain contexts in which capital, or specific forms of capital are transferred from parent to child. These examples suggest that specific cultural capital related to the “imagined future” (Beckert 2013) path of students may be more seamlessly transferred in situations where the parents and students take a joint approach in working towards those future goals.

In a more requisite way than parents, all of the students ultimately had to be deliberate in their actions in order to accomplish everything they needed to fill out an application. The college-bound environment in the public schools that students attended also fostered this kind of approach. As a result, the majority of the students are categorized as strategizers. However, some students revealed a more calculated approach than their peers. More than others, this often resulted from a lack of confidence in their academic record, peer pressure or parent pressure.

Sometimes those students who held a strategic orientation appeared to be filling in the gap for more relaxed parents. A middle-class junior in high school, Danielle, was stressed about her candidacy despite telling me at first “I mean I’m sort of the person who’s laid back.” Her parents, who are divorced, did not overly emphasize extracurricular activities and took a quieter approach, so she decided to set up an appointment with her guidance counselor and both parents to hear what she needed to do.
Her guidance counselor told her that “what you have is fine,” but Danielle’s concerns persisted. She explained to me: “I was like I’ll pick up golf because that always is an obscure thing that makes it look better on your application or whatever.” An upper-middle-class student, Abbey, echoed Danielle stating: “From what it seems, it’s kind of important to stand out from the pack.” She went on, “I’ve definitely tried to boost my GPA this year. I also signed up for volunteering on this learn escape program, so yeah I could get volunteer hours… and doing programs outside the school that could look really nice on my transcript.” Abbey and Danielle reveal their strategic attitude was not merely a result of insistent parents, but rather their own worries about their candidacy.

Somewhere along the way, they had absorbed the message that carefully, pointedly choosing “obscure” activities would “look good,” so they planned accordingly.

Others did not take the initiative on their own, but rather took cues from their purposeful parents. Upper-middle-class Alex, an avid hockey player, was enrolled in a special hockey team outside of the high school that was specifically for college recruitment. He clearly stated the strategy he learned from the coaches: “the whole goal is to use hockey to get into a school that you wouldn’t normally get into without it so I’m not going to just play hockey but just like they said, just using it.” No apologies and no sugarcoating this method, Alex was comfortable asserting that hockey would help him get into school. He explained that at first, he was unaware of the college implications of this team, he just wanted to play, although his parents were clear on the team’s focus. This attitude also reflected the privileged social class background of these students. As McDonough notes, “working class students see academic achievement as set, an
inflexible fact of their admissions potential. For upper-middle-class students, achievements are seen as somewhat manipulable through SAT coaching classes, the use of private counselors, and their presentation of self” (1997:12). The college application was something to be built up as a means to the end goal of a successful career rather than an education in and of itself.

There was the sense from these students that they needed to bolster their chances by participating in additional activities. Consequently they took the approach of developing their candidacy in a strategic way that disregards the skills or learning that may go along with these choices, and instead emphasizes a calculated approach. While this can be seen as more tactical, methodical, and goal-driven versus a continuous, process-driven, merit-based approach, in this case we can assume that many of these students still received admission to the school of their choice. This points to the possibility that this type of visibly acquired and mid-level cultural capital may still have high value with American institutions, despite being distinct from elite cultural capital, which suggests that being strategically overt is inappropriate. However, the naturalizers’ and compliers’ orientations show a subtle critique of the strategizer approach.

_Developing character: Naturalizing the college preparation process_

Not all of my participants were so direct in their explanations about their preparations for college; many were uncomfortable equating their activities and involvement directly to college acceptance. Instead, in line with high cultural capital characteristics (Holt 1997; Bourdieu 1984), the naturalizers tended to emphasize that
their activities were related to character development or that they just naturally evolved as a result of the children’s interests. Though this was the smallest group of parents and kids, (Six parents and eight students made specific references to character, natural talent, and skill as the driving force in their activities/decisions), their stance is significant in that it provides a foil against the other two groups. Their rejection of the admission-driven approach to raising teenagers highlights the main critique of strategically minded parents (they are pushy and too aggressive) and the disillusions of the compliers (the game is rigged and unfair). In the process of naturalizing the students’ preparations, this group also reveals itself as the staunch believers and defenders of a meritocratic education, again, reflecting high cultural capital sensibilities. Their trust in this façade served to downplay the privilege required for their approach rather than revealing their boost to the “meritocratic” process.

The naturalizer parents focused on activities that they believed would develop and mold their children into knowledgeable, open, urbane adults. They valued experience for experience’s sake, and learning for learning’s sake. While sports were often involved in the repertoires of these students, they were not the emphasis and according to parent and student accounts, were certainly not used advantageously. Academics and activities such as traveling abroad were the key to these participants’ plans, however, they were not described as such. To them they were just part of the lifestyle and general parenting approach of these families, rather than being planned with the purpose of attending an elite university. As Holt (1997:114) describes, this is typical of those with high cultural capital sensibilities, “HCCs [High cultural capital holders] seek out diverse, educational,
informative experiences that allow them to achieve competence and acquire knowledge.”

It will become clear through the examples below that denial of purposeful engagement in activities was the defense against the specter of helicopter or tiger parenting; these parents did not want to be viewed as overly involved, or controlling, or as scheming the game of college admission (nor did their kids!). These families were quite privileged – coming from social class origins where their parents had bachelors and graduate degrees (with the exception of one). No one from the lower-income families demonstrated this same “elite” orientation to college preparation that reflects high cultural capital.

Linda represents the character development approach through the preparations she outlined for her son. An upper-class stay-at-home mother, Linda was fairly curt in her responses and at times a bit defensive when asked about the financial or college admission implications of the activities her son had participated in. Linda revealed that she was more comfortable thinking about the pathway to college as part of the natural course of her son’s young life, and she had a lot of uneasiness in thinking that everything was part of a strategic plan to get him into the best college.

Linda’s son, Max, was a strong student by all accounts and involved in many different activities – sports throughout the year, student council, clubs. When asked about his activities, Linda said:

He’s been very involved in sports, although particularly ski racing and he’s talked to a couple of coaches, one in particular… I don’t know – he’s talked to the Yale coach and that seems to be moving along. Although I mean he certainly never got into the sport thinking this will certainly help me get to college. That would just be the icing on the cake if that’s the case.
At several points throughout our discussion she emphasized this point. When discussing a trip to another country that Max took Linda explained: “again it wasn’t for the purpose of getting into college, in my mind about that would be great kind of independence builder, kind of preparing him in that way not something to put on his application really.” Regarding travel, she told me, “We’ve traveled a fair amount as a family, again not for the purpose of getting him into college but just to sort of broaden his horizons and just sort of try to prepare him for life after his leaving here at home.” For Linda, the character development frame is her way of explaining these trips; it is part of her family’s nature and her parenting style to expose her children to the world. What is missing is the acknowledgement that this is a privilege that not many high school students are able to experience, and that it will likely, in the end, benefit Max’s application. In fact, he ended up at a top Ivy League school.

Those parents who I characterize as “naturalizers” were strategic in a decidedly less obvious way, and while they had clear goals for their kids, in contrast to strategizers, they were not focused on the idea of college as a specific career training experience. Linda explained,

... My husband and I both went to liberal arts colleges and majored in things that really weren’t professionally oriented so that’s kind of the same approach that we have for our kids. *I think there’s a lot of value in liberal arts college level education just in and of itself*. I guess chances are pretty good that Max would go onto graduate school or professional school after that and that would be where he gets more prepared for jobs. [Emphasis added]

Unlike Sarah or Sheila who want to see concrete job-related skills as an outcome of the undergraduate experience, Linda is not as concerned about Max’s job prospects straight out of college. She seems secure in the fact that he will pursue a professional career that
will likely require further study (which is what she herself did, though at the time of the interview she was a stay-at-home-mother). Thus we see it is not only Linda’s own upper-class background that leads her to reflect a natural development orientation, but it is these social class resources in conjunction with her educational experience and her belief in a liberal arts education as valuable “in and of itself.” Linda did not envision a pre-programmed course experience for Max, but rather he would have the freedom to take a variety of classes in order to develop into a well-rounded, learned person.

The children of naturalizers aligned closely with their parents’ perspective. Unprompted and in a separate interview, Max’s characterizations of his travel experiences reflected those of his mother. Regarding his school trip to China, Max described that it was “really interesting for me to see a third world country and seeing how some of the poor people lived there.” The focus is on learning and exposure, not cost or benefit. Max also casually mentioned his participation in a ski camp across the country during the summer before his senior year. From their perspective, there is some negativity associated with a purely instrumental form of participating in activities or travel, thus they nonchalantly invoke a character development frame in describing these activities. Given Linda’s expectation that Max would attend graduate school, it is not surprising that Max confirmed this in our discussion of his future plans. He did not have a major picked out, (“probably nothing with math or science”), but felt that graduate school would help, “Just to be more prepared for a career, be more ready for the real world.” He expressed that his parents do not dictate what he has to do, “They never told me that I needed to do anything…like we’re on the same page that I just go to college and
then probably go to law school…kind of doing whatever.” Thus while Max was on a clear path to a powerful education, he was not expected to have his major or a career decided at this stage. In contrast to strategic students, he was given the freedom to explore his interests and develop his mind before committing to a specific path.

Like Linda, Oona, an upper-middle-class Ivy League graduate also saw college, and the experiences that may help him get in, as a way for her son to develop into a sophisticated, mature person. Oona mentioned that her son Jet had “this idea of being a doctor,” which was casually brought up. While Jet was young at the time of the interview (in the second semester of his sophomore year), unlike other parents who reflected a different orientation to college preparations, Oona was not overly concerned about Jet’s career trajectory or his grades. She explained, “[what] my husband and I have explicitly and implicitly tried to get across our kids is an active intellectual life and really engaging with ideas and maybe you don’t get something or you’re never gonna get that.” She was confident in Jet’s capabilities as a student, including his focus and drive to learn, even when he did not receive a good grade. Part of this was owed to Jet’s individual personality, while another large part of this relaxed, confident, “naturalizer” approach derives from the cultural context; as Oona noted, “but I think partly for our family – it’s just the normal process. I’ve done it, my brother did it, and everybody in my family had gone to college. A lot have gone to grad school, so that’s our world.” Additionally, for Oona (who had attended an Ivy League school herself), it seemed that she did not feel pressure to prove anything through her son (or elder daughter), she told me:

To be frank, having gone to a school like Princeton, yes I had to work my ass off to get in. I worked really hard while I was there but you learn not to be quite so
impressed or to take it quite so seriously. You also learn sort of how to attribute the system, as you know that there were a lot of idiots there, maybe I was one of them. I don’t know.

However, while it seems Oona was almost critical and questioning of the meritocratic process of admission, she went on to show that she still trusted in this process. In fact, her older daughter who was in her freshman year of college at the time of our interview, had apparently insisted on getting into a college on her own terms without her mother’s legacy, she held firm to her belief in meritocracy, as Oona relayed her pride that her daughter said, “‘I’m not going [to apply to your alma mater] because I do not want legacy to be any part of this at all.’”

Oona’s son Jet was in the process of applying to a semester abroad in Europe at the time of our interview. He told me that he planned to do it because his older sister had done a similar program, and when I asked if he thought it would help him prepare for college, he immediately responded: “I think it is going to look very good on my resume,” but he followed, “That’s not why I’m doing it – because it’s a huge commitment just to write a little stuff into the resume. It’s going to be a really great experience and I hope it makes me a much more worldly and aware person.” For Jet, the travel was not purely about padding his college application, but developing himself as a person. Though his mother thought it was likely plans might change (he was halfway through sophomore year at the time), Jet did express interest in becoming a surgeon. He explained how this interest came about from watching a movie:

I was thinking wow that is really cool – saving people is really cool and that was a couple of years ago. It’s a cool career. I mean the activity that searching to do – at the operating table is very methodical. There’s one way you can come out of a mess and that’s something that appeals to me as kind of thinking about how I’m
going to get through this.

While Jet planned to look at schools with pre-med as a major option, at least one of the schools he mentioned visiting did not have a pre-med program, so he was still relatively open to career possibilities, as of course were his parents. With the naturalizer orientation to college preparations, no education is wasted, thus even if Jet changed course midway through college Oona would not be troubled.

In these examples, it becomes clear that the parents’ vision of the future aligned closely with the students. Like the strategizers discussed above, these families’ experiences reveal that the tie between the parents’ background belief in meritocracy, subsequent framing of activity involvement, and thus preparation for a specific future path is one way that this “future capital” is transferred from parent to child. In this case it is not only the parents’ own beliefs in meritocracy that shapes this process, but also their “imagined future” (Beckert 2013) for their children that especially the strategizers and naturalizers work hard to sustain. The subtle distinctions between these groups also suggest the varying degrees of cultural capital within the families greatly influence their approaches.

*Following the rules, with reservations: Complying with the demands of the process*

While some parents and students were unabashed about wholeheartedly doing what they can to look good to college admissions and others denied the relevance of their activities to college applications, there was another group that was more ambivalent about this catch-22. Compliers participated in a mix of activities; but their overall tone
was a sense of frustration and exasperation with the college process. Compliant parents were involved in a base level of strategic planning for their kids, but they (more frequently than others) drew boundaries around what they felt was appropriate or not given the hype surrounding college admission. In this case, one of the significant factors that shaped the orientation of five of the eleven parents in this group was that they had already gone through the college application process with one or more children. As they recounted, it was easier for these parents to take a more relaxed approach given that they knew it had worked out for their older child(ren) and that eased their anxiety. Jan, for instance, took a step back in the actual application process with her second daughter, knowing she had done more than was necessary the first time around. Victoria was still worried, but not overly concerned with anything but her daughter’s confidence and happiness. Her experience with her two sons who were already well into college was that college should not be romanticized, thus that perspective infiltrated her levelheaded stance.

However, even for those who did not have an older child or sibling, the parents and students who fell into this category revealed a more critical lens on the college admission process, and a general disillusionment with the lack of a truly meritocratic system. Some identified it as unfair, feeling that the admissions process was more of a “game” than a reflection of what kind of students their children were. In the cases where the parents were “compliers” who were going through the application process for the first time, they reflected an orientation to college that prioritized the learning experience and abided by the belief that “college is what you make of it,” showing that the elite school
status was not as important to these parents as it appeared to be to others. These families reflected a mix of cultural capital, mirroring the various class backgrounds in the group. Some compliers were upper-middle class and appeared to hold high levels of cultural capital which led to their critique of the application process, others in the middle- and lower-middle class were compliant as a result of low cultural capital sensibilities reflecting a lack of savvy regarding the process.

Additionally, most of these parents had less clarity on their kids’ futures than the strategizers who saw a particular career path or naturalizers who saw the graduate school trajectory but not a specific career, nor did they show much preference besides feeling that they hoped their children would be happy and fulfilled in what they chose to do. They may have thought that graduate school was a possibility, but in these instances it was not an assumption as in others. The students who fell into this category experienced some added stress – they seemed to feel a heavy burden as they managed complying with the demands of the college application process and their parents’ criticisms of it.

Upper-middle-class Nancy, a part time office manager, sorted through her discomfort as we conversed about college preparations. She expressed this contradiction well:

You wonder how many things you do, not saying that it’s for that [college] but like… um, I was thinking that… Andrew’s done [a mission trip] with our church, it’s a work service, community service trip and it goes towards your service for graduation. And I’m sure it looks good to say that you did these things. I don’t know, like I said, when the opportunity comes up to do them do you think well this looks good for college or is it just good for you?

She could see both sides of this equation, so Nancy encouraged her three children to participate in activities that might booster their application, but she did notice as we
spoke that she was unsure at times if these decisions were made purely for the kids or for the kids to get into a good college. She went on to describe the experience she had when helping her daughter fill out her applications.\(^8\)

“They [the applications] ask you a lot of things and it’s sad when you don’t have a lot to put in it. I mean, Emily feels like, you know, she’s a good student, she’s in a lot of sports, I mean, and when they ask you what awards, I mean there’s not really that many things you put down even though you’re a very involved, busy, healthy American girl…it makes you feel inadequate sometimes. I think they try to have things they can say about themselves.

Nancy felt awkward about the notion that her daughter did things with the purpose of filling a line on the application, but the reality that it needed to be filled out overpowered that feeling. Diverging from strategic and naturalizer parents, Nancy focused on the lifestyle implications of her children’s future careers. Nancy explained,

I want them to have the kind of career that gives them that opportunity to just have that solid structure so that they can spend their time, or their anxiety or energy or whatever on things…like their relationships which is where I think their true happiness is going to be. But I guess realistically it’s nice if you’re comfortable financially.

But I don’t think that’s the ‘be all end all.’ I think that’s a challenge living here. Like, I wouldn’t care if I have this house. You know sometimes I think I’d be so much happier with less of the pressures. You know what I mean so I think sometimes that quality of life could be better sometimes, with a little bit less, cause there’s not all that expectation of everyone’s doing this and this cause like who cares.

Like Emily wants to go into teaching and I’m so excited I just think that no matter what happens, you can support yourself with that life. You could have a nice lifestyle and you can spend time doing the things you would like. You could have hobbies, you could do something else, and you could coach. Um, you know what I mean if you wanted to make extra money. It doesn’t limit your happiness as far as what it is that makes you happy. I don’t know that I can define that for

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\(^8\) At the time of our interview, Nancy’s daughter had just received early acceptance to her first choice college. I interviewed her daughter and her son who was in his junior year.
Nancy prioritizes her children’s happiness and understands happiness to be a balance between family, relationships, and a career that provides a stable income.

Victoria, an upper-class mother who holds a professional degree from a prestigious university, experienced an elite education but is not attached to this experience nor did she expect her children to have the same one. Similar to Nancy, she prioritized her children’s happiness and sense of self-assuredness above grades, school, career, and anything else. Being part of an extended family where the majority of the relatives attended or plan to attend an elite university, Victoria was weary of the added stress on her sons and her daughter, Olivia (the child of focus). Though I did not interview Olivia’s father (a professor), I gained the impression that he wanted her to apply to at least one Ivy League or elite university, while Victoria genuinely seemed more concerned with Olivia’s happiness.

