Abstract

How do undergraduates engage authority figures in college? Existing explanations predict class-based engagement strategies. Employing in-depth interviews with 89 undergraduates at an elite university, I show how undergraduates with disparate precollege experiences differ in their orientations toward and strategies for engaging authority figures in college. Middle-class undergraduates report being at ease in interacting with authority figures and are proactive in doing so. Lower-income undergraduates, however, are split. The Privileged Poor—lower-income undergraduates who attended boarding, day, and preparatory high schools—enter college primed to engage professors and are proactive in doing so. By contrast, the Doubly Disadvantaged—lower-income undergraduates who remained tied to their home communities and attended local, typically distressed high schools—are more resistant to engaging authority figures in college and tend to withdraw from them. Through documenting the heterogeneity between lower-income undergraduates, I show how static understandings of individuals’ cultural endowments derived singularly from family background homogenize the experiences of lower-income undergraduates. In so doing, I shed new light on the cultural underpinnings of education processes in higher education and extend previous analyses of how informal university practices exacerbate class differences among undergraduates.

Keywords: Academic Engagement, Cultural Capital, Diversity, Education, Inequality, Sense of Belonging, Trajectories
INTRODUCTION

Marie: I have such great fortune with professors. I have very personal relationships with one of them, two of them actually. We go out for dinner. I go to office hours all the time. My relationships with professors and teaching assistants are all pretty good.

Nicole: I say, “Let’s get coffee.” I have no qualms asking a teacher for help. If I need something, I’m more than willing to go; I email often. It’s valuable for your grades to know professors. I make it a point to know my teaching assistants, my professors. Since my high school had mandatory tutorial hours for teachers, I was like, “If I need help here, I’ll just go to office hours.” It wasn’t a big thing.

A constant refrain rings out across campus, the social call of professors: “My door is always open.” Many undergraduates welcome these invitations; some do not even wait for such offers before reaching out. Others run from them, finding such solicitations odd, intrusive, even terrifying. Previous scholarship shows that differences in engaging authority figures in academic contexts affect students’ access to institutional resources, acquisition of cultural and social capital, educational experiences, and post-graduation mobility (Calarco 2011; Carter 2005; Collier and Morgan 2008; Holland 2015; Lareau 2003; Rivera 2015; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbush 1995; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012; Stuber 2011; Zweigenhaft 1993). Building on Bourdieu’s (1984, 1986) work on the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, scholars argue that working-class youth are at a distinct disadvantage because (1) they have low stocks of dominant cultural capital to draw on when acclimating to college and (2) colleges privilege middle-class norms and behaviors (Aries and Seider 2005; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lehmann 2014; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Stephens, Townsend, et al. 2012; Torres 2009; Walpole 2003). Yet Marie is a legacy student and daughter of professionals and Nicole is a first-generation college student and daughter of drug addicts whose addictions cost them custody of their children and their own freedom.

Drawing on interviews with undergraduates, I examine what Stevens et al. (2008:131) call the “experiential core of college life,” the often-overlooked moments between entry and exit when undergraduates employ different cultural competencies to navigate college. Rather than observing

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3 All names are pseudonyms.
strict, class-stratified engagement strategies “marked by [their] earliest conditions of acquisition” (Bourdieu 1986:49), I show how the Privileged Poor—lower-income undergraduates who attended boarding, day, and preparatory high schools—enter college with a propensity for and an ease in engaging authority figures akin to middle-class students. In contrast, the Doubly Disadvantaged—lower-income undergraduates who remained tied to their home communities and attended local, often distressed high schools—tend to withdraw from engaging authority figures and feel uneasy when forced to interact with professors. In effect, Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged are Weberian ideal types (Weber 1978; see also Anderson 1999): analytical concepts used to represent the overlooked heterogeneity in the experiences of lower-income undergraduates.

It is important to understand how social class shape how undergraduates navigate college. In outlining differences between the Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged, however, I show how attributing individuals’ cultural endowments solely to family background homogenizes the experiences of lower-income undergraduates. Institutions—not exclusively the family—can equip students with the cultural competencies they need to succeed in college. Further, I extend previous organizational analyses on how informal university practices exacerbate class differences among undergraduates. I show how colleges are biased toward those not just from advantaged class backgrounds, but rather those with precollege experiences usually reserved for wealthier segments of society.

SOCIAL CLASS AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

From asking for help to developing mentoring relationships, engaging authority figures in academic contexts—a form of dominant cultural capital—is a mechanism through which youth gain access to institutional support and resources (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Calarco 2011; Erickson, McDonald, and Elder 2009; Holland 2015; Kim and Sax 2009; Lareau 2003; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). Researchers argue that social class stratifies how students engage teachers in
primary and secondary school. Highlighting the role of parental socialization, Calarco (2011:873) states that “children’s class backgrounds provid[e] them not only with different dispositions for choosing whether and when to seek help but also with different strategies to use in help-seeking interaction.” Compared to working-class youth, middle-class children are both primed to engage teachers and feel comfortable doing so (Calarco 2014a; Lareau 2003; Streib 2011). Moreover, teachers respond more positively to middle-class interactional styles, often spending more time with and/or favoring those who adopt them (Calarco 2014b; Carter 2005; Patrick et al. 2001; Willis 1977).

