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RUNNING A RACE WITH WORN OUT SHOES: WORKING CLASS STUDENTS AND THE FULFILLMENT OF COLLEGEASPIRATIONS

By

Michael E. Stone

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ABSTRACT

RUNNING A RACE WITH WORN OUT SHOES: WORKING CLASS STUDENTS AND THE FULFILLMENT OF COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS.

By

Michael E. Stone

The focus of the study is the relationship between class background and the fulfillment of college aspirations. The study features life histories of three working-class students who chose to attend a small, private, selective liberal arts college located in the Great Lakes Region. The scope of the life histories extends beyond what is typically referred to as "college choice" to include the obstacles faced by the three students once they arrived on campus. The study is framed using Lareau's (1987) definition of cultural capital as the "social and cultural elements of family life."

The life histories highlight the importance of educational resources, namely the educational history of the parents, in helping students make it to and ultimately succeed in college. Further, the study highlights the importance of the "success orientation" that many middle class students bring with them as they attempt to fulfill their college aspirations. By contrast, the working class families featured in this study approached the college experience with a sense of having little control over the final outcome.

A discussion of implications for practice and policy follows the life histories. The discussion centers on two aspects of the effects of one's working class background. First, I discuss how high school counselors and college admissions personnel can work with working class families to teach them how to deploy what resources they have at their

disposal to improve the chances that their children will actually make it to college. Second, I discuss how college faculty, particularly those teaching first-year orientation courses, can help working class students overcome the cultural and psychological barriers that can prevent them from fulfilling their college aspirations.

I discuss the ways that the college aspirations of these three students were mediated by the availability of social and cultural resources. Using the latest research on college choice, I discuss ways that practitioners can work with working-class students and families to offset the disadvantages that result from discrepancies in social and cultural resources.

To LouAnn, for making room in her life for this project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Jason began talking about going to college as early as the ninth grade. Although neither of his parents had attended college, Jason was very much aware that one of his uncles had graduated from college, as did one of his aunts. In addition, the two cousins closest to him in age were planning to go to college. All of this is to say that the idea of going to college was familiar to Jason, if only vicariously. As far as his career aspirations, Jason could not be specific about what he wanted to do after college. Even today, Jason has difficulty imagining himself doing anything beyond construction and carpentry work, things he has come to know through direct experience, though he thinks that he might enjoy doing something with computer technology. Nevertheless, Jason is at least thinking about his future and what part college might play in shaping it.

Jason is now eighteen years old, in what should be his senior year in high school. It has been a difficult year for him academically and otherwise. Rather than making his final decisions about where to attend college, Jason spent the past spring tending to other, more pressing matters. About six months ago Jason decided to move out of his father's home, with whom he had been living during the past two years, and moved into an apartment with a friend. In order to pay his portion of the rent, Jason has been working two part-time jobs in the evenings and on weekends. His schoolwork, which was suffering already from lack of attention, was shoved further down Jason's list of priorities. Eventually, the demands on his time became overwhelming. Jason came to terms with the fact that it would be impossible for him to graduate on time because of his

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Jason had performed well academically in elementary and middle school, but once he entered high school his grades began to slip. He was required to attend summer school following his sophomore to stay on grade level, and from that point on it seemed that school steadily became of decreasing importance in Jason's life. Consequently, his grades accelerated in their downward spiral until the point where the only left for Jason to do was to abandon the mission altogether. Despite the sudden turn of events in his life, Jason still holds out hope that he may be able attend college in the fall. But as he knows, much has to happen over the next few months to make it possible. Jason's mother has agreed to let him live with her while he sorts out his personal affairs, which relieves him from a huge financial burden. Once he completes his GED, something he plans to do over the summer, he will have to contact the colleges in the area to find out who will accept him without ACT or SAT scores. Once he is able to find a job near his mother's home, he will be able to purchase an automobile, which in turn will allow Jason to commute between home, school, and work. Only then will this very complicated puzzle of Jason's educational aspirations be complete.

Although he is not one of the three students featured in this study, the story of Jason's college aspirations encompasses many of the issues presented within it. My perspective on Jason's experience is shaped by two important factors. First, Jason is my nephew. As such, I have known Jason literally from the day he was born and have had the opportunity to watch Jason's life circumstances unfold over the years from up close. In addition to sharing a common family and social heritage with Jason, I know his

temperament and personality very well, I know the educational and work history of his parents, and I am privy to some intimate details of his sometimes-troubled home life.

The second important factor shaping my perspective on Jason's college aspirations is my own professional work. I have spent the last twelve years as a college administrator working with families on issues related to college. In the course of my work I have had numerous conversations with students like Jason, often centering on the most basic of concerns related to going to college. In addition, I have spent the last six years engaged in the systematic study of higher education, out of which I have developed an interest in the relationship between social class and one's experience in the formal system of education. Thus, I have enjoyed a dual relationship with Jason over the past several years: looking for ways to intervene in the life of my nephew in order to nurture his aspirations for college, while periodically stepping back to try and make sense of predicament from the appropriate analytical distance.

There is no question that Jason's poor academic performance in high school is a problem he created for himself. It would be difficult for any student to set their sights on college when the prospect of getting through high school grows dimmer each year. And one might rightfully question the advice given to Jason by his father. But I can't help but wonder what might have led to a different set of circumstances for Jason. While I recognize that the explanation for why Jason finds himself in his current predicament is multi-faceted and complex, in my mind I keep going back to a conversation I had with Jason's mother when Jason was in the seventh grade. My question to her at the time was straightforward: "Is Jason planning to go to college?"

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Lurking behind my question were several follow-up ones based on what is known to make a difference in whether or not students who express a desire to go to college actually end up going to college. Questions like: Have you started a savings account? Do you attend parent-teacher conferences in his school? Are you going to enroll him in the college-prep track in high school? Will he take the PSAT? In other words, I wanted to know what she was planning to do to increase the odds that Jason would actually make it to college. Her response to my question, surprisingly, was as straightforward as the question itself. But her response was straightforward not in the degree of certainty with which she expressed it, but in what it revealed about her perception of how much influence she has over the final outcome. "I want him to," she said to me. Nothing more. Nothing less. She wanted Jason to go to college.

While she did not attend college herself, her response suggests that she does at least recognize the benefits of going to college. Knowing the family like I do, I am certain she knows that a college education is the surest way for Jason to have a chance to better himself in terms of the types of employment opportunities that will be available. But the statement also suggests that the idea of Jason "going to college," though a possibility, is not something she will take for granted. Partly, this is due to her lack of knowledge of how to make it happen. Not knowing the importance of starting a college savings account, for example, or how taking the PSAT puts students on the radar screen of guidance counselors and college admissions personnel, can render parents passive in pushing their children toward college. Lacking the confidence and sense of control that accompanies such knowledge, her response "I want him to" is most fitting for the "wait and see" attitude that characterizes her approach to Jason's college aspirations.

Framing the Study

Educational and social science researchers have long been interested in the college-going behaviors of America's high school graduates. Most of the research related to college attendance is aimed at one or more of the following: 1) the development of aspirations for college; 2) the formulation of a choice set of institutions from which a student selects a college to attend; and 3) the factors that influence the selection itself. The range of a single study may highlight one of the three aspects in particular, while others are more comprehensive in scope. Regardless of the range of a particular study, these streams of inquiry are grouped together under the tradition of research known as "college choice."

Within this genre of college choice research is a particular emphasis on the development of "aspirations" for college. More specifically, educational researchers have sought to understand what leads one to aspire to go to college. (In the college choice literature "aspirations," "predisposition," "expectations" are terms used to describe the process by which an individual decides whether or not to continue education beyond high school [Hossler, et el, 1989]). The early research on college aspirations (e.g., Boyle, 1966; Brookover et al, 1967; and Sewell and Shah, 1968) examined the relationship between family characteristics, student characteristics, and high school activities in search of combinations of variables that were correlated with college attendance. With the exception of the occasional critical ethnography (e.g., Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1987; Foley, 1990), the notion of aspirations has received little attention apart from their role in initiating the larger college choice process.

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One of the more useful forms of college choice research is the comprehensive choice model. Hossler and colleagues (1998) identify the four major combined models of college choice, each of which presents a series of stages through which students and families pass as they make decisions about college. Chapman's (1981) model of choice reflects the influence of both student characteristics and external influences on the choice of colleges to be considered. According to this model student background characteristics (family SES, aptitude, aspirations, and high school performance) interact with external influences (significant persons, fixed college characteristics, and college communication with the student) to shape the students' general expectations of college life.

The Jackson Model (1982) consists of three stages, beginning with the preference stage. It is during this stage that students develop the desire to go to college, a process that is strongly related to academic performance (in Hossler et al, 1998). From there, the student moves to the exclusion stage, whereby they begin to narrow down the range of possible institutions by a process of elimination. Finally, the student moves to the evaluation stage, at which time the final selection is made based on the relevant institutional characteristics. The Hanson and Litten Model (1982) is similar in scope to the Jackson Model, except that the former model consists of five steps, ranging from "having aspirations" to "enrolling."

The model presented by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), and later affirmed by Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1998), represents a "simpler yet more conceptual model of college choice, based partially on a synthesis and simplification of previous work" (Hossler et al, 1998). This combined model highlight the factors that influence student and family decision-making at each phase of college choice. In the *predisposition* stage

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the student considers college and non-college options. Stated another way, predisposition represents the decision on whether or not to continue formal education beyond high school (Hossler et al, 1989). During the *search* stage the student develops a set of institutions from which they will select a college or university to attend. The final selection is considered the *choice* stage of the process, and is represented by the selection of a particular college or university. This model is useful because it identifies points in the process where certain individuals, such as peers, parents, and high school guidance counselors, are most influential in shaping decisions related to college choice.

Jason's "College Choice" Experience

One conclusion reached from a review of this literature is that class matters in all aspects of college choice. In many ways Jason's predicament reflects some of the major findings from the college choice literature. Unfortunately, his experience is devoid of many of the behaviors that are known to increase the likelihood of going to college. The latest research by Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1998), for example, points to the importance pre-planning activities in increasing the likelihood of college attendance, behaviors such as ongoing parental encouragement, taking the PSAT, and starting a college savings account. Further, they remind us of the importance of relationships with college-bound peers in nurturing college aspirations. The fact that Jason did not consult with his guidance counselors in high school and has not yet applied to colleges is consistent with findings from early research on the relationship between class and college choice behaviors (Gilmour, 1981). And if Jason does end up attending college he probably attend one of a small group of geographically-bound colleges (Zemski and

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Oedel, 1983) and will probably attend his first choice institution by virtue of self-selection (Manski and Wise, 1983). Chances are, he will end up either at a community college or a low-selectivity four-year institution (Alexander et al, 1987; Hearn, 1991; Karen, 1991).

Further, many aspects of Jason's college choice experience graft neatly on to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) combined model of college choice. The fact that Jason is still considering going to college suggests that to some degree he was predisposed to the idea in the course of growing up. Time will tell whether or not to Jason decides to follow through on his expressed desire to attend college. If he makes the decision to go to college Jason will soon move in to the search phase, where he will begin to gather information about the institutions in his geographic area. From there Jason will move to the choice stage, with the final decision about where to go following consideration of the institutional characteristics that are most relevant to Jason given his current circumstances: proximity to his mother's home, affordability, and low selectivity.

But there are also aspects of Jason's experience that are not represented in the college choice models. What is missing from the descriptions of Jason's predicament in the vocabulary of college choice is an account of the effects of Jason's family background that shape his current predicament, and which ultimately determine whether or not Jason will be able to fulfill his college aspirations. For example, it is one thing to be able to situate Jason in the college choice scheme, but where would one turn for an explanation of why he is in this predicament in the first place? How do you factor into the college choice equation the "wait and see attitude" that he and his mother take toward his future? How do you properly weigh the impact of a general lack of knowledge about

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the system of higher education and the lack of clarity and certainty surrounding his expressed desire to go to college? And how will this general orientation toward college, devoid of certainty and purpose, affect his ability to attain his degree once he arrives on a college campus?

Thus, the story of Jason's college aspirations is still in progress. Knowing that Jason is slowly moving through the college choice process, it remains to be seen whether or not he will actually make it to college and, if so, where he will attend. And perhaps of more importance is the question of what will happen to him once he does make it to college. It is this aspect of Jason's educational predicament that shapes the study at hand: how trying to make it to college without a clear sense of what lies ahead, without the benefit of a guide to see you through, and with the feeling that ultimately you have little control over the final outcome can determine whether one's educational and career aspirations are delayed, compromised, or fulfilled.

Focus of the Study

Featured in the study are life history accounts of the college choice experience of three students who chose to attend the same small, private, liberal arts college (referred to by the pseudonym "Central College"). But the three students in featured in the study share characteristics that differentiate them from Jason. Unlike Jason, Hannah's, Ethan's, and Rhonda's notable academic performance in elementary and middle school continued into high school. Ethan struggled a bit in high school but was still able to graduate with a respectable grade point average. All three students scored above the national average on the ACT. The results of a recent study suggests the greatest predictor of whether or not a

student will attain the bachelor's degree is the degree of "academic resources" that students have in their background (Adelman, 1999). The effects of academic resources, a variable that takes into account the strength of the high school curriculum and test scores, is more pronounced than the effects of socioeconomic status. "Students from the lowest two SES quintiles who are also in the highest academic resources quintiles," Adelman reports, "persist at a higher rate than a majority of students from the top SES quintile" (p. vii).

The aspect that most differentiates Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda from Jason is the outcome of their college choice experience. Unlike Jason, these three students made a smooth transition from high school to college. Even if Jason does make it to college he will more than likely not end up at a private, selective liberal arts college. In this respect Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda are unlike most other students with similar family backgrounds, given what is known about the relationship between class background and college attendance patterns. As the review of the literature will show, students from the lower and working classes are becoming increasingly more likely to attend community colleges and less-selective four-year colleges and universities. This growing tendency toward increased stratification supports the earlier conclusion that "the patterns of college choice are stitched deeply into the social and economic fabric of the nation" (Zemski and Oedel, 1983, p. 44).

Despite these differences, Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda share characteristics with Jason that are of particular importance in the study of college choice. First, they are similar to Jason in that they come from homes in which neither parent attended college. Consequently, their parents work histories, at least for those who did work, are made up

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of jobs that are not considered professional or managerial. Hannah and Rhonda share the additional characteristic of having grown up in homes with a single mother and spending at least part of their childhood on welfare. Rhonda's mother did not work at all and Hannah's mother went to work once Hannah reached middle school, taking a job in a nearby factory. Ethan's parents both worked steadily throughout his primary and secondary school years.

While the educational and work histories of Ethan's and Hannah's parents place them securely in the working class, Rhonda's background is perhaps more accurately described as lower class. However, the differences between the conditions of the lower class compared to the working class are less useful in this study than are their similarities. Namely, the students are bound together by the educational histories of the parents and the fact that they are *not* in the professional middle class. Thus, for the sake of simplicity, Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda will be referred to as working class students.

Second, despite the fact that their parents did not college, Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda knew at a relatively early age that they would attend college. Like Jason, the three students remember thinking about going to college as early as middle school, even though they are unable to trace their desire to go to college to a specific episode or event. This is perhaps due to the fact that they are part of a large cohort of late twentieth-century students who, despite the fact that many end up missing the target, at least grow up thinking that "going to college" is where you aim. The early expression of the desire to attend college is of particular importance given that students whose aspirations are in place by the ninth grade are more likely to actually attend than students whose aspirations are formed later (Hossler et al, 1998).

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The most important characteristic that the three students share with Jason is that the stories of their college aspirations extend beyond the college choice models. Thus, in this study I examine the relationship between family background and the *fulfillment* of college aspirations. In focusing on the fulfillment of college aspirations I bring together two aspects of the students' experiences. First I seek to uncover the aspects of their college choice experience, despite the fact that it ended successfully with their decision to attend Central, are not represented in the traditional college choice scheme? Specifically, I explore the following:

- What were the experiences within the family, with their peers, and in their high schools that shaped their ability to get to college?
- What resources were available to them that would help ensure that they would actually make it to college?
- What obstacles did they have to overcome in order to fulfill their desire to go to college?

In keeping with the comprehensive view of college choice, the life histories cover the range of events and experiences beginning with the predisposition toward college, through the selection of Central College. Returning to Jason, the story of his college aspirations will not end once he makes it to college. Only when he is able to attain the bachelor's degree will his aspirations be fulfilled. And the same is true for Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda. As such, I extend to scope of the life histories beyond their arrival at Central College to include the delays, disruptions, and tensions that accompany their college experience. In other words, I seek to illustrate the small margin for error facing

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working class students in the fulfillment of their college aspirations, even after they have been successful in getting to college.

So despite the unusual nature of their choice, the primary aim of the study is not to explain how it was that Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda were able to make it to Central College. Rather, the value of the study is in what these college choice "success" stories reveal about the relationship between class, aspirations, and mobility. By examining the effects of family life on the fulfillment of college aspirations beyond college choice we begin to see how vulnerable these college choice success stories come to being stories of delayed, compromised, or unfulfilled aspirations.

The Effects of Class: Social and Cultural Capital

McDonough (1997) notes that there have been three basic approaches to the study of college choice. Social psychological studies examine the effects of internal and external influences on students' choices, including the students' assessment of fit with a particular institution. In economic studies, college choice is viewed as a rational investment decision, and rests on the assumption that families have access to perfect information, which in turn allows them to carefully weigh the costs and benefits associated with a particular choice. Within this strand of research two types of choices are modeled (Hossler et al, 1989): in one type, the student chooses between college and other non-college options; and in the other the focus is on the choice of a particular college or university from a pre-determined choice set.

By comparison, this is a study in status-attainment, meaning that the focus in on "how the socialization process, family conditions, interactions with peers, and school

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environments shape the college choice experience" (Hossler et al, 1998, p. 144). Underlying the status-attainment approach is an emphasis on the relationship between social class, resources, and educational attainment. The effects of cultural capital are manifest in part in the academic achievement of students. Schools, according to proponents of the cultural capital view, valorize the cultural competencies of the middle class (i.e. cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills [Swartz, 1977]) and undervalues those same attributes as they are embodied in working class students. Hence, cultural experiences in the home facilitate academic achievement for the middle class student, thereby transforming the family's social and cultural resources into educational "capital" (Lareau, 1987 p. 74). By converting these social hierarchies into academic hierarchies, Bourdieu (1977) writes, the education system fulfills a function of legitimation of the cultural capital of the middle class. Consequently, the differences between the two groups on the measure of cultural competencies become translated into educational distinctions based on merit.

The cultural capital framework has spawned a collection of well-known ethnographies aimed at understanding how working class culture shapes the educational and career aspirations of working class high school students (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1987; Foley, 1990). The aim of these studies was to understand, in the words of Willis, how it is that "working class kids get working class jobs." The cultural capital framework has also been employed extensively in studies of college choice. DiMaggio and Mohr (1985), for example, attempted to assess the impact of cultural capital, defined in this study as having "high cultural interests" and participating in "high cultural activities [p. 1231]) on the likelihood of individuals attending college. They concluded,

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in part, that cultural capital does indeed increase the likelihood of attending college. By facilitating access to information about educational opportunities, they argue, students are exposed to settings in which education is valued.

Two recent studies of note are Valadez's (1996) study of the effects of cultural capital on a group of working class community college students and McDonough's (1997) study of how social class and high schools shape a student's opportunity structure. Valadez looked at how class position, as a form of cultural capital, facilitates success in higher education. Specifically, he explored students' definition of what knowledge is, and how they proceed to claim the knowledge they need to know to make educational decisions. McDonough, in examining how students formulate their choice set of institutions, concluded that the amount and quality of pre-college guidance offered was a reflection of the prevailing cultural values, a form of collective habitus, of the community in which the school was located.

Despite its popularity in the educational and social science research communities, an exact definition of cultural capital remains elusive. Bourdieu himself has used the term to describe a number of phenomena, including informal academic standards, indicators of class position, power resources, and class attributes (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Lamont and Lareau (1988) offer a definition of cultural capital as "widely shared cultural signals" in the form of attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and credentials used to differentiate members from non-members (p. 156). In this study I employ Lareau's (1987) definition of cultural capital as "the social and cultural elements of family life" (p. 73). This definition narrows the concept of cultural capital while preserving the features most relevant to this study: the ability to draw on the social

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The distinctions between social capital and cultural capital, though useful in some contexts, are intentionally blurred in this study. In employing Lareau's definition as cultural capital as "the social and cultural elements of family life" I am able to take into account the features family life that are relevant to the purposes of the study. The **social elements** family life include the following:

- Students' peer relationships
- Parents' family and social networks
- Access to community resources, including college preparation and planning support available in the high school

The **cultural elements** of family are manifested in, among other things, the family's attitude toward and relationship with the formal system of higher education. Specific aspects include:

- Involvement in the education of children
- Orientation toward education, such as whether one acts as a passive recipient of education, or one deploys resources to gain advantage
- Knowledge of "the rules of the game" when it comes to college

An analysis framed by the social and cultural elements of family life also takes into consideration the predisposition that develops from observing the behaviors of those in the immediate environment (what Bourdieu [1986] refers to as *habitus*). Aspects of predisposition include the use of leisure time, the availability of books in the home, and

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Although working class culture is not uniform or monolithic, writes a working class faculty member, it does socialize its member to view the world with different beliefs, hopes, and attitudes than middle class people (Dewes and Law, 1995). In this study the concepts of social and cultural capital are used to understand the challenges faced by these three students in the fulfillment of their college aspirations. Though the effects are played in different ways, the phenomenon is the same -- how their working class background shaped the construction of their day to day experiences as they moved through and beyond "college choice."

How Class Affects College Choice

A review of the college choice literature shows that all things are not equal when it comes to going to college. The effects of family background are evident in the pre-planning stages of college choice. Stage and Hossler (1989) measured the effects of background characteristics on parents' expectations, parents' savings for college, and discussions with students about college. For males, fathers' education and marital status both positively influenced the tendency to discuss college, while the strongest influence for females was number of children already enrolled in college, which was a negative influence. In addition, the authors found that family income and parents' education positively influenced parents' expectations. Not surprisingly, student aspirations were most strongly influenced by parents' expectations.

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And we know from a long tradition of college choice research that working class families behave differently from middle class families in aspects of the search and application phases. Gilmour (1981) interviewed college freshmen, parents, and guidance counselors. He divided the college choice process into six phases and found differences between those students whose parents attended college and those whose parents did not attend college in all phases of the choice process. The more significant findings are highlighted below:

- Of those students whose parents did attend college themselves, 52% considered their parents as the primary influence on their decision to attend. Of those students whose parents did not attend college, only 23% considered their parents as the primary influence.
- Students whose parents attended college were more likely to consult with guidance counselors, write to colleges for information, consult with their parents, consider academic program more heavily than cost, and develop a longer list.
- Students whose parents attended college were more likely to apply earlier, apply to more institutions, and show less interest in cost.
- Students whose parents attended college were more likely to make a final choice by the winter of the senior year, be accepted at two or more institutions, place less emphasis on cost, and consult with parents.

Zemski and Oedel (1983) studied, among other things, the effects of parental education on college choice. In general, they found that "students and their families organize the process of college choice by choosing from among just a handful of often

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very similar institutions" (p. 30). In deciding which group of institutions to consider, parents operate within the limits of family income and the distance of the institutions from home. Students, on the other hand, are sensitive to peer influence and tend to consider particular institutions out of a need to "maintain a sense of social belonging" (p. 29). They conclude that college-educated parents encourage a wider range of institutions for their children to consider than do parents who did not attend college, citing their finding that just over 70% of the students from families in which both parents have college degrees concentrated their college choices among regional and national institutions (p. 32).

In an attempt to more fully understand the application, admission, and attendance patterns of students, Manski and Wise (1983) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, which included data from over 23,000 seniors from over 1,300 high schools. Among the more relevant findings at the application phase was that the likelihood of applying to a four-year institution increased with high school class rank, SAT scores, and parents' education. Parents' income is relatively unimportant at this stage of the choice process. They also found that most applicants in their study were admitted to their first-choice school, and that the likelihood of applying to a four-year institution increased with high school class rank, SAT scores, and parents education level. Thus, the authors conclude that "self-selection is the major determinant of attendance" (p. 4), a process which itself is heavily influenced by parents.

As one would suspect, a similar relationship exists between family background and patterns of attendance. Thomas et al (1979) found that students whose father's had gone to college were two-and-a-half times more likely to attend college than were those

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whose father's had not completed high school. This influence was "very strong and consistent across all race and sex groups" (p. 139). Hearn (1984) found that Blacks, women, and lower SES students were less likely to attend the more selective colleges and universities, even when controlling for "educationally relevant factors" (p.25). He concluded that social characteristics at least partially influence the placement of students within the educational hierarchy of the U.S., and states that "in the high school-to-college transition, the academically and socioeconomically rich become richer while the academically and socioeconomically poor become poorer" (p. 28).

This phenomenon was supported in a later study (Hearn, 1991) in which he focused on the relationship between personal characteristics and the type of college and univeristy attended. Among the more significant findings was that student with less educated parents were especially likely to attend lower-selectivity institutions even if their academic ability and achievements were high (p. 164). Thus, Hearn observes, "contrary to meritocratic norms, entry into the most prestigious and selective colleges has been found to be a function not only of test scores, grades, and the like, but of ascriptive factors" (p. 160). "The most fundamental threats to equality of opportunity," Hearn concludes, "may lie in the realm of choice" (p. 169).

The results from other research on attendance patterns by family background point to a similar conclusion. Alexander and others (1987) found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have become increasingly likely to attend community colleges rather than four-year colleges. And the same pattern holds true for when we compare the attendance rates for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at elite and non-elite universities and colleges (Karen, 1991). Thus, as Karen (1991)

concludes, "it may be the case that the relationship between being from a low socio-economic background and being located lower in the higher education hierarchy has become stronger" (p. 218).

Conclusion: The Effects of Class

Stated simply, working class students differ from middle class students in all phases of the college choice process. In general, working class parents are less likely to initiate the idea of going to college than are middle class parents; working class families begin the application process later and are more likely to look outside the home for support with the process; and working class students apply to fewer institutions and are more bound geography. And not surprisingly, these differences in choice behaviors result in stratified attendance patterns. The tendency for lower and working class students to attend community colleges and less-selective four-year colleges, when compared to middle class students, has actually strengthened over the past decade. A careful reader of the growing body of college choice research will conclude that the meritocratic foundation on which the relationship between our system of higher education and the hope of social and economic mobility rests is beginning to show signs of stress.

This study exposes another area of weakness in the foundation of meritocracy: the relationship between class background and the ability to actually fulfill one's college aspirations. In one sense, Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda are a subset of the larger population of working class kids with aspirations to attend college, in that they were able to at least make it to a private, selective, liberal arts college. And, as has been

demonstrated, where one attends college matters. Students who attend more selective colleges show higher immediate gains is socioeconomic status (Smart and Pascarella, 1986) and in long-term earning potential (Grubb, 1995). So while the decision whether or not to go to college is still the crucial one, the range of economic and social mobility is shaped in part by the decision about where to attend. If we stop telling the story at the point of choice, then Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda are examples of college choice success stories.

Even considering their experiences within the traditional college choice scheme, the three life histories provide another layer of insight into the college choice experience by the highlighting, among other things, the difficulties faced by these three students in actually getting to college. However, the story of a student's college aspirations does not end once the student makes his or her way through the college choice model. Economic and social mobility is possible only if students are able to fulfill their aspirations by graduating from college. As such, in this study I extend the scope of aspirations beyond college choice and into the domain of persistence, illustrating how the effects of class continue to shape the fulfillment of aspirations even after a student has been successful in getting to college. Thus, this study bridges the concepts of "college choice" and "persistence" and reconstructs the two into the notion of the *fulfillment* of aspirations.

The Study of College Choice

Researchers working in the domain of college choice, despite the variety of methods by which an individual inquiry may be made, generally adhere to a common set of assumptions about the proper study and representation of the college choice experience. Consequently, the way the inquiry is conducted, the types of questions asked, and the scope of application of a given study is determined by these assumptions about what can be known about the phenomenon. While I recognize the contribution made by researchers operating within the college choice framework, I also recognize the inherent limitations imposed by it: the way we understand college choice is shaped by the way the educational and social science research community conceives of it, the methods used to study it, and, ultimately, by the claims we can make as a result.

Through the presentation of life history I am able to present an alternative telling of the college choice story by showing what the process looks and feels like for those involved in it. The decision to approach the topic in this way is founded on the recognition that "college choice," despite the confidence and regularity with which educational researchers invoke it, is merely a construct fostered by educational researchers as a way of managing what is in reality an idiosyncratic and complex collection of individual experience. Hossler and his colleagues (1998) readily acknowledge that college choice does not occur in a linear, predictable fashion, and that it does not occur the same for all students. However, in order to "inform marketing approaches and help those charged with recruiting students" (Hossler et al, 1998, p. 142), they posit, the complexity and ambiguity of the college choice experience must to be contained within a simple, manageable framework.

My purpose in conducting the study using life history is to recapture those idiosyncratic aspects of experience that are left out of choice models or stage theories. Rather than imposing the college choice template over their experience, I seek to understand how the students themselves make sense of their college aspirations and their college choice experience. In unpacking the notion of "aspirations" within the context of the study of college choice I seek to restore the complexity of the experience to complement the descriptive approach as represented in college choice models. In doing so, I am able to reveal aspects of the aspirations of these three students that are not typically included in the traditional telling of the college choice story: the varying degree of certainty and specificity surrounding their expressed desire to go to college; the subtle shades of influence coming from family, peers, and the high school; and the ubiquitous pushes and the pulls working on and against their expressed educational and career aspirations. This nuance of day to day experience, while difficult to categorize or even contain, nevertheless contains insights that can lead to improved policy and practice. The challenge for college choice researchers is to find a way to include some of these variables into future college choice research.

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Methods and Procedures

Selection of Participants

With assistance from the Registrar at Central College, twelve students who entered Central in the fall of 1995, and whose parents did not attend college, were identified. The parents' education level was taken from admissions data that became part of the students' permanent records. Each of the twelve students was then contacted by phone to see if they would agree to participate in a series of interviews related to their decision to attend Central College. Of the twelve, eight agreed to participate. Those eight students were then sent a short questionnaire asking for details about the educational and work histories of their parents. One student was unable to participate due to scheduling problems, which left a total of seven students who were interviewed for the project. From the seven students, three were selected for inclusion in the study.

