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The Experiences of First Generation, Working-Class Women Students: A Qualitative Study

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By

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the eight women who participated in this study. The time they spent answering in detail such a lengthy questionnaire has made this study possible. Their accounts have provided validation for my own experiences and will surely validate other first generation, working-class women students.

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This study is a product of my own search for validation. As a first generation, (e.g. the first in my family to attend college) white working-class woman student many times I searched my college library for materials on working-class women. However, there is little research or literature on working-class people, fewer on working-class women, and fewer still on first generation, working-class women students. As Lillian B. Rubin states in Worlds of Pain,

> portrayals of the flesh-and-blood people who make up America's working-class - portrayals that tell us something of the texture and fabric of their lives, that deal respectfully with their manners, mores, and values - are notably few. (5)

To illustrate just how invisible working-class women are in research, Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler's papers examine the effect of chilly academic climates on what they consider special groups of women. They emphasize the effects of a chilly academic climate on women graduate students, women in traditionally "masculine" fields, women minority students, and older women students. One might think under the topic, women minority students, the authors would mention working-class women. They do not. Working-class women students go unnoticed.

This study is twofold in purpose: (1) to express the need for scholarly research on working-class women students, both white and of color, and (2) relate the experiences of eight first generation, predominantly white, working-class women students. I am particularly examining the experiences of first generation students because, as one of my respondents noted, we do not have

"the common upbringing, support, and socialization of the 2nd, 3rd generation college student." Our fathers and forefathers have been blue-collar laborers; our mothers mostly homemakers, service workers, or factory employees. Our parents have only vague ideas of what to expect on a college campus. We are forging new ground in our families, and mostly doing it without their guidance.

To facilitate the reader's understanding of the meaning of important terms used in this study, the following definitions are provided:

First Generation Student- A student whose immediate family members, (e.g. mother, father, and siblings) and extended family members, (e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) have not attended a four-year college. The student is the first in her family to attend college beyond technical training required for employment reasons.

Working-class- A person whose immediate and extended family members are blue-collar workers and are not educated beyond the high school level with the exception of technical training attained for job related reasons.

Alienation- I use Ryan and Sackrey's definition of alienation, meaning: "separateness from the academic community, of being a stranger, distanced from an authentic sense of self, and also from one's past, the cultural network of earlier life" (75).

Literature Review

In this section I will review some of the literature pertinent to the first generation, working-class woman's

experience. In the next section I will propose five hypotheses which have been generated from the literature. Then, I will explain the methodology for this study, discuss the results and limitations of the study, and finally, suggest future avenues of research and academic policy implications.

This culture's lack of interest in the working-class struggle is reflected, in one way, by the scarcity of literature on the working-class experience. A few researchers have, however, taken up this subject and underscored the personal and private dilemmas of the American working-class. Almost all of the literature I use for this study examines in one manner or another the reasons middle and upperclass Americans feel apathetic or unsympathetic toward the working-class.

The prominent factor that researchers attribute for the lack of sympathy toward the working-class is the existence of the myth of upward mobility. Ryan and Sackrey in Strangers in Paradise: Academics From the Working Class examine in detail the myth of upward mobility. According to the authors, the myth claims that all American citizens "are free to rise to the highest level that 'their talents permit.' No 'artificial' obstacles stand in their way" (2). A person's class position and occupational status are determined by that person's ability and willingness to achieve. It is a fair game with all the players beginning at the same starting line. "Hence, it is the individual's efforts and talent that are determinative, not the class into which one is born" (2).

Upon reflecting on this myth one can see that it is pervasive, practically an American creed. Presidents and

presidential hopefuls espouse it, parents tell it to their children, and the media presents it on television and in literature as if it is a common, everyday experience. If the myth was true, Americans would most likely not be so intrigued by the "rags to riches" stories presented to them by the media. If it was a common, everyday occurance, the popularity of this phenomena certainly would decrease. If it were true the income distribution in the United States would have changed much more dramatically than it has since the early 1900's.

Rising from the depths of the working-class to the heights of the upper class, or even the middle classes for that manner, is not a common, everyday occurance. Working-class people rarely rise to the middle or upper classes. Sennett and Cobb, authors of The Hidden Injuries of Class compute from Blau and Duncan's The American Occupational Structure that approximately only 18 out of every one thousand sons of blue-collar workers rise to the level of the professions (229). Sennett and Cobb assert "even fewer reach the penultimate position of self-employed professional: about eight out of one thousand males from a manual-laboring background do so" (229).

In the minds of Americans the myth persists. It perpetuates in such a way that most working-class people buy into the myth, internalize its message, and convince themselves their position in this society is their own fault. Sennett and Cobb find "there is a split between conscious belief and inner conviction" (97) in the mind's of the working-class. Consciously the working-class person may feel that s/he never even had a

chance, but privately "he [sic] feels ashamed for who he is. Class is his personal responsibility..." (97). Working-class people commonly say one thing while believing another. They may not consciously and intellectually accept their class position as their own responsibility, but internally they believe their class status is of their own making (251). Most working-class people think the system is unfair but they internally believe the myth of upward mobility is true. Rubin asserts that:

> in the American myth...everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps if only they have the will and the brains. What, then, are such people to say to themselves when they don't succeed? They <u>know</u> they have the will. There's little left but to accept that they don't have the brains.... (36)

If the working-class accept responsibility for their class position, it makes sense that most other Americans feel little or no sympathy for their struggles. The working-class have little pity for themselves. Why, then, would middle and upper class Americans feel empathy or sympathy for the disadvantaged?

The fact that the working-class generally accept their class status as their own responsibility reflects the extent to which the purposes of the myth have been met. Ryan and Sackrey state the purpose of the myth is,

> first and foremost,...to justify the huge inequalities of income and political power that are integral to a capitalist social order. It has the secondary purpose of keeping the "no-bodies" in a state of political impotence and frozen by self-contempt for their own

failure, rather than fired by righteous anger at their victimization. (2)

Further proof that the working-class is not "fired by righteous anger" is the lack of class-cohesion in this country. There is little class solidarity in the United States in comparison to other countries, like Great Britian, for example. America is experiencing a sort of backlash at any attempt at class cohesion. Organized labor unions can serve as agents for class cohesion. Unions not only protect workers, they also bring workers together, allowing them to feel solidarity with people of their own class.

The unpopularity of unions has escalated in the recent Reagan years. Union busting has become almost common practices for many American businesses.[1] The practice of union busting currently has the American government's blessing. For instance, strikes, have become virtually worthless for organized labor. And Ronald Reagan's firing of the striking air-traffic controllers, (who were striking for more safety precautions, not an increase in wages) set a precedent between the government and organized workers. These firings were the first time the government intervened in a dispute between management and labor by firing the striking workers. Many surviving unions now steer away from strikes because they realize the futility of such an action. Instead they resort to other means of protecting their workers like trying to gain more control over pension funds, for example.

The American government and the American public's

perpetuation of the myth of upward mobility practically garantees that the working-class will not overtly rebell. As Rubin states, if there is any kind of working-class rebellion it is collective action, instead '"it is a personal rebellion against what are experienced as personal constraints" (34). Because the working-class, like the other classes in America, subscribe to the "individualistic ethic" of the myth of upward mobility, when they fail to achieve their goals and dreams, they turn inward with self-blame (Rubin 19). This turning inward is especially noticeable with the working-class men who are husbands and fathers. Rubin finds that "preoccupation...would seem to be the most remembered quality about fathers in professional families; withdrawal, the most vivid memory in working-class families" (37).

America perpetuates the myth of upward mobility in many often subtle and complicated ways. When working-class people believe their position in this society is their own fault, the self-blaming ensures the perpetuation of the myth. And the myth will continue to perptuate if never challenged. There is little chance of working-class people collectively challenging the myth. As Rubin states, the socialization

> process by which this occurs is so subtle tht it is internalized and passed from parents to children by adults who honestly believe they are acting out of choices they have made in their own lifetime. (211)

Parents who turn inward with self-hate and blame will give that legacy to their children and the cycle will repeatedly continue.

To further insure that the working-class subcribes to the

myth of upward mobility, and hence, continually blame themselves, America has created the two year community colleges. I would not deny the importance of the community college for a working-class person. I would, however, like Ryan and Sackrey assert that these schools promote a false hope for working-class students (32). The community colleges are the fastest growing schools in the nation, practically spilling over with working-class students (32).