Scholars assert that youth’s classed dispositions, or habitus, persist into college and that the cultural norms that govern campus life exacerbate class differences (Lareau and Weininger 2008; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2014). Emphasizing how social class shapes behavior, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013:10) state that “students from similar class backgrounds share financial, cultural, and social resources, as well as lived experiences, that shape their orientations to college and the agendas they can readily pursue.” Analyzing how institutional expectations related to faculty engagement affect undergraduates’ well-being and functioning, Stephens et al. (2012:3) argue that colleges too narrowly “focus on middle-class norms of independence as the culturally appropriate way to be a college student,” thereby alienating working-class undergraduates (Lehmann 2007; Smith 2013). Collier and Morgan (2008:439) posit that first-generation college students’ lack of cultural capital leads to emotionally taxing moments of miscommunication with faculty and “broad failures to understand faculty’s expectations about the basic features of student performance.” Further, scholars argue that this contrast is starkest at elite colleges (Aries and Seider 2005; Mullen 2010; Torres 2009; see also Binder and Wood 2013). The cultural mismatch that working-class undergraduates experience increases stress (Stephens, Townsend, et al. 2012), heightens their sense of isolation (Aries 2008; Ostrove and Long 2007), threatens their academic identities (Collier and Morgan 2008; Tinto 1987), undercuts academic performance and persistence (Pascarella and
Terenzini 2005; Pike and Kuh 2005; Terenzini et al. 1996), and can prompt them to withdraw from campus life (Bergerson 2007; Lehmann 2007; Suskind 1999). Social class limits undergraduates’ acquisition of cultural and social capital (Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014; Stuber 2011; Walpole 2003). These experiences, important in their own right, can also affect mobility after college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Rivera 2015; Zweigenhaft 1993).

Clearly, social class is crucial to understanding undergraduates’ college experiences. Previous investigations, however, treat lower-income undergraduates as a monolithic group by adopting fixed understandings of undergraduates’ acquisition of dominant cultural capital that happens during early childhood. Consequently, they do not show how interactions outside the home influence acquisition of cultural capital (Erickson 1996; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Young 1999), or how those experiences may moderate the relationship between social class and academic engagement in college.

**College: Next Step or New World**

When engaging authority figures in and navigating the “hidden curriculum” of academic institutions (Anyon 1980), undergraduates rely on cultural competencies developed before college. Consequently, high schools play a powerful role in shaping students’ cultural competencies as they serve as judges of academic success and the social dynamics attached to it (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Carter 2012; Cookson and Persell 1985; Flores-González 2002; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Mehan 2012; Nunn 2014; Tyson 2011). As middle- and working-class youth transition to adulthood, however, they typically do so separately from one another (Putnam 2015; Stephens, Markus, and Phillips 2013). While middle-class youth hail from more formally educated families, reside in safer neighborhoods, and attend well-resourced schools, working-class youth come from less formally educated families, live in less secure communities, and attend less-resourced schools (Logan, Minca, and Adar 2012; Massey 1996; Massey et al. 2003; Orfield et al. 1994; Ryan 2010; Sampson 2012). Such unstable social circumstances are compounded for disadvantaged blacks and Latinos (Kozol

Scholars interested in disadvantaged undergraduates’ college experiences tend to overlook a growing number of lower-income, high school students of color who enter college from highly resourced high schools by participating in government-sponsored mobility programs (Carter 2012; DeLuca and Dayton 2009); joining agencies like A Better Chance and Prep for Prep that place them in private high schools like Exeter and Andover (Holland 2012; Ispa-Landa 2013; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1991); or receiving scholarships directly through diversity initiatives at boarding, day, and preparatory schools like St. Paul’s and Milton (Anderson 2012). Recent National Association of Independent Schools reports (2013a, 2013b) show that roughly 28% of private school students are students of color (e.g., black, Latino, and Asian) and that 23% of all students receive financial aid, roughly an 8% increase in a decade for both. Following the top college placement of their affluent classmates (Cookson and Persell 1985; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1991), I show how lower-income black students who graduate from private schools, for example, constitute, on average, 50% of lower-income black undergraduates at elite colleges (Jack 2014). I call lower-income undergraduates who travel this alternative path to college the Privileged Poor.

Although they come from economically disadvantaged homes and distressed neighborhoods, the Privileged Poor are immersed in resource-rich, predominantly white and wealthy secondary schools (Cookson and Persell 1985; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Ispa-Landa 2015). Importantly, they do so during adolescence when they are developmentally malleable (Crone and Dahl 2012; Erikson 1980). In these schools, students forge academic and social identities in contexts that encourage independent thinking; open dialogue; and close, frequent contact with teachers (Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Kane 1992; Khan 2011). Their precollege exposure to elite environments differs

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4 Programs like A Better Chance do partner with and place students in high-performing public schools, but the vast majority of participants attend private schools.
from that of their lower-income peers who remain in or near their home communities for school and socializing, those whom I call the *Doubly Disadvantaged*. Their schools typically reinforce notions that teachers are distant authority figures, adopt test-oriented curricula, deal with problems that interrupt learning, and lack formal structures that promote contact with teachers (Kozol 1991; Neckerman 2007; Paulle 2013; Ryan 2010). Golann (2015:108), for example, notes that by focusing on discipline, “no-excuse” schools create “worker-learners—children who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority.” Some lower-income students do attend magnet or charter schools. The cultural and resource differences between alternative public schools and private schools, however, are greater than alternatives and public schools.

These studies outline the overlooked divergent high school contexts and experiences for lower-income students. They cannot, however, speak to how these disparate precollege experiences relate to lower-income undergraduates’ college experiences (Jack 2015). Consequently, the theoretical implications of how lower-income undergraduates from these disparate streams navigate college remain underexplored. I address this gap by documenting the different engagement strategies of the Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged.

**DATA AND METHODS**

**The Place**

Renowned University (pseudonym) is a highly-selective university in the United States with a long history of educating youth from wealthy families. The student body and faculty are predominately white. Renowned accepts less than 15% of applicants, the middle-50% of SAT scores is between 2000 and 2400, and roughly one-third of undergraduates do not qualify for financial aid. Although they serve fewer undergraduates than large, public universities, elite colleges increase chances of upward mobility for lower-income and/or minority undergraduates more than lower-tier institutions (Bowen and Bok 1998; Dale and Krueger 2002). Renowned adopted progressive need-
blind and no-loan admissions and financial aid policies to increase access for underrepresented groups. These financial aid policies reduce undergraduates’ need for outside loans and full-time employment, which are associated with academic and social disengagement (Bergerson 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Additionally, Renowned is almost exclusively residential, which means that all undergraduates are immersed in the same social milieu and are exposed to the social and cultural norms that govern campus life even if they experience it differently.