Participant Interviews

In gathering the data for the study, Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda were invited to literally tell their stories of how they got to college. The vignettes that make up the three narratives are organized around different dimensions of the students' college choice experience. First, there is the issues related to the very act of going to college: when they first knew that they would go to college, how they ended up at Central College, and why going to college is important given their life predicament as they understand it. Second, in considering the pursuit of their college aspirations, our attention turns to how the students were able to make it to college: where they found for support of their college and

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career aspirations, the resources that were available to them, and the obstacles that had to be overcome in order to make it to college. And third, the significant events, experiences, and relationships that take place in any or all of three contexts: the family, the high school, and the community.

In gathering the information to construct the individual narratives I engaged the students in in-depth, life history interviews (Seidman, 1994) over a six week period. Each student was interviewed four times with each interview lasting from between sixty and ninety minutes. I interviewed the students again eighteen months after the initial round of interviews to check the accuracy of my interpretations, as well as to allow them to offer their reflections on their experience with the project).

This interview method differs from more conventional approaches in several ways. First, the interviewer uses primarily open-ended questions. The participants were presented with general categories ("the family," "the community," "the high school," and "significant others") within which they were allowed to describe events, experiences, and relationships that were significant in the shaping of their college aspirations. Second, the participants were invited to reconstruct their experience rather than remember it. As Seidman points out, reconstruction is based partially on memory and partially on what the participant now senses is important about the past event (p. 67). And third, the participants were invited to offer storied responses to the questions, which includes descriptions of the events, experiences, and relationships that were influential in shaping their college aspirations as well as reflections on the relative significance of each.

The interviews were guided by a three-stage interviewing protocol. The first stage of the interview process was semi-structured and allowed the participants to tell the

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story of how they came to decide to go to college, how they were able to realize their college aspirations, and how they came to select Central College. This phase was by design participant-centered in that the students were allowed to talk at length about experiences and events within the three major contexts. The information gathered in the first interview was analyzed in search of significant themes, events, or actions that in turn served as points of departure for the second stage of the interview process.

During the second stage the participants were given the opportunity to clarify and then elaborate on the information gathered in the first interview. This served to focus the conversation on those aspects of the student's background that seemed to be the most significant to them. The first task was to confirm with the participants my understanding of the relative importance of certain events, experiences, and relationships in shaping their college aspirations. From there I sought clarification on particular aspects of their previous responses, including factual information and the sequence of particular events.

Finally, in the third stage the participants were invited to offer their reflections on the relative significance of the key events, experiences, and relationships that were first identified and then elaborated on during the two previous interviews. In other words, the conversation shifted from the descriptive to the relational aspect of the experiences that comprised their individual stories. It was during this stage of the interview process that we began to uncover the themes that gives unity to their stories.

As Polkinghorne (1988) reminds us, "we are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives" (p. 150). This has particular relevance when we consider aspirations as evolving and fluid, rather than as a one-time event. While our stories never

end, we can revisit them on occasion in light of new insights that often accompany new experiences. As such, I visited Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda eighteen months after our initial meeting to provide the reader with a sense of where each of their stories (and their lives) stand now. They were given the opportunity to offer comments on the interpretations and conclusions drawn by the researcher. Hearing their experiences in the context of a unified story gave the participants the opportunity to clarify pertinent details, to reallocate the amount of emphasis given individual experiences, and to respond to the conclusions about their college choice experience drawn from the individual accounts.

Writing Life Stories

Contained within each of the three narratives are elements of both "life history" and "life stories." With life history the researcher presents experiences in chronological sequence, and the emphasis is placed on the significance of the experiences at the time they happened (Rosenthal, 1993). In the context of this study the life history approach is useful because it allows the students to "retrace their steps" and to point out those events and experiences that were of particular significance in their college-going experiences. From a life history perspective, the researcher attempts to tie together specific events, conditions, and significant others in such a way that we have an understanding of how something came about.

"Life stories," on the other hand, are regarded as but one part of a life history, the part that is told to another (Kotre, 1996, p. 34). Whereas life history is aimed at explanation of outcomes, the purpose in gathering life stories is to provide interpretation of significance and meaning from the point of view of the participant. As utilized in this

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study, the life stories shared by the students provide an additional layer of insight by helping us to see the relative significance of certain events, as well as the relationship between the various events, experiences, and relationships that make up the life history. More importantly, the life story aspect of the narrative enables the students to reflect on the significance of going to college, itself an action that is situated within a larger narrative structure.

Because life history (the events) and life story (the narrative) always come together, attention needs to be paid both regardless of which one is of primary interest (Rosenthal, 1993). One the one hand we are interested in what we can learn from the actual events and experiences related to going to college. In treating the narrative as "data" (Sewell, 1992) we take at face value what the students tell us about their experiences. We must assume that the accounts of that significant events, experiences, and relationships influenced their college aspirations are accurate and that they actually did contribute to the outcome in the way the students' perceive that they did.

The first step in organizing the interview data was to chart the flow of content from one interview to the next. This was done separately for each student. To begin the topics from each individual interview were listed sequentially in a column. The remainder of the interviews were catalogued in the same fashion and placed in columns alongside one another. From there, I looked to see what themes carried over from one interview to the next and which ones received little or no additional mention. This allowed me to determine which experiences were of greater significance in the larger scheme of the college choice experience. Relationships or connections between separate topics were also noted with the use of arrows and other visual notations.

What emerged from this process was a visual representation of the component parts of the narrative and their relationship to one another. This allowed me to identify the threads that ran throughout the interview process and to see how the participants organized the events, while also allowing me to discern the relative significance of each one. As one would expect, some aspects of the story were relegated to the background, or were discarded altogether, while others serve as central features of the narrative. It is this core theme, comprised of both description and reflective commentary, that serves as the organizing principle around which each narrative is constructed.

Limitations of the Study

The Limitations of Narrative Inquiry

While the use of life history is well suited for my stated purposes, the reader should be aware of the limitations of narrative inquiry as advanced by its critics (see Philips, 1994). First, it is important to recognize that narrative inquiry deals with perception and interpretation on the part of the participant, and, therefore, is subject to distortion and inaccuracy. The fact that a story is credible, Philips argues, tells us nothing about whether it is true or false. But as Philips goes on to state, the desire for truth depends on your research purpose: "if we want to know what about a person's beliefs makes him or her behave in a certain way, it might be of little consequence to us that his or her key beliefs are unfounded" (p. 19). In the context of this study, it is the persons' beliefs, and their responses to them, that are of the greatest concerned.

Further, even in cases where the account of an event may be true, in the sense that the participant's account is consistent with others' perceptions of the same event, the

interpretation of the significance of the event may be inaccurate. To state it another way, the researcher may have a more theoretically correct interpretation of the action than the participant -- or the participant may have no theoretical interpretation of the event at all. In either case, the researcher is left to choose between the participant's own intuitive sense of importance, and the imposition of a meaningful, more useful framework from the outside.

Because of the subjective nature of perception and interpretation, and hence the somewhat suspect nature of the stories they produce, narratives can serve as justifications or rationalizations of behavior that is undesirable or that contradicts the image that the participant prefers to project for him or herself. An example of this potential for distortion is found in the story of Ethan, who frames his educational experience in terms of his deficiency of economic, social, and cultural resources relative to the other students in his school. While as the researcher I find his interpretation credible, a critic of narrative inquiry could argue that framing his story in this way may in fact be Ethan's way of masking the possibility that he failed to commit himself to the degree that others did, or that he simply lacked the innate intelligence of those around him.

Lastly, Philips asks us to consider two fundamental questions in judging the value of narrative inquiry: 1) what is the role of scientific inquiry in narrative? and 2) what follows from a good narrative? The value of the narratives presented in this study is found both in their capacity to stand alone as individual stories, and in their ability, when considered collectively, to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon around which they are organized. As individual stories, the narratives are presented as examples of the ways in which going to college takes on meaning only when understood within the

context of the life of the individual. Considered in this way, the three narratives are meant to be read and understood as separate, self-contained stories, each of which adds texture to descriptive accounts of how students get to college.

"The Problem of Induction"

I employ the cultural capital framework in this study fully aware of "the problem of induction" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) in choosing to reduce the students' experiences to a single interpretation. "Not only are facts determined by the theory window through one looks for them," Guba and Lincoln write, "but different theory windows might be equally well supported by the same set of facts" (p. 107). In truth, each story is "about" many things: they are working class; they are male or female; they are white; and they live in a particular time in our nation's economic history. However, my theoretical interpretation is intended as one version of a multi-faceted story, an interpretation well suited to the stated purpose of this study: to inform the practice of those whose work brings them in direct contact with working class students who aspire to go to college.

Chapter 2: Hannah

"Survival means being able to take a position and withstand criticism, so you can maintain your own identity. And in this sense my mom is not surviving. She just doesn't have an identity all her own. She goes to work because she has to do a job she doesn't like, in an environment she shouldn't be in. And she does it just to survive. She hasn't known any other way. And I don't want to be stuck that way."

Introduction

The many academic awards that Hannah has won over the years are proudly displayed on the main wall of the living room in the apartment that she and her brother share with their mother. The wall contains "everything I have ever won," according to Hannah, and is the first thing people see when they enter the apartment. The awards on the wall are a testament to the academic ability that Hannah began to show at an early age. Hannah always enjoyed school, she recalls, and much of the work she was required to do seemed to come naturally to her. As a result she received much encouragement from her teachers and from some members of her family to continue on in pursuit of her ultimate dream, which is to become a lawyer. While Hannah is proud of all that she has accomplished up to this point, there is little doubt that a diploma from Central College will become the center attraction on the living room wall.

That Hannah is now enrolled at Central is not surprising at all. Quite literally, Hannah has known from the time she was in grade school that she wanted to go to college. She began setting her sights on college when, in the seventh grade, she wrote a paper on careers in the legal profession. This experience, Hannah recalls, solidified her desire to become an attorney, an interest originally sparked by the portrayal of lawyers on television. But Hannah's aspirations for college and career were developed beyond the point of knowing what she wanted to be when she grew up and the recognition that, in order to realize this dream, she would need to go to college. Hannah even knew where she would attend college:

> "I've always been interested in Central because I live in the town. To see the kids walking back and forth to classes and see the various activities that go on, like the football games..I always thought it was neat how college kids got to live in dorms and got to get away from their parents, got to go to classes at various times...They looked so grown up and it was just intriguing.
>
> "It's odd, but -- because I grew up with it, I think it was always here, I could always see it. I always saw some aspect of it, whether it was watching the students paint the rock, or hanging up sheet signs, or doing the cardboard sled race. Just everything about it."

If Hannah's choice of a college was driven largely by the desire to remain in familiar surroundings, she had several options from which to choose. She could have chosen to attend one of the two community colleges that are within twenty miles of her

home. Or she could have made a somewhat longer commute to one of the two or three universities located within an hour's drive from the town of Central. Any of these options would allow her to live at home and maintain her current way of life, while simultaneously fulfilling her desire to go to college. But as Hannah points out, her expectations for the college life includes more than maintaining a sense of comfort and familiarity:

> "Even though it was my same town, I would be living with somebody and learning to get along with them. Over the last four years living at home, it was just me and my mom...I guess I was ready for this idea of having close friends, and being friends forever...I had that in a sense at home, but I only had my mom. And so we were close. So I guess what I was looking for was a living environment so I could get away from what I had at home, but in a sense get the same there."

Now in her sophomore year at Central, Hannah is doing well in her classes, although she admits that she was not expecting college-level work to be as demanding as it turned out to be. But like most other students she quickly learned to devote more time to her studies than in high school, and she has developed the self discipline needed to handle the new freedom and independence that was handed to her when she went away to school. Hannah has also learned to get by on less sleep than in high school, a requirement given that she works between twenty and thirty hours per week to fill the gap

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between the total cost of attending Central and what she and her family are able to pay. All of this she does so that she can maintain a full-time class load and graduate on time.

Hannah's self discipline and strong work ethic will suit her well as she continues to pursue her educational and career goals. It is her focus on the goal of graduating from Central, the first step toward law school, that compels Hannah to make the sacrifices necessary for her dream to become a reality. And there have been many sacrifices. Because of her work schedule she is unable to take advantage of many social and cultural events available to the other students on campus. In fact, for many of the large campus events she is required to attend as one of the "on duty" student officers from the department of campus safety. On most weekends when she is not working for campus safety she goes to her job as a waitress at a restaurant in town. And this semester has particularly difficult for Hannah. Whatever free time she is able to find in between work and school she spends at home, providing comfort and support as her mother goes through a serious of medical evaluations in search of the cause of her sudden illness. Although other members of the extended family live in the area, Hannah feels a particular sense of responsibility for her mother's well-being. As the only daughter Hannah and her mother have developed a special kinship based on years of mutual reliance and support.

Hannah's Story

The explanation for how Hannah ended up at Central serves as background to the main features of her story. As we have seen, Hannah's commitment to her own education was developed during her earliest years of schooling. Because schoolwork came rather naturally to her, and because she enjoyed being in school, she garnered the attention of her teachers in the form of encouragement and formal recognition. Further, her career aspirations, defined in terms of the professional image in which she sought to create herself, were also developed at an early age. And because she grew up in the town of Central she developed a rather detailed and accurate image of what college life was supposed to be like. It was this sense of familiarity, combined with her desire to remain close to her home, that accounts for her decision to attend Central College.

Thus, no one had to convince her of the benefits of a college education. In fact, Hannah has known from the time she was in the seventh grade that she was going to go to college. Further, she received much support for her educational and career goals from certain members of her family, and was fortunate enough to attend a high school where students were encouraged from their freshman year to set their sights on college. In this sense, Hannah's story begins with her aspirations clearly defined and already in place.

And yet contained within Hannah's story are illustrations of the difficulties she faced in trying to make it to college, even though her aspirations were within her reach academically. As a working class student with middle class aspirations, Hannah would come to know firsthand the tension and conflict that accompanies life on the margin of two cultures. Not only did Hannah have difficulty integrating herself into the middle class

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ethos of her high school, she must now find ways to deal with certain members of her family, who harbor resentment over her wishes to leave behind her working class roots.

In the last section, entitled "The Origins of Aspirations," Hannah offers her reflections on how she hopes to improve her life circumstances by going to college. Using her mother's lifestyle as a reference point, Hannah talks about how going to college will help her to create a version of family life different from the one she experienced with her mother. But before she can consider starting her own family, Hannah feels she must first establish a strong personal and professional identity. The literature on the career psychology is employed as a framework for understanding the origins of Hannah's college aspirations.

I. Getting to College

Hannah's parents have been divorced from the time she was three years old. From that point until she entered college Hannah has shared and apartment in the town of Central with her mother and older brother. Her mother did not work outside the home until Hannah was fourteen years old, a choice she made out of her desire to spend time in the home with her children. Hannah's mother, in choosing to stay at home rather than work outside the home, was like most of the other moms in the neighborhood. "The neighborhood I lived in," Hannah recalls, "all the moms stayed at home and took care of the kids. So there was always a mom in every house." And, like most of the other kids in her neighborhood, Hannah recognized the benefits of having a mother in the home.

But unlike most of the other families in the neighborhood, Hannah and her family did not have a father who provided for them financially. Hannah has little recollection of her father and has had no contact with him to speak of over the past fifteen years. She does have vague memories of her father coming around during the first few years after the divorce, visits related to his obligation to provide alimony and child support to Hannah's mother. But her father made little money himself, which meant that Hannah, her brother, and her mother could not count on the money always being there. Consequently, as Hannah recalls, the family was able to get by financially, but often just barely so. Needless to say, Hannah's father has had little positive influence in her life.

Hannah has had little actual contact with her father over the years, at least until very recently, seeing him only periodically as a child, and even then for only brief amounts of time. This past year, however, her father has attempted to reestablished

contact with her. For the first time since she can remember, Hannah spent Christmas in the company of her father:

> "It's awkward, actually. I see my father trying to fit into my life and there's no room for him. Because I have the role model I need. I see it as that. I have my uncle who owns his own company. He's successful and he's always there.
>
> "I really don't think he [my father] is ready to offer anything. I don't think he knows how. I've always seen him as kind of like a dead-beat dad in a lot of ways. For not being there. He's not as you see'people getting a divorce and the father or the mother takes them'.you know'scheduled weekends, every other summer or whatever it is. He never did that. I don't even think he paid his child support. So, don't come around now."

Hannah's recent contact with her father has re-ignited the resentment that had been lingering in her mind due to her father's absence from her life. What Hannah resents most is that he wasn't around to share in the joy, the excitement, and the pain as she moved closer to her goal of going to college. "He wasn't around in high school when I was making all these accomplishments and doing everything," Hannah says with a tinge of anger still in her voice. "It goes back to graduation and saying he was proud of me. I thought, you have no right to be proud of me. You didn't do anything. You weren't there." As far as Hannah is concerned, her father simply has been "out of the picture" too

long for her to try and find a place for him now. His appearance in her life at this point is, in her words, "too little too late."

The "Snotty" High School

Despite his absence from Hannah's life, her father left an unusual legacy that would prove to be of vital importance in helping Hannah move toward her dream of going to college. In her parents' divorce contract it was stipulated that Hannah and her brother were to attend private schools through the twelfth grade. Even today, this arrangement sounds strange to Hannah, given her father's lack of involvement in her life otherwise. But at the time of the divorce Hannah's older brother was enrolled in a local Catholic grade school and, according to Hannah, was doing pretty well. Her parents attributed his success to the fact that the school was private, and thus it was agreed that her father would pay for the first eight years of private schooling and her mother would pay for the last four.

In order to take advantage of the opportunity to attend a private high school Hannah had to commute to the town of Logan. Holy Cross, a Catholic high school, is located about twenty miles from the town of Central in an affluent suburb of Logan. Expectations for student performance at Holy Cross are high, and the messages about the importance of academic success and college preparation were sent early and often to Hannah and the other students. The amount of emphasis placed on college preparation by the high school teaching and guidance staff served as a constant reminder to the students that the goal is not simply to graduate from Holy Cross, but to gain access to a quality college or university. Hannah remembers how they would always refer to the

importance of preparation and planning for the "college-bound student, affirmation that she credits with reinforcing her own aspirations:

> "My high school really pushed going to college, whether it was a community college or a big university. They talked about colleges from your first day until your last day...I thought that was really neat. They brought in colleges about twice a week during the main recruiting time. And I just remember things were always geared to help you to get into school, especially the college-bound student...You know, you should take four years of this and four years of that. "And we had counselors who always pulled us in and would ask 'well, what are you thinking about doing when you get out of here.'...They were always evaluating the scores of your tests and exams and grades...I saw college pushed a lot more in my high school than some of my friends who went to public schools...They weren't even talking about it in their freshman and sophomore years, where we were and we were already sending out flyers saying we were interested, and getting brochures...I guess that all the ideas I got about college, the high ideals I got in grade school, were just reiterated in high school."

Looking back Hannah credits Holy Cross with fueling her college aspirations. To begin, Holy Cross provided with the academic preparation she would need to be successful in college. The classes were rigorous, she recalls, and the students were motivated by a strong sense of competition both in and out of the classroom. Hannah also credits Holy Cross with predisposing her to the liberal arts. "They would always

bring in graduates of Holy Cross who had gone on to college and then on to successful careers," Hannah recalls. "And a lot of them talked about the importance of a well-rounded education." And just as important as the academic preparation Hannah received from Holy Cross was the time and energy the teachers and counselors devoted to college preparation and planning activities. Even though she came in with the desire to go to college already in her mind, Hannah left Holy Cross with an even more deeply ingrained image of herself as a future college graduate.

Hannah also benefited from being around the other students at Holy Cross. While the attitudes of parents are most influential in shaping students attitudes toward higher education, peers "may at least have a reinforcing effect upon each other in the choice process" (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987, p. 211). Hossler and others (1989) suggest that the composition of the student body in the high school leads to the formation of "peer subcultures," which in turn influence the motivation for students to make plans for college attendance (p. 239). As we might expect, relationships with college-going peers increase the likelihood that a student will attend college (Hossler et al, 1998).

While the middle class culture at Holy Cross would ultimately serve Hannah well in the pursuit of her college aspirations, it did not feel that way to Hannah at first. For the first time in her life Hannah would have to interact on a daily basis with people whose family backgrounds were far different from her own. Most of the students at Holy Cross came from homes where at least one parent had attended college, and many now hold positions of relative prominence in the community. "My high school was very 'snotty,'" Hannah remembers. "They had money and didn't think twice about not having it."

Despite her academic ability and her clearly defined aspirations, characteristics that she held in common with the other students, Hannah began her experience at Holy Cross High School very much an outsider. Coming from the town of Central, Hannah had to fight against the prejudice that she felt greeted her when she entered the doors at Holy Cross. "They looked at you as being different, that you were from Central, this godawful town," Hannah remembers. In some ways, this perception of the town of Central was accurate. Dubbed "little Detroit" by the locals because of its declining industrial base and high level of unemployment, the conditions in Central do stand in stark contrast to the way of life that most students at Holy Cross were able to experience in the affluent suburb of Logan. And because she attended grade school and middle school in Central, Hannah did not have the opportunity to connect socially with the students and families of Holy Cross prior to attending there. "We didn't go through the same Logan schools that they did and so we were different," remembers Hannah. "And they weren't very accepting of that, especially if you did well."

But what most separated Hannah from her classmates at Holy Cross was not geography, finances, or educational pedigrees. Her biggest fear, she recalls, was having the shortcomings of her family life exposed for all of her classmates to see:

> "Here I am trying to sit in this snotty school and I come from a single parent home. Even though most of them probably knew my background, it's not something you go around talking about. I would just hope that it wouldn't come up."

For Hannah, the feelings of discomfort over being the outsider were present from the start:

> "One of the first things I remember is the first day we went to school. You know, we rode the 'Central' bus, there was a group of about 20 of us who got off the bus. We all looked the same, we all had the same uniform on. You can't tell that we are Central people, you can't tell that we weren't one of the Logan elite, but it was very different. It was like when we walked into the school they just turned and looked, and then went back to the little groups that they were talking to...My cousin is the same age as I am and we were in the same grade, and we shared lockers. So we were walking in the building arm in arm and thinking 'what are we doing here,'
>
> "Then you go to class...We had to go through and tell, you know, 'my name is Hannah and this summer I did this,' this kind of thing. I was so scared. I was just so scared. I mean the first day was just awful. I just wanted to cry because I felt so excluded. You'd walk into the lunchroom and everybody was in groups at the table, and it was just my cousin and me...So we just sat in the corner eating our lunch thinking 'what are we doing here.'"

Eventually, Hannah would come to terms with exactly "what she was doing" at Holy Cross High School. In fact, once she came to recognize that this was exactly the type of environment she would need to accomplish the goals she had set for herself, she began to flourishe both intellectually and socially. Once she proved to herself that she

could hold her own in the classroom, she gained the confidence and poise that made her feel equal to her middle class peers in other ways. The risks she took in trying to become fully integrated into the culture at Holy Cross paid off. In Hannah's words, "they came to know me as just Hannah, and not as Hannah from the single-parent home in Central."

Hannah's feelings of being the outsider who had to earn her way into the peer groups at Holy Cross shaped her view of the significance of her high school experience. It was the type of experience that would make her confront the reality that she was indeed entering a different world of sorts. As a working class student she could indeed attend a middle class high school. But Hannah didn't stop being working class once she entered the doors at Holy Cross. But with her feelings of inferiority over her family background safely tucked away, Hannah pressed forward in pursuit of her goals. But those same feelings of discomfort over her background, the ones she had worked so hard to overcome in those first few months at Holy Cross, would again surface before she left there.

Considering Colleges

In a place like Holy Cross, college selection is considered a routine aspect of the high school experience. Like most of the other students there, Hannah entered Holy Cross certain in her own mind that she was going to go to college. Yet, Hannah was able to envision her aspirations even a step further than simply expressing the desire to go. Hannah knew, in fact, she had known for some time, that she was going to attend Central College. Stating simply, Hannah came to believe that "college" was supposed to be like what she had come to know from years of observing the students at Central College. The

fact that Central is a small, residential liberal arts college made it even more appealing to Hannah. She had the opportunity to spend a weekend in the residence halls as part of a visitation weekend, she recalls, and that experience instilled in her the desire to become part of a close, intimate community that she felt characterized life in the first-year residence hall. "I thought it would be nice," Hannah remembers, "to be part of a close knit family like that, where your door was always open and where you could cry, and it would be okay."

All in all, Central seemed to offer just what Hannah was looking for in a college: it was a liberal arts college, something she had come to appreciate through her experience at Holy Cross; it was small and intimate; and, perhaps most important of all, Central was close to home, which, Hannah believed, allowed her to "go away to college without really going away." As far as Hannah was concerned, she could not have made a better choice. Even if she was not able to get enough money to support herself living on campus, Hannah was prepared to go to Central anyway, knowing that she would have to live at home with her mother in order to do so. Whatever it would take, Hannah remembers, she would have done it in order to realize her lifelong dream of attending Central College. And all was going according to plan for Hannah until she realized how some of the other students at Holy Cross approached the college selection process::

> "We were in an English class working in small groups putting together writing portfolios to send to colleges. And everyone was talking about where they would send them. They were like, 'who's your portfolio going to, well mine's going to the University of Michigan, Dartmouth.' I mean, they were everywhere.

They were all going away, and they were all going to big universities that are half-way across the country.

"They never said anything to me about going to Central, but I was always afraid that they would. It was like commuting was this bad word that you shouldn't say. They associated it with, I thought, less of an education, like you weren't good enough to get into a good college, so you commute. And I guess they thought it was more economic status, like you had to commute because you didn't have the money to go away to school. That's what I was always afraid of."

Proximity, the distance a student must travel to attend college, is an important consideration in college selection. As Zemski and Oedel (1983) discovered, working class students tend to consider a more narrow geographic range of institutions compared to middle class students. Proximity takes on added significance for students whose choice set of institutions may be limited by their life circumstances. For adult students who work and attend college on a part-time basis, for example, the choice of a college is limited to those that are within a reasonable commuting distance from home. Stated another way, these students simply may have no other choice. In Hannah's case the effect of proximity on her college selection took on even greater importance. Because she grew up in the town of Central she grew up thinking that college was supposed to look like Central College. Hannah's decision to enroll at Central College following graduation from high school was, in reality, a foregone conclusion.

After the episode on English class Hannah began to wonder if indeed she was being to narrow in her thinking about where to go to college. She began to think that

maybe she should go away to school. "It started sinking into my head," she recalls. In response to the perceived scrutiny from the other students, Hannah applied to St. Mary's in Notre Dame. As Hannah points out, St. Mary's is similar to Central College in almost every respect except that St. Mary's is all female. But the distinction that mattered most to Hannah was that St. Mary's is not in her hometown. It is not even in the same state. And the difference in location seemed to matter. "Once I applied and got accepted," Hannah recalls, "it became a change in topic. People were like, 'where are you going?' And I would say, 'oh, I might go to Central and I might go to St. Mary's.' And people would say, 'oh, St. Mary's, that's cool.' So that right there kind of changed things, the way they looked at my decision to go to college."

Hannah did end up at Central College, but not before she called into question all that she had assumed was important for her to consider in selecting a college. To begin, she wanted to remain close to home so that she could be near her mother. And as the first in her family to go to college, the opportunity to do so in an environment that was familiar to her gave her a sense of comfort that took away many of her fears about college. And as a liberal arts college, Central would offer her the type of educational experience she felt she needed to achieve her personal and professional goals. What Hannah did not anticipate was that her desire to attend Central, despite all the benefits of doing so, would serve as yet another reminder of her working class background:

> "I didn't want them to think that if I was staying at home it was because of the money issue. That probably played into it a lot. It sounds odd, but in high

school you have all kinds of things to worry about, including the way people look at you."

Hannah's experience at Holy Cross brought her face to face with her feelings of inferiority about her social and economic background. Through the course of her experience she learned about the psychological and emotional conflict that accompanied her middle class aspirations. Attending a middle class high school and harboring college aspirations, Hannah would learn, does not mean that you suddenly stop being working class. Whether or not the other students at Holy Cross viewed Hannah and the other students from the town of Central with disdain, her own feelings of insecurity over her family background dramatically shaped her high school experience. She found herself in a situation where her ability to benefit was potentially hampered by her perception of herself as an outsider, in constant fear that the subject of her background would find its way into casual conversation. Yet, despite the trepidation with which she entered Holy Cross, in the end she flourished. So for Hannah, the most important thing she took away from Holy Cross may not be the diploma, but rather the sense of accomplishment knowing that she had navigated her way through the first stretch of unfamiliar cultural territory on her way to realizing her middle class aspirations.

Preparing for College

Hannah responds with warm admiration as she remembers the reaction of her mother whenever an envelope with the return address of a college arrived in the mail. "She would get so excited," says Hannah. "She would always say 'is this the one, is this the one.' She just didn't know how the process worked." Her mother's excitement was in anticipation of the news Hannah had been waiting for. Hannah had applied to Central College months before, and now, as her senior year at Holy Cross was drawing to a close, she was waiting to find out if she was going to be allowed to pursue her lifelong dream of attending Central College. Up until this point, her mother had not been actively involved in Hannah's college selection. "I know that my mom gave me the decision to go anywhere," Hannah recalls. "She said it's your decision, you know about college, I don't know anything. But wherever you go I'll back you." Sharing Hannah's excitement over getting accepted to Central was one way that her mother would be able to participate in this important phase in Hannah's life.

The excitement over Hannah's impending news was her mother's way of "backing" Hannah, and is a good illustration of how she would find ways to become involved in the educational lives of her children. Hannah remembers her mother always being supportive of anything she or her brother did. "She went to any activity, any event that we had," says Hannah. "That's one of the positive sides of not having to work." In her desire to push Hannah along toward her goal of attending college, Hannah's mother showed interest in Hannah's academic life any way she could. The support continues today, and Hannah attributes much of her own diligence in pursuing her educational and career goals to these expressions of support offered by her mother. Lacking the

wherewithal to do so in concrete ways, Hannah's mother expressed her support for Hannah's college aspirations in ways that were familiar to her.

