ESTABLISHING STRUGGLE CRED:
HOW PRIVILEGED STUDENTS DOWNPLAY AFFLUENCE AND LEGITIMATE
CLASS IDENTITIES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Honors Tutorial College
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for Graduation
from the Honors Tutorial College
with the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by
Sam W. Regas
April 2016
ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which college students conceptualize class and formulate SES-based identities. I posit that middle/upper-class students attempt to reframe and downplay privileged aspects of their identities in the attempt to confirm a sense of "struggle cred." Using original, qualitatively coded data from eight elite colleges' Class Confession boards, I show how these relatively privileged students justify their struggle and accordingly present, socioeconomically downward versions of the self by describing parents' economic struggles, their family's frugality in collegiate saving, and their ethos of hard work. In essence, these students actively strive to negate a “privileged” identity. My study serves an important sociological function in analyzing the alternate ways in which individuals adopt class locations; instead of merely positing class in structural terms, I use my data and analysis to demonstrate the ways in which psychological motivations, notions of morality, and cultural capital inform how privileged students confer class identities.
# Table of Contents

I. Introduction.................................................................................................................5

II. A Review of the Literature................................................................. 8

III. Methods.....................................................................................................................18

IV. Findings...................................................................................................................26

   “Stop Assuming We Have Carefree Lives”............26

   “But My Parents”.................................................................35

   “I’m Not Snobby”.................................................................39

   Recognizing Privilege; Negotiating Guilt...............44

V. Conclusion.................................................................................................................49

References..............................................................................................................57

Appendix..................................................................................................................60
I. INTRODUCTION

Class affects us all. In an era of rapidly increasing socioeconomic inequality, this sentiment proves particularly relevant and functions as a plea for persons of all positions on the socioeconomic ladder to become more cognizant of others’ (and their own) class-based privilege and/or marginalization. As the recent “Occupy Movement” and “We are the 99%” rallying cries suggest, the subject of social class has been particularly timely. The gap between the haves and have-nots has never been larger, and public and academic circles alike have taken notice. Yet, the fact remains that many individuals struggle to talk about, or even recognize, class status—even their own.

This conflict functions as the subtext for many Class Confession boards, sites wherein college students—primarily those of low-income/first-generation status—comment on the economic, cultural, and social struggles that one’s socioeconomic status can engender on campus. Coming into fruition only in the last several years, these sites offer students a unique online arena for expressing the class-based turmoil that one may internally suppress on campus. The majority of these sites state as an ultimate goal to “raise class dialogue.” With students from different cities, states, countries, and familial backgrounds, the college campus carries a plethora of class-based cultural markers—what students wear, where they eat, how (or if) they pay the tuition. Students from low-income backgrounds often struggle to financially make ends meet in this new environment—one historically shaped by culturally privileged populations—in both academic and social capacities (e.g. college nightlife). In short, it
proves impossible to disentangle interpersonal interaction in the collegiate environment from the class-based nuances that affect one’s fiscal opportunities. These confession boards indeed illustrate such interweaving complexities.

In addition to posts by low-income students, many of these sites feature commentary by more affluent students. Herein lies a crucial irony: on a site intended primarily for first-generation and low-income students, these otherwise powerful, privileged actors function as the contextual minority; they are outnumbered and typically profess ideologies that contradict the dominant discourse of the pages at large. The data suggest that these latter students may present their class identities in a seemingly curious way. Rather than self-affirm and readily acknowledge privileged aspects of their class identities, these students may seemingly, contradictorily profess their marginalization. In this sense, students are often active and conscious in their attempts to downplay their class status, or at least certain notions of privilege that accompany this status. One particular commenter on the Stanford Class Confession page accuses a privileged peer of trying to cultivate a sense of “struggle cred.” I adapt this term as a key operative component in my analysis. Specifically, I posit that these privileged students largely seek to adopt many specific values associated with financially-induced struggle. These students may perceive such struggle as important in building one’s character and integrity, invoking a hard-fought earnestness in one’s achievements that negates the notion that they may have been spoiled or coddled due to an affluent upbringing; I argue that many of these privileged students seek to construct identities that fall in line with this notion of struggle cred.
While scholarly attention has typically focused on how marginalized populations navigate the collegiate environment, comparatively less scholarship has addressed how middle-class and upper-class students perceive and perform social class on campus. Using anonymous confessions coded from posts on social media platforms at nine elite universities, I examine how these students attempt to construct a struggle-cred identity on these sites. These privileged students’ posts demonstrate the ways that they justify, downplay, and deny certain class-based privileges in the attempt to identify with a converse, marginalized ethos. These confessions illuminate seeming conundrums of privileged class culture that I strive to question: despite maintaining economic and cultural privileges relative to first-generation and/or low-income peers, do these middle-class and upper-class students identify—or want to identify—with a privileged culture? How do these students’ SES-oriented self-presentations speak to larger issues of social stratification and the culture that this stratification embeds? I analyze these students’ motivations and their potential connection to the larger ambivalence of privileged class construction. Moreover, I hope to position class-based analysis beyond mere structural determinism and qualitatively demonstrate the complexities that underscore class identity on campus. SES does not exist in a vacuum: notions of relativity, presentation of the self, and (false) class consciousness all inform one’s class. Recognizing these complexities is an important step in raising the class dialogue which these very pages advocate.
II. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Defining Class, Privilege, and the “Normal” Middle Class

“Class” is not easy to define, nor does it always have clear parameters. A multitude of variables exist in bracketing class status including assets, education, employment, and pedigree. Yet, regardless of categorical methodology, the vast majority of scholars have posited the “upper class” and “middle class” (particularly the upper-middle class) as the statuses that hold the most economic, social, and cultural power and privilege in America (Case, 2013). Traditionally, many scholars have posited class in terms of one’s income and occupational status. By one such categorization, the “upper class” includes individuals who are top-level executives, celebrities, or heirs with prestigious educations and considerable incomes (Gilbert, 1998). The “middle class” often remains a bit more of an elusive, loosely categorized group. As Scott T. Fitzgerald articulates, “there is no single, widely held definition of the middle class...despite copious studies on the middle class” (Fitzgerald, 2012). Nonetheless, scholars have used certain systematic means for defining and separating the middle class from other SES brackets. For instance, C. Wright Mills (1951) classified the upper-middle class as a group defined by high educational achievement and high economic security, a classification method still commonly applied to this day. By these structural frameworks, the acquisition and maintenance of economic privilege rests heavily in educational and occupational prestige. Other scholars have defined class privilege beyond directly objective markers. Pierre Bourdieu (1985) famously conceptualized class privilege as a reflection of economic, social, and
cultural capital. Other scholars have echoed this method of categorization, arguing that factors such as one’s access to social networks, exhibition of social decorum, and even aesthetic tastes (e.g. liking classical music) are similarly crucial in affecting one’s privileged status (Katz-Gerro, 2002).

Still, class may largely function as a “subjective location.” In this vein, class operates more perceptually, defined more by one’s “shared subjective understanding of people” rather than his/her “objective properties” (Ritzer, 2004, pp. 716-717). More specifically, “being middle-class” may lie in one’s belief that he/she is middle-class more than his/her strict, categorical membership (Ming Liu et al., 2007). From this vantage point, one acquires middle-class membership, at least in part, on the basis of his/her sheer perception. A story on All Things Considered (2010) demonstrates how this perception-oriented mode of classification can yield quite diverse results; for example, a variety of types of workers (a hospice care provider, a painting contractor) who earn a variety of different incomes (ranging anywhere from $25,000 to upwards of $100,000) all identify as “middle class.” Professor Sherry Linkon from Youngstown State University describes this broadly inclusive class membership as a byproduct of shared values and the way that we as a culture conceptualize categorical rank. That is, when there are “four options: upper, middle, working and lower, people split about half and half” and largely tend to identify as middle-class or working class rather than “upper” or “lower” (All Things Considered, 2010).

A PEW research study echoes this centralized pattern of SES identification and demonstrates that nearly 50% of surveyed Americans identify as “middle class,” with
another 25% and 15% identifying as lower-middle and upper-middle, respectively (Shenker-Osorio, 2013). Other research has affirmed this pattern, indicating that nearly all Americans identify as “middle-class” or “working class” (Lareau and Conley, 2008). This broad identification with the middle class may parallel the perceived normality of the term, particularly when situated against, say, “upper-class.” That is, objectively, structurally privileged populations may take more comfort in subjectively identifying with the former, “normal” term (Ritzer, 2004; Archer, 2008). Should individuals operate with arcane, polarized class associations that involve hyperbolized decadence or impoverishment, then the very “leftover” essence of the middle class allows for a sense of broad relatability (Shenker-Osorio, 2013).