Victoria was well aware that her daughter would probably not go to a top school, especially given her struggle with anxiety and Attention Deficit Disorder: “Um, so it’s a different kind of parenting challenge. And in a way probably a good one, to make this more…to help her set up some realistic expectations and to prepare for disappointment.” Victoria did not want Olivia to feel the pressure of the name of the school, but wanted her to be able to succeed as a student at the pace that is best for her. She explained,

I’m worried about her self-esteem in this. You know. [yeah] and that goes back to something we were talking about earlier. Part of what I hope she gets in the next couple of years is a really grounded mature understanding of who she is as a student and that you make choices based on who you are, and not on who you want to be.
Opposite of the strategizer and naturalizer approaches, Victoria expressed that she does not believe there is a “perfect fit” for every student and saw the emphasis on that to be problematic. She did not want to mold Olivia into the perfect candidate, but for her to independently become the person she wants to be. Also important to note is that this family was able to provide ample support to their daughter. They offered support to her, paid for tutors, and therapy for Olivia to cope with her learning disability and anxiety. The family engaged in the steps they needed to in order to prepare Olivia to have the best chance at success that she could obtain. Olivia was involved in several different extracurricular activities, which Victoria touched on in our conversation, however, she highlighted these other issues rather than specifically discussing the role that activities played in her candidacy for college. Victoria emphasized several times that she knew it would all work out and Olivia would attend college, however, her worry about the future showed through. As she confessed at the end of our conversation, she really was concerned about the toll the college process may take on Olivia’s self-esteem more than anything else. Thus she showed her skepticism and struggle with the status game that the college admissions process entails, but this did not mean that Olivia would not be a participant in that game. Additionally, like Nancy, Victoria did not have a specific career path in mind for Olivia; in fact she did not mention any particular plans beyond college. There was the expectation that Olivia would go on to find a career that she cares about, but without a prescription coming from Victoria.
Olivia was a sophomore in a private school at the time of our interview, but she showed a compliant, concerned attitude towards the college admissions process. She was nervous about the whole process and at the time, was not looking forward to it at this stage:

School is not my forte, it’s not what I like to do…so I kind of feel like college is something everyone has to do and to be honest I’m not really looking forward to it. Like the whole process is a drag and a bit unnecessary and…I just…I don’t know. I just want to get somewhere where I'll be happy.

Like her mother, she was focused on attending a school where she would be happy, revealing less concern than other students about the status of the school or the available majors. Olivia was also uncomfortable with the idea of just doing activities that looked good on her resume, but admitted that she still did it. Olivia explained:

I did mock trial this year, because that definitely looks good. But I don’t know. I find each year I’m thinking more and more like, what looks good? You know what I mean? It's weird because I’d rather be doing stuff that I really like but I find myself choosing things that just look good.

As discussed, her mother Victoria (showing her high cultural capital sensibilities) did not want to fall into the trap of making decisions based on what looks good, and made an effort to reject that evaluation. However, Olivia told me that, “My parents have definitely kind of thought of …things that I can add to my resume that would look good so that when colleges see that I don’t have the best test scores but I do have these things and these things, so that might help.” Olivia did not like this, but the reality of her academic challenges seemed to necessitate the extra effort to boost the application.

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* Olivia transferred from the local public high school after her freshman year after she had some negative experiences at the school. She and her parents felt she was not receiving the necessary support for her learning disability and the felt she could not thrive in the prison-like (“I felt like I was in juvy”) environment at the public high school.
Compliant parents and students could challenge and question this need to participate in things that “look good” when they conversed with me, but when push comes to shove and their applications are due, they want to have the best chance they can. Olivia also mentioned potentially taking a year off before college to travel, an idea that other compliers entertained as well.

In this case, the uneasiness with disingenuous involvement that Olivia and others expressed may have some weight in the admissions process. In their examination of the role of race and class in admissions, Espenshade and Radford (2009:30) find that extracurricular activities do play a significant role. But not just any extracurricular involvement mattered, “to receive average if not extraordinary marks in the extracurricular portion of the application, students need to demonstrate a depth of commitment to a few activities rather than perfunctory participation in many activities.” Thus the institutional gatekeepers suggest that this concern is valid because they prize genuine involvement, and thus high cultural capital is rewarded. While for compliant students the challenge is to actually feel that connection to their involvement in certain activities; for strategizers, the challenge is to create the appearance of genuine commitment; and the naturalizers assume this connection without articulating its implications.

Conclusion

The varied orientations to college preparation found among these families tell us about the important subtleties in social class distinctions. These often taken-for-granted rhetorical practices shed light on the process of the transfer of the forms of capital and
ultimately, the intergenerational transfer of social inequalities. The subtle differences between those with high cultural capital versus middle and low cultural capital, and the corresponding ideals about meritocracy, prestige, and distinction tell us how and why certain educational experiences and trajectories are more highly valued than others. In particular, the ways that parents and students with differing attributes converge via their “imagined futures” reveal that the manner in which families talk about the future is another mechanism in the transfer of capital. Streib (2013) discusses the fact that we often lump together parenting beliefs and thus do not gain a clear understanding of how the parent-child relationship impacts intergenerational mobility. She points out (2013:688), “rather than debating if cultural reproduction or cultural mobility better characterizes individuals’ parenting beliefs, researchers may find it more fruitful to examine which parenting beliefs are associated with parents’ class origin, which parenting beliefs are especially culturally mobile, and what mechanisms root some beliefs more firmly in the past than others.” The conceptions that parents and students hold for their futures impact the development of a student’s habitus; the rhetoric of strategizing, naturalizing, or complying with college preparations shape their ideas about what is an appropriate way to gain admission, what is fair, and what is deserved.

The interaction of these various orientations also provides insight into what is valued by families in the college admissions process. The stress and pressure to secure admission demonstrated by class insecure strategizers, the critique and discomfort around concerted tactics felt by the upper echelon naturalizers, and the frustrated ambivalence among concerned compliers converge to show that there is a discrepancy about how to
define merit. There is a sense from the high cultural capital standpoint that merit should be effortlessly, intuitively developed and yet not everyone has the ability (or knowledge) to present the appearance of ease in achieving admission. Though strategizers may achieve admission and their future goals, will they ever achieve high cultural capital status? While this may be the goal for naturalizers, the strategizers do not embody this same conception of success. That being said, though small in number, the power of the naturalizer perspective is clear especially in light of Bourdieu’s articulation of these dispositions; “the capacity of a class to make its particular preferences and practices seem natural and authoritative is the key to its control. These become standard through society while shrouded in a cloak of neutrality, and the educational system adopts them to evaluate students” (Bourdieu in Lamont and Lareau 1988:159). While visible effort may go so far in the contest for college admission, I argue that the naturalizer orientation holds the most power and influence as elite institutions value and reward experiences and qualities such as worldliness and sophistication (Karabel 2005). Strategizers’ potential success in their short-term focus on preparing in college for financially stable careers is contrasted to the possibility that naturalizers may be more highly rewarded (and regarded) in the long term with higher educational returns and economic ones as well if they pursue more schooling and prestigious careers. Alternatively, compliers may be rewarded in that they may find personal fulfillment from the “imagined future” paths they are encouraged to seek.

Interestingly, the Harvard Graduate School of Education recently submitted a report of recommendations to move the admissions process away from the tone seen
among strategizers. Endorsed by 85 institutions and stakeholders, *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions*, focuses explicitly on the concerns of compliers and the goals of naturalizers. The report is critical of the strategic approach; one dean expressed, “This report communicates our expectations much more clearly to applicants. We don’t want students who do things just because they think they have to in order to get into college” (Harvard Graduate School of Education 2016). Another recommendation states “numerous extracurricular activities or long ‘brag sheets’ do not increase students’ chances of admission.” Missing in this recommendation is clear criteria how students and their families should determine what qualifies as a genuine activity from an admissions standpoint. Strategizers with lower levels of cultural capital through no fault of their own, for example, may not have the requisite knowledge to make the “right” choices. While the goal of the report is to provide recommendations to reduce admissions mania, the message still suggests that high cultural capital reigns and the “over-eager” strategizer approach is unlikely to result in students’ admission to elite universities.

Though the future trajectories of these families are speculative, it is worth noting that the development of specific class sensibilities such as being transparent, guarded, or critical of advantageous strategies leads to the maintenance of a clear social class hierarchy. Those who hold generations of elite status keep their privilege a carefully shielded secret, those who scramble to secure their class position or upward mobility encounter judgment, and those who analytically consider the downsides of this process find no recourse to challenge it.
The next chapter explores more of the subtleties in the process of social mobility and reproduction by turning a lens to the financial negotiations that transpire through this process. Continuing the discussion of social class and the forms of capital, but moving on from the discussion of specific activities in the college preparation process, Chapter Five focuses on the ways that parents and students conceptualize the financial implications of college tuition. I highlight the intensity of these decisions between parents and students, as they are at once financial and emotional.
CHAPTER FIVE

Preparing to Pay: Relational Work and Social Class Sensibilities

As shown in Chapter Four, even amid families who share college-bound status, there is ample variation in their approaches to reaching this goal. Parents and students apply distinct framings to their understandings of what it takes to achieve admission, and as such they activate their cultural capital in ways that have varying consequences for the habitus formation of both parents and children. Moving on to explore another aspect in this process of habitus formation, this chapter focuses on the ways that the families handle economic capital as they prepare to apply to college. Explaining families’ economic actions as they look to the future is a multilayered effort. These types of educational investments are not typically examined using an economic sociology framework or by highlighting family consumption practices (with a few exceptions, see Pugh 2009; Zelizer 2005). Studies on families and educational trajectories more commonly feature the parenting approaches (Hamilton 2016; Lareau [2003] 2011), parents’ social class and educational backgrounds (Roska and Potter 2011), parent involvement from a quantitative standpoint (Perna and Titus 2005), or, they may look at the institutional side of education (Hamilton 2016; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Stevens 2007). Additionally, there is an absence of research on intersections of education and the economy (Brinton 2005), and the intersection between educational trajectories and the household economy.

The forward-looking focus of the decisions that these families make is a central theme in this project. While it may seem obvious that the concept of the future is
important to parents and students preparing to be accepted and attend college, the theoretical and practical implications of this future lens are understudied within sociology (Poli 2014; Beckert 2013). Most literature in this realm focuses on the ways in which parental background, socioeconomic status, and involvement shape students’ educational aspirations and whether or not they will attend college (Lareau [2003] 2011; Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Perna 2000; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper 1999). In this case, the starting point is with families who have already established the expectation that the children will attend college, thus I explore what the future vision looks like for those who are college bound and what steps they take at this preparation stage to reassure that vision will become a reality.

**Theoretical Background**

Much of economic sociology centers on understanding the numerous ways that people shape and organize economic action, as the subfield initiated efforts to develop the traditional economic perspective on what it means to be a ‘rational actor’ by denoting the limitations of a subjective definition of ‘rational.’ Over the past thirty years, economic sociologists have successfully argued for an expanded definition of ‘rational,’ and in doing so have demonstrated economic “action as anchored in networks, institutions and cultural scripts that direct choices” (Beckert 2013:222). Beckert (2013) points out though, that these conclusions are largely drawn from interpretations of past actions, rather than people’s concerns with what the future holds. He draws our attention to another central facet of economic action, “imagined futures.” In moments of heightened uncertainty, specifically during the college application process, there is a lack of control
over what the future will look like. In the economic realm, for this concept to be applicable and distinct from any general “imagined futures,” these “fictional expectations must influence action” (2013:232). In the case of college trajectories, the power of the imagined state does motivate and influence economic exchange when families prepare and plan to pay for college tuition. Beckert (2016:43) asserts, “The career dreams of adolescents and young adults and their parents operate as a motivating force in the process of their skill formation.” Additionally, Beckert talks about the “largely emotional” side of this (2013:232), but does not elaborate on the role of the emotions. I argue that the “imagined futures” shape the direction of their choices, and furthermore, they intersect with parents’ own background, past experiences, and their emotional and relational ties.

While the process of preparing and applying to college involves a number of social, cultural, and familial factors as shown in the previous chapters, economic consequences hover in the background because this is one of the most expensive purchases that any of these families will ever make. Not only is the college tuition a huge financial burden for most, but the emergence of a specific market for college preparation in recent years places additional pressures onto families as they compare and evaluate whether or not they are doing (i.e. paying for) the ‘right’ things. Financial deliberations intersect with emotional and familial relationships, influencing these powerful decisions. Some scholars characterize all financial decisions as “nothing but” a market exchange (Zelizer 2005) to be treated no differently than any other (Becker 1996), negating the intricacies that make these economic exchanges more than a simple cost-benefit analysis.
Others note that although we have entered a commercialized period in which the notion of paying for services that aid in the accomplishment of family demands is commonplace (Hochschild 2012), the belief that money and intimate relationships represent two “separate spheres and hostile worlds” persists (Zelizer 2005). This notion is not limited to the economic or sociological literature (Satz 2010) because it is seen in the discourse of my respondents as they consider what is or is not appropriate to spend money on.

Relational work, Zelizer’s (2012) more recent theoretical contribution to our understanding of the economy/intimacy nexus, illustrates what happens at the micro level as people negotiate these two supposedly conflicting sectors. Interest in relational work grew among economic sociologists following Bandelj’s (2012) call to acknowledge its relevance in helping us understanding another layer of complexity within economic actions. Relational work emphasizes the meaning-making that occurs within economic transactions (Bandelj 2012). Zelizer (2012:146) describes relational work as the process in relationships whereby:

People erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation.

This concept complicates traditional embeddedness studies in economic sociology that are more likely to focus on the structure of social networks, by instead looking at the meaning of those ties through the role of emotions and culture. While the general approach to studying relational work has centered on either the repercussions for the relationship between the two individuals involved, or on the ways it highlights the
“connected lives” perspective (Bandelj, Morgan, and Sowers 2015), in this chapter I seek to take a broader approach to relational work by also drawing attention to how it is shaped by future expectations along with its implications for social mobility.

Establishing Financial and Familial Terms through Relational Work

The relational work that occurs within these families illustrates the many ways that people grapple with broader societal expectations about how they should spend their money. Particularly when it comes to a large and meaningful financial decision such as paying for college, parents and students must negotiate the reality of their financial capacity, their desires, and the expectations of others. The next section of this chapter explores the connected financial and emotional lives of the participants and their conceptualizations of this process. I investigate how the relational work performed by parents and students serves as another potential mechanism in the transfer of economic and cultural capital within families, ultimately shaping the processes of social reproduction and mobility.

When asked about their broad aspirations for their children’s futures, some parents just “want their kids to be happy,” others prioritize “happiness with success,” and still others envision a budding entrepreneur. These “fictional futures” take hold of parents’ imaginations (Beckert 2013) in powerful ways. Demonstrated earlier, the powerful visions of the future emerge as one of the central factors that distinguish parents’ orientations to college preparation. These imagined futures also have implications for the spending philosophies of the families and vice versa. Parents reveal that they themselves reflect and absorb the conceptualizations of money discussed by
sociologists, namely, “connected lives” and “hostile worlds,” as they make decisions for the future (Zelizer in Bandelj, et al. 2015:122). However, the wide-ranging impact of these decisions permeates the discussions as evidenced by the fact that no one considers this exchange “nothing but” a financial transaction.

Mirroring continuing debates within the academic literature regarding the separation between money and intimate relationships, these families reveal differing class sensibilities; i.e. opinions or attitudes about the role that money should play in their familial, educational decisions. Following Streib (2015:7), I use the term “class sensibilities” to refer to “default ways of thinking about everyday events, such as how to use resources.”10 The discourse of respondents indicates differing beliefs about the role of finances, but as Zelizer argues, the behavior underlying these words confirms that they are living “connected lives” in which the financial and intimate worlds coexist and affect each other whether they want to admit this connection or not. Some families do speak in terms that reveal “connected lives” as they explicitly discuss the implications of finances on their actual relationships and the activities of their daily lives. Others negate the impact of money, preferring to see intimate relationships and child development/education as a sacred, separate sphere. These frames also lead to varying forms of relational work. As Mears explains (2015:1102), relational work emerges as “people try to create viable matches between appropriate kinds of economic and social exchanges, thereby overcoming the tension between the ‘hostile worlds’ of intimacy and

10 In Power of the Past: Understanding Cross-Class Marriages, Streib (2015:247) highlights class “sensibilities as a nontechnical way to refer to the dispositions that are part of the habitus.” She makes a distinction between sensibilities and tastes, of which the latter are more frequently explored in sociological literature.
commerce.” While they go through this process, they engage with certain relationships, choose forms of exchange (“media” referenced here is in the form of the families’ own income and assets, contributions from extended family members, loans, or scholarships), and create meaning that shapes and reflects their values as they make economic transactions, the combination of which Zelizer terms the “relational package” (2012:151).

Relational work between parents and their children is not merely about the ways that they frame their financial discussions. By examining relational packages, we gain insight into the form that the financial exchange will take and the future expectations about how the money will be used, which furthers our understanding about the complex negotiations in the family during the period from college applications to acceptance to attendance. While the term “relational work” draws our attention quite literally to the intimate, personal connections so inherent in economic exchanges, the emotions and feelings that result are less explored. In particular, the emotional side is ever-present as parents and children weigh costs and benefits that directly affect the future of the people nearest and dearest in their lives.

Compelled to engage in relational work due to the circumstances, both consciously and unconsciously, parents and children develop a variety of ways to justify and negotiate the financial terms of their college plans. Four different relational packages surface among the families in this study that reveal the form of exchange for the college payment and the future expectations tied to that payment. I refer to the different relational packages in the way that the parents and students conceptualize both the college payment and the preparations that go into the application phase; some see this
expenditure as a gift, others as a down payment, a duty, or an incentive. These relational packages are linked to financial resources in some obvious ways – those families who conceptualize tuition as a gift can also afford to do so – but there is not always a clear pattern falling along social class lines. Rather it is not only current resources, but also the past class sensibilities and future aspirations that impact the subsequent relational packages they use. The disjuncture between social class resources and relational packages emphasizes the importance of a broader conceptualization of social class which must include past, present, and future sensibilities as they all combine to shape one’s outlook and approach to life’s many decisions.

*The gift of education*

Paying for college is an enormous expense even for those who have the money at their disposal, and for some this is best thought of as one of the most powerful gifts they can give or receive. Adrienne, an upper-middle-class corporate recruiter, worried about how she and her husband would pay for her twin sons’ tuition, however, the lack of clarity around payment did not mean she would burden her children with the cost. She expressed, “My absolute wish is that they do not have to take loans, that we will pay for it all. My college was paid for and I felt like it was a huge gift that my parents gave me that I came out of school without college loans.” Adrienne did not speak of this as something her parents were obligated to do; instead it was something extra and unexpected. Adrienne watched friends who had loans struggle to move to their first apartment and begin to support themselves; she did not want this for her own children. Her conception
of this payment as a gift that she and her husband would provide to her children was also tied to her future expectations. She anticipated that given the head start of graduating debt-free, her sons would then secure jobs that would allow them to support themselves upon graduation. Adrienne’s grandparents made a large contribution to her college tuition, though she did not count on her own parents to be able to pay a large portion. In line with her strategic orientation to college preparation, instead of relying on money from others, Adrienne mentioned the possibility of downsizing and using the profit from selling their home to pay the difference. Closer to retirement age than other parents of high school students, she explained that she was not willing to dip into her retirement, thus she was weighing her options in leveraging her home. Adrienne’s worry was clear throughout our conversation. She was proactive and trying to plan ahead as much as she could to relieve the monetary stress, and in the process she also worked to shield her sons from these financial concerns.