> "I think that's one of the reasons why I'm still in college because every time I pass a semester and my grades go home, my mom opens them and she's like 'wow, you're doing so well in college, I could never do that.' That's a phrase she comes up with a lot, 'I could never do something like that.' She has ideas that college is some place, you know, for the gifted. Only certain people can go there and if you survive its this magnificent thing."
>
> "But most of her support was verbal. Because the homework I was doing, she had no clue. I did well in high school so the support was mostly when grades came, or when I received an award. I mean she always made sure she got the day off and attended the ceremony. Just always being there. Like if I had a bad grade and I came home upset she would make me dinner or something and tell me it would be OK, that she knew I could do it."

Parents become involved in the educational lives of their children at different levels (Epstein, 1995). At the lowest level parents provide for the basic needs of the children at home. This includes making sure that students receive proper nourishment and rest so that they are able to attend school on a regular basis. When they are able, parents may become involved more directly and more visibly by serving as a volunteer or by supporting events that take place at the school. Moving along the involvement

continuum, parents may choose to participate in the learning activities of the students. Examples of this type of involvement include attending teacher conferences, helping with homework, and, when necessary, attending meetings at the school to discuss the individual educational plans for their student. At the highest level, parents will deploy community, family, and school resources to enhance the education of their children.

A parallel scale of parental involvement is useful for understanding how parents shape and nurture the college aspirations of their children. At the lowest level, parents will express what might be called "benign support" for their children's educational and career aspirations. This usually takes the form of statements that parents will support their children in whatever they decide to do, even if the choice made by the student does not involve going to college. From there, parents may become more direct in shaping college aspirations by verbally expressing their desire for their children to attend college. At the higher levels of involvement parents begin to deploy resources to enhance their children's chances to attend college. For some families the goal is not simply to go to college, but to make it to the best college possible. The deployment of resources at this level takes various forms, ranging from the purchase of a home computer, to the establishment of college savings accounts, to the enlistment of tutors and test preparation courses for the ACT and the SAT.

Hannah appreciates at the deepest level the fact that her mother was always there to support her academic pursuits, whether in the literal sense by taking time off from work to attend awards ceremonies, or in the emotional sense by sharing Hannah's excitement as she waited to get accepted into college. But as Hannah would discover, the verbal encouragement she received from her mother, while vital to Hannah's emotional

well-being, was not sufficient to ensure that she would make it to college. Stated another way, her mother's verbal and emotional support was not matched by the actions required to see that she would make it to college. The limitations of her mother's support were felt by Hannah at the most basic level as she found herself trying to negotiate a process that was complete unfamiliar to both her and her mother. But when it came to getting ready to go to college Hannah was fortunate to have someone who could compliment the verbal encouragement she continued to receive from her mother:

> "I remember sitting at the dining room table with my typewriter trying to answer these questions on the college applications, and my mom would want to help me because she could see that I was frustrated, but I couldn't ask her because I knew that she wouldn't know. So I would call my uncle."

Seeking Approval: Extending the Support Continuum

Hannah describes the family environment in which she grew up as supportive, loving, and caring. Hannah feels that in a way her mother's side of the family, most of whom live in the town of Central, pitched in to compensate for what might have been lacking due to the absence of a father in Hannah's home. To this day, members of her extended family get together to celebrate birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions. One of the things Hannah appreciates most about her aunts and uncles is the nature of her relationship with them. They really were, as Hannah says, more than just "extended" family. They showed an interest in the each other's lives, and saw it as part of the

obligation to the larger family unit to help in the raising of each other's children. "Even though I came from a single parent home," says Hannah, " I was still taught to love, obey, and respect other people." As a result of this close kinship Hannah feels a deep sense of connection and belonging with the members of her family, both the immediate and the extended one.

Hannah enjoys a special relationship with one uncle in particular. He, too, lives in the town of Central and has been involved in Hannah's life from the time she was very young. Hannah is especially close to her uncle in part because he has a daughter who is the same age as Hannah. Growing up in the same town, Hannah and her cousin were virtually inseparable. They spent many days and evenings together in their younger days, and even now they talk on the phone almost daily. To Hannah, her cousin is the closest thing she has ever had to a sister.

Hannah has come to value her relationship with her uncle even more over the past few years. As she began to think more seriously about going to college, she found herself turning to him more and more for support. Her mother's support continues to encourage Hannah forward in pursuit of her educational goals, but there is something different about the support she receives from her uncle. Unlike the other members of her extended family, Hannah's uncle went to college, graduated, and, as a result, now owns his own business. It is hard to describe the difference in precise words, Hannah acknowledges, but the best way she can describe her relationship with her uncle is to say that he treated her just like a father would:

"He's always asking me 'are you still going to be a lawyer; are you doing this, are you doing that.' He's done that since grade school. There would be times when I would be talking to my cousin on the phone, and he would pick up the other phone and be like, 'girls, don't you think you should be doing homework,' or he'd pick up the phone and ask if I had gotten any letters back and how the application process is going."

In surrogate fashion, Hannah's uncle was able to step in and provide the tangible forms of support to complement the verbal encouragement Hannah was receiving from her mother. First, he helped Hannah with the application process itself. "He was on me from the first day of my junior year about applying to colleges," Hannah recalls. He also provided financial support to Hannah by paying the application fee and the tuition deposit that would allow Hannah to apply to Central. Even now, as Hannah is beginning to think more seriously about law school, his support continues. Through his regular contacts he keeps tabs on Hannah's academic progress, knowing full well the importance of good grades in getting into graduate school. Because he had been through it himself, Hannah says, he wants to make sure that she is doing it right so she could get into the law school of her choice.

Hannah knows that without the material support she might not have been able to afford to go to college at all. But beyond providing the material support and guidance that she needed in the college selection and application processes, she appreciates her relationship with uncle for the intangible ways that he supports Hannah's career aspirations. Perhaps it is this aspect of their relationship, the informal yet persistent

conversations about colleges and careers, that Hannah appreciates most. "Compared to my mom," declares Hannah, "he seemed to ask the right questions. He got me making sure that I was on the right track. "

Indeed, Hannah is on track to realize her educational and career aspirations. What her uncle has provided are the intangible forms of support that emanate from his own educational history. But the most important contribution that her uncle has made to Hannah's educational and career aspirations defies easy categorization. Hannah's own intuitive sense tells her that her life is headed in the right direction. But what she was not able to get from her mother was the validation that can only come from someone who has been where you want to go, who understands what it takes to get you there, and who is willing to invest themselves in your dream:

> "I was always looking for his approval on things that I did, things that I didn't do. Because I didn't have my dad to go to do that. And also, because he had gone through college. He'd been there before and he knew what was going on. It was that kind of support from a person who had already been through what I wanted to go through. And I always thought that I was doing something right when he would say 'good job,' or showed interest in what I was doing or in what I wanted to do.
>
> "It's always easier when it comes from somebody who knows you. He treats me just like a father would. It's really nice. He still keeps in touch with me, he'll call and I'll have a voice mail message from him like, 'you'd better be doing

well in school, can't wait to see those grades.' That kind of thing. He's always been there."

Conclusion: "Who Does She Think She Is?"

We have long recognized the importance of parental support and encouragement in shaping the college aspirations of young people. Not surprisingly, "parental expectations" is the most influential factor in determining whether or not a student will aspire to go to college (Stage and Hossler, 1989). But when it comes to college choice activities, students whose parents attended college, the primary determinant of the family socio-economic status, differ from students whose parents did not in important ways. Murphy (1981), for example, found that parents who had attended college themselves are much more likely to initiate the idea of attending college than are parents who did not. Stage and Hossler (1989) found that parents' education level positively influenced educational planning activities, such as parents' savings for college and discussions with students about college. In a later study Hossler and his colleagues (1998) confirmed the importance of these pre-college planning activities in increasing the likelihood of college attendance.

Perhaps encouraged by her early academic success, Hannah's mother knew that Hannah displayed the aptitude, the ambition, and the determination to "make something of herself." And, as one who knew firsthand the drudgery and alienation of life in the factory, Hannah's mother committed herself to doing everything in her power to see to it that Hannah would have a better life than what she was able to provide for her. Thus,

despite the fact that neither of her parents attended college themselves, Hannah knew from the time she was in grade school that she was destined for college.

Hannah's ability to realize her college aspirations is shaped by a combination of influences. In terms of the influence of the family members on Hannah's ability to get to college, her mother and uncle each in their own way are significant in Hannah's life. The verbal and emotional support offered by her mother and the guidance and direction from her uncle each show the vital role that family members play in the development of college and career aspirations. But at the same time, the ways in which Hannah's mother and her uncle express their support for of her educational and career goals points to an important distinction between active support on the one hand, and verbal encouragement on the other.

The verbal encouragement offered by Hannah's mother represents her best effort at contributing to the eventual success of her daughter. Fortunately for Hannah, she was able to look to her uncle to compensate for her mother's lack of resources. In essence, the different types of support given by mother and her uncle illustrates the difference between wanting the best for your children and knowing how to actually make it happen. This disconnect between parents' high aspirations for their children on the one hand, and the required knowledge, experience, and resources to facilitate the process of getting into college on the other is critical to our understanding of the various roles families can play in helping students realize their college aspirations.

Indeed, the types of support Hannah received for her college aspirations span the continuum. The encouragement shown by her mother and the support provided by her uncle, each in their own way, have proven to be vital in helping Hannah succeed. If she

continues in her current direction she will indeed graduate from Central College, and she hopes to add to this accomplishment the distinction of graduating with honors. She hopes to maintain her level of performance as she leaves Central and goes on to law school. Seemingly, the long journey toward the type of future she wants for herself is well underway. But there remains one more obstacle that Hannah must overcome if she is to continue on in the pursuit of her college and career aspirations:

> "It's weird because I get in different places I get really mixed support. I mean I get the most support from my uncle and his wife, and my mom. But outside of that they think that I'm crazy, you know, they think that -- I'm weird. Probably because I'm doing it and I'm going into debt. And I'm going into debt to get a degree to go into law school but they don't see it that far. They just think 'oh my gosh, she's paying how much to go to college and what is she actually learning from it.' Because they don't know.
>
> "They don't know anything about the college life and so it's odd to them and they think it's odd for someone like me to do it all by yourself and -- it's strange because I get support when I do something really great, like when I bring home really good grades. But if I have a bad semester, and I beat myself up over it, they're like 'what are you doing in college.' So you get this kind of mixed, strange support going on. Whereas people who have supported me from the beginning are like 'it's OK, you'll do better next semester.' "

As Billson and Terry (1982) point out, "the new values and behaviors that first-generation students must develop if they are to achieve their long-term goals of securing white collar or professional jobs carry some degree of conflict with the norms of their families and peers in the community of origin" (p. 67). Despite the range of support provided by her mother and uncle, Hannah must deal with the resentment from other members of her extended family over her desire to "become something better." She fully recognizes that in pursuing her career goals she is choosing to give up the way of life to which she is accustomed. She is also fully aware that the rejection of her family's lifestyle that is implied in pursuit of her career aspirations does not sit well with everyone. This balancing act reminds Hannah that while she has publicly expressed her desire to become middle class, she must maintain relationships with those family members whose lifestyle she is trying to leave behind:

> "I think that maybe they think I treat them like they're not good enough. Like when I go to Christmas dinner, they're like 'she just doesn't want to be like us. What's wrong with her, what's wrong with the way we live.' But I think there is something wrong with the way they live. I want to be -- I mean, what are they doing? I guess if they're happy, then no there's nothing wrong with the way they live...But if they're not happy, then yeah, there is something wrong with it. If all they care about is me failing then they're obviously not happy."

II. "The Professional Woman"

Hannah has talked about becoming a lawyer from the time she was eight years old. At the age of eight Hannah's desire to become a lawyer is perhaps no more significant than my four year old son's current plans to become a firefighter. His knowledge about what firefighters do is based on what he has observed in movies and in books. While he may decide later in life to pursue something else, from where he sits right now the appeal of sirens, hoses, and rubber boots is strong enough to shape his desire for what he wants to be when he grows up. Similarly, Hannah's understanding at that early age of what it means to be a lawyer lacked any real substance. What she knew about the legal profession was limited to what she was able to learn about the work and lifestyle of lawyers from how they were portrayed on television. Hannah may not have understood much about the work that a lawyer does, but, as she recalls, "it was cool when you were eight to walk around and tell your friends that you were going to be a lawyer when you grow up."

Hannah's dream of becoming a lawyer has endured. In fact, as Hannah worked her way through junior high and then high school her resolve to achieve her goal grew even stronger. No doubt encouraged by her early academic success, Hannah continues to do well academically at Central College. She is beginning to think about preparation for the LSAT, which she plans to take some time within the next year. Hannah has also been talking to her uncle, himself a college graduate and successful businessman, about her goals. He has been a key figure in Hannah's life, especially in the support he has shown for her educational aspirations from the time she was in grade school. Thanks in large

part to the support of her uncle, Hannah's dream of becoming a lawyer, once a childhood fantasy drawn from television, day by day moves ever closer toward becoming a reality.

Hannah plans to pursue another dream following graduation from law school. What Hannah wants as much as anything in life is to marry and have a family of her own. She loves spending time with children, often volunteering to baby-sit for the children of Central College faculty and staff members. But when Hannah decides that she is ready to start her own family it will not be at the expense of her other priorities. "A family will have to fit into the plan somewhere along the line," she says, "but I want to do something more than just stay at home." Having grown up in a single parent home, Hannah saw firsthand the consequences of placing family over career. To Hannah, her mother's decision to stay at home rather than work outside the home has robbed her mother's soul of any sense of personal identity. Stated in Hannah's words, her mother is not surviving.

Mothers and Daughters

The mother-daughter relationship is a critical aspect of the psycho-social development of adolescent women (Rainey and Borders, 1997). One area where the effects of this relationship are manifested is in the development of the self-concept of the adolescent woman (Gilligan, 1982). Adolescent women, Gilligan argues, develop a strong sense of identification and affiliation with the primary caregiver, which for most is the mother. As a result of this close affiliation and identification with their mothers, adolescent women develop the ability to empathize with others, to try and understand circumstances and their effects as others experience them. In the realm of moral decision making, adolescent women, as a result of their highly developed sense of empathy, tend

to focus on the relational aspect of situations where a framework for moral decision making is needed. In practice, this means that rather than making moral judgments simply on the basis of objective standards of right and wrong, women first seek to understand the motivations of the person who commits the act in question. Rather than deciding whether stealing a loaf of bread is wrong, women might reason, let us first seek to understand the circumstances of the person involved that would lead them to steal.

This work in the realm of women's moral development causes us to consider how the personal identification daughters develop with mothers leads adolescent women to define their own self-concept in the context of this relationship. One important aspect of the mother-daughter relationship we can discuss with a great deal of confidence is its influence on the career choices of adolescent women (O'Brien and Fassinger, 1993). In the most general of terms, the career choices of adolescent women are characterized by the extent to which they develop a strong career orientation versus a strong family orientation. One of the strongest predictors of a career orientation in adolescent women is the presence of a "pro-feminist attitude." High ability women, like Hannah, who possess a pro-feminist attitude are likely to favor nontraditional, high prestige jobs over traditional, "feminized" occupations (Fassinger, 1987, 1990).

Thus, it is apparent that the relationship between mother and daughter is crucial in the development of career aspirations in adolescent women. At the most basic level, the career choice of women is characterized by the extent to which they display a strong family orientation versus a strong career orientation (Fassinger, 1987). As we might expect, one of the strongest predictors of the development of a career orientation in women is the presence of a "feminist orientation," defined in part as the presence of

liberal gender role attitudes (Fassinger, 1990). This characteristic, along with high ability and the presence of agentic characteristics successfully predict high levels of career orientation, as well as career choices that were high in prestige in adolescent women (Fassinger, 1990).

Theoretical explanations of the influence of the mother-daughter relationship on adolescent women's career identity development divide into two camps. Psychoanalytic explanations emphasize "daughters' unconsciousness internalization of maternal values and behaviors, as well as the meaning of these values and behaviors" (Boyd,1989, p.292). The consequences of close identification of the daughter with the mother, argues Boyd, are felt as adolescent women begin the process of separation and individuation. During this time adolescent women begin to develop their own self concept, a process that requires them to first define themselves in relation to the values and behaviors they see expressed by their mothers. This process of separation, the time when adolescent women begin to differentiate themselves from their mothers, serves as the backdrop against which women begin to develop their own views toward, among other things, the relationship between gender, family, and work.

Social learning theorists, on the other hand, rely on the principles of modeling to explain the process by which young women come to identify with their mothers. By having their imitative behaviors reinforced during early adolescence, young girls eventually internalize the mothering behaviors as their own. Viewed in this way, young women literally learn to be like their mothers. Regardless of the theoretical explanation, Boyd writes, the mother-daughter relationship is the primary influence in shaping the self-concept of adolescent women. One area where this relationship takes on particular

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significance is in the development of views toward gender roles. Using their mother as a baseline, adolescent women begin to form their own views of the relationship between gender, work, and identity. In Hannah's case, her mother's expression of her identity served as a backdrop against which Hannah began to develop her own sense of gender and work.

"Part of my reason for wanting to be a lawyer," Hannah recalls, "was because at that age my mom was at home." Granted, there was nothing unusual about her mother being at home while Hannah was growing up. Hannah didn't know anything different because, as she puts it, "everybody else's mom was at home doing the same thing. I didn't know what else to expect." As might be expected, her mother was the first real role model that Hannah had. But Hannah would soon discover another role model, one whose choices were very different from her mother's and, by consequence, whose very way of life was vastly different that what Hannah had come to know with her mother. "So I had my mom," says Hannah, "and that was good enough for a while." But then, as Hannah puts it, this striking woman rolled into her neighborhood, "this knight in shining armor:"

> "We had a neighbor that was really good friends with my brother. She's an interior designer and she is just brilliant. She is a professional and she owns her own business, and any time I talked to her I was just in awe. You know, look what she's done. She went through college and she did this and she did that. She's doing it for herself because she enjoys it.
>
> "...I was really impressed with her. I was young and she used big words and I had no clue what they meant. And to see her when she left the house, she

was always dressed so perfectly, had this briefcase, the portfolios with designs in them. To see her work and to go in and see the office that she had in her home with the big drafting board. It was cool, you know? Every other mom on the block they just stayed at home and did laundry and cooked and cleaned and she didn't do that. I mean she did that too when she came home, but to see all of that was just like 'wow,' you know, 'a woman can do it.' And I want to do it. I wanted to be a professional woman."

The differences between her mother and her neighbor were stark. What Hannah saw in her neighbor was a strong personal and professional identity, one based on a solid educational foundation. She was impressed with the fact that her neighbor had waited until she was forty before starting her family. What this said to Hannah was that it was indeed possible to work a family around a career. And her neighbor seemed to make it work. She appeared confident in the way she carried herself, she was professionally competent and, above all else, she seemed to genuinely enjoy her work. By contrast, Hannah saw in her mother the consequences of missed opportunity brought on by extreme self-sacrifice. "I saw that my mom was just, you know, a mom and raising kids," recalls Hannah. "I decided right there that just wasn't me. I'm glad mom stayed home with us, but I couldn't see myself doing that."

As Hannah reflects on her aspirations for college and career she points to the one aspect of her background that she identifies as exerting the most influence on the development of her strong career orientation is her mother's life circumstances. Hannah's ambivalence toward her mother's way of life centers on the void between the separate

worlds in which they seemed to live. Thus, the orientation toward family as expressed by her mother held little appeal for Hannah as she began to imagine the type of relationship she desires to have with her own children. By going to college Hannah hopes to develop the parental voice that will allow her to participate in the daily lives of her children in a more meaningful way:

> "I felt like it was very hard to talk to her about things because she wouldn't understand. It's not that I think my mom is stupid, but things like current events, current issues, she couldn't relate to. And I began to link that to her staying at home...She was always home, always there. I saw other parents who worked, they were able to relate to issues. I just began to think that she was so secluded in this house, never did anything without us, and because of that she was so isolated.
>
> "If there was something that we had to talk about in school, or that we had to write about and I didn't understand, or I didn't know which side I was on, I kind of wanted to be able to talk to her about it and say 'well, what do you think.' And she didn't have an idea, or couldn't tell me what it was or what it was about. I just thought that was something that was missing in our relationship. Because other people could go home and talk to their parents about it. And I think I missed out on that. I think we could have been closer...In high school we weren't that close."

The story of family life was conveyed to Hannah in the form of the words and actions of her mother. First and foremost, her mother's story is one of traditional gender roles. Watching her mother she began to question the "selflessness" that characterized

her mother's commitment to her family. While she appreciated having her mother at home, Hannah nevertheless preferred a more balanced approach to the family-career continuum. One aspect of family life Hannah feels she missed out on is a core set of beliefs and values on which the members of her family could agree. To Hannah, one of the most important responsibilities of parenthood is to provide a baseline of values that guides the decisions of the children:

> "I see a lot of kids having the same ideas or the same beliefs about issues as their parents because they were able to talk about it...They were able to show their kids, you know, 'I see the connection, I see that point.' Whereas I didn't have anyone like that to talk to and I just think that's a vital connection. When you have questions about something you should be able to answer it to the best of your knowledge, and I think that my mom didn't have that knowledge because she was so isolated.
>
> "I think that ideas about certain issues are kind of like values that get passed down from one family to another. And I think that I missed that because my mom wasn't aware of it. I didn't have anyone to guide me in my thinking, didn't have anyone to say 'well, legally this is right and legally this wrong.' Whereas is she was able to talk about it she would be able to say 'I see it this way and I think that it's the best because of this.' And so I had to talk about these issues, or to think about these issues, I had to do it myself and establish my own opinions, which is good in a way, but it's that missing out on the family link."

Despite the benefits of having her mother at home, Hannah feels that in the final analysis both she and her mother missed out on a critical aspect of family life. The sense of loss runs deeper than the inability to talk about current events, or even the missed opportunity to be closer to her mother. What is lacking in the relationship Hannah shares with her mother is the one aspect that for Hannah is most crucial in her view of the family life: the opportunities for parents and children to participate in the shared construction of systems of values and meaning. "It is through attentive love," Belenky writes, "the ability to ask 'what are you going through?' and the ability to hear the answer that the reality of the child is both created and respected" (p. 189).

What her mother was not able to do was to provide an atmosphere where she and Hannah could work together to create a common ground on which a family identity could be forged. The common ground for Hannah is not necessarily a forum within which her mother could impart a prescribed set of values and standards to guide her life. Rather, Hannah longed for a common ground defined as a forum for conversations, where she and her mother were equal participants in sustained parent-child dialogue. To put it another way, what was missing in Hannah's relationship with her mother was the parental voice that would enable her mother to participate in the creation of Hannah's story. "Daughters," Belenky states, "wish their parents to have voices of their own so that they might be full participants in an ongoing conversations" (p. 176).

> "I think that I would like to have a family and be able to raise the child with the same values. That's part of the identity of the family, I think. And that it's not so much to say that they have to see it the same way, but they need to be

aware of how I would see it. I just think that they would have a better understanding.

"When I have children I want to make sure that I always know what's going on, not only in their school but the world that they live in. I see it as two different generations have two different worlds. And my mom was kind of stuck in her world. She didn't take an active way to try to make this bridge between our worlds. And that's what was really hard. Because when I had a problem she was like 'we didn't have that kind of problem in school.' And I want to make sure that when I have kids that I know what's going on in their world and how it's different and learn how to maybe help them or show them that, you know, it's OK."

The "significant other" can play a role in shaping the college choice experience at various points along the way. Indeed, significant others play a central role in the Hannah's story of how she was able to realize her aspirations by making it to college. The person who had the most direct influence on Hannah's ability to make it to college is her uncle. In addition to the direction he provided in the college selection process and the financial assistance he provided so that Hannah could complete the application process, the significance of that relationship continues in other ways. The periodic calls to offer encouragement, his insistence on seeing her semester grades, and the gentle prodding she receives to make sure she is on track in the law school application process all remind Hannah that she is not alone in the pursuit of her aspirations.

But there is present in Hannah's story the presence of a significant other of another sort. Hannah's neighbor, whom she refers to as the "professional woman," played

no direct role in helping Hannah get to college, nor did she influence Hannah's decision to attend Central College. Further still, her neighbor provided no material support. Yet, her presence of in Hannah's life profoundly shaped Hannah's educational and career aspirations. Rather than exerting influence in the form of direct involvement in her life, her neighbor projected an image that Hannah would use to define the kind of life she hoped to create for herself by going to college. For Hannah, the image of the "professional women" as projected by her neighbor was crucial in helping her to imagine herself living an adult life other than the one she saw expressed by her mother.

As a smart, ambitious, career oriented woman, Hannah faces the challenge confronting most college women today whose desire it is to "have it all" (Machung, 1989). In this sense we can view Hannah's college aspirations as an expression of her feminist views toward women and work. Within this framework we can understand Hannah's aspirations for law school as the rejection of the traditional gender roles as expressed by her mother, an orientation manifested in her desire to "do something more than just stay at home." But while Hannah's career orientation will indeed allow her to construct a work identity different than that of her mother, there is another aspect of her college aspirations related to her new image of the "professional woman." In addition to allowing her to find meaning in her work, Hannah's college aspirations are significant in helping her build and maintain a strong identity, for both herself and the family she hopes to have someday.

In the final analysis, Hannah recognizes the conflict and tension that often accompanies the educational and career aspirations of adolescent women. For Hannah, the options from which she can choose in defining her educational and career aspirations

are personified in her mother and her neighbor, the two women whose lives Hannah knows best, and whose own choices have sharpened Hannah's thinking on what she wants to accomplish in her life. She has weighed the benefits and the costs of each choice in her mind, and is more convinced now than ever that the only way to be true to herself is to keep her eyes on the prize she identified back when she was eight years old. And Hannah has not lost sight of the fact that her ability to continue on in the pursuit of her career goals is due in large part to her mother's willingness to sacrifice her own:

> "My mom would always tell me that she was at home for me. I loved having my mom at home, it was great. But now that I look back on it I feel that maybe it deprived her of something she could have done."

III. "Trying to Survive"

The mother-daughter relationship provides a useful framework for understanding the origins of Hannah's college and career aspirations. Through Hannah's reflections we begin to understand the complex ways in which her own career aspirations continue to develop against the backdrop of her relationship with her mother. On the one hand, her aspirations for college reflect a strong career orientation, a preference developed at an early age, and which was strengthened as she became more aware of the limitations of being a "stay-at-home" mom. With the help of her college-educated, career-oriented neighbor, Hannah was able to see a new model for the working-women, one in which career success and professional fulfillment serve as the foundation upon which a strong personal identity is formed.

While a college degree is the first step toward Hannah's goal of becoming a "professional woman," there is aspect of college aspirations that speaks to another, less apparent expression of her feminist orientation. In response to her predicament Hannah is attempting to create a new story of the family life in contrast to her mother's. Hannah's image of the family life is founded on the ability of parents to bridge the gap between themselves and their children, to provide moral and ethical guidance, and to impart a set of values. Thus, Hannah's desire is to create this new version of family life for herself and her children, one in which parents and children together build a family identity around the shared construction of systems of meaning. In this sense, going to college will provide her with the credential necessary to continue on in pursuit of her ultimate career goals and, more importantly, will provide her with the parental voice necessary to

participate fully in the lives of her children. Her decision to attend college, her desire to become liberally educated, and her image of the lifestyle that will accompany her status as a lawyer are all moving her toward this new version of the family life, a version founded upon her own story of the relationship between gender, work, and identity.

A degree from Central College, then, represents many things to Hannah. At the most basic level graduating from college represents something unique in her family, as she will become the first in her immediate family and only the second in her extended family to earn a college degree. Her college degree also represents an important step in acquiring the credential necessary to gain access to law school. In this sense, a degree from Central represents a first step toward life as a practicing attorney and her standing as a professional woman. But graduating from a liberal arts college means something much more profound to Hannah than racking up another academic accomplishment or enhancing her opportunities for law school.

By going to college Hannah hopes to avoid the shortcomings of her mother's decision to stay at home and raise children. In Hannah's estimation, the only way to ensure that she is more open-minded than her mother is to push herself into unfamiliar academic and intellectual territory. She looks forward to her last two years at Central in part because of the changes she knows will take place within her. "I have positions and opinions on certain issues now, she explains, "but I know that with two years left those views will probably change." One view that she knows will not change is her resolve to expose herself to "everything that's out there" so as to strengthen the relationship between her and her own children. For Hannah the college degree will provide her with the foundation upon which the other aspects of her college aspirations will rest:

"To graduate from a liberal arts school, and a private one at that. To be able to apply to law school and say that I will be graduating from Central College in '99. I just have this image that this diploma, once you get there, it will help you in other places. To help me get out of here, to help me get out of Central so I don't get stuck in the same place, the same run of the mill thing that I watched my older cousins or my mom and all of her family do, and I just don't want to do that.

"...I think that a liberal arts education is important to survival and success, and if you want to be successful then you have to expose yourself to everything that's out there. And I think that might trace back to my mom when I saw her at home and she's so narrow minded, and she hasn't seen everything. I want to make sure that I get exposed to everything and that I'm more open-minded than my mom. So it was very important that I had a school that backed my ideas about reaching out to all these different areas and become familiar with them."

So for Hannah, going to Central College is helping her achieve what she has decided is most important in her life. Once she graduates from law school she will consider going back and raising a family. "If it all works out," she cautions. At that point in her life, Hannah hopes to have a better idea of who she is and what she ultimately wants to achieve in her life. "And I won't be stuck in a family rut where family comes before," she goes on to say. "I hope to have this career established and then build my family around that. And hopefully by doing that I wouldn't be restrained by a family. Because I don't think that my mom ever reached an identity of her own. She married, had kids and that's it. She didn't reach anything that she wanted to."

Trying to Survive

Hannah talks about the meaning of her desire to establish a strong career identity for herself and a common identity for her own family in terms of her ability to survive. As the central metaphor for the feminist movement, "survival" is a response of women to the withdrawal of men from family life (Belenky). Women became strong and independent, Belenky argues, because their survival and the survival of their children depend on it (p. 173). In Hannah's case, survival takes on added significance. On a practical level she attributes her successful experience at Holy Cross High School to surviving those difficult first few months, during which time she questioned the wisdom of her decision to attend there at all. And on a larger scale, her goal of graduating from Central and going to law school has survived despite the resentment from members of her extended family. And of more immediate concern to Hannah is surviving her two remaining years at Central. Although she has done well academically she has had to sacrifice much of her social time in order to earn enough money to remain at Central.