Moreover, one’s perception of class may largely take root in how one processes certain culturally associated symbols and virtues. For instance, traditional middle-class membership often predicates valuing education, an emphasis on the nuclear family, the white picket fence. If one should endorse these values, he/she may further endorse and seek to belong to this middle-class identification. By this logic, the construction of class status eschews concrete monetary bracketing, lending itself to subjective and often vague conceptualization. This very ambiguity may play a large role in how privileged students culturally perceive and adopt or reject certain class identities.
Conceiving One’s Privilege

Acknowledgement

From a structural angle, factors such as environment, upbringing and access to capital (financial, social, and cultural) all inform how one processes class identity. Class consciousness is the process by which individuals acquire and maintain certain beliefs and ideologies with regard to their SES rank and the class structure in general. This concept may particularly inform how individuals perform class (Parillo, 2008). Lareau and Conley (2008, p. 32) note that most Americans are “familiar enough” with class to place themselves where experts would place them. That is, these scholars note a strong relationship between “family income and subjective class identification” (Lareau and Conley, 2008, p. 33). For example, an educated professional would likely have the wherewithal to accurately identify as middle-class or upper-middle class on the premise of his or her income, assets, and education. Yet, it may prove a bit trickier to track the class awareness of the pre-professional collegiate subject. These young adults do not hold salaried jobs or bring in substantive income, yet may still actualize class-based opportunities on the premise of their upbringing and parental support in both emotional and monetary capacities. In many cases, middle-class and/or upper-class students on campus actively perform the privilege associated with their rank. As Kaufman (2010, p. 260) notes, many middle-class students exhibit very little “fear of failing,” having come to employ their class privilege in a way that leads to an expectation of educational success; many respondents even report never having considered an alternative to higher education, citing their parents’ constant preaching
on the importance of education. Given their active class-based performance, these students may particularly acknowledge certain benefits that their privileged socioeconomic status awards them. Other scholars have found that more affluent students generally display a greater familiarity with their privilege (and the opportunities that this privilege can allow) than more disadvantaged students; in essence, this logic suggests that having certain cultural/economic privileges as the majority of upper-class and middle-class students do should precipitate a deeper understanding and acknowledgment of the privilege-based power that these students hold (Aries and Seider, 2007).

**Misconception**

However, greater numbers of scholars have argued that advantaged students do not possess an accurate “recognition” of this power-privilege dichotomy (Stuber, 2006, p. 295). More specifically, privileged students may embody an alternate, but related, sub-thread to Marx’s aforementioned theoretical framework: “false consciousness.” This is the process by which economic, cultural, or ideological forces in a capitalist society mislead the individuals that inhabit it. Though generally applied to the proletariat/working class, certain scholarly works demonstrate that this misplaced consciousness may still readily apply to more privileged SES groups (Parillo, 2008). Many middle-class and upper-class students employ a false consciousness through ignorance of broader class processes and their effects on other SES groups. Stuber (2010) notes that many middle-class students cite class as “not mattering that much” on campus; these students find it “hard to tell” if a student is
lower-class. These students’ economic privilege has placed them in a position where they do not need to think about class; in turn, they may not account for how class issues negatively affect students of a lower SES status. This positioning may function as a byproduct of parental influence. The majority of privileged students possess parents who set their children up with distinct advantages (e.g., access to good neighborhoods, social networks, etc.). The realm of education serves as no exception. For instance, scholars have noted that families in the highest socioeconomic groups are far more likely to send their children to “elite and respectable schools” such as lauded private and well-ranked suburban, public institutions (Power, Edwards, Wigfall, 2003, p. 28). Furthermore, many middle-class parents explicitly “rationalize” these advantages, showcasing a failure to recognize privilege that may be imparted to their children (Brantlinger, 2003). Lareau (2003) specifically terms a version of this child-rearing “concerted cultivation,” a parenting style in which upper middle-class families actively engage their children in organizations and structured institutions that help facilitate class-cultural reproduction. These parents may encourage their children to engage in extracurricular activities or participate in organized team sports; these organizations thus serve as important symbolic markers in cultivating a privileged, class-specific embrace of institutional participation. This cultivation may foster an internalization of class at a particularly subconscious level. Calarco (2011) further illustrates how middle-class rearing can influence students to conduct themselves in distinctive and highly advantageous ways in the classroom thus displaying a heightened sense of entitlement, interacting with the teachers more directly than
working-class peers (Calarco, 2011). The middle-class student may deeply internalize these behaviors at a very early age and subsequently, subconsciously embed these learned behaviors in his/her psyche. Thus, by the time these individuals go to college, they have become groomed to misrecognize the very class privilege that they actualize on a daily basis. In short, the behaviors and social networks that individuals carry into adulthood are social constructs that class privilege rewards, not necessarily inherent or meritocratic skills.

One’s internalization of privilege can be further skewed by the sheer framing of relativity. One particular social psychological study illustrates how the perception of peers’ privilege can powerfully shape one’s own perception of privilege (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011). In this example, affluent students showed emotional “depletion” when informed that they would be competing for post-graduation jobs alongside Ivy League graduates. The example demonstrates how heightened social comparisons may lead one to devalue his/her own social identification, particularly in the case of class. Many of the same subjects from Stuber’s study display further reactions to relativized comparison. By pointing to extremely wealthy students on campus and their extravagant luxuries, these middle-class students grow to misrecognize the power in their own privilege (Stuber, 2010). Their lapse in consciousness derives from the relativity of the imposed situation and a hyperbolized conceptualization of wealth. By extension, this relativity heavily informs their own class-based self-concepts.
“Downward” Construction of Class and the Self

This literature highlights the complexities and contradictions that frequently underlie (upper) middle-class culture. While certain scholarly works surrounding class (e.g. Neo-Marxism) gives credence to the influence of structural and social-environmental factors, these factors alone may not determine how individuals process and perform class. Distinct motivational impetuses may influence this processing and performance of socioeconomic status, implying a heightened level of autonomy in the process than a Neo-Marxist lens would suggest. This stance, in part, parallels the core doctrine of social identification theory. At a basic level, this social psychological theory posits that individuals seek to achieve and maintain positive concepts of themselves (Hogg, 2006). Furthermore, social identification theory posits that one can predict intergroup behavior based on the way individuals formulate group statuses and perceive the legitimacy and stability of those status differences (Taifel, 1982). In the context of class-specific construction, one may seek to affirm the “self” by downplaying his/her class-based privilege. For example, Stuber (2006, p. 300) cites how middle-class students establish a sense of “moral high ground” by distancing themselves from “upper-class” populations. These students may, for instance, cite how their modest sedans pale in comparison to the lavish sports cars owned by more wealthy students on campus, thus presenting a clear distinction in the two groups’ economic and cultural performance of privilege. As Patrick Archer describes in a separate study, a group of pooled middle-class students found upper-class peers to be more “successful” but less “moral.” These middle-class students thus more closely
identify with lower-class peers (Archer, 2008, p. 139). Herein lies a key element of class-based formation: individuals may not simply ascribe to and perform class status strictly based on the influence of income, education, or other structural factors. They may use the seeming lack of morality associated with upper-class privilege as a catalyst for the construction of a converse, downward class identity. In line with social identification theory, this individual fundamentally legitimates his/her “moral” group status in a way that differentiates himself/herself from the counter, upper-class immorality. These patterns may demonstrate a pertinent, though seemingly contradictory, stance on class mobility. That is, individuals may seek to ascend the class ladder in a structural sense while clinging to cultural or perceptual markers of lower class status.

This vantage point implies that one’s performance of class identity—and, by extension, one’s performance of “morality”—function as a mechanism for drawing community boundaries. Scholars have noted how actors use “boundary work” to create symbolic repertoires that differentiate themselves from outsiders who differentiate “us from them” (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). As it pertains to socioeconomic status, individuals and students may largely use ideological concepts such as upbringing, credentials, hard work, and the (lack of) access to capital to draw boundaries between their perceived SES communities and others. Interestingly, this boundary construction can occur even in relatively impersonal formats. In an age of rapidly expanding social networking and technology, many community and organizational members “interact” without face-to-face contact or direct, interpersonal
exchange. These “imagined personal connections” draw on symbols and common vocabulary to create “categorical communities” which fundamentally distinguish the differences between insiders and outsiders (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Cerulo, 1997). In this virtual world, one can more feasibly make his/her self-concept (e.g. a socioeconomically based self-concept) malleable to fit the parameters of the virtual “us versus them” community. The Class Confession sources for my data collection indeed epitomize this notion of “impersonal” symbolic exchange or boundary work. These confessions allow the given commenter to create a virtual class identity wherein he/she has the autonomy and luxury to present the narrative of his/her socioeconomic status.

