Talk of Class
The Discursive Repertoires of White Working- and Upper-Middle-Class College Students

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Discourses of social class are an important object of study because how people talk about social class can translate into how they act on the basis of social class. Using data from sixty in-depth interviews with white college students from working- and upper-middle-class backgrounds at two institutions of higher education, I explore college students' social class awareness, whether they think that social class matters, and how they construct symbolic boundaries. I find that whereas there are some similarities in how working- and upper-middle-class students talk about social class, differences ultimately emerge whereby working-class respondents construct social class as a more salient issue. Moreover, in contrast to earlier research, both upper-middle- and working-class students construct symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis those above them in the stratification system. This pattern suggests some possible implications for processes of social reproduction.

Keywords: social class; culture; discourse; college students

Understanding how lay people make sense of social inequality is critical for understanding how social inequalities get reproduced. For many years, analyses of social reproduction focused on the role of structural processes and unequal access to economic and political resources (Domhoff 1967, 1990; Mills 1956; Useem 1984). Beginning in the 1970s, however, theorists increasingly drew their attention to the cultural underpinnings of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron; 1990 [1970]; Willis 1977). Whereas some researchers examined the convergence of culture and action in processes of social reproduction (Burawoy 1979; Fantasia 1988, 1995; E. P. Thompson 1968), others emphasized the reproductive potential of dis-

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course (Gramsci 1990; J. B. Thompson 1984, 1990). For these theorists, discourse either is action or it shapes and constrains social action such that it, too, plays a critical role in the production of social inequalities.

My research explores the cultural underpinnings of social inequality by investigating how college students talk about social class. Using in-depth interview data from sixty college students, I ask: What kinds of *discursive repertoires* (Frankenberg 1993) do college students use for talking about social class? How does their “talk of class” compare across class lines? Examining the social class constructions of a group of individuals within a particular context—such as a college campus—is important because status processes and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion take place within specific social contexts and in interaction with concrete others (Sauder 2005). College students are an important group to study because they are positioned to become society’s next generation of gatekeepers; hence, their constructions of social class speak to future processes of social reproduction.

To explore these questions, I adopt a position that combines objectivist and constructionist approaches to social inequality. Like objectivists, I assume that social class does matter; I assume that real social inequalities exist and that social class inequalities structure social life in important ways. Like constructionists, however, I bracket the question of precisely how social class matters to social actors. Instead, I examine the meanings that individuals construct to understand social class. Treating the meaning of social class as an open question is important because researchers may find that concepts such as these matter very differently to lay persons than they do to analysts (Harris 2003; Stuber 2005). Ultimately, this structural constructionist perspective (Bourdieu 1990) is valuable because it is on the basis of symbolic understandings that people act (Blumer 1969), and it is through these actions that the macrolevel architecture of social class takes shape (and shapes actors, in return).

**How Americans Think and Talk about Social Class**

Motivated by their discipline’s interest in social class and social inequality, many sociologists have endeavored to understand precisely how Americans think and talk about social class. Three themes woven throughout this research are a concern for class awareness, a concern for class consciousness, and an interest in cultural constructions of social class. In general, researchers find that Americans think and talk about social class in ways that are “squishy,” imprecise, highly contextual, and often contradictory.
(Bott 1954; Brantlinger 2003; Coleman and Rainwater 1978; Gilbert and Kahl 1982; Halle 1984; Lamont 1992). And whereas some theorists are skeptical of lay Americans’ ability to conceptualize the class system, noting that lay persons do not conceive of the class system in ways that map onto analysts’ understandings (Kingston 2000), others highlight both the facility and significance with which Americans think and talk about social class (Brantlinger 1993; Gorman 2000a; Jackman and Jackman 1983; Lamont 1992, 2000).

One of the persistent themes in the research on how Americans think and talk about social class deals with their class awareness. Class awareness refers, in part, to the tendency to see society as partitioned into two or more social classes (Rothman 2002). Researchers find that even if Americans lack a common vocabulary for talking about social class and speak about it in highly variable ways, they still exhibit a sense of class awareness. Although they may not agree on how many classes there are or what lines demarcate these social groupings, lay persons do adhere to the general belief that society is divided into at least two classes (Coleman and Rainwater 1978). Unlike people in societies with longer histories of class mobilization, who tend to view the class system in categorical terms (Parkin 1971; Poulantzas 1975; Vanneman and Cannon 1987; Wright 1985, 1997) and define social classes on the basis of occupational position and workplace autonomy (Johnston and Baer 1993; Pammett 1987), Americans tend to see the class system gradationally and use multiple, interrelated criteria to construct class placements (Centers 1949; Coleman and Rainwater 1978; Jackman and Jackman 1983). While including both economic and cultural factors, Americans tend to place particular importance on economic factors, especially income, in shaping a person’s social standing.

Further evidence of Americans’ class awareness is their ability to locate themselves within a particular class location and claim a fairly high level of salience for their class identity. Although results depend on how the question is worded (Centers 1949), high percentages of Americans readily identify themselves as members of a class, with the working and middle classes each being claimed by about 40% of the respondents (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Smith 1996). Beyond simply identifying with a social class, Jackman and Jackman (1983) also report that affective class ties are stronger than might be expected: more than three-quarters of respondents in one national sample expressed an either very or somewhat strong attachment to their social class (Jackman 1979). Furthermore, they find that people feel closer to those falling below them on the class hierarchy than to those above and that affective class bonds are stronger among those situated at the lower end of the class spectrum than at the higher end. In short, these researchers find that
respondents have little difficulty understanding basic class terms and are able to use these terms both to identify their own class position and to talk in more abstract terms about the criteria defining a particular social class. These findings, then, show that social class has not become insignificant within advanced capitalism (Bell 1961; Lipset 1960; Wilensky 1966), and that Americans have a discernable level of class awareness.

That high percentages of Americans report a clear sense of class identity tells us nothing, however, about the ideologies they hold of the class structure. It tells us nothing, for example, about how Americans think about the legitimacy of the economic system, its distribution of rewards, and so forth. A second theme, then, in the research on how Americans think and talk about social class focuses on their sense of class consciousness (Mann 1973): their sense of whether and how social class matters. Consistent with the dominant American ideology, Americans are much less likely than are their European counterparts to support government efforts at redistribution and are much more likely to emphasize the role of individual effort in shaping class outcomes (Ladd 1994). In addition, a majority of Americans believe that social inequality can have a positive impact on society (Ladd and Bowman 1999).

Still, national surveys show that Americans generally acknowledge that some social groups have more power and influence than others and receive disproportionate economic and political benefits (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Indeed, despite the fact that those lower down in the stratification system are somewhat less likely to embrace the dominant ideology (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994), even the poor do not strongly support political efforts at economic redistribution (Hochschild 1981; Jackman 1994; Ladd 1994). In conjunction with Jackman and Jackman’s (1983) findings on class identification, these findings provide a complex and contradictory picture of how Americans think about social class: although class position does play a part in shaping one’s class consciousness, Americans across the class spectrum generally endorse the existing class system and are unlikely to mobilize for structural change.