**THE PEOPLE**

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 89 native-born black (B) and Latino (L) undergraduates. I limited the investigation to the experiences of native-born undergraduates to examine how exposure to structural inequalities in the United States shape undergraduates’ college experiences. To gain analytical leverage on how lower-income undergraduates who travel different trajectories to college report navigating Renowned, I include Latino respondents for four reasons. First, much of the literature on inequality and undergraduate college experiences focuses on black/white comparisons or intraracial investigations of class differences (Small and Newman 2001). Second, Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, making up 17% of the country’s population in 2013 (Lopez and Patten 2015). Third, black and Latino undergraduates have more similar precollege exposure to poverty, segregation, and the concomitant social dislocations than they do with white or Asian undergraduates (Massey et al. 2003). Fourth, lower-income Latino youth are also targeted for diversity initiatives at boarding, day, and preparatory high schools and elite colleges and universities (Anderson 2012). I did not interview middle-class Latino undergraduates. Over the course of fieldwork I discovered that a significant number of the middle-class Latinos were born outside of the United States.

To assess respondents’ absolute and relative disadvantage, I asked a number of questions...
including how much financial aid they receive (if any), what their parents’ occupations are, if they are first-generation college students, whether they receive a Pell grant, whether they receive additional college scholarships to help with purchasing books or clothes, if they experienced economic hardships growing up, and whether they received government aid growing up (i.e., food stamps). As I show in Table 1, twenty-seven respondents are from middle-class backgrounds (MC), meaning they have parents who graduated from a four year institution, and sixty-two respondents are from lower-income backgrounds, meaning they are first generation college students and/or report receiving significant financial aid (on average, greater than 80% of tuition covered by scholarship). I classify twenty lower-income respondents as Privileged Poor (PP) and forty-two as Doubly Disadvantaged (DD). Sixty-one respondents identify as female, twenty-eight identify as male. This gender imbalance mirrors that of black and Latino undergraduates at Renowned and elite colleges more generally. Massey et al. (2003:40) show that for black and Latino undergraduates, there is a 2:1 and 1.18:1 gender ratio favoring women, respectively. I did not observe gender differences with respect to comfort in and strategies for engaging authority figures.

I recruited respondents in three ways. First, I immersed myself in the community by eating in the cafeteria; attending social gatherings and informal events like television show screenings; moderating discussions on race, class, and inclusion held by student clubs and organizations; and building rapport with different college administrators. Through these interactions, I engaged different student leaders of affinity groups. I used these connections to send invitations to participate in the study over the groups’ email lists. Second, respondents referred friends, often

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5 I do not intend to flatten the heterogeneity in middle- and upper-middle classes (see Lacy 2007 for critique). To bring attention to overlooked differences between the Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged, I use “middle-class” to designate those from more advantaged backgrounds. Many respondents from families where both parents have degrees are upper-middle or upper class. Respondents with parents who have degrees from four-year colleges but with lower status positions exhibit similar proactive engagement strategies and report feeling more comfortable engaging faculty.

6 Women constitute equivalent portions of Doubly Disadvantaged (70%), Privileged Poor (77%), and middle class (68%) respondents.
making introductions at events or via email. Third, I introduced myself to undergraduates at public events on campus and personally invited them to participate in this study.

I constructed my interview guide to investigate undergraduates’ lives inside and outside of school before college. In the first part of the interview guide, I followed a targeted life history approach to investigate respondents’ depictions of and experiences in their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and different organizations (see Young 1999). In the second part, I focused on respondents’ college experiences. I began data analysis by listening to interviews to develop major themes. The primary data source for this paper came from respondents’ answer to the statement, “Tell me about your interactions with college officials” and instances where respondents describe encounters with or perceptions of professors and other authority figures at Renowned. I asked about engagement in this open-ended manner so as to allow respondents to identify their most salient experiences and outline their modal engagement strategies that I could then explore in more detail with probing questions (see Hirsch and Jack 2012 for similar methodology). I created an “engagement” code in ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, to focus on respondents’ engagement with authority figures (Charmaz 2006:57–60; Weiss 1994:154–156). I read transcript excerpts after classifying respondents as Privileged Poor, Doubly Disadvantaged, and middle-class to assess general patterns within and across groups.

Given my background as a black man who is a first-generation college student and my (perceived) status as an authority figure, I thought critically about researcher effects—how who I am might influence respondents’ openness and my analysis. I do not believe respondents withheld essential information in their interviews. On average, interviews lasted almost 2.5 hours. Respondents provided intimate details about their lives before Renowned. They were equally forthcoming about many aspects of their college experiences from their engagement strategies to thoughts about fitting in on campus. Many respondents mentioned that interviews “felt like therapy”
or said that the interview was one of the few times at Renowned that they felt someone cared about their story rather than just what they plan to do during (e.g., major) or after (e.g., job) college. I believe respondents came to see me more as an emotional outlet than authority figure.

**Validity and Robustness Checks**

I checked my analysis by sharing preliminary findings with individuals at Renowned. First, I shared observations with deans, professors, and support center personnel for feedback. Second, I presented findings at public forums and departmental meetings focused on strategies to engage first-generation college students for different support services. Feedback confirmed an unsaid institutional expectation that undergraduates should reach out if they want help. After meetings with student affairs officers at Renowned, I gave a public lecture that roughly sixty professors, deans, residential advisors, and undergraduates attended. Additionally, two student groups hosted open discussions on this research. These structured dialogues, along with informal discussions with undergraduates around campus, suggested that this analysis captured not only respondents’ experiences, but also those of undergraduates not in the sample. During question and answer periods, students often described their class background and high school when outlining their engagement strategies in ways that largely aligned with my findings. Similar experiences occurred after a lecture at another college when an undergraduate identified herself as Doubly Disadvantaged and explained why she and her friend (who subsequently identified as Privileged Poor) engaged faculty so differently from one another.

**Findings and Analysis**

In this section, I describe respondents’ engagement strategies. I show how those with disparate precollege experiences differ in how they engage authority figures at Renowned. I conclude with implications for theory, higher education practices, and policy.

~ Insert Table 2 About Here ~
MIDDLE CLASS

Middle-class respondents enter college with an ease for engaging adults. As I show in Table 2, the vast majority of middle-class respondents (22/27) describe positive interactions with professors, deans, and administrators at Renowned. Many report engaging authority figures to develop support networks and to extract key assets like recommendation letters, research assistantships, and access to authority figures’ professional and personal networks.