While Hannah has proven that she is indeed a survivor she knows that the real test of endurance has only begun. And when Hannah considers all that is at stake in her attempt to complete college and go on to law school, the need to survive takes on profound importance. In a world of moral relativism and multiple realities, the key to Hannah's survival is to develop a strong personal identity for herself, which she can then use to provide a common framework through which family members can participate in the shared construction of a system of values and meaning. As Hannah tries to capture the essence of college aspirations, she once again looks to the plight of her mother for grounding:

"I think that in order to survive in society today you have to be aware of everything, every aspect and every side to an issue to be able to go out there and have a belief and let it -- to let that belief actually live, survive. You have to be open to all areas of that. And if you don't know then someone comes along and says 'well, what about this?' And then it just isn't there anymore.

"...So survival means being able to take a position and withstand criticism because you're aware of the different aspects of the position, and you can maintain your own position and you own identity. And in this sense my mom is not surviving. She just doesn't have an identity all her own. She goes to work because she has to at a job she doesn't like, in an environment she shouldn't be in. And she does it just to survive. She hasn't known any other way.

"Survival for her means just getting by. Even if it means not being yourself. Because she's not herself when she goes and works on the line. When she comes home she's not herself. And I don't want to be stuck that way."

Epilogue

As I had become accustomed to doing throughout the interview process, I called the campus security department at Central College to arrange a follow-up interview with Hannah. I was surprised to learn from one of the officers there that Hannah no longer worked for campus security. Hannah had been a student officer from the time she entered Central, often working as many as twenty hours per week so that she could afford to stay in school. Not only did Hannah no longer work for campus security, the officer went on to tell me, Hannah was no longer a student at Central. I found this bit of news rather surprising, to say the least. Fortunately, I had saved the phone numbers from the other places where Hannah had worked during the school year, as I often would have to contact her at work to make arrangements for our meetings. I was finally able to reach her at a local business in town, a distributor of satellite equipment, where Hannah had been working part-time for about two years. Hannah was very interested in meeting with me again to update me on her story. As she told me at the time, it had been a very interesting eighteen months.

Indeed, it was true: Hannah was no longer a student at Central College. Because of her busy work schedule, Hannah had chosen to drop one of the courses she was taking in the spring semester of her sophomore year. The course was part of the pre-law curriculum and was unusually demanding, she recalls. Rather than risk failing the class, Hannah withdrew from the course, with the hope of making it up over the summer. But she was not able to make up the course over the summer because, in her words, "I was literally working four jobs over the summer. I just didn't have time to take a course."

The four jobs, of course, were necessary so that she could make enough money to return to Central in the fall. Ironically, what Hannah didn't realize was that in dropping a course she had fallen below the minimum number of credit hours to maintain eligibility in the fall. Caught in a dilemma, she chose to take a leave from Central because without the financial aid she simply could not afford to return.

Over the course of the summer, Hannah had managed to weed out a few of the part-time jobs she held and settled on the two she enjoyed most. One of the jobs she kept was the one with the satellite company. She was given a full-time job, promoted to sales, and was asked to stay on full-time once the summer was over. The situation worked well for Hannah. Not only would she be able to save money by working full-time, she would be able to take a few courses at the local community college, which Hannah felt was important in keeping her connected with her educational goals. The company even offered to pay for the remainder of Hannah's college education if she would agree to stay on indefinitely. "It's enticing to want to stay here," Hannah admits. "But I can't. It's a real learning experience, but it's not what I want to do." What she wants to do, she must continually remind herself, is to move ahead with her plans to graduate from college and go on to law school.

When Hannah does return to college to pick up where she left off, it will not be the same as it was before: She is fairly certain that she will not return to Central College. In her time away from school she has come to realize that the things that attracted her to Central in the first place are no longer as important to her as they once were. There are some things about Central that still appeal to her. She enjoyed her time in the classroom and she treasures the relationships she developed with the other students in campus

security. But in other ways, she has gotten all she can out of her time at Central. Whereas she once took comfort in the familiarity of the surroundings, she is now ready for something completely different; and whereas the desire to be close to her family once made it difficult for her to consider going anywhere else, she now feels ready to prove that she can make it on her own. "It changed from going to the school that you have always known," Hannah says, "to being stuck in the environment."

Working full-time and taking classes in the evenings at a community college is a far cry from the life of a full-time college student on the campus of a small, private, liberal arts college. But Hannah keeps it all in perspective, knowing that the present situation is temporary. But as she expected, the reactions among the members of Hannah's family to her circumstances have been mixed:

> "My uncle, he's letting me do it. He keeps asking me 'what are your plans, what's going on.' And it's nice because we can also talk about the business aspects. We understand each other. He is still there.
>
> "But he wants me to go back, of course, as soon as possible. Because he's afraid, too, that maybe I won't go back."

As for her aunts and cousins, who have resented Hannah for her career aspirations all along, the reaction was also predictable:

"They think I have failed. They don't think I will ever go back. They think they were right. 'Look what Hannah's doing. She's messing up her life.' I hear that a lot. That I'm ruining my life."

Hannah is quick to defend herself against the suggestion that by taking a leave from Central she is ruining her life. However, she does admit that the recent change in plans is the result of shifting priorities in her life. A degree from Central College is something Hannah has been aiming for from the time she was in grade school. By not returning to Central College, she knows that she is settling for something less from her college experience. "I think that when I get my degree," she says, "wherever that may be from, it's not going to be as rewarding as if it were from Central." But on balance, Hannah feels that she has much more to gain by moving on to another college, in another town, where she can continue to pursue her educational and career aspirations free from the scrutiny that has plagued her thus far:

"Being able to live my own life and do what I want. I want to live my own life and not have somebody watching it or trying to live it for me. A degree is important. And I will have one. I'm not sure where from yet, but just being able to live my own life -- that's what I want.

"You don't want to stay in an environment when it's that negative. When people are just waiting for you to ruin your life. If I'm going to ruin it, I want to do it in secret."

The one person who is having the most difficult time with Hannah's changing circumstances is her mother. On the one hand, Hannah's mother knows the importance of a college education. Like Hannah herself, she wants a life for Hannah much better than the one she was able to provide. And also like Hannah, she other has full confidence in Hannah's ability to finish college. But when it comes to the unexpected change in Hannah's educational circumstances, her mother finds herself unable to make sense of it all:

> "I think it was very hard on her that I decided to do this. She hears a lot of stuff. But it's really hard on her because she doesn't know what to do, what to say, what to think. She doesn't know what to say when people say to her 'your daughter is ruining her life.' "

Still Surviving

Seemingly, Hannah had all of the elements in place to enhance her chances of attending and eventually graduating from college. First, she knew from the time that she was in the seventh grade that she would go to college. Recent research has shown that students whose aspirations for college develop before the eighth grade are more likely to attend college than those are students who wait until high school before considering going to college (Hossler et al, 1998). Second, she was fortunate to be able to attend a high school in a middle class suburb of Logan, where most of the other students came from homes where at least one parent was college-educated. As McDonough (1996)

would argue, the educational values of the middle class families who attend Holy Cross are reflected in the amount of emphasis that the teachers, counselors, and administrators there place on college preparation and planning. And underlying both of these important factors is the fact that Hannah, from the time she was in grade school, displayed a high level of academic ability.

But there were also circumstances working against Hannah in her attempt to realize her college aspirations. First, because her mom was not equipped to offer more than verbal encouragement for her college and career aspirations, Hannah had to seek support from outside the home in order to be able to go to college at all. Not only was her mother unable to help Hannah, she deferred to Hannah as the "expert" in such matters, which reinforced that Hannah was indeed alone in trying to make everything work out. Second, during those first few months at Holy Cross, Hannah's fear of having her background exposed almost prevented her from being able to take advantage of the supportive environment. Wondering to herself, "what am I doing here," it is easy to imagine that Hannah had serious doubts about whether she belonged at Holy Cross at all. And perhaps the most difficult obstacle Hannah had to overcome is the resentment from some members of her family, and their expectations that she will fail in her attempt to leave behind their way of life for something better.

Although Hannah was able to make it to college, the challenges to the full realization of her college and career aspirations continue. To begin, Hannah has had to work twenty to thirty hours per week during the school year, often having to juggle three work schedules along with her class schedule, just to be able to remain at Central. While she has been unable to take advantage of many of the ancillary benefits of attending

Central because of her busy schedule, she was at least able to keep her head above water academically. That is, until last spring, when she was unable to keep up in one her classes and chose to drop it. The consequence of the drop, Hannah discovered after the fact, was that she failed to earn the minimum number of credit hours required to maintain her eligibility for financial aid. And even three years into her college career, the resentment from her aunts and cousins continues. The recent change in Hannah's circumstance is seen by those same family members that, just as they predicted she would, Hannah has failed.

Hannah sees things very differently than those members of her family who look upon her circumstances as failure in progress. Rather than dwelling on the most recent turn of events, Hannah continues to take the long view in making sense of her predicament. Where she is now, rather than representing failure, is merely a disruption from a journey that never promised to be smooth in the first place. Thus, despite the unexpected delay in the realization of her college and career aspirations, Hannah looks upon her current circumstances, and the fact that she has made it this far, as indications of her instinct for survival:

> "Even though you are not raised in the proper environment, one that's conducive to developing goals and then sticking to them, you kind of search out what you think you need to survive. I obviously needed role models. So when I grew up I picked out two. I didn't honestly realize I was doing it, but looking back, I did. I have my uncle -- he's successful and he's always been there; then I have my other mom -- the professional woman."

Hannah knows that she will eventually graduate from college and go on to law school. In fact, her work with the satellite company has helped her sharpen her thinking about her career goals by exposing her to the field of business law. And with the opportunity to live on her own and support herself, Hannah continues to move ahead in other important areas of her life. If she were writing a book about her life, Hannah explains, the major theme would be, not surprisingly, survival. But the chapter in which she situates herself now, she says, is still being written. Stated another way, her present circumstances are simply one episode in a much larger sub-plot. This is how the current chapter would read:

> "Something about being on the right path, but it being a winding path. Because you know, I go forward -- but yet I'm still here. But I've still got a couple of pages left to write. Hopefully, in the fall I'll be back on a straight path."

Chapter 3: Ethan

"I think the worst thing about it is feeling like I'm limited in what I can do. That's the worst thing. Sometimes I felt like I was just being held down, I didn't have any choice. Everything was going on without me. I felt like I was running a race with worn-out shoes."

Introduction

The system of education in the United States is based on the idea of contest mobility, in which the governing objective is to give elite status, in the form of educational distinction and college credentials, only to those who earn it (Turner, 1960). "Under contest mobility," Turner writes, "the object is to train as many as possible in the skills necessary for elite status so as to give everyone a chance to maintain competition at the highest pitch" (p. 863). This ideology of meritocracy emanates from the belief that ability and effort count for more than privilege and inherited status in a democratic system of education (Hurn, 1985). Underlying the meritocratic thesis, Hurn writes, is a conviction that achievement is a far more rational way of allocating status than ascription (p. 49). In this scheme the contest is open at all times and anyone can choose to play. And because the results are based on the achievements of the individual, those who come out on top are, rightly so, entitled to the privileges that accompany their new social position.

In theory, then, our system of education offers all students a level playing field on which to compete for the economic, social, and cultural rewards that await the winners. But we have learned from a strong tradition of research into the relationship between social class, education, and occupations that the competition for credentials and middle class status is far from open and fair. Social reproduction theorists in particular challenge the meritocratic underpinnings of our system of education. "Roulette," Bourdieu (1986) writes, "gives a fairly accurate image of this imaginary universe of perfect competition and perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties, in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one" (p. 241). The position of Bourdieu and others is that while the competition for educational distinction and college credentials may be open to anyone, not all participants began at the same place and thus not all have an equal chance of coming out on top. While this strand of social reproduction theory is not without its critics, a careful reader will find it difficult to deny that socioeconomic factors weigh heavily in the outcome of educational competition.

Ethan's Story

Ethan will probably transfer from Central College at the completion of the current semester, a decision dictated by his inability to afford what it would cost for him to continue at Central. He was forced to take out an additional loan in order to come back this year, and the interest payments on the loan requires him to work twenty hours per week during the school year. To compound his financial problems, his parents have informed him that the small amount of financial support they have been able to contribute

up to now will no longer be available. Ethan's only option is to transfer to one of the regional state universities, probably the one nearest his home, so that he can afford to finish college. He regrets that he will miss out on much of what attracted him to Central in the first place, namely small classes, a small student body, and more personalized attention in the classroom. But he also realizes that he really has no other options. Much to his dismay, Ethan's plans for his last two years of college are being shaped by his inability to secure the necessary financial resources.

Indeed, resources play a central role in Ethan's story of how he was able to make it to college. His financial difficulties are simply the latest, and the most obvious, example of the way his educational aspirations have been mediated by the availability of resources. Despite his inability to clearly articulate his career goals, Ethan never doubted that he would attend college. And despite the interruptions that have delayed his plan, he is on track to finish college and fully expects to find a position as a teacher once he graduates. In this sense, his story is not about overcoming seemingly overwhelming odds to graduate from college. Rather, his experiences and his reflections on them highlight for us at the most intimate level the ways in which family background, whether defined in terms of class, culture, or the all-encompassing designation of socio-economic status, affects one's ability to succeed in the educational system. As Ethan understands it, his educational predicament has been shaped more by the lack of social and cultural resources than by his financial situation.

Social classes are differentiated in part by the cultural dispositions that are formed unconsciously as people observe the patterns of behavior of those around them (Bourdieu, 1986). As we shall see, Ethan's social relationships have been shaped in large

part by his cultural disposition, which rendered him unable or unwilling to connect with his peers in meaningful ways. In high school the resource discrepancy between him and many of the other students, which he feels ultimately manifested in a disparity in achievement, created an animosity for Ethan that prevented him from joining the circle of "good" students. Later, as a college student returning to his hometown, he found himself working alongside mostly uneducated, unmotivated co-workers whose lifestyle did not appeal to him on any level. Consequently, he was unable to form meaningful relationships with his work peers as a young adult.

Ethan's experience illustrates the paradoxical nature of the relationship between family background and educational achievement: the ability to obtain valuable cultural capital in its institutionalized form (i.e., the college credential) is a function of the embodied cultural capital (i.e., disposition) one possesses in the beginning. Ethan aptly captures the essence of his predicament in his description of his educational experience as "running a race with worn-out shoes." For Ethan, graduating from college will signify that he has caught up with those whose positions at the outset of the race were far ahead of his own. As he makes clear with his actions and his words, you can still finish a race wearing worn out shoes. It just takes a little longer and is a little more painful.

I. The Elements of Family Life

Lifestyle and Aspirations

A lot of kids come home from school and there's no one home to watch after them, so they just sit and watch TV all day. Because they must find ways to occupy their time, many of these kids end up with no real direction in their lives, at least as far as their educational plans are concerned. As a consequence, they end up hanging out on the street. And once on the street, they become bored because they really have nothing worthwhile to do, which usually means that they end up getting into trouble. By contrast, some kids come home from school and their mom has dinner ready for them, she helps them with their homework, and maybe their dad checks over it to make sure that it has been done correctly. These kids, because their parents are involved in their education, probably spend their time very differently than those other kids. Rather than hanging out on the streets, they find ways to occupy their time more constructively. Maybe they are involved with a church youth group; maybe they attend plays and other events at the local school; or maybe they simply devote more time to their studies.

Ethan offers the two scenarios to illustrate what he understands to be the relationship between class and education. If the two scenarios represent opposite ends of a continuum, Ethan sees himself more toward the former. Indeed, much of his description is autobiographical. He was one of those kids who came home after school and watched television all afternoon. He did hang out on the streets with his friends instead of doing his homework. And he did get himself into trouble as a result, the most serious being the time he and a friend were caught drinking beer in the park -- when they

were in the sixth grade. And Ethan does attribute his behavior to a general lack of direction in his life.

Admittedly, the line that runs from lifestyle to educational outcomes is a circuitous one. But for Ethan the complexity of the equation can be distilled down to a few essential elements: "Whatever you do with your time," Ethan adds, "that's what you think about as being important." He goes on:

> "I don't know how to explain it, but I think there's a relationship between the families, the parents and jobs they have and the people that are around them, and the children, and then what happens to them in school. Money is definitely a factor too, but I think these are much more important.
>
> "Some people are successful and a lot of it has to do with their family. And a lot of people are not so successful in school and it has to do with families. A lot of it has to do with just what's talked about at the dinner table, that type of thing. Or the parents might have friends who come over and talk and ask you what you want to do, then you'll think about that. The company you keep.
>
> "I just think some of your lifestyle affects your relationships with people, and then your relationship affects the choices you make."

Ethan never really though much about careers when he was growing up. "In fact," he says, "I didn't know what I wanted to do for a career until my senior year when colleges started asking me what I wanted to choose for a major." He attended church frequently when he was younger, and so for a while he considered getting involved in

some aspect of religious life. He also knew a little about the work his father did, which Ethan now describes simply as "blue-collar work," and he was aware of what some of the other parents in his neighborhood did for a living. One guy drove a Coca-Cola truck, Ethan recalls, and a few others worked in the pickle factory in town. Again, blue-collar types of things. But beyond that Ethan knew little else about the world of work.

To make matters worse, Ethan did not know where to turn to look for help in deciding what he might want to do with his life. Much to his dismay, Ethan received little guidance from his parents. Not that they were indifferent to Ethan's educational and career aspirations. To the contrary, his parents had always expressed confidence in Ethan's ability to do well and to become successful in life. "When high school came around I didn't do very well," recalls Ethan. "And my dad's typical comment would be 'well, I'm proud of you no matter what grades you get.'" These words of support were common in Ethan's early educational years. "But," Ethan adds, "my parents didn't really give me any direction, like you should really think about what you want to do. They didn't give me options, really. They just said 'you're capable of doing what you want to do.' That's pretty much it."

The importance of a college education was understood by Ethan and his parents, even though neither of them had ever gone. So despite the vague expressions of support offered by his parents, Ethan always knew that he would go to college. Despite the wishes of his parents for him to be successful and the confidence they placed in his abilities to succeed, Ethan feels that the general ethos that characterized his home life did not support the words. The problem from Ethan's perspective is the incongruence between the words of encouragement offered by his parents on the one hand, and the

intentionality of attitudes and behaviors that might have helped ensure his success on the other. To put it another way, his lifestyle simply did not push him toward specific college and career aspirations.

> "I think my parents had a goal for me. I think they had this idea that I would do well in school. My parents didn't really teach me much as far as college and careers go, they were always a loving family and that's important. So I felt like I had a place to be loved. That has a lot to do with it, I think.
>
> "...I think my parents encouraged me to do well and I think they always encouraged me to be successful and do what I want to do. My dad has always said 'I'll support you, whatever you want to do.' But I don't think he had the resources to tell me what to do. Maybe they didn't think it was important."

Critical Conversations: The High School Experience

High school represents a critical crossroads in the pursuit of educational and career aspirations. The choices made by students during these four years in many ways determines whether they will go to college, which college or university they will attend, and whether or not they will persist to graduation. A study of high school students in the state of Indiana (Orfield and Paul, 1993) found that the vast majority of ninth grade students expressed a desire to go to college. But in later years many of the students with expressed college aspirations were not taking the college prep courses required for admission to four-year colleges and universities. The authors conclude that the low

college attendance rate in the state may be due less to lack of aspiration on the part of students, and much more to the poor, uninformed choices students make in high school.

From a theoretical standpoint, much has been written about the disparity in college attendance patterns. McDonough (1997) suggests that high schools contribute to attendance patterns through the amount, type, and quality of college counseling offered by the school, all of which is intended to reflect the prevailing values of the families whose children attend the school. As an example of this phenomenon, Karen (1988) found that elite prep schools concentrate on gaining access to elite colleges and universities for their students. My aim is not to reduce the complexity of these theoretical positions for the sake of simple comparison. For my purposes the lesson drawn from this body of work is this: while high school attendance is universal, it is meaningful to consider the ways in which the high school experience influences college aspirations only at the most local level.

Ethan's high school experience was shaped by his inability to participate in important conversations in the ways other students did. The term "conversation" refers metaphorically to the various forms of dialogue, both in and out of the classroom, that are part of the high school experience. His inability to participate in classroom discussions, for example, made it difficult for him to project himself as a "serious" student. Similarly, his lack of focus and clarity about his career goals made it difficult for him to be taken seriously as "college material" by his teachers and counselors. Ethan shares with us his experiences as a non-participant in these critical conversations, and the consequences for him as he attempted to give form and substance to his vague aspirations.

"Showing Signs of Being Capable"

Ethan noticed that many of the students in his classes seemed to be much more engaged in the material than he was. As a case in point, he recalls a biology course he took, a course that Ethan found rather boring and uninformative. "We just went through each section in the book and did fill in the blanks." But Ethan noticed one student in particular who apparently held a very different view of the class than he did. She seemed to always engage in the classroom discussions, and her level of participation indicated to Ethan that she was probably doing well in the class. Ethan approached her after class one day and began sharing his complaints about the class: he found it boring, and he didn't think the teacher was actually teaching the class much at all. The student, who Ethan knew was planning to go to college, responded to Ethan in a most surprising way:

> "She said 'well, you just have to know how to ask the right questions.' You have to know how to get things out of him, you have to ask him the questions so he can teach you.' And I thought about that, and that keeps coming back to me. If you don't really have a general understanding of what the subject is or what you're trying to ask, then you can't even ask the logical or intelligent question. I never knew what questions to ask him. I didn't even really know what biology was, what it really was, until after that class was over."

At the time Ethan concluded that the students who were participating in the discussions in biology class were simply more interested in the material than he was. He was even prepared to accept that they were "smarter." In retrospect, however, Ethan sees

his relative inactivity in the classroom as an insidious by-product of his lifestyle. These other families, Ethan now believes, were more adept at utilizing their available resources to the benefit of their children's education and, in many cases, they simply had more resources to deploy. Rather than a reflection of native ability, Ethan has concluded, the discrepancy in classroom participation reflects a much larger discrepancy in the amount of resources available to students in the home:

> "I think her parents probably talked to her about biology. And I'm sure her parents had biology in college, maybe had conversations, and it kind of piqued her interest and so she came in the biology class and asked the biology teacher 'well, what does this mean, I talked to my dad about this' and so she was able to have a good discussion in class.
>
> "It happens that way in math, for example -- this really bothers me. Seventh grade, I think we took a math exam or test to determine whether we're going to take algebra or not the next year. And I remember one kid telling me that the day of the test, he said 'well, I think I'm going to do real great on this. The last couple weeks my dad and I sat down and he taught me some algebra and, so, I'm going to do really well'. And he told me that if I do well, if I'm going to get in the algebra class I'm going to get a jet ski this summer.'
>
> "And I think about it now and that test just didn't seem very fair to me. So he's going to go on and take the algebra the next year, and it's going to be easier for him to take the more advanced math in the future. And the first time I ever saw an 'x' or a 'y' was on that test and I didn't know what it meant. And the kid

that sat next to me he had his father, who knew what algebra was a little bit. It was really elementary algebra that was on that test but if you knew anything about it you, I think that you showed signs of being capable."

From Ethan's point of view, what he lacked in high school is that which the students around him seemed to possess in abundance: the ability to participate fully and actively in the educational experience. Ethan noticed that some of his classmates seemed to take a more active role in classroom discussions. They would ask questions and make connections between concepts that signaled to Ethan a comprehension of the material that far exceeded his own. By comparison, Ethan simply did not feel comfortable or confident enough about his abilities to engage the teachers or the other students in ways that would perhaps help him to refine his own thinking on issues. Nor did he feel secure enough in his knowledge of specific subject matter to contribute to the discussion in the classroom.

Ethan's inability to ask the right kinds of questions in order to derive the most benefit from the educational experience rendered him a passive observer in most of his classes. While he does not dismiss the relevance of native ability in determining academic success, Ethan has come to believe that the primary cause of his own mediocre academic performance lies not in his inability to master the subject matter, but rather in his attitude toward school that led him to view himself as a passive recipient of education. His approach was to try and learn as much as he could and let the meritocratic process take care of the rest. It never occurred to Ethan that there might be ways to seek out a competitive edge beyond the bounds of natural ability and work habits. In this sense,

Ethan's inability to ask the right kinds of questions is merely an indication of a much deeper deficiency on his part. Beyond not knowing what questions to ask, Ethan was not predisposed to understand the importance of asking questions at all.

From the Dinner Table to the Classroom: The Relevance of Education

Ethan was excluded from full participation in his educational experience because of the sets of rules and assumptions under which he was operating. Knowing the importance of "asking the right questions" in the classroom, for example; or further still, recognizing that there are ways to work within the educational system to gain a competitive advantage over the other students in earning markers of educational achievement, have obvious implications for the way a student approaches their own educational experience. Ethan's assumptions about education, by contrast, led him to passively absorb that which the school had deemed important and rendered him content to compete "on his own," confident that the meritocratic process would sort things out accordingly.

While this aspect of the educational experience, understanding the rules of engagement, may have contributed in part to the nature of Ethan's educational experience, another more obvious form of exclusion was also taking place. "There is no doubt in my mind," Ethan suggests, "that students were treated differently by teachers and by the administration." The differences in treatment, according to Ethan, have to do with the varying expectations that were placed on the students. What seemed to make the difference was whether or not students had demonstrated academic promise in the past, and whether they were bound for college. If the student had a need for what the teacher

could offer, Ethan believes, then the teachers though they were doing their job by paying more attention to those students. But for the vo-tech students, who past performance and career interests suggested that they might not be "college material," the expectations, and thus the actual classroom experience, was very different. In essence, as Ethan puts it, the teachers "took an interest in the kids who had something to bring already:"

> "Like in our government class, when NAFTA was a big deal a lot of people were talking about it. I didn't know anything about it and a couple of kids were talking about it with our teacher and he seemed to have a real interest in talking to them about it but not an interest in telling us all what it really meant. I had no idea what it really was. But they were having an intelligent conversation about it, I mean they were talking about it and obviously understood it. But it would seem useless for other people and he didn't seem to want to talk to us about it.
>
> "Or our stock project, for example. Maybe some kids knew what stocks meant and what they are all about, but he didn't really describe them or what the significance of them was and why they are important. So, we did this entire stock project for the last month of our class and we were supposed to spend all this time in it, but a lot of kids didn't really understand why they are important. And so the teacher really spent time with the kids and talked about it with the students who had a general understanding of it."

It is easy to imagine a teacher feeling frustrated over a classroom climate in which students are not aware of current events such as NAFTA, or are not familiar with the workings of the stock exchange to a degree that would allow them to engage in meaningful classroom discussion. In a scenario such as this one the impulse on the part of the teacher to engage those students whose baseline of prior knowledge about the subject at hand closely mirrors their own is understandable. And even if Ethan's teachers did not intentionally engage the more knowledgeable students to the exclusion of the others, it is reasonable to accept that they were acting on the assumption that everyone in the classroom possessed roughly the same amount of prior knowledge. After all, anyone who reads the newspaper and pays attention to important events should be aware of the issues surrounding the introduction of NAFTA. Hence, some teachers might conclude that the lack of participation must be a symptom of something more attitudinal than substantive, revealing something about the low motivation level of the disengaged students and the lack of seriousness with which they approach their education.

But Ethan's version of his experience with these classroom discussions causes us to consider an alternative interpretation of the participation scenario. When the conversations in the classroom centered on middle class themes, like how to successfully negotiate the stock exchange; or when the ability to participate in discussions about current events was heavily dependent on lifestyle habits like dinner discussions, Ethan found himself once again on the outside. While we have an easy time imagining a frustrated teacher in a classroom partially made up of seemingly uninterested and disengaged students, it is just as easy to imagine a classroom in which some of the students are simply disinterested in the subject of the discussions. In other words,

Ethan's experience brings to light the possibility that there may have been students in the classroom, himself among them, who felt that neither the implications of NAFTA nor the workings of the stock exchange were relevant to the lives they were living. To state it another way, the conversation taking place in the classroom seemed to him to have no direct bearing on Ethan's life and, consequently, was a conversation for which his own life experience provided no vocabulary.

"What's a Kid Supposed to Say if He Doesn't Know What's Out There?"

Ethan's experiences in his biology and government classes shed light on what it is like for a student who is hindered from full participation in classroom discussions. In the cases of NAFTA discussion and the stock market project, Ethan was hindered by a perceived lack of relevance of the subject matter to his own life. But there exists within the high school a form of conversation that is both more pervasive and arguably much more important in its implications for students who aspire to attend college. Unlike the exchanges in the classroom, the conversation about college and career aspirations requires that students be fluent in yet another language.

One area where Ethan felt he lagged far behind many of his high school classmates was in his knowledge about various colleges and careers. By his own admission, he had given little thought to his future while growing up and even as late as his senior year in high school had still not clarified his options for college and career. He grew up believing that, in his words, "whatever would happen next would just happen." Consequently, he never felt the need to think about it much nor was he encouraged to do so by his parents. But despite the lack of clarity about his career goals, and his apparent

lack of concern about it, Ethan knew for sure that he wanted to attend college. He admits that he and his parents had bought into the ideology that defines success as going to college, getting a "good job," and "doing well" financially. Unfortunately for Ethan, he approached this critical crossroad with little else other than his vague notion of wanting to be successful.

Specifically, Ethan's lack of knowledge about college, both in terms of the different types of institutions and the process for getting there, and his inability to talk with clarity about his career goals affected his ability to present himself in a serious light. The consequences of non-participation in this conversation, as Ethan would learn, could be the difference between being thought of by teachers and counselors as a serious, career-minded prospective college student or as someone whose aspirations outpace their potential. Ethan shows us what it is like to be cast in the latter category:

> "Some students knew what they wanted to be. Even people who wanted to go to vo-tech, I think they knew what questions to ask. 'Well, I want to run this mechanics garage. Well, go to vo-tech.' That sort of thing.
>
> "I had no idea what I really wanted to do. There were times when I wanted to be a mechanic, times when I wanted to be a firefighter, times when I wanted to be a pastor. I remember going out to vo-tech to visit one time. I didn't know anything about it. Then I remember going to take the tutoring class for people who were planning on being teachers. I had no clue what I wanted to be."