The third and final strand of research on how Americans think and talk about social class deals with symbolic boundaries and cultural constructions of social class. Symbolic boundaries are the conceptual distinctions made by actors to categorize objects, people, and practices (Lamont and Molnar 2002); because they also “constitute a system of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social acts,” symbolic boundaries “not only create groups; they also potentially produce inequality” (Lamont 1992, 12). Through their boundary work, individuals constitute the self, claim membership in a group, and draw a line between the pure (themselves) and the polluting (others). As such, symbolic boundaries are a neces-
sary, but not sufficient, condition for the construction of social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002). 1

Although they approach the problem from different angles, other researchers similarly emphasize the importance of these kinds of cultural constructions. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, interpretations of social class are important because it is on the basis of these interpretations that people act (Blumer 1969). For such theorists, terms such as race, class, and gender can be understood as labels for routinized forms of thought, speech, and action that create and maintain relations of domination and subordination (Schwalbe et al. 2000, 441). For critical theorists, who see the discursive and material dimensions of society as inextricably linked, these cultural constructions are important because they partially structure the class system (Gramsci 1990). This perspective is powerfully argued by Paul Willis (1977), who, rather than locate mechanisms of social reproduction in external structural forces, shows how powerful the cultural level can be—in this case, in social class understandings of adolescent males—in shaping social inequalities. By embracing their working-class culture and resisting the dominant ideologies of the school, the working-class lads unwittingly participate in the reproduction of unequal class relations. Although they are critical of the class system, their “penetrations” into it remain “partial” and hence fail to challenge the existing class structure. The implication then is that more complete cultural penetrations hold the possibility of more forcefully challenging the material class hierarchy.

An important characteristic of symbolic boundaries and cultural constructions of social class is that actors do not construct them idiosyncratically; rather, they are shaped by the class positions and structural locations in which they are situated. In her comparative work on how macrolevel structural factors, unique national histories, and individual social identities (such as race, class, and gender) influence the construction of symbolic boundaries, Lamont (1992) finds that upper-middle-class Americans draw stronger socioeconomic boundaries than do the French, who are more likely to evaluate people using cultural criteria. In addition, Lamont finds greater claims to egalitarianism and universalism among upper-middle-class Americans, who frequently deny the significance of class and occupational difference. These denials, however, seem “ritualistic” to Lamont, particularly when “juxtaposed to the great salience of money and success-based socioeconomic boundaries” elsewhere in her interviews (p. 79). In general, she finds that upper-middle-class Americans position themselves in the class system and claim a sense of superiority by drawing a boundary between themselves and those they perceive as less successful socioeconomically.
Working-class Americans, by contrast, are more likely than are members of the upper-middle class to construct moral boundaries (Lamont 2000): workers tend to embrace the dignity of their own hard work and “honest labor” while criticizing members of the middle classes for their perceived lack of integrity and superficial interpersonal relationships. According to Lamont (2000), these moral standards “function as an alternative to economic definitions of success” and allow workers to make meaning of their lives “in a land where the American dream is ever more out of reach” (p. 3). Like members of the upper-middle class, working-class individuals also look across class lines to claim a sense of superiority; in their case, however, they draw a line between themselves and the more economically advantaged who they perceive as less morally pure.

Although other researchers may not explicitly use the vocabulary of symbolic boundaries, their research similarly shows that people from different class positions talk about class in very different ways (Brantlinger 1993; Gorman 2000a; Sennett and Cobb 1973). Consistent with Jackman and Jackman (1983), these researchers find that the class discourses used by those on the lower end of the class spectrum tend to be more elaborate and carry greater emotion than those on higher end. In her research on the social class constructions of secondary school students, for example, Brantlinger (1993) found that lower-income youth were able to provide more detailed information about both their higher-income peers and about class dynamics at school, in general. However, despite their insights into and criticism of the class system, they also tended to internalize the messages sent to them by school and society and ultimately blame themselves for their school failures and socioeconomic situation. Upper-income youth, by contrast, used more restricted social class discourses and spoke in ways that rendered class differences largely invisible and irrelevant. What is more, their discourses embraced a more meritocratic view of social and school hierarchies, such that they viewed their class privilege and school successes through the lens of entitlement and self-congratulation.

Research on cross-class perceptions reinforces the notion that how individuals construct the class system is deeply connected to their own position in that class system. For Gorman (2000a, 2000b), these class constructions derive as much from everyday interactional experiences with persons from different class backgrounds as they do from one’s “structural” location. Indeed, half of his working- and middle-class respondents offered rather negative accounts of their perceptions of and experiences with members of the other social class. Members of the middle class, for example, characterized the working class as spending their days in overpaid union jobs and their weekends living mundane, uncultured lives. Meanwhile, echoing the find-
ings of Lamont (2000), members of the working class took pride in their own work ethic and criticized the middle class for living the “easy life.” In general, Gorman (2000a) finds ample evidence of “hidden injuries” in the narratives of working-class adults, with simultaneous evidence of contempt for the working class among middle-class respondents.

Together, this research on how Americans think and talk about social class suggests a number of common themes. First, despite the claim that Americans are not particularly class conscious, many researchers find that social class is quite salient to these respondents and that they are able to talk about social class with ease, particularly when confronted with topics of a more immediate, personal nature (Coleman and Rainwater 1978). Second, in spite of this ease, their talk is often highly variable and rife with internal contradictions. The same individual may, for example, draw strong socioeconomic boundaries while also voicing rather egalitarian beliefs; alternately, they may be cognizant of inequalities throughout the system but also view the economic system as generally good and fair. Americans do not, it seems, tell one simple story about whether and how social class matters. Third, there is general agreement that how people talk and think about social class is powerfully shaped by where they stand in the class structure. Indeed, as with those who occupy subordinate positions with respect to race and gender, those occupying subordinate social class positions tend to construct social class as a more salient issue. In addition, the interactional experiences also structure what it is that people have to say about social class. Finally, where researchers disagree somewhat is in terms of where people draw their class boundaries: whereas some argue that people feel closer to those below them in the class hierarchy (Jackman and Jackman 1983) and tend to minimize differences between themselves and those above (Gilbert and Kahl 1982), others (Gorman 2000a; Lamont 1992, 2000) find that upper-middle-class people draw a boundary below them to claim a sense of superiority, whereas working-class individuals do the same by drawing between themselves and those above.

Although understandings of social class are an important object of study, their meanings cannot be taken as a given; rather, they must be understood as situated constructions that emerge organically, dynamically, and contextually. This research responds by asking, How do college students make sense of social class within the college environment? I build on this research by using qualitative data to unpack the cultural meanings that lie beneath the insights generated by survey research on the topics of Americans’ class awareness and class consciousness. In addition, I use the insights of cultural sociology to investigate where the rising generation draws its class lines. Throughout, I argue that although the class talk of young Americans is com-
plex and sometimes contradictory, it is important because it sheds light on the relationship between cultural constructions of social class and processes of social reproduction.

**Research Design and Methods**

During the 2003-2004 academic year, I conducted in-depth interviews with sixty students attending two institutions of higher education within the same Midwestern state; half of the respondents were enrolled in a large public university (“Big State”) and half were enrolled in a small, private liberal arts college (“Benton College”). In-depth interviews are ideal for understanding the meanings that people attach to their social experiences; here, they are used to illuminate how college students construct understandings of social class. College students are an important group to study because they are positioned to become the next generation of gatekeepers and hence play a critical role in institutional and interactional processes of inclusion and exclusion. This population is also of interest because schools function as sites of class socialization, and much of the differentiation and stratification that takes place in these settings is mediated through peer interactions (Bettie 2003; Eckert 1989; Holland and Eisenhart 1992).

To understand how social class backgrounds influence how people construct understandings of social class, I drew respondents from the relative poles of the socioeconomic spectrum. The model of social class used herein is a categorical one: it assumes that individuals occupy distinct structural locations and that their social experiences are shaped in important ways by that location (Giddens 1973; Lareau 2003). The sample is fairly evenly divided between first-generation, working-class students ($n = 28$) and non-first-generation, upper-middle-class students ($n = 32$). I define students as “working class” if their parents or guardians have not completed a four-year degree and if they hold jobs in lower-skilled, lower-paying manual or service occupations. “Upper-middle-class” students, by contrast, are those whose parents have completed at least a four-year degree and hold jobs in higher-skilled, higher-paying professional or managerial occupations. I designate this group upper-middle class rather than simply middle class because these parents have jobs as upper-level managers and professionals, rather than lower-level managers and semiprofessionals (Gilbert and Kahl 1982).