Middle-class respondents discuss being comfortable engaging authority figures, and many do so early on in their time at Renowned. Antoinette (MC,B), a freshman whose parents also attended Renowned, calls her transition from her days as a boarding school student to her days as an undergraduate at Renowned “smooth.” She feels comfortable reaching out to professors, intimating that similar rules for engaging faculty exist at both Renowned and her boarding school:

Antoinette: It is possible to do it here because not all professors are scary. At my boarding school, it was a given. The same people who were your dorm parents were your teachers. It was easier to make close connections because you’re living with them. Literally. Here, it’s different. You have to go seek that relationship; it’s not going to come to you.

Interviewer: Do you feel ok doing that?

Antoinette: I do. Because of my boarding school, I know it’s possible. I’ve reaped the benefits of being close to faculty members in high school. Coming here, if I see someone who’s awesome… I’m in this English class that clearly has an awesome professor. I have more confidence to go to office hours and meet her in person.

Going further, Antoinette says that, like Renowned, her boarding school reinforced “the independence thing. You learn how to talk to teachers yourself. You learn to do what you have to do on your own and be responsible for all the things you have to do…. The amount that they mix
students and teachers makes you feel more grown up than you are.” Prioritizing independence, her high school pushed students to be agents in their own development while also providing ample opportunities for personal contact with teachers. Although relationships with faculty at Renowned are less automatic, Antoinette feels comfortable cultivating them, even as a freshman.

Similarly, Joe (MC,B), son of healthcare professionals who attended local public schools that catered to surrounding middle-class enclaves, regales me with accounts of positive relationships with faculty. In high school, where he “thrived in small classes,” Joe loved opportunities to show adults both his productivity and personality, something he claims has carried and helped him at Renowned. In describing his bond with one professor at Renowned, he says, with a knowing smile, “I go to his office hours. I’m like his right hand man; we’re pretty cool.” One less positive interaction, however, showcases his ease in engaging authority and advocating for himself. Joe recalls feeling slighted out of a higher grade:

I expect a lot of teachers: be compassionate, happy to help, make sure you understand and be understanding of where you are coming from, give advice. But, man, I had the weirdest encounter with a TA; it set me off. I hadn’t done as well on the exam as I wanted to, so I went to her about a regrade. Brought the idea up to her. And she was like, “That probably won’t work.” I was like, “I explained my point.” She was like, “Yeah, but you have to say this.” She didn’t seem like she cared and that kind of pissed me off. I talked to my TA about it when I went to class later.

Joe, the self-proclaimed “right hand man” to a prominent professor, feels comfortable arguing for a regrade and expects that his TA will see things his way. He refuses to simply accept the lower grade without a challenge. Although unsuccessful this time, future attempts may prove beneficial, as may his comfort in advocating for himself inside and outside the classroom.
Outside of office hours and class, middle-class respondents also discuss engaging authority figures on social and personal matters. While one middle-class respondent partners with his teaching assistants for tennis, another reports befriending deans at social events. Misha’s (MC,B) success in lobbying administrators to endorse housing for transgender students, and their support of his own gender transition, leaves him feeling welcomed at Renowned. Calling interactions “positive,” he says, I don’t think I’ve had a bad one. I’ve had to meet with the housing coordinator; she was ridiculously nice. I don’t know if the resident advisor counts, [but] the QueerPRIDE advisor is the nicest guy I’ve ever met. My residential advisor is nice enough, distant, but nice enough.

Similarly, Justin (MC,B), a junior, says that his strategy is to “reach out; I reach out to everyone.”

Going further, he explains how and why he bridges the academic and social:

Renowned is what I expected: a place of profound excess and profound wealth. Definitely try and get a slice of it. What I do really well for myself this past year, not only this past year, is reaching out to professors, reaching out to business people, reaching out to physicians. I’m interested in medicine. Reach out to public health scholars; I’m interested in public health also. This place is becoming what it should be for me, a place where I have this opportunity, the privilege to understand how the world works [and] how I can effect change.

Hitting the books is not the only way Justin wishes to make the most of college. He looks to the full community of scholars at Renowned to help him with on-campus endeavors and post-baccalaureate projects. His work on campus exemplifies this point: one semester he hosted conversations with leading scholars and activists that drew hundreds.

Generally, middle-class respondents report proactively engaging authority figures, describe the interactions positively, and argue that they reap benefits for building those relationships. Even
freshmen like Antoinette and Joe report hitting the ground running. Middle-class respondents see professors and other authority figures as partners in their journey toward adulthood, whether it relates to personal growth while at Renowned or advancement after graduation.

**DOUBLY DISADVANTAGED**

In contrast, the Doubly Disadvantaged experience more disruptive transitions to college than their middle-class peers. Corinne (DD,B) quips that everything at Renowned constituted culture shock “except for the fact I’m in the same country.” As I highlight in Table 2, they report fewer interactions with faculty and tenser, negative interactions with adults. They lack the skillset or desire to engage faculty, even as they perceive their peers reaping the benefits of forging relationships with them. Naturally, not all Doubly Disadvantaged respondents report negative encounters with or withdrawing from faculty. However, only a third (15/42) report positive relationships and, sometimes, even these more favorable relationships are strained.

Active disengagement was common for the Doubly Disadvantaged. Shaniqua (DD,B), a senior, says that before college, living “above the poverty line was high.” With continued bouts of homelessness and living in shelters before Renowned, Shaniqua developed the grit to withstand tough times and excel academically in the four segregated, poor high schools she attended where violent fights between rival gangs disrupted learning almost daily. Yet the resilience that once protected her before Renowned spawned an inability to advocate for herself in college:

> Shaniqua: When you’re poor and you’re homeless, you get used to [taking] what is given. You don’t complain. Someone gives you a shirt, even if it’s ugly, you wear it. Of course you’ll be grateful. It’s made it harder for me to advocate for myself. Part of me is like, “I’ve been given enough.” It wouldn’t really be good to rock the boat when you’re homeless and depend on others. I make myself likable, being ok with
what is given. I've gotten better but it's hard for me to advocate for myself. It's taken
time to not feel guilty asking for extensions.