While any form of higher education is presumably better than no higher education, most students at these community colleges are there because of a lack of resources that could get them into a four year university, not a lack of intellect. The tuition and fee costs of community colleges make them an attractive form of higher education for the working-class. Cuts in government subsidization of higher education have led to the growth of community colleges. Ryan and Sackrey assert that one of the main reasons the two year, community colleges are experiencing such growth is because the Golden Age of Education (from 1960's to 1980's) is over. This Age began when the baby boom "sent unprecedented numbers of youngsters off to college at the same time that there was occurring the great increase in government subsidization of higher education" (27). The Reagan administration's education cuts have helped to make the low-cost community colleges practically the only viable alternative for the working-class.

Rubin finds her respondents have hardly any real idea of the costs of attending four year colleges. Most of her participants

who have children guess the costs to be "maybe a few hundred dollars a year or so" (207). She attributes their lack of knowledge on the costs of attending college to "naivette; but partly, also,...because they don't discriminate between the local junior college and the university" (207). I argue that it isn't a matter of working-class parents' inability to discriminate. Even the least educated in this country usually realize the difference between a four year college graduate and a community college graduate. In fact, working-class people are probably the most acutely aware of status differences. Rubin says that for the working-class "very often, 'going to college' means the two-year community college in the neighborhood" (207). The reason they attend these community colleges is because they can only afford a "few hundred dollars a year or so", if they can afford that much. Why imagine or admit the costs being any higher when they know they can't afford anything more than this amount? So the main reason working-class students are at two year community colleges instead of "institutions with better reputations, better facilities, more prestige in the eyes of employers in the job market...is because of their parents' income and background" (32).

Ryan and Sackrey believe the community college offers the working-class a false hope by giving their students an incomplete education that ultimately prepares the students for "lesser stations" in life (33). In a recent paper published by the Project on the Status and Education of Women, Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler explain that:

> ideally, the college environment as a whole should help

> students acquire knowledge, build skills and and confidence, learn how to make informed choices, and how to handle differences .... (1)

The humanities and liberal arts curriculum generally enable a student to acquire these abilities, and also provide the core of a sound education. Ryan and Sackrey believe that the community colleges "typically minimize instruction in the liberal arts" (32). Instead the two year colleges are more like training or apprenticeship schools. Even in the area of training they fail the working-class student because such institutions typically offer predominantly working-class fields of study like cosmetology and automotive technology. The white-collar fields of study they offer only prepare students for lesser stations. For instance, they "will train someone to be an engineer's 'aide', rather than to be an engineer" (32). If a working-class person desires to train in a predominantly white-collar field, s/he can do so. Ultimately, the student will be trained for a lesser position.

Of course, if expenses allow, the argument is that the working-class student can tranfer to a four year university after completing the associates degree at the community college. But is it highly unlikely that the student coming from a local, community college will be able to attend a more prestigous university. First and foremost, the more prestigous schools admit students who are predominantly from the middle and upper classes. Even if admitted, many working-class students cannot afford the costs. Often the transferring student will attend an

in-state university where tuition and fees are lower than the norm for colleges in that particular state.[2]

The United States Census Bureau projects that by the year 1990, 20 percent of the over 25 age population (of all classes) will have completed four or more years of college. This equates to only one person in five having completed four or more years of higher education (Rubin 208). Rubin considers the 1990 projection a rather optimistic estimation (208). These education statistics fail to differentiate between universities attended, the quality of the education received, and the opportunities for upward mobility because of attending the particular college (209). As Rubin says, the tables count "four years as Teachers' Normal...as the same as four years at Harvard or Dartmouth...."(209).

Working-class people rarely attend college, especially women of color and white working-class women. When they do, it is almost completely without the emotional and financial support of their parents. It is a myth that most working-class parents dream and save their money to send their child or children to college. Rubin states, "in order to plan for the future, people must believe it is possible to control their fate - a belief that can only be held if it is nourished in experience. That seldom happens in working-class life" (38). Instead, working-class people are forced to mostly live from paycheck to paycheck, or if lucky enough to hold a union job and earn higher wages, they are still the ones who suffer the most from the fluctuations in the economy. They are generally the first to be layed off in economic hard times. "While it may be true that the weekly pay

checks of some blue-collar workers are higher than those of some white-collar workers, it is the blue-collar workers who are less likely to earn that paycheck the year round" (8). For the majority of working-class people, "the difficult realities of their lives often limit their very ability to envisage a future" (38). This inability to plan ahead is not due to what many social scientists have accused their inability to delay gratifications. Irregardless of popular opinion, working-class people are not particulary prone to instant gratification. Instead there are few gratifications to delay, so "planning for the future seems incongruous" (39).

Rubin's respondents' answers to the question "Do you hope your children will go to college?" are not surprising given their lack of control in being able to plan their daily lives. The participants indicate they are mostly not sure if they want their children to attend college. "If they want to" they most often reply. "Indeed, less than 20 percent of the families answered a firm and unequivocal "yes" - even that small proportion almost always referring only to sons not daughters" (207). Rubin finds that for working-class daughters there is really only one sure way to attain their parents' respect - through marriage (41). To move from girl to woman and attain a respected social status, she must marry. When pushed about the issue of their children attending college, the respondents remarks indicate it is a distant issue for them. Because of the lack of finances and the costs of attending college, most of Rubin's working-class parents say that if their children want

to go to college,

> the only help they'll give their children will be to let them live at home without cost. The rest, the children will have to do for themselves - an attitude that rests not on their callousness or their unwillingness to help, but on their conviction that to give the children more, even were it possible, would be to spoil them, to encourage them to take the opportunity lightly.... (208)

This is certainly not the way most middle class parents would view their child's desire to attend college. Zinn and et al say that for white working-class women and women of color, "completing college and graduate education itself poses financial, emotional, and intellectual challenges" (292). Small wonder Rubin concludes that only those working-class people who are "the hardiest, the most ambitious, the most motivated toward some specific occupational goal will ever get through college" (208).

There are those working-class people who are determined and motivated and manage to attend college. I am especially interested in what happens once the working-class student arrives on the university campus. Rubin's research does not examine this area because her respondents do not have children in college. Sennett and Cobb's classic, The Hidden Injuries of Class provides some insight into what the working-class student and family experience when a working-class youth attends a four year university.

Before delving into this matter though, I suggest two

criticisms of Sennett and Cobb's study. The Hidden Injuries of Class is a book which claims to examine the experience of the Boston area working-class. The majority of Sennett and Cobb's respondents are first, second, and third generation Italians. Sennett and Cobb acknowlege this, but they do not attempt to differentiate between ethnic values and working-class values. Instead they attribute all phenomena as class characteristics. This may be why Rubin's findings sometimes directly refute Sennett and Cobb's. One is left thinking for instance, that working-class parents invest in their childrens' future and plan ahead for their college education. Sennett and Cobb fail to consider whether the middled aged respondents' desire to see their children obtain a formal education is a ethnic value. They do not explore the real possibility that for many ethnic communities attaining a formal education means becoming more of a legitimate American. Richard Gambino in Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian Americans uses Sennett and Cobb's respondent's information when considering the struggles of being an Italian American (332). He seems to acknowledge the respondents' ethnicity and considers their ethnicity in his own work.

The second criticism is that Sennett and Cobb examine only the working-class male's experiences. They interviewed as many women as men for The Hidden Injuries of Class but they use the women's interviews only when "they elucidate[d] something common to the experience of both sexes" (42). Their reasoning for not illustrating the women's experiences is that they are exploring

"a social order that affects men in a different way than women" (42). They also claim that they will publish a companion volume of interviews with the women separately (42). The companion volume must have never made it into print. My efforts at locating its existence have been fruitless.

The omission of women is a common practice in research. Ryan and Sackrey do not include women in Strangers in Paradise. They say women professors are rare, and hence, difficult to find. Ward and Grant document the omission of women in research. They find four themes in which to analyze "deficiencies of sociological accounts" (140). The four areas are:

> Omission and underrepresentation of women as research subjects; concentration on masculine-dominated sectors of social life; use of paradigms, concepts, and methods, and theories which more faithfully portrayed men's than women's experiences, and the use of men and male lifestyles as the norms against which social phenomena were interpreted. (140)

Sennett and Cobb's justification of omitting women from their study equates to the theme concentrating on "masculine-dominated sectors of social life."