Here, I will show that class performance may extend beyond the parameters of mere structural determinism and operate in accordance with agency-driven, and agenda-driven, construction of the positive (online) self (Hogg 2006). In this research, I seek to bridge this gap between the structural and the self, the macro and micro, the psychological and the sociological. I attempt to illuminate the actuality of downward class construction and the rationales and motivations that may underlie this construction. In the process, I strive to answer my driving research question: how and why do middle-class and upper-class students systematically downplay their privilege?
III. METHODS

In this project, I build off data that I collected for a complementary research project conducted during the summer of 2015 with Dr. Elizabeth M. Lee of Ohio University. While working on this research project, I gathered approximately 15 Class Confession pages with the intent of studying how low-income, first-generation students perceive collegiate culture at elite colleges/universities. These pages feature anonymous posts in which students comment and vent on class-based issues present on their respective campuses. I poured through these first-generation students’ posts, learning about the structural obstacles that these students must face on a daily basis. I then performed a content analysis in which I summarized and coded these confession posts under a set of categorical themes that addressed issues such as financial inequality, emotional stress, and spatial/cultural segregation that these first-generation students experience. Over the course of my research, I noticed that a sizeable minority of posts on these sites were authored by more privileged students. These posts seemed to disrupt the flow of the Confession pages, shifting the discourse away from a strictly first-generation-specific focus. I began notice these distinctive pieces of commentary. These narrators rarely came outright and declared themselves as affluent, yet they included subtle details that differentiated their narratives from the first-generation subjects; they spoke of their parents paying their college tuition; they made mention of their evidently suburban hometowns. While these privileged students could not as feasibly describe or sell narratives concerning their experience with extreme poverty or multi-generational unemployment (as did many of the first-generation
commenters), these subjects nonetheless often appeared to want to convey a sense of solidarity in struggle, an ethos that both they and more low-income commenters alike could share. In other cases, these privileged students even constructed narratives that placed their struggle in more heightened terms than low-income peers, a point which I will address with more depth in the findings below. In short, I find these privileged students’ posts to illuminate a number of telling implications relevant to the aforementioned concepts of class, culture and identity. In essence, why do these relatively affluent students comment on online forums designed primarily for low-income and/or first-generation dialogue? What are they trying convey about their struggle and, by extension, their core identities? These were questions that I was eager to tackle as I began my coding, theorization, and, ultimately, analysis.

Over the course of my research, I sifted through roughly 2000 posts, primarily submitted by anonymous first-generation students. I then specifically gathered 90 of these posts I deemed to be "privileged" confessions. 75 of these confessions were authored by students that I deemed "privileged" while 15 operated as “response” posts (i.e. posts by students who, themselves, may not be privileged but reference a separate, privileged student’s post). I decided to use these posts as the building blocks upon which I would construct an argument concerning the nuances of economically privileged collegiate culture. My very strategy of drawing from online forums serves as sociological challenge in and of itself. Little research in the field has been conducted on online forums/confession pages, particularly in the context of education. Furthermore, a good deal of studies concerning online interactions, many of which
have been couched more squarely in the discipline of psychology as opposed to sociology, have focused on how individuals navigate personal profile pages such as Facebook and Myspace, analyzing, for instance, how interactions on these pages may impact their offline relationships or face to face meetings (Xie, 2008; Rauch et al., 2014). Simply put, these studies do not tackle online forums wherein the subjects exist almost completely anonymously; the discrepancy between this focus and my study’s parameters are clear. In some cases, some “group research” scholars have studied relatively anonymous social media outlets (e.g. Wikipedia) and how users navigate these arenas. One particular study examines how these online community members work to positively collaborate and “deliberate” with other members (Black et al., 2011). Yet, these studies give precedence to largely statistical interpretations of analysis as opposed to more ethnographic interpretations of online interaction. Thus, I was forced to conceptualize a methodological framework without many obvious precedents for reference. While some may find my “anonymous” focus of data collection to be potentially compromising, I actually view this context to allow for even more upfront, and thus measurable, dialogue. In short, these subjects likely do not have to self-restrict, self-monitor, or engage in any other type of online behavior with which they must reconcile during face-to-face interactions. The opinions on these sites thusly may reflect honesty, deep-seated ideological beliefs, and personal reflection about class and identity that one can present without fear of direct, personalized labeling.
The sites through which I gathered data feature commentary by students from nine elite campuses: Brown University, the University of Chicago, Columbia University, Northwestern University, Stanford University, Wellesley College, Washington University in St. Louis, Williams College, and Yale University. The selection of these schools serves, in part, as a byproduct of sheer convenience; a finite amount of colleges and university have created confession pages, and the majority of these pages have only existed in the last few years. Yet, I also employ a theoretical rationale in utilizing these given schools’ confession pages. Given that they have been long associated with wealth and scholastic prestige (according to the *U.S. World News and Report* (2015), all the included universities and liberal arts colleges consistently fall among the top programs in their respective categories), I do find these private, post-secondary institutions to neatly fall under an “elite” umbrella.

Furthermore, these institutions have increasingly implemented admission policies that attract and support low-income students through generous, often free, tuition packages. For instance, one study conducted by IvyG, a group that fosters awareness of first-generation students’ challenges at Ivy League schools, shows that the majority of Ivy League, and other highly ranking, institutions have displayed a noticeable increase in the admission of Pell grant recipients from 2000 to 2013; some schools such as Brown doubled this figure over this timespan (Pappano, 2015). As suggested by my data, these recent policies may foster “barbell” environments (as

---

1 In Appendix 1, I list the schools that I study and the number of “privileged” comments that I gather from each school’s Class Confession page. In the effort to demonstrate the increasing—though still heavily underrepresented—number of low-income students at these schools, I list the percentage of first-generation students and Pell recipients, respectively.
termed by one Yale University student): campuses bookended by extremely wealthy and extremely impoverished populations in efforts to diversify the student body. Given that they fall in between these binaries, I find that the middle-class students at these elite schools offer a distinct lens for studying class identity. Even students who moresolidly fall on the wealthier side of this dichotomy prove interesting in this context. That is, they may seek to posit their class rank as “lower” on this perceptual barbell. These students often strive to occupy an “in-between status” in a collegiate culture significantly shaped by privilege and marginalization, alike. Thus, I view middle-class and upper-class students as telling subjects for analyzing both poles of this privilege-marginalization spectrum on campus.

“Class” and, in particular, “upper class” and “middle class,” though widely used, are ambiguous terms that often function without precise parameters. I therefore implemented a scheme to determine if a commenter qualified as “privileged.” As an aside, I should note that privilege does not always automatically equate to class status and vice versa. Yet, given that I cannot as accurately and systematically measure the influence of factors such as gender and race from this data, I do operate this “privileged” rhetoric in terms more specific to socioeconomic status. I used certain operational metrics for determining privilege:

1. **Coded Words and Phrases**

If a subject used codewords to refer to his/her monetary affluence, he/she qualified as privileged. This pool includes the words “rich,” “affluent,” “well-off,” “upper-class,” and “(upper) middle-class.” Oftentimes, students would utilize these
terms in roundabout ways. For instance, a student may cite his/her hometown as affluent without necessarily describing himself/herself as affluent. Given my speculation that privileged students will actively downplay and avoid privilege, students frequently avoided explicitly claiming “wealthy” statuses. Nonetheless, a handful of middle-class and/or upper-middle-class acknowledged privilege in the context of these specific terms.

2. Legacy Status

If a student referred to himself/herself as a “legacy” of the given school, I also found him/her to qualify as privileged. Very few students referenced explicit family income, but those who did all cited annual figures of $100,000 and above, thus qualifying them for this classification. I further executed more esoteric measures of determining privilege.