From a constructionist perspective, it is important to consider how respondents labeled their own class positions. Among the twenty-eight “working-class students,” six self-identified as middle class, whereas the remaining twenty-two claimed identities ranging from poor to lower-middle
class; twelve of these identified as working class. Among the thirty-two “upper-middle-class students,” twenty-six identified as upper-middle class, whereas four identified as middle class and two labeled themselves as upper class. Consistent with constructionist assumptions, these respondents do indeed use a social class vocabulary that differs from that used by the analyst. In fact, during their interviews, respondents used a wide variety of terms—many of them more evocative than those used by analysts—to refer to their own and others’ social class positions, such as “poverty-stricken,” “dirt poor,” “difficult,” “normal,” “rich,” and “filthy rich.”

Respondents were recruited using both random and purposive sampling methods. Potential respondents were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study. For those who replied, I used a set of screening questions to determine how well they fit the sampling frame. Individuals were excluded if they did not fit the operationalization for the working- or upper-middle-class categories. Respondents were asked to participate in two interviews, each lasting approximately 90 minutes; six of the sixty respondents chose not to participate in the follow-up interview. The average total interview length is 165 minutes; interview length does not vary by gender or social class background. Within this sample, males and females are represented in roughly equal numbers (n = 28 and 32, respectively); all of the respondents were traditional-age sophomores or juniors (19-21 years old) at the time of the interview. Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Although the quotes presented are verbatim, some have been edited for easier reading. All names are pseudonyms. Finally, because I interviewed only white students, these analyses speak only to the class constructions of a group of white, traditional-aged college students.

Interactional dynamics between respondent and interviewer, including how they understand their roles and the framing of questions and answers, shape the data produced and reported herein (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). At times, I used unassuming questions, such as “Do you think that social class matters?” so as not to presuppose whether and how class matters for these students. At other times, I strategically used more directive questions to probe the boundaries of these students’ constructions and explore how shifting frames might influence their utterances. In presenting these data, I include several examples of turn taking so that the reader may evaluate how these data were produced (Harris 2003). Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that these interviews took place within a college setting, with students’ attention purposefully drawn to class dynamics within that setting. Had these interviews taken place in a different context, these respondents’ attention may have been drawn to different social cues, themes, and comparisons; hence, they may have produced different data.
I used an inductive approach to make sense of the respondents’ narratives. Inductive analysis involves using the data to develop empirical assertions and then substantiating these assertions by systematically looking for confirming and disconfirming cases (Glaser and Strauss 1967). During preliminary analyses, I developed a set of codes to understand the patterns that emerged within a subset of the interviews; I then used these codes to refine subsequent data collection and analysis. I coded all of the data using ATLAS.ti. This software program enables large quantities of text to be analyzed in a systematic fashion; it allows the user to uncover themes, organize data, and analyze complex phenomena.

Findings

Within the interview context, college students constructed understandings of social class that were remarkably complex and contradictory. Each respondent, whether over the course of an interview or within one conversational turn, talked about social class using a variety of discursive repertoires and moved back and forth between these modes with ease. Indeed, working- and upper-middle-class individuals alike talked about social class in ways that alternately acknowledged and rejected the significance of social class. Despite this similarity, differences emerged between working- and upper-middle-class students in their class awareness, their class consciousness, and the kinds of symbolic boundaries they draw. Although any claims about their link to social inequalities must necessarily remain speculative, their accounts provide some hints at how talk of class might be linked to processes of social reproduction.

Seeing Social Class: Assessing Students’ Class Awareness?

Researchers argue that for individuals to possess a sense of class consciousness, they first need to possess a sense of class awareness. Class awareness, in its simplest form, refers to the belief that society can be divided into two or more class groupings (Rothman 2002); in its more complex manifestation, it also means identifying with a particular class and being able to recognize and talk about class distinctions (Jackman and Jackman 1983). Students from different social class backgrounds had varying levels of class awareness and differed in the extent to which they felt that social class is something that can easily be detected. The majority of upper-middle-class students described themselves as being unaware of social class differences
and argued that class is not something that can be easily or reliably determined from external cues. Working-class students, by contrast, were more likely to describe themselves as aware of social class differences. In addition, unlike their more privileged counterparts, they did not hesitate to label the class differences they saw.

Although upper-middle-class students were quick to acknowledge their privilege and could label their own class positions with relative ease, they also tended to describe themselves as having little social class awareness. Fully half of these students remarked spontaneously that their class awareness was limited because they grew up surrounded by people from similarly privileged class positions. In the words of Benton College’s Andrea Barnett, “I really was not that aware. I still don’t think I’m that aware. Just because I grew up in a wealthy community and a lot of the people were in the same situation that I was.” Whereas a handful of students said that they developed some sense of class awareness while riding the school bus through different neighborhoods, others said that what class awareness they did have was largely hypothetical: that is, it was something they learned about from televisions, movies, or books.

Whereas approximately one-third of these students said they had developed greater awareness of class differences while at college, the majority still characterized themselves as rather unaware and indeed spoke in rather vague terms about their exposure to class differences on campus. For a significant minority, their new college environments seemed no more diverse than the environments in which they grew up, hence providing little opportunity to learn about class differences. For Big State’s Nick Wrede, the high costs of higher education led him to conclude that his peers can basically fall into two and only two categories: “extremely wealthy and wealthy enough so you can go to college. I mean, we’re in college, so people have to have some sort of money.”

A deeper look into the discursive repertoires of these upper-middle-class students reveals a high degree of equivocation in their class talk. More than half of these respondents displayed a palpable sense of uncertainty over precisely what class is, how to read a variety of potentially class-coded cues, and generally how one might go about identifying a person’s social class. Even when these upper-middle-class students did offer some schema that might be used to identify a person’s social class, they often seemed unwilling to commit fully to this point of view:

Like some girls might wear the nice, new fall line, and others don’t, but I don’t know if that’s class, ’cause like some people. . . . Well, I guess that would be class, ’cause I guess if you’re in the upper class, you might focus on that stuff,
maybe. I don’t know. I guess it’s kind of a stereotype, but... (Ryan Connors, Benton College).

For students such as Benton College’s James Rice, social class is not something that is immediately apparent but rather something that reveals itself over time:

It’s not something you can figure out in like a week or a month or two. But if you hang out with someone for a year and a half, or if they’re your roommate, you can tell, you know what I mean? ‘Cause you learn more about their family, and the things they have and stuff like that.

A common refrain among upper-middle-class students was that “you just can’t tell” what social class a person might belong to. A majority of these students discounted their ability to “pick out” or label a person’s social class and were particularly adamant that a person’s social class cannot be read from their appearance. In the words of Big State’s Stacey Sandefer:

I don’t think that if you walked outside you would really know who has money and who doesn’t. I feel like people who don’t have the same amount of money as everyone else will find some way to have the things that other people have, so it’s not as apparent. I don’t think you can tell based on appearance.

Indeed, status pressures—as suggested by Stacey—combined with the recent upscale marketing of budget-minded retailers like Target and Old Navy, may make it increasingly difficult to identify a person’s social class by what they wear or how they present themselves. For fellow student Kendall Baker, how one presents oneself is largely a matter of personal choice and individual priorities, rather than a reflection of social class:

Clothes don’t really matter all that much, ‘cause somebody can spend all their money on clothes and not have anything else. Or some people take better care of themselves than others, but who’s to say that they didn’t just get up late that morning and run to class? So no, I wouldn’t say that you can tell... That doesn’t necessarily mean they’re not the same status, but maybe they just don’t care.