Sennett and Cobb begin The Hidden Injuries of Class with Frank Rissaro who has worked as a meat-cutter for most of his adult life until he lands an entry-level, white-collar job at a local bank. Rissaro's new job and subsequent income increase give him the opportunity to move his family out to the suburbs and send his son, James to college. His reaction to James'

school is of particular interest here. Although Rissaro seems supportive of James being in college, he admits he resents James and his success. In Rissaro's mind James' success puts him in the league of the higher classes. Though he sincerely wants his son to succeed, he does not want to lose James' respect. He fears he is losing his son's respect because to him, entry into the middle class is synonymous with losing respect for the working-class (132). "The young of the working class," according to Sennett and Cobb, "have a tremendous 'burden of hope' placed on them" (187). This burden of hope is a complicated matter for the working-class son with tight family ties. If he doesn't succeed in school, he betrays his family by being a failure. If he does succeed, this invites him "to desert his past, to leave it and the parents who have sacrificed for him all behind" (131). Frank and James both then, are in a difficult crisis that was not an issue for Rubin's respondents. Rubin states, they have "the reassurance" that their children will not "be lost to an alien way of life, a way of life that parents can't and don't want to understand" (208).

What about working-class women who go to college? What do they experience? Due to the second wave of the women's movement there is becoming increasingly more research available on women. It is interesting to note however, that much of this research is for the most part written by women. Most of the studies are also primarily about white middle class women. Zinn and et al find that women of color and white working-class women are "virtually excluded from consideration as vital building blocks in feminist

theory" (291). While women are often excluded in scholary research, women of color and working-class women are generally omitted in male scholarly research and feminist research.

A recent publication written by Field Belenky, McVicker Clinchy, Rule Goldbergh, and Mattuck Tarule examines and categorizes women's processes of learning. The authors of Women's Ways of Knowing interviewed some women from what they call "lower class origins" (160) or what I prefer to call the working-class. Unfortunately, the authors seem to dwell on dysfunctional working-class families - families that are characterized by alcoholism, "silence, hierarchy, and violence" (160). The authors lead one to believe that all working-class families are characterized by unhealthy attributes.

Not all working-class families are dysfunctional. Many working-class families, though poor, manage to maintain a healthy, family environment. Most working-class people would most likely resent their families being referred to as dysfunctional, even if the family dynamics fit the definition of dysfunctionalism. The term, dysfunctional, carries with it an inherent judgement when applied to the working-class. It insinuates that something in the family has gone wrong. The family or someone in the family is behaving in an unhealthy manner. The term does not take into account the outside forces which usually cause the dysfunctionalism. The authors of Women's Ways of Knowing fail to show an understanding or sensitivity to working-class people.

Rubin offers a much more sensitive account of the dynamics of working-class families. She believes the characterictics

considered dysfunctional in a working-class family are actually coping mechanisms - unhealthy perhaps, but nonetheless, reactions to the stresses of poverty. She explains that families deal with the stresses of being working-class in different ways. Some working-class families are among the "settled-living". They struggle and usually succeed at maintaining a sense of being among the "respectable" poor. Others are the "hard-livers" who have grown tired of endlessly struggling against the forces of poverty. They usually have escaped through alcohol abuse, desertion or violence (30). Rubin uses these two terms because they rest "on differences in a family lifestyle and avoid[s] some of the negative connotations of so many characterizations of working-class life" (30). She also explains that hard-livers, though usually considered dysfunctional, are in a sense rebelling. They are the nonconformists who "cannot or will not accept their allotted social status" (34). Most of the families Rubin interviewed fluctuate from settled-livers to hard-livers and vice-versa. The hard-livers will become settled-livers when financial problems are not so overwhelming. Predominantly settled-livers will become hard-livers when economic troubles are too much for the family to bear. In this context, dysfunctionalism is an inappropriate term when applied to the working-class. (It may not be an appropriate term for families of any class for that matter.) The word carries with it too much "blaiming the victim" which makes many working-class people uncomfortable with its use.

What the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing discover about

working-class women who come from hard-living families is quite informative. Unlike more advantaged female children, even if they grew up in a dysfunctional family, working-class female children who grow up in hard-living families have little chance at acquiring the ability of seeing "multiple perspectives on truth and values" (63). The authors believe more advantaged children have "opportunities for international travel, discussions and debates with worldly parents and diverse friends, the popular media, and challenging liberal education and educators" (63). So even if the family has a hard-living element, for example, alcoholism; the more advantaged children are most likely able to find outside sources of sustenance that will "promote their development elsewhere" (160). Most of the poor women who are interviewed by these authors are not able to move beyond their family environments. Either their families or schools fail them. When both fail them, there is little chance for working-class female children to transcend their family environments. A few manage to, however. The women who transcend their family environments are women who as children,

> learned to immerse herself in at least one symbol system for a very early age. This might have been music or art, but most often they found another world through books and literature.... Most found important, decent relationships outside of the home....A few created such relationships for themselves through the sheer power of their imaginations, by endowing their pets and imaginary playmates with those attributes that nourish the human potential. (162-163)

The authors of Women's Ways of Knowing find that the majority of the women they interviewed from working-class homes are what they call subjective knowers. Subjective knowing is an early stage in the authors' five categories of the learning process. Subjective knowing entails seeing truth as "an intuitive reaction - something experienced not thought out, something felt rather then pursued or constructed" (69). Subjective knowers are dualistic because they believe there is one right answer, one truth, and it is within themself waiting to be birthed (54). Obviously, such forms of thinking are not encouraged in our scientifically orientated society. Forms of intuitive thinking are discouraged and negatively categorized as femimine. The masculine, objective and rational form of thinking is valued in our society, and thus taught in our schools.

Even women who are farther along on the authors'developmental scale have difficulty making the necessary transitions into a more "masculine" mode of thinking that is necessary to succeed in higher education. The authors explain that although there has been a significant

> increase in the number of women students in higher education and professional schools, faculties, usually predominantly male, argue against a special focus on women students and resist open debate on whether women's educational needs are different from men's. (5)

If women's needs are different, (which the authors show they are), most women conform to the male model in to succeed in college. The highly objective, rationalistic manner of thinking

is not necessarily the healthiest form of learning for women, nor for men. According to the authors, women usually enter the university with less confidence than men. They know that for generations it has been assumed women have less powers of rationality than men (217). Particular models or teaching methods can then be "at best redundant and at worst destructive, confirming the women's own sense of themselves as inadequate knowers" (228).

The doubting model is one teaching method which can be especially detrimental for women and is unfortunately, used often in academia. The doubting game, so to speak, is usually played between a person who has most of the power, (the professor) and a much less powerful person, (the student). From my own experience I have come to understand that the point of the game, or the type of arguing is to make the student prove she can back her argument, opinion with facts. I imagine many women despise this model not because they don't have the necessary information to prove their arguments, but because they lack the confidence which is necessary to react appropriately under those circumstances. I despise the model because I feel my argument or opinion is invalidated if I can't provide the necessary proof. The authors add another dimension to why women dislike the model. They explain:

> women find it hard to see doubting as a "game"; they tend to take it personally. Teachers and fathers and boyfriends assure them that arguments are not between <u>persons</u> but between <u>positions</u>, but the women continue to fear that someone may get hurt. (105)

Fearing someone will get hurt probably stems from women's socialization to take care of people and to nurture at all costs. The authors conclude "on the whole, women found the experience of being doubted debilitating rather than energizing" (227).

The idea of arguing for argument's sake is also a strange notion for women. For instance, according to the authors, women rarely engage in reasoned discourse or critical arguing among friends (105). "The classic dormitory bull session, with students assailing their opponents' logic and attacking their evidence, seem to occur rarely among women" (105). But it seems to be an amiable form of discourse between men. It certainly is emphasized by professors in the classroom. When prompted to engage in argument in the classroom, women are often reluctant to do so, even if explicitly encouraged (105). For women, this is "ceremonial combat" and it "often seems just silly" (111).

The women interviewed for Women's Ways of Knowing express the need for supportiveness and confirmation instead of doubting and ceremonial combat. Supportiveness and confirmation seem to be the polarity of typical educational environments, though. In fact, "in the masculine myth, confirmation comes not at the beginning of education but at the end" (193). Hence, graduation is referred to as commencement. If confirmation came during the college years, so many women who experience self-doubt might be able to overcome these debilitating feelings. Hall and Sandler cite a study which finds "there is persuasive evidence that in selecting and reacting to educational environments, females tend more than males to be attuned to the personal supportiveness of

these environments" (Campus 2). Hall and Sandler stress the need for a supportive educational climate for women. They describe activities usually referred to as extra-curricular as really being co-curricular because "they are complementary and crucial parts of the learning process" (Campus 1). Co-curricular activities often involve not only students but faculty. The authors believe "faculty members who take time to socialize with their women students may help them to overcome doubts about their own intellectual competence and thus develop greater self-esteem" (2). This is especially important when considering several studies have indicated that male faculty tend to affirm male students more than females (Classroom 2).