3. Privilege by Ignorance

If a student “did not know” his/her class or displayed notable ignorance concerning class conflict, I made the assumptive leap that this student maintained some degree of financial privilege. This assumption lies in the notion that more advantaged individuals simply do not think about class as much, their privilege fundamentally allowing and perpetuating ignorance. For example, Stuber (2006) notes how students that are unaware of their parents’ incomes or cite class as a non-issue on campus overwhelmingly come from (upper) middle-class backgrounds; the not knowing implies an automatic privilege.
4. Financial Aid

If a student noted that his/her family was paying tuition and/or did not qualify for financial aid, I included him/her in my sample pool. I acknowledge that this metric may have some shortcomings due to the varying “aid packages” that these nine schools provide. Yet, virtually all schools provide substantial aid, if not outright full tuition, to students from families that earn at least $60,000 a year and typically offer compensation for families that earn considerably higher than that figure. For instance, a student attending Stanford University receives full tuition if he/she comes from a family who earns $125,000 or less a year. As such, I contend at-large that a student who does not qualify for any financial aid must come from a family of relative privilege. Still, I do recognize that a good deal of monetary discrepancy may exist between populations who do not receive financial aid (e.g. the difference between a Stanford student’s family making say $150,000 a year versus $1,500,000 a year).

5. Subjective Location

Even one’s simple self-description as “upper class” or “middle-class” proved to be a qualifier. After all, I find the perceptions behind class to crucially inform my argument surrounding class identity. By and large, privileged students tended to avoid describing themselves as “upper-class,” opting to describe themselves as (upper) middle-class or avoid status description altogether.

While I strived to employ systematic measures for every post, I inevitably had to assess some subjects’ privileged inclusion/exclusion on a “judgement call” basis. For instance, one subject urges, “Stop making rich people feel shitty.” At no point
does this student use any language that could be coded to reveal his/her own status; yet, one can reasonably infer that a low-income subject would not construct a hyperbolic, hyper-defensive plea directed against other low-income individuals. In this sense, I often gathered privileged posts on the premise of what they were *not*. These posts did not reference food stamps or poverty or familial incarceration or teenage pregnancy. By simply noticing the lack of mention of these topics (which I had initially coded during the first incarnation of the “first-generation” research), I was largely able to ascertain who might qualify as privileged.
IV. FINDINGS

In documenting and assessing these coded confessions, I found that privileged students discuss class and accordingly construct class-based self-concepts in distinctive and strategic ways. Specifically, these middle-class and upper-class students generally strive to present a version of the self predicated on personal tribulation and adversity rather than economic/social/cultural privilege. In downplaying if not outright ignoring their privileges, these students frame narratives that highlight their personal hardships, the challenges that their parents have faced, and their perceived distance from “snobby” culture. In some cases, privileged subjects do more readily acknowledge their affluent statuses and must reconcile the associative guilt that frequently accompanies this acknowledgement. These narratives point to the ways in which privileged students construct class-based identities and legitimate the class-based struggle cred embedded within them.

“Stop assuming we have carefree lives”: Negating the gilded path in economic terms, beyond economic terms

By and large, privileged students on these confession pages reject the notion of having convenient or “easy” lives as the result of economic privilege. This rejection may function as something of an implicit response to (their perception of) others’ perceptions of privileged class backgrounds. That is, these students strive to make clear that their personal narratives are not necessarily mollified or gilded by economic privilege. One Northwestern University student bluntly proclaims in comment no. 543,
“Stop assuming we have carefree lives.”2 This proclamation reveals key implications that more broadly reflect the ethos apparent in many of these comments; these students largely identify a perceived threat against their privileged statuses (the condemnation of having an “easy life”) and collectively identify with this status (“we”) while trying to strip the very connotation of the status. The latter point carries a great deal of irony. In using “we,” this subject implies that he/she shares a sense of solidarity with a privileged culture, yet uses the very post as a vehicle for negating his/her own privilege (and, thus, his/her identification with a privileged culture). In this sense, the middle-class and/or upper-class student actively performs some degree of boundary work in separating the we from they, the us from them (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Yet, this performance of boundary work eschews traditional class antagonism in the sense that the privileged student attempts to reframe his/her stance as discrete from both lower-class and privileged culture. More broadly, these privileged students feel falsely persecuted for leading lives wherein they don’t have to face true challenges and actively seek to rectify this persecution. A variety of students frame their defenses in both economic terms and beyond monetary terms; that is, some students either justify struggle cred by downplaying their economic privilege or describing the inevitable challenges that they face despite having these privileges.

2 With the exception of Yale University, each confession page lists the posts in numerical, chronological order. For instance, this Northwestern comment is the 543rd confession on the page.
Beyond economic terms

Many students strive to negate this carefree accusation by outlining the challenges that they face in spite of potential economic privileges. One such challenge that many commenters cite is the pressure of hard work. One Brown University student (comment no. 205) claims that despite his/her “upper-class” background, he/she was forced to academically achieve in the presence of parents who “were always working and never around for homework help.” Another Northwestern University post (comment no. 497) echoes this sentiment and states, “Just because I’m financially supported doesn’t mean I don’t work just as hard.” These students reject the notion of carefreeness via economic privilege. Furthermore, they attempt to frame “hard work” as a marker of integrity independent of economic privilege, a challenge with which they acutely grapple. The implications in such statements prove dense. In justifying one’s work ethic as independent from SES status, these commenters may fail to account for the structural factors that have facilitated their advantages.

For example, while this Brown student may have experienced some neglect from his/her parents that affected his/her academic performance and general emotional stability, he/she does not account for the factors that his/her upper-class background rewarded regarding “homework help.” As scholars such as Brantlinger (2003) articulate, class status facilitates one’s ability to access good schools, good teachers, and high-performing peers. In framing one’s scholastic “plight” in the face of absentee parents, this student may undermine the struggles that lower-class students face without parents; that is, “parental help,” or even the lack thereof, may hold wildly
different meanings to those from the upper and lower rungs of the class ladder, respectively.

The aforementioned Northwestern University student also cites that his/her family’s affluence enables him/her to live without needing a job. As another student (comment no. 543) on the confession page notes in response, the very privilege in not needing a job in college means that the privileged student does not, in fact, work as hard as the low-income counterpart who does. That is, this student has the privilege to just work hard at school, to free his/her mind from structural obstacles (paying rent, securing loans, dealing with family traumas related to class position) that may challenge one’s ability to complete schoolwork. Such a construction of struggle cred functions in terms highly specific to middle and upper-class security by denying the factors that may contribute to a lower-class peer’s experience of “hard work.”

Other students, such as one Williams College subject (comment no. 211), lament that financial privilege has not necessarily cured mental and emotional stressors. As this student says, “I am so lucky that my family has the financial resources to help me with my mental health problems, but I wish that people would stop assuming everything is easy for me.” Another Northwestern University student (comment no. 521) describes the strains of his/her “completely broken and dysfunctional family” despite a well-off financial background. These students posit economic privilege as a general benefit but cite these privileges as illegitimate means for accusation of carefreeness. Further contentions manifest in even broader terms. A privileged student from Washington University in St. Louis (comment no. 25) states,
“People have this strange assumption that if one of you’re [sic] parents or both happen to be a doctor, your [sic] automatically well off.” This student declares that one’s occupational status does not automatically “make life easy.” This student functionally downplays his/her privilege by adhering to the notion that wealth, itself, can exist exclusive from an “easy” livelihood. This post embodies the loose dichotomy between economic status and ease that many students’ commentary illustrates. While these students may concede to some degree of financial affluence, their active identification with other external obstacles—hard work, emotional stress, the general non-“easy” nature of life—functionally serves to distance themselves from the perceived easy lifestyle of the affluent.

Furthermore, these comments consistently reveal a pattern of “but” and “just because”, showcasing how these students feel the need to construct rebuttals to perceived class-based accusations. This defensiveness, in and of itself, illustrates a common but somewhat theoretically elusive theme throughout the confession pages. Who are these accusers, the “people with strange assumptions,” the people who “assume everything is easy” for the privileged student? Throughout these posts, middle-class and upper-class students reference attacks on their characters yet vaguely specify the nature of the attacks or the perpetrators behind them. These comments portray a general air of animosity toward higher SES groups on campus. This defensiveness calls to question a number of important considerations. While a bulk of literature suggests that privileged students may display a certain false consciousness in ignoring class-based conflict on campus (e.g. the “class doesn’t matter much” ethos),
these posts’ frequent perception of threat may alternately illuminate a false consciousness that *heightens* the degree of class conflict on campus. Such defensiveness implies that a sizeable amount of lower-class peers take issue with the privileged lifestyle. In line with social identity theory, the defensive privileged student thusly posits himself/herself in legitimate terms in the face of this judgement—he/she is under unfair attack, being unfairly scrutinized. The lower-class peer thusly functions as a counter to this moralized legitimacy and becomes the attacker rather than marginalized. This defensiveness again brings to light the prevalent, if often contradictory, notion of privileged solidarity that permeates these confession pages. Privileged students want validation, solidarity. Yet, the solidarity manifests in seemingly contradictory ways. The privileged subject wants to differentiate himself/herself from lower-class “immorality” but with the constant reference to his/her struggle, he/she also differentiates himself/herself from privilege and those associated with privilege. The privileged dissenter struggles to find a neat niche.