*Interviewer:* How long did it take you to feel comfortable?

*Shaniqua:* I don’t know how much of it is pressure or me feeling comfortable. Junior year was really good. I know I'm not comfortable now (as a senior) because I almost failed a class. I didn’t reach out to the professor until he sent an email. Even though he said if you don’t turn in this paper you’ll fail, it wasn’t until I got that email that I realized I needed to email him. For weeks, I just kind of sat and didn't do anything.

Unlike Joe (MC,B) who feels comfortable enough engaging adults to argue for higher grades as a freshman, Shaniqua reports accepting what is given to her well into her junior year. Her strategy of withdrawing from her professor placed her grades in jeopardy; and the stress of it all paralyzed her.

Respondents also note feeling uneasy with the expected style of engagement at Renowned, and believe that interactions with professors should be limited to discussing academic material. Daniel (DD,L), a junior, remembers the relationships between teachers and students in high school as strained: “freshmen year, classes [are] mixed (honors and regular students). People heckle teachers, argue with them, text blatantly in their face, ignore them. My honors and AP classes, we got yelled at for not doing homework.” It was not until junior year of high school when he joined Scribe, a writing club, that Daniel began engaging teachers because his work caught their attention.

At Renowned, he avoids professors and his academic dean, even while on academic probation:

*Daniel:* I don’t do office hours. I never thought of myself as an “office hours”
person. In high school, I didn’t talk to teachers. I walk in and sit down. I would take the test and then they’d be like, “You got a high grade. Congratulations!” I’d be like, “Oh cool. Thanks.” That’s how they would notice me. I didn't want to talk to them.

In college, I was like, “I'll do the same thing.” But no [laughs]. I wasn't smart
enough. And then, these kids who go to professors after class and just talk to them. I have no idea what they’re talking about. I don’t have any questions beyond what they’re teaching. They’re kiss-asses. These people want recommendations, a spot in this guy’s research team. I never wanted to grovel.

Interviewer: Are both strategies equally effective?

Daniel: Theirs and mine? Well, mine’s not effective at all [laughs]. It worked in high school but that was high school. Now that I’m here, I never would’ve cut it as pre-med because I wouldn’t have anyone to write my recommendations. I’m sure their strategy worked out. They’re all going to get glowing recommendations.

Daniel draws moral boundaries between himself and those he labels “kiss-asses” similar to how Willis’ (1977) lads distance themselves from the “ear’oles” (see also Lamont 2000). Finding his peers’ behavior annoying and against his beliefs about how one should get ahead, Daniel wants to focus on the work like he did in high school but stumbles in adjusting to the social dynamics of academic life at Renowned. Even Daniel believes that his strategy is ineffective compared to the “kiss-asses” who possibly gain access to lab assistantships and glowing recommendations that will aid them in the future. Despite his fear of missing out, however, he cannot shake old habits.

Respondents agree that Renowned expects undergraduates to seek out authority figures. But unlike Antoinette (MC,B), who feels at ease doing so, it makes many Doubly Disadvantaged respondents feel anxious. Valeria (DD,L), a junior and top-performing student in her major, identifies “building relationships with professors” as one of her biggest struggles. Explaining her limited engagement, she describes mixed messages and unanticipated expectations:

My being uncomfortable going to office hours: that’s the [social] class thing. I don’t like talking to professors one-on-one. That’s negative because Renowned really wants you to be proactive. And raise your hand. And talk. Freshman year, I didn’t say
a word. People who I had small classes with, if I see them on the street, I recognize them. They won’t recognize me because I didn’t speak. My dad would always teach me, “You don’t want to get where you are based on kissing ass, right? You want it based on hard work. It’ll take longer, but there’s more value to it. You’ll feel more proud.” That’s bad in this context because Renowned totally wants you to kiss them.

The expectation to proactively seek the attention of adults contradicts life lessons Valeria heard growing up and strategies she employed throughout high school. As she notes, “I just went to class; I didn’t talk to them outside of class ever. I didn’t feel a reason to except I guess when I had to apply” to college. Counselors, she admits, did not help because she felt like any question she had like, “What is the common app?,” intruded on their time because they were “very preoccupied with students who were having disciplinary problems… or mental health issues” despite her needing the support to fill gaps that her older sibling could not.

Many find engaging professors emotionally taxing. Isabel (DD,L) is a junior from an impoverished suburb where school counselors told students to “dream small” and teachers battled to stem growing heroin use among the students. Describing her transition to college, she remembers being “very stressed first semester. I would just cry sometimes.” Reflecting on the absence of relationships with professors that exists into her junior spring, Isabel admits,

It is actually a really bad thing; I still feel great hesitation talking to professors, even TAs. TAs are closer in age; you would think it is more comfortable…. I have never felt comfortable speaking to adults as equals or even asking them questions. It is something I have been cognizant of since I came here. I need to be able to talk to adults. How am I going to get some sort of recommendation? How am I going to ask for help? How am I going to build a relationship they say is “one of a kind” here? I can’t even open my mouth.
Some Doubly Disadvantaged respondents discuss a lag in acclimating to the expected styles of engagement. Ariana (DD,L), a second-semester freshman, avoids engagement for fear of being judged: “I feel very self-conscious. I still don’t feel comfortable speaking to school officials. I’m constantly wondering what’s going through their mind, how they’re perceiving me which I probably shouldn’t do but it’s an instinct.” Ariana, however, shows progress. Over dinner in the cafeteria during her sophomore spring, she adopted a determined tone to discuss her growth since our last interview, mentioning that she involves herself more on campus and sees Renowned more as her own. Speaking to a group of high school students the following semester, Arianna revealed to them that the culture shock of academic and social life overpowered her during her first three semesters. Reaching out for help was something that she had to learn, but once she did—in part through working at the Equality Center that placed her in contact with administrators, deans, and upperclassmen—she felt more comfortable at Renowned. Joshua (DD,B), a junior, experiences a similar learning curve: “I’m a lot more comfortable now. When I got here, I was intimidated by everybody. Now, I realize that most intellectuals ask a lot of questions. That’s why I’ve been more open to asking questions, whether it be in class, office hours. With professors; not just TAs.” Similarly, Charlotte (DD,B), a senior, recalls, “my first two years were tepid. I went to office hours once in a while but only because I really didn’t understand something or if I ever really needed help. I rarely went just to talk, which they recommend us do. I never do that, which is bad.” Many Doubly Disadvantaged respondents eventually adjust to what is tacitly expected of them, but they potentially lose out on more than a year of relationship-building and access to institutional resources.