At the time of our interview during the summer approaching junior year, much was uncertain about the future payment plan, but the idea that the tuition should theoretically be a gift from parents to children was explicit in this family. The twins, Neil and Isaac, were clear that their parents would pay for college, and they noted that their grandparents had been saving on their behalf as well. Neil explained, “I think, I mean we haven’t talked about it yet entirely, but I think most of it will be covered by our parents.” Though this plan was not set in stone, it was an anticipated gift, and one that Neil and Isaac agreed would “always be worth it cause I just don’t think…that you can succeed the way people want to without a college degree.” They seemed unconcerned with what I
characterize as their mother’s high anxiety about the financial toll of college tuition for two sons at the same time, likely because of the work Adrienne had done to protect them from these worries. She reflects a “separate spheres” attitude in this sense; Adrienne worked behind the scenes to maneuver these tuition payments such that they retained the ‘gift’ status. Her efforts made it so that her sons would not see a price tag attached to their educational opportunities. Also important to highlight, Adrienne’s personal experience of having college paid for by her parents and grandparents with no strings attached directly shaped her current desire to provide this ‘gift’ to her own children.

However, while Adrienne protected her children from financial concerns, she made it clear that there was a reciprocal aspect to this exchange as her sons were expected to decide on a major right away and plan towards a post-college career path. And though she did not appear to be forceful, like other strategizers, (see Chapter Four), she outlined a rough plan for each son’s major, which they echoed in our separate conversation.¹¹ Mears (2015:1102) highlights that “gifting, a prominent form of relational work, plays an important role in motivating workers. In economic experiments, workers who receive gifts rather than cash payments put in more effort to uphold their sense of reciprocal obligation (Kube, Maréchal, and Puppe 2012).” Adrienne put her finances on the line for her sons because she wanted to provide this gift, but she also felt this signified that in return they would work towards financial independence. Neil and Isaac implicitly agreed with this arrangement as they also discussed future plans to choose a major, and subsequently a stable job. In their

¹¹ Parents and children were interviewed separately. See Chapter Three for more on the methodological approach.
interview separate from their mother, they expressed that they planned to meet these expectations. Without prodding, Neil and Isaac embraced the future hopes placed on them as a result of this gift. Previous literature on gifting indicates that Adrienne’s logic in expecting her sons to be career-ready by graduation in exchange for their tuition is a common understanding of the “gift;” “there are no free gifts, as Mauss (1954) established, only exchanges misrecognized as free” (Mears 2015:1109). And the twins were responsive to this reasoning. However, the meaning of a gift can be quite different when it comes to the relationship between parents and their children – in some cases the parents agree that this may motivate them to work harder. But as other relational packages show, some parents feel their kids may take the gift of tuition for granted if they do not have a personal financial contribution at stake.

In providing the gift of tuition, Adrienne hoped to offer the same opportunities to her children that she received from her parents. Though part of the upper-middle class due to her education, income and occupation, Adrienne was unsure where the tuition money would come from. She engaged her strategic mindset to figure out how to manage without her sons being involved financially. Adrienne interpreted the gift of tuition as a critical piece of her sons’ future success, and we can infer, as part of their ability to at the very least maintain the family’s social class status. With this foundation, they would be poised to potentially surpass their parent’s class location. A few other parents from the upper- and upper-middle class show a similar “gifting” attitude, reflecting on their own experience of receiving tuition paid by their own parents, and also displaying a preference for separate spheres between their children’s education and
financial concerns. Notably, Oona, a naturalizer whose experience is highlighted in Chapter Four, also discussed tuition as a gift. Aligning with the naturalizer frame, she epitomizes the discomfort between intimate relationships and economic exchange as she repeatedly emphasized the character development aspects of her son’s activities rather than the cost. These families had enough financial security that they are able to maintain the false construct of separate spheres by paying the tuition, and limiting the financial negotiations with their children to the message that it is a gift. Thus, the relational work performed particularly by the parents who manage the tuition conversation reflects a desire to maintain this notion of separate spheres.

**Education as a down payment**

Rather than viewing the college tuition payment as a gift, other parents preferred to view it as a down payment for the future financial success of their children. Though the payment derives from the parents in both relational packages, the gift frame does not necessitate a discussion of tuition in investment terms. Additionally, though some are closer to the natural approach, those parents who viewed it as a down payment primarily embraced a strategic orientation to college preparations and thus accordingly, were also apt to spend on preparatory activities and resources because they reasoned that these were investments that would pay off in a higher status school and eventually a higher status job. The influence of their past experience was less obvious in their discourse as they were focused on future aspirations for their children. Their class sensibilities were quite ambitious – therefore the notion of a down payment was appropriate given their hopes for
their children. The relational work that occurs among these families reveals pressure from the parents who engage regularly with their children about holding up their end of the bargain by performing well in and outside of school.

Like the gift relational package, the families who treat preparations and tuition as a down payment are also largely upper- and upper-middle class; they have the financial resources to be able to purchase these additional resources. However, Cindy Li, a middle-class manager who emigrated to the U.S. from China with her husband after receiving her undergraduate degree, did not have a large income at the time (especially compared to the other parents who interpreted tuition as a down payment). Though Cindy has a Masters in engineering and a steady job, she did not have the same assets as the upper- and upper-middle-class families in this study. In spite of this, Cindy felt that the investments she made for her daughter Eleanor now would result in her transformation into an independent, successful individual in the future. Cindy encouraged her daughter to participate in many different activities from piano to fashion club at school, and after much thought she ultimately decided to pay for a private college counselor to help Eleanor with applications as well. Though Cindy was fairly strategic in her orientation as evident through these actions, her tone indicated a naturalizer approach when she spoke about her motivations for encouraging Eleanor to be engaged in many activities because: “It is not just for the college. It is for the life.”

Cindy wanted Eleanor to have the best chance at attending a school with a notable reputation. She explained, “I teach her not because I’m a worshipper of a good school, but I just feel like this is the step…it is a first step the way for her to become an
independent. Relatively good school has competitive network.” Hesitant to suggest that all of her actions were to increase Eleanor’s prospects, Cindy was pragmatic but still emphasized the character development frame. Cindy measured success in terms of not only Eleanor’s job prospects and financial independence, but she also described, “the treasure we leave to them [her two children] is to make them to become independent and capable to help themselves.” Part of providing that path to independence is to provide the down payment to get there; Cindy explained that “Basically we pay for her, yeah. If she earned the money she can pay us back later.” This down payment does not require reimbursement, but Cindy expected that if Eleanor achieves financial success later in life, she will be inclined herself to do so. Eleanor was a dedicated student who came across as self-assured and motivated, as were all of the students whose parents treated tuition as a down payment. Consequently, the parents were not concerned that the children would fail to uphold their implicit agreement to continue to work hard in school.

Upper-middle-class Sheila Collins also hired a private counselor for her son as a way to provide as much help as she could in his son’s process. Though she grew up in a highly educated family, attended college and works as a nursery school teacher, she was insecure about her knowledge. She felt she did not have enough expertise about the application process herself, thus the money spent on a private counselor seemed to be a logical investment in the future success of her son, Kevin. She explained,

We [Sheila and her husband] believe that by having her [private counselor], it might give him a little bit of an advantage and we want him to have as many advantages as he can have. I would say that's our number 1 reason for doing it and the second reason is because we may not know everything, what to do, in a timely manner. We wouldn't want to screw up and find out later that we should have
done something differently so kind of want to do it right first time.
Sheila saw this as a way to ensure a smooth application process, one that would result in admission to his first choice college. Sheila is a strategizer who felt no discomfort providing advantages to her son. Though Sheila understood that the private counselor was an extra investment and benefit that many students do not have access to, she did not see this as problematic. Nor did she appreciate the advantage gleaned from her son’s tuition being paid in full; that was an assumed cost that the family would take on because it was an investment for the future.

The upper-middle-class Lincoln family was arguably even more intentional in their approach to paying tuition. They were in a unique position in that at the time of our interviews, Margo, the youngest of 3 children was a top soccer player who was actively being recruited by universities as early as her sophomore year. In spite of the story that follows which reveals a strategic approach, her mother, Audrey, a real-estate broker, was adamant that Margo did not become competitive in soccer in order to get a scholarship to college. Audrey asserted her naturalizer frame in the face of openly strategizing for a scholarship; “We didn’t put Margo in soccer to help her get into a good college…we just love sports…so I just never had that foresight to think…” However, once that option was presented, she and her husband worked hard to increase Margo’s chances of receiving a scholarship. Audrey noted the financial burden that her daughter’s commitment to competitive soccer entailed, but it was immediately justified by her hope and vision for the resulting scholarship to a good school. Thus the costs were considered a down payment for a future reward in the form of a substantial scholarship to a top school. For
Audrey, this all happened as a result of her daughter’s natural inclination towards soccer, she insisted that she did not foster that interest for any ulterior motive – her interest in a possible scholarship for Margo was mentioned in our conversation in a light-hearted, joking manner that downplayed its relevance: “Umm… we plan to pay for all their [her three kids] education so Margo hopefully is going to get a lot of help hah.” Audrey was concerned about whether or not Margo would receive a scholarship in part because of the investment that they had already made. She elaborated, “I would say that we pay maybe half a tuition’s worth of money a year for travel and coaching and equipment.”

According to Audrey, it was because of Margo’s love of soccer, she felt it worthwhile to spend money on private lessons and regular travel for tournaments across the country. Audrey is able to highlight the inherent interests of her daughter as the priority, and the potential return on the investment via a scholarship as a secondary advantage.

And though the potential financial rewards were downplayed as compared to the non-material benefits of participating in soccer, Margo felt the pressure to secure a scholarship. Thus the relational work that occurred between Audrey and her daughter reflects a careful balance between emphasizing the enjoyment of the sport and the need to do well in order to successfully receive a scholarship. Finishing her sophomore year when we spoke, despite some pressure, Margo was fairly confident that things would work out for her in her quest for a scholarship. She understood that soccer was a vehicle to receive a good education and later a job.

The vision of the cost of college preparations as a down payment that would be returned in the future by way of admission to a good school or a substantial scholarship
helped parents feel reassured that they were investing their money wisely. Those who treat the tuition payment as an investment show their faith in aspirational thinking as a way to provide the pathway to social mobility for their children. They also had the resources to make preparatory investments that were similarly justified as aiding the children in their ultimate goal of college acceptance and eventual career success. Interestingly, while these families may most powerfully exemplify the “connected lives” perspective as they show how much their intense desires for their children’s future success shape their economic choices, the same families were reluctant to attach a price tag to these costly activities which they preferred to view as character developing pursuits. Their discomfort once again highlights the persistence of the “separate spheres” attitude.

In these instances the children did not give parents cause to worry that the money spent was not worthwhile – the students maintained a level of effort and work that their parents approved of, avoiding conflict and creating a relatively harmonious dynamic at a stressful time. These calm relationships also point to the subtle and often unacknowledged emotional benefits that result from financial stability. Additionally, the aspirational planning involved here reveals a focus on the future that is more pronounced than it is in other families. These are some examples of how the class sensibility to strive for higher achievements than their parents can be engrained in children through the tuition payment process.

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12 See previous chapter for more on the natural approach to college preparations.
Parental “duties”

Distinct from the language of ‘investing’ or ‘gifting’ a college education, some families embrace paying for college as part and parcel of the long list of parent responsibilities in today’s world, and others see it as a ‘duty’ in the financial sense.

Middle-class finance manager Jia laughed as she told me about her son Lou’s opinion on the matter, “He says I pay for it. It is my responsibility. He always says ‘whoa that is child support.’” Though Jia laughed about her son’s assertion in a way that made it seem she was bemused by it, she, along with her husband and extended family intended to pay for Lou’s education with the help of financial aid. Jia, who moved to the U.S. from China after receiving her undergraduate degree there, elaborated that having the financial help of extended family was expected because that was the tradition, and that was her own experience. She noted that Lou would apply for scholarships and she, her husband, and the grandparents would cover the rest of tuition and costs. This was an obligatory payment that all close family members would be part of, it was not described as a gift, perhaps because Lou was still expected to work hard to procure scholarships. Talking more explicitly about the financial steering that they would undertake, these families highlight the “connected lives” perspective because they do not overlook or conceal the fact that this enormous expense is a decision that impacts all family members, even extended family.

More so than many other students like Neil and Isaac, Lou was aware of where the money would come from, however, he seemed less clear about his mother’s assertion that he would need to apply to all available scholarships and for financial aid. When
asked if he had discussed the issue of payment, Lou explained, “It’s come up but she pretty much said that she’s gonna pay for it, like everyone, like all my relatives and stuff are going to help pay for it. I kind of expect that.” Lou continued,

I know my grandparents have like $5K in a college fund because every ‘A’ they put like $500 in my college fund. And my mom has been saving some…my dad put like a stock market account that I’m supposed to monitor and that would be like my college tuition and all the money in there.

He said he “thought” he would still apply for grants and financial aid, but was unclear that that would be required. His grandparent’s strategy also fostered a dynamic whereby Lou was rewarded financially for doing well in school. Though the reward was for a distant future, this exchange connected his grandparents’ pride and generosity to his ability to succeed academically. Jia and her husband (who was living and working in China as a chemist at the time) involved Lou in the financial planning process to an extent, however only in ways that reinforced the dynamic that it was the parental, familial duty to provide college tuition.

Furthermore, the future trajectory of Lou’s life was tied to the parents and grandparents taking on the college tuition payment. Adrienne expected her children to become financially independent following their gifted college education and they appeared to seamlessly accept this exchange by fulfilling that goal. In Lou’s case, tuition was not framed as a gift, and though he was a good student, Jia suggested that he required nudging to fulfill his end of the bargain with his parents. Lou explained that his parents urged him to do very well in school and to become a doctor or a lawyer, “Because I guess they’re well known jobs to be successful.” While Jia did not demand he become a doctor, her preference was that he work in the medical field. Only a few years older than
Lou, his cousin already selected courses related to medical school admission; he had a plan, which is what Jia hoped for Lou. However, true to her strategizer orientation, Jia felt that Lou needed additional encouragement to take the initiative to plan for his future, so she signed him up for academic summer camp and brought him to college planning seminars at a local university. With Jia’s efforts, Lou understood on some level his parents’ desire for him to follow one of these professionalized, prestigious careers. He rationalized: “Like um doctors need to be really smart and hard-working and I guess they kind of want me to be that person.” Lou’s parents showed they were ready and willing to add college tuition payment to their list of obligations, but with this they also pressured Lou to make an effort to be academically engaged.

Jia’s laughter when Lou told her it was her responsibility to pay for college reflected her easy acceptance of this duty, however, some families took on this duty of payment as a burden that might be shared among the parents and children. This required a different sort of relational work between parents and child; in the case of the Osgood-Abraham family the expectation of sharing the cost meant open and frank discussions about the financial limitations that daughter Addie would face in choosing a university. Upper-middle-class parents Alicia and Oliver both hold PhDs and they are quite knowledgeable about higher education. While their extensive knowledge led them to take a more compliant attitude in some preparations because they were confident Addie would end up receiving a good education, their financial concerns led them to be more strategic about how best to manage the cost.
The cost of college was a contentious issue between the two parents. They were not exactly sure how they would pay for college and they held different viewpoints about it because they both had different experiences when they attended. Oliver wanted his daughter to have all options available because he was only able to apply to one college. He wanted to avoid, in his words, the “price is right” equation promoted by his wife as they looked at colleges. Oliver preferred not to have this educational decision tainted by the economic consequences – reflecting a “separate spheres” framework. While he would not rule out the possibility that he and his wife would take out a loan, Alicia was strongly against taking out loans for an expensive school. She insisted Addie focus on schools in the $20-30K range, but Oliver was uncomfortable with this; “I hope not that number…but I think she will be looking for best buy type thing to the extent that you can get a return for that buy.” Alicia’s past shaped this current attitude; she had to work while she was in college in order to pay for it. She did not want Addie to work or to take on debt, but she also did not want to take on debt that might prevent them from retiring; “You shouldn’t sacrifice…your own financial security for your child because you’ll never be able to make it up if you don’t save for retirement.” They are older parents (in their 60s), so retirement is right around the corner and the burden of college would greatly affect their ability to retire.

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13 Oliver was prohibited from applying to more than one college when he applied in the mid ’60s because of racism. He is black and attended a prestigious boarding school where they told him he was only allowed to apply to one school. He was convinced this was due to the fact that his applications may have endangered the counselor’s chances of getting 3rd and 4th generation legacies into Princeton, Harvard, and Yale. He only applied to Harvard where he successfully gained admission.
So as not to refuse the duty of college tuition by placing some of the burden on their daughter, the Osgood-Abraham’s were in the process of negotiating a way to make sure this huge expense was not debilitating. They had to reconcile two conflicting attitudes – “separate spheres” and “connected lives.” Alicia was quite adamant about avoiding the financial burden by choosing an inexpensive school, whereas Oliver held out hope that Addie would receive a merit scholarship that would prevent them from needing to take out loans on her behalf. They were both skeptical of investing in extra support and activities purely for the purpose of gaining admission because this contradicted a meritocratic system, which they did believe in. Still, Oliver wanted to invest in SAT tutoring or a course in order to boost his daughter Addie’s score and increase the potential that she would receive a merit scholarship. Alicia did not see this as money well spent despite Oliver’s insistence that consuming now might help them to pay less later on.

It is important to note that Oliver is a professor at a local university where, if admitted, Addie would be eligible for free tuition. Both parents hoped that Addie would attend her father’s university, and while that may be intense pressure for some students, Addie was unusually laid back about her college prospects. Addie was aware of the financial concerns of her parents, though she did not seem to be worried herself. Addie asserted there was “no bad college,” thus she was confident she would end up satisfied wherever she attended. Addie explained, “My mom talks about it [the cost of college] a lot and my dad’s like just ‘let’s not worry about that’ because we don’t know how much financial aid we’re gonna get. Our financial situation could be different by the time we’re
going to pay for it.” She went on to say that when they do talk about colleges a frequent comment is: “this place is cheaper.” Because Addie’s parents, particularly Alicia, labored to inform Addie of the potential financial ramifications of her college choice, Addie then managed her options accordingly. She was not overwhelmed by this potential limitation, but was comforted by the other value expressed by her parents that there is “no bad college.” In the end, Addie attended her father’s university. 14

In these examples, it is clear that the college education payment is a ‘duty’ that these parents wholeheartedly or reluctantly absorb. This duty comes in the form of savings generated by the parents and extended family, loans, and scholarships. Although the children must at least apply for scholarships and are expected to make a practical choice that the parents may shape and influence, they are not expected to take on the duty of payment, and priority is given to the “separate spheres” outlook, though not behavior. The economic burden should not outweigh the educational choice because the parents and students would purportedly work together to ease that financial load. While Alicia challenged the perspective that the ‘priceless child’ should be free of the tuition burden given her own past, the other parents felt the emotional pull of this prevalent upper- and middle-class attitude.