*In Economic Terms*

In other cases, students strive to negate the *carefree accusation* by subverting the degree of their financial privilege altogether. For instance, when the aforementioned Washington University in St. Louis commenter declares, “Just because your parents are doctors doesn’t automatically make you well off,” the student functionally downplays privilege by disconnecting the assumed linkage between one’s career and level of monetary wealth. In short, the issue of money can still prove strenuous even when one hails from what is perceive to be an affluent background. In
many cases, students specifically justify their “downward” economic claims by pointing to the increasing strain of college tuition, articulating how this strain has devastated the financial situations of their relatively privileged families. One “(upper?) middle-class” University of Chicago student (comment no. 6) claims that his/her “parents are going bankrupt paying for [his/her] education.” Here, the student’s description of bankruptcy may function literally or figuratively, but the essence of the statement remains: he/she is presenting his/her family’s financial status as under duress despite relative privilege. Other commenters similarly project these claims while discussing the challenges of not qualifying for aid. A Brown University student (comment no. 205) claims, “My parents make just enough money for me to not qualify for financial aid, but this doesn’t mean that they can afford anything but school.” A Williams College student (comment no. 206) also admits to not being on financial aid but claims, “I have cried multiple times in the past 4 years watching my dad work himself to the ground to pay tuition.” These subjects largely reject the idea that a lack of financial aid qualification automatically equates to economic carefreeness; their privileged families still struggle to “get by.” While these privileged students’ claims of financial stress may very well prove true, they fail to address the relevance of the wealth-tuition dichotomy.

These students may lament that they do not qualify for aid, but this very failure in qualification implies that they likely come from families that earn annual incomes well into the six figures (re: the case at Stanford University where a family earning $125,000 qualifies for free tuition). In doing so, these students negate “carefreeness”
in terms highly specific to a relatively privileged upbringing and, thus, prove ignorant 
to economic strains that affect first-generation/low-income students. One 
Northwestern University subject (comment no. 538) even claims that he/she “can’t 
handle all these poor kids whining about being poor when they’re on a full ride and 
will have significantly less debt.” Yet, this student conceptualizes debt from tuition as 
the primary source of economic strain in post-graduate adulthood. While tuition debt 
undoubtedly burdens a wide array of students from diverse SES camps, such 
conceptualizations of expenditure prioritize the burdens of tuition in a way that 
ignores the larger financial challenges that may hamper students and their families 
who hail from lower income backgrounds. Again, the privileged student may fall prey 
to fallacy in his/her construction of the independent struggle. Mental illness, parental 
neglect, tuition—these students, while entitled to adversity that can afflict anyone on 
the SES ladder, often fail to articulate their struggles in ways cognizant of the 
interconnected presence of economic status. For better or for worse, tuition does not 
“completely bankrupt” a middle or upper-class student in the same way that it may 
“bankrupt” someone lower on the SES ladder (even with the consideration of financial 
aid).

Other commenters similarly carve narratives that negate accusations of 
economic carefreeness and “misrecognize their privilege” in the process (Stuber 
2006). For instance, one Yale University student, claiming to not be “super rich,” 
describes how the pressures of college tuition have caused his/her family to sell its 
second house. Here, this student strives to downplay his/her socioeconomic status in
the attempt to deflect privilege-directed accusations, but his/her possession of certain capital (i.e. the ability to acquire a second home in the first place) presents the idea of financial strain in fairly ignorant and highly exaggerated terms. Another Yale University student cites that tuition leaves a “huge dent” on his “middle-class family.” This student notes that Yale’s financial aid system neglects the “90% in-between” on the class ladder. This student’s venting further illuminates the notion of the privileged student’s strain as a result of increasing tuition. Yet, one should note how this student’s very positing of the “in-between” class may reflect his/her own attempt to (falsely) represent his/her economic privilege. Again, these financial aid systems largely only deny financial aid to students whose families earn considerable incomes, families that would not come close to qualifying as “in-between” on the broad SES ladder. This student’s framing of class status parallels the scholars’ articulation of the “normal middle class” (Ritzer, 2004; Archer, 2008). “In between” indeed suggests an element of normalcy, commonality, relatability, even hardship; moreover, it fundamentally implies a shared experience and a firm sense of belonging. By equivocating the definitions of affluence and its relative counterparts (being “in between,” being “not super rich”), these students manipulate their SES-based narratives as guided by financial struggle, not financial ease; these students use college tuition and its correlative aid packages—specifically, their inability to benefit from such packages—as variables that legitimize their struggle cred.
“But my parents”: Perseverance by familial proxy

In several cases, privileged students attempt to establish and legitimate their struggle cred by pointing to the tribulations of their parents and other family members. Many of these commenters may cite a certain degree of economic privilege, but back these by pointing to their relatives’ class ascension in the presence of challenging obstacles. For instance, a Northwestern University subject (comment no. 40) notes how his/her father “worked his way up from nothing” and further notes that “apparently that’s something [he/she] needs to feel ashamed of” in college. A student from the University of Chicago (comment no. 29) carves a similar narrative while incorporating an immigration-oriented focus, saying, “My dad grew up in a small farming village. He used to tell me that they could afford to eat meat only on the new years [sic] when the entire community would come together to slaughter a pig... We live in a million dollar home in Silicon Valley and he now pays for my education. I am proud of him” A Stanford subject (comment no. 161) admits to coming from a “well-off family” but contends that “it wasn’t always that way.” The student continues to tell of his multi-generational line of ancestors who emigrated from Eastern Europe and, with “hard work,” eventually “made it in America.” The role of these third-person anecdotes proves interesting on a platform primarily centered on the discourse of first-person class struggle. Yet, the by-proxy nature of these stories serves a purpose; the otherwise privileged commenters can access rags-to-riches narratives as legitimation for their familial success. These students can admit to living in “million dollar homes” and being squarely “well-off” should they couch said claims with appropriate,
contextual lineage; they are affluent but it wasn’t always that way. In essence, the fruits of these commenters’ privilege have historic roots in capacities of struggle (extreme poverty, immigration). Thus, the referential commentary serves to distract from the students’ own affluence, instead purporting their struggle cred by familial association. These students construct a self heavily nested in their broader families’ identities and affirm the notion of subjective class location in the process. For these families, class does not merely, structurally reflect monetary assets and current economic opportunity. Rather, class may function in part as a fluid narrative wherein a family maintains the ability to access past ancestors’ SES positions in a way that complements—or as some may argue, contradicts—its current SES position.

Beyond justifying their own SES-based struggle cred, these anecdotes may even function to more broadly endorse particular Western, capitalistic doctrines. Commenters frequently employ terms such as “fought tooth and nail” and “paved their way” when referring to their ancestors. This language operates with a distinctively meritocratic subtext. Under this framing, these students’ ancestors do not achieve as a primary result of luck or chance. These students construct the ancestors’ success as the product of agency and toughness; the family’s financial privileges (and, by extension, the students’ privileges) are earned, deserved and thusly credible. More broadly, adhering to this doctrine implicitly underscores one’s conceptual framing of social stratification in general. In essence, the message reads: if my family can do it, everyone can do it. While recounting narratives of class ascension and empowerment can serve a productive and necessary motivational function, strictly abiding by and
Establishing struggle cred

Espousing this meritocratic philosophy may downplay the current climate of poverty that afflicts many lower-income students. Key, modern structural disadvantages (educational institutions, neighborhoods, job opportunities) make upward class mobility increasingly difficult; steadfast promotion of “rags to riches” tales may redirect focus away from the reality of these pressing socioeconomic issues. Furthermore, in the case of the Northwestern University subject, sarcastically describing one’s familial success as “something to be ashamed of” again reinforces an “us versus them” framework. Here, the privileged student is able to access moral high ground by framing his/her detractors’ commentary as counter to the ethos of hard work and familial pride. While this commenter may or may not experience this “shame,” he/she nonetheless feels the need to employ defense mechanisms that legitimize his/her class standing and condemn the accusers (lower-income students perhaps). Such a construction contextually attaches an emotional argument to his/her struggle cred that may persuade a sample reader to empathize with the affluent “plight.”