The differential treatment of women and working-class people on college campuses is exacerbated for women of color. They face the effects of double stereotypes, sometimes triple, based on gender, race, and class. Hall and Sandler say that "women minority students...frequently find the general campus climate at predominantly white institutions <u>the</u> major barrier to intellectual and personal development and to the completion of degree work" (Campus 11). Women of color "report much less informal interaction and encouragement from faculty and others than majority students" (11). They indicate feeling like unwelcomed guests on the college campus. The classroom environment can be especially uninviting. Often faculty are uncomfortable dealing with women of color. Many times they "act on the basis of a variety of assumptions about minority women's capabilities and attitudes" (Class 12). Black women especially report feeling that the faculty either expect them to be

incompetent or to be the brilliant exceptions to their race (12). Consequently they often are either ignored in class or singled out as tokens. As tokens they are asked to answer questions in representation of their entire race. For instance, a black woman will often be asked "to give the 'black woman's view'" instead of her individual viewpoint (12). Because of stereotypes and media portrayals some women of color also may be seen by male faculty and male students in terms of their sexuality. It is a common practice in media to portray ethnic women as sexually insatiable. The stereotypes that result from these portrayals can lead to sexual harassment or faculty distancing themselves from their students who are women of color (12). It is crucial then if women are to advance as equally as male students developmentally and intellectually, that they receive confirmation and support during, not after their academic careers.

Hypotheses

Drawing from the ideas previously discussed, the definitions provided, and my own speculations derived from personal experience as a first generation, working-class woman student, the following hypothesis have been generated:

Hypothesis One, Part A - Before entering college, the parents of the working-class woman have very little control in the decision of whether their child will go to college nor in which school she will attend. The actual decisions are made almost exclusively by the prospective student...

Hypothesis One, Part B - ...and are based on one or more of these factors: the costs of tuition and fees, the availability of

scholarships in relation to the cost of tuition and fees, and the proximity of the college to the working-class woman's home.

Hypothesis Two - Initially the first generation, working-class woman student feels alienated by and from the academic institution, both professionally and personally.

Hypothesis Three - After surviving the weeding-out process and thus, having been in college for at least two years, the working-class woman student still feels alienated by and from the academic institution she is attending.

Hypothesis Four - A network consisting sometimes of family members, but mostly friends, significant others, a few professors, academic advisors, and women's services serves as a support system for the working-class woman student.

Hypothesis Five - During her undergraduate studies and afterward, the working-class woman student experiences a sense of alienation by and from her family.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected by using an open-ended questionnaire. The primary reasons for using a questionnaire as opposed to a oral interview format were that I wanted to interview participants living in different regions of the country. I did not have the neccesary financial resources for transcribing lengthy interviews. The actual questionnaire was ten pages in length containing 42 questions. On the average it took the respondents two weeks to return the questionnaire. Some participants were able to return it in less than a week, a few took as long as a month. The questionnaire contained questions directly relevant to the hypothesis as well as

supplemental questions intended to give me a sense of the respondent that would have been more obvious with an in-person interview (see questionnaire in Appendix A.)

The respondents were located by using the networking or snowball system. I began with two women I knew who were first generation, working-class women. Both agreed to answer the questionnaire and also offered to give questionnaires to other women they knew who were first generation, working-class women. The other women then filled out the questionnaires and informed me of women they knew who fit the criteria of the study. The criteria used in selecting respondents was that she was a first generation, working-class woman student, (or had been) and had completed at least two years of undergraduate work at a four year college. In this manner I generated eight respondents, including several women who I did not know personally. I used eight respondents because the questionnaire provided for rich data and extensive analysis.

The respondents vary in age, regions of the country where they were raised, and the level of education they have attained. They are similar in the sense that they all are first generation, working-class women students who have completed their bachelor degrees at a four year university, with the exception of one student who is near completion. They are all white also, except for one respondent who is black. Initially I wanted respondents who began their education and finished their undergraduate work at a four year university. I soon discovered that finding working-class women who fit this criteria would be

difficult. As I have already discussed, because of a lack of financial resources most working-class students must begin their formal education at a community college. Because of the difficulty locating respondents who had started and finished their education at four year schools, I decided to include respondents (three to be exact) who initially attended a community college and then transferred to a four year institution.

The respondents in this study are anomalies in many ways. Simply attending a four year university makes them the exception to the rule in working-class families. All but two are not married, which means they have not accepted the expectation that for them to gain the family 's respect, they must marry. Another unique characteristic of these respondents is the level of education they have received. Most are either currently in graduate school or have already attained doctorate degrees. Two are currently college professors which is a major achievement for working-class women. Recall that Sennett and Cobb assert that only 18 out of every one thousand sons of blue-collar workers rise to the level of the professions. Ryan, Jake and Sackrey use only male working-class professors because they had such difficulty locating working-class female professors. The respondents high levels of education means they are not only highly intelligent but also determined to foster that intelligence through formal education no matter the emotional and financial obstacles. Because these women are so highly educated, they are not microcosms of working-class women. This does not mean they don't identify themselves as working-class

because they do. Instead it just means they are atypical working-class women.

Like the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing I propose to share some of the personal experiences of eight first generation, working-class women who either are or have been undergraduate students. For example, I examine: (a) how they managed as working-class women to attend a four year college; (b) how they felt once on the college campus; (c) how they survived and succeeded through their undergraduate years; (d) and how their relationships with their families changed over time. I identify each respondent by reference to her undergrqduate major and academic area.

Data Analysis and Discussion

To consistently analyze the data for each hypothesis, I created one method of measurement to use for all the hypotheses. In this method the respondent's answers were recorded using x's to mean the answer confirmed the hypothesis, y's refuted, and z's meant the answer neither confirmed nor refuted. Usually z's equated to the fact that the respondent did not answer the question at all or gave an answer which was irrelevant to the hypothesis. I developed a chart, giving each respondent a number from one to seven. The respondent's numbers were place at the top of the chart, and on the side the numbers of the questions intended to support or refute the hypothesis. Then I coded each respondent's answer to the questions used for each hypothesis. If the response confirmed the hypothesis, I marked an x. If the answer to the question refuted the hypothesis, I marked a y. If

it did not refute or support, or if the question was not answered, I marked a z. After coding the respondents' answers to all the appropriate questions, I tallied up the number of x's, y's and z's. The number of x's determined the status of the hypothesis. The relevance of the number of x's was drawn from a statistical chart I created:

Percentage of X's

0-20% = strong refutation

20-40% = refutation

40-60% = neutral

60-80% = confirmation

80-100% = strong confirmation

By using this chart I was able to consistently analyze each hypothesis instead of relying too heavily on my own subjective opinion.

The first hypothesis deals with the working-class woman's decision to go to college and the manner in which the decision was made. I broke this particular hypothesis into two sections in order to effectly analyze. Part A states:

> "before entering college, the parents of the working-class woman have very little control in the decision of whether their child will go to college nor in which school she will attend. The actual decisions are made almost exclusively by the prospective student..."

The questions intended to solicit this information are:

10) Why did you decide to go to college?

11) Why did you decide to go to a four year university?

12) How much imput/control did you have in the decision to go to college?

13) How much imput/control did your parents, siblings, friends, or acquaintances (such as guidance counselors) have in the decision?

The responses to these questions indicate a strong confirmation that the parents of the working-class prospective student have very little control in the decision of whether she will attend college. They have little influence in deciding which school she will attend, also. Instead the decisions are made almost exclusively by the prospective student. Each respondent indicates she had complete control in the decisions. For instance, the question "how much imput/control did you have in the decision to go to college?" evoke the following responses: "I had total control in the decision." "I feel that I had the control in making the decision." "90% was my input," and "it was my decision exclusively." Many of the responses indicate that not only did they have full control, their parents had little direct influence in the matter. There is not any mention of parent's strongly encouraging or pushing the respondents to go to college. An english major says, "at best, I received only passive support from anyone." The parents of these working-class prospective students are incredibly inactive in the decision-making process. This is not so surprising in light of Rubin's findings. The respondents in her study, for the most part, do not really intend for their children to go to college, especially their female children. They expect their children will ultimately live the same kind of lives, maybe slightly better, as they do. Many of the participants in this study indicate their

parents had other plans for them - plans that were specifically based on the fact that they were female. The biology major has this to say about her mother's plans for her:

> I think her aspirations for me were: getting some sort of "training" after high school so I would have some skill to "fall back on" if (god forbid) that was necessary. I remember her telling me once that she had taken out an insurance policy when I was born that I could cash in when I was 18. She said it wasn't much - but maybe I could use it to go to school to be a beautician or a secretary.