"...I don't know how to explain it except that sometimes I feel like I didn't know anything about any side of it. I was just kind of in between somewhere. I don't think I really identified with any group. I mean I went to vo-tech and I was interested in what that was all about. I took the honors English my senior year, the composition class that everyone took who was planning to go to college. I was interested in what that was like. I took the tutoring opportunities for people who wanted to be teachers. I was interested in all of that, but I don't think I cared too much or thought about what any of it would actually be like."

Once again, Ethan found himself excluded from a conversation from which he could have benefited had he been able to participate. What separated Ethan from the middle class students in the domain of aspirations was his inability to talk with clarity and with focus about college and his career goals. In this instance the conversation was dominated by students with lofty career goals and by a staff of teachers and counselors who were more interested in working with amphibious, career-minded students. Lacking this capacity Ethan was assumed to be lacking the ability and the desire that one need to be taken seriously as a prospective college student:

"I remember talking to my high school counselor. In tenth grade we do our schedules for our junior and senior year, and a lot of people chose vo-tech as an option. And so I went out and visited a building trades class or something like that and I just didn't like it. It was mostly the people, but I -- she just asked me 'well, what do you want to do?' Well, what's a kid supposed to say if he doesn't

really know what's out there? So, I just said 'well, I really don't know what I want to do.' Maybe that sound like I just don't care, but maybe that means that I just don't know what options were out there for me...I think the counselor interpreted that as 'he doesn't care.' She probably interpreted it as 'he really doesn't care.'

"So I was encouraged to go to vo-tech, to go see. So I went to vo-tech with all the kids who were thinking about vo-tech. I didn't like it but that was something I was encouraged to because I didn't like my math class. Just because I didn't like my math class doesn't mean I couldn't have used it.

"...In my mind the counselor should be the person that is encouraging people to think about all their options and what that means for them. But, instead they seemed to just ask questions like "What do you want to do?" And if someone doesn't really understand what it means to take these different routes then I don't think that is just a stupid question."

Asking someone "what do you want to do" when they finish high school is to assume a baseline of knowledge and awareness on the part of the person being asked. First, the question assumes that the student has been exposed to enough of what's "out there" to know where he or she may fit within the contours of the labor market. It also assumes that the student understands the differences between the various types of occupations, whether in terms of amount of education required, range of income, or measures of status and prestige. Second, the question assumes that the student is aware of the differences between types of postsecondary institutions. To simplify the point, the student needs to understand the differences between the community college located

within his or her own neighborhood, the major research university located downtown, and the private liberal arts college located in the next county. Each potentially affects the student's life trajectory in different ways and he or she needs to understand which type is most likely to get them where they want to be in the short term and in the long term. As some of us find out after the fact, it is not true simply that "college is college."

By his own admission Ethan's thoughts about his future included everything from youth pastor to English teacher to homebuilder. When a high school guidance counselor asks the question of someone who has not been encouraged to give it serious thought the question takes on new significance. Though he had aspirations to become successful, he was unable to pinpoint with any degree of specificity what becoming successful for him entails. Did he mean he needed to make a lot of money? If not, then what type of occupations best suited his interests and personality? And perhaps most importantly, what level of education does he ultimately aspire to? Add to his uncertainty in these areas his lackluster academic record and it would seem entirely reasonable to conclude that Ethan, despite his internal convictions to the contrary, that he was indeed more suited for vo-tech.

Peer Conversations

As we will see later in this story, part of what Ethan most values about his time at Central College is the opportunity to learn from those around him. Beyond the obvious desire to become educated and earn a degree, Ethan is benefiting from being surrounded by students who can expose him to points of view different from his own. One of the greatest benefits for Ethan is that he is around people whose points of view include high

aspirations for themselves, as well as knowledge of the available resources to facilitate their attainment. Consequently, Ethan's career goals have become more clear since he arrived at Central, and he continues to challenge himself to experience as much as he can during his remaining years in college.

The students in Ethan's high school represented a wide range of abilities and aspirations. Ethan would later learn from one of the counselors in the school that there was about an even split between students from blue-collar families and students from college educated, professional families. As such, Ethan found himself on a daily basis in contact with students who exhibited the full range of educational and career aspirations: students who aspired to go to selective colleges; students who were content to obtain job training while in high school; and some, like himself, who were unable to talk about their future plans with any degree of clarity and certainty. And yet, as Ethan describes it, he never felt comfortable with a lot of the groups in high school. "I was really solitary," Ethan goes on to say. "I would sit with these people one day at lunch, and then the football players the next day at lunch. I just didn't try to become close to people. I just didn't want to become part of a group and then be influenced by them."

It is difficult to ascertain whether Ethan was completely free from peer influence in high school. It is safe to assume, however, that how Ethan chose to relate to his peers, especially those who had clearly defined educational and career goals, determined the extent to which he would benefit from being around them. We can only speculate along with Ethan as to why he was not more fully enculturated into one of the various peer subgroups or, to use Ethan's words, why he "didn't want to be part of a group and then be influenced." Had his grades been better perhaps Ethan would have identified more with

the woman in his biology class; or maybe had he made the effort to learn more about NAFTA, or had he summoned the courage to ask the teacher for an explanation of it, his perception of himself as an outsider in the classroom may have been altered.

Yet, rather than associating himself with those students in order to better himself he responded to these students very differently. As it stands, we can only conclude along with Ethan that unwillingness to try and form meaningful relationships with his college-bound high school peers was shaped by his perception of gaps in the way they view the world:

> "I didn't like a lot of those other people. This one girl in my biology class was so determined to get into the good colleges that she didn't care about learning anything. When I suggested that we don't have the answer sheet before the test so we could actually learn, she said 'no, I have to get good grades so I can get into college.' And I said 'what?' I didn't understand that. I didn't like some of those people and I didn't like some of those attitudes."

The Elements of Family Life: Conclusion

Ethan recognizes the power of the mundane aspects of family existence, those seemingly benign daily rituals, habits, and conversations that in the aggregate comprise a way of life. For Ethan, it is these aspects of his life, the things that are often taken for granted, that are most powerful. As he has reflected on the relationship between his family's lifestyle and his experiences in high school, Ethan has come to recognize the

consequences of having to compete with students and families who were more able to deploy social and cultural resources in order to gain an educational advantage. Lacking the background and experience to help Ethan develop specific college and career goals and concrete plans for getting there, his parents defaulted to the type of support they could readily give: they simply wanted Ethan to be happy and to "do well." But strategies for gaining a competitive advantage, including recognizing the importance of class participation and extracurricular involvement, was not something about which his parents were qualified to speak in concrete terms.

By contrast, many of the students in his class whose parents attended college were at a distinct advantage because they understood how to play the educational game. Further, many of these families were able to deploy educational and social resources and convert them into markers of academic achievement in ways that he was not able to. At one level we heard Ethan talk about his inability to participate in certain classroom discussions because he was unfamiliar with the subject matter, and because of he had no one at home to turn to for help. He also felt that he was handicapped by his inability to talk with specificity about his career goals, which he feels led the counselors to not take his stated colleges aspirations seriously.

But another important feature of knowing how to play the educational game is revealed in the general orientation one has to their role as a participant in the process of formal schooling. While having the ability to deploy resources on behalf of your children can result in educational advantage, knowing the importance of such behavior is often less a question of available resources than of background and experience. Things like encouraging students to participate in outside activities like student government, for

example, have the potential to fundamentally alter both the educational experience and the outcome for an individual. Involvement in these activities gave his classmates detectable advantages within the educational system, many related to the expectations for future performance placed on them by the staff at the high school based on past participation and achievements. So perhaps of more significance than Ethan's inability to actively participate was a lack of understanding of the inherent value of such participation. As Ethan aptly summarizes the phenomenon, the teachers seemed to respond more favorably toward those students who brought middle class educational histories and social backgrounds to the discussion.

II. A System of Trial and Error

Ethan characterizes his college experiences as a process of trial and error. To illustrate the analogy he points to the fact that he is now enrolled in college for the second time, following a dismal performance during his first attempt. He did not attend Central originally, having chosen instead to attend Atkins College, another small, private liberal arts college. He spent only a semester there during which time he struggled academically as well as financially, socially, and culturally. By his own admission, Ethan was not quite prepared for what awaited him at college. As he discusses later in this section, he continues to struggle now at Central, both in and out of the classroom, to keep pace with the students whose social, cultural, and economic resources surpass his own. Still, his experiences at Central, the second trial in his program to attain a college degree, is much improved over his first attempt.

As we shall also see, the significant influence of Ethan's community on his college and career aspirations was felt later in his life and is directly tied to his failed attempt to go to college. More specifically, it was in the period of time he spent back in his hometown following his first unsuccessful semester at Atkins when he truly felt his aspirations begin shaped by the people with whom he interacted. As painful and discouraging as it was at the time, Ethan now points to the experience of having to return home and work in what he describes as a series of "low-level" jobs that turned his life around. The lifestyle that awaited him in Utley City as a college drop out provided him with the incentive and the motivation to undertake one more trial in the pursuit of a college degree.

Thus, Ethan's story of going to college contains the elements that are central to understanding his current predicament as a student at Central. His original decision not to attend Central, his woeful first semester and Atkins, and his unfulfilling time as an hourly worker in Utley City all foreshadow what turns out to be the meaning of his eventual return to college. The story begins with Ethan's first college choice experience.

"They have more things than I do"

Vague though they were, Ethan's college aspirations nevertheless persisted through high school. His lackluster academic performance in high school, combined with his inability to talk in specific terms about his educational and career goals, suggested to his teachers and counselors that perhaps he was reaching beyond his abilities. Consequently, the guidance counselors in his high school led him toward postsecondary options that seemed to be more on a level with his abilities and interests. Further, the verbal encouragement he was receiving from his parents was devoid of the intentional, concrete supportive activities that might have facilitated his transition to the next level of his academic and career pursuits. Rather, the vague expressions of support expressed by his parents simply kept alive within Ethan his own vague notions about the benefits of college attendance.

Admittedly, Ethan and his parents thought of college as a monolith of institutions, each separated only by geography and cost. In Ethan's words, "we just thought college is college -- you just go to college." Had he not chosen to attend Atkins he probably would have ended up at the regional university where his brother attended briefly before dropping out. He had visited his brother a few times and "knew a few people there." To

Ethan, there was little else that was of any consequence in deciding where to go to college. But experience has taught him much about education and opportunity and he now fully recognizes the value of the type of education he is receiving at a residential, liberal arts college. At the time, however, the characteristics that attracted him to Atkins were far removed from the curriculum and the classroom:

> "I would say that choosing a college wasn't purely an academic thing. In high school I had a fairly good football team. I hadn't thought a lot about college. I think in our family it was more that my parents wanted us to be successful. I think they just wanted us to have more of an opportunity than they did. That's my general impression of what they felt. So I never really thought about college until football came around. I think the coaches thought that I could play a little Division III football. So some of my football coaches talked to a few schools, and those coaches came to me first.
>
> "My coaches didn't really talk to me about it, they just called the Division III coaches and they sent me some information. I never really spoke directly to my coaches about what it was like academically here or anything. Purely football."

Despite the resource discrepancies that have plagued Ethan throughout his educational life, he was fortunate to possess a resource that would prove vital in his college choice experience. To high school football coaches, the small, private liberal arts college was seen not necessarily in terms of academic quality, but rather as a venue for

division III athletics. Once exposed to this environment, despite the original pretense of athletic participation, Ethan's perceptions of the college experience evolved to the point of full recognition and appreciation of the environment in which he found himself. In Ethan's words, "I came for the football, but I stayed for the education."

Ethan did eventually enrolled at Central, but his initial decision was to attend another small, private liberal arts college. While football was the most important factor in identifying the small group of division III schools from which he would choose, Ethan was very selective in deciding which school to attend. To even arrive at the point of considering Central required the pull of a feature on the periphery of the classroom experience itself, in the form of athletic participation. In a similar fashion, it was another peripheral feature of Central that would serve to push him away:

> "The first time I came to Central I stayed in a fraternity house. It was interesting because everyone had computers and I didn't have a computer. And everyone had Nintendo and these stereos. So my first impression was 'wow, these are rich kids.' I felt kind of uncomfortable.
>
> "It was mostly their possessions. We didn't really talk about a lot of academics. I was really impressed with the classroom thought when I visited an education class and it was small and there seemed to be a lot of interaction. But I didn't really base my opinion on the classroom.
>
> "So I didn't go to Central first, I went to Atkins then. I felt like I'd fit in more at Atkins. I visited there and I just seemed to be able to connect more, I felt

more comfortable. I felt strange with some of the people at the fraternity house, I just felt like I couldn't connect.

"I don't know if it was just a matter of different personalities or if it was just that I felt uncomfortable with the fact that they were rich, or that they had more money...Lifestyle. At Atkins it just felt more like me."

By his own admission, Ethan's decision not to attend Central had nothing to do with the academic program. Despite his desire to be in a setting that would support his desired style of learning, the differences he perceived between himself and the others was too powerful to overcome. In a recurrence of his high school experience, the cultural gap between himself and the rest of the student body, represented by those he met, would prevent him from fully connecting with the very students from whom he could benefit. Ethan attributes these differences, as difficult as they are to pinpoint beyond the manifestations in the form of material possessions, to the general orientation that develops out of the differences in lifestyles:

"At the time I didn't think about it other than, well they have more things than I do -- they seemed to just be care free, more care free than I was, and -- I don't know, I just felt uncomfortable with them...I know what I told my parents, 'well they're all rich, they have vcr's and computers and big stereos in their rooms.' And they just seemed care free, or something -- I don't know.

"I used to have to think a lot more about what my career's going to be eventually. I think a lot of those people know 'well I want to be an accountant, I

want to go into business. I want to be a lawyer.' They just knew. I think that's the way they view life."

The First Trial: "I Didn't Know How to be a Student"

The fact that Ethan was able to get to college at all is noteworthy. Considering his lackluster high school academic record, the lack of tangible support from his parents, and the haphazard nature of the selection process itself, it is easy to see why many students in Ethan's circumstances do not make it to college at all. But as Ethan quickly discovered, getting there was just the beginning:

"I went to Atkins for a semester and I wasn't focused at all. I found it much more challenging than I thought it would be. A lot more work than I ever did. So I didn't do very well, and I thought that -- oh, and my dad lost his job, so it was kind of stressful and I thought I would go home and work for a while and maybe take classes.

"...I think I would have done well at Atkins if I had -- I didn't even know at that time what I needed to do to be a good student, if that makes sense. I dropped my first two classes because that was, well, I just didn't know how to handle that much homework. So, I did terrible. And then it made it worse because I missed classes sometimes, and then my grade was affected. And so I hated college because I didn't do well."

"It was awful...There was a political science class, kind of ironic because that's my major now. But I was lost, I did terrible. By the second test I knew I

was done. I was kind of intimidated because I had no idea what language they were speaking practically. They would use all these words I had no idea what they meant, all these concepts...He spoke in a lot of technical words and words that were just used in that discipline. And I had no idea what he was saying. After the lecture I didn't know what to write down for notes because I didn't know a lot of what he meant. I mean, it was an introductory course."

"The scholastic yield from educational action," Bourdieu (1986) writes, "depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (p.244). This relationship between class, culture, and educational achievement serves as the foundation of a truism that shapes the work of teachers from K-12 to graduate school: the social background and educational history of the student find their way into the classroom is such a way as to shape the very process of teaching and learning. Through Ethan's experience at Atkins we see the ways in which this dynamic can play itself out in the course of everyday experience. One powerful manifestation of Ethan's social and educational history in the college classroom are the "linguistic misunderstandings" (Bourdieu et al, 1965) that occurred between him and his college professors. In general, these misunderstandings occur because of the inability of the student to decipher the "codes of transmission used to convey a particular body of knowledge" (p.5). In Ethan's case, the effectiveness of the political science lectures, despite the expertise of the professor, was compromised due to Ethan's lack of linguistic capital. The result this time mirrored his earlier experience in high school: once again, Ethan found himself unable to fully participate in the teaching and learning process, despite his intense desire to become educated.

More than likely, Ethan was not alone in his inability to understand the language of a given academic discipline. Indeed, it has been suggested that most college students are ill prepared to cope with the scholastic demands made on their use of language (Bourdieu et al). But in Ethan's case, the linguistic limitations he encountered in his political science class are only symptomatic of his larger educational predicament. In many ways, Ethan epitomizes the plight of many nontraditional students who come to college each year with no orientation toward, to use Ethan's words, "how to be a good student."

Although the term "nontraditional" has lost much of its meaning due to the changing demographics of the college student population (that is, the presence of adult students, students from various racial and ethnic groups, low-achieving students, low-income students, and handicapped students in larger numbers call into question the meaning of what it actually means to be "traditional"), it is nevertheless applicable in describing Ethan's experience as a college student. McGrath and Spears (1991) argue that what distinguishes the experiences of many nontraditional students on the college campus is not merely demographic characteristics, but rather their cultural orientation. First-generation college students, they argue "come from backgrounds which have not prepared them to identify with, or even to recognize the central values and practices of academic life" (p. 24). The result is that Ethan was being asked to take on an identity with which he was completely unfamiliar, both in terms of behaviors and attitudes. For example, his is expected not simply to acquire effective study habits, but to develop a commitment to learning; and to not just go to class regularly, but to engage in the

exchange of ideas. In other words, Ethan was asked to see the role of student not just in terms of what you do, but rather as an expression of who you are.

The Return Home: "This could be my life"

Ethan's family moved to Utley City when he was nine years old. He speaks of his early years in Utley City with little sense of importance, except that he does recall how he became involved with the "wrong crowd" and once ended up in the police station for drinking beer in the park. But the true significance of life in Utley City was felt at a much later point in Ethan's life. Like so many other students who enter college without adequate preparation, and with little knowledge of what it takes to succeed, Ethan quietly withdrew from college after only one semester and returned home. He planned to live with his parents and work in town, thinking that this would allow him to regroup and prepare for his eventual return to college. In addition to working in order to save money for college, he hoped to commute to the branch campus near his home in order to keep pace academically. Unfortunately, this part of the plan fell through because he had no steady means of transportation.

It was during this time, and for the first time in his life, that Ethan begin to think seriously and deliberately about his career aspirations. In retrospect Ethan views this turn of events, not being able to continue his education while in Utley City, as the key moment in his educational life. Instead of holding on to the image of himself as a college student working his way through school, he slowly began to face the possibility that he was exactly what and where he was destined to be: a college failure, trying to construct a meaningful life for himself in a town that had little to offer:

"I don't like my hometown. I don't know how else to say it. People didn't talk about the same things I was interested in. After I went to college for awhile I was interested in becoming a teacher and maybe graduate school, I was thinking. Maybe politics. I thought 'wow, there's a lot out there that I just did not know about.' These people just didn't seem to have the same interests I had."

What Ethan realized at that point in his life was that he needed to be in college. Despite the fact that he was completely overwhelmed by the demands placed on him as a college student at Atkins, the prospect of returning to what awaited him back in Utley City was even more overwhelming:

"I didn't feel like these people -- I have a hard time saying 'these people' -- the people at McDonald's, the people at the car dealership, the mechanics there, the people at the county park who worked there -- I didn't feel like they had any goals to improve, or make more money, or have more responsibility, or anything.

"I worked in a quick oil change for awhile. They just wanted to talk about their car, or the girl they saw the day before, whereas -- I got in trouble for picking up a newspaper and reading it...Sometimes between changing oil in the cars -- well they would tell me to clean up or whatever. I hated that, so I'd go into the front room and then I'd pick up the newspaper and get a cup of coffee and just sit there until a car came. And the owner came in and he said 'that's the customers' newspaper. You gonna have to put that down.' I said 'well I just want to read the front page, there's not a car here or anything yet. And he said 'you

need to put that down right now.' And I just -- that's when I realized that man, no teacher would tell me to put the newspaper down. So I didn't like that. It was a bad experience.

"He didn't respect me. That's the conclusion I reached. It was more than just him, it was everyone around me didn't respect me. People that came to get their oil changed, you know, they looked at me differently. I was greasy, I was dirty, I wore, you know, a blue collar. And people didn't respect me very much."

To hear Ethan speak now, you get the sense that he has become keenly aware of the relationship between education, occupations, and status in his own life. He has a deep, intuitive understanding of the subtle yet pervasive ways in which his own parents' education level and occupational status shaped their social relationships, and how this in turn shaped his educational aspirations and experiences. But the implications of this relationship for his own life became apparent to him only after it was almost too late. For the first time in his life Ethan was beginning to see that his decision not to return to college after the first semester was already shaping his social relationships and, much to his dismay, was determining for him a future from which he felt there might be no escape:

"I saw this guy that was thirty years old washing cars over there for minimum wage and I said 'well why is that guy over there washing cars? I mean, why isn't he doing something else?' 'Well, he's just not -- he's just not good enough. He's not very good at washing cars.' And I said 'why can't he be good

enough washing cars?' And then I figured out he just likes it. He likes making minimum wage and driving this beat up truck and living in this dumpy apartment.

"I asked him, 'well have you thought about getting a better job, or maybe learning how to become a mechanic or something like that? He said 'no, no I like this job.' ..It was baffling. I didn't understand. I didn't understand why he would want to work for that little money. I was really baffled. I didn't understand why he would want to do that.

"...I looked around at the people I was working with and the lifestyles they had. And I didn't do well at Atkins before. And I thought that's just who I was. There might be a chance I can't go anywhere. This might be where I'm going to be. I was trapped."

For Ethan, the view of Utley City as an adult proved to be the turning point in his life. Up until that time Ethan had not thought much about his own future, other than to assume things would just fall into place. But following his dismal first attempt at going to college, he had begun to think maybe his high school counselors and teachers were right. Maybe he was not "college material." And maybe he was indeed fooling himself by thinking that he had the capability to become something other than the working class kid that he was. His return to Utley City, coming on the heels of the disastrous experience at Atkins, gave him the opportunity to sample his own future by bringing him face to face with the work environment, lifestyle, and social relationships that would characterize his life as a college dropout.

Now, as a seventeen-year-old college drop out, Ethan was forced to give serious thought to the role that work would play in his life. His experiences working at a fast food restaurant, in the county park as part of a maintenance crew, and as an oil changer in the car dealership shed new light on the realities of unskilled blue-collar work. Not that he was unfamiliar with this kind of work. To the contrary, he had spent most of his summers working in jobs like this. But this time it was different. This time he noticed that his co-workers were not just students like him, trying to make some pocket money. This time he began to notice the people who were a few years older than he, trying to work and raise a family. This time he began to understand what it would be like to build a life around work like this. Realizing the long term implications of living through a string of unrelated and unfulfilling jobs, Ethan was beginning to understand that he did indeed want more than Utley City had to offer, and that despite his first trial and error college experience, he did indeed belong in college:

"I realized that I could be working like this. This could be my life."

III. "Running a Race with Worn Out Shoes"

Although Ethan understands that in some very important ways his aspirations for college outpaced his resources, he has also come to accept that the distance between the two represent not a barrier to aspirations, but merely a handicap to be overcome. And in the process of trying to make sense of his educational predicament Ethan has come to recognize the ironic nature of his own resource deficiency: that the people with whom he has been unwilling to form meaningful relationships because of the social and cultural distance between himself and them are the very people who can help him fulfill his own educational and career aspirations. And it was about this time, after having the opportunity to experience life on the blue-collar side of a deep social and cultural divide, that Ethan decided that he had to do something to improve his lot in life. "It was about this time," Ethan recalls, "that I decided to apply again to Central."

Ethan's first thoughts were that he could still play football. "That's why Central wanted me to come in the first place," Ethan reasoned. "I thought maybe I would get in shape, so I started running and lifting weights and just starting to feel better about myself because that was part of my identity before." But Ethan's outlook would change, thanks to an encounter with an individual whose own life story began with circumstances much worse than Ethan's:

> "There was this guy from Johns Hopkins University, the director of pediatric neurosurgeory there. He's the youngest guy there. He came to speak at Utley City that summer at the high school. He talked about how he came from a

single parent home and his mom was a cleaning lady and she washed toilets and cleaned. And for a while he started hanging with a crowd that tried to pull him away from the direction his mom wanted him to go.

"And his mom always encouraged him to do well in school, be morally upright and all of this. And he ended up doing well in high school and then he went to Yale and then he finally went to medical school at Johns Hopkins."

Ethan was inspired by the man's story, how he was able overcome the potentially debilitating effects of his background to realize his dream of going to medical school. For Ethan, the lesson was a simple one: not everyone starts from the same position in life. But at the same time, Ethan began to realize, where one ends up does not have to be fully determined by one's social and economic origins. The message caused Ethan to alter his outlook on his educational predicament. Rather than spending time all of his time in the gym getting in shape, Ethan split his time between the gym and the library. And the more he read, he recalls, the more confident he became in recasting himself in the image of a serious college student. And the more he thought about where he wanted to go in his life, the more clear it became to him that Central College, despite the differences between himself and the other students, was where he needed to be:

"I think I realized that I wanted that kind of environment. I wanted that kind of environment, even thought it was so challenging. I just don't think I was focused enough the first time. So I felt like if I worked hard enough I could learn

a lot from the people around me. I could learn a lot, even if I don't get great grades."

The Second Trial

Drawing on the lessons learned over the previous year, Ethan was now ready for the second trial. Ethan has returned to college with a renewed sense of purpose and an ironclad determination to succeed in spite of his resource handicap. His experience in Utley City solidified his resolve to become more than his background and high school achievements suggested that he might become. And the doubts he had about being able to succeed in college have faded, having been replaced by a commitment to work as hard as it takes in order to keep pace with his more advantaged classmates. All in all, Ethan believes that Central College is the best environment for him, and he knows that he will emerge from the experience with a deep appreciation for his accomplishments because of the effort it took just to persist. But despite his renewed sense of commitment, some of the challenges still exist:

"A lot of what happened last year when I first came to Central I struggled a lot in my classes. I didn't do well at first. I was worried that I was going to have to just go back to Utley City again. And that was kind of scary because of the experiences I had. I didn't want to go back and be stuck somewhere.

"It's tough to deal with because every day in my classes I wonder 'well what would it be like if I would have taken -- what would it have been like if I would've had different friends, if I would have been involved in different

activities, maybe I would have done this -- it's a lot of 'what-ifs.' So it's tough because I get frustrated sometimes in my classes. Sometimes I don't work as hard because I feel that it's just not worth it.

"...I think the worse thing about it is feeling like I'm limited in what I can do. That's the worst thing. I feel like, well I don't really have a choice to do what I want. It's discouraging. Sometimes I felt like I was just being held down, I didn't have any choice... Everything was going on without me. I felt like I was running a race with worn out shoes."

Ethan knows that despite the feelings of discouragement that often over shadow his experience, his time at Central has been advantageous for him in some important ways. Granted, the frustration and the "what-ifs" may always be with him. But he has not let the advantages of the other students get in the way of the pursuit of his own educational and career aspirations. In fact, Ethan now realizes that it is the very students who cause him to feel frustrated and discouraged who have proved to be most instrumental in helping give form to his own aspirations:

"I think part of it is just being a part of this environment to be honest with you. Being around people who have high goals and career goals and things. I think that this kind of encourages, motivates you. I think that it rubs off on you, which is good for me. So this environment is really good. Being the small class sizes you get to share that more. You get to see where people are coming from. I have learned a lot about a lot of different people and what their goals are.

"I think my expectations are higher for everything. Just being around other people who have different views on life. I think like the expectations of what they should have. I think that has kind of changed. I think that I have always had high expectations I just didn't have the confidence. So for an example, a couple of weeks ago I went home to look for a summer job. It is kind of hard to find a summer job. My dad said 'well, I think that you should go down to SUBWAY and I think that they will hire you. Or you could go down to the grocery store and stock on midnights. That is a good job.' And I didn't want to. I said no way I am not doing that.

"So I went to the bank and I had my girlfriend type up a resume and I dressed up nicer and I went in and I introduced myself. I said I am from Central College and I am here for the summer and I am looking for a position. And gave them my resume and three or four banks called me back and they offered me a teller job for $7.50 an hour or something. Much better than $4.50 an hour."

After years of looking on from a distance, Ethan has taken the first step in bridging the chasm that has separated him from many of those around him. Whether we consider the peer groups in his high school whose attitudes he found disdainful; or the students in the fraternity house whose lifestyles appeared to be so different from his own, the distance between himself and them was simply too great and, consequently, was reinforced by Ethan's self-imposed barriers. However, having seen what life was like as an adult on his side of the divide, Ethan has decided that he belongs on the other side.

And the key to his successful transition, he concludes, is to capitalize on those differences and to use his time at Central to his own best advantage:

> "...I think I might have taken advantage of the opportunities in high school more if I would have been around these kinds of people. My girlfriend for example, I met her doing opera scenes. I wouldn't have been in opera scenes in high school. I don't know why I got involved in opera scenes. So, I think when I came to Central I had this attitude that I just wanted to explore everything and just see everything that was out there."

Overall, Ethan's predicament has not changed that much. He is still trying to catch up to his peers whose lifestyles provided them with a competitive advantage in the educational system. He still experiences periodic episodes of frustration over opportunities that he may have missed out on, and he sometimes must fight the urge to just give up. And, as mentioned in the introduction to Ethan's story, he will probably end up transferring from Central because he can no longer to afford his monthly loan payments. Yet, despite his ongoing struggle to overcome the social and cultural elements of his background, there is one very important aspect of Ethan's predicament that has improved. What he once saw as forces against acting against him, Ethan has turned into a source of motivation and a sense of purpose:

"Now I don't feel as overwhelmed. Life for a while I felt like I had to run really fast. And now I feel like I can slow down a little bit and not be so worried. It's not as demanding or something. I think becoming more educated is liberating. Learning that what I didn't know I didn't know. That's what has been liberating. Just learning.

"There are some things I'm never going to be able to help. I can't make up for those experiences I had in the past, things I haven't been exposed to. But I'm just going to continue going through college. Then I'll feel much better when I help other people because then I'll feel like well there's the chance that I didn't have...I just want people to have more opportunities."