Other privileged students further implement meritocratic language as SES-based “cred” legitimation by citing their parents’ economic frugality. This pattern in my data parallels Stuber’s research of middle-class collegiate culture. Stuber notes how many middle-class students justify their parents’ ability to pay for college in highly individualized terms, rarely attributing this ability to inherent structural advantage. For instance, Stuber (2010) finds that many of these middle-class students cite their parents’ savviness (e.g. “being frugal”) as reason for their financial security
in college. This notion of frugality comes to light in several comments on these confession pages. Again, these comments often operate in concert to dialogue concerning one’s (lack of) financial aid. For instance, one Northwestern University student (comment no. 515) claims that his/her “parents have the money to pay for the full tuition, but that is because they’ve been saving for twenty years.” In this scenario, this family’s saving portrayed as an exhibition of intentionality and agency functions as the foremost reason for a family’s having the money to pay tuition. A Williams College student (comment no. 209) similarly writes, “My parents are paying all of my college tuition—not because we’re very wealthy (well enough off, but far from upper class), but because my parents planned our whole lives. Of course their sacrifices were what made my time here possible.” While these students may posit one’s frugality as the driving factor in being able to pay full tuition, this vantage point assumes a privilege-specific level of base income in the first place. That is, having the ability to “save for college” automatically implies that one has enough money to pay for other basic expenses such as proper food/housing and, resultantly, have additional capital situating them not all that “far from upper-class.” In propagating the importance and relevance of frugality, these privileged students fundamentally ignore cases wherein families do not have enough income to invest into day-to-day expenses, much less funding for college. Furthermore, many of these students, such as Williams College commenter no. 209, broadly describe how their parents had to make “sacrifices” in order to accumulate and store away this money. One Northwestern University student (comment no. 45) states, “I am so glad that my parents sacrificed so much so that I can
graduate without any student debt.” By including language that specifically references one’s “sacrifice,” the privileged student attempts to present an economic background in constraining, struggle-laden terms. Yet, that these students curiously neglect to describe the specific “sacrifice” in question raises questions regarding the extent or validity of the sacrifice. Perhaps, these students internalize further Western ideological tenants concerning asceticism, the Protestant work ethic, the “no pain, no gain” mantra. However, an access to capital, opportunity, and by extension, convenience, fundamentally implies a lesser need to sacrifice in the first place; as such, these students generally fail to cite particular moments of sacrifice, preferring to reference the concept in vague terms. Nonetheless, even a vague sacrificial construct allows this student to posit himself/herself as a representative of overarching struggle. Again, the privileged student can access this sacrificial construct by pointing to his/her familial relationships, demonstrating that one may employ struggle cred rationales within a distinctly by-proxy framework.

“I’m not snobby”: Dismantling the Perceived Upper-Class Self

As findings indicate so far, privileged populations largely seek to highlight their struggle cred by distancing themselves from perceived upper-class culture. Differentiating oneself from this culture may yield distinct, if subtle benefits in the form of an air of relatability, a claim to “moral high ground” (Stuber, 2006). In particular, by not associating with a “snobby” culture, these students attempt to more effectively other themselves from wealth or at least the cultural display of it. For instance, one Yale University student monetarily identifies as “upper-class” but
doesn’t relate to the “rich snobby assholes” on campus. Another Yale student also admits to being “well-off” but doesn’t “flaunt wealth like other Yalies.” A Williams College student (comment no. 21) admits, “Sometimes I downplay my wealth/the wealth of my town growing up because I don’t want to be associated with who I view as the douchey rich kids on campus. Here, these students posit a version of wealth that extends beyond mere financial status, a version of wealth based on its very ostentatious performance. “Douchey,” “snobby,” “flaunting”—these privileged students use particularized language to construct an unflattering version of wealth based on (im)morality and accordingly distance themselves from said immorality (and, by extension, wealth itself). In essence, these students actualize the notion that being wealthy and acting wealthy connote vastly different meanings, the latter holding a more culturally pejorative connotation on the college campus. Thus, the privileged student may choose not to associate with wealth insofar as he/she culturally represents it in public.

Even a situation as innocuous as packing one’s lunch can demarcate the moralized, cultural performance of wealth. As this University of Chicago student (comment no. 18) says, “I’m from an upper-middle-class family, but I grew up packing my lunch every day, and that’s something I try to do as often as possible here. Apparently, that’s not something from people of my socioeconomic status do.” In this case, the student does admit to being a member of a high socioeconomic camp but fundamentally distances and moralizes himself/herself from this income bracket by endorsing a behavior perceived to be indicative of a lower class. In essence, many
children and adults may eat “packed lunches” in order to save money. By extension, a family that needs to cautiously save money through such everyday activities may experience broader economic hardship at some level. Thus, a packed lunch in this instance serves as a symbolic embodiment of struggle cred, even in the most mundane sense. This positing of socioeconomic performance again separates notions of money and the performance of this money in line with subjective class location. In this case, the commenter utilizes specific subjective location despite certain monetary advantages in order to affirm a sense “downward” self-identification. Put simply, he/she has affluence but does not perform affluence.

The aforementioned Williams College post also reveals another nuanced way in which privileged students downplay their affluence: by presenting relative background scenarios. In this case, the student admits to being from a “wealthy town” but interestingly does not admit to being wealthy himself/herself. His/her background community thus serves to relatively posit this student’s financial lack relative to the counterparts that he/she references. As another Yale University student echoes, “My family is fairly well-off, but I come from a town where many people are even more well-off…I get negatively stereotyped as a certain kind of person because of the town I come from.” Here, the student’s struggle exists in conjunction to his/her former peers. While these latter individuals may have led lives of luxury and ease on the premise of their families’ wealth, this student’s identification as merely “fairly well-off” functionally ascribes a status of lesser luxury, lesser ease, and therefore lower privilege. Conversely, students may initiate relative current scenarios to construct their
(lack of) privileges. Given that many of these schools have historical—and, by and large, ongoing—cultures of financial affluence, these privileged students may use the more privileged peers they encounter at college (e.g. the douchey rich kids on campus, the Yalies who explicitly flaunt wealth) as postmarks for underpinning their own relative lack of affluence. This construction of privilege partially reflects another facet of Stuber’s research. Specifically, Stuber articulates that many middle-class college students may view certain peers on campus as truly wealthy, using these “upward comparisons” to negate their own monetary privilege (Stuber 2006). For example, one Yale University student, despite being from a “wealthy background,” says that he/she “went to public school and is startled by what [he/she] sees here” on campus. Regardless of his/her personal financial status, this student juxtaposes the low status of his/her past environment (public school) to directly contrast the high status of the current environment (Yale). The inclusion of the former environment serves to legitimate the struggle-based integrity of the student given his/her comparatively rougher and character-building background of public schooling. This student continues in saying, “I could have been that way [i.e. like a “rich” Yale student] if I wasn’t raised right.” This commentary reinforces how these privileged students legitimate their wealth through the very cultural distancing from it. Here, being “raised right” equates to being brought up with implicitly non-upper-class morals. An irony, of course, exists in this dichotomy. Scholars such as Lareau (2003) have demonstrated the explicit ways in which middle-class and upper-class families raise their children to succeed in various institutions through concerted cultivation. This cultivation includes
the internalization of highly learned behavior (how one interacts with adults, how one executes particular social decorum). In many ways, the success by virtue of this learned behavior may suggest “being raised right” while also holding large debt to one’s being economically privileged.

These students often morally conceptualize wealth and culturally distance themselves from wealth in some ways, while likely reproducing learned behavior (as a result of a wealthy upbringing) in a variety of other social outlets. For instance, utilizing social networks or taking an unpaid internship are distinct advantages that a background of privilege allows; yet, these students would likely not cite these privilege-specific performances as “being raised wrong.” In short, these students can pick and choose when to perform their privilege and when to endorse this privilege as morally sound; they frequently opt to construct their narratives of privilege on the premise of refinement and proper social decorum. The seeming contradiction of how and when these students actualize their privilege points to the highly flexible nature of class status in general. Again, class identification often holds stake in a variety of cultural factors that belie structural categorization. Yet, even certain ways in which these students culturally perform class can either reflect class privilege or distance themselves from the very privilege; the spectrum is fluid. In navigating this spectrum, the privileged student can nonetheless cement his/her “cred” as a non-upper-class actor, if in practice (or even portraying the practice) online rather than in terms of his/her economic capital. Such a process points to the complex distinction between moral and immoral privilege. Essentially, by justifying his/her behavior and social
acumen, the privileged student can remove himself/herself from the camp of the immoral privileged.