Indeed, nearly a third of these upper-middle-class students offered the example of the rich hippie student, the one who is “loaded” but you would “never know,” to explain why outward appearance cannot reliably be used as an indicator of social class.

For Benton’s Andi Arvidson, even the classic symbol of the American dream cannot be used to gauge someone’s social class:
If somebody lives in a really big house in a really good neighborhood, then people will just assume they have a lot of money. And if you’re from the inner-city, people will kind of assume that you don’t. But I don’t really know if that’s true because I don’t know anything about money.

These students equivocated, then, as they moved back and forth in their assessments of what a person’s house or clothing might reveal about their class position. For many upper-middle-class students, their hesitancy to act as experts in the realm of social class is often paired with assertions of their ignorance of class-related issues. This sentiment emerges most clearly in the words of Big State’s David Gold, who said, “That’s one of the negatives about growing up where I grew up and then coming here, is that I haven’t really seen much about social class.” Thus, like white people who argue that they do not know much about race because they are white and have grown up surrounded largely by white people, these students suggest that they are not qualified to make claims about social class because they have grown up in largely class-homogeneous environments.

In contrast to their more privileged peers, the majority of working-class students described themselves as aware of social class differences; they were also quicker to draw various inferences about social class. For these students, an early awareness of their own and others’ class situation was something they developed as they moved through a variety of mixed-class environments, including their schools and their neighborhoods. For some, like Benton’s Jenny Wilson, this class awareness emerged through contact with her own extended family: “My dad’s side is actually wealthy and my mom’s side is definitely not wealthy. So I was very aware very early on because I had the two complete opposites to compare.” More often, though, an awareness of social class is something these students developed within their own immediate families. According to Benton College’s Bobby Sanders, “I’ve been aware of it all my life because we’ve always struggled to pay the bills. I’ve always known that we were not upper class, or even middle class.” For fellow student Tiffany Morrison, childhood experiences similarly shaped her awareness of social class: “Like when churches are bringing you your Thanksgiving dinner, or when the church gives you Christmas dinner and your Christmas gifts and, like, back to school supplies, you’re aware of it.” The words of Bobby and Tiffany are noteworthy and stand in stark contrast to those of their more privileged peers, in that they claim that an awareness of social class is something they hardly could have avoided.

Rather than equivocate when talking about social class dynamics on campus, less-privileged students tended to construct quick and forthright judgments about social class. Their discursive strategy was to “tell it like it is.”
Free of the hesitations and self-consciousness that characterized many upper-middle-class students, these speakers were more decisive in talk of social class. When asked, for example, what her first impression was of her peers at Benton College, junior Suzanne Sorensen responded flatly: “A bunch of rich preppy kids.” Matching her certainty were the voices of other students who similarly claimed that “you could just tell right off” that some kids grew up in a higher social class. Although many respondents elaborated their claims by referring to a number of appearance-based signifiers (Burberry scarves, Tiffany jewelry, Northface jackets), they also claimed that a person’s social class can easily be detected by the way students act. Benton College sophomore Jenny Wilson said: “It’s very obvious to me when people are from a higher social class, just by their demeanor and the way they present themselves. The way they act is very much like an ‘I’m-better-than-you’ kind of attitude.” For Jenny and the thirteen other working-class students who invoked this phrase, the sense that their more-privileged peers were looking down on them came from interactional cues such as eye-rolling, not engaging in conversation, not laughing at their jokes, or offering only the shortest of replies. Appearing only a few times in the accounts of more privileged students—sometimes even to characterize their own behavior—these interactional cues were frequently used by less-privileged students as a way to name social class.

Many students also commented on how their experiences at college further honed their social class vision. Although he had already learned much about social class while attending a mixed-class middle school, Big State’s Chris McAteer noted that his move to a more diverse environment for college further augmented his class awareness:

I can just see it [social class] so much clearer now. I can just constantly see it in everyday life, whereas before, I wouldn’t really notice it. But now, I notice it just like driving through a certain neighborhood. Now I’m like, “Oh, this is a real rich neighborhood or this is a real poor neighborhood.” Or going into classrooms and being able to see it. Or going into school and just interacting with students here. I can definitely tell, Oh, you’re from a rich neighborhood; you definitely have two parents or this or that.

The pace of Chris is quick and his tone is confident; he emphasizes the ease with which he can now “see” social class. In contrast to the upper-middle-class students who expressed an inability to see social class in everyday life, Chris claims that he can detect such differences through a variety of mundane markers, including housing and students’ self-presentation. Indeed, unlike their more privileged peers, working-class students typically did not claim an
inability to determine where their peers stand in the class hierarchy. Rather, they used experiences within their immediate households and in mixed-class environments to construct a self that is sufficiently knowledgeable to make claims about social class. Instead of providing equivocal responses to questions about their social class awareness, these students tended to “tell it like it is.”

What’s Class Got To Do With It?
Assessing Students’ Class Consciousness

In addition to a sense of whether or not classes exist and can be easily detected, class consciousness also encompasses beliefs as to whether differences between social classes matter (Mann 1973). Students across the class spectrum offered rich and frequently contradictory accounts of the significance of social class. When asked directly, both working- and upper-middle-class students refuted the significance of social class; a more comprehensive look at their narratives, however, reveals that respondents also talked about social class as something that does matter. Ultimately, the narratives of working- and upper-middle-class students diverged as working-class students more decisively arrived at the conclusion that social class does, in the final analysis, matter.

Assessments of students’ class consciousness were made by looking at how students responded to both direct and indirect questions about social class. For example, when asked directly whether they thought social class matters on campus, nearly half of both privileged and less-privileged students suggested that social class does not matter. These students did not, in other words, see social class as significantly structuring one’s college experiences. Students from both working- and upper-middle-class backgrounds variously commented that they did not think about social class in their daily lives, that they did not choose friends on the basis of social class, and that their own lives would not be substantially different if they came from a different social class background. Whereas some students suggested that social class may matter more outside the classroom than inside, a significant minority rejected the power of social class to shape students’ lives in social, academic, or extracurricular realms.

In responding to these direct questions, students used a variety of discursive strategies to explain why social class does not matter. A number of privileged students said that social class does not matter because financial aid and scholarships exist for both regular college tuition and for programs like study abroad. These students tended to see college as a level playing field. Another common notion was that everyone, regardless of social class, was in “the
same boat.” Angel Curtis, a working-class sophomore at Big State, put it this way: “I think we all kind of walk into the class with a common goal. We’re all doing the same things. We’re getting up, we’re throwing on clothes, and we’re going to class.” Derek Bryant, a working-class sophomore from Benton College, extends this line of thinking beyond the classroom:

It’s sort of an even plane because, first of all, everybody goes to class. And then, you know, almost everybody’s in an extracurricular and most of them don’t cost anything, so there’s no way to stratify along those lines. And also, a lot of people are in Greek organizations, whether they are of modest means or not.

Derek argues, in essence, that there is a common Benton College experience, one that is not differentiated along class lines.

Finally, other students downplayed the power of social class by emphasizing the power of individuals to construct their own college experiences. Students argued that plenty of opportunities are out there and that anyone can take advantage of them if they are motivated. When asked if class matters in terms of the kinds of experiences students have at Benton College, Brook Marshall, a soft-spoken upper-middle-class student, offered this particularly succinct articulation:

I don’t really think so. If you’re involved enough and work hard enough to immerse yourself in the campus and try hard to have every experience you can, then it really doesn’t matter. It shouldn’t shape who you are and what you want to do.