Unfortunately her mother died when the respondent was a sophomore in high school. So she never knew what her daughter did with the insurance policy. The respondent did not use the policy to become a beautician or a secretary. Instead she cashed it in her first year of college, the most financially difficult year for her. The insurance policy helped her become a professor. Her story illustrates what many of the parents expect of their female children is not what they eventually become. The english major also reveals her parents'expectations of her. She says, "I remember quarrelling with my mother about my wanting to take a college preparatory course in high school. She was very insistent that the secretarial course was a wiser choice. My father would not involve himself in our dispute." This respondent went on to attain a bachelor of arts degree and she has completed a year and a half of graduate work.

None of the respondents indicate their parents wished them ill will or were malicious in any manner. Instead they were

simply passive and inactive in their female child's pursuit of an education. They simply did not participate. They did not, or could not plan ahead for their child's education. Most of the respondents' families are traditional working-class families, holding traditional working-class values. Working class families tend to view their male children as breadwinners and their female children as future wives of breadwinners. So there is for them, very little reason to extravagantly plan ahead for their daughters futures.

Part B of the first hypothesis states that the decision of which school to attend is:

> "based on one or more of these factors: the costs of tuition and fees, the availability of scholarships in relation to the costs of tuition and fees, and the proximity of the college to the working-class woman's home."

The following questions are intended to support or refute this part of the hypothesis.

> 14) What college(s) did you attend and where was it in relation to your home?
>
> 15) Why did you decide on that particular school?

The respondents' answers to these questions confirm the second part of the first hypothesis. The decision of which school the working-class prospective student will attend is based on one or a combination of the following factors: the costs of tuition and fees, the availability of scholarships in relation to the costs of tuition and fees, and the proximity of the school to the woman's home.

All of the women interviewed initially attended a college

located within 90 miles of their home. The majority of the respondents enrolled in a school that was not any more than five miles from where they called home. Furthermore, several of the women indicate proximity of the college as being the deciding factor. The political science major ironically later did her graduate work overseas but first attended schools in her hometown. She went to these schools because they "were close to home." A communication major indicates both proximity and costs as determinative. She chose the college because "it was close by and very inexpensive." Furthermore, as she explains securing a scholarship was an extra incentive.

> I was living with two other women who had recently gotten out of the army. [The university] was close by and cheap - they were going and we all had the GI Bill - you lose it if you don't use it within ten years - and it was money - so I decided to go.

The availability of scholarships and other forms of aid are a crucial factor which allowed some of the women in this study to be more selective in their college choices. The music student says that she went to school on a music scholarship, grants, loans, work-study and help from her aunt and uncle. (She is was one of two who had some financial support from extended family relatives.) She attended a small, private school. When asked why she decided on that particular school she indicates that first, "it had an excellent music school", second, "it was small and seemed personable", and third, "it was impressive because it was expensive." Unlike the majority of the women, she

was able to choose her school based on the quality of a department regardless of costs. The music scholarship though, probably played a role in being able to be selective. The biology student also chose her school in part because of departmental reputation. She went to a college which was 80 miles from her home that "had a very good biology department..." This woman is the only respondent who attended college during the 1960's, a period when there was liberal subsidization of higher education. She says she "had a Basic Opportunity Grant, a scholarship, and an NDSL fund loan," and work-study. The Basic Opportunity Grant and the NDSL are difficult to obtain now even for the neediest students.

A psychology major in attempting to explain why she attended a private college says she really doesn't "even know that there were clear deciding factors." She says that:

> I feel like deciding factors might come into play more with someone who has information on the costs and benefits of 2 and 4 year programs and can then weigh that information; I feel it wasn't that clear to me, but that I just did it.

She further explains that while attending this private, expensive college she was not aware that their tuition and fees costs would be considered high. She did not know the typical costs of attending a university. All this reflects how baffling choosing a school can be for a working-class woman. The psychology major ultimately explains that she chose the private college because of its promotional jingle. She remembers she liked the name of the college. In high school, at a college fair, a representative of

the college related a "catchy phrase" that played on the colleges name. She thought it was "cute and decided to go." She says, "I'm being very serious; I had no idea really what they were like academically, nor did I realize that this should be a concern or a deciding factor." Her account certainly makes the point that she did not really know what factors most students consider when choosing a college.

Unfortunately, most of the women interviewed indicate in one way or another that the academic reputations of their schools was not the top priority. Like this women, some did not even know it should be a serious consideration. Because they did not have any experience in this new game, nor a rule book, most of these women chose their schools because of the costs of attendance, or the availability of scholarships and the proximity of the school to help defray the costs. Several of the women did not even see the college they would be attending until after they had committed to attend. The women's responses indicate then, that for the most part these first generation, working-class women students have not chosen their schools first and foremost on academic reputation. The quality of the university's education is secondary to other more pressing matters. How much tuition and fees are, chances of securing aid, and how close the school is to home are the primary factors involved in the decision of which school to attend.

The second hypothesis states:

"initially, the first generation, working-class woman student feels alienated by and from the academic

institution, both professionally and personally."

The questions intended to support or refute the hypothesis are:

19) Did you go to "new student" orientation? If you did not, why? If you did, why? Describe your experience. (Please answer but not limit yourself to these kind of questions: Were you alone? How did you feel?)

22) What were your initial feelings and attitudes about your classmates? Did those feelings and attitudes change over time? If so, when and why?

23) What were your initial feelings and attitudes about your professors? Did your feelings and attitudes about your professors change over time? If so, when and why?

29) If you lived in the dorms, did you participate in dorm activities? If you participated, why? If you did not participate, why?

30) Did you initially become a member or become involved in a student organization or activity? If you did, please describe the organization or activity and why/how you became involved in it.

31) If you did not become involved in a student organization or activity, is there a particular reason why you did not?

The analysis of the data for these questions indicates the hypothesis is refuted. Specifically, ten of the responses refute the hypothesis, fifteen confirm it, and seventeen answers are irrelevant to the hypothesis.

When writing these questions I hypothesized that working-class women students who participate in extra-curricular activities do not feel alienated from the academic institution. I equated participation as an indication of feeling a sense of belonging. Five of the respondents lived in the dorms. Of those five, four participated in dorm activities. The music major says, "I tried to participate in most activities because I am a

social person..." An educational media major says that there were not many dorm activities but she did participate "mostly at the urgings of ... friends." The psychology major was even hall president. She was involved during high school in student council. So she continued her involvement in student government during her first years of college. The respondents who participated in dorm activities were also active in other extra-curricular organizations. The music major was especially active in several different music groups. She says, "I loved music and wanted to be involved. It was also expected that music students would be in several organizations." The media major "joined several Christian student organizations for fellowship, support and friendship." For a variety of reasons then, many of the women participated in extra-curricular activities. Assuming that participation indicates feeling a sense of belonging on the college campus, then these women appear to have not felt alienated by the academic institution.

The irony of these women's statements is that almost all of them indicate in a previous question that they did feel different, strange or alienated from their academic environment. For the question, "what were your initial feelings and attitudes about your classmates?..." five out of seven of the women express feelings of alienation from their classmates. Two of the women who actively participated in extra-curricular functions also indicate feeling different or estranged from their classsmates. The music student says, "the basic feeling was one of snobbiness." She feels her classmates thought they were

better than her, especially "fraternity and sorority people." Even the psychology major who held the position of hall president indicates she immediately felt different from her dorm-mates. She says:

> I think of my attitudes toward the other women who lived in my dorm. While many of them came from smaller towns too, I still realized that they had more money than me; for example, my roommate had tons of clothes and shoes... My second day there they were all (well most) interested in tennis matches on T.V. Of course they all played tennis and I didn't know anything about it. I realized even then that this was because of my background....

She goes on to explain that her feelings of not fitting in only intensified over time. Even while she was hall president she felt bitterness toward her dorm-mates. When she tranferred to a larger and cheaper university, she left with "the attitude that they were a bunch of rich, shallow, immature brats."

Her feelings toward her past dorm-mates are certainly strong. According to John McDermott her feelings are a result of experiencing what he terms the "laying-on of culture."[4] Sennett and Cobb explain that working-class students are often

> made to feel inadequate by a "laying-on of culture" practiced in college by their teachers and the more privileged students - a process that causes people to feel inadequate...by subjecting them to an unfamiliar set of rules in a game where respect is the prize. (26-27)

This woman's experience with her dormmates and their excitement over tennis matches is an example of "laying-on of culture." Several of the respondents give remarks that show they encountered similar experiences. The communication major says, "I felt like so many people were snobs..." From reading her questionnaire it does not appear she generally had difficulty making friends. But on campus she "felt alone and uncomfortable a lot." She also remarks that she "felt like an alien." This feeling of alienation continued for her throughout her academic career.