**Recognizing Privilege; Negotiating Guilt**

Throughout these cases, the given privileged students frequently deny or reframe their affluence in order to legitimize the struggle-cred self. Yet, not all students use these confession pages to alternately position their class locations. Many subjects more directly acknowledge their economic, social, and cultural capital privileges and seek to reconcile the guilt that accompanies this acknowledgement. More specifically, many subjects feel unworthy or undeserving of the privilege that their class location has allowed them. One Northwestern University subject (no. 498) feels “horribly guilty every time [he/she] fails a midterm.” This student later contends that given his/her lifelong access to quality schools and standardized test prep classes, “A lot of people commenting on here deserve an NU degree much more than me.” Another Yale University subject claims to be “going out a lot recently” and notes how this has made him/her a “bit more self-conscious about how [he/she] uses money.” These students recognize certain markers of their privilege—access to SAT test prep, the ability to eat at fairly expensive restaurants—and attach feelings of guilt and self-consciousness to their actualization of this privilege. In essence, these students readily acknowledge how their affluence has allowed them a certain capacity for frivolous spending or occasional, poor academic performance, a degree of leverage that low-income students do not possess. Many privileged students on these pages even go to great lengths to lie about their privilege due to this associative guilt; some “lie about
being on financial aid” (Stanford University comment no. 141); others are embarrassed to host lower-income peers at their posh off-campus residencies (University of Chicago comment no. 22). This conscious silencing of wealth functions as a peculiar strategy on historically elite campuses where affluence and prestige may be more expected, more normative. Still, the continual inclusivity of low-income students at these schools as well as the broader inclusivity of social dialogue concerning the United States’ inequality gap may point to an evolving culture wherein hiding one’s privilege (as opposed to hiding one’s lower class standing) holds growing functionality.

A prominent sect of students on these sites even holds bitterness about acknowledging their privilege and that these online climates saddle them with the brunt of unfair class antagonism. For instance, a University of Chicago student (comment no. 5) states, “I understand the importance of initiating a dialogue about class, but can we do it in a way that does not make other (“rich”) people feel shitty because of the things which they themselves have little control.” This student fully acknowledges his/her privilege and uses this acknowledgement to back the well-being of other “rich” kids by arguing that they have no “control;” any persecution against privileged students thus proves unfair. The student continues, “It is not my fault that I was taught to speak a certain way from a very young age, such as never ending sentences with prepositions or calling my parents ‘mother’ and ‘father.’” Beyond the classist implications that low-income students use socially improper slang and fundamental grammar, this comment suggests that privileged students may reconcile
their guilt by simply implying that it has been imposed on them by lower-income peers and the general discourse of class dialogue. Here, the student’s admission to “feeling shitty” functions as less of an apology than as a rebuttal.

To reiterate early discussion regarding the privileged student’s “us versus them” ethos, this post squarely positions the middle and/or upper-class student as victimized and under attack. Other comments similarly demonstrate how students recognize privilege, yet deflect any sense of “choice” or “fault” in the process. One Brown student (comment no. 229) comments, “There is so much hate against middle and upper class people but it’s not like we chose our situation any more than you did.” A Wellesley student (comment no. 33) explains, “Being at Wellesley has made me more insecure about my family’s wealth than ever before. I had never felt guilty for having more than others or felt as if being wealthy made me a bad person. This is not my fault and it does not mean that I have never struggled through extremely tough times.” The latter point again calls back to the vague conceptualization of sacrifice and past turmoil through its citation of “tough times.” Furthermore, both points reinforce the notion that many privileged students on these sites posit privilege as something of an affliction beyond their agency, almost as if they would have opted for poverty should they have had a say in the matter.

While these students do self-identify as “rich” and “upper class” and “wealthy” (thus conferring an admission of privilege), they still actualize an alternate form of struggle cred by highlighting their persecution on campus, online, and in other social forums. It remains unclear what or who has explicitly caused these students to feel so
attacked given that the majority of posts on these confession pages feature first-person narratives of impoverishment. As such, it is interesting that many privileged students interpret accounts of poverty as condemnations against the integrity of “rich kids.” By expressing their emotional depletion as a result of these “condemnations,” privileged students maintain an air of moral superiority in contrast to the slanderous online pages and the assumedly lower-income students on them.

Even when less overtly aggressive, many of these cases reflect a sort of pessimistic concession to one’s privilege, a feeling of being trapped in the guilt that hangs over his/her affluence. For instance, a sample Wellesley subject (comment no. 23) comments, “My parents are rich. They are paying my tuition and I will graduate without any debt. I cannot help but feel unbelievably guilty for this privilege… I’m incredibly lucky, but I don’t feel like I deserve anything of what I have.” Just as lower-income students may feel maligned by the (bad) “luck” associated with their poverty, this wealthier student offers a soundly non-meritocratic bit of self-reflection in which he/she feels maligned—albeit for vastly different reasons—by the flipside of this luck. While perhaps more critical and recognizant of the socioeconomic landscape that they actualize, the emotional near-paralysis of these students’ comments does not suggest a feasible way to improve upon socioeconomic inequality on campus or elsewhere. Yet, a handful of cases on these sites actually suggest that some privileged students maintain a strong desire to foster cross-class empathy. Indeed, some privileged students concede to and feel guilty about their privilege while proactively searching for ways to use this privilege to help those who are less fortunate. Still, even
these subjects frequently appear uncertain how to put this want into action. One University of Chicago student (comment no. 30) from a “well-off background” notes that he/she has “donated some money to help UChicago friends out from time to time” but realizes “that people might feel bad if they think they’re being treated as charitable cases.” Here, the privileged student must negotiate his/her desire to assist lower-income peers without being condescending or patronizing. Another Williams College subject (comment no. 199) states, “I don’t know how to offer to pay for things, or offer to take people out, without most people feeling weird about it if they can’t do the same back. Everyone’s different, of course, but I wish it weren’t weird, because I really don’t mind.” These commenters appear to display a genuine wish to help out lower-income friends financially, yet they struggle to overcome a discernible rift in communication between the given SES camps. That is, upper class and middle-class students may not always conceal or deny their privilege from lower-class peers with the intent of perpetuating stratification. Rather, they simply may not know how to extend gratitude and bridge cross-class relations without inhibiting the lower-class subject’s sense of autonomy or power.
V. CONCLUSION

The latter point proves deeply important. A communication lapse (on these pages and elsewhere) undoubtedly prevents honest and upfront dialogue between different SES groups. This lapse can often exacerbate and perpetuate larger ideological rifts between these groups. Class is not a comfortable subject for most. Furthermore, students—particularly those from relatively privileged backgrounds—frequently use systematic ways to alter, reposition, deny, and outright ignore their very class statuses and associative privilege. A number of middle-class and upper-class students on these confession pages reflect this trend. Instead of promoting their affluent statuses, these students more frequently seek to downplay their socioeconomic privilege in struggle-laden terms. In the process, they fundamentally strive to construct positive concepts of the self, a la social identification theory.

These students may cite personal economic hardships in order to negate the perceived notion that they lead particularly “easy” lives. These privileged students may alternately point to their parents’ and relatives’ hardships. In citing their families’ struggles in gaining upward mobility, these students forge a sense of hard-fought meritocracy for themselves, a proxy struggle. Furthermore, noting their parents’ “frugal saving” for their college tuition allows these students the ability to posit their privilege as a product of familial savviness, individualized agency, and, thus, meritocracy, not luck. These privileged students also highlight their own struggles in juxtaposition to “rich” students. That is, affluent students may manipulate the perceptions of their own privilege by utilizing relative comparisons to more affluent
peers, more affluent families, more affluent hometowns, etc. In detailing these points, the privileged commenter actively constructs a struggle cred identity that reframes and moralizes his/her character in specifically class-based terms. Yet, a number of middle-class and upper-class students conversely acknowledge the actuality of their privilege at some level. In struggling to reconcile with the guilt that accompanies this recognition, many privileged students express a desire to assist low-income peers.