Additionally, the ‘duty’ relational package does dictate greater financial awareness among the students than when it is presented as a gift or a down payment. In this scenario, the relational work that must take place between parents and children

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14 I was unable to secure a follow up interview with the Osgood-Abraham family; however, I exchanged emails with Addie who expressed her excitement and enthusiasm about attending the school where her father is a professor.
makes it more difficult to maintain this myth of separate spheres than in the gift or down payment relational packages. While those receiving the ‘gift’ of college tuition understood it was a large expense, it was a more abstract concept for those who did not need to contribute even by applying for grants. Thus the contrasts especially between the ‘gift’ and ‘duty’ relational packages start to reveal the ways that social class sensibilities, specifically financial knowledge, take shape through the relational work process.

*Loans as an Incentive*

Though many of the parents I spoke to were unsure how exactly the full college tuition would be paid for, they all had an idea of who would be involved in the process. The majority of the thirty families planned to cover the balance of their child’s education after financial aid awards, as discussed earlier, some even planned to take on loans themselves. Despite differing conceptualizations of the money – gift, down payment, and duty – they all reasoned that their children would return the favor of their payment by performing well academically and working to either get a stable job after graduation, or secure admission to a graduate program. Thus in these instances there was a level of trust in the children that they would not squander this opportunity. But, this parent-centered contribution was not solely about trust; the parents also had to have some means to be able to carry the burden of payment. In this quite privileged sample only a few students were expected to contribute to their tuition by taking out loans in their own name. A few families focus on the importance of their children taking out their own loans as a way for them to take their educational experience more seriously. Here a “separate spheres”
stance was nearly impossible given the direct interaction between the financial constraints and the students’ college options. Furthermore, the following examples reveal a shared orientation to college preparations; whereas the preceding relational packages all reflect a combination of mainly strategizer and naturalizer approaches, those who planned to have their children take out loans were also compliers who were correspondingly averse to spending extra money on college preparations just to boost the application.

This was the case for lower-middle-class school administrator Vera Rivers who knew that she and her husband would be unable to cover the cost of tuition for her twin son and daughter. Vera and her husband attended college a few years after high school on a part-time basis; they paid for their degrees while also working. Evident in her more compliant approach to the college preparation process, Vera was nervous about her lack of experience with four-year college applications. It seemed that her class background shaped her actions more so than her future aspirations; one of the few parents in this study whose own parents did not graduate college, she was one of the first in her family to graduate. Given that her experience was non-traditional compared to her children, she was unfamiliar with the tacit aspects of college preparation and her kids took the lead. That said, she was assured in her conviction that her academically oriented children would be attending college (and rightly so, the twins ended up receiving scholarships to two of the top ranked universities in the country). 

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15 I cannot verify how large their scholarships were; however, through another participant I learned that Lilly received a substantial scholarship to an Ivy League university.
The Rivers had a modest household income and she told me that while they paid for the children’s extracurricular activities and they planned to contribute to their college payments (as she reasoned, “I always figure I can transfer those into like a college tuition payment”), the twins would also take on loans. Vera was upfront with them about the reality that cost was a factor in their college decision; she recalled a recent conversation with the twins: “So I said remember when I told you guys you can go wherever you wanted? Money will play into kind of where you go.” Vera expected they would pay with a combination of loans and scholarships, depending on the financial aid awards. Her children, Lilly and Chulipe, understood that their parents hoped they would find scholarships to apply to, and they mentioned their mother joked with them about a school where twins can attend for the price of one. While they acknowledged this was a “joke,” and they had no intention of applying to the same schools, they also understood the underlying truth to the monetary concerns it implied. Vera elaborated,

I know we couldn’t afford it and I think it will just be kind of… if I could I would and they wouldn’t [take loans] but I just feel like just for their – to value it more and to kind of not motivate them, but I don’t want them to think it’s a joke… but they are aware of that [financial cost] and they were most kind of better at it than me because I would say like why don’t we go do this or something, and they would say no, don’t you think we should put that money to college or you know what I mean? So it is kind of funny.

Here Vera highlighted the seriousness with which her children approached the financial planning. Her relational work shows that she coped with her desire to pay and the reality of her limited resources by lightheartedly communicating to her children that cost would be a determining factor. She reasoned that because the kids would have a financial stake in their education, they would be more motivated to work hard at school.
The middle-class Colburn family also hoped that their second child to attend college, Lucy, would receive scholarships to help cover the cost. While the Colburn family lived comfortably in an expensive town, Jan, a nursery school teacher, made it clear that they did not have unlimited funds, nor did they want to raise their children with that attitude. The Colburn’s were one of just two families (of 12) from Shoretown that did not plan on paying for their children’s full education, in fact they planned for each of their three kids to take out loans of $5,000 per year, so that they would graduate with $20,000. Jan explained, “Because we want them to own this whole thing too. So it’s not just a free ride. And they don’t get to go and party. And so if it turns out they get out of college and they don’t have a job, then we will help pay it, but when that times comes... Yeah so they are each going to have to take a piece of it.” Although Jan was not unique in this opinion as Vera held a similar viewpoint, she was one of the few middle-class parents to implement it.

A true complier in her orientation to college prep, Jan saw the spending on admissions-focused extracurricular activities as extravagant. Jan had a sense of bitterness regarding the spending that she saw amongst other families in Shoretown. She distinguished herself from that kind of spending, but explained that it took great effort for Lucy not to compare herself to others:

But there’s a lot of people in this town that are spending the money and it’s…it doesn’t bother me, but I think it’s bothering Lucy. She’s starting to see all her friends flying all over the place, doing this and that and having that…and she’s feeling it more than I am. So we’re just trying to make her feel relaxed, I think she’s getting all worked up. My older daughter was not…she was so laid back.
Jan recognized that her spending values were more challenging for her daughter to accept in the face of peer pressure, but she tried to be supportive without changing her stance. When I asked her about any spending she had done for her children, Jan explained,

We haven’t sent them to Europe over the summers, or anything like that. No. The only thing that they have done which is not a financial strain on us is they have done the work camp through our church in the summers…they don’t have private tutors, they don’t take piano lessons. They’ve all grown up sailing every summer. And teaching sailing, so…but we would have paid for them to be in sailing anyway.

Jan’s tone was assertive, but also reflected a sense of pride that she had not engaged her children in elaborate schemes to help their college chances. Her decision not to take her daughter on more than one far away college trip was couched by, “I mean I would love to be able to fly all over the country and have her look at schools, but I think unless she’s really interested in it, then I’m not going to do it.” Jan continued, “I think there’s enough information out there on the internet that she can get a really good feel for the schools and be able to eliminate a lot too.” She quickly followed up these comments with some awkwardness, “I’m sounding really cheap aren’t I?” Despite Jan’s confidence in her grounded and financially conservative approach to preparing her children, she was surrounded by a culture of wealth and competitiveness that was inescapable, causing her to self-consciously note her “cheap” approach as we spoke.

Jan’s daughter, Lucy, felt some pressure from her parents to be competitive for scholarships. Her mother’s self-described “laid-back” approach led to some stress for Lucy. Because Lucy was a stronger student academically than her older sister, her parents expected her to receive merit-based scholarships to school. Though Jan only mentioned this once, Lucy brought it up several times, stressing, “they always say I will
still get a lot of money…I feel like I’m just like an average student in class so like I don’t – I feel like they think I’m smarter than I am so, it’s like oh I’ll get a lot of money but…I don’t think I will, I feel like that’s like the top of the class.” However, she later noted that:

I’m like really hard on myself, like I put stress a lot upon myself. I’m like, I feel like my parents, they expect like a lot from me too but then like – and I talk to them about that and they were saying like, oh no, like it’s all you, you’re just putting the stress on us, it’s like we don’t expect all this from you, like this is coming from yourself and like I do know that but like when they say stuff like you’re going to get like a lot of money to these colleges, like that’s stressful – I told them not to say that but they were like yeah.

While this was not the only area of stress for Lucy, the financial burden of college weighed heavily because she felt she would not qualify for the additional support. Lucy told me that she had been a weak student in elementary school, only realizing her academic potential later in middle school. After being tracked into medium level classes, she had to work harder than her peers to prove her ability and make the jump into higher level and AP classes. From Lucy’s account, she was already a very motivated student and had plans to major in journalism, thus Jan’s financial strategy to prevent her from taking her education for granted had already taken root in Lucy’s mind as she was ahead of some of her peers in starting to think about a major and post-college career plans.16

Like Vera, neither of Jan’s parents graduated from a four-year college, and thus she was less concerned about debt holding her daughter back and more focused on her ability to secure a degree. The Rivers and Colburn’s highlight the reality of “connected lives” in the college process. Jan’s insistence on loans and Lucy’s stress in attaining a scholarship

16 Lucy attended a public university in the mid-west and early on was focused on journalism. I was unable to secure a follow-up interview, so I do not know how tuition was paid.
and choosing a college illustrate the intersection between financial constraints, educational prowess, parenting values, and class sensibilities. These examples show the power of the past classed experiences; these families do not see educational debt as something that will prevent their children from at least maintaining the current class standing of the family and potentially achieving upward mobility.

**Conclusion**

Shaped by past, present, and future class sensibilities regarding spending on college tuition, parents and students engage in relational work as they reconcile what they believe to be an appropriate exchange within the reality of their constraints which are economic, emotional, and value-laden. This relational work occurs in the context of broader attitudes about the intersection of intimate relations and economic exchange.

Evident in their planning discourse, though not mirrored by the behavior they subsequently describe, parents and students operate under the tenet that intimate and economic realms should not impact each other. And for the most part, parents in the upper- and middle-class milieu are expected to just bear the burden of paying the tuition; as discussed earlier, the intensive parenting that has become the norm includes a high financial cost. Those in administrative and other “expert” positions reinforce this message by focusing on advising parents to follow their recommendations to manage this payment by making the most economical decisions. The website of a local financial advisor used by a participant promotes “thinking like a CFO” and managing the household like a “mini-business,” thus prioritizing profit over other family demands. Similar to the messages of financial advisors and advice books for those families who are
not in the top one percent, news media often emphasize the importance of planning ahead, not over-spending at an expensive school, and figuring out ways to avoid large loans – supporting the notion that parents should consider college tuition nothing but an economic exchange.

Of course, the reality of the situation is that college means much more than just a purely economic equation for most families. This point is underscored through the examples of families in somewhat similar class locations who interpret and handle payments in different ways, as showcased through the various relational packages they use. Financial resources play a role in their conceptualization of the college tuition payment, but it is not the defining characteristic of the corresponding relational package. Upper-middle-class parents Alicia and Oliver, (despite their own differences), generally treated the tuition payment as their obligation to figure out. They were not only critical of the high price of tuition, but also expensive preparatory activities. However, middle-class corporate manager and immigrant Cindy considered tuition a down payment for her daughter’s future development and success. She was willing to invest in the “extras” like the private counselor (recommended by her American boss) because she felt it necessary to give her daughter the best chance at future success. Alicia and Oliver’s daughter Addie learned college will be what she makes of it, regardless of its cost or status. Cindy’s daughter Eleanor learned that paying for additional resources may lead to greater opportunities. While Addie learned to be aware of the financial implications of her college choice, Eleanor had the freedom to choose without financial constraints. While Addie was poised to reproduce her parents’ class status, Eleanor was poised to potentially
achieve social mobility by exceeding her parents’ class status. Alicia, Oliver, and Cindy had children at the same school and shared similar future visions for their daughters; but their confidence in their own ability to secure that path differed. Alicia and Oliver’s high levels of education and Cindy’s immigrant status shaped their differing class sensibilities and subsequently their relational package when planning to pay for their children’s college education.

This is not to say that current class resources do not play a role, rather to show that there is a complex intersection between social class and relational work. Lower-middle-class Vera was certain of her inability to pay for her children’s tuition, she emphasized that their contribution would be an incentive to do well in school. She was less concerned about the loans weighing down their opportunities post-college. Vera’s own social class background and experience paying her own way through school molded this class sensibility. Though her children were at the top of their class and by all appearances did not require extra motivation to work hard academically, Vera engaged in relational work with her children that served to justify the fact that they would need to take out loans in a context where parents are assumed to be the main financier. In contrast to Vera, upper-middle-class Adrienne was also uncertain of exactly how tuition would be gifted to her twins, but she performed relational work to protect her children from this burden, masking her uncertainty about payment in their presence. She had the ability to leverage other assets, namely her house. Each parent’s own class sensibilities shaped the ways they performed relational work; Adrienne had received the gift of college tuition from her parents and grandparents, Vera paid for herself. Vera knew that
her children would make this work as she did, but Adrienne worried this debt would weigh down her children after college, preventing potential job opportunities.

Not intended to overshadow the importance of the students’ opinions, the parents are highlighted in this chapter because they had more to say on the topic of college tuition. The students’ understandings of how they would pay was largely dependent on the communication they received from their parents. While in other areas the students’ voices reveal unanticipated insight and maturity, their general lack of clarity on the financial implications of college tuition betrayed their youth. They absorbed the message that college is a huge expense, but seemed unsure about what loans (or the lack of) would mean for their future. The relational work performed within each parent-child dynamic intersected with these class sensibilities. The varying levels of comprehension indicate that children’s own class sensibilities are being shaped and developed during the negotiation and discussion of these decisions. In these differing ways, the families are establishing pathways to social reproduction or social mobility.

In the next chapter I turn to the context of uncertainty in order to understand how families make sense of the multitude of options and decisions they face as they approach application deadlines. Building on the previous chapters, I investigate how social class sensibilities shape the discourse invoked by parents and students as seek to confront and control this ambiguity.
CHAPTER SIX

Coping with Uncertainty: Choice Discourse in College-Bound Families

While it was assured that the students in this study would attend college, where they would gain acceptance was highly uncertain. Many of the families were accustomed to a sense of control over their lives given their privileged class status (Khan 2011), and as such, when faced with a scenario where their control was limited they felt anxious. However, they were also proactive in figuring out ways to cope with this insecurity. The context of uncertainty is noted in the previous chapters about the orientations to college preparations and the financial negotiations families undertake. This chapter furthers the exploration of this concept and specifically expands on the themes of Chapter Four by moving from the application preparations to the ways that parents and children conceptualize the college choices they have ahead of them. I analyze how families activate their various forms of capital to create a discourse that idealizes the concept of choice as a way to confront and control the uncertainty of admission.

The specific details of choosing a college have been documented in sociological literature (McDonough 1997), yet the broader contextual aspects such as uncertainty and the impact of a ‘risk’ society (Beck 1992) on the college choice process have not been part of the conversation. Choosing a college is highly uncertain situation as opposed to a risky one; according to Knight (1921), risk is a scenario “to which probabilities can be assigned” (Beckert 1996:807). The many different types of colleges and the unique preferences of each parent and child make the evaluation of a college and the potential outcomes from the experience that much more uncertain. And as modernity theorists
Beck and Giddens have noted, changes in the institutions of marriage and employment in particular have led to a period characterized by great uncertainty because life trajectories include more options than in the past (Cooper 2008). The pathways to adulthood have shifted in a way that there may be more “freedom of choice but the downside is that it also increases the burden to make the right life choices since individuals must make their own personal decisions, rely on their own resources and do their own life planning to determine their destinies” (2008:1233). Especially in the U.S. as compared to other nations with stronger social welfare traditions such as free access to healthcare and higher education (Schalet 2011), many parents internalize this burden and feel that it is on their shoulders to ensure their children’s future success and stability. Furthermore, the lack of a safety net means that there are heightened consequences for those who do not have easy access to fundamental resources such as healthcare and education.

The degree of uncertainty faced by families varies and in a context of limited resources, it is possible that there would be less uncertainty around particular decisions because there would be fewer options. There are also different types of future uncertainty. Families living in poverty might have less uncertainty regarding educational choices as a result of fewer options, but could face greater uncertainty about how they will afford a rental payment. Additionally, the ability to cope with uncertainty is not distributed equally and is affected by the amounts and types of cultural, social, and economic capital that families have access to. The broader context of increased uncertainty explains some of the pressures faced by anxious families making decisions
for their children’s future; with this we can more deeply understand the sense of insecurity in their class location – even for those at the top.

As Chapter Four explores in detail, despite similar class standing, these families engage in varying tactics in order to prepare competitive candidates. The strategizers, naturalizers, and compliers demonstrate differing notions of meritocracy along with differing expectations for the future paths of the students. While the three orientations are once again relevant in families’ conceptualizations of choice, there is much more overlap between strategizers, naturalizers, and compliers on this topic, which is evident in a widely shared narrative of choice among these college-bound, largely white, upper, and middle-class families. This narrative reflects agreement among families that choice is positive, they must have choices, and they operate under the assumption that they will all have choices to make despite the uncertainty of where the children will be accepted.

Three scripts within the narrative of choice reflect the various ways that families utilize the concept of choice as they go through the decision-making process: the informed consumer script, managing disappointment, and the ‘right fit.’ Respectively, the scripts reflect that choice is something that is best made with knowledge, that having many choices is a way to alleviate dissatisfaction, and that a good choice must generate a positive emotional reaction. Amid this privileged group, the process of choosing a college often mimics the process of falling in love (Swidler 2001); students are expected to form an emotional attachment to the school of their choice and proclaim their love through their application, but in contrast to choosing a romantic partner, if rejected, they are then expected to quickly turn their excitement to the next best school. These parallels
are clear in the ways that the students in particular disentangle their school options as they prepare to apply.

Following previous studies which have applied a Bourdieuan approach to understanding life chances, college choice, and the impact of living in a risk society (Lareau [2003] 2011; Cooper 2008; McDonough 1997), I explore how various forms of capital are enacted during the process of choosing in this specific context of uncertainty (Beckert 1996). Additionally, the “fictional expectations” for the future of the children play a significant role in shaping the discussions of choice (Beckert 2013). While social science literature has tackled the issue of “choice” for decades (Iyengar and Lepper 2000), the connection between choices, managing uncertainty, and social class needs further examination particularly in the familial realm. The data in this case speak to the conceptualizations of choice that emerge in my discussions about where and how students will gain acceptance to college, but at the time of these conversations most families did not have a fully developed list of colleges to which they would apply, thus their sense of uncertainty about the imminent future was heightened at this unsettled moment. In spite of the anxiety this provoked, these highly-educated parents and students treated uncertainty as something that could be managed, manipulated, or controlled so it would not to deter them from meeting their future goals.