Epilogue

Ethan's experience at Central College didn't quite turn out as he had hoped. He came to Central hoping to enter the education program to earn his teaching certificate. He had decided to go into teaching because of his poor high school experience, which he feels was due in part to some of the teachers who taught him. But at the end of his sophomore year Ethan received a letter of denial from the education program at Central. The reason, the letter stated, was that his grades were not high enough. In some ways it was just as well. Just as he had anticipated, Ethan had to transfer from Central College for financial reasons following his sophomore year. He tried to find a way to make it work, but the burden of working twenty hours per week just to stay even financially became too much. With his parents unable to lend any additional support, Ethan would have to take on additional loans, which was not appealing to him. The immediate concern for Ethan was how he would be able to make the payments on the interest while in school. Once again, Ethan's educational goals became victim to his lack of resources.

Nor did Ethan's plans for the summer turn out well. He was able to get a job at the bank working as a teller, which was going fairly well until the day his drawer was short $300. As it turns out it was simply a matter of a missing piece of paper instead of missing cash. But by that point it did not matter that the situation had been resolved. The experience was so unsettling to Ethan that gave his two week notice on the spot, and actually ended up quitting his job at the bank that same day. Ethan was able to end the summer on a high note, though. After leaving the bank he was able to get a job leading recreational activities at a day-care center. The center was happy to have him working

there, Ethan explains, and they trusted him to make his own decisions about the sports camps he was running. But the experience at the bank still lingered in Ethan's memory, causing him to "wrestle with those issues" about what his abilities are:

> "I still think about the pictures in my mind over and over. Why did I miss that? Why didn't I...because $300, really...'your drawer is short $300...and I'm like, 'that's what it says, but that's probably not it.' I tried to explain it to them and they would just get frustrated. It was terrible. It was the worst thing that could have happened to me that summer."

Ethan is now attending his third college, this one a regional state university. You might say the he is in the midst of his third trial. But unlike the first two, this time the pieces of his college and career aspirations are falling into place in ways Ethan would never have anticipated. "As far as my career goals and things like that, it's kind of interesting because they seem more reachable now," Ethan reports. Ironically, Ethan attributes much of this to his time at Central. "I've gained a lot of confidence being at Central," Ethan says. "I gained the ability to write better, I gained study habits. I learned from other students around me." Part of the benefit of Ethan's time at Central was, in his words, "being around students with lofty goals -- people talking about internships, people talking about going to law school and medical school." What struck Ethan about these conversations with the students at Central was how they talked about their goals as if they just expected that it would happen. Now, after years of frustration and doubt, Ethan feels himself moving along in the same manner:

"It started feeling really good. I realized I'm a senior now and I'll probably be student teaching next fall, and then I'll graduate the following spring. It's like these steps are now -- just the next obvious steps."

While Ethan's progress is measured in part by his ability to imagine himself reaching his educational goals, he has also come a long way in coming to terms with his educational predicament. To state it another way, Ethan is beginning to see the bigger picture as it relates to class and educational outcomes. As a result, he is able to take the anger and bitterness about his own situation and channel it into his ambitions. Or, as Ethan puts, "I just want to harness those feelings and move forward." One area in which Ethan has come to terms with his situation is his high school experience. In researching a paper for one of his classes at the university, Ethan came across some statistics on college attendance patterns by socioeconomic status. He was fascinated by what he discovered. Sensing that his own experience in trying to make it to college might have its origins in the class inequities he had read about, he returned to his home town and talked to his high school guidance counselor.

Ethan's instincts were on target. As a blue-collar town, Ethan was told by the counselor, you just have to expect that not everyone is going to want to go to college. Nor, the counselor was saying between the lines, should they want to go to college. Suddenly, Ethan's high school experience -- the way he seemed to be shut out of some classroom conversations because his background hadn't familiarized him with the subject matter, and the way he was diverted into vo-tech by the counselor because of his inability to clearly articulate his educational and career goals -- was seen in a new light. What the

counselor was saying to Ethan was that the career aspirations of the students in his school were considered in light of the occupational status of their parents. "I'm looking at him and he's just saying that's the way it should be," Ethan says in disbelief. Of course, Ethan was one of those blue-collar kids from Utley City. "The counselors weren't there to counsel," Ethan concludes, "they were there to direct you where they thought you should go. I realized that my high school experience was basically hopeless."

Ethan may not like what he has learned about educational stratification, but at least he is able to place his own predicament in a larger societal context. He no longer gets angry at his parents for the choices they made. In fact, Ethan reports, his relationship with his parents has gotten much better. Rather than blaming his father for the lifestyle they lead, Ethan now makes a deliberate effort to show an interest in his father's activities and hobbies. "I've just become more accepting after thinking about the circumstances they endured," Ethan says. "I've become more aware and I've made more progress. I feel like I have more of a grasp of it." And perhaps more importantly, Ethan no longer blames himself for his predicament. There was a time, not so long ago, in fact, when Ethan felt that the difficulty he faced in high school and in college was due to his own lack of ability. "When I came to Central," Ethan recalls, "I thought that all you have to do is work hard." While Ethan recognizes the value of hard work, he has also come to realize that hard work can be a lot less grueling when you have good tools to work with. Or, as Ethan might state it, running the race is a lot easier in new shoes.

Indeed, Ethan has come a long way toward reaching his educational goals. But he also had a lot of ground to make up. Only by his own determination and persistence was he able to make it to college at all. Once he made it to college it took him three tries to

finally be successful. But Ethan doesn't regret his experiences. In fact, he feels that the bumps in the road and the unexpected turns have made him a stronger competitor:

> "In some ways I feel real good about the situation I'm in. I feel like I kind of have an opportunity that some people don't have. Just going down that road, I can see things somewhat differently. I feel almost advantaged in some ways."

Yet, Ethan does periodically think back in frustration at the difficulties he faced in realizing his college aspirations. "Although I am happy and content in the position I am in," he explains, "I'm still in a position that is different some people because my beginnings were different." But unlike a few years ago, Ethan now feels like he now has a better grasp on the origins of his predicament. For Ethan, then, the race continues. And now, for the first time in his life, Ethan can actually begin to see the finish line. His feet are hurting a little bit, he says metaphorically, but now at least he is able to what it is he has been running toward all these years:

> "It's just like running cross country when I was in the eighth grade. Half-way through it really hurts, but then I know I have my coaches toward the end saying, 'you've got it...just a little bit farther...push it.' And all of a sudden you have an extra burst of energy."

So here he is, just a few yards short of the finish line: He has gotten accepted into the education school at the university, he plans to student teach in the fall, and he will

graduate the following spring. As his cross-country coach might say to him at this point, "just a little bit farther." And just like in the eighth grade, Ethan responds with a burst of energy:

"Sometimes I run a little faster when I can see the finish line."

Chapter 4: Rhonda

"I'm just waiting to fail...I guess I've seen failure so much that I'm just waiting for the time when I'm going to do it. I'm confident, but yet there's always that feeling in my stomach that this is going to be the time."

Introduction

Rhonda is in her junior year at Central College and is preparing to travel to Oxford, England to study next semester. Like most eighteen year-olds preparing to travel abroad, Rhonda is looking forward to the experience. She speaks with great anticipation of her impending journey to another country, an emotion that contains elements of both excitement and apprehension. "Culture shock" is how Rhonda describes her upcoming trip, "like when you fear something new, yet you're excited about it." This sense of anxious anticipation aptly captures Rhonda's state of mind as she thinks about going from the familiarity that characterizes her life at home, to the unknown way of life that awaits her in England. Rhonda fully understands that she is about to enter into unfamiliar territory, and she is doing her best to prepare for what might await her there. "I know I'm going to experience all these new things," she says.

Little from Rhonda's family background suggests that she would be where she is today: at a private liberal arts college, where she is preparing herself to enter law school following graduation. Rhonda spent most of her childhood years on welfare, living with

her mother in a trailer park on the edge of Midtown, a prosperous town that is home to an the international headquarters of a chemical manufacturing company. But the course of Rhonda's life would change dramatically. Following her sophomore year in high school, on the heels of an alcohol-related incident that nearly cost her life, Rhonda was offered a fresh start on life.

The Hamptons, a family whom Rhonda had known for some time, and whose way of life was quite different from her own, invited her to move into their home on a permanent basis. Life with the Hamptons held the promise of putting Rhonda on a different path, one that would lead her toward college and ultimately toward a better life. But at that point in her life Rhonda saw nothing wrong with the life she was living. She had a group of close and loyal friends to whom she could turn for support, even though they themselves had little hope of moving beyond their current economic and social conditions. In the final analysis, however, the ambivalence displayed by her mother suggested to Rhonda that despite not knowing just what a better life would look like, she was better off taking the leap of faith that landed her squarely in the midst of life in the middle class.

Rhonda's Story

Rhonda's story is one of elevated aspirations. The course of events in Rhonda's life provides an up-close look into the effects of class background on the college choice experience. In Rhonda's case the most immediate effect of the change in her circumstances was her decision to go to college at all. From there, as we shall see, she would go on to attend Central College and eventually set her sights on law school. We

have come to expect such stories of "beating the odds" to unfold gradually. Levine's (1996) book of the same title chronicles the plight of low-income high school students who, with the aid of self-appointed mentors, are able to overcome the limitations of their home environment and eventually make it to college. By contrast, the circumstances surrounding Rhonda's life lend themselves to a story told in almost exaggerated form.

First, the magnitude of the change itself is extreme. The Hamptons' way of life, as a college-educated, dual career household, stands in stark contrast to the life of deprivation Rhonda lived with her welfare-dependent, single mother. Second, the pace of the change was accelerated. Unlike the gradual pace of the more familiar mobility story, Rhonda went from the deprivation of life on welfare to the privileges and opportunities of life with the Hamptons literally within a matter of weeks. Third, because of the speed with which the move took place, Rhonda did not have the luxury of a gradual, steady exposure to her new environment. Instead, she found herself completely immersed in an unfamiliar way of life with little in the way of preparation for coping with the uncertainty and conflict that accompanied the move. And perhaps the most telling feature of Rhonda's story is that the changes that took place in her life were devoid of intentionality on the part of Rhonda. Stated simply, the move was not Rhonda's idea; in fact, Rhonda had to be convinced that the move would matter in any meaningful way.

One conclusion reached from the extensive literature on college choice is that class background does indeed matters in the experience of going to college. Who decides to go to college, how families go about selecting a college, and who ends where are all closely linked to the educational, social, and occupational histories of the parents. The timing of the move was such that the majority of the activity associated with Rhonda's

college choice experience took place with her new family. The influence of her new environment was immediate and is manifested in the encouragement she received from the Hamptons to raise her sights for college, as well as in the amount of involvement displayed by her new family in guiding Rhonda toward Central College. Thus, we see played out in dramatic form the immediate advantages of life in her new environment.

Indeed, culture shock may be the central metaphor in Rhonda's life. She knows from experience that moving from one environment to another, from a place where things are familiar to one in which all that you have taken for granted during your life is called into question, can be both exciting and frightening. In this sense, the move into the Hamptons' household and her upcoming trip to England are more alike than different. But there is one important distinction between the two that for Rhonda serves as a reminder of the exceptional nature of her unfolding life drama. Whereas her time in England is temporary, the family who took her in did so not as an invitation to visit but as the opportunity to become someone and something different. Consequently, Rhonda is immersed in the gradual and conflictive process of reforming her peer relationships, adjusting to the new expectations that have been placed upon her, and, most significantly, elevating her aspirations for the future.

I. The Gradual Awakening

"The Dirty Little Secret"

Rhonda grew up in Midtown, a town that is home to the international headquarters of the Chemex Company. Chemex is the largest employer in Midtown and many of the families who live there are third generation Chemex employees. In addition to employing many of the Midtown residents, several of the corporate executives from Chemex live in Midtown, including the CEO. "It seemed that everyone in town worked for Chemex and made a lot of money," Rhonda recalls. Everyone, it seemed, but Rhonda's mother. Her parents divorced when she was four years old, and from that time on she had virtually no contact with her father. "My dad was a maintenance man, so he didn't make a lot of money," explains Rhonda. "And the court never ordered him to pay child support." To make matters worse, her mother had a difficult time finding and holding a job. Consequently, Rhonda and her mother would spend the next twelve years in the trailer they shared on the outskirts of town, living off welfare and trying to sustain some semblance of a normal life.

Looking back, Rhonda is able to recognize the differences between the life she lived with her mother in the trailer park and the lifestyles of the more affluent residents of Midtown. Rhonda describes the differences in straightforward terms: she was lower class and they were upper class. But it's more than just the money that made them upper class, Rhonda says. "They also act differently." Rhonda's conclusion about the people in Midtown acting differently is one that developed from observing the habits and behaviors of other families. In fact, many of the working class families with whom she has

interacted during her short time in the town of Central help her to see the differences even more. As an example, Rhonda talks about a recent Friday evening, when she and a few other students decided to attend a local high school football game. "The bleachers were half empty," she remembers. This is in sharp contrast to the games at Midtown High School, where many of the home football games sell out. Some Midtown parents, in fact, attend games whether or not they have a son on the team.

Rhonda attributes the show of support for high school athletics in Midtown to more than simply the love of the game. Rather, it shows the deep commitment on the part of these upper class parents to the educational lives of their children. And on this level, her mother was very different from other Midtown parents. Her mother did not support the high school by attending home football games. In fact, she hardly showed support for her own daughter's education at all. Granted, there are measures of support more reliable than attending football games on a Friday night. And, to her credit, Rhonda's mother did attend parent-teacher conferences in grade school. But, says Rhonda, she wasn't involved in any other way:

> "I'd bring my homework home and show it to her and put it away, but it didn't really matter. She always figured that when I got my report card if it was lower than normal she would say something. But anything above a "c" was adequate to her. So it didn't matter how well I did as long as I did that well."

Although Rhonda now recognizes the differences between the lifestyle she lived with her mother and the more affluent residents of Midtown, for a time she saw no

differences at all. As far as Rhonda knew, the lifestyle she was experiencing with her mom was completely normal. Because she had never known anything else, Rhonda assumed that everybody was like her mom. "I didn't know that everybody went to work," she recalls. "I didn't know that everybody wasn't on welfare like my mom." That is, she didn't realize that other people in Midtown were living differently until one day when she was in the sixth grade. The circumstances surrounding that day are rather unspectacular. As best as Rhonda can remember, she and a friend were playing hopscotch in the driveway after school. In this respect, the day was like most other days spent with her friends from the trailer park. But what happened that day forever changed Rhonda's perspective on what constituted a normal way of life:

> "My friend told me her parents were on welfare, too. She said 'don't tell anybody.' And I was like 'why? Doesn't everybody do that?' And she said 'no, most people go to work. We're just different.'

The friend who filled Rhonda in on the "dirty little secret" about welfare altered Rhonda's view of the world such that she could never return to her former state of naivete and innocence about the kind of life her mother was leading. She now knew the truth about welfare, that indeed the type of life she was experiencing with her mother was not the way most people in Midtown lived. Although she and her friend never talked about it again, the conversation stuck in Rhonda's mind:

"After my friend told me that, I think I became a lot more private about my home life. If the other kids asked questions I wouldn't tell them anything that I felt would invade my little wall. If anybody asked I just made up a story."

While the short-term effect of the episode may have been a tinge of embarrassment and shame, the experience would stay with Rhonda and later would be understood by her as part of a general, cumulative awakening that would fundamentally alter feelings about her mother. A year later Rhonda would have another such experience, this time precipitated by a physical move that took her out of Midtown and into much larger environment. But as in the welfare episode, the result of this move was an even clearer view of the truth about her mother:

"When I was in the seventh grade mom and I moved to Bay City to be near my grandma. I saw that a lot of people had real jobs. My uncle is a machinist, my aunt bags groceries, but there were other people...There was a nurse, things like that. Well, then, too, my mom was still on welfare. I tried to show her that, you know, this is not what you're supposed to do, you're supposed to work like everybody else. Everybody else is working, why aren't you working? But, she didn't work either. I mean, she just didn't work"

At one level these episodes are part of a natural widening of Rhonda's perspective on the ways of the world. That is to say, most of us can point to times in our lives when we begin to see our parents in a different light, times when we were able to step outside

the limits of our own environment and look at ourselves and our families as others see them. Likewise, Rhonda offers these two recollections to illustrate the "loss of innocence" that characterizes those years of her life. But the effect of these episodes would prove to be much more profound and durable. These small "awakenings," the gradual realizations of the differences between the home life she took for granted and the way other people lived, predisposed her to recognize the rare opportunity to live a different kind of life. Ironically, it would take an event that almost cost her life to find the opportunity to improve her life chances.

The Critical Event

Eventually, Rhonda and her mother would move back to Midtown in time for Rhonda to attend junior high and high school there. While in Midtown Rhonda became acquainted with the Hamptons, a middle class family for whom Rhonda had been baby-sitting from the time she was in the eighth grade. Sue and Rod Hampton were both college educated and were well established in their respective careers. Rod was a successful CPA, having owned his own business at one time. Sue was involved in the culinary arts, most recently working as a chef at the local country club. Over the years Rhonda had became very close to the Hampton family, especially their three children. The relationship between Rhonda and the Hamptons grew so strong that she would often be invited to accompany them on family vacations. Over time Rhonda had come to know the Hampton family very well and, perhaps more importantly, they had come to know her.

When Rhonda was sixteen years old, she and her best friend went roller skating one Friday evening. The two of them left the skating rink that evening with a male acquaintance, and later the three of them began drinking vodka together. Rhonda had never experimented with alcohol before that evening and she became, in her words, "trashed." She ended up unconscious and in the emergency room of the hospital where she was treated for alcohol poisoning. Shortly after the incident Rhonda was having dinner in a restaurant with the Hamptons, as she would often do on weekends. But this dinner was different. Despite her hope to the contrary, the Hamptons had found out about the alcohol poisoning incident. Rhonda felt embarrassed and ashamed that she had disappointed the Hamptons. However, the Hamptons' reason for bringing up the subject was not to embarrass Rhonda or to shame her into changing her ways. Rather, the Hamptons saw this as the opportunity they had been waiting for -- to offer Rhonda the chance to turn her life around:

> "Sue took me aside and said, 'you know, I talked with the rest of the family and we think that you should move in with us. It would help you out a lot, we could help you get a good start on college, just make your life a little easier.'
>
> "They felt that my life that they saw for me wasn't going in the direction that it should, I guess they were trying to first take me out of a harmful situation and to lead me in the right direction, and then head me toward college."

Despite the mutual familiarity between Rhonda and the Hamptons, Rhonda originally balked at their offer. Given how she felt things were going in her life, she was

not convinced of the need to move in with them. After all, she says, she was doing relatively well in high school. "And I had lots of friends nearby," she recalls, "and personally, I always thought my mom could help me with college." The members of her extended family were not excited about the possibility of losing Rhonda to another family. And her friends thought it was a bad idea, too. From Rhonda's own point of view, the worse that might happen if she chose to stay with her mother is that she might end up with a high school diploma and not a college degree. Even then, Rhonda felt that she would still be able to do okay. To state it simply, Rhonda didn't think that the Hamptons could do anything for her that her mother couldn't do. The benefits of moving in with the Hamptons, according to her calculations, were negligible compared to the irreparable damage it would cause to the relationships with her family and friends. "I didn't think that it was really important for me to leave my mother's home," Rhonda remembers. "I thought I was having a happy life."

The Hamptons had offered Rhonda a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a new beginning on life. Obviously, the Hamptons believed that her present circumstances would do nothing more than debilitate any chance Rhonda had to succeed. But as a sixteen-year-old, who had only glimpses of life outside of her home environment, Rhonda's enthusiasm over the prospect of moving out of her present living conditions did not match that of the Hamptons. In fact, Rhonda recalls that at the time the offer was made she had no idea of the magnitude of the change she was about to undergo. "It would be like visiting my grandmother's house," is how Rhonda remembers thinking about it. But what the Hamptons had in mind was much more encompassing than simply moving in as a visitor:

"They said part of me moving in with them was going to be for me to change. I would grow away from my friends and that's what they wanted for me. But if I wasn't willing to start the change then they didn't want me to live there."

In the end the decision to leave her mother's home to move in with the Hamptons was the only one to make. This is not to suggest that it was an easy decision. To the contrary, Rhonda had to manage an onslaught of conflicting emotions that were visited upon her as she began the transition into her new way of life. One of the strongest pulls away from the Hamptons was the concern Rhonda was feeling over her mother's well being. In fact, Rhonda at first decided not to move because of the concern that doing so would hurt her mother's feelings. But Rhonda's concern for her mother went unrequited. Her mother's ambivalence toward Rhonda's predicament removed any doubt that moving out was the best thing for Rhonda to do:

"When I talked to her about it, and she said, you know, it doesn't matter. Do whatever you want. To me it seemed like, you know, she didn't care. I could do anything in the world and it wouldn't have an effect on her life, and I guess I didn't find myself wanting to be raised by somebody like that. She actually said 'if you leave I won't be able to live, I won't have any money so I want you to stay. But I really don't care if you go.' And so I thought this is not the environment I want to live in, so I left."

In the end the decision to leave her mother and move in with a new family would drastically alter the course of her life for the better. But the transition into her new environment was difficult and at times painful for Rhonda. While she was sure that she no longer wanted to live in a home with a mother who cared little whether she stayed or left, she at least was familiar with her previous surroundings and could count on her friends to be there for her. Now she found herself in a new situation with new sets of expectations, and without the comfort of familiar relationships to provide the emotional moorings for her life. It would be awhile before she became completely comfortable in her new environment:

> "...At this moment I was also trying to deal with my mom. She was always worried that I was going to stop loving her -- so I was having to deal with this and my extended family because they didn't like that I was moving out. And my friends, and then I was trying to fit in with the Hampton family, their extended family, and my new friends. So I don't know how to isolate those emotions from all the other things that were happening.
>
> "Then I would always feel guilty because I'd have to talk to my other family so they wouldn't think I stopped caring about them. And I'm still dealing with the fact that my extended family if I call the Hamptons 'mom and dad' they just go crazy. But they don't realize all they've done for me.
>
> "It was just overwhelming. I was scared half the time and I was excited the other half the time. There was so many emotions that I was going through...They didn't try to isolate me from my friends but at this point I seemed

different from my friends so I isolated myself from my friends. I felt really alone."

Despite the pain of separation, Rhonda new that in the long run living with the Hamptons was better for her than had she chosen to stay where she was. In addition to the confusion and isolation that accompanied the transition to her new home and her new environment, Rhonda was feeling the added pressure to live up to a new set of expectations:

"I wanted to work hard to show that the Hamptons, that they weren't disappointed, that they made the right choice. I was getting ready to go to college in a year. So leaving my mom, moving in with a new family, friends, trying to fit in both situations -- life was scary."

II. Heading Toward College

Elevated Aspirations

Although the Hamptons are largely responsible for Rhonda being where she is today, the idea of going to college was in Rhonda's mind well before she moved in with them. On all measures, she had established herself early in her educational career as one of the bright students in her class. She was in the highest reading and math groups in grade school, had always managed to complete projects at home and turn them in on time, and she scored well on standardized tests. However, she does recall going through a period of boredom in the eighth grade, which led her and her group of friends to engage in the typical types of rebellious behavior: not completing homework assignments, causing disruptions during class, and, whenever possible, skipping school altogether. This behavior was abruptly halted for Rhonda after a conversation with her eighth grade counselor. The counselor's message to Rhonda was simple and straightforward: if Rhonda had any hope whatsoever of going to college, the time was now to establish the work habits and the academic record that would allow her to keep that door open. Rhonda took the admonition to heart.

By the time Rhonda started high school she had established an impressive record of academic achievement. The good grades continued into high school and, realizing that she would soon be faced with important decisions about her future, Rhonda began to think more seriously about what kind of life she eventually hoped to have. Rhonda had always enjoyed close relationships with members of her extended family, many of whom had themselves attended college. They were aware that Rhonda's academic abilities

would allow her to be successful in college. But they also knew that Rhonda stood little chance of actually making it to college if she had to rely on the support from her mother to make it happen. Not wanting to see Rhonda's potential smothered under her mother's cloak of ambivalence, they began to encourage Rhonda to begin thinking more seriously about college. "They expected me to go to college," Rhonda says of her extended family. "They expected me to do something with the rest of my life. They didn't want me to be -- like my mom."

Urged on by members of her extended family, and guided along the way by her grade school counselors and teachers, Rhonda would eventually come to believe that she was "college material." But at that point in her life, Rhonda admits, going to college was not the basis of the plans she was considering. Rather, the decision about whether or not to go to college at all, and if so, where she would go would be determined only after other considerations were taken into account:

> "The college idea, it's always been in my head but it was never a bright light, it was always just a little thought back there. My mom didn't really ever assume anything. If I wanted to live there as long I had to, then I could. So I knew I was going to college, but I didn't really think much about it. I had wanted to be an astronaut for a while so I was thinking about going into the Air Force. I had a boyfriend and we were talking about getting married. I was only 16. But I told him that we could never get married until I go to college. And he was like 'but you can't leave.' And I said, well I can go to the community college."

The Hamptons reasons for inviting Rhonda to move in with them was, in Rhonda's words, to change the direction of her life and to point her toward college. Not coincidentally, the timing of the move into the Hampton household was such that there was still time for the Hamptons to have an strong influence on all aspects of Rhonda's college-going experience. First and foremost, the Hamptons had to begin to chip away at the ambivalence toward college that Rhonda carried away from her home environment. "I think that the second or whatever I decided to move in with the Hamptons it was assumed that I was going to go to college," Rhonda recalls. "I don't think it was assumed by me. It was more assumed by them." That assumption on the part of the Hamptons very quickly found its way into their day to day conversations:

> "When I was a junior in high school we were talking about what I was going to do with the rest of my life. And I said 'I don't know.' I had only lived with the Hamptons for two months at that point. I was trying to get good grades in high school, maybe not so I could go to college but if I left high school I could possibly find a job. So we got into a big heated argument. They were like 'we know that you can do whatever you want. You just have to decide.' And I guess that would be the turning point that made me decide that I'm definitely going to go to college."

The Hamptons' offer of a better life required Rhonda to leave behind everything from her past. By this time Rhonda had already decided that she was not ready to get married, which led her to break off the engagement with her boyfriend. Gone, too, was

the relationship Rhonda shared with her mother. Any doubt that may have lingered in Rhonda's mind about the move was removed during that painful conversation in which her mother's ambivalence toward Rhonda was revealed. And now, after only two months, the Hamptons were indeed able to rid Rhonda of her own ambivalence toward college. Indeed, they had begun to change the direction of Rhonda's life by pointing her toward college. Now that Rhonda's aspirations for college were elevated and were becoming crystallized in her own mind, the Hamptons moved on to other matters related to Rhonda's aspirations. Rhonda was not surprised that the transition to her new environment would mean that she would have to reexamine many of the assumptions that guided her former life. What Rhonda did not anticipate, however, was that one aspect of her former life she would need to reexamine was the relationships with the peers who had been loyal to Rhonda throughout her adolescent years:

> "Sue would say that the new group of friends were better for me, but I thought that she was just trying to keep me in a cage so I wouldn't do anything, so she could watch every move I made. Once I started to move away from my old friends and saw the things they did I realized that it's just stupid. And my new friends they didn't do things like that. And once I grew to trust her more that I realized that she had my best interest at heart. I guess I figured that I was going through all these other changes, why do I have to leave all my friends. I didn't realize that leaving my friends was going to be part of the changes.
>
> "I kind of felt like torn because I didn't want to leave my old friends. They had always been there, but I knew that my new friends they would be, you know,

they were better for me. And so I kind of felt torn because I didn't want to leave them either. I did want to go all the way there, but I didn't want to leave them, so I kind of felt isolated. I think the ties to my old life were holding me back. I think also I figured that I was going to change too much. I liked myself but I knew I needed to change."

New Peer Relationships

Students take into account in the development of postsecondary educational plans the expectations of peers (Hossler et al, 1989). While the attitudes of parents are most influential in shaping students attitudes toward higher education, peers "may at least have a reinforcing effect upon each other in the choice process" (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987, p. 211). As we might expect, relationships with college-going peers increase the likelihood that a student will attend college (Hossler et al, 1998). Peers also influence a student's choice of which college to attend. The influence of friends and family on the selection of a college operates in three ways: 1) shaping expectations for what a particular college is like; 2) direct advice on where a student should attend; and 3) where close friends themselves go may influence the student's decision (Chapman, 1981, p. 494). However, what the Hamptons were looking for from Rhonda's new peers was the reinforcement of her college aspirations that would come from being around students with similar aims and goals.

One sign of the influence of the new peer culture to which Rhonda was introduced by the Hamptons is that she now has a different perspective from which to view both

sides of the class divide. The students she once thought of as "preppy and snobby" she now respects for their hard work in the classroom. On the other side of the coin, she recognizes that the self-defeating behaviors displayed her old group of friends, while they resulted in poor grades and low ambition, were merely manifestations of the feelings of inferiority that result from the conditions of their lives. The most notable condition, according to Rhonda, is the absence of support that accompanies life with a "good family." While these observations have helped Rhonda to fully appreciated the advantages of her new environment, the most telling marker of the effects of her new conditions is the psychological distance she must travel in order to return to her home environment. For Rhonda, her changing peer relationships are the indelible mark of her new position, a position that renders her a visitor to the social territory that was once her home:

> "It's a little bit -- well, it's a lot different I guess. We'll talk about what we did in high school and if I tell them something really awesome that's happened here, they get all quiet because they don't have any stories to compare. So I try to focus on what we did then to make them feel more comfortable, so they won't not consider me a friend anymore. Not that I'm worried about that, it's just that they've been friends for such a long time -- time does grow people apart, but they are still my friends...
>
> "They just have nothing to look forward to, so I try not to make them see the benefits I've had so they don't feel bad about themselves. I'm happy to do it for them so they won't feel uncomfortable around me. I want my old friends to

feel comfortable. I don't want them to be unhappy in their life. If they enjoy their environment and the situation that they're in then I don't want them to see my life -- I don't want them to try to change too much so that they are unhappy in their current situation. So if I have to put up a front for them then I'll do it."