Like others, Brook argues that individual efforts can override the influence of social class on what students get out of their college experiences. Brooke’s response, then, reflects a more general pattern among college students: denying the significance of social class by invoking a rather egalitarian, meritocratic imagery.

In contrast to these responses to direct questioning, a more comprehensive analysis of their accounts shows that virtually all of these students also talk about various ways in which social class does matter at college. Upper-middle-class students gave several indications of how social class can exert its influence on the college experience. They stated, for example, that whereas social class did not matter in regard to participation in Greek life as a whole, it might matter in a few specific houses; it might—particularly at Big State—affect where you live on campus and the people with whom you make friendships, and as suggested above, it can make opportunities such as study abroad more feasible. Many of these students also acknowledged their own
privilege and praised their parents for enabling them to attend the college of their choice. As the words of Benton College sophomore Alissa Brennan show, however, even when upper-middle-class students did acknowledge the significance of social class, they frequently retreated from the brink and returned to their original position that it does not, ultimately, matter.

Interviewer: So, this may be purely speculation on your part, but I want to ask you: Do you think that social class matters in any way on this campus?
Alissa: Hmm . . . not really. It’s not . . . I haven’t seen it influencing anything to the degree that it would make a difference, really. The only thing I can think of is how people are dressed sometimes—if they’re wearing expensive clothes or whatever. But I don’t think that’s really significant.
Interviewer: Okay, so it doesn’t matter in that sense. Do you think that students from different class backgrounds get the same thing out of their Benton experience?
Alissa: I think people of lower social class backgrounds are more of a minority here, so maybe their experiences interacting with a lot of upper-class people would be different than other upper-class students interacting with each other.
Interviewer: Uh-huh. But does that mean it matters?
Alissa: Does it matter? I mean, it might affect their experience. Not necessarily in a negative or positive way. So I guess it doesn’t matter.

Here, Alissa shows an ability to conceptualize how class might matter, but in the end, after a number of probes, she concludes that social class does not matter.

Indeed, the tendency to construct class as a moving target, one that alternates between significance and insignificance, is typical among these upper-middle-class students. The question then becomes, Why do these students alternately acknowledge and refute the significance of social class? One piece of this puzzle may be that the dominant American ideology is so deeply embedded in these students’ minds that rejecting the influence of social class is, for many of them, virtually automatic. A key part of this ideology is the emphasis on individual achievement, or the belief that each member of society is in control of his or her fate. This sentiment, whose pervasiveness has been noted by both classic (de Tocqueville 1966) and contemporary observers (Lipset 1996), is particularly evident in the constructions of those upper-middle-class students, as they argue that what matters is not so much social class as individual effort. Closely connected to this belief in individual achievement is the image of society—particularly its educational institutions—as a meritocracy (Turner 1960). Thus, students spontaneously reject the possibility that social class matters in the classroom or that professors
would give it any weight in evaluating students’ performance. Indeed, Benton’s Jordana Lindholm ties together both of these notions as she says:

I don’t think any professor would treat you any differently because of social class. And I don’t think they would grade you any differently because of social class, so as far as GPA goes, I would think that if you put in the same effort as someone else you would get the same sort of results.

For Jordana and others who view schools as formally class-neutral institutions, their rejection of the significance of social class seems to rest, in part, on their immediate invocation of a cultural frame that places the dominant American ideology at the center.

An understanding of why these college students may alternately reject and acknowledge the significance of social class may also rest on the relationship between culture and cognition in social interaction. This relationship suggests that such contradictions are, in fact, a perfectly normal characteristic of how people use their cultural resources, as they pick up and put down different discursive tools to deal with different interactional problems (DiMaggio 1997; Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Harris 2003; Swidler 2001). Shifting frames within social interactions—such as interview context—can invoke new schemas, such that speakers move back and forth between automatic and deliberative cognition (D’Andrade 1995); these shifting frames can help explain why students—like Alissa above—may initially deny the significance of social class, but when a new frame, or schema, is invoked they may reconsider their position and construct new ways in which social class might matter. Because these frames are constantly shifting, both in the interview context and in real life, it is essential to evaluate how people talk by looking not just at the things that they say individually or in isolation but in terms of how any particular utterance is situated within the larger conversational context (Harris 2003). Although this approach may be analytically frustrating in that it inhibits the drawing of simple conclusions—in this case about whether and how these students think social class matters—it is essential if one is to remain truthful to the complexities of social life.

As a whole, the accounts of these upper-middle-class students show that considerable nuance exists in their constructions of social class; it is not, however, clear how these acknowledgments ultimately affect their class awareness. Like the more privileged respondents found in Jackman and Jackman’s 1983 research, social class did not appear to be particularly salient for these privileged students; moreover, this reflects a more general pattern whereby individuals talk construct dominant identities as less salient than subordinate identities (Frankenberg 1993). In fact, one privileged respon-
dent claimed, “I’m sorry, this is just not something that I’m interested in,” whereas another said, “I guess it’s there [social class], but I don’t want it to be a huge part of my life,” and yet one more stated in a somewhat defiant tone: “I just don’t see it [how social class might matter on campus], and if I do, I don’t think it’s a big deal.” In the end, upper-middle-class students tended to compartmentalize and minimize the influence of social class and did not draw sweeping conclusions about its significance.

Although just more a third of working-class students denied the significance of social class when asked directly, most of them provided more uniform and more extensive constructions of how social class matters. With some exceptions, compared with their upper-middle-class peers, these students responded more quickly and more extensively to questions of social class. Throughout their interviews, these working-class students claimed that class matters in that it gives one a “different outlook,” puts pressure on one to work harder, results in weaker academic preparation, and reduces one’s ability to take advantage of the many opportunities offered in college. Several young men also commented on how social class limited their dating life, worrying that they did not have the financial means necessary to engage in the traditional courtship process. Ty Mills, a member of a Greek house at Big State, put it this way:

When it comes to dating, it’s hard for me to be like, “Hey, let’s go see a movie,” or “Hey, let’s go out to dinner,”’ cause I can’t always do that. Not only that, but when you get closer in relationships you always feel uncomfortable, you know, telling them about your past. You wonder if they’re going to think less of you. Or if you were to meet their parents, are they going to accept you? They’ll ask you, like, “So what do your parents do?”—and you don’t even live with your parents.

Expanding on this point, some students continued to tell it like it is by offering virtually encyclopedic accounts of how they felt social class mattered. When asked if she thought there was a class system on campus, Big State junior Anna Barlow replied: “I think there’s a class system everywhere; everywhere you go there’s always, I think, going to be social class.” Benton junior Jesse Miller echoed this sentiment:

Interviewer: So this all leads to the very big question of, do you think social class matters at Benton?
Jesse: Like in all senses?
Interviewer: Does it matter in any sense?
Jesse: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Of course it matters. You’ve got—do you want the ways it matters?
Jesse then proceeded to tell me that social class “has to do a lot with everything,” and provided an extensive list of examples, including general happiness, dating opportunities, access to computer equipment, “how much you get to do” on campus, and spring break opportunities. When asked, “What would you say to those kids who say, ’No, I don’t really think class matters on campus’?” Jesse tersely replied, “I would probably ask what class he’s from. . . . Then, depending on how they answered, I would probably start to point out how they’re wrong.” Responding to the same question, fellow Benton College junior Eric Carpenter said, “I hate to get into all those vulgar Marxisms,” but quickly went on to list the many ways in which class affects one’s friends, one’s outlook on life, one’s aspirations, one’s work ethic, and one’s popularity on campus.