These subjects often frame their narratives in ways that reflect much deeper social/psychological roots that demand ongoing research. For instance, many privileged students victimize themselves in the discourse of cross-class relations, a position which belies the way our society often perceives cross-class relations at large (i.e. a system wherein privileged individuals have heightened power and agency). In many of these upper-class and middle-class students’ minds, the campus/confession page rhetoric posits them as immoral, undeserving, fundamentally at fault for having monetary wealth. The way in which these students hyper-defensively rebut these accusations proves curious given the demographic divide at these schools. As evidenced by the high-income threshold of the financial aid packages and the minority of first-generation/low-income students, these universities/colleges still predominately cater to elites. These rebuttals alternately imply a deep fear of powerlessness despite the assumedly secure power positions which these upper-class and middle-class students hold. Perhaps the online arena for the class discourse which does in fact cater to first-generation students enables these privileged students to reframe their self-narratives and collective social esteems in ways that play up their relative “minority”
rank in terms of online power. Still, given the tenacity of many of these subjects’ defenses, logic suggests that these privileged students have shaped these class-antagonistic opinions for years, before any such online confession page existed. I surmise that this defensiveness in part serves as a deflection mechanism, purporting the privileged student’s victimization as a means of turning attention (even the given privileged student’s attention) away from the severe class inequality at hand. In this sense, the privileged student’s utilization of the victimization argument principally reflects a motivation. Yet, agenda alone may not tell the complete story. That is, when these subjects ask lower-income peers to stop “making [privileged students] feel shitty,” I interpret these pleas as rooted in legitimate, honest emotion. Clearly many of these privileged students hold powerful feelings such as guilt, anger, and insecurity about their class locations and the cross-class interactivity on campus as a whole. In framing themselves as victims of class antagonism, these privileged students can justifiably project these ill feelings with a parallel narrative.

This insecurity about one’s access to privilege coupled with the abovementioned class-antagonistic defensiveness speaks to the conundrum of the privileged student’s quest for solidarity, a place of proper “fit.” That is, these privileged students bemoan lower-income students’ accusations, even posit these latter students as bullies of sorts. Yet, in framing their struggle-cred narratives, these upper-class and middle-class actors strive to actualize an ethos reflective of cultural aspects from these very students’ SES camp. The duality of this vantage point raises an important question: with whom are these privileged students attempting to forge
solidarity? The answer is not entirely clear. On one hand, one may argue that these privileged students’ inability to connect with lower-class peers and inability to claim relative economic power places them in a resultant, purgatorial position of identity isolation and class dislocation. On the other hand, many of these students legitimate their struggle cred as a way of manipulating a version of their class status that they can endorse; in essence, this particular subject seeks to make peace with belonging to an upper and/or middle-class status in general. In their citing “douchey Yalies” and the “flaunting of money” on campus, one can gather that many privileged students take particular offense to certain cultural markers of collegiate wealth. Thus, by framing themselves as class sensitive, these students can effectively negotiate an upper-class and/or middle-class economic status. I find this acute recognition to be a full-circle process that takes shape far too infrequently on these pages; yet, it serves an extremely important function. Simply ignoring or hiding one’s privilege likely does little to improve cross-class relations.

A key issue in subverting this tendency lies in reforming the perceived morality associated with keeping one’s SES status private. That is, many of these students and probably privileged individuals in general view quiet, disguised wealth as socially proper and indicative of humility. Furthermore, most would agree that “flaunting” one’s wealth in a condescending manner reflects both poorly on the individual and societal inequality as a whole. Yet, the converse approach of concealment may prove even more destructive. If privileged individuals take more confidence in admitting and consciously recognizing their advantages, it may yield
benefits for lower-income students as well. A select minority of students on these
confession pages notes a want to help low-income students, yet feel unequipped to do
so. In asking “How can I help?” or “What can I do?” it becomes pretty radically clear
that the majority of these privileged students have rarely communicated with low-
income students about their socioeconomic power in an upfront way. We as a culture
value the right to privacy and individualism, perhaps to a degree that denigrates
communal dialogue and participation in certain venues; conquering these internalized
dogmas is no easy task. However, taking steps to more honestly reflect upon and
communicate one’s class status may prove immensely important in bridging this lapse
in cross-class discourse. Should affluent students more fully come to terms with their
own privileges (on campus, on these confession sites), they may feel more
comfortable and less guilt-ridden in lending a helping hand to those less fortunate.

In this sense, I firmly argue that further research on the subject of class identity
and the perception of class location can yield tremendous benefits regarding a
collective class consciousness and, ultimately, improved understanding between
seemingly disparate SES groups. While I posit that my study effectively addresses the
way in which privileged students negotiate, reframe, and legitimate struggle-cred
identities, I do concede that my research contains certain, inevitable limitations that
future research can facilitate. For instance, the very nature of these Class Confession
pages posits the commenter as anonymous. In many ways, I feel that this anonymous
space may actually allow for a uniquely honest dialogue given that these students can
project their true feelings and class perceptions without worry of social ostracization.
Still, one could reasonably argue that transparent spaces (online or otherwise) hold an important function in keeping individuals accountable for their dialogue. In essence, being able to place a name to a face frames one’s argument in a new light. As such, research that explores the compares how anonymous/identifiable subjects formulate self-concepts will produce important findings concerning the very importance of accountability. Given the boom of Internet forums, chatrooms, and social media outlets in the 21st century, research regarding the “online self” holds great potential that has gone relatively unexplored in many sociological circles thus far.

I further note that the implicit context of these particular online confession sites may partially manipulate how middle-class and upper-class students frame their SES narratives. Given their orientation toward first-generation/low-income issues, these sites largely predicate dialogue concerning struggle and conflict. Thus, the possibility exists that privileged students may particularly frame their SES narratives in a way compatible to the tone of the environment. In a sense, privileged students, like all individuals to some extent, may fall prey to a heightened degree of “code switching,” a process in which the speaker shifts his/her language to meet the cultural cues of the given environment. While these privileged students may lament about struggle and their difficult lives on these sites, they may reflect upon entirely different issues in other social arenas such as when amongst friends or family. In this regard, I feel that continued research is needed to study class-oriented behavior in these multiple arenas. As I have continually argued, class often functions malleably and under a highly subjective umbrella. Moreover, it may be entirely possible for an
individual to carry multiple class locations depending on the given social context. Measuring how one manipulates his/her self-concept in multiple environments may serve as an important step in analyzing how individuals form class-based identities.

While the notion of class’ universality proves timely and relevant, individuals in our society do not always discuss or even directly recognize socioeconomic status. Analysis of these Class Confession pages provides a unique vehicle for recognizing how SES issues indeed affect us all. No matter the subject, each person carries with him/her a background distinctly shaped by SES-based cultural, social, and financial capital (or a lack thereof). In turn, individuals may use these “Confession” platforms as unadulterated, anonymous spaces for venting and, in turn, negotiating their own class-based experiences. By examining the complex ways that these privileged students come to terms with or, more likely, reframe these struggle-cred-laden class statuses, one can more effectively understand how we as individuals come to understand and apply class, often with distinct motivations. In this sense, this research fills a much needed gap in academic research in its multifaceted analysis of class identity. While we as a culture often glamorize the idea of being wealthy, my data and analysis demonstrate that many affluent individuals hold deep insecurities and reservations about this very wealth to the point of deflecting it, often quite defensively, all together. Such a point touches on the very anxiousness of being privileged. Perhaps this anxiety serves as a response to the dualistic class-based ideals that our country often implicitly endorses: earning globs of money yet living with Middle-American values; consuming at all costs yet, contradictorily, saving money at all costs. These
catch-22 binaries are not lost on these privileged subjects, and their very narratives of struggle cred may dominantly serve as an attempt at resolving the spiritual disparity of having wealth yet expressing humility.

At the core of this struggle, the privileged student wants to present a positive self-concept, be it in the eyes of the online community, the campus, or even just himself/herself. No matter the individual, he/she strives to create and purport a certain version of the self by actualizing a sense of struggle cred. In coupling this concept in the context of SES status, my research bridges a gap between the psychological/structural and adds a new dimension to how we define “class” in America. Through a more acute understanding of this class formation and its underlying implications, students—and individuals at large—can better create a dialogue surrounding SES backgrounds and the interrelated struggles involved; through this dialogue, privileged and low-income subjects will hopefully develop ways to empathize, integrate, share knowledge and resources, and work to dismantle cross-class inequality and its accompanying silence.
REFERENCES


Shenker-Osorio, A. (2013, August 1). Why Americans All Believe They Are 'Middle Class' Retrieved September 22, 2015


## APPENDIX I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>Number of Posts gathered from Confession Page</th>
<th>% Receiving Pell Grants</th>
<th>% First Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18 (Class of 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Chicago</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern University</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16 (Class of 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington University in St. Louis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellesley College</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12 (as of March 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams College</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17 (of class of 2019)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>