**Theoretical Background**

*Talking about choices: Uncertainty, habitus, and emotions*

It is clear that financial considerations play an important role in college choices; however, the decision of where to apply and ultimately attend college is not a neat cost-
benefit analysis. As the discussion of relational work reveals in Chapter Five, the predominant separate spheres framework, which holds that intimate relations must be left out of economic decisions, is an inaccurate portrayal of reality. Here I further emphasize this point by applying the concept of uncertainty from economic sociology to highlight the role of social class and emotions in the decision-making process, dispelling notions of “rational choice” as the modus operandi of individuals within families.

Because this study is based primarily on families with privileged social class standing who are all college bound, the general tone of anxiety is contradictory considering their simultaneous presumption that there will be choices and success for their children in the future (Backett-Millburn, Wills, Roberts, and Lawton 2010:1322). Parents indicated feeling stress because it was an uncertain time. Nina surmised that she was “not a control freak” but she still felt anxious: “Maybe it’s because it’s…kind of out of my control.” Nina was confident her son would attend a four-year college, but she had a variety of concerns that involved everything from the financial piece to getting the high school work done, to what type of college choices he would have. Considered a complier due to her overall approach that much of the process was out of her “control,” Nina still strategized to an extent and sought advice from her son’s high school guidance counselor to understand what steps he needed to take. In the end she was very involved in developing her son’s list of colleges and helped him choose where to attend. Beckert (1996:819) argues that uncertainty leads people to rely on “devices,” (available to them depending on the circumstances), which “restrict their flexibility and create a rigidity in the responses to changes in an uncertain environment,” ultimately allowing them to make
a decision. These devices include a reliance on traditions and routines, norms and institutions, social networks, and power (Beckert 1996). While Nina relied on the institution of the school in order to cope with uncertainty in this case, other parents valued the opinion of their peers, or their own college experience as a way to manage. Nina did not attend a four-year college, thus in contrast to many of the other parents in this sample, she could not reference that experience to calm her nerves as she guided her two sons through the application process. The variation in approaches points to the fact that not only are the devices valued differently, the distribution within and between these devices is not equally spread among individuals; we might also think of these devices as forms of capital in Bourdieu’s terms.

The sociological examination of uncertainty moves from the foundational economic theory of rational choice to show that decision-making and actions derive from many other complex factors. Instead of suggesting that actors behave either rationally or irrationally, Beckert’s (1996) application of uncertainty reveals calculations that are based on broader criteria than a strictly economic cost-benefit analysis. Beckert (1996:804) argues that the “situational structure” plays a large part in determining how actors will make choices in the face of uncertainty; there is an interaction between the individual and their context. Relevant to any examination of uncertainty is Bourdieu’s (1984:170) concept of “habitus,” described as both a “structuring structure” and a “structured structure,” it highlights the ways that an individual’s dispositions and sensibilities are subject to broader forces while they are simultaneously a product of those forces. Although Beckert confirms that economic sociologists have the opportunity to
reveal important processes underlying individuals’ economic choices by focusing on uncertainty, by including Bourdieu’s foundational concept of “habitus” into the analysis we gain a deeper understanding of the class dynamics involved in these scenarios. The families develop a discourse around college choice, and in turn a “college choice habitus” reflective of their access to various forms of capital (McDonough 1997:108). In her 1997 study of college choice, McDonough focuses on the organizational side of this process by looking at the school context. I apply the concept of “college choice habitus” here to capture the discourses that emerge as parents and students find ways to cope with the uncertainty of college admission.

The future focus of these discussions is another relevant piece of the habitus that develops among parents and children, and, importantly, reflects the potential patterns of social reproduction and mobility. Beckert (2013) elaborates on his discussion of uncertainty in his more recent theoretical contribution that sheds light on the crucial impact of temporality on how people handle uncertain situations. He emphasizes that truly uncertain scenarios are “anchored in fictions” about the future (2013:220). Particularly relevant to the case at hand, Beckert (2013:220) elaborates, “‘Fictionality’ in economic action is the inhabitation in the mind of an imagined future state of the world. Actors are motivated in their actions by the imagined future state and organize their activities based on these mental representations.” Parents and students therefore invent an image of what the college of their choice will look like, which in turn powerfully shapes not only the approaches they take to get there (as seen in Chapter Four), but also how they talk about the process of choosing which one to attend. Beckert (2013:220)
further explains, “Fictional expectations in the economy take narrative form as stories, theories, and discourses,” as exemplified by the narrative of choice. This future focus reveals the motivations behind families’ navigation of uncertainty.

Adding an analytical layer to our understanding of how people make decisions when they face uncertain scenarios, I underscore the emotions tied to these fictional expectations. As Bandelj (2009:355) points out, “emotions produced in interaction significantly influence economic outcomes. Like culture, networks, institutions, and power, emotions also enable and constrain economic activity.” Drawing on studies from neurobiology such as Damasio’s 1994 study that suggests “emotionally flat” brain damaged patients are unable to make decisions efficiently, Elster (1998:61) argues that a truly “rational choice” made without emotion is nearly impossible to decide, and so he highlights the positive role emotions can have in decision-making. Without emotions or “gut feelings” to aid the decision, circular reasoning can result in endless evaluation. In this instance of choosing a college, the emotional consequences of the uncertainty surrounding this choice play a large role especially in shaping parents’ decisions at this time. Thus again, the overwhelming sense of anxiety regarding the many possibilities in an uncertain time, in fact may lead people to rely on what they know, potentially reproducing similar experiences for their children.

**The Narrative of Choice**

Parents express the desire for, and the expectation of, a bright future filled with options for their children, but when the future trajectory of children enters the picture, this multitude of possibilities is fraught with anxiety that leads to a façade of options
much more restrictive than parents and children acknowledge. There is much debate about whether or not more options is in fact positive. While generally “most Americans see choice as freedom, and thus all to the good” (Fischer 2010:214), psychologist Schwartz argues that these freedoms can actually lead to a “tyranny of choice” (in Fischer 2010:215) that leaves people dissatisfied. In the case of these families, the “tyranny of choice” may mean that parents have a greater say in shaping their children’s many choices than they even realize. Parents sometimes think they allow their children to have more input by providing many options, but in reality the options are often quite similar because they all require four years of college.

Families making choices about college preparation are faced with this conundrum – many of them have a wealth of options which most agree “probably leads in the long run to a set of more satisfying outcomes” (Fischer 2010:216) – still this does not stop them from “obsess[ing] about the options not taken” (2010:215). Additionally, some evidence suggests that a wide array of options can lead to greater difficulty in making a decision; a range of two to six selections may be an easier range to choose from (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). During the pre-application phase when students are just beginning to consider where they might apply, the huge number of options can be difficult to grasp. The anxiety about where the child should attend, coupled with the societal pressure that parents feel to provide what is best for their children, encourages many parents to play a large part in shaping their child’s path.

The “fictional expectations” of parents and students reveal a narrative of choice that is characterized by the desire for open opportunities for children to pursue their
passions, paired simultaneously with a fear of constraints. In these discussions the theme of “options” was ubiquitous. Again, in this mainly upper-middle and middle-class group, the “options” required college. Senior Emily candidly stated, “I feel like there wasn’t a choice, I never would think not to.” There was no choice regarding whether or not to attend college, however, there was the expectation of a multitude of options among this college-bound group and a big choice to be made when selecting a school to attend. Emily contrasted the many options she was presented with against her mother’s experience: “she said it was so different for her, it wasn’t like she had a choice, it was like you can go to this school and be like this.” Emily’s mother, Nancy, in turn demonstrated how different her own experience was by expressing her amazement as she went through the college search for the first time with Emily. Nancy described their experience on several college visits: “It’s been fun, really. I mean, I found it daunting, and when you start out you’re like, oh my god I don’t understand this. But when you go, it’s like window-shopping. I just find it so interesting, and the talks and the tour…you’re like who wouldn’t want to go here?” Nancy was thrilled about the opportunities that her daughter would have, which looked quite different from the public university she attended.

In the following section I discuss the three different scripts within the narrative of choice. Each script reflects families’ application of the concept of choice as they go through the decision-making process: the informed consumer script, managing disappointment and the ‘right fit.’ The scripts also illustrate the complex emotions that
enter decisions between parents and their children.

_Becoming an informed consumer_

While the uncertainty of where students would be admitted loomed over each decision, some families sought as much information as they could about each college in order to cope. Parents and students wanted to have clarity on their “fictional expectations” (Beckert 2013) and as a result, all of the students I spoke with had either visited colleges or planned to visit colleges, whether it was with parents, friends, or just from living near college campuses. They relied on not only the institutions to provide knowledge about themselves, but also their own experience and social networks helped to inform their future decision. Though some families approached the visits as a way to increase options by broadening their list of colleges to apply to, the following examples reveal families who stress the importance of visits and research as a way to learn as much as they could about various schools in order to narrow down the many options. I found that those families with less economic capital, the solidly middle-class families, tended to galvanize their knowledge as a way to be sure they did not waste money by including unrealistic options in their application list.

Junior Reva revealed much concern with the uncertainty of college admission. A strategizer in her approach to college choices as well as her preparations, Reva took more extreme measures than her peers to reduce uncertainty. Known by her group of friends as “the one with the spreadsheet,” she told me: “I literally just collected the names of colleges that I know for whatever reason and I put like 50 colleges on, and then I just
started collecting information on the spreadsheet. And I’m looking at colleges like next weekend because I’m going away in the spring so I won’t be able to look.” Her mentality was that “it can’t hurt to get more information” as she planned to visit college and had also already attended several information sessions from colleges that visited her high school.

Reva was worried about finances as it was unclear how her single mother would cover college expenses. She told her mother early in the process: “you’re stressing me out, how am I going to pay for this? Am I going to be living in debt?” She went on, “It’s not like the pressure is I’m not going, or I’m not going to get in. It’s just so stressful…” Facing no uncertainty about whether or not she would attend college, Reva’s worries stemmed from her awareness that financial restrictions might limit her college options. This experience underlines that exposure to uncertainty is unequal, as is the method of coping with it. For Reva, emotions were at the forefront as she sought more and more information to reduce her worries about choosing and paying for a school, however; in this case information did not seem to ease the high stress levels. The pressure did not come from her remarkably laid-back mother, Maggie, who explained, “like they’re [her friends] the ones whose parents are saying ‘you should really look at this one’…She does a lot of that on her own. She’s researching colleges on her own. We talk about that. We discuss it but I’m certainly not leading the way in that discussion.” As Maggie’s comments show, she reflects a complier stance in her approach to college preparations and in the process of choosing where to apply, which stands in contrast to many other parents who lead the way in suggesting school options. Maggie was confident her
daughter would attend a good school and was more concerned with the pressure Reva
placed on herself.

For others, more information alleviates stress, and these discussions show that for
those who do not have money to waste in visiting numerous campuses or applying to
impractical schools, high value is placed on being an informed consumer in the college
choice process. Students talked about their parents encouraging them to look at schools
online and in college books. Entering Junior Addie’s father was in the habit of leaving
college books on her bed periodically and her parents also told me that they regularly
added a college trip into their vacation plans (Addie’s parents both have PhDs). Oliver
explained,

I’m always looking at the ratings. Every August I buy the US news ratings. It’s
got other kinds of stuff in there like the make-up of student body, the diversity
index. She’s now started paying attention to what percentage of those student
bodies are receiving financial aid…I think that she knows some places that she
doesn’t want to go or some geographical areas that she doesn’t want.

It was clearly important to Oliver to do the due-diligence, to know as much as they could
before making a decision. As noted previously, Oliver and Alicia had financial
restrictions, and thus he wanted to make a “rational choice,” which in this case was one
only made after learning about all of the possibilities. Addie astutely observed, “I think
they mostly try and give me as much information as possible so that I can make my
decision as a well informed decision.” In contrast to Reva, Addie saw her parent’s
emphasis on college visits not as added stress, but their way of giving her choices and
ultimately the freedom to decide where to apply and attend. Given their strategic
approach and educational backgrounds, Oliver and Alicia applied their research skills to
lessen the uncertainty and guarantee their daughter would make a knowledgeable decision.

Another Junior Abbey said that her parents also wanted her to “get an idea of what I want” by visiting and researching colleges. While parents were often involved in shaping these options – Addie’s parents took the lead in suggesting where to visit – parents also framed the visits as time for their children to decide as Abbey puts it “what they want.” In this manner the parents and students activated their cultural capital in order to feel confident that they did not make an uneducated decision that could result in economic consequences or dissatisfaction, but rather one based on their knowledge of the complete landscape of options. They ostensibly followed the guidelines of “rational choice” by weighing their options and considering a cost-benefit analysis, however, they weighed a multiplicity of factors including how the child felt about the options, cost, location, interest in the academics, and so on.

_Preventing disappointment with options_

Distinct from the informed consumer attitude, but still reflecting discourse that values choice, other students and parents wanted to have enough options to prevent disappointment, but to still be happy to attend even their safety school. Notably, the families who emphasize this script hold upper- and upper-middle-class standing and are characterized by the natural and strategic orientations. Without concern about financial consequences, they prioritize emotional wellbeing, and outline specific “fictional expectations” for the future as they face the uncertainty of admission. Isabel told me that
to ease the anxiety about which college to choose, “my parents reassure me that college is what you make of it. But graduate school is another opportunity to get into different schools, if you go to a safety, you could always transfer if you want.” Her parents provided her with options and strategies for what to do if she did not get into her top school, options which included graduate school. Isabel noted that though distinct, both of her parents prioritized her happiness above all other “rational” factors. In her words, her father focused on the idea of “happiness with success” and he wanted her to get into the best school she could, whereas her mother said, “I don’t care as long as you’re happy.” In prioritizing Isabel’s emotional state at school, her parents show that emotions hold an important place in the conceptualization of the future and that the college choice is unquestionably a complex one that goes beyond a cost-benefit analysis.

Some students fixated on a specific school, but they seemed to be aware of the risks in doing so and adjusted their thoughts on the future possibilities accordingly. These students have to navigate the contradictory messages espoused by universities, school administrators, counselors, and parents; they are expected to fall in love with a school and prove that love through their application essays, but yet they also must be ready to accept the next best choice immediately upon rejection. Abiding by the powerful script of falling in love with a school, Kevin had his heart set on University of Michigan (which he had already visited three times by his junior year). Strategic in his approach to college preparations, this frame carried through to his college choices as he tried to reconcile his love of the school with the reality that he might not get in. Despite knowing the University of Michigan was his ‘true love,’ he protected himself by being
prepared to connect with the next best school; “I just want to keep my options open. And when I’m looking for a school, it’s one that not only has a good engineering program, but not necessarily a liberal arts school, but I want something that has business or has something else, something like that just in case if I wanted to minor in it or something like that.” Kevin knew that if his heart was broken he would be expected to bounce back quickly and have a solution ready. Accordingly, he set clear parameters that were not just about the school, but also about his future career path. He worked to have options that were centered on his future plans so that he was not sidetracked by possible rejections. Senior Max set his sights on Yale, but he had plans to visit almost fifteen schools in the coming weeks when we spoke in August before his senior year. His naturalizer mother Linda was cautious about appearing over-eager in her strategizing. In talking about his college choices, she casually explained that they would do these visits “just kind of [see] what would be a good fit for Max, where we should make sure we go see so that he’s got a pretty good perspective on different types of schools and what he thinks might work best for him.” That said, the list of schools was quite similar; filled with Ivy League universities and small liberal arts schools in New England, there were no public universities. Encouraged by his mother, Max also felt the visits were important so that he would have viable options in case of disappointment. Linda was instrumental in shaping this list based on her knowledge,

It’s been a number of years since I was in college, but I think I have some idea about a number of different schools are like, having played sports in college I’ve seen a bunch. I went to school in New England so I think I’ve tried to at least start off with a set of schools that you might want to look at that I think might be good matches. I’d say I drive him to the places that we’re going to visit.
Linda envisioned her son choosing a school in line with her own educational experience, and one that would not disappoint if he was not admitted to his first choice. Again, the expectations about what the future would look like for each of these students was integral to their thought process as they prepared alternatives in the face of uncertainty.

Other parents had to mediate between family pressures and their children’s likelihood of admission. Adrienne knew that one of her twin sons felt pressured to attend a prestigious legacy school in their family, but she was unsure if he was qualified to get in. She spoke of this in terms of wanting him to have ample options: “I don’t want him to feel pigeon-holed that that’s where he’s going to have to go if he’s going to end up being frustrated for four years and come out not even anywhere near closer, anywhere closer at all to where he wants to be.” Neil and Isaac felt pressure in spite of the fact that their mother explicitly encouraged them to not to be influenced by the family’s legacy. Isaac explained: “I have 14, 15 cousins on one side and like I think the majority have gone to Notre Dame…There’s not one in our family that said you have to go to ND, you have to continue the legacy, but you think like that.” Neil, who was interested in a career related to music, expressed, “I would love to carry on the legacy but I don’t think that really has the majors I’m focused on.” He showed a sense of regret when he said that he knew it would “make his grandfather proud,” but he also was well aware that the school was likely not the right place for him, nor was he confident he would be accepted.

Adrienne spoke to her twin sons frequently about career options and planning for potential careers as they decide on a college – she had a very practical sense about which school they would attend and she did not want it to be a place that would limit their
career opportunities. She did not emphasize the status or name of the school; she recognized the importance that the legacy at a competitive school held in the mindsets of her sons, but she knew that it might be difficult for them to be accepted there and she felt strongly that the school may not have enough majors for them to choose from. She was concerned about their emotional wellbeing and wanted to avoid a scenario in which they would feel failure or disappointment, or both. These approaches suggest that the future-focused mindset among these students and parents allow them to brainstorm and plan for multiple options as a way to open the door to opportunities, but also to prevent feelings of disappointment in case the expectations are not met. Furthermore, the ease with which these families could access the cultural, economic, and social capital needed in order to provide these options reveals the significant influence of social class in shaping the ways that people treat and talk about uncertain situations.

The ‘right fit’

Within the narrative of choice that emerges among the families, another major thread emphasizes the importance of selecting a school that parents and students feel is the ‘right fit.’ In some ways this judgment helps to narrow down the many options, and in other ways it serves to justify possible rejections. Of course the ‘right fit’ is a subjective term that means something different to each family, however, the term ‘right fit’ as I discuss it here indicates the importance that some parents and students placed on a school for the individual, tailored to their wants and needs. This ideal appears in spite of the popular message dispersed today by the media, guidance counselors, and college
administrators that there are many great colleges. The “College Bound” blog on The Boston Globe website highlights tips from Andrew Flagel, Senior Vice President for students and enrollment at Brandeis University. Flagel emphasizes that “The notion that there is just one perfect fit is untrue. There are hundreds of great colleges and universities out there” (Ishkanian 2013). He feels that the biggest mistake families make is “fixating on one institution, especially if it is an elite institution,” continuing, “it is an unreasonable expectation to count on admission to an elite school, and it puts an unnecessary burden on the whole family.” Journalist Frank Bruni echoes this message in his account of the process, Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania (2015). Interviewing parents and students, Bruni highlights the extreme pressures they face, particularly when they emphasize the need to gain admission at one specific school. As the book title denotes, he features the multitude of options available that can still provide students with an array of opportunities for a successful life. As an outsider observer, it is easy to take on this perspective. And many of these families are aware of this reality, but they are overwhelmed by the sense that their child has specific needs that must be met in order for success to ensue. Their “fictional expectations” rely on a strong belief that there is a ‘right fit’ that students must find.