In a society in which discussions of money and social class are considered gauche, it is not surprising that individuals would struggle to arrive at neat and tidy conclusions about the meaning of social class. Indeed, individuals from both working- and upper-middle-class backgrounds spoke in ways that alternately acknowledged and rejected the significance of social class. The stories of working-class students, however, more consistently argued that social class does matter. In addition, like the lower-income high school students described by Brantlinger (1993), these students’ accounts were rife with emotion and tales of the “hidden injuries of class” (Sennett and Cobb 1973). Even if those lower down in the stratification system may not call for radical social and economic change, they are still less likely than are their more privileged counterparts to embrace the dominant ideology (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994); this may help explain why these working-class students were slightly less likely to invoke the dominant ideology and more likely to tell a consistent story of their class consciousness. Thus, although Americans in general have difficulty talking about social class, their class position clearly shapes the kinds of class stories they tell.

**Where Do You Draw The Line?: Assessing Students’ Symbolic Boundaries**

Because symbolic boundaries play an important role in shaping very real social, or material, boundaries within society, it is important to examine the types of symbolic boundaries drawn by this group of students. The types of boundaries they draw are also revealing because they tell us more about their class consciousness; that is, to the extent that these students are conscious of class differences, what are these differences and how do they matter? My analysis reveals that students from both working- and upper-middle-class origins tend to draw boundaries between themselves and those above them,
rather than between themselves and those below them. Rarely, if ever, did they construct a sense of self, or mark out a symbolic boundary, by comparing themselves with those occupying lower or more disadvantaged class positions. Whereas the tendency to “draw up” makes sense for working-class students, in that they are surrounded by a far greater concentration of more privileged students, it is somewhat surprising that upper-middle-class students would look upwards to construct boundaries between themselves and those they perceive as being even more privileged than themselves.

Like earlier research on the construction of symbolic boundaries among working-class individuals (Gorman 2000a; Lamont 2000), these data show working-class people drawing boundaries between themselves and others based on claims of moral superiority. These less moral “others,” however, are most frequently those situated higher up in the stratification system. In part, these working-class students drew a boundary between themselves and their more privileged peers by condemning or critiquing the values and behaviors of the middle- and upper-middle classes. In general, these students charged their peers with being spoiled and used to getting what they want, valuing the wrong things (e.g., looking good, being popular, etc.), being lazy and not picking up after themselves, not taking care of their possessions, and of taking their privileges and life experiences—including their education—for granted. On numerous occasions, these students proclaimed that they would not want to be like these more privileged students and that they were glad that they did not grow up in similar circumstances. When asked about what she’d learned about social class since coming to Benton College, for example, Jodie Brewer gave this reply:

Interviewer: Are there groups of students or individuals on this campus who simply didn’t exist in your high school? In other words, did you encounter new kinds of people on this campus?
Jodie: That’s hard. Just I never thought that I would really have any close contact with anyone who was like super rich or anything like that, and that also kind of tells me that I don’t want to be like that. You know, my aspiration is not to become filthy rich when I get older. I just want to be happy and not be like them.
Interviewer: Why don’t you want to be like them?
Jodie: I don’t want to feel like I’m making other people inferior. Because, I don’t know, that’s just not me. I don’t want to feel like I’m too good for anyone to come and talk to me or too good for—I don’t know, I just don’t want to be seen as that kind of a person.

Whereas Jodie’s critique of middle-class values comes in response to some of the “hidden injuries” (Sennett and Cobb 1973) she’s experienced at college and centers on the importance of treating others with a sense of dignity,
fellow student Eric Carpenter argues that the middle-class experience is a morally impoverished one, one that fails to transmit key social values:

Some people can just spend their money on stuff that they don’t need; like they’ve just grown up with a silver spoon and stuff like that. And I just don’t want to be that. I would hate to be that, actually, because they have no sense of values, you know, of what it’s like to have to work to come to school here. I would like to see a lot of the guys here work on a farm, like I did, and see how long they last.

For Eric, to claim that some of his peers have “no sense of values,” then, is to say that they lack a strong work ethic—something he identifies with and takes pride in.

The above cases show working-class students drawing a line between themselves and their more privileged peers by critiquing the values and behaviors of the middle- and upper-middle classes; they extend this theme by simultaneously embracing the values and behaviors of the working-class. These students, then, claim a sense of superiority by both pushing themselves away from those higher up and pulling themselves toward those lower down. As suggested by Eric above, this embrace of working-class values centers on notions of a stronger work ethic, greater self-sufficiency, and being more “laid-back” and humble. Working-class students widely endorsed the importance of working hard and not having things given to you, as shown by Big State’s Anna Barlow:

I have my ambitions of making sure that I’m fairly well-off and that I can send my kids onto college, but I’m definitely not going to give them a car. They’re going to work just like I did so they can have more appreciation and respect.

Indeed, Benton’s Tiffany Morrison views her working-class background as an asset that will aid her beyond college and well into the future:

I know that when all is said and done, I’m a stronger and better person than they are. That’s probably a horrible thing to say and it makes me sound very egotistical, but it kind of gives me, like it makes me more glad that I’ve been through what I’ve been through, because at the end of the day, I know I had to bust my ass to be where I want, and that makes me feel really good. I know how strong a person I am and I don’t want to be privileged because you take things for granted. Like when you go out into the real world, if Mommy and Daddy cut you off, are you going to be able to fend for yourself?
Cultural values such as these are not cultivated in a vacuum; rather, individuals develop their norms and values neatly tailored to the opportunities and constraints of their actual life circumstances (Swidler 2001). Thus, in a context where these working-class students find themselves surrounded by many students who they perceive as having experienced success with relatively little struggle or hard work, they face the challenge of constructing a dignified sense of self; they do this by claiming an alternate set of standards—one that privileges moral worth above the socioeconomic (Lamont 2000).

Because symbolic boundaries are used in processes of inclusion and exclusion, they contribute the formation of social boundaries; hence, they play a role in social reproduction (Lamont and Molnar 2002). The reproductive potential, however, of these working-class students’ symbolic boundaries is quite unclear. These students are, after all, on the road to becoming college graduates and, as such, are involved in a project of social transformation rather than social reproduction (Kaufman 2003). Furthermore, as Anna Barlow indicates above, they clearly value a college education and want to attain some degree of success. At the same time, there are faint suggestions in these data of leveled aspirations and limited mobility. For Benton College’s Tiffany Morrison, this possibility emerges as she explains why she has not yet involved herself in the résumé-building culture of contemporary college life:

I personally feel like if I get hired purely on the basis of my résumé and people don’t take into account the type of person I am, then what’s the point of having a job? I mean, I hope employers would be able to see, you know, distinguish between someone who’s grounded and understands the importance of being at work everyday and, you know, as opposed to, “Well, if I get fired Mommy and Daddy are going to support me.”

As she simultaneously embraces her own working-class values and rejects collegiate culture of the middle classes, Tiffany may be engaged in a project of social transformation that limits her own social mobility.

Working-class students may also level their aspirations as they navigate the worlds of higher education and construct new symbolic understandings of who they are, where they fit in, and what they might accomplish through their college education. Early on in his college career, Ty Mills became involved in several federally funded programs aimed at enhancing the educational experiences of underrepresented college students. Although this initially inspired him to pursue a doctorate in education and enhanced his research skills and connections to professors on campus, Ty was currently in
the process of reevaluating his goals. Reflecting on his aspirations during our second interview, Ty took a more critical, if not pessimistic, tone:

Say I’d like to be able to make things better for first-generation, lower-income students and become a dean of admissions or something. Bottom line is, I can only do so much. Some people are naïve to think that they can do a lot and they don’t even realize the amount of bureaucracy involved.