The Doubly Disadvantaged find the new style of engaging authority figures unsettling. As Valeria exclaims, “Wow! Relationships are all that matter here.” Consequently, most Doubly Disadvantaged respondents report limited engagement with authority figures and feeling uneasy at the prospect. Highlighting the dignity of their strategies of getting ahead by focusing on the work,
some Doubly Disadvantaged respondents draw moral boundaries against those who network with professors to advance their personal agendas even if they share similar goals.

**Privileged Poor**

The Privileged Poor’s engagement strategies break from the class mold. Unlike the Doubly Disadvantaged, the Privileged Poor report being familiar with the expected styles of academic engagement at Renowned and being at ease in engaging authority figures. They attribute their smooth transitions to having previously navigated elite academic environments laden with similar unwritten rules. As I show in Table 2, the majority (16/20) report being comfortable engaging authority figures at Renowned and many are proactive in doing so.

Privileged Poor respondents discuss feeling entitled to authority figures’ time and resources. Ogun (PP,L), a freshman, lived in Section 8 housing in a highly segregated neighborhood before college. Ogun, however, received a scholarship to attend a celebrated New England boarding school with an endowment over $200 million. While her family was unaware of this opportunity, Ogun’s middle-school teacher recommended that she apply because she wanted Ogun to go to a school that would nurture her potential. Through institutionalized practices like seated meals and monthly advising meetings (organized especially for scholarship students), engaging teachers and administrators who oversee student groups became commonplace (Khan 2011; Kramer 2008). Ogun says her school encouraged everyone to develop a sense of entitlement in their academic endeavors that she identifies with strongly. While Alice (DD,L) “rarely go[es] to school-sponsored people for things” and finds it anxiety-inducing that “you have all these [professors] but they’re not going to come find you, you have to find them…. It’s been difficult; it’s hard to find the help you want. You’re too intimidated or too afraid to go and talk to people,” Ogun reports “feell[ing] empowered to talk to professors and say, ‘I want to meet with you, chat with you.’” She says, “My high school instilled in me that I’m allowed to do that and it’s actually my right.” Going further, Ogun equates
her first year at Renowned to her fifth year of high school, something I never heard from the Doubly Disadvantaged:

I draw on skills I learned in high school. I have the same agenda except this time it says Renowned. My first month, I was like, “Wow, I like this.” Another thing I learned was connecting with teachers. They made it ok to say, “Hey, can you meet Tuesday at this time?” I had the small classroom experience in high school where it was ok to ask your teacher, “Can we meet about this paper?” I did that a lot my first semester here too. There was a TA, we had a final paper and he was in New York. I asked, “Can we talk?” He was like, “Sure, give me a call.” I was perfectly comfortable with that. My friends are like, “You’re crazy; on the phone with your TA?” Listen, I gotta go out for mine. When I talk about my fifth year, I learned to go out and get mine because I didn’t have a network anywhere else. My high school was providing my network. I use the same mentality.

Ogun develops what she calls a “go out and get yours” attitude that prioritizes developing a support network who can give specific advice on how to navigate Renounced. She comes to see authority figures as facilitators to her academic pursuits in elite contexts to fill gaps that her family cannot.

Similarly, Marina (PP,L) also recalls reaching out constantly on academic matters early in her time at Renowned: “Academically, definitely my first year academic adviser, I went to her for everything. I asked her so many questions. She was very helpful.”

Many Privileged Poor respondents discuss the institutional structures and culture at their high schools when they outline their engagement with adults. Sara (PP,L), who received a scholarship to attend a day school on the other side of town says that her school encouraged contact with teachers by building it into students’ and teachers’ daily schedules.
My high school was very nurturing. They had study hall incorporated into our school schedules. By study hall I mean eighty minutes of time to study or free time. They’re like, “Take this time to meet with teachers. They’re here. They’re also free.”

Sara and I reviewed what resources at Renowned have been important in how she navigates college. Quietly, she says, “emotionally, an adult. It’s happened once this semester when I reached to my residential advisor and I realized how much of a calming effect an adult has that perhaps a peer doesn’t have. That was a really bad night. Just talking to my residential advisor: Wow!” The comfort Sara derives from adults stands in stark contrast to the anxiety and alienation the Doubly Disadvantaged endure when engaging authority figures.

Stephanie (PP,B), a senior, also recalls dense support networks at her boarding school. She engaged teachers who hosted informal, intimate dinners and faculty advisors who followed her development from convocation to graduation. Furthermore, she worked closely with her college counselor who had a caseload of twelve students—1/21 of the long-held recommended national average of 250 and 1/40 of the actual 2014 average of 500—to coach her through the college process (Harris 2014; McDonough 1997). Reflecting on interactions with faculty at Renowned, she offers a parable highlighting differences in preparation among lower-income undergraduates and where she sees herself along this spectrum.

I know what I ought to do. My friend struggles: “I don’t get this; I don’t know what to do.” I told her what to do: “Contact them.” That was very intuitive to me.

Reaching out to your teacher and having one-on-one time was definitely something that was at [my boarding school]. I didn’t think it was a big deal but the fact that she was like, “You sure I can just email them?” Not that she felt the professor wasn’t welcoming, but ‘cause she wasn’t used to that. I arguably have an advantage. I would have been meeting with my professor for a whole semester at this point and she
would have been struggling. Let’s say there’s two students, both struggling. One of
them gets a tutor, which I figure is normal at public schools. I would very intuitively
email the professor and say, “I’m not doing well. Please meet with me. This is my
schedule.”