Some students and parents reveal a high level of confidence suggesting their privileged class position, but they also show their belief that there is such thing as a “perfect school” that would reinforce their children’s future success. Though they hold bachelor’s degrees, the parents who place higher emphasis on the ‘right fit’ do not have the extensive knowledge of the higher education landscape that might have allowed them
to broaden their viewpoint on the many college choices available to their children. Even more so than the other scripts, the ‘right fit’ script demonstrates the importance of emotion in determining the best choice. In line with Rivera’s (2015b) findings that employers often rely on the “emotional energy” they receive from interviewees to make hiring decisions, these families require that the college choice elicit an emotional reaction. Besides the families’ emphasis on this discourse, the institutions themselves reflect this ideal. Universities encourage students to do their research in order to find the best school for them – applications ask why students have chosen their particular school and admissions officers look for signs that the student has expressed interest via tours and interviews at the school.

For students who emphasize that they must find the ‘right fit,’ they embody the message that they can be selective in choosing their school because they do have options, so they should think about what would best serve their interests. Junior Abbey’s language when I asked about her school plans demonstrates this point. She had settled on two ends of the spectrum in her college choices: “I’ve been thinking about what my perfect school like what it would have and there are kind of two. I like the idea of a small liberal arts college just like in the city or somewhere else but what would be a nice city. But then I also really like the idea of a big school and just a more traditional college, but either one.” Though Abbey had more thinking to do to narrow her search, she shows that part of the process of decision-making includes a consideration of not purely a cost benefit analysis, but what kind of environment she would enjoy – because she had the capacity and privilege to choose.
Another junior, Danielle, articulated her assessment that choosing the right school for her would be the easy part of the college process. She did not have her heart set on one school, but liked her older sister’s school. She explained, “I want to go to Rutgers, but I really truly don’t know if I do because I haven’t seen that many other schools. I don’t have that college like I’ve always dreamed of going there.” She responded to me as if she was already in conversation with those peers that have their “dream school” that they were reaching for because this idea of a “perfect fit” is so pervasive among college-bound students. Though she did not have that school, she asserted,

I feel when I find a college that would be [good], once I start looking at colleges and I think I will know where I want to be, so I think that part will be the easiest…UMass I didn’t really like. I didn’t feel that would be a school for me. So I feel like instinct, but also I need to see where it’s at and kind of the people too, that will have a part.

Despite not having this “dream school” in mind midway through her junior year, Danielle was still quite confident that she will have an “instinct” when she finds the right college. This idea that finding a college is instinctive runs contrary to the ruthless competition that we hear about throughout admissions season as it simultaneously dispels the principles of rational choice theory. But many students echoed Danielle’s attitude that “instinct” would guide her to the right school. Lou told me that he did not know where he wanted to attend college, but he was not stressed about the process of finding the school itself; “I feel like if I find out my major, the rest will come naturally…. once I figure out my major I feel like picking a college would be a lot easier. Everything else from there will be easier.” Again, this emphasis on a “natural” process shows how this confidence that everything will work out in the future persists among these college-bound families.
However, the emphasis on the “instinct” one might have in choosing a school did cause additional stress for those who did not have the same confidence. Lucy expressed, “My mom always tells me when she went to look at colleges, like when she walked on the campus she knew it was her school and like that just scares me just like a little cause like I don’t know, when I walk into a school, that I’ll have the thing that like this is my school and like I want that, but I’m not sure if that will ever happen.” Lucy was nervous that she would not be capable of finding that school and having that “instinctual” feeling that it is the right place for her. Her mother Jan, who took a compliant approach to college preparations, was surprisingly concerned, as Lucy indicated. Jan saw college as a time where Lucy would begin her adulthood and she hoped Lucy would experience a new region, but Jan did not know how Lucy would find the best school for her:

Um, I’m most worried about her finding the right school. Because she’s all over the map right now. I mean…my husband and I are both encouraging her to get out of the Northeast as we did, and you know with all of our kids, because they can always come back, but they can live in another part of the country for four years in a safe environment. You know you’re not stuck out in San Francisco in a job but you know, she’s looking at schools that are 15,000 [students] and schools that are 5,000 and I just think the hardest part is just…I think she could fit into so many different environments. And I just really hope she finds the right one for her. I think she could very easily be at a small liberal arts school and be at a big university, but…

In contrast to the parents mentioned above who reflect a broader scope of knowledge about higher education and thus were hesitant to concentrate on one school, Jan was nervous about her daughter finding the ‘right fit’ because Lucy did not express a clear attachment to one type of school. The emotional connection Jan felt when found her college was etched in her memory, so it was concerning to her that Lucy did not have that yet. This highlights the sometimes contradictory aspects of the narrative of choice; Jan
noted that her daughter “could fit into so many different environments,” yet she was worried about Lucy’s ability to find the right one. Lucy was aware of her mother’s worries and absorbed them herself. Whereas her mother had that special feeling when she found her own college, Lucy was skeptical that she would have the same experience. As many other parents do, Jan equated this experience to falling in love with a school as you might with a romantic partner, she believed that there must be a “special feeling” when you find the “right fit.”

While Lucy framed this as a stressful part of the process, and I could sense the anxiety this caused her, at some level she was also critical of the concept of a perfect school. When her older sister looked at colleges the previous year, she had fallen in love with a school because of the beautiful campus: “My sister was like basically like this is a nice school…the fountains, and she’s like, I love it I want to go there, but like, she didn’t get in, and I don’t know if she actually wanted to go to the school or just liked the look of it.” Lucy suggested that the idea that “when they walked in and they loved it” is a bit superficial; she emphasized “just, like, I would have to look at like do they have good academics, do they have what I’m looking for, are there people that I like, the size, the neighborhood, I feel like there’s so much going into it.” Her thoughtfulness and greater transparency about the process of choosing a college revealed a contrast to the other students who saw it as a natural process and chalked it up to instinct.

The uncertainty of acceptance and the ‘right’ fit script could lead to disappointment as well. When parents could not ensure that their child would have the choices that they wanted to provide, this became a painful process that left some feeling
bitter. When we spoke, Irene was about to send her daughter to her second choice college and her son was entering his junior year. Irene was disappointed because she felt that her daughter’s “good character” was not a factor in where she was accepted to school; “I wish it wasn’t all about GPA. I wish it was more of the person and getting the right fit but that’s just not the reality.” Irene continued, sharing her concern about the admissions process:

I think based on my daughter’s graduating class and where I know kids got in and didn’t get in, I don’t think there’s a lot of right fits there. I think there’s a lot of kids going to schools that they don’t want to go to which I think in the long run is going to hurt these colleges too because don’t you want to get the kids that really want to be there? It’s almost at a point like with a lot of my daughter’s friends, it was heartbreaking.

Irene coped with the disappointment by turning a critical lens to the colleges – from her perspective this is an injustice to the kids that is perpetuated by the colleges who do not admit the right students. And she may have good reason to issue this warning as many colleges are focusing more on retention rates (Tyson 2014). Still, Irene also seems to take this from a privileged stance that assumes that because she has a daughter who is prepared, a decent student, and a kind person from a good solid middle-class background, she should be admitted to the college of her choice. The “right fit” means getting in wherever she desires without much regard to the many reasons why students are accepted, rejected, or left without the means to attend their top choice.

While Irene had developed a clear picture of the “right fit” for her daughter, her son was a different story. She was frustrated with his lack of focus on his schoolwork and while she also emphasized that people, including his tutors, tell her “he’s a really nice kid,” she had learned from her daughter’s experience that this would not translate
into acceptance to a good school. She again talked about the “fit”: “I’m still trying to help him find the right fit…he’s not really in love with any aspects of high school academically so that’s gonna make it a little more challenging.” While she had found the right path for her daughter if not the right school, she had neither for her son in his junior year. Irene summed up: “Mostly I just want the best fit for both of my kids. I want it to be a place where I think they will do well.”

For these parents, finding the ‘right fit’ meant a place where they would be happy, comfortable, and get a good education, but for many, it also meant a place that would set them on the right path for a successful future. However, whereas those who emphasize either a wealth of information or many options set their sights on long-term visions for success, those focusing on the ‘right fit’ looked for more immediate results from the school choice to alleviate the uncertainty about the future.

**Conclusion**

The notion that the future holds boundless opportunities characterizes many families’ *perceptions* of uncertainty. They strongly desire options for their children – they did not want them to feel limited but to have choices. Whether they emphasize information gathering, providing options, or finding the ‘right fit,’ the narrative of choice reflects the broader cultural belief that more options is positive (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). The narrative also highlights the emerging belief that emotions have a relevant place in important decisions (Rivera 2015b; Bandelj 2009; Swidler 2001; Elster 1998).

Notably, the analysis shows that there appears to be more space for the role of emotions when there are fewer financial restrictions. Though the class differences are
subtle within this overall privileged group, the families who worked to gain as much information as they could to inform their choices and reduce uncertainty did have to take finances into consideration. There was an implicit pressure to follow a traditional rational choice model of weighing the costs and benefits of each possible outcome. However, those who did not have to consider the financial implications of their choices had space for emotions to move to the forefront of their decisions. In fact, emotions were an indispensable part of the decisions, however contradictory. Similarly, in her exploration of cultural notions of romantic love held by middle-class couples in the 1980s, Swidler (2001:129) finds that “mythic love” – the belief that there is one romantic match that is “right” – persists in spite of the reality that half of marriages end in divorce. “Mythic love” exists alongside “prosaic realism,” which is the more accurate account of love as somewhat situational, tumultuous, and not necessarily everlasting. We might think of these two conceptions in relation to the college choice – there is the idealized notion of the “right fit” or “mythic love,” which coincides with the “prosaic realism” perspective that students must make the best of their options in the face of possible rejection. Swidler shows that the tenets of marriage help to maintain the mythic love, and I argue that institutions of higher education and parents uphold the “right fit” script. These two ideas of love in relationships and in the college search are not mutually exclusive, and Swidler (2001:129) highlights that “people can live quite nicely with multiple, conflicting ideas about the world.” These notions aid decision-making in the face of uncertainty as they reveal what are considered appropriate value judgments.
Furthermore, in this case social class influenced not only the perceptions of uncertainty, but also the ways of approaching uncertainty in the college choice process. Risk and uncertainty are both socially constructed through the college application process and the interactions it necessitates. The “college choice habitus” shapes and is shaped by the scripts that emerge among the families. Accordingly these understandings of uncertainty hold implications for the future trajectories of these students; “social class operates through high schools to shape students’ perceptions of appropriate college choices, thereby affecting patterns of educational attainment, and how individuals and schools mutually shape and reshape one another” (McDonough 1997:107). The subtle advantages that accompany distinct types of cultural, social, and economic capital lead to various understandings of how to conceptualize and manage a highly uncertain situation. In a sense, the experience of uncertainty is a result of privilege. For some, there is not as much uncertainty because the finances make the choice a non-choice. But for most, the overarching narrative of choice led the families to first grapple with uncertainty, and then activate their numerous capital resources to find the best path for their children.

In a broad sense, most parents embrace the uncertainty of the future likely because of the certainty that their children will attend college. Despite that certainty, anxiety, stress, and worry filter throughout many of these examples. I also underscore the important role that the macro-context of changes in the transition to adulthood, social class instability, and the lack of a safety net in the U.S. (Cooper 2008) play in shaping these insecurities despite the relative advantages held by these families. That said, these worries might serve to mask those advantages because of the general sense of insecurity.
Cooper (2008:1252) points out, “it is easier to be reflexive when you have more options, it is easier to plan if your life is more predictable, and it is easier to look down the road if you already possess a psychic template of your future.” Those who truly have reason to be concerned with the uncertainty of the future are more often underserved in the college choice journey.
CONCLUSION

Negotiating Opportunity Consumption and Meritocracy

In this qualitative study, I explored the role of parents and adolescents in the context of their efforts to fulfill what I argue are classed expectations of educational success and mobility. Adding to the complexity of this experience is the ambiguous college admissions process, which increases stress and anxiety for parents and students who are left guessing what it is that college admissions officers want to see on their applications. Over the past thirty years, there has been an important cultural shift in American higher education that has led to a framework where students are often considered consumers of education, rather than young minds to be shaped into engaged citizens. This refrain has also infiltrated the years leading up to college, as families consume opportunities when they pay for extracurricular activities, test preparations, and extensive travel during students’ high school years. However, the firmly rooted belief in the meritocratic character of the U.S. educational system has not subsided in spite of the rise in supplemental educational investments that are not endowed on talent or ability. This presents a predicament for families who must reconcile their belief in meritocracy with the reality that many of the actions they take in the college preparation process are not equally accessed, nor equally rewarded. Thus this project sheds light on the negotiation of opportunity consumption amidst these contradictory beliefs.

This research confronts the shifting terrain of higher education expectations and its influence on families, American middle-class culture, family relationships, and social reproduction and mobility. Because most people in the U.S. classify themselves as
middle class, the reality of this complex identity becomes obscured. This research highlights the nuances of the middle class category by noting the distinct social class origins and class expectations held by those who might ostensibly be considered part of the same class location. These thirty families reflect divergent class-laden tenets about the best way to approach college process preparations, finances, and school choices. These class-laden tenets guide their behavior as they transfer their capital in distinct ways when they prepare their children to reproduce or exceed their own class position.

The project adds to the literature on education, which rarely incorporates the sociological perspective on the role that family consumption plays in shaping educational trajectories. Furthermore, I contribute to economic sociology by bringing the higher-education market and the household to the forefront as legitimate areas of focus through the lenses of relational work and uncertainty. My interviews also give high-school-age children a voice that is rarely heard from in this field. I spoke to students just at the point when they are beginning to consider their transition to adulthood. In particular, these conversations reveal much about the subtle ways that social class dispositions are formed as students discuss their worries, aspirations, and visions for the future. Though Bourdieu (1984) successfully argued that valuable forms of capital are passed on from parents to children, he failed to fully examine how children themselves undergo and experience this transfer (Cook 2008). This research addresses this shortcoming by focusing on parents and their high-school aged children at a moment when this transfer is happening.
Chapter Summary

The meaning-making examined in this dissertation brings to light mechanisms within the family that reinforce social class trajectories. Though the analysis is not always organized around dyads, by examining both parent and child accounts, I underscore the significant influence that this relationship dynamic has on students’ futures. I contextualize the study first by denoting the current economic climate, and the unwavering faith that most Americans place in education, mainly higher education, as the step to securing social reproduction or social mobility. Each consecutive chapter then builds on the idea that there are lessons imparted through the college preparation process that have specific consequences for the social class hierarchy in the U.S. Following the Bourdieuan framework applied throughout this work, the reproduction of the current class structure is generally assumed to be the outcome of these practices, however, I later conclude by considering how these practices may create new, less visible forms of inequality that are not typically part of social class analyses.

Chapter Four outlines the three main orientations to college preparations present among my participants. I argue that the strategizers, naturalizers, and compliers hold different types of cultural capital that correspond to distinct approaches to college prep and subsequent visions for the students’ futures. Though all are college-bound families, the small differentiations in these parent’s own social class origins and educational values proved to be relevant in shaping their varied understandings about what the students needed to be strong candidates for college admission. Here I contribute to literature on cultural capital and social class origins, while adding the ‘future’ vision to the
conversation. In particular, I show that the façade presented by naturalizers with high levels of cultural capital negates the intentional pursuit of activities. In doing so it serves to perpetuate unequal access and demeans efforts to increase access to higher education because colleges continue to reward these types of activities.

In Chapter Five I explore the relational work employed by the families as they talk about how they plan to finance their children’s college education. They engage in relational work to cope with the conflict they feel between the financial and familial realms. Their experiences show the persistence of the assumption that economic decisions should be separate from emotional ones. Depending on families’ resources and their own educational experiences, they talked about financial plans for college using different relational packages – some considered the finances as part of the gift of education, others as a down payment, a duty, or an incentive. I show that these relational packages are tied to social class and have long-term consequences for the social class trajectory of the students.

Finally, I argue in Chapter Six that the period prior to college admission provides a unique and informative lens into how families conceptualize and manage uncertainty. Again emphasizing the critical importance of social class, I argue that class not only impacts the extent of uncertainty that families face, but it also influences their subsequent management of uncertainty. Across the class spectrum, all of these college-bound families operate under the assumption that choice is positive. However, certain people think about choice as something that can be controlled by becoming an informed consumer, some attempt to increase their choices determined to bypass disappointment,
still others try to find the ‘right fit’ to manage the doubts. These scenarios reveal the critical role of emotions in decision-making under uncertain circumstances, and suggest that those in more privileged class positions may have more space for, and more frequently rely upon, emotions when making consequential decisions. Here I reinforce how something that, at first glance, is a seemingly marginal aspect of one’s life trajectory – their understanding of and handling of uncertainty – has much to do with the continued secure class locations of some and the tenuous position of others.

**Implications of the College Preparation Process**

In the high stakes college admissions game, the persistent anxiety and fear of uncertain outcomes lead parents and children to rely on past experiences, to activate their assets, and formulate future aspirations that satisfy their hopes and dreams. Though the media is dominated by stories about the pressure that accompanies increasingly selective rates of admission at top schools, this study shows that college-bound families are largely resourceful as they navigate the process. What is less discussed is how, in response to this hype, highly-educated, college-bound families activate their capital in ways that renew and recreate social class inequalities that are supposed to be erased through college access.

Many have argued that higher education has the ability to substantially diminish unequal past experiences (Brand and Xie 2010; Hout 1988, 2012). This study adds to more recent sociological literature that instead highlights the enduring importance of early experiences that can lead to unequal outcomes during and after college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lareau [2003] 2011). This research on mostly upper-middle and
middle-class, college-bound families reveals how slight differences in social class origins, educational experiences, and future aspirations create the potential for imbalanced opportunities.