The question that asks the respondents about their feelings toward their professors elicits a few comments that reflect alienation. Two of the respondents say they were intimidated or afraid of their professors. A radio and television major, the only black woman in this study says, "initially I was afraid of all professors. After time went on I realized they are people also." Her's and other respondent's feelings of intimidation is certainly directly related to class differences. Working-class children are taught to respect, and almost hold in awe, anyone who is in a position of power. While respecting professors is important for the student/teacher relationship, fearing professors is counterproductive to the student's learning process. The political science major says, "I generally held them in awe and was quite shy and non-assertive. These feelings and attitudes did not change appreciably over time." If a woman student doesn't feel comfortable approaching professors, it is quite possible that her intellectual, academic, and emotional

confidence will remain low. As Sandler and Hall point out informal and formal interaction with professors can help to foster a woman's self-esteem.

During the first three years of my undergraduate work, I was particularly intimidated by professors. I rarely went to their office hours unless absolutely necessary. While I would participate in class, I was too uncomfortable having one on one interaction with my professors. I changed my behavior only because I finally realized it was detrimental to my growth as a student. I literally forced myself to seek professors out, question my grade or ideas that were discussed in class. When I did seek out professors I actually received a lot of positive feedback that helped my self-esteem and made me feel like I "deserved" to be in college. While it isn't a professor's sole responsibility to interact with students, I believe it is partly their responsibility to initiate interaction. Initiating interaction with a working-class woman student can benefit her by sometimes helping her to feel like she belongs on the college campus, that she isn't an unnoticed guest.

By confusing behavior with attitudes I believe I asked questions for this hypothesis which are not always appropriate in eliciting the respondent's feeling of alienation or belonging. I've come to realize that just because a student participates in extra-curriucular activities, this doesn't necessarily mean she feels welcome on the college campus. The real problem lies in framing questions which can gauge feelings of alienation or feelings of belonging. I believe I could have asked different questions, phrased like: How comfortable did you feel on your

college campus? How comfortable were you with interacting with your professors and classmates? These kind of questions might have more effectively elicited the respondents feelings.

The third hypothesis states:

"After surviving the weeding-out process and thus, having been in college for at least two years, the working-class woman student still feels alienated by and from the academic institution."

The questions used to support or refute this hypothesis are:

27) If it is possible, please relate how you see yourself as having changed academically, emotionally, and mentally form your initial experiences of college to your last semester of undergraduate work.

32) Did you ever become involved in a student organization or activity? If so, when and why? If not, why?

The third hypothesis is directly related to the second hypothesis; the only difference is the time factor. It is obvious then that the third hypothesis is refuted. I used the same logic as before - assuming participation equates to a lack of alienation. The same respondents who earlier indicated feelings of alienation also indicated in question 32 that they participated in extra-curricular events throughout their academic career.

The fourth hypothesis deals with the necessity of a support system. It states:

"A network, consisting sometimes of family members, but mostly friends, significant others, a few professors, academic advisors, and women's services serves as a support

system for the working-class woman student."

The questions used to support or refute the hypothesis are:

24) Was there a professor who was especially supportive or non-supportive during your undergraduate studies? If so, please relate your experience.

33) During your initial experience of college did you have any friends who were supportive or encouraging? If so, please explain what your relationship was like with them. For instance: Were they friends you knew before college? Or did you meet them at school? Did they have a similar background as yours?

34) During your undergraduate studies did you ever have what you consider a support system? If so, please describe that support system, who it was made up of, and what it meant to you.

35) At the school you attended were there any student services available specifically for women? If so, did you use them? If you did, when and why? If you did not, why?

The responses to these question indicate a strong confirmation of the hypothesis. All but one respondent say they had what they consider a support system. This support system was made up of close friends, significant others, professors, a few advisors, and sometimes when available women's services.

The respondents indicate they had at least one supportive professor who made a lasting impression on them. It really is not remarkable that all the women have come into contact with a professor who was especially supportive and thus memorable. Most former college students could reflect on a particular professor who was influential during their college careers. The important point some of these women make is how a professor's support affected their self-esteem. I believe a professor's support is crucial for working-class women who enter the academic environment without a frame of reference for what they are about

to encounter. Not having this frame of reference can probably lead to plaguing self-doubts for the first generation, working-class woman. Many of the women I questioned indicate they had difficulty believing in their intellectual capabilities. While a few women mention that supportive professors helped them by writing letters of recommendation and other tangible actions, most of the women emphasize how the professor affected the way they felt about themselves. For instance, the psychology student says this about a Women's Studies professor: "She was very free with positive feedback. Which did wonders for my self-esteem." The english student as a child dreamed "obsessively" about attending a particular highly respected university and was strongly influenced by the support of her junior college literature instructor. In her words, "he encouraged me not to give up the ... dream." The professor even went so far as react strongly when the respondent dropped out of junior college. She says, "when I dropped out, he wrote my father to deplore my action and to enlist my father's help." It took this woman "more than ten years to get there" but she eventually realized her dream and attended that particular university. On that campus she met another professor who was especially supportive. She says her history instructor "was very encouraging and really boosted my confidence." The music major says her flute instructor gave her "positive support" and "really kept" her "going". The radio and television major explains that when she was having difficulty in her spanish class, "my professor was really helpful and understanding. He even told me to stop trying

to study when I don't feel into the study mood. 'Just give yourself some time and things will come back to you' was one of his best lines." He eventually left her college and she expresses how much she would like for him to return "because he was a great professor."

These comments reflect how beneficial the affirming model can be to working-class women students.[5] Previously, I discussed the detrimental effects of the doubting model on women students. I strongly believe the affirming model can have long-term, important benefits. For instance, in the case of the pyschology major, the encouragement, support, and affirmation of professors directly influenced her decision to go to graduate school. She says she was introduced to a counseling psychology professor who became her advisor. "He was always very nice and available" when she "needed to talk about psychology and grad school." He offered to write her letters of recommendation, but more importantly, he gave her "a lot of support and information." The Women's Studies professor previously mentioned also encouraged her to go to graduate school. She says, "both [professors] just helped me to believe in myself and my ability to go to grad school." Her account is a testament to the important role professors can play in having a positive influence on working-class women students.

A supportive professor can influence a working-class student both academically and emotionally. This kind of support is especially significant when considering the work of Elaine H. El-Khawas. In her study, she finds women undergraduates exhibit less confidence toward their preparation for graduate school than

their male counterparts (7-8). Furthermore, Alexander W. Austin finds that women students actually experience a decline in their academic and career aspirations during their undergraduate years (114,129). The support of professors like the psychology student experienced may contribute significantly in moderating a woman student's self-doubts. In this particular case, the supportive guidance influenced her future educational goals.

All of the women who went to a school that offered student services directed specifically to women eventually used those services. While the women did not indicate these services were their primary source of support, they did suggest that just the existence of these services provided a sense of assurance. The radio and television major actually entered college with the help and guidance of a student services called Special Services. She says:

> Special Services was a support group for handicapped students, first generation students, and financially depressed students. This program introduced me to ... [her university] and new friends. If it wasn't for Special Services I doubt I would have made it through my 1st year. Special Services was federally funded so it was killed by Ron Reagan [sic].

Her account is a testament of the need and benefits of student services aimed at first generation, working-class students. Special Services had a twofold effect on her. First, it introduced her to the college environment giving her support and guidance. Second, it allowed her to make friends who are also

first generation, working-class students.

One of the interesting findings from the questions about a support system is that some of the women say their support system was made up of friends who were also working-class. The music major says, "I really feel it was our similiar backgrounds that drew" her friend and her together. But most of the women indicate that while their friends were their primary source of support, some also add that their friends were not working-class. The biology major says this her about close and supportive friends, "my college friends did not have a background similar to mine (no one did that I knew of - a few folks who were farmers' daughters came the closest)." By adding that their friends were different from them, the respondents remarks left me feeling like they were always aware that their friends weren't working-class, and that they felt working-class friends were missing from their support system. Because class is a characteristic which can't easily be identified, it is often difficult for working-class women students to find other working-class women students. Finding other working-class students is important; otherwise these women probably would not have added that their friends were not working-class. This is where a student services like the radio and television student's Special Services can be so helpful for a working-class student. Through a service like this one, a working-class woman can be introduced to other working-class women. Her experiences as a first generation, working-class woman student can be validated by other students who are similar to her.