Perhaps there is no more telling measure of how we think of ourselves than by considering those others with whom we identify or choose to associate. Likewise, Rhonda uses her peer relationships as the gauge with which she measures the psychological distance she has traveled from the home environment in which she grew up, to the new conditions of her middle class way of life. Rhonda now considers herself more a member of her new friends than of her old friends, based on the differences she perceives from her new vantage point. "When I talk to them now, my old class of friends talk about the past," Rhonda says. "My new friends talk about the future." Although at the time the difficulty of separating from her old group of friends was just one more aspect of a transition fraught with conflict and uncertainty, Rhonda has now come to understand at the most profound level the effect that the Hamptons have had on the course of her life:

"I think my old class of friends think that their high school years are -- because they're not going to college and they're kind of where there parents were, they're going to be in a slump. And so they consider high school years the best years of their life. And I think we consider the future as, you know, this is only a stepping stone to what we have to look forward to."

Preparing for College

To abandon the life that Rhonda had come to know in favor of a life that promised nothing more than the vague promise of a "better life" required a leap of faith on Rhonda's part. True to the word, the Hamptons had indeed altered the course of Rhonda's life. Encouraged by the Hamptons' confidence in her potential to succeed Rhonda came to believe, as the Hamptons themselves believed, that the only obstacle between herself and a successful life was deciding that she wanted it. Whether or not the belief in herself was unequivocal, Rhonda respected the Hamptons enough to at least take them at their word. Having overcome this obstacle, the next step was to take concrete steps to make sure that her new dreams would no go unfulfilled. In the short term, that meant making sure that Rhonda would be in a position to compete for admission to the selective colleges and universities. Once again, the benefits of life in a household with college educated parents was made apparent to Rhonda immediately and in very concrete terms:

> "I took it the ACT my junior year and when the scores came back they were a little low. So I got an English tutor who came and helped me. Well, I didn't really decide. It was Sue. She was like 'you should do this, but it's your decision.' And I kind of felt that it was -- I always felt that I was pretty smart and that this was something I didn't need. But then I started looking at college brochures. I'd go down to the career development office that we had and I noticed that colleges had a higher level request than I had gotten. And even on the ACT form the three college that I put down they said I would be in like the top 50% and I didn't want to be there."

The strategy paid off, as Rhonda's subscore on the English section of the test went from a 19 to a 24, which raised her composite score to a 27 from the 24 she received the first time. Still, Rhonda was not ready to completely abandon the dream she developed for herself out of her original home environment in favor of the one being offered to her by the Hamptons. She had always wanted to become an astronaut, she recalls, a goal that came about as a direct result of the explosion of the Challenger when she was in the fourth grade. During one of their many conversations with the Hamptons about college and careers, Rhonda mentioned that she was still considering joining the Air Force:

> "Sue was like 'you don't want to do that.' So we started touring colleges."

One conclusion that can be drawn from educational and social science literature is that class matters when it comes to college choice. We know, for example, that parents' education level has a direct impact on the likelihood that parents will engage in pre-college planning activities, such as starting savings accounts and engaging in discussions with their children about college (Stage and Hossler, 1989). As we might expect, these types of activities have a direct affect on the likelihood that an individual growing up in that environment will choose to go to college. Chapman (1981) notes the role of the family educational history in setting in the student's a general expectation for the college experience as well as the benefits to be derived from it. Others have noted the effects of socioeconomic status on a student's general predisposition toward college (Hossler et al, 1989).

Clearly, class background exerts a profound influence over the likelihood that a student will choose to attend college. But the effects of class background extend beyond the question of whether of not a high school student chooses to attend college. For instance, it has been shown that college-educated parents instill in their children more wide-ranging educational aspirations (Zemski and Oedel, 1983), meaning that upper class students tend to consider a wider range of institutions and are less bound by geography and proximity than are students from the lower classes. Likewise, Gilmour (1981) found that compared to students whose parents did not attend college, students who came from families where the parents did attend college were more likely to engage in an informed and systematic college search process. Students from college educated families enjoy higher levels of parental involvement, they are more likely to consult with guidance counselors and write to colleges for information, and they tend to apply earlier and to more institutions.

And, as we might expect, the results of these class-based differences in the development and nurturance of college aspirations and in the behaviors related to the selection of a college lead to attendance patterns which are themselves differentiated by class background. Students whose parents did not attend college have become increasingly likely to attend community colleges rather than four-year colleges (Alexander et al, 1987; Karen, 1991). The same pattern holds true when we compare attendance rates for working class students at elite and non-elite universities and colleges (Karen, 1991), in that working class students are far more likely to attend non-elite universities than they are to attend elite ones.

Further, the evidence suggests that the effects of class position on college destinations may be such that it can offset academic abilities. Grubb (1995) concludes that students are more likely to attend selective colleges and universities if they come from upper income and higher status families, and if they had high achievement during high school (p. 487). Conversely, Hearn (1991) found that students with less educated parents were especially likely to attend lower-selectivity institution even if their academic ability and achievements were high (italics added). So, as Karen concludes, "it may be the case that the relationship between being from a low socio-economic background and being located lower in the higher education hierarchy has become stronger" (p. 218).

Thanks to the influence of the Hamptons Rhonda ended up at a selective, private liberal arts college, where she is now preparing to travel abroad. The story that is told through Rhonda's reflections is of the relationship between the conditions of life that result from one's social class position, and the experience of going college. On the one hand, we see how Rhonda's new class position immediately influenced her college-going experience by elevating her aspirations, preparing her for admission to "better" colleges, and guiding her toward Central. In and of itself this story is not spectacular. Class differences in college aspirations, college preparations, and college attendance is well documented. In fact, the differences are understood intuitively by anyone who works in education, whether it be at the K-12, postsecondary, or graduate level. What makes Rhonda's story valuable is that it allows us to vicariously experience the differences that the conditions of life associated with class position make in everyday life.

As Rhonda succinctly pointed out during one of her conversations, "we are all products of our environment." Stated in more common language, you only know what

you know, and you make choices based on your limited view of the world. Out of the milieu of her home environment came the conclusion that getting married and attending the local community college was Rhonda's most viable option for going to college. The environment in which Rhonda spent the first sixteen years of her life perhaps produced within her a desire for a way of life that was safely within her realm of experience and comfort. But as Rhonda would quickly discover, a home environment in which parents are themselves college-educated produces a different set of expectations for college. As Rhonda's experience illustrates, and as supported by the literature on college choice, perhaps nothing signifies social position more than the answers to questions of how, why, and where one "goes to college."

For Rhonda, these differences are felt most profoundly as she compares her current situation to what might have been. Despite the conditions of her former life Rhonda managed to emerge from it with an image of a future constructed from the fragments of the lifestyle she knew best. But getting married at 16, starting a family, and attending the local community college conjures up images of a lifestyle far removed from the traditional results many of us have come to expect from the decision to attend college. For most of the upper class residents of Midtown, going to college ensures the perpetuation of the lifestyle they inherited from their parents. For Rhonda, she fears, the course she considered choosing would have done the same. It is this realization that for Rhonda best captures how the move into the Hamptons' household altered the course of her life:

"Now, I picture myself having a life like my mom. Being married, having kids, if I'm working, not a lot because I have to take care of these kids. This guy that I would have married wouldn't have gone to college because --- he just wouldn't have gone to college. And he would be working -- I don't know, he would be working at McDonald's or something. And so we wouldn't -- it wouldn't have been a good household."

But Rhonda has also become aware of how this relationship can go in the other direction, how the different paths to college can lead to different social outcomes. Fortunately, the move to the Hamptons occurred at a time when their influence would be felt immediately and concretely. Rather than ending up living the scenario she envisioned above, she has her sights set on a career as a tax attorney. If marriage is to come, it will come at a time so as to not to interfere with the pursuit of her career aspirations.

While the magnitude of change between her former and present conditions of life is staggering, it is nevertheless difficult for Rhonda or anyone else to untangle the web of influence that leads one to develop college and career aspirations. Even with the change all but complete, Rhonda continues to sort through her past from the perspective of her new position, trying all the while to make sense of what has happened to her. One thing she has come to realize is that what often separates her life in the lower classes from life in the middle class is what is taken for granted about the future. Her experience with the Hamptons has introduced her to an entirely new set of expectations that governed her thoughts about college, and that continue to fuel her career aspirations. For Rhonda, the

differences between the two environments, those conditions of life that really matter when it comes to aspirations for college and career, can be distilled down to those simple, routine aspects of daily life that determine what we come to take for granted:

> "I just never had these kinds of conversations with my biological parents. My extended family would say college is a good thing, but my parents in general didn't really care. I don't think when I lived with my biological parents I thought about the future and what I was going to do.
>
> "I feel a lot more comfortable with myself. I have a lot more confidence. I would have never gone to England before and now it's coming true."

III. "Waiting to Fail"

Social class is a major source of identity in the U.S. (Jackman and Jackman, 1983; Vanneman and Cannon, 1987). Class membership influences our daily subjective experience by shaping our views on our prospects for mobility, our views on the fairness of class inequities, and our "general awareness of class differences, as well as one's own position with the class structure" (Heaton, p. 612). While it is difficult to untangle the interplay of objective and subjective dimensions of class in determining one's class position, there is general agreement that individuals place themselves in class categories based on both objective and subjective aspects of their environment. Ultimately, however, "it is the subjective interpretation of the relevant criteria for group membership that lends social significance" (Jackman and Jackman, p. 5).

For Rhonda, the move from her mother's home into the Hamptons' household was not just a physical one. Rather, it symbolizes the process of moving from the lower to the middle class, and the shift in perspective that accompanies her new environment. Her ascension into the middle class was confirmed by both her objective and subjective reality. On the one hand, the move was marked by the occupational status and income level of the Hamptons who, unlike her biological parents, were both college-educated professionals whose standard of living was well above that to which Rhonda was accustomed. Likewise, her new environment constituted differences in the way Rhonda's experienced life on a daily basis. These qualitative differences in her subjective experience expressed themselves in everything from learning how to use chopsticks, to discussing the day's events over dinner, to learning to be more self-confident. It is

abundantly clear to Rhonda that she is not the same person who left her mother's trailer three years ago:

> "I think since I've lived with the Hamptons for such a long time that I don't really view myself as being in the lower class anymore. I don't have much contact with my biological parents anymore and I call Sue and Rod 'mom and dad.' They consider me a member of the family."

The advantages of middle class life were apparent to Rhonda right from the start. "Life is easier in the upper classes," Rhonda concludes. "When I lived with my mom I didn't have hardly anything." But the advantages extend well beyond, in Rhonda's words, "the ability to get things:"

> "It's not only money, you have a happier lifestyle. I didn't feel like my mom cared about me nor did I feel that my dad cared about me. But once I moved into the Hamptons there was just so much more caring and love that's visible that wasn't visible then. It made my life easier because I didn't feel so uncomfortable with myself anymore."

Rhonda's college choice experience with the Hamptons, compared to the plan she had developed living with her mother, effectively illustrates how, in the words of one researcher, "the patterns of college choice are stitched deeply into the social and economic fabric of the nation" (Zemski and Oedel, p. 44). In dramatic fashion we have

seen how the conditions of Rhonda's new life with the Hamptons caused her to re-evaluate her ambivalence toward college, and in turn how the support and guidance she received from the Hamptons guided her toward a more focused and intentional college choice experience. One result of this change in environment is clear: in place of the community college that Rhonda once perceived as her most realistic option, she finds herself in her junior year at a private liberal arts college preparing to travel abroad. But Rhonda's college choice is but one manifestation of a much larger, more profound change in her outlook on life. Perhaps the most significant aspect of her new environment are the intangible benefits of life with the Hamptons, the way that life in the middle class has shaped what Rhonda now takes for granted:

> "I think the whole transition from my mom to the Hamptons was the ability to look forward to something. The Hamptons helped, but it took time for me to get comfortable with my new self and my new goals. Until I got comfortable with that I couldn't really look forward to anything. But over time, when I started feeling more comfortable, the future just developed."

"Where a man comes from," Centers wrote in 1949," is of some importance, but where he is now is a more significant index to his present states of mind and behavior, beyond a doubt" (in Jackman and Jackman, 1983, p. 158). Embedded in this statement are two fundamental assumptions that undergird our understanding of the relationship between class and identity. First, it takes into account our ability to overcome the influence of our social and cultural backgrounds in the pursuit of economic and social

mobility. Second, Centers' observation makes explicit our intuitive acceptance that, in Rhonda's words, "we are products of our environment." Indeed, our beliefs, our values, and our aspirations are shaped by the "cultural signals" (Lamont and Lareau, 1988) that bombard us as we make our way through the various cultural and social settings that comprise our daily existence. As we move from familiar to unfamiliar cultural and social settings, and as what we have come to believe about ourselves and the world around us is called into question in light of our new experiences and understandings, we find ourselves crafting new systems of meaning to accommodate these new realities. Taken together, these two assumptions lead us to Centers' implicit conclusions about the relationship between class and identity: that the conditions of our lives are indeed malleable, and, as the conditions of our lives change so, too, does the sense we make of ourselves and the world around us.

Rhonda was given an opportunity that few people will ever have: to experience life from both sides of a clear and distinct social divide. What makes her life story so interesting and informative is that the events in her life were so sudden and dramatic, compared to the routine, almost mundane nature of most of our lives. One consequence of the sudden change in Rhonda's life is that we are presented within an insider's view of class mobility, a view that itself takes us from life in the lower class to life in the middle class in accelerated fashion. Rhonda's story illustrates the interplay of objective and subjective factors in considering one's class position. On the one hand, her experience reinforces the belief that the social and cultural boundaries separating the classes are indeed permeable (Lamont and Lareau, 1987). This belief in the possibility of upward mobility is the cornerstone on which our meritocratic system of education is founded.

But at the same time, Rhonda's story illustrates just how distinct the day to day lives can be for people of different social classes, despite the permeability of the boundary between them.

Rhonda characterizes her move into the Hamptons' household as an elevation in her class standing. In specific terms, she feels as though she left the lower class environment of her mother's home in exchange for the upper class lifestyle of the Hamptons' home environment. As we have seen, the move to the upper class shaped her peer relationships, solidified her aspiration to attend college, and influenced the nature and form of her college choice experience. But Rhonda's new class position shows its influence most profoundly in the way she now thinks about herself and her prospects for the future. Having moved from one environment to the other, Rhonda now has the ability to look back and reflect on her life as seen through the lens provided by her new life. Who she is, how she has changed, and what she hopes to become are all given their meaning in the way Rhonda organizes and makes sense of the events in her life.

Rhonda's heightened sense of self-confidence has served her well. Just a few years ago she was on the verge of succumbing to the limitations of her life conditions. But due to a now familiar series of remarkable events Rhonda has developed the courage to travel abroad in the spring, something she never imagined sitting in the trailer with her mother. Rhonda's confidence has continued to build in momentum to the point where she is now ready to apply it to other areas of her life. Recently, she developed the courage to critically examine some of those basic understandings about the life from which she managed to escape:

"I think I grew out of some of the innocence I had then. You know, you're a product of your environment and I didn't see my mom as being so different from the Hamptons until I moved in and got used to it there...I guess up to this point I always figured everybody was really similar and then when I moved there, it was like, so profound. There were a lot of political things I stopped believing in....I don't know how to explain -- it was just gone.

"The Hamptons are a very conservative family and I never saw the welfare issue like I see it now until I lived with them for a little and realized that some families are capable of working, but just don't in order to stay on welfare and not having to work. And the Hamptons have tons and tons of work ethic. They believe you shouldn't have anything unless you really work for it."

It has been suggested that class is more keenly felt by those who experience its deprivations than by those who enjoy its privileges. (Jackman and Jackman, p. 69). From the time of her parents' divorce when she was four years old until she moved out of her mothers' trailer at age sixteen, Rhonda was all too familiar with the deprivations of life in the lower class. But that same sensitivity to its deprivations perhaps predisposed Rhonda to become fully aware of the privilege that awaited her in the upper class. What became most apparent to Rhonda, once she became comfortable in her new home environment, was that the people with whom she now associated had different assumptions about their lives than what she had been exposed to before. With support and guidance from the Hamptons Rhonda would soon come to claim these values as her own.

Having had the opportunity to experience life from both sides of a class divide she now has placed the expectation on herself to never return to a life characterized by deprivation. But despite her heightened self-confidence, her elevated aspirations, and her desire for success in life, Rhonda is haunted by doubt. She has benefited from the privilege of class in numerous tangible ways since her move in with the Hamptons. As she sat in her mother's trailer five years ago and began to plot out the trajectory of her life, she never dreamed that she would be at Central College preparing to travel to England. In that respect, she is far removed from those days of her adolescence:

> "Maybe the innocence is the only thing I really miss. Other than that I don't miss anything about my former life. I see life as it is now. I think it was the environment I lived in. It was so small. Then I got into a bigger environment and it was easier to see."

But Rhonda cannot help but wonder if the distance she has managed to put between herself and her past life is permanent. On the one hand, she lives in a middle class home environment, she is attending a private, selective liberal arts college in preparation for entry into law school, and she is preparing to travel to England for a semester of study. Suddenly, Rhonda is able to envision aspects of her life that before she could not even imagine:

> "I just know as I accomplish more of my goals I'll have more. So I'm not sure if I'll ever view myself as completely successful because I'll always have

something else I will want to do. One thing Rod always told me was that once you realize that there are other things you want to do, you're too set in your ways to do anything about them. I don't ever want to be set in my ways. I want to be willing to change, to adapt."

As it stands now, things are going well for Rhonda. She is enjoying her time at Central College; she continues to do well academically, and she has no doubt that she will graduate from law school. Yet, despite these outward assurances of her new class position the transformation is incomplete. While Rhonda will most certainly obtain the credential that will allow her to secure her place in the middle class, her state of mind has yet to catch up with her aspirations. Remnants of the ambiguity and conflict that accompanied Rhonda's move to her new environment continue to intermingle with her optimism. Maybe over time, Rhonda wonders, her background will catch up to her to remind her where she came from. Maybe the family she has grown to love and the environment she has come to claim as her own will, in the final analysis, prove to be but one small interlude in a much larger tragic story. Maybe, Rhonda wonders, her lower class roots are so deep as to resist the pull of her middle class aspirations:

"I'm just waiting to fail. It's just seeing that my mom wasn't doing anything after I realized that she was supposed to be. And my cousins going to college. They'd gone to college and they were really smart in high school but when they came to college they failed out. My mom and dad weren't intelligent,

neither were my closest aunts and uncles and I've just seen all this stuff -- you know, nobody succeeding in life. They weren't happy.

"I think I'm doing well enough at Central to know I'm going to make it but I'm afraid that I'm not going to get into law school. And I'm going to Oxford next semester and I'm really nervous that this is going to be the time when I'm going to fail. I guess that I've seen failure so much that I'm just waiting for the time when I'm going to do it. I'm confident, but yet there's always that feeling in my stomach that this is going to be the time."

Epilogue

When I spoke with Rhonda eighteen months later, much had changed in her life. Her trip to England, about which she first introduced the idea of culture shock, had been a success. Once she got accustomed to the strange accents, Rhonda recalls, life in England got much better. And time at Oxford University was deeply enriching. She particularly liked the tutorial method of instruction, which allowed her to meet one on one with an instructor over a six-week period. The reading load was heavier compared to what she had gotten used to at Central, Rhonda states, and the final grade was determined by the one paper that was due at the end of the term. The stress of the course was manageable, though, in part because the social life that inevitably forms on such trips. All in all, Rhonda says, "it was just awesome. I never imagined it would be as different as it was."

A week prior to the interview Rhonda experienced an event that, even five or six years earlier, she might never have imagined: she graduated from college. Even now, Rhonda is trying to digest all that has happened to her. To Rhonda, graduating from college represents the close of another chapter in the brief yet dramatic story of her life. Indeed, so much had happened to her in such a short amount of time. And, because of the course of those events, there was much wrapped up in that brief walk across the stage to pick up her diploma. Even as she was making her way through the commencement ceremony, the reality that she actually accomplished such a worthy goal was difficult to grasp. She recalls those brief moments:

"They took your picture as you walk across the stage. And I can just imagine. I had this total look of terror as I was shaking the president's hand."

But the story of Rhonda's elevated aspirations does not end there. Rhonda recently learned that she had been accepted into three law schools, including one Ivy League school. Her two other choices are a regional law school located in Ohio and a somewhat less prestigious one in Michigan. Rhonda is not sure which law school she will attend, but she is fairly certain that it will come down to affordability. Law school can be expensive, she has discovered, and she may need to find a compromise between the prestige she desires and the amount of prestige she can afford. Nevertheless, she is pleased to have been accepted into law school at all and is looking forward to pursuing a career as a tax attorney.

As far as her life circumstances, Rhonda has settled into the middle class way of life. She has traveled abroad, she has earned a college degree, and she is headed for law school. But there are other aspects of Rhonda's transition that are less concrete and tangible. The remainder of the epilogue to Rhonda's story brings us up to date on the emotional aspects of the transition to the middle class: Where does she see herself in relation to her biological family? How does she view her current situation? And, given all that has happened to her over the past fifteen months, is she still waiting to fail?

Negotiating the Transition

At the time of the initial interviews Rhonda and I talked at length about the various aspects of her transition into her new home environment. Her conversations with her old peers were strained, Rhonda said at the time, and she was still trying to negotiate the difference between the expectations placed on her by the Hamptons and the resentment from her extended family over her decision to leave her mother in the first place. Where, I asked Rhonda, is that transition now, given all that has happened over the past fifteen months?

> "I think it's done...I really think a lot of things have settled. The other segment of my life is like a very long ago memory. I think I've changed into two totally different people"

There are telltale signs that the transition from Rhonda's former life into her new one may indeed be complete. For one, the few threads of relationships that kept Rhonda connected to her former peers have now all been severed. She did work to maintain a relationship with one of the friends from her former life for a while, but as time wore on even that one fell victim to the change in Rhonda's life. The change in Rhonda's life was too dramatic to sustain old relationships. "We never, ever talk any more," Rhonda says about her former friend. "And the rest of them, we've all just gone different directions."

Rhonda's relationship with her biological family, strained at best during the months immediately following her move to the Hamptons, fell victim to the same fate. Rhonda never sees the members of her biological family anymore, she reports. She

hadn't seen her mother for a year and a half, and the same is true of her dad. They did come to her graduation but, as Rhonda recalls, they stayed for about five minutes afterward, then left. The distance between herself and her family, in Rhonda's words, has grown over time.

> "It's like they are not even a part of my actual family anymore. I talked to my dad the day I came home from college and it was like I was talking to a friend that I hadn't talked to in a long time. But we didn't have much to say to each other. It was like he wasn't even my father.
>
> "And my mom came to my room after graduation and she stood there. She was like 'how are you doing, are you going to come and visit me.' And I just said, 'I kind of want to go home and move everything.' So she just turned around and left the room. She didn't hug me or anything. She just left."

The value of relationships is one of the things that Rhonda has learned since moving out of her mother's home. The relationship she cherishes most is the one she shares with Ms. Hampton, who she now refers to as "mom." At the time of the move Rhonda was barely able to grasp the magnitude of the change in her life, much less put in into words. What she did notice first about her new life were the little things about the way the Hamptons conducted their everyday lives. They ate meals together, something Rhonda rarely did with her biological mother. They took vacations together, they ate out at restaurants, and they would talk to each other about what was going on in their lives. To Rhonda, this was unfamiliar behavior in the context of living out one's daily life.

And, naturally, Rhonda did notice the difference that money makes. With the Hamptons, she was able to buy things she needed, to go places she needed and wanted to go.

Back then, Rhonda attributed these changes in her life to the differences between the lower class and the upper class. "It's easier to get things in the upper class" is how she summarized her circumstances at the time. But with the passing of time Rhonda has reached a different conclusion about the source of her new way of life. True, the move in with the Hamptons did take her from life below the poverty line to a comfortable, middle class existence with two college-educated, professional adults as heads of the household. But the essence of the change in her life, the one aspect of her middle class environment that matters most is not the income or the travel. Rather, says Rhonda, "I think a lot of it now was just the difference in relationships." Rhonda's life with the Hamptons is characterized by the respect and trust between her and the Hamptons, elements that in their fullest consequences pushed Rhonda to succeed beyond her own wildest imaginings. It is the respect, above all else, that seems to have mattered most:

> "I think I'm willing to work harder now than I was then. I think it's just a matter of respect. It's like my [biological] mom didn't respect me then and doesn't respect me now. I never had a problem with that with the Hamptons. They always thought I could do whatever I wanted to do.
>
> "Even I was surprised when I graduated from college. Like, gee, I never thought that it was going to happen. The Hamptons never had a question."

Rhonda's relationship with the Hamptons has given her a new sense of appreciation for the value of a supportive, loving, and caring family. And since the death of Mr. Hampton two years ago Rhonda's loyalty to her new family has only grown stronger. Once she completes her law degree Rhonda expects that she will have many opportunities to experience life in a different parts of the country. Initially, her plan was to finish law school and to move out of her home state completely, to "get as far away from here as possible," she remembers. But now, Rhonda is not quite so sure. For the first time in her life, Rhonda knows the nurturing, supportive side of family life. Her first hand experience has left an indelible impression of what family life can be like when the relationships between parents and children are based on love, respect, and trust. "I have a biological family," Rhonda states, "but they were never were really family." Now, she says, "I have a real one and I don't know if I am ready to leave that."

And perhaps the most enduring effect of Rhonda's relationship with the Hamptons is how it has shaped her views of the relationship she hopes to have with her own children someday. "There's a saying that you always end up like your mom," Rhonda says hesitatingly. "And that kind of scares me. I hope that I'll end up treating my children more like Sue treats me."

Lingering Doubts: Remnants of a Former Life

Rhonda's trip to England during her junior year at Central represented much of what has changed in her life. Just a few years ago the thought of even going to college was, to paraphrase Rhonda, a dim light somewhere in the back of her mind. Even still, while the idea may have been there, the fact that it might actually happen unimaginable

for Rhonda. And now, only a few years after moving out of her mother's home, she was planning to visit England. What made the trip possible for Rhonda was the momentum of self-confidence that began with the move itself. "I just slowly accomplished different things," Rhonda recalls, "and as I accomplished more things I gained more confidence." The trip to England, while in itself an accomplishment, accelerated the pace of Rhonda's growing self-confidence even more.

Rhonda's heightened level of self-confidence, her ability to actually see herself accomplishing things that before she was not able to even imagine, is perhaps the aspect that epitomizes the difference between her former life and life with the Hamptons. "I think that one of the things that happened was the longer I lived with them the more goals I set for myself," Rhonda recalls. At first, Rhonda had to be convinced to even go to college at all. But over time, she says, "It wasn't enough to graduate from Central. I wanted to graduate with honors. And I don't want to just go to any law school. I wanted to get accepted at Penn." In short, in Rhonda's words, she just has more goals for herself than she used to.

While she grows in her self-confidence and her dreams for her own future are starting to take shape, there remains an unresolved aspect of Rhonda's story. Despite the elevated self-confidence; despite Rhonda's plans to attend law school, which were injected with enthusiasm with her acceptance into Penn; and despite her restored faith in the possibility of a loving and caring family life for herself in the future, the chains of Rhonda's former life, the self-doubt caused by a life time of watching others unsuccessfully try and change their positions in life, have not yet been cast off:

"When I was at Central this last semester, which was before I had heard from law schools, I had to go see a counselor because I was just freaking out. I thought that I was never going to get accepted, or that something would happen and not let me graduate. I had to go see this counselor once a week just to calm my fears."

Rhonda's life experience has placed her firmly on two sides of a class divide. Her elevated career aspirations, the supportive relationship she enjoys with Sue Hampton, and the new sense of self that is rooted in her heightened self-confidence, stand in stark contrast to the life she remembers with her biological mom. The opportunity to begin a new life with a new family is something that most of us have never experienced and never will. Yet, the circumstances surrounding Rhonda's life led to a change in lifestyle that was both swift and dramatic. This alone suggests the exceptional nature of her story. Yet, Rhonda does remain on the margin of two cultures. While her conditions have improved in a material sense; and while she is making choices and engaging in the behaviors that will secure her life in the middle class, emotionally she finds herself still trying to straddle the chasm between the old life and the new. As her story unfolds the central feature of the plot continues to center around the lingering doubts about the security of the footing on which her dreams of a middle class life rest:

"I'm afraid that when I go to law school I'm going to fail, or once I get out of law school that I will never find a job, or -- there's just too many 'what if's' in my future."

Chapter 5: Discussion

I. Class and the Fulfillment of College Aspirations

The three students featured in this study were invited to tell the story of how they came to attend Central College and what has happened to them since their arrival. The narratives were written to reflect the way the students themselves organize and make sense of the events, experiences, and relationships that shaped the development and fulfillment of their college aspirations. Consequently, each narrative is different in terms of emphasis, premise, and voice. The variety that characterizes the three stories is indicative of the highly personalized nature of the college choice experience. For the reader, these stories present an alternative interpretation of college choice, one that is built around the significance that each student attaches to their desire to go to college. Only in light of all the larger life predicaments in which the students see themselves – the history that each brings with them to college, as well as their hopes for what life will be like when they leave – can we more fully understand the college aspirations of Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda.

Rhonda's story, for example, centers on the dramatic turn of events in her life and how the change in her life circumstances served to elevate her college and career aspirations. On the one hand, going to college is an expression of Rhonda's shifting class identity, one rooted in the new expectations that were placed upon with her acceptance of the offer from the Hamptons. Yet, even though Rhonda has adopted many of the behaviors and attitudes associated with her middle class position, she cannot completely

distance herself from the reality that governed her previous life – the fact that no one else in her immediate family ever succeeded. For Hannah, her college aspirations find their meaning in her quest for survival, which for her includes financial security as well as her desire for a strong personal and family identity. Having watched her mother struggle to connect with the world outside of the town of Central, Hannah has vowed to use her time in college to expose herself to everything that's "out there" so that she will be able to create an environment in which she and her own children can participate in the shared construction of a common set of values.

And for Ethan, college is about "catching up." His story is told in inductive fashion, in that the events that make up his college choice experience are presented as examples of the ways in which access to social and cultural resources shaped his educational experience. While he knows that he will eventually finish "the race," Ethan has come to accept that he will simply have to work harder than the socially and culturally advantaged students to reach the same destination. Even then, Ethan realizes that in some areas he may never fully catch up. Yet, the more Ethan has reflected on his circumstances, the more he has come to recognize the social and cultural roots of his disadvantaged position in the credentials race. As a result the anger and bitterness that once characterized his outlook on his predicament has been converted into a new sense of focus and determination.