The current and future direction of college admissions reflects a preference for the naturalizers’ approach that focuses on the character development benefits of college preparation activities – an approach that is seen only among those with high levels of both cultural and economic capital. While the difference among strategizers, naturalizers, and compliers are at first glance more about semantics than concrete inequalities, the subtleties among them are the crux of the generation of new forms of inequalities. The naturalizer families spoke of plans involving graduate school, thus seeking a long-term career trajectory that could result in highly paid careers distinct from those who viewed the undergraduate experience as the time for career preparation. And the various relational packages accessed by the families convey advantages to those students who received college tuition as a gift or a down payment. All of these students attended college whether they shared in the payments or not, but as a result of these financial packages, they faced starkly differing scenarios upon graduating. Thus their shared experience of becoming college graduates did not erase the realities of how they managed to attend. Moreover, as the discussion of uncertainty underscores, those in more privileged financial situations will continue to have access to choices and those with more cultural capital may also have a better capacity to reduce uncertainty to feel more in control. The emotional toll of these psychological distinctions deserves greater attention as it adds another layer of inequity in educational achievement. These elements of the
college preparation process show that social reproduction is a likely consequence, but there are other significant and less-explored forms of inequalities that may lead to greater social mobility for some over others.

*Considerations for College Admissions Officers*

I want to conclude by recommending that college admissions officers utilize the framework of the strategic, natural, and compliant orientations to deepen their understanding of students’ applications. By applying the lens of these orientations to their evaluation of applications, admissions officers can gain a richer and more empathetic view of how and why students participate in certain pre-college activities. As the admissions process stands today, high levels of cultural capital are most rewarded, especially at elite institutions. By taking the strategic, natural, and compliant orientations into account, admissions officers will be able to better understand the varied forms of capital embodied by each student so that they can work towards a more meritocratic process of admission.

I argue that as they stand today, higher education institutional values are closely aligned to the natural orientation to college preparation. Just as these institutions pride themselves as being the representatives of meritocratic principles, naturalizers portray college preparations as effortless, ordinary extensions of themselves that were not accorded to them by any unfair advantage. Faced with a difficult contradiction of values, naturalizers deny that their preparations might be anything but fair. The *Turning the Tide* report (Harvard Graduate School of Education 2016), mentioned in Chapter Four, was
produced with the intention of improving the admissions system. The report’s goal is to make the admissions process more equitable with less focus on the number of activities and AP classes, and more focus on community, family engagement, and “meaningful” activities. While a worthy effort, the recommendations fall short of real reform. For instance, strategizers approach the college preparation process more systematically because they are unaware of an alternative method to achieve admission. Lower-income strategizers can be involved in “over-coaching” (Harvard Graduate School of Education 2016) in order to access resources that from their understanding, will position them well for admission. Immigrant strategist parents do not have the same knowledge of the educational landscape of the U.S., thus they sometimes invest in outside help and encourage participation in numerous activities. By taking such socio-economic and cultural dispositions into account through the use of this framework, college admissions officers can more fully grasp why students from low-income and/or low-cultural capital backgrounds may present as over-zealous on their application. An appreciation of students’ cultural and economic backgrounds will help dissuade admissions officers from disregarding these types of students, thereby helping fulfill the meritocratic ideals of the admissions process and inhibiting the reproduction of inequality.

Designing applications in a way that allows admissions officers to learn what went into each students’ approach to preparing for that application would bring greater accessibility to deserving students. Instead of routinely rewarding the natural orientation, which merely appears to be the most meritocratic approach, a more nuanced application can determine why these students are able to embody this elite orientation while others
are not. This would require self-reflection on the part of universities – reflection on the ways that the values espoused by powerful institutions of higher education are complicit in reproducing social inequalities.

**Future Research**

Given that college is increasingly seen as a necessary credential for a wide range of jobs, I see graduate education as the next important area of research to explore from a similar lens of educational and economic inequality. As established in this dissertation, graduate school is part of the long-term plans for many of these families – particularly those from an upper- and upper-middle-class background – many of whom emphasized a career trajectory rather than just a job for their children. Thus many questions abound:

How early must students begin preparing for graduate school? For those who do not initially plan to attend graduate school, how likely are they to pursue an advanced degree later on?

These forthcoming plans represent another moment where stratification is solidified. Torche (2011) explores the power of intergenerational association by separating BA and advanced degree holders’ socioeconomic attainment. In this quantitative analysis, Torche (2011:799) expects to find more meritocratic outcomes the higher the education levels, because distinctions based on social origins should presumably be reduced as a result of the extended time spent pursuing education and due to the “technically specialized” nature of graduate education. However, her results infer otherwise; “they indicate that intergenerational reproduction is pronounced among those with less than a college degree, that a bachelor’s degree erases the influence of social
origins, but that intergenerational reproduction reemerges among advanced-degree holders” (2011:790). While her analysis rests on data from the 1970s and 1980s, the pursuit of advanced degrees has only surged since then. Given my findings that graduate education is at the forefront of the future plans for many of these upper- and upper-middle-class participants, it necessitates further examination. A longitudinal and qualitative approach such as that of Hamilton (2016) would be helpful to understand when, how, and why the decision to attend graduate school is generated among students. Based on the participants in this study I hypothesize that a parent often plants the seed of graduate school, however, my personal experience pursuing an advanced degree was more influenced by an undergraduate professor than by my parents. Still, Torche (2011:797) suggests that for the advanced degree holders in her study, “the substantial expansion and differentiation at the college level may have provided an avenue for privileged families to invest in a more advantageous type of higher education for their children.” When the college degree became the benchmark that the general population could meet, elite families sought another form of distinction through advanced degrees.

Along similar lines, additional research could also explore the alignment between the discourse discussed in each empirical chapter and the reality of how the activities benefitted students in the end – how do families finance the college education when the bills arrive? How do they discuss the cost at that later stage? Do their tactics to reduce and manage uncertainty give them a greater sense of control when they do choose a college? Are they able to prevent heartbreak when rejected from the first choice school? Do their understandings of meritocracy change after the college admission process? The
more visibility we bring to the experiences of families in intimate contexts, the better we can understand how subtle meaning-making has palpable consequences for the perpetuation of social inequalities.
## APPENDIX A

### Table 2: Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>Race &amp; Social Class</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Mother Occupation</th>
<th>Father Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent interviewed: Nancy Engel; Kids interviewed: Emily and Andrew</td>
<td>White, Upper-middle</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Part time office manager</td>
<td>VP of Sales for Security Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Anderson; Avery</td>
<td>White, Upper</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Part time nurse’s assistant</td>
<td>VP of healthcare company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey Lincoln; Margo</td>
<td>White, Upper-middle</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Real estate broker</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Ullman; Isabel</td>
<td>White, Upper</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>CPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene Reynolds; Alex</td>
<td>White, Upper-middle</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Part time pre-school teacher</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrienne Leary; Neil and Isaac (twins)</td>
<td>White, Upper-middle</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Corporate Recruiter</td>
<td>Real Estate Broker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Evans; Max</td>
<td>White, Upper</td>
<td>J.D.</td>
<td>Stay at home with law degree</td>
<td>Chief Operating Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie Regan; Jeff</td>
<td>White, Upper-middle</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>President of Engineering Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Knope; Eric</td>
<td>White, Upper</td>
<td>MSN</td>
<td>Nurse and teacher at college</td>
<td>Finance Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan Colburn; Lucy</td>
<td>White, Upper-middle</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Nursery school teacher</td>
<td>Sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila Collins; Kevin</td>
<td>White, Upper-middle</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Nursery school teacher</td>
<td>Financial associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie Shaw; Danielle</td>
<td>White, middle</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Unknown, divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URBAN AREAS (2)</strong></td>
<td>Race &amp; Social Class</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Mother Occupation</td>
<td>Father Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Isen; Olivia</td>
<td>White, upper</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Psychologist not currently employed</td>
<td>Psychologist and Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen Ingram; Elizabeth &amp; Allison (twins)</td>
<td>White, upper-middle class</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Professional management</td>
<td>Professional management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia Osgood &amp; Oliver Abraham; Addie</td>
<td>White, African American; biracial; upper-middle class</td>
<td>PhD (both)</td>
<td>fundraising</td>
<td>History professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name(s)</td>
<td>Race; Class</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Additional Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Barnes; Lindsey Barnes</td>
<td>White; middle class</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Public School teacher</td>
<td>Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera Rivers; Chulipe &amp; Lilly (twins)</td>
<td>White, lower-middle class</td>
<td>B.A. (finished as adult)</td>
<td>Works for public school administrative offices</td>
<td>Director of unemployment office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Rose; River</td>
<td>White, upper-middle class</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>Editor of a Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina Derby; Cushy</td>
<td>White, middle class</td>
<td>No college</td>
<td>Works for the city</td>
<td>Director of facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley Kaufman; Ana</td>
<td>White, upper-middle class</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>School psychologist</td>
<td>Works in a school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Miller; Reva Dell</td>
<td>White; biracial; lower-middle class</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Works in HR</td>
<td>Divorced, occupation unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun Hu; Sylvia</td>
<td>Asian immigrant; Asian-American; middle class</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unemployed architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram Ellis; Lucas</td>
<td>White; middle class</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Solar project business developer, unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jia Liang; Lou Min</td>
<td>Asian immigrant; Asian-American; middle class</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Bank professional</td>
<td>In China, a chemist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy Li; Eleanor</td>
<td>Asian immigrant; Asian-Amer; mid class</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa Olson; Laney</td>
<td>White; upper-middle class</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Works in finance</td>
<td>Divorced, Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa Turner &amp; Evan Rogers; Abbey</td>
<td>White, upper-middle class</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>ED of a non profit</td>
<td>Real estate broker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oona &amp; John Simpson; Jet</td>
<td>White, upper-middle class</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Working on MSN</td>
<td>Designer and teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amalia Pereira; Reggie Vincent* attends a city charter school</td>
<td>Caribbean immigrant, lower-middle class</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Associate to accountant</td>
<td>Divorced, works at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kid: Leo Washington *attends charter</td>
<td>African American, working-class</td>
<td>No college</td>
<td>Lives with Grandmother; Aunt is guardian</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Recruitment Email

Email to participants:

Dear [Name],

I am a graduate student at Boston University in the Sociology department and a former Hingham High graduate. I am contacting you to ask if you would be interested in participating in a study I am conducting. The purpose of this research is to understand family decision-making. Specifically, I am interested in understanding what parents and their children do in school and outside of school in order to help their children’s chances of attending college.

I have contacted you because you have a child in high school that is currently making decisions about how to prepare for getting into college. If you have any available free time and you are interested in this topic, please let me know if you would be willing to let me interview you and your child. The interviews would take about 1 hour, and I would speak to each of you separately. I would ask you about your background, your child, and about your day to day activities and practices when it comes to spending.

Even though you may not receive any direct benefits from this study, your participation will contribute to our understanding of the strategies that families use to prepare their children for the possibility of attending college. This research may also help us learn ways to lessen the stress involved in this process for both parents and children. However, you personally may receive no benefit from participating in this study.

I will do my best to keep the information that you tell me private. I will change your name when I report the study so that no one can identify you. Even though I will try to keep the information private, there is a slight chance that someone who is not part of the study will learn some private information about you if you join this research study. You do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

I am happy to meet you where it is most convenient for you, as your participation would be a big help to me. Thank you for taking the time to read this and to consider speaking with me.

Sincerely,
Cara Bowman
Boston University Department of Sociology
781-724-8134
bowmanc@bu.edu
APPENDIX C

Adult Research Consent Form

Title of Project: Transferring Ambitions: Negotiating Opportunity Consumption among Families
Principal Investigator: Cara Bowman

Study Background
For this project I am interested in understanding family decision making processes from a sociological perspective. Specifically, I am interested in understanding what parents and their children do in order to help their children prepare for the possibility of attending college. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have children in high school who are currently making decisions about how to prepare for the possibility of getting into college. I am a graduate student, and I am conducting this research over several months with approximately 40 different families. Your participation will last for 1-2 hours.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to understand what parents do outside of school to prepare their kids for the possibility of attending college. In addition, I want to understand how parents make decisions about what they do to help their children prepare, and what resources they would like to have to help this process. This research is focused on learning more about the relationship between parents, children, and the way they plan for the future.

This research involves interviews with parents and their children about their preparation for the possibility of attending college. The interviews will involve questions about the parents’ background, their child, their hopes for their child, and also their day-to-day activities and spending practices. The interviews will each take approximately 1-2 hours. The research will take place at a location determined by the participant.

Risks and Discomforts
If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you do not need to respond. All of your answers will be confidential. All names will be changed so that there is no risk of identification. There may be unforeseen risks to the study. If new risks are identified the study staff will update you in a timely way about any new information that might affect your health, welfare, or decision to stay in the study.

Benefits
While you may not receive any direct benefits from this study, your participation will contribute to our understanding of the strategies that families use to prepare their children to attend college. This research may also help us learn ways to decrease the stress
involved in this process for both parents and children. However, you personally may receive no benefit from participating in this study.

There are no known costs to you for participating in this research study except for your time. You will not be paid to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality
Any identifiable data that is collected from you will be recorded by a study ID. Only the investigator (Cara Bowman) will have access to the master-code that links your personal information to the study ID name. I will take appropriate care to protect the confidentiality of your private information, and after the interviews have been transcribed and analyzed the voice recordings will be deleted. However, there is a slight chance that others could learn information about you from this study.

Your information may be used in publications or presentations. However, the information will not include any personal information that will allow you to be identified, all names will be changed. Information from this study and study records may be reviewed and photocopied by the institution and by regulators responsible for research oversight such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the Boston University Institutional Review Board.

Taking part in this research is voluntary. You have a right to refuse to take part in this study. If you decide to be in this study you can refuse to answer any question if you wish. If you decide to be in this study and then change your mind, you can withdraw from the research.

If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether or not you wish to continue to take part in the research, you will be told about them as soon as possible. The investigator may decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent. This might happen if she decides that staying in the study will be bad for you or if she decides to stop the study.

If you have questions regarding this research either now or at any time in the future, please contact Cara Bowman at 781-724-8134, bowmanc@bu.edu. You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Boston University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at 617-358-6115 or irb@bu.edu.

Agreement to Participate
By signing this consent form you are indicating that you have read this consent form or it has been read to you. You are also indicating that you have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing the consent form you are indicating that you voluntarily agree to
participate in the study. You will be given a copy of the consent form to keep if you wish.

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date
APPENDIX D

Student Research Consent Form

Title of Project: Transferring Ambitions: Negotiating Opportunity Consumption among Families
Principal Investigator: Cara Bowman

Study Background and Purpose
We want to tell you about something we are doing called a research study. A research study is when people collect a lot of information to learn more about something. A research study may be like a science experiment or collecting information to solve a mystery. The researcher is doing this study to learn more about the things that parents and children do to prepare to get into college. I would like you to be in the study because you are at the age when you begin to think about preparing for college.

After we tell you about it, we will ask if you would like to be in this study or not.

What Happens in this Research Study
If you agree to be in the study, I will ask you some questions about the things that you do to prepare yourself for the possibility of going to college and the things that your parents or other people do to help you. We will talk for about one hour. I would also like to speak with you after you have graduated high school to hear how things turned out. I would speak with you for about an hour at that time as well.

Benefits
While you may not receive any direct benefits from this study, your participation will contribute to our understanding of the strategies that families use to prepare their children for the possibility of attending college. This research may also help us learn ways to lessen the stress involved in this process for both parents and children. However, you personally may receive no benefit from participating in this study.

I will do my best to keep the information that you tell me private. I will change your name when I report the study so that no one can identify you. Even though I will try to keep the information private, there is a slight chance that someone who is not part of the study will learn some private information about you if you join this research study.

Voluntary Participation
Do you have to be in this study? No, you don’t. No one will make you if you don’t want to do this. Just tell the researcher if you decide not to do it. No one will be mad at you or change how they take care of you because you don’t want to participate.

If you decide to join and then later change your mind it is ok. If you decide to join but then don’t want to answer some of the questions now or later that is ok.
If you have questions regarding this research or if you think you are being hurt by the research now or later you or your parents can contact Cara Bowman at 781-724-8134, bowmanc@bu.edu.

Agreement to Participate

If you sign this assent form it means that you have read it or it has been read to you. It also means that you have been given the chance to ask questions about the study and your questions have been answered. If you sign this it means that you are agreeing to participate and no one is forcing you.

The researchers will give you a copy of the consent form if you wish.

____________________________________
Name of Subject

____________________________________   ________________
Signature of Subject                        Date

____________________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent

____________________________________   ____________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent          Date
APPENDIX E

Parent Guiding Interview Questions

Parent(s) Interview

A. Future plans for children
   a. Tell me about yourself and your family, what is happening right now in your lives. Has preparing for college been a big part of your life right now?
   b. What do you think it will take for your child to have a successful life?
      i. How do you define success?
   c. When did you start thinking SERIOUSLY about your child going to college?
      i. What spurred this consideration?
      ii. When did you begin considering the financial aspect of college?

B. How do you envision this process of preparing for college?
   a. What kind of school does she plan to attend? Private? Public?
   b. Did you develop this plan or did your child develop this plan?
      i. Why did you develop this plan?
      ii. Has anyone else helped you/your child develop the college plan? (i.e. guidance, FUEL)
   c. Does she have any idea of what career she wants to pursue after college?
      i. How did that come about? Do you discuss this with her?
   d. Does she have a list of schools in mind? Can you tell me some of them?

C. Strategy for achieving future plans
   a. Is this something you talk about frequently in your family? What aspects do you discuss?
      i. Who brings it up? When does it come up?
   b. Do you think about the financial aspects of the college application process frequently?
i. Have you come up with a financial plan? How? Examples?

ii. Do you have a college savings account?

C. Who makes those decisions in your household?
   i. Do financial decisions in your household depend on the purchase?
      How are these decisions made?

D. What is your child doing in school to work towards achieving this goal of attending college?
   i. What is she doing outside of school?
   ii. Is she working?
   iii. What extra-curriculars does she participate in?

E. Do you consider yourself as having a large role in helping her achieve these plans?
   i. Why or why not?
   ii. Do you help your child with her homework? Do you know what assignments she has due, etc?
      i. Are there things you (or anyone else) are doing at home to help them?
         1. Why or why not? How did you make this decision?
   ii. Outside of home?
      2. Why or why not? How did you make this decision?

F. Is there anything else specific that you are doing right now to help them achieve these plans?
   i. If not, is there anyone else who is helping your child?

G. Does your partner play an equal role in the process or would you say you have more of a role?

H. Have you purchased anything that is helping her achieve these plans?
   i. Financial contributions?
   ii. How much would you guess you have spent on purchases that you think will help your child prepare for college?
      1. Study Books?
2. Tutoring?
3. After school/ extracurriculars?
4. Camps?
   i. Why do you feel your child needs a tutor?
   j. Are there any clear alternatives to the things that they are doing?
   k. How do you decide what to buy and what not to buy?
   
   i. **Do you think college is a worthwhile investment considering the economic climate?**
      
      1. How do you maximize your investment?
   
      l. Does this process cause you anxiety or stress? How?
      m. Does this process cause your child anxiety or stress? How so?
         i. Do you do anything to try to help relieve your child’s stress? Dinner?
            Special meal, gift, study motivators?
   