Although this quote can be read as a reasonable critique of how social institutions work, additional context suggests that it may also reflect leveled aspirations. Indeed, Ty had recently dropped out of a pre-graduate school training program and shifted his focus to majoring in general studies so that he could finish his degree on time. Moreover, after the interview he spoke candidly about how fearful he had been feeling: fearful of breaking away, fearful of being alone, fearful of not making it, fearful of not having someone with whom he could share his achievements. These sentiments emerged as Ty further navigated the world of higher education and constructed a new set of symbolic boundaries and understandings of where he and others fit in. If Ty eventually does abandon his goal of earning a doctorate in education, this discursive reality may give way to a material reality that continues to undermine the college experiences of less-privileged students. He will, however, have attained a college degree, thus ensuring at least his own social transformation.

In contrast to much of the literature on symbolic boundaries, rather than construct a sense of self vis-à-vis those below them in the stratification order (Lamont 1992), upper-middle-class students drew the strongest boundaries against those students they perceived as more privileged than themselves. Although these upper-middle-class students were able to characterize members of the lower classes—variously describing them as less confident, less adept with grammar, and more humble and laid-back—never did they compare themselves with these students. Instead, they drew boundaries that distanced themselves from students they perceived as more privileged than themselves, and in doing so claimed the moral high ground and minimized their own privilege.

When asked to compare themselves with other students, the equivocal strategies for talking about social class among upper-middle-class students soon fell away. Many of the students who previously claimed that they were unable to identify social class now constructed a rather sophisticated set of distinctions to articulate where they stand with respect to other students. More often than not, their gaze turned upward, to students they perceived as being at the top of the status hierarchy. In these accounts, the very kinds of status markers that were previously rejected as having any particular mean-
ing return as the bearers of incredible social significance. Students drew distinctions, for example, among everything from the brands of alcohol one drinks, to the brand of wallet or purse one has, to the newness of one’s golf clubs, to how many items of a particular brand-name good they possess. Upper-middle-class students also frequently situated their own class positions by comparing their own car with the cars owned by other students on campus. Erika Douglas, a Big State sophomore, claimed that she’s not “a rich girl” because while other students are driving their BMWs around campus, she just drives her “little Jeep Wrangler.” Fellow Big State sophomore Chad Bush made a remarkably similar comparison, speaking at length about those “other” students who drive around in Mercedes and the like. When asked what kind of car he drives, he said, somewhat sheepishly, “I drive a Jeep. It’s my baby.” Stories of spring break followed a similar pattern. Numerous upper-middle-class students lamented, for example, the fact that they “only” went to Florida for spring break and had to rent a cheap hotel room rather than stay in a friend’s time share. In constructing such boundaries, these students made no reference at all to their fellow peers who do not own cars or who did not go on any kind of spring break trip but rather returned to their hometowns to earn money for school.

In making these comparisons and mapping the symbolic boundary between themselves and their peers, upper-middle-class students also constructed moral arguments that allowed them to claim a position of superiority. In general, these students offered considerable criticism of other privileged students, frequently referring to them as snobby, high-maintenance, materialistic, and elitist. At the same time, they scrupulously insisted that they were cut from a different cloth. Indeed, many of these students argued that they have a different—and ostensibly better—relationship to their possessions than their more “materialistic” peers. This theme emerges in Emily Chase’s (Big State) account of the tensions she had on a recent trip with some of her sorority sisters, where they spent much of their time shopping:

There’s just a certain attitude I get from them. For me, it’s just that I like things that are nice. I may have these $50 Tiffany earrings that I got as a gift, but I appreciate what I get. I kind of see that they maybe they don’t have the same kind of appreciation.

A similar sentiment is found in the words of Big State’s Peter Ashbaugh, who said, “I mean, I have that kind of stuff [Northface jackets and backpacks] as well, but I guess I just don’t value it as high as maybe those other people do.” For these students, there appears to be a right way and a wrong way of relating to one’s possessions; the right way, from the perspective of these stu-
dents, is not to flaunt or fetishize their goods, but to have a more casual, but respectful, attitude toward them. By marking this boundary, these students are able to claim a sense of moral dignity for themselves.

Other boundary-making strategies had the effect of minimizing one’s own privilege. In comparing himself with his fraternity brothers, for example, Benton’s Kyle Kempner suggests that it is not so much that he is a “rich kid” who has a lot of disposable income but that he makes thrifty financial decisions:

I do have nice clothes and my room is really nice; I definitely went all out in trying to make my room the best I possibly could. But at the same time, I’m smart about it. I got all of the stuff for my room on sale; I shop around and stuff.

Kyle effectively minimizes his privilege by tying his ability to have nice things to a behavioral or personality trait rather than a socioeconomic position. Mollie Weinstein—who was using her trust fund to pay for her education at Big State—similarly minimizes her privilege by using a number of status markers to draw a boundary between herself and the truly wealthy:

Interviewer: So how would you say the students at Big State compare to the students you went to high school with?
Mollie: Much more image conscious. I didn’t even know what a Coach [brand] bag was until I came to this campus. I just didn’t think that so many people were so rich and so beautiful and so skinny.
Interviewer: But you don’t identify with that?
Mollie: I’m not that rich, that’s the thing. My mom won’t, she won’t get me Gucci sunglasses.
Interviewer: But I can see that you have some Tiffany jewelry on.
Mollie: Yeah, but I don’t have a real Prada purse or a Coach purse, and that’s what makes me different. I don’t really feel that spoiled. I mean, I can get my mom to do whatever I want her to do, but it’s at a lower level, I feel, than some people. I just feel like I’m maybe a little less arrogant.

Later on, when asked about how she thinks her social class background compares with those of other students on campus, Mollie offered: “I just have always had that idea that everybody else is richer than me. I don’t really want to not accept that, ’cause I’ve sort of accepted it for so long.” This statement, too, shows how upper-middle-class students construct a set of symbolic boundaries by drawing a line between themselves and those they perceive as genuinely privileged.

The relentless focus on those above carries reproductive potential to the extent that it results in a partial view of social class dynamics and inequali-
ties. The tendency to draw up when constructing symbolic boundaries suggests that students are generally more aware of those they perceive as standing above them in the status hierarchy than they are of those standing below. Compared with their rather anemic descriptions of less-privileged students on campus, these students exhibit a wealth of interest in and knowledge about the lives of other privileged students. This way of looking at social class becomes potentially problematic to the extent that the construction of such boundaries results in greater invisibility for those below. These students remain unaware of the existence of less-privileged students, their day-to-day experiences, and the challenges they may face within a college environment. Furthermore, as they position themselves in relation to more privileged students, they effectively minimize their own, albeit relative, privilege.

The symbolic boundaries of upper-middle-class students highlight the relative nature of social class constructions; these constructions are developed as part of an interpretive process in which individuals work out the meaning of social class within a particular context, in relation to others situated within that context. As constructions of social class, these symbolic boundaries suggest some interesting parallels to the dynamics of white privilege (Frankenberg 1993): like white privilege, these students see their class privilege as largely normative—particularly within the college context—and develop little awareness of individuals occupying lower class positions. These students, then, seem to be using a general cultural strategy that encourages individuals to focus on the ways in which they are not privileged and downplay the ways in which they are.

Yet, class privilege is also different from race or gender privilege because, unlike the binary distinctions of race (white/non-white) and gender (male/female), the gradational nature of social class provides greater space for claims of relative deprivation and hence greater possibility for individuals to minimize the privilege they do have.