Bypassing auxiliary sources of support, Stephanie sees going to the professor, with times that best fit
her schedule, as the only option. This strategy is second nature by the time she enters Renowned.

Beyond academics, the Privileged Poor seek out authority figures for myriad reasons. In
middle school, Damion (PP,B) skipped classes and “literally don’t remember studying ever in middle
school, I don’t remember doing homework, I don’t remember studying” because the work was easy
and teachers had low expectations. Wanting to reinvent himself, Damion entered a private high
school instead of the vocational school that his sibling and friends attended. His private school
allowed him “to refocus on what was important because I didn’t have those social distractions
keeping me from fulfilling goals I had for myself.” Issues of diversity became central to his high
school experience as he often reflected on being one of the only minority students there. Lobbying
administrators to increase diversity at his all white, upper-middle class Catholic school, he explains
how he “catalyzed a minority initiative. By the time I was a senior, the school built a partnership
with local communities and was siphoning students from there every year.” When Damion identifies
the resources at Renowned that most helped him overcome initial angst, he states: “Definitely
advisors.” Damion worked with three advisors—an alum, a professor, and the dean of admissions—
to create a college-sponsored support group for lower-income and first-generation college students
like himself. Moreover, Damion brought the president of the alumni association to speak and pledge
support for connecting alumni to first-generation college undergraduates.

When the Privileged Poor discuss adjusting to the expected styles of engagement that
pervade elite academic settings, they refer back to their freshman and sophomore years in high
school. Michelle (PP, L), who endured bouts of homelessness while at her posh day school, welcomes close, personal contact with professors at Renowned. It reminds her of relationships with teachers in high school where they practiced holistic advising that bridged academic enrichment with personal development and “highly suggested” all students attend office hours. Her ease with this style of advising, however, was not automatic. It came only after enduring the culture shock of being around white, wealthy people and an initial resistance to her high school’s hands-on advising style. Over time, however, she says that these connections provided stability when she did not know whether she would have a place to sleep when the school day was done. She asserts,

Freshman year (at Renowned), there’s a very good support system, a lot of advisors you could go to. Sophomore year, they don’t help you as much. I’m really good friends with my advisors. TAs, they’re most loyal7 to those who come to office hours quite frankly.

Interviewer: How would you rate your interactions: positive, negative, in between?

Michelle: Advisor is great: out of ten, probably nine. Some TAs haven’t been good and others have been excellent. I bother them a lot if I need help. I make it known I need help so they’d help me. So that would probably be a seven. There is this macroeconomics professor who’s really legit. I would love to get to know him better. He’s super chill. We got along really well. We chilled, had a good talk… best buds.

Accustomed to frank, open conversations about everything from being homeless to choosing where to study abroad in high school, Michelle brought an affinity for connecting with faculty to Renowned. Building on these positive experiences, she developed a relationship with her economics

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7 “Most loyal” is an urban colloquialism used to describe when a person is faithful or dedicated to another person, cause, or belief compared to an alternative option. In this case, Michelle is saying that she believes teaching assistants devote more time and energy into undergraduates they know.
professor that goes beyond supply and demand curves. As an economics major interested in finance, she plans to build on this relationship after completing his class.

Contrary to extant literature on lower-income undergraduates, the Privileged Poor generally do not feel nervous, uncomfortable, unprepared, or guilty when engaging professors and other authority figures at Renowned. Familiarity with approaching authority figures in similar environments before college attenuates or removes the shock of the expected style of engagement at Renowned. Moreover, their proactive strategies resemble those of their middle-class peers more so than those of the Doubly Disadvantaged. Instead of withdrawing or waiting for authority figures to come to them like the Doubly Disadvantaged, the Privileged Poor report actively reaching out to them, enlisting authority figures as facilitators to their goals rather than bystanders or adversaries.

**DISCUSSION**

Scholars argue that class-based engagement strategies lead to greater inequality in academic settings (Calarco 2014a; Lareau 2003; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995), especially colleges (Collier and Morgan 2008; Stuber 2011). I document how proactive engagement with authority figures is not as strictly tied to social class as social reproduction theory predicts. Rather, I show that scholars homogenize the experiences of lower-income undergraduates. Cultural sociologists and education scholars must account for undergraduates’ acquisition of cultural capital beyond early childhood socialization. Future studies should explore the circumstances that mediate the effects of class origins on youth’s cultural endowments. Experience and exposure are powerful teachers.

The Privileged Poor enter college at ease with the expected style of engaging faculty and previous experiences navigating institutional practices like office hours. Accustomed to academic contexts that emphasize independent thinking and prioritize teacher contact, the Privileged Poor enter primed to engage authority figures. They see authority figures as facilitators of their academic journeys in ways that their families cannot be. They trust that their proactive engagement strategies
will work to their advantage in college as they did in their preparatory schools. Even though the Privileged Poor come to see authority figures as facilitators of their advancement and middle-class respondents see them as partners, their proactive outreach leads to similar experiences with authority figures and potentially more equal access to resources than those of the Doubly Disadvantaged.

The Doubly Disadvantaged report being uneasy navigating the new norms of engagement at Renowned. Compared to the Privileged Poor, the Doubly Disadvantaged lack exposure to elite academic environments before college and have limited experience navigating institutional structures like office hours. Expectations of continued, close contact with authority figures and treating adults as equals is so different and anxiety-inducing that the Doubly Disadvantaged withdraw from such encounters despite seeing their peers potentially reaping rewards for reaching out. Moreover, the Doubly Disadvantaged adopt a defensive stance toward engaging authority figures and draw moral boundaries against those who do. The expected manner of how to engage faculty conflicts with the notions of how one gets ahead held by the Doubly Disadvantaged. In contrast, the Privileged Poor or middle-class respondents see it as normal operating procedure. Consequently, the Doubly Disadvantaged engage less and experience greater stress when forced to interact with authority figures.