The primary focus of the study, however, is the relationship between class background and college choice. More specifically, I explored how being working class shaped the ability of three students to fulfill their college aspirations. With the use of life history, we are able to see what the process looks and feels like from the point of view of

those involved in it. Consequently, aspects of the experience not accounted for in the traditional representation of college choice are made visible: the subtle influence of peers and significant others in shaping college aspirations: the varying degrees of specificity and clarity with which the students are able to give form to their aspirations; and the unevenness with which various contexts such as the high school shape the experiences of individual students. Most importantly, these three stories contain illustrations of the obstacles that working class often need to negotiate in the fulfillment of their college aspirations. The lessons drawn from these experiences is of interest to anyone interested in addressing the disparity in educational attainment that separates the middle class way of life from those who aspire to it.

Educational Resources

The most valuable resource in making sure that students who express aspirations to go to college actually make it to college is the education history of the parents. Rhonda's life with her new family illustrates the advantages of having college-educated parents when it comes to getting to college. First and foremost, the Hamptons were instrumental in elevating her aspirations for college. At the time she moved in with the Hamptons, Rhonda was still ambivalent toward the idea of going to college. She held out hope that she might still follow through with her plans to join the Air Force, an idea Rhonda had carried around with her from the time she was in grade school. Once the Hamptons had redirected her aspirations away from the Air Force and toward college, they set about to ensure that she would be able to compete for admission to the more

selective colleges. This included persuading Rhonda to enlist the aid of a tutor in preparation for the ACT.

The Hamptons' support of Rhonda's college aspirations continued into the formal college selection process. To begin, they worked with Rhonda to narrow her list of college options to a small number of small, private, liberal arts colleges. From there they accompanied Rhonda on visits to each of the colleges in her choice set and, on the visit to Central, made it a point to spend time in town to assess the quality of life there. And in preparation for the final selection, the Hamptons helped Rhonda sort through the relevant considerations to ensure that she would select a college that would be best for her.

Hannah also had the full support from her mother, but it was in a very different form of support than what Rhonda received from the Hamptons. Hannah's mother had always shown an interest in Hannah's education, beginning in the earliest years of grade school. Despite the fact that her mother worked in a factory on an hourly wage, Hannah recalls, she always took time from work in order to attend awards ceremonies at school. The support continued as Hannah began to make decisions about college. However, her mother was unable to take an active role in Hannah's college selection due to her lack of familiarity with how the process worked. Feeling at a loss over how to intervene in a substantive way, her mother would continually defer to Hannah as the expert in such matters.

Ethan recalls similar expressions of support from his mother. As Ethan points out, his parents wanted him to be successful and expressed full confidence in his ability to do so. If being successful meant that Ethan would go to college, his parents would be in full support. But by the same token if he chose not to go to college that was okay, too.

What was most important to his parents, Ethan recalls, was that he does what makes him happy. In Ethan's words, his parents would support him "no matter what he decided to do." For Ethan, this hands off approach to his educational experience manifested itself in his inability to present himself as "college material" in high school. Understanding the importance of classroom participation in order to be labeled as a high achiever, for example, or knowing whom to talk to for guidance on graduate school preparation and selection provide those who are endowed with the predisposition a tremendous advantage in the competition for credentials.

At the end of the project Ethan was attending his third college. Having found the courage to return to college after his first dismal attempt, Ethan would soon encounter yet another obstacle in his path. At the end of his second year at Central Ethan's parents informed him that they could no longer provide any financial support for college. Ethan had been working to twenty hours per week during the school year just to keep his head above water financially. But in the end he was unable to keep up with the pace required of him if he were to remain at Central College. Despite the earlier delay and the more recent change of course, Ethan is on track to graduate seven years from the time he first entered college.

Whereas Ethan's journey toward the fulfillment of his college aspirations has resumed after the unexpected turn of events, the status of Hannah's aspirations at the end of the project were are on hold due to financial necessity. Hannah was forced to withdraw from Central in the spring of her junior because of financial hardship. Ironically, the source of her financial difficulties is the need to work two jobs to be able to go to college at all. The demands of her workload on top of a full load of courses became too much for

Hannah, and she dropped a course in the spring semester of her junior year. This put her below the minimum number of hours required to retain her eligibility for federal financial aid. Even if Hannah does return to college it will not be to Central, having chosen to abandon the dream that had sustained her educationally from the time she was in the seventh grade.

Of the three students, Rhonda is the only one of who was able to complete college in four years. And just as planned, Rhonda is now deciding where she will attend law school in the fall. Indeed, Rhonda's story provides a sharp contrast to the journeys taken by Hannah and Ethan in the fulfillment of their college aspirations. Unlike Hannah and Ethan, Rhonda did not have to work while in college because of the financial support of the Hamptons. Not only did Rhonda not have to worry about working, she was able to study abroad for a semester. But Ethan and Hannah, even though they were some how able to make it to Central College, did not have the cushions in place to keep them from straying off course. In fact, the material conditions of their working class backgrounds meant that it did not take much at all to disrupt their college experience.

Indeed, the role of material conditions in determining the ability of students to fulfill their college aspirations is not to be underestimated. But as MacLeod (1987) states, "individuals make of [their] objective conditions what they will in forging their identities" (p. 248). Ethan's story illustrates how the subjective conditions of working class life can shape the educational experience: his feeling of not liking "those other students" in his high school, those students whose orientation to their education led them to participate in the classroom experience in a much more active manner than Ethan felt himself capable of; his inability to participate in what Suskind (1998) calls the "success

discourse," and how this suggested to the guidance counselors in his high school that perhaps he was not college material. For Hannah, the subjective aspect of her working class background was expressed most forcefully during those first few critical days at Holy Cross High School, the fears that accompany a working class kid from a single parent home who finds herself sitting in a "snotty," middle class high school.

But what happens to working class students once they make it to college and find themselves in daily contact with people whose behaviors, attitudes, and values differ from his own. Particularly useful in this regard is the work of Howard London (1992). London has interviewed students from various minority categories, including membership in racial and ethnic groups, as well as white working class students. "If there is a common element in their poignant stories, he writes, "it is that these students live on the margin of two cultures" (p. 6). The very act of going to college indicates an interest in attaining a white-collar, middle class position not previously attained by a family member. This, London states, may take the student into uncharted cultural territory (P. 10).

McGrath and Spear (1991) argue that demographic characteristics fail to capture the essence of what makes working class and other nontraditional students different from those students with a family history of college attendance. These students, they argue "come from backgrounds which have not prepared them to identify with, or even to recognize the central values and practices of academic life" (p. 24). This idea was expressed by a working class faculty member who recalls of her own experience as an undergraduate, "I never felt that I knew the academic rules, especially the unwritten ones,

well enough to participate as an equal with my supposed peers" (Dewes and Law, p. 216).

Thus, full participation in the culture of higher education, London writes, requires working class students to abandon many of the values and norms of the culture of origin. But more importantly for the survival of their aspirations, working class students must quickly adapt to the expectations placed upon them by virtue of their participation in a new cultural environment. Among the tasks these students must negotiate is to learn the language, social conventions, patterns of economic consumption, understandings regarding outsiders, relations with outsiders, and matters of taste associated with membership in a status group (p. 7). This is not to suggest that other, more concrete explanations for Ethan's dismal performance are not viable. Perhaps he lacked the type of high school preparation he needed to succeed in such a rigorous academic environment. Maybe it is attributable to his lack of motivation to succeed, or his lack of interest in the subject matter itself. But what lies beneath all of this for Ethan is something more fundamental. The cultural challenges facing working class students once they arrive on the college campus is epitomized in Ethan's explanation for why he struggled in his first attempt: "I didn't know how to be a college student," he said.

The Success Entitlement

Negotiating the culture of higher education is the first challenge awaiting working class students when they arrive on the college campus. But by no means do the threats to the fulfillment of one's college aspirations end once the student has arrived at a place of cultural equilibrium. When Ethan left college the first time, he had planned to take

classes at the branch campus of the state university in order to stay on track with his academic progress. Unfortunately, this did not work out due to lack of transportation. Nevertheless, at least at that point Ethan had not given up on the idea that he would eventually graduate from college. His parents, on the other hand, interpreted Ethan's return home quite differently. Fully aware of the difficulties Ethan faced in college, his parents assumed that he was home for good. In other words, Ethan had given college a try but, to state it simply, it just didn't work out. Naturally, their response was to tell him get a job so he could start paying rent, given that his identity as a college student had been replaced in the eyes of his parents by the reality of his working class future.

Hannah remains up in the air, though she is firm in her conviction that she will eventually return to college. Not only did Hannah not have the financial cushions in place to keep her on track, she is faced with the resentment from other members of her extended family over her decision to go to college. Their resentment is expressed in the questions that are openly asked, or that are implicit in the way they make sense of Hannah's desire to go to college: Why is she wasting all that money? Why isn't she working? And what's wrong with the way we live, anyway. Her decision to leave Central simply reinforced their expectations for failure that had plagued Hannah from the beginning, the belief that people like them simply do not belong at a place like Central College.

In contrast to the how the families of Ethan and Hannah make sense of the disruptions in the fulfillment of their college aspirations, the Hamptons from the outset approached the pursuit of Rhonda's college aspirations very differently. Rather than viewing college as a roll of the dice, with the outcome dependent on external factors such

as luck and circumstance, the Hamptons looked at Rhonda's prospects for the future with a sense of entitlement. Not only were the expectations for success present, the Hamptons did everything they could to ensure a desirable outcome. Based on their own educational history, the Hamptons viewed the economic and social rewards of a college education as "there for the taking," given that the right choices are made and the available resources are deployed at the right time.

But as these stories makes clear, the deciding factor in whether or not a student is able to fulfill his or her college aspirations is the amount of control that the family perceives itself to have over the outcome. Sadly enough, good intentions are simply not enough to ensure a successful outcome. If asked, all parents would say they want the best for their children. Rather, what often makes the difference in educational outcomes is the amount of active, intentional action aimed at enacting the parent's support of a child's college aspirations. To state it another way, the difference between the verbal encouragement received by Hannah and Ethan, and the active support shown by the Hamptons toward Rhonda's college aspirations, can be thought of as the difference between words and deeds.

It is one thing to want the "best" for your children, however vaguely-defined those wishes may be. As Ethan and Hannah's stories suggest, their college aspirations were fueled by their parents' desire for them to be successful. But neither benefited from the investments of time, money, energy, and expertise that might have made the pursuit of the college aspirations less burdensome, or that might have made the outcome less prone to chance. Neither Hannah nor Ethan questions the depth or the sincerity of the expressions of encouragement offered by their parents. However, in considering the

support received by Hannah, Rhonda, and Ethan it is clear how actions such as visiting college campuses and hiring a tutor for the ACT can provide substance to the hollow ring of verbal encouragement.

Thus, not only did Rhonda have the advantage of being able to navigate a course with the aid of critical social and educational resources, there was every assurance made that she would stay on course until she reached her destination. This orientation to college success stands in stark contrast to the lack of control exhibited by Hannah and Ethan, especially when face with unplanned disruptions. Rhonda may have felt at times during her time at Central that she didn't belong there, and there may have been times when she had doubts about her ability to succeed. But the Hamptons, given their orientation to college success, would never have said to her "you gave it your best shot" or, worse yet, "we knew you would fail."

II. Implications for Practice

Endowing Families with Educational Resources

For high school counselors, college admissions personnel, and others who work with college-bound students, these insights are useful in designing interventions to offset the adverse effects of class background as other working class students try and make their way to college. The implications of these findings are rather straightforward in principle. If parents are sincere in their support of their children's college aspirations, they can be taught how to enact that support in direct and concrete ways. First, we can work to ensure that parents are involved in key educational decisions at the high school level so that families do not inadvertently limit their opportunities for a college education. A recent study of the college aspirations of Indiana high school students (Orfield and Paul, 1993) revealed a gap between students desire to go to college on the one hand, and the level of preparation during high school on the other. Students and families, the study points out, make choices in high school about curriculum, course selection, and college preparation and planning activities that greatly decrease the odds that they will actually make it to college. The cause of the poor choices is often a lack of information on the part of high school students and their parents as to what will adequately prepare students to enter and be successful in college. The conclusion drawn by the authors is disturbing: the problem is not that parents are making bad decisions at critical crossroads; rather, the problem is that no one is telling them that the crossroads even exist.

Second, we can capitalize on the ability of parents, regardless of their own educational level, to increase the likelihood that their children will attend college. Recent

research on the college-going behaviors of high school students highlights the importance of pre-college planning activities in increasing the likelihood of college attendance (Hossler et al, 1998). For example, starting a college savings account, irrespective of the amount of money actually put in it, increases the likelihood that a student will attend college because it captures in material form the level of importance placed on a college education by the parents. In other words, what matters is not how much money is saved, but how the effort to save sends a message about the importance of college by providing a way for parents to show support for their children's aspirations in a tangible way. Similarly, we now recognize the importance of "triggering events," such as taking the PSAT, in increasing the likelihood of college attendance. And in the more routine aspects of college preparation, the importance of being around college-bound peers and engaging in conversations about college with parents are now well understood in their capacity to help students to crystallize their aspirations for college.

Once students reach the college selection process there is much to be done to ensure that students and parents make good choices. Research on the experiences of first-generation students reveals some important distinctions between students based on the education level of their parents. Students whose parents did not attend college, for example, often perceive less family support for their college aspirations than do students from college-educated families (York-Anderson, and Bowman, 1991). Further, students who perceive less support from their parents often have less factual information about college. Once these families reach the campus, admissions personnel need to be sensitive to the varying degrees of "college knowledge" that families bring with them. Things as simple as providing parents with a timeline of college application activities, for example,

will not only keep families on track as this critical time, but it may give them some sense of control over a process that is complete unfamiliar, and consequently may seem overwhelming and intimidating. Or, if parents and students have no reference point for sorting out the complex mix of colleges and universities, then our ability to communicate with them in a language that is meaningful to them may remove an additional barrier to a good decision.

Despite their ability to make it to Central College, Hannah and Ethan both fell victim to the harsh reality that going to college can impose a severe financial burden on students and families. Despite the academic and social sacrifices they made just to keep their heads above water, in the end it simply was not enough to allow them to continue at Central College. For institutional policy makers, the lesson drawn from these experiences is clear: students of modest financial means are vulnerable to the slightest change in financial circumstances. Granted, abrupt changes in financial circumstances are beyond the control of Central College, or any other college or university for that matter. And on the face of it, Hannah failed to meet a clearly stated and well-grounded requirement related to her eligibility for financial aid. In terms of financial aid policy, it is not an efficient use of scarce resources to continually support students who are not making reasonable progress toward degree completion. However, in Hannah's case a surface reading of her predicament misses its essential element. Hannah was not careless or irresponsible in making progress toward her degree. To the contrary, it was her willingness to do whatever it takes to complete her degree – including working three jobs – which ultimately led to the disruption in her college experience.

Further, as Colleges like Central tout the benefits of the residential, liberal arts experience, we must ask to what extend the need to work twenty hours per week while enrolled in college robbed Hannah and Ethan of those espoused benefits. While Rhonda traveled abroad to study, Hannah and Ethan were fortunate to find a weekend to spend with family. While other students enjoyed the social and educational benefits of co-curricular life, Hannah and Ethan filled their daytime hours between classes with work hours. In short, while the other students at Central were taking advantage of all that Central College had to offer, Hannah's and Ethan's experiences at Central were characterized by their struggle to make financial and academic ends meet.

Values and Orientation: The "Invisible Hand" in Educational Attainment

"While working class culture is not by any means uniform and monolithic," writes one working class faculty member, "it socializes its participants to see the world with different beliefs, hopes, and expectations from those held by middle class people" (Dews and Law, 1995). Indeed, there is a consistent and meaningful relationship between people's social class position and the values and general orientation that direct their behaviors and actions (Kohn, 1977). To state it another way, we act upon what we think is important; what we consider important is shaped by observing the behaviors and actions of those around us; and the people with whom we come in contact in our neighborhoods and in our schools tend to come from families of similar social standing. The development of a class orientation is akin to Bourdieu's (1986) notion of the development of *habitus*, a term used to describe the unconscious process by which individuals internalize the behavior and attitudes of those in their immediate

environments. This framework of values and orientation in turn directs future actions by serving as a filter through which options are considered to determine their fit with what is deemed important and relevant to one's life.

Examples of the relationship between orientation and behaviors are seen in how a family spends discretionary time and money, as well as in matters of taste. Why, for example, do tractor pulls appeal to some while others prefer the symphony? Or what differentiates a listener of National Public Radio from one who prefers AM talk radio? This is not to suggest that as individuals we become locked into a closed circle of class experience because of the educational and occupational choices of our parents. To the contrary, one of the defining characteristics of the class system in America relative to European societies is the permeability of class boundaries (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Still, the family socialization process is a powerful one and shapes such aspects of everyday life as the use of leisure time, the use of discretionary money, and the people with whom we choose to build social relationships.

One way to characterize the ways in which values and general orientation shape college aspirations is to say that they determine the extent to which parents are inclined to place importance on those types of activities and behaviors that predispose their children to the value of a college education. While this includes the obvious things like explicitly encouraging children to go to college, values and orientation are manifest in ways at a much more mundane level. Choosing to spend discretionary time and money to visit colleges, for example; or participating in your children's high school experience to make sure that the right choices are being made at critical times; or simply making it a point to

talk about current events, careers, and colleges at the dinner table all emanate from the values of the parents.

Explanations of the differences between the middle class and working class orientation are varied. The "culture of poverty" thesis states that working class culture has distinct values and forms of social organization that work against them in the formal educational system (Lareau, 1987, p. 73). One manifestation of this, the thesis suggests, is that lower and working class families do not value education as highly as middle class families. Thus, children may grow up in a home environment in which their education is simply not the focus of attention on a day to day basis. Similarly, based on short-term analysis of costs and benefits, working class families may decide that entering the work force immediately after high school is more economically advantageous than forgoing potential earnings for four years by going to college. Or, parents may verbally express their support of their children's college aspirations by may decide that other priorities prevent them from paying for college.

One proposed solution to the growing economic gap between the working and middle classes is to elevate the college aspirations of lower and working class students. Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda, because they knew from the time they entered high school that they would attend college, stand as exceptions to this approach. Nevertheless, the implied logic in the proposals aimed at elevating aspirations is that students need to be led to understand the long-term economic advantages of going to college. If working class students and parents just had access to better information about the relationship between education level and earning potential, the thinking goes, more of them would aspire to go to college. But despite our enthusiasm for intervening in the lives of students

to elevate their aspirations for college, we need to resist the assumption that the disparities in college attendance rates would lessen if we simply provided more and better information to working class families.

Put simply, the economic argument for college attendance does not always hold up in light of local economic and demographic data. In my home state, for example, high school graduates can still get good paying jobs without a college degree. In fact, manufacturing jobs sector represents the largest employment sector in the state and continues to grow at a rate that exceeds the growth rate of any other state. Conversely, the state economy is near the bottom in terms of professional and service jobs created. The result is that based on economic considerations of the value of the college degree in my home state, the employment infrastructure serves as disincentive for high school graduates to attend college. On what grounds, then, do you make the case for college attendance?

As a college administrator, I spend a lot of time selling the benefits of a college education to working class families. Particularly given that I am situated on the campus of a liberal arts campus, I find myself selling families on the softer benefits of college attendance: civic participation, lifelong learning, appreciation for diversity, etc. And as a working class student, I understand how my life is qualitatively better because I went to college. However, it is difficult to engage in these types of conversations with families without eventually bumping into a core set of values, beliefs, and expectations that undergird the very lifestyle that gives rise to one's predisposition toward college. Stated another way, we, as college graduates whose own professional lives take place on a college campus, need to recognize that in arguing the benefits of high education as we

have come to understand them, we are espousing a set values based on our own educational and occupational status.

Thus, in trying to help working class students make it to and eventually graduate from college, we need to find a way to talk to families that takes into account their own work values and their own system of meaning. Certainly, we need to educate parents about the "rules of the game" when it comes to getting to college. But at the same time we need to move away from simply trying sell the benefits of a college education using an argument laden with middle class values. Instead of just focusing on how students will be changed by the college experience, for example, we need to validate for them what they bring to the educational experience. And rather than simply holding out promise that going to college can help them gain distance from their working class roots, we need to emphasize the role of education in helping them come to understand and appreciate how their family's social and work history has shaped who they are.

Making Education Relevant: The Narrative Principle

College orientation courses began showing up in college catalogs about ten years ago as a way of helping first-year students, regardless of social and educational background, make the adjustment from high school to college. At colleges like Central, particularly those that are enrolling larger numbers of working class students, special attention needs to be paid to the cultural challenges facing these students. First, working class students can be led to understand how their family history has shaped their educational experience. It is in this forum that many of the challenges faced by Ethan - the language barrier between himself and his professors, the perceived differences in

preparation between him and his middle class classmates - can be brought to the surface so that these students can at least understand the conditions that are working against them in their desire to fulfill their aspirations.

Second, the courses should help students understand the values, practices, and assumptions that lie beneath the surface of the classroom material emanating from the various academic disciplines. Jerome Bruner (1996) writes that one of the aims of liberal education in a democratic society is to help students make sense of their own daily lives in the context of the formal theory. Stated another way, education becomes more meaningful and relevant to students when what they "bring with them" is seen as a legitimate framework for making sense of what is being presented in the classroom. This is not to suggest that learning be reduced to the validation of purely subjective points of view. Nor does it require gutting traditional courses of their academic content. I am suggesting, however, that instructors of first-year students, whether in orientation courses or first-year seminars, make explicit the assumptions that guide inquiry in the formal disciplines. For example, students need to recognize that implicit in the teaching of history is an argument for the importance of a historical framework for making sense of contemporary events that impinge on our daily lives. Similarly, rather than teaching sociology through the presentation of esoteric theory, students can be encouraged to reflect on how their own class position has shaped their social relationships, their political views, even their educational and career aspirations.

As a conceptual framework, the narrative principle accounts for the fact that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make choices according to narrative structures (Sarbin, 1986, p. 8). Said another way, we organize and make sense of the

events in our lives in storied form. The participants' experience in this project supports the narrative reflects this principle. By carving out time and space for Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda to make explicit the private stories they employ to organize the events in their lives, we begin to understand the roots of the educational and career aspirations. In his autobiography, Richard Rodriguez (1982) describes his education took away the option of remaining who he was prior to going to college. For him, the value of a college education was felt as he gradually came to embrace his working class background, to understand and appreciate how the hopes, beliefs, and expectations of his family shaped his own sense of self.

Similarly, Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda are in the midst of an ongoing process of redefining who they are in light of their college aspirations. As Hannah and Ethan continue on in pursuit of their career aspirations, and as Rhonda continues on into law school, several questions linger: What does it mean to be middle class, beyond the procurement of the college degree? How will the students understand their predicaments once they have gotten their first professional job? What aspects of their working class backgrounds will they have left behind? What aspects will continue to shape who they are? Are they destined to live out their lives feeling "nowhere at home" (Dewes and Law, 1995), knowing that they have chosen to leave behind much of their past way of life, but also knowing that they can never completely shed their working class skins?

Rhonda, for example, harbors fear that eventually her past will catch up to her and that, just like everyone else in her family, she too will fail. Will there come a time in Rhonda's life when the fears will dissipate? And will Hannah be able to resist the possibility of self-fulfilling the expectations for failure placed on her by her aunts and

cousins? At what point will she feel like she has attained the status as a "professional woman?" Will she then feel like she is surviving? And although Ethan is well on his way toward completing his degree, he still feels unable to participate in certain conversations with his wife's family. But how important is that in how he views his class standing? Does it, in his mind, make him less middle class? If so, how can he learn to be more middle class? Or is being middle class rooted somewhere more deeply than in learned behaviors? In short, only time will tell whether Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda ever come to fully embrace their new identities as middle class, or if they continue to see themselves as "working class kids" trying to learn, think, and act, like middle class adults.

Conclusion: Reflections of a Working Class Academic

As should be apparent to the reader, this study brings together streams of interests that emanate from the professional and personal realms of my life. To begin, I share with the participants in this study my working class origins. Despite the fact that I have a graduate degree and now occupy a position as a professional educator; and likewise, despite the fact that the participants in this study have taken the first step toward the professional middle class by choosing to attend college, the way we view our relationships, indeed our very understanding of the world and our place in it, was formed largely out of our experiences in our working class neighborhoods and within our working class homes.

What first drew me to these particular students was a curiosity about their college choice experience. As a working class student and the first of seven children in my family to go to college, I wondered how it was that these students ended up at a private liberal arts college. That I would actually attend college was never in doubt. I experienced a high degree of academic success throughout my primary and secondary schooling. But despite a successful high school experience, my ACT scores rendered me just another above-average graduate in the class of 1979. Thus, I didn't receive attention from a large number of colleges, particularly those that are considered selective and, by consequence, prestigious. The fact of the matter is that with my test scores I probably would have ended up on the waitlist of any college that considered itself to be selective. But the point is that I never considered applying to "those types" of colleges.

Without a clear sense of the characteristics that differentiate colleges, I set out to gain entrance into the university located in my hometown. For me, two-year colleges, liberal arts colleges, regional universities, branch campuses, and major research universities were all part of the monolith called "college." The only real differences between colleges, as far as I was concerned, were distance from home and affordability. While my college selection differed from theirs, there is one fundamental aspect of our background that binds us together: by definition, our decision to go to college requires that we leave behind some aspect of our working class backgrounds. First, the odds are high that we will obtain better, more prestigious jobs than our parents ever had. However, considering only the occupational dimension of going to college misses the question of how our private and public lives will be shaped by our educational and occupational status.

Second, going to college requires that we devote four years of our lives to developing the "life of the mind." The relationship of education to occupational prestige is apparent and needs to be taken into account. That is, part of the reason we choose to devote four years of our lives to college is to get a better job. But beyond the desire to obtain training for a job, we are introduced to a new framework for making sense of the world. Going to college requires that we develop the ability to be reflective, that we learn to think critically about much of what we have been told all our lives, and that we develop the ability to form defensible positions in light of the multiplicity of opinions that swirl around us. All of this, of course, is to be accomplished in an environment where we find ourselves interacting on a daily basis with peers whose educational and social histories may be quite different from our own.

All of this is to say that going to college for working class students takes on added significance because it is about changing who we are and how we think about ourselves. Two of the students profiled of this study spoke about the difficulty they faced in trying to adjust to the middle class ethos that dominated their high school and college environments. While the transition to a new culture is an important aspect of the college experience for working class students, that is not the primary focus of this study. (This phenomenon is well documented. See, for example, Billson and Terry, 1982; London, 1989; McGrath and Spear, 1991; London, 1992; Dewes and Law, 1995). What is of interest to me about the college-going experiences of working class students is what going to college means for how we develop our sense of identity.

Maybe as college graduates we will define ourselves by occupational prestige alone, or maybe we will measure how far we have come the way we interpret and make sense of the world compared to the way we did prior to coming to college. Either way, or perhaps in some combination of both, college for us is about redefining who we are. It is my fascination with this aspect of going to college, the relationship between going to college and our changing sense of self -- where we see ourselves going, who we want to become -- that is the impetus for this study.

Where this all leads is back to the predicament facing Jason, to whom the reader was introduced in the opening paragraphs of this study. Although the final destination in Jason's educational journey is yet to be determined, several questions emerge from this study: What can I draw from the experiences of Hannah, Ethan, and Rhonda to help prepare Jason for what lies ahead should he decide to go to college? What can I do, as a significant other in Jason's life, to ensure that if he does decide to go to college that he

will succeed? How can I instill in him the sense that he does have some control over the outcome?

It is of little value to go back and question what might have happened differently in Jason's life that might have improved his current circumstances. The fact is that Jason and his parents, like many other families acting with the best of intentions, made decisions regarding Jason's education without full recognition of the long-term effects of those choices. Why didn't they talk more deliberately about going to college while Jason was in grade school? Why didn't Jason take college prep classes as a high school freshman, a time when he would have been susceptible to positive peer influence that would have been every bit as strong as the negative influence that seemed to take hold? Why did Jason not take the PSAT as a sophomore? And dropping out of high school, of course, introduces obstacles in Jason's path that are far more difficult than the ones other students on the way to college. Thus, there is little question that Jason's current predicament is the direct result of the choices he and his parents made.

But there is also little question as to the role of the material conditions of his working class background in shaping the earlier choices made by Jason and his family. What if his parents had been able to send him to a private high school, like Hannah's parents did for her? What if they had been able to start a savings account? What if early on, when Jason's grades began to slip, if they had been able to afford to hire a private tutor to get Jason over the hump? What if his parents had chosen to live in a middle class neighborhood, where from an early age Jason would have been exposed to a different set of peers and probably a more rigorous middle and high school curriculum?

The life histories presented here on the surface chronicle the journeys of three students as they try to get to and eventually graduate from college. Embedded within their stories are insights that begin to address the questions posed above. We see the benefits of having college-educated parents who know how to seek out advantage for their children and who have the means to deploy to make it happen. But beneath the surface lies the stories about a parallel journey, a journey of the self. A deeper reading of the events that make up these life histories suggests that, indeed, when a working class student decides to go to college a process is set in motion whereby the experience changes who they are. The effects of a college education on the identity of a working class student, as Richard Rodriguez's educational journey reminds us, are often felt long after a career takes hold.

Thus, I will do what I can to help Jason decide what he wants to do with his life. If he decides to go to college he will probably need help with the federal financial aid form; he will need to visit with admissions counselors to talk about his educational and career plans; and he may even need to take part in an admission interview because of his marginal high school academic record. If this is indeed the case I will deploy all the resources at my disposal on his behalf. However, the most valuable resource at my disposal may be my own experience in grappling with the subjective aspects of one's class identity that need to be renegotiated when working class roots take hold on the college campus. Hopefully, as a reader of his own life history Jason can begin to interpret his past, to understand how his aspirations, aims, and goals have been shaped by the events and experiences in his life. But more importantly, Jason may eventually gain the confidence to author the next chapter in his unfolding life story.

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