Almost all of the women did not include their family members

as sources of support. The exception to this is the radio and telivision major. She remarks several times that her parents are behind her "all the way." While one respondent's remarks do not substantiate this claim, it may be possible that ethnic working-class parents are more likely to be supportive of their children going to college. On the whole, a parent's support is rarely mentioned. The music student indicates her mother's support was not the kind she needed anyway. She says:

> I talked to my mother at home a lot but she did not give the same kind of support. Whenever I felt hopeless, she would ask if I wanted to come home! I did not like that idea and therefore picked myself back up and went on.

For some reason the music student's mother was not able to give her the encouraging support she needed. It is actually questionable as to whether her mother's reaction was really supportive. In one sense the mother's comment can be seen as feeding into the student's already existing self-doubts rather than encouraging her endeavors. Parent's reactions to their daughters educational pursuits will be discussed further next.

The final hypothesis states:

"During her undergraduate studies and afterward, the working-class woman student experiences a sense of alienation by and from her family."

The questions that address this hypothesis are:

21) What was your relationship with your family members like before entering college? Did your relationship change over time? If so, when did it change and what do you attribute the change to?

40) How did your family react to your educational pursuit and/or your successful completion of your degree?

The information the respondents provide confirm the hypothesis. The majority of the women experienced a sense of estrangement and alienation from and by their families. For most of the respondents the change was gradual beginning with their entrance into college and worsening and they progressed. Some of the respondents were close to their family members before entering school and then experienced a change in the relationship during school. Others were not particular close to their family members anyway, so the relationship further deteriorated.

This is not to say that parents of working-class women students do not take pride in their daughters' accomplishments. Most of the respondents indicate that upon their successful completion of the undergraduate degree, their parents exhibited pride in them. The psychology student seems surprised when she recalls, "my parents actually had a small graduation party for me afterward." The communication major directly acknowledges her suprise. She says, "After I graduated I made a visit home. My mother told me she was proud of me and gave me $100. I was very surprised."

These women express surprise about their parents obvious show of pride because their parents have for the most part been unsupportive through their daughter's undergraduate years. Some of the respondents' parents are resentful or intimidated by their daughters. Repeatedly the respondents remark that on one hand their parents are very proud of them, but on the other their

parents began to treat them rather differently. The biology major says, "I know my father is quite proud of me...But as I acquired more and more education, my parents - and to a greater extent - my extended family...seemed somewhat suspicious of me and awkward around me..." The psychology student, whose parents threw her a graduation party, says she thinks her mother resents her. The political science student's parents seem to hide their true feelings behind more acceptable ones. She says when she finished her undergraduate degree, her parents were "proud but skeptical of its true worth." Her "brothers gloated when" she "did not get a great paying job." It appears underneath the skepticism is resentment. Otherwise her brothers would have been sympathetic when she didn't get a well paying job. Other women express similar experiences. The music major says about her father, "I feel he respects me more and sometimes I feel he fears me because he thinks I know alot [sic] from going to college." Her father's reaction is similar to Frank Rissaro's in Sennett and Cobb's study.

The respondents view this change as occurring not only because they have attained formal education, but because higher education has changed them. Many acknowledge their attitudes and beliefs either changed in college or they grew more adamant in their already existing beliefs. The pychology student says her viewpoints are drastically different from her family's. "I think, too, that my Mom sometimes has a hard time with my feminism; I think there's a mixture of feeling envy, respect and anger." The problem seems to lie in the fact that two different worlds begin to clash. The parents still hold on to their

traditional values (and rightfully so) while the daughters embrace new values. Both groups have difficulty accepting the other's values. For instance the biology student says:

> As I progressed through school, my interests changed somewhat... I came to like classical music - and some of those interests just set me apart from my family. My father would call attention to this by saying I was becoming "high falootin" or "a snob"....

It was not just that her interests changed though, but her beliefs became more pronounced.

> I had always been liberal politically... However, after several years of college I became even more liberal and this made my father very uncomfortable. He referred to me several times as the family's "jew and nigger lover" - even introduced me once that way to a friend of his.

She explains her father's behavior is a result of him being a like the character, Archie Bunker.

Some of the respondents take part of the responsibility for the alienation they experienced. They acknowledge they also alienated their family members by becoming very verbal in their beliefs or being intolerant of their parents and siblings. They also give excuses to justify their parent's feelings toward them. The psychology student whose mother has problems with her feminism says: "I thinks she feels threatened by me and my education, mainly because she didn't graduate from high school and really sees herself as stupid..." In this way, the women can forgive their parents. At the same time, they understand their

parent's feelings. Unlike what their parents might think, some of them have not went to college and embraced middle class ideals. Many of them are still firmly rooted in their sense of being working-class. They understand and are sympathetic to the plight of the working-class because they too experience the same difficulties. They take pride in being working-class - for they realize an education does not necessarily mean acceptance into the middle classes. As the communication major explains, "working-class is knowing where you came from and never forgetting it." And many of them express dislike for middle class customs and values. They probably would not want to join the ranks of the middle class even if they were invited. I am sure many struggle daily with being a working-class woman trying to participate and succeed in a middle class environment. For example, the psychology major, who is doing her doctorate work now, finds herself constantly questioning and challenging the traditional psychological methods and models she is being taught in graduate school. She realizes many of them are created in the minds of middle class scholars who have little understanding of working-class beliefs and values. She finds some of the methods and models particularly biased against working-class people. And she wonders why she is working toward a Ph.D. in a field which is so often oblivious to the diversity of people in this country. Although she is very successful, she also realizes success doesn't change who she is, and hence, where she came from. Getting a Ph.D. will mean she is a working-class doctor of philosophy; she will never be a middle class doctor of philosophy. Maybe that is why the respondent who majored in

communication is reluctant to go to graduate school. She is a working-class woman who questions middle class values. She says:

> "I still feel at odds with the academic world and all its values on intellectualism. I have trouble with a society that grants so much power and authority to many with college degrees (and money) when lessons learned from life are given such little merit. I struggle with the idea of pursuing a higher degree partly because of the academic world and my inability to completely embrace it."

As long as this society refuses to acknowledge that it is stratified, and until upward mobility is recognized as a myth, and the distribution of power in this country is granted equally, these women will continue to struggle with their class statuses.

Summary

This study is intended to explicate the experiences of eight first generation, working-class women students. I examined how a first generation, working-class woman chooses the initial college she will attend. For the most part she decides on the particular school solely on her own. Her parents have little, if any, control in the decision-making process. The working-class woman generally must place great emphasis on the costs of tuition and fees, her ability to secure scholarships and financial aid, and how close the school is to her home. Many of the women indicate they felt alienated by the academic institution. They build a network consisting of friends, significant others, professors, some advisors but rarely parents. The network serves

as a support system for the working-class woman student. During her undergraduate years and afterward, the woman experiences alienation from and by her family. This reciprocal process includes clashing of new values with old values.

Limitations

By interviewing these women after they had completed their degree, I had to depend on the accuracy of their reflective capabilities. As with any study which relies on retrospection, the participants' memories are always in question. Most respondents tell the truth but the passing of time distorts actual events. The biology major who became a professor and research explains it well. She cautions me when she says,

> in some ways, it's been hard for me to separate out insights I actually had during my college years from conclusions I drew later... it's difficult to separate (and even remember) what I thought <u>then</u> from what I know and think with the vantage point I have <u>now</u>.

This is a legitimate drawback with a retrospective study. The problem is with qualitative research studies there are few feasible options. Longitudinal studies usually require years of time and much financial investment. I think there is a benefit to using open-ended questionnaires in a retrospective study. In a verbal interview the respondent is asked a question and must soon respond. The researcher probably isn't rushing the participant, but the researcher is physically there waiting for a reply. The participant has more time with a questionnaire, and the researcher is not even present. The respondent can think about

the question for as long as s/he wants. S/he has more time to separate between fact and fiction, between what really happened and what s/he likes to think happened.

There are drawbacks to the questionnaire format. Many people find it difficult to express their thoughts in writing. They are more verbally orientated. I faced the problem of writing specific questions that couldn't be elaborated on when necessary. I also could not further explore the respondents' answers. What they wrote on the questionnaire is what I analyzed.

I have been taught to be critical of studies which don't use a large "subject pool". Ordinarily I might criticize a study which only uses eight respondents. But many "subject pools" in research studies are too small. Why invalidate these women's lived experiences because there was not enough of them? The data they provided was rich and quite extensive. What they told me in their questionnaires was what they experienced as first generation, working-class women students. Throughout the study I stuggled with trying not to over-generalize the respondents' experiences - not because there were only eight women involved - but because each woman has an individual, unique experience. Each woman is the exception to the rule in her family. Therefore, I have tried to allow each respondent's voice to be heard.