One can liken the Privileged Poor’s time in their preparatory schools to a turning point (Maruna and Roy 2007; Sampson and Laub 1993). They left their distressed communities and entered resource-rich environments where they learned new skills and attitudes toward relationships with adults in elite institutional settings. The Privileged Poor adjust to this style of engagement four to six years before college at an age when they are developmentally more malleable (Crone and Dahl 2012; Erikson 1980). The Doubly Disadvantaged, however, enter college in early adulthood when ideas of successful scripts for academic interaction may be well settled. With no explicit rules for when or how to engage professors (Collier and Morgan 2008), and with less coaching than the
Privileged Poor had when they entered their preparatory schools (Kramer 2008), the Doubly Disadvantaged have trouble transforming their general understanding that engagement is positive into real relationships. The resulting cultural lag lasts into the sophomore and junior years of many Doubly Disadvantaged students. Such a lag is not insignificant. The first two years of college are the foundation for undergraduates’ academic and social development as well as a time for expanding one’s cultural toolkit (Charles et al. 2009; Stuber 2011). Respondents outline some of the payoffs of being proactive. They note how ties to and relationships with authority figures provide access to a host of resources like emotional support during rough points of their academic journey, additional help in various extracurricular activities, extra time for assignments, and access to authority figures’ social resources, as well as a host of other positive gains that can accumulate over time (Merton 1968; Tinto 1987). Sustained contact allows professors—who serve as gatekeepers to internships, fellowships, graduate school, jobs, summer travel, and a host of other opportunities (publicized and unpublished)—to get to know undergraduates, their personal stories, interests, and qualifications. Not only are undergraduates who faculty know well more likely to receive greater favor and access to opportunities, but are also more likely to procure stronger recommendation letters than those students who faculty know on a more cursory level.

Colleges must account for the disparate cultural resources that new admits bring to college. Doing so can lead to more effective interventions to help the most disadvantaged undergraduates transition to college. Summer and pre-term orientation programs can ease less socially prepared undergraduates’ transition to academic and social life (Fiske 2010; Stuber 2011). These programs provide familiarity with the campus community and those who populate them. Enlisting faculty as instructors and mentors can remove some of the social barriers that respondents identified as hindering their academic integration into college.
To be accessible and inclusive of more diverse student populations, colleges must also do more than provide scholarships and create pre-term orientation programs. They must interrogate the institutionalized cultural norms that shape campus life, ask whether they help or hinder the progress of culturally diverse admits, and actively work to adopt policies that create opportunities for success for all undergraduates. One policy suggestion is to change the campus culture by framing college in terms commensurate with interdependent norms like collaboration and community rather than independent norms of individualism. Such affirmation helps lower-income undergraduates feel like they share similar goals with the college and this alignment improves academic performance without negative repercussions for those from more affluent backgrounds (Stephens, Townsend, et al. 2012; Stephens et al. 2014).

These solutions may provide localized knowledge of particular colleges and can potentially adjust the college culture but they are limited in scope. They do not represent the type of “durable” investments needed to address the structural inequalities that create the educational disparities that handicap students, preventing many from ever entering college (Sharkey 2013). The differences outlined between the Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged, or rather, the similarities between the Privileged Poor and middle-class students, highlight the consequences of the opportunity gap in America. Given resources more equitable to those of their affluent peers, lower-income students can acquire and later employ the skills needed to successfully navigate mainstream institutions like colleges. However, programs that extract students out from disadvantaged neighborhoods and schools and place them in resource-rich private institutions provide resources for the individual, not the collective. We must find ways to transform public education—especially in underfunded, under-resourced school districts—by creating structures in schools like scaffold advising that integrate students into intergenerational, educated support networks. We need to develop curricula that promote self-empowerment and encourage faculty engagement within critical thinking frameworks.
that engender not only a “college-going culture” but also support the development of orientations and behaviors that align with the cultural norms of social and academic life in college (Mehan 2012). This requires greater funding and commitment to institutionalize practices similar to those found in private schools. That way, the gulf between public schools and colleges, and the resulting culture shock, can be lessened.

Understanding the ways in which culture and inequality shape how individuals engage authority figures has import outside of academic contexts. Whether one is at ease with gatekeepers (Rivera 2015) or how one constructs a “developmental network” inside firms or organizations (Higgins and Kram 2001) influences access to information, guidance, and other resources that may enhance or undercut one’s mobility. Moving beyond traditional gender and racial dimensions of inequality, investigating the cultural underpinnings of different engagement strategies and how such strategies are disparately rewarded can make explicit how endogenous value systems and norms operate in local environments and influence the acquisition of resources and the reproduction of inequality (Turco 2010).

The methodological choices made for this project result in some limitations. I do not investigate how undergraduates use alternative channels for institutional support. Future studies could document the frequency with which they use supplemental institutional resources like career or advising centers and the nature of those interactions, thereby broadening the analytical scope. I cannot account for how the race of the authority figure plays out in these interactions given that most of Renowned’s faculty and authority figures are white. Still, I show how undergraduates with disparate precollege experiences enter college with different orientations toward and skillsets for engaging professors, teaching assistants, and other authority figures. Exploring this relationship in across organizational contexts and also the potential outcomes of using different support networks for access to institutional resources is an important goal for future research.
Colleges serve as levers of mobility, especially for lower-income youth. Elite colleges, by opening their doors and coffers to economically disadvantaged undergraduates, are diversifying the demographic elite in unprecedented ways (Khan 2012). These colleges, however, must not stop with increased financial aid. Investment in diversity must expand from access to inclusion. As the uneven experiences of the Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged show, to make the most of college resources requires access to privileged environments long before receiving a college acceptance letter. Undergraduates from America’s forgotten neighborhoods and ignored schools are truly at a disadvantage as colleges continue to privilege the privileged. This stratification results not from any individual shortcomings of the Doubly Disadvantaged, but rather from systemic structural inequalities that plague society.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The Institutional Review Board at the university being studied reviewed and approved my research protocol. All human subjects gave informed consent prior to their participation in the research and adequate steps were taken to protect participants’ confidentiality.
References


## Tables

**Table 1. Analytical and Racial Classification of Respondents**

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<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
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<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Respondents</td>
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<td>89</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Doubly Disadvantaged</td>
<td>Privileged Poor</td>
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