   D. Additional roles
   a. Is there anything that you have done in the past to help them prepare to achieve these plans?
      i. What financial contributions have you made?
      ii. Why or why not? How did you make this decision?
   b. Do you see these costs as providing an advantage to your child?
      i. Is that fair?
   c. What sorts of things do you imagine you will help with in the future?
      i. For example, will you be paying for your child’s education?
      ii. How did you make this decision?
      iii. Will your child work when attending college?
   
   d. Do you know anyone who has not helped their child plan for their future? Can you tell me about them?
e. Who else helps prepare your child for the future?
   i. (i.e. who plays a role in helping to prepare your child to get into college? (school staff, other family members, friends)
   ii. Do any school staff members help your child? Any other programs in or outside of school?

f. What are your expectations for the guidance counselor at your child’s school?
   i. Did you ever consider sending your child to private school?
   ii. Do you have any friends or neighbors who attend private school?

g. When did you move to _____? Why did you end up living here? How did you make the decision to live here?
   a. What influenced that decision?

h. Are there any resources that you feel are particularly helpful?
   i. Any resources that you feel are unhelpful or that cause more stress?
   ii. Are there any additional resources you would want to help your child achieve their goal?

i. Do you think your child will be successful in achieving their goal of attending college? Why or why not?
   i. Are there specific obstacles you think your child will face?

j. Do you think your child appreciates your help? Do you think your child needs help from you?

k. How do your child’s friends influence her experience?

E. Environmental influences on parent
   a. What has led you to become a part of your child’s plans?
b. Do you have friends who are doing similar things or do you each handle this differently?
   i. Is this a common topic of conversation among your friends?
   ii. Why do you think this is such an important topic?
      1. Lack of other interesting topics?
      2. Is there something in common about the people who talk about it more than others?
      3. Status?

c. Do you know anyone who is not doing enough for their child? Anyone who is not careful enough about college preparations?

d. Do your child’s peers have similar plans to hers?

e. Do you think there is a difference in how this process has gone for your son versus your daughter? (and vice versa)
   i. How so? Career expectations? Major?

f. Are these plans similar to the ones you had as a teenager?

g. Are you doing similar things for your child that you did or your parents did for you when you were her age?

F. Follow up

a. Is there anything else you that you think would be important for me to know?

b. Can I contact you in the upcoming (year or two years) to find out how things work out for your child and possibly speak again after this process has ended?

c. Do you know anyone else that you think would be a good person for me to speak with?

d. Would you like to give yourself a name for when I write about you?

GIVE QUESTIONNAIRE
APPENDIX F

Student Guiding Interview Questions

Child Interview:
GIVE ASSENT FORM

A. Demographic Information
   a. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What are you doing currently? Where are you in school, etc?
      i. Where do you go to school currently? What year are you in school?
      ii. What is your GPA/average grades?
      iii. What classes are you currently taking?
      iv. What do you do afterschool?
         1. Sports?
         2. Job?

B. Future plans
   a. Do you have a plan in mind for after high school?
   b. What kind of school do you want to attend?
   c. Why do you want to go to college?
      i. Can you remember when did you decide you wanted to go to college?
   d. Are your friends planning to go to college also?
   e. Do you have a list of schools in mind? Can you tell me some of them?

   f. What do you think the process of getting to college looks like?

   g. What kinds of things are you doing to make sure that you go to college?
      i. In school?
      ii. Out of school?

   h. How often do you talk about planning for college?
      i. With your parents?
      ii. With friends?
i. When did these conversations start?

j. Are your friends doing similar things to you?
   i. How are they preparing for college?
   ii. What are they doing if they are not attending college?

k. Are you worried that some of your friends aren’t prepared OR more prepared than you?

l. After college do you have a plan in mind for what career you will pursue?
   i. How did you become interested in that field?
      1. Parents? Friends?
   ii. Is your career something you discuss a lot at home?

C. Influences on the child’s plan
   a. Who has helped you the most in making this plan?
   b. Have your parents help you make this plan? How did they help?
   c. What level of involvement do your parents have in your preparation? Do they have a large part in helping you? What sorts of things do they do to help?
      i. Do they help you with school work?
      ii. Do they help bring you to events or activities after school?

   d. Do you have to buy anything that may help you get into college? Has anyone else bought anything that might help you get into college?
      i. Do you think these purchases will help?
         1. SAT tutor? Summer plans? Application help?
      ii. Why do you feel you need a tutor?

   e. What other things to they buy for you?
      i. Laptop?
      ii. Car?
iii. Gifts?
iv. Travel?
f. Do you buy anything for yourself?
g. How do you decide what to buy and what not to buy?

h. Do you know anyone whose parents help them too much?
i. Do you know anyone whose parents are not very involved or who do not help them very much?

j. Are you happy that they are helping you?
k. Why do you think they are helping you?
l. *Do you think college is a worthwhile investment?*

m. Did your parents have a similar experience when they were your age?
   i. What do you think they want you to do in the future? Why?
   ii. Do you want to have a similar path to your parents?

n. (If they do not have a big role…ask similar questions above but geared towards the person(s) who help) Why do you think they have not had a big role in helping you?
   i. Who has helped you the most as you develop these plans?
   ii. Friends? Teachers? Guidance counselors? Other family members?
      1. Paid counselors?

o. What resources do you think are most helpful?
   i. What resources are not helpful or cause the most stress?

p. Do you think there will be any obstacles to you achieving your goal? If so, what might they be?
i. What additional resources would you want to help you achieve your goal?

D. Closing:
   a. *Is there anything else you that you think would be important for me to know?*
   b. Can I contact you in the coming (year or two years) to find out how things work out for you?
   c. Do you know anyone else that you think would be interested in speaking to me about these issues?
   d. Would you like to give yourself a new name for when I write about you?
APPENDIX G

Demographic Information Survey

The information in this questionnaire is confidential and will not be used to identify you. It will be used to help me draw statistics about my participants as a whole. Please circle your response.

G. Are you Male or Female?
   a. Male
   b. Female

H. What is your race?
   a. White
   b. African American
   c. Asian-Pacific-Islander
   d. Other
   e. White, Non Hispanic
   f. Hispanic
   g. Native American
   h. Multiracial

I. What is your age?
   a. 18-21
   b. 22-25
   c. 26-30
   d. 31-40
   e. 41-50
   f. 51-60
   g. 60 or over

J. How many children do you have? What are their ages?
   a. Do they all plan to attend college?

K. What is your highest level of schooling?
   a. Less than high school
   b. High School/GED
   c. Some college
   d. 2 year college
   e. 4 year college (BA, BS)
   f. Masters degree
   g. Doctoral degree (PhD)
   h. Professional degree (medical doctor, lawyer)
L. What is the highest level of schooling your father completed?
   a. Less than high school  
   b. High School/GED  
   c. Some college  
   d. 2 year college  
   e. 4 year college (BA, BS)  
   f. Masters degree  
   g. Doctoral degree (PhD)  
   h. Professional degree (medical doctor, lawyer)  

M. What is the highest level of schooling your father completed?
   a. Less than high school  
   b. High School/GED  
   c. Some college  
   d. 2 year college  
   e. 4 year college (BA, BS)  
   f. Masters degree  
   g. Doctoral degree (PhD)  
   h. Professional degree (medical doctor, lawyer)  

N. What is your current marital status?
   a. Married  
   b. Single, never married  
   c. Widowed  
   d. Divorced  
   e. Separated

O. If you are married or have a partner, do you both work? If so, what are your occupations?

P. What is your yearly individual income (approximately)? Please check one.
   a. Less than 10,000  
   b. 10,000-19,000  
   c. 20,000-29,000  
   d. 30,000-39,000  
   e. 40,000-49,000  
   f. 50,000-59,000  
   g. 60,000-69,000  
   h. 70,000-79,000  
   i. 80,000-89,000  
   j. 90,000-99,000  
   k. 100,000-149,000  
   l. 150,000-200,000  
   m. 200,000-249,000  
   n. 250,000-300,000  
   o. 300,000-399,000  
   p. 400,000-499,000  
   q. 500,000-749,000  
   r. 750,000-999,000  
   s. 1,000,000 or more
Q. What is your yearly **household** income (approximately)? Please check one.

- a. Less than 10,000
- b. 10,000-19,000
- c. 20,000-29,000
- d. 30,000-39,000
- e. 40,000-49,000
- f. 50,000-59,000
- g. 60,000-69,000
- h. 70,000-79,000
- i. 80,000-89,000
- j. 90,000-99,000
- k. 100,000-149,000
- l. 150,000-200,000
- m. 200,000-400,000
- n. More than 400,000

R. Do you own your home?

- a. Yes
- b. No

*Thank you for your time and participation!*
APPENDIX H

Parent Follow-up Interview Guide

Experience of college admissions
1) How did things turn out?
   a) How did your child make the decision about where to go?
      i) Money? Location? School attributes?

2) Did the process go smoothly?
   a) Why or why not?

3) Are you happy with how things turned out?

4) Is there anything you would have done differently?

5) Does it seem like your child was adequately prepared to go to college?

Specifics:
   i) Ask about which specific items that they felt helped:
      (1) Sports?
      (2) Academics

Roles
6) Who ended up helping the most through the process?

7) Who took the lead with applications?

8) Who made the ultimate decision about where to go to college?
Financial

i) Did you end up spending a large amount of money on college admission preparations?

ii) How much? Was it money well spent?

iii) Are you paying for your child to go to college or did she receive any financial aid/scholarships?

iii. Financial contributions?

iv. **How much would you guess you have spent on purchases helped your child prepare for college?**

   1. Study Books?
   2. Tutoring?
   3. After school/extra curriculars?
   4. Camps?

b. How do you decide what to buy and what not to buy?

   i. **Do you still think college is a worthwhile investment considering the economic climate?**

   1. How do you maximize your investment?

c. Did this process cause you anxiety or stress? How so? How did you cope with the stress and anxiety?

d. Did this process cause your child anxiety or stress? How so?

   i. Did you do anything to try to help relieve your child’s stress? Dinner? Special meal, gift, study motivators?

B. **Additional roles**

   a. What sorts of things do you imagine you will help with in the future?
b. Does your child have a plan for after college?

c. Does your child have a job at school? In the summer, will she work?

d. Do you know anyone who had a negative experience with the college admissions process?
   i. Why do you think they had that experienced?

e. Are there any resources that you felt were particularly helpful?
   i. Any resources that you felt were unhelpful or that cause more stress?

C. Environmental influences on parent
   a. How has your life changed since your child went to college? In what ways?

   b. Do you think there is a difference in how this process has gone for your son versus your daughter? (And vice versa)
      i. How so? Career expectations? Major?

   c. Are these plans similar to the ones you had as a teenager?
   d. Are you doing similar things for your child that you did or your parents did for you when you were her age?

D. Follow up

E. Is there anything else you that you think would be important for me to know?
APPENDIX I

Student Follow-up Interview Guide

E. What school are you attending?
   a. Are you enjoying it?
   b. Are you living at school? On campus?

F. How did the process of applying to college go for you?
   a. Was it stressful? Successful? Any obstacles during the process?
   b. Describe the experience for me.
   c. Who helped you the most?
   d. Were you the person to ultimately make the decision about where to go?
   e. Did you do visits? How did you decide?
   f. How did you make your choice? Who had the most say?

G. Financial
   a. How are you paying for college? Parents? Financial aid?
   b. Do you have a job at school?
   c. Will you work in the summer?

H. Do you feel prepared for college?
I. Why/why not?

J. Do you have a major? Do you have a sense of what you’d like to do after college?

K. How did the process go for your friends?
   a. After college do you have a plan in mind for what career you will pursue?
i. How did you become interested in that field?
   1. Parents? Friends?
   ii. Is your career something you discuss a lot?

b. What about the cost of all of the preparations. Was it a lot? Was it worthwhile?

L. Personal q’s:
   a. Still planning on more school after bachelors?
   b. Living situation?
   c. Which activities were the most beneficial?
      i. Was tutoring beneficial?
      ii. Sports?
   d. Classes?
   e. Did your parents buy you anything to prepare for actually going to college?
      i. Laptop?
      ii. Car?
      iii. Gifts?
      iv. Travel?
   f. Do you buy anything for yourself?
   g. How do you decide what to buy and what not to buy?

   h. What resources do you think are most helpful?
      i. What resources are not helpful or cause the most stress?

   i. Do you think there will be any obstacles to you achieving your goal? If so, what might they be?
      i. What additional resources would you want to help you achieve your goal?

M. Closing:
   a. Is there anything else you that you think would be important for me to know?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


CURRICULUM VITAE

Cara Bowman  
Boston University  
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EDUCATION

Ph.D. Sociology, Boston University, anticipated 2016  
• Conducted interviews with 65 parents and high school students in the greater Boston area about the strategies they employ to ensure their children’s college attendance and economic success.  
• Committee: Alya Guseva, Nazli Kibria, Ashley Mears, and Johnny E. Williams

B.A. Sociology and Spanish, Trinity College, 2005, with honors  
• Presidential Fellowship in Modern Languages: Awarded to the student who achieved the highest level of scholastic achievement and leadership within each discipline.  
• Awarded the Sociology Prize for Outstanding Scholarship and Achievement.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Family Sociology Economic Sociology  
Social Class & Mobility Race & Ethnicity  
Cultural Sociology Qualitative Methods  
Writing & Research Childhoods & Youth

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Department of Sociology, Boston University  
• Instructor; developed syllabi and led undergraduate students to understand sociological inquiry through readings, lectures, class discussions, quizzes and writing assignments  
• Sociology of Childhoods & Youth  
• American Families (5 semesters)  
• Sociology of Economic Life
College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program, Boston University

Graduate Writing Fellow, 2010-2012, 2013

- Instructor for 5 semesters; led first-year undergraduate students in discussions about the meaning of consumption in the family, while developing their writing skills through the assignment of drafts and three major papers
- Provided one-on-one feedback to students through revision of multiple drafts and mandatory individual conferences
- Developed syllabi in conjunction with the writing program requirements for the fall introductory class (WR100) and the spring research based class (WR150)
- Integrated core writing elements with sociological content in the courses; both entitled, “Consumer Society and the American Family: A Sociological Perspective”

Department of Sociology, Boston University


- Teaching assistant; led discussion sections of undergraduate students; supported professor to effectively engage students with the curriculum; developed lesson plans for discussions each week and graded all paper assignments
  - American Families
  - Community Sociology
  - Principles of Sociology


- Verified the accuracy of undergraduate student exams and paper assignments; supported one professor per semester

Publications


Presentations

2016 “Negotiating the financial & familial: Paying for college as a gift, duty, burden, or investment?” Eastern Sociological Society annual meeting. Boston, MA.

2015 “Negotiating Opportunity Consumption: Family Preparations for College.” American Sociological Association annual meeting. Chicago, IL.

2015 “Expanding our Understanding of Taken for Granted Practices of Upper and Middle Class Families’ Preparations for College” Eastern Sociological
Society annual meeting: New York City, NY.

2014
“Orientations to College Prep” American Sociological Association annual meeting: San Francisco, CA.

2014
“‘Is this gonna look good?’: Families Consuming Opportunities to Prepare for College” Eastern Sociological Society annual meeting: Baltimore, MD.

2013
“Race, Education, and Cultural Capital.” Guest lecturer, Boston University
“Race & Ethnicity” course in Department of Sociology.

2013

2013

2013
“The Cultural Narrative of ‘Choice’ in College-Bound, Middle Class Families.” Eastern Sociological Society annual meeting: Boston, MA.

2012
“Families Negotiating Opportunity Consumption to Plan for College & Beyond.” Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics annual meeting: Cambridge, MA.

2012

2010
“Purchasing Strategies, Aspirations and Inequality: Opportunity through Consumption among Parents of High School Students.” Eastern Sociological Society annual meeting: Boston, MA.

**Fellowships & Grants**

2015
Morris Dissertation Grant, Department of Sociology, Boston University

2015, 2014

2012
Senior Teaching Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Boston University

2009-2010
2015, 2014  Morris Travel Grant, Department of Sociology, Boston University
2013, 2008-2009  Teaching Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Boston University
2013, 2012  Morris Dissertation Research Support, Department of Sociology, Boston University
2013, 2010-2012  Graduate Writing Fellowship, College of Arts & Sciences Writing Program, Boston University
2009  Morris Collaborative Research Grant, Department of Sociology, Boston University
2007-2008  Dean’s Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Boston University

Professional Affiliations

- American Sociological Association
- Eastern Sociological Society
- Society for the Study of Social Problems
- National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity

Related Experience

National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity
Dissertation Success Program Peer Mentor, 2016
- Support a group of 14 dissertation writers through virtual daily check-ins
- Instill NCFDD core curriculum skills such as daily writing, creating specific, achievable goals, and how to counter resistance to writing

Les Perelman Associates
Writing Evaluator, 2013
- Analyzed several hundred undergraduate essays to evaluate a first year writing program
- Joined a team of evaluators to calibrate the essay scoring system and assess the writing

College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program, Boston University
Curriculum Committee Research Assistant, 2013
- Worked to review and reorganize the BU Writing Program curriculum resources website
• Assessed the relevance of lessons and activities for future use

Department of Sociology, Boston University
Student Editorial Board Member, Political Power and Social Theory, 2009-
• Work with Editor in Chief, Professor Julian Go, to review manuscripts and provide commentary to inform the final recommendation for the annual academic journal publication

ADDITIONAL EXPERIENCE

Citizen Schools, Boston, MA
National Network Coordinator, 2005- 2007
• Supported 20 national sites for non-profit, after-school program serving disadvantaged students
• Implemented district due-diligence process by conducting research and interviews
• Collected and maintained data on program sites and communicated this information to team
• Organized and facilitated Diversity Working Group projects within the organization

Department of Sociology, Trinity College, Hartford, CT
Administrative Assistant, 2003-2005
• Supported and interacted with a diverse team of professors
• Provided general office help including general secretarial work

COMMUNITY SERVICE AND ACTIVITIES

YWCA, Facilitator for Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity, 2006-
• Trained to facilitate dialogues on Boston’s ethnic and racial diversity; facilitated several dialogue sessions

Consumer Studies Research Network (CSRN), 2008-2010
• Member and organizer of CSRN sponsored “Contested Terrain of Consumption Studies” Mini-Conference 2008

Citizen Schools Apprenticeship, Spring 2006
• Designed and delivered a ten-week dance curriculum that reinforced self-esteem and leadership skills for middle school students

The Bar Method, Spring 2014-
• Certified Bar Method instructor. Trained to teach 60-minute exercise classes based on The Bar Method curriculum.

SKILLS
• Proficient in ATLAS.ti, SPSS
• Fluent in Spanish

REFERENCES

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Nazli Kibria, Professor
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