Discussion and Conclusions

Because class consciousness is an important precondition for class action, researchers have long been interested in the class awareness and the “psychology of social classes” (Centers 1949) within American society. Many such researchers argue that how people think and talk about social class influences the class structure. The present research, which explores the discursive strategies used by college students to talk about social class, continues the tradition of examining the cultural underpinnings of material inequalities. This research shows that although there are noteworthy similarities in how working- and upper-middle-class college students talk about social
class, their constructions ultimately diverge and suggest two rather different understandings of social class. In terms of similarities, students up and down the class hierarchy talked about social class in ways that were complex and contradictory, both accepting and rejecting the significance of social class. They did so, sometimes, within the same breath. In terms of differences, respondents varied in the extent to which they felt that they could detect social class: whereas privileged students tended to equivocate on this question, less-privileged students claimed the power to see social class. In addition, despite their occasional egalitarian claims of the insignificance of social class, the narratives of working-class students, in their totality, show a greater sensitivity to social class and a greater likelihood of concluding that social class does matter. Finally, these students also share the tendency to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and those above. The social and cultural implications of their boundary work, however, differ. For upper-middle-class students, the tendency to draw boundaries against those above them may play into processes of social reproduction; for working-class students, although they are engaged in processes of social transformation, their boundary-drawing strategies hint at the possibility of leveled aspirations and the limiting of their own mobility.

The construction of symbolic boundaries among upper-middle-class students deserves further elaboration. By defining themselves in relation to other privileged students, they largely disregard less-privileged students. This, coupled with a professed inability to identify social class, highlights the presence of certain “blind spots” in the accounts of upper-middle-class students. These blind spots are noteworthy for a number of reasons, some negative and some positive. On one hand, the virtual invisibility of working-class students may be negative in that it limits class consciousness and reinforces the notion that class does not matter. To the extent that individuals are unaware of social inequality or the dynamics of social class, they will be less likely to be receptive to social changes—whether on campus or in society as a whole—aimed at ameliorating such inequalities. On the other hand, if we take these narratives at face value, they can be construed positively in that they suggest that social class matters less for these social actors than is often assumed. It is possible that these students are not particularly attuned to social class differences, not particularly concerned with class dynamics, and hence not particularly adept at orchestrating processes of social exclusion.

Adopting a more “naturalist” gaze (Harris 2003), one might also ask why social class is not more salient in the stories of these upper-middle-class students. One possibility is that, as young adults, they are still in the process of developing their class-decoding and gatekeeping skills. Although researchers find that even children have some implicit understanding of the class sys-
tem (Simmons and Rosenberg 1971), our national vocabulary for talking about social class is still rather limited, and thus it is reasonable to assume that the ability to engage with the concept in complex ways develops over time. A second possibility is that these students are aware of social class and do act on the basis of social class but are not conscious of the ways in which they do so. Perhaps social class has become embodied in them and their peers, in the manner of Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) “habitus” or Williams’s (1961, 1977) “structures of feeling,” so that it is a lived, but not necessarily named, reality. Thus, they may, in fact, be engaging in a variety of class-exclusionary practices but do not define them as such. A third and final possibility is that the class consciousness of these upper-middle-class students remains muted because their working-class counterparts are not doing much to raise their class consciousness. Indeed, despite discussions of both their “hidden injuries” and the ways in which class matters, many working-class respondents said that they were not likely to engage their friends or classmates in discussions of social class. Thus, their own silence may play a role in reinforcing the class unconsciousness of their privileged peers.

A recent movement within sociology has called for increased attention to constructionist, or interpretive, understandings of social stratification (Harris 2003, 2004; Sauder 2005). These proponents lobby for a shift from “objectivist” variable-based approaches to social inequality to ones that approach social inequality as a process of meaning making. Harris (2003) acknowledges, however, that there is no firm line demarcating these two approaches; rather, their differences span a continuum. The approach used in these analyses borrows from both perspectives. I assume that social class matters in an objective sense, but I also take seriously the possibility that social class does not matter exactly in the way that analysts say it does. For this reason, it is imperative that lay persons’ talk of social class be taken seriously. These analyses, then, take for granted—for the time being—the fundamental realness of social class (as a structure with objective social consequences) while foregrounding college students’ constructions of social class. Such an approach is useful because it challenges the tendency of interpretive approaches to downplay the role of structural constraints and the tendency among structural approaches to minimize the role of agency and social processes (Sauder 2005).

An important contribution of this research is that it examines constructions of social class within a particular setting. Much of the previous research, whether conducted through surveys or in-depth interviews, tended to elicit more general evaluations of social class. Such evaluations, however, are limited in that they shed little light on how individuals act within specific situations and in concert with concrete social actors. This research tran-
scends that limitation by looking at how college students make sense of social class within the college environment. Similarly, looking at constructions of social class within a particular setting is crucial because it is within concrete settings, with concrete others, that processes of inclusion and exclusion play out. Many of the situations they discuss are not merely hypothetical but rather illustrate specific examples of decisions they have made or boundaries they have drawn, which may have repercussions down the line. A limitation of this approach, however, is that this research cannot speak more broadly about these students’ understandings of social class. Their responses would surely differ had they been interviewed in a different setting or if their attention had been drawn to different comparisons. In fact, to make inferences about class differences or inequalities, students sometimes drew their attention to the lower-income citizens of the surrounding communities rather than their classmates. This further reinforces the finding that many privileged students are not particularly aware of inequalities and class dynamics within the college environment, but it also illustrates the importance of context by showing that their class awareness, class consciousness, and symbolic boundaries may be constructed differently within a different context.

Notes

1. Social boundaries refer to objectified forms of social difference. Cultural sociologists have not reached consensus on the conditions under which symbolic boundaries translate into social boundaries. Lamont and Molnar (2002) suggest that symbolic boundaries are more likely to translate into social boundaries when they are widely held. Suzanne Shanahan (personal communication, May 2005), by contrast, argues that boundaries are never simply either symbolic or social.

2. It is possible to argue that the analyst’s imposition of class labels on these students violates a fundamental assumption of constructionist approaches to social inequality (Harris 2004). It is also important to point out that other scholars would propose rather different models of class measurement. I have decided to use these labels for three reasons: (1) because they are supported by other class theorists, (2) because these two categories allow for a more streamlined class language, and (3) because this study is not specifically about how the respondents understand the content of particular class categories. If the present study were about the meaning of different class categories, my use of these labels would be quite problematic. This study, however, focuses on students’ class awareness and their evaluations of the significance of social class.

3. These respondents’ self-reported class identifications stand in stark contrast to the oft-repeated notion that Americans tend to think of themselves as middle class (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Smith 1996). Indeed, only 12.5% of the more-advantaged respondents and 21% of the less-advantaged respondents claimed a middle-class identity.

4. Respondents were excluded, for example, if only one parent had graduated from college.

5. Whereas thirteen of twenty-five upper-middle-class students said that the lack of diversity within their own neighborhoods prevented them from developing an awareness of social class, only four of twenty-five working-class students made this claim.
6. The strategy of “telling it like it is” is not meant to imply that the analyst thinks that this is the way that things really are, and that those who equivocate have it all wrong. Rather, this phrase was selected to denote the pace and tone used by the respondents when making statements as to the decipherability of social class.

7. The residential life system at Big State seems to be somewhat segregated along class lines. Among these respondents, 71% of the privileged students lived in the Sycamore Region of campus, whereas only 21% of the less-privileged students lived there. Although I do not have such statistics for the student body as a whole, the Sycamore Region has the reputation as being home to the wealthier, out-of-state students.

8. I would like to acknowledge an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

References


Smith, Tom W. 1996. Comment on “Are you middle class?” *American Demographics* 18:56.


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