I have tried in this study to also include the voices of working-class women who are women of color. When the working-class woman of color responses differed dramatically from the white women's responses, I noted it. This study mainly focuses on gender and class. I have tried to illustrate how women of color are effected because of their ethnicity in academia. But

as Baca Zinn, Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Bonnie Thorton Dill state, it is "difficult to delineate the ways that classism excludes...women of color who are from the working-class" (294). When the compounding variables of class and ethnicity combine, it is difficult to determine which factor is having the detrimental effect. A woman often faces discrimination because of a combination of both factors, not just her ethnicity and not just her class position. I have chosen to focus on class in this study and have usually refrained from discussing class and ethnicity. Not all of the respondents in this study are heterosexual either. Therefore, I have also not considered how lesbianism combines with class.

Future Avenues of Research

This study should indicate the need for scholarly research on first generation, working-class women students and on working-class women in general. Specifically there is a necessity for longitudinal studies that could trace first generation, working-class women students' experiences during college. Also there is a strong need for studies which examine the combination of ethnicity, class and gender. How these three factors combine and compound one another have rarely been examined.

Other areas which need to be studied are important for college and university policies. As discussed earlier in this study, a student services office was quite beneficial and effective for one working-class respondent. Unfortunately, education is currently being hit hard by budget cuts. On

universities, usually the first areas to be eliminated are services that specifically deal with special groups of students. Student services do not always have to be federally funded to exist though. There are always alternative forms of funding available, for instance, using a portion of students' fees to begin and maintain a first generation support service is an option. It really is a question of the universities commitment to people who have diverse needs.

Institutionalized discrimination is usually subtle but rampant on most college campuses. For instance, most universities state in the financial assistance section of their handbooks that their philosophy toward financial aid is: It is primarily the responsibility of the parents and/or student to finance the costs of an education. A philosophy of this nature institutionally discriminates against working-class people. In most middle class families, the parents are able and willing to financially invest in their child's education. In fact, they view their child's educational pursuit as an investment. Working-class parents usually can not afford to even contribute to their child's education. When they can, they often won't because they hold a different set of values than middle class people. Working-class parents believe it is their child's responsibility to fund an education. How can a working-class student be expected to pay for her or his own education? Their parents and educational institutions expect them too, though. As a result, working-class students have an unequal chance of attaining a formal education. Many institutions would probably argue that there is federally funded types of aid for

disadvantaged students. While this may be true, aid is becoming very difficult to obtain and rarely is enough. A working-class student will eventually pay more for the same college education that a middle class person receives because s/he will have to take out more federally funded loans. Offering college workstudy and paying minimum wage to students is not committing to giving disadvantaged students an equal chance, either. It is difficult to believe that one university handbook actually boasts of having employed over 5,000 students in one year. Paying 5,000 students $3.35 an hour means this university has acquired a cheap labor force.

These are the obvious and most desperately needed ways a university can be sensitive to working-class people's needs. There are other ways that are just as vital. One such area is faculty awareness of their students diversity and divergent needs. Faculty can play a major role in fostering a student's educational pursuit. By being sensitive to the needs of working-class women, ethnic women, and women in general, faculty can interact with these students in a beneficial manner. They can confirm their women students and validate their feelings. Employing teaching methods such as the affirming model can improve their teaching techniques. All of these different ideas can be taught in a consciousness raising workshop for faculty. It is up to each university to commit themselves to offering a fair and equal education to all people, regardless of race, class, or gender, and to provide a campus which welcomes and seeks to understand the needs of these people.

The field of class research is abundant in opportunities. Scholarly work could provide validation for so many women who feel isolated and alone in their experiences. At the least, I hope this study can provide validation for the eight first generation, working-class woman who shared their stories and made this study possible.

Appendix A

1. Did you grow up in a neighborhood? If so, where was it?

2. What were the socio-economic backgrounds of your neighbors?

3. If you did not grow up in a neighborhood, what kind of area did you grow up in?

4. What kind of income-earning work did your parents do?

5. Did you have any brothers or sisters? If so, how many?

6. What were you in relation to them? Oldest, youngest, middle child?

7. Please list your immediate family members and how much education they received. (Please include yourself. It is also not necessary to use actual names, just their relation to you. For example: Mother - High School graduate, Step-father - Ninth grade.)

8. What were your parents' attitudes about secondary education? (Grade school and high school)

9. What were your parents associations/attitudes toward higher education?

10. Why did you decide to go to college?

11. Why did you decide to go to a four year university? (Please give all deciding factors.)

12. How much imput/control did you have in the decision to go to college?

13. How much imput/control did your parents, siblings, friends, or acquaintances (such as guidance counselors) have in the decision?

14. What college(s) did you attend and where was it in relation to your home?

15. Why did you decide on that particular school?

16. Had you ever been on a college campus before you entered school? If so, how often and what for?

17. Did you visit the campus of the college you eventually went to before attending?

18. If you did, did your parents, siblings, or friends visit the campus with you?

19. Did you go to "new student" orientation? If you did not, why? If you did, why? Describe your experience. (Please answer but not limit yourself to these kind of questions: Were you alone? How did you feel?)

21. What was your relationship with your family members like before entering college? Did your relationship with them change over time? If so, when did it change and what do you attribute the change to?

22. What were your initial feelings and attitudes about your classmates? Did those feelings and attitudes change over time? If so, when and why?

23. What were your initial feelings and attitudes about your professors? Did your feelings and attitudes about your professors change over time? If so, when and why?

24. Was there a professor who was especially supportive or non-supportive during your undergraduate studies? If so, please relate your experience.

25. Initially how did you do in terms of grades? Did your initial grades remain the same or did they change over time? If they improved or declined, when and what do you attribute the improval or decline to?

26. What were your initial feelings about success and failure? Did those feelings change? If so, when and why?

27. If it is possible, please relate how you see yourself as having changed academically, emotionally and mentally from your initial experiences of college to your last semester of undergraduate work.

28. Where did you live initially and why did you live there?

29. If you lived in the dorms, did you participate in dorm activities? If you participated, why? If you did not participate, why?

30. Did you initially become a member or become involved in a student organization or activity? If you did, please describe the organization or activity and why/how you became involved in it.

31. If you did not initially become involved in a student organization or activity, is there a particular reason why you did not?

32. Did you ever become involved in a student organization or activity? If so, when and why? If not, why?

33. During your initial experience of college did you have any friends who were supportive or encouraging? If so, please explain what your relationship was like with them. For instance: Were they friends you knew before college? Or did you meet them at school? Did they have a similar background as yours?

34. During your undergraduate studies did you ever have what you consider a support system? If so, please describe that support system, who it was made up of, and what it meant to you.

35. At the school you attended were there any student services available specifically for women? If so, did you use them? If you did when and why? If you did not, why?

36. How and when did you choose a major? Why that particular major?

37. During school, did you work? If so, how often and how many jobs during one semester?

38. If you worked, did you want to or have to? Why?

39. If you had to work, did your work ever interfere with your studies? If so, how and why?

40. How did your family react to your educational pursuit and/or your successful completion of your undergraduate degree?

41. How do you define "working-class"?

42. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked? Do you have any questions or additional comments?

Notes

1
See Ron Chernow's "Grey Flannel Goons: The Latest in Union Busting."

2
Southern Illinois University, for example, claims to have the lowest tuition and fees costs for a four year university in the state of Illinois. I have many times been informed by professors at SIU that the university has a high enrollment of working-class students. I would not, however, agree with one professor's comment that SIU is a working-class school - a high enrollemnt of working-class students does not necessarily equate into a working-class school. Factors such as total enrollment of middle class students versus the numbers of working-class students enrolled, and the class status of professors must be taken into account. As Ryan, Jake and Sackery point out most professors come from middle class homes (76). Southern Illinois Univerity's higher than normal enrollment of working-class students may be partly attributed to its lower tuition and fee costs. Hence many working-class students transfer from local, community colleges to SIU.

3
Also see Nadya Aisenberg, and Mona Harrington's Women of Academe. University of Massachuset Press: Amherst, 1988.

4
See John Mcdermott, "The Laying on of Culture," The Nation, vol. 208, no. 10 (March 10, 1969).

5
See Nadya Aisenberg, and Mona Harrington's Women of Academe. University of Massachuset Press: Amherst, 1988.

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