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**Narratives of Interdependence and Independence:
The Role of Social Class and Family Relationships in
Where High-Achieving Students Apply to College**

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Research demonstrates that social class shapes where high-achieving students apply to college. Based on 45 in-depth interviews with high-achieving students in the Bay Area, I find that higher-SES students are more likely to apply to out-of-state public and private universities, especially liberal arts and Ivy League colleges. I argue that the upbringing and experiences associated with students' social classes shape their narratives regarding how much autonomy or constraints they perceive in making decisions about their choices of college. In discussing their upbringing and their future, higher-SES students present a narrative of independence about what they have done to prepare themselves for college and where to apply. In contrast, lower-SES students speak of experiences and considerations that reflect a narrative of interdependence between themselves and their parents that is grounded in the mutual concern they have for one another as the prospect of college looms. As a result, higher-SES students frame college as an opportunity to leave their families and immerse themselves in an environment far from home while lower-SES students understand college as a continuation of family interdependence. Consequently, higher-SES students are more likely to apply to public and selective private universities in other parts of the country, while lower-SES students tend to limit their choices to colleges – both selective and nonselective – closer to home. This study draws attention to the social and cultural context of decision making among youth.

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Introduction

Higher education destination continues to be a significant source of stratification in the United States (Ayalon et al. 2008). Where students go to college matters as much as whether or not they go (Gladieux 2004). Social class affects where students begin college and their chances of completing a degree. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are far less likely than other students to enter highly selective colleges and universities (Hoxby and Avery 2012; Hill and Winston 2006). They are more likely to enroll in public community colleges, a starting point from which the prospect for earning a bachelor's degree is low (McPherson and Shapiro 2006; Ayalon et al. 2008). While attendance at community colleges and nonselective higher education institutions is linked with students' inability to finish college, matriculation at a college of high quality is credited with easing students' passage through the system of higher education itself. (Bowen and Bok 2000). Graduates of selective colleges are more likely to attend graduate school, more likely to receive a graduate or professional degree, and more likely to attend a high-prestige graduate school (Bowen and Bok 2000). It is clear that where students attend college has tremendous implications for educational and occupational outcomes and overall stratification.

Given the importance of attending selective colleges for completion and post-graduate opportunities, it is important to understand how students end up at these institutions. Research studies on higher education consistently point to the significance of social class in shaping where highly qualified high school students attend college: high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to end up at less selective institutions compared to their higher income counterparts with similar academic qualifications (McPherson and Schapiro 2006; Hoxby and Avery 2012; Hill and Winston 2006). Individuals whose parents graduated from college are five times as likely to enter elite baccalaureate institutions as individuals whose

parents graduated from high school, all else being equal (Ayalon et al. 2008). There is a larger share of low-income, high ability students in the national population (13%) than in the student bodies of selective private colleges (10%) (Hill and Winston 2006).

A major reason for social class differences in access to selective colleges is that few highly able, low-income students actually apply to such institutions in the first place (Radford 2013; Hoxby and Avery 2012). Drawing upon data of all students who took the SATs from one particular year, Hoxby and Avery (2012) find that the vast majority of high achieving students who are low-income did not apply to any selective college or university. Similarly, Radford (2013) reveals that social class strongly shapes how students go about identifying colleges, and students from less affluent schools are less likely than their affluent peers to apply to selective institutions. Why are low-income, high-achieving students less likely to apply to selective institutions? How does social class shape where high-achieving students decide to apply? How do family, school, and other factors shape students' understandings of what colleges are appropriate for them?

To examine how social class shapes where high-achieving students apply to college, I compared the processes used by high-achieving students from different social class backgrounds in the Bay Area when deciding where to submit college applications. Based on 45 in-depth interviews, I found that lower-SES students tend to apply to in-state colleges, specifically California State Universities (CSUs) and University of California campuses (UCs), and a couple of in-state private universities. Higher-SES students applied to in-state colleges as well, but they also submitted applications to out-of-state universities, especially Ivy League and liberal arts colleges. My findings show that while social class does not affect the decision to apply to

selective colleges, since many of the UCs are considered selective colleges, it does shape whether students apply to out-of-state colleges.

By examining the processes by which social class shapes college application choices, I show that part of the explanation for social class differences in application to out-of-state universities can be found in how much autonomy students perceive they have over their decision-making. When discussing their decision-making processes, higher-SES students present a narrative of independence regarding what they have done to prepare for college and where to apply. They emphasize aspects of their upbringing and experiences that demonstrate how they exercise initiative in making decisions about what activities they should participate in. They downplay the influence of their parents in making these decisions, and they see themselves as individuals who are autonomous in choosing their directions and college options.

In contrast, lower-SES students speak of experiences and considerations that reflect a narrative of interdependence between themselves and their parents that is grounded in the mutual concern that they have for one another as the prospect of college looms. Lower-SES students recognize the struggles their parents have had to overcome and they develop a sense of responsibility for their parents. Some students have assumed family responsibilities throughout high school. Others have parents who press them to consider attending only those colleges near home. These factors reinforce this narrative of interdependence and the belief that the fate of students and parents are intertwined. Consequently, for lower-SES students the decision of where to attend college is saturated with concerns for their family's well-being.

These narratives show that students make decisions about where to attend college not in a vacuum, but based in part on the social class-based experiences they bring to bear in the decision-making process. Social class experiences shape how students perceive higher education,

and higher-SES students are making decisions about a conception of college that is different from that of lower-SES students. Whereas higher-SES students frame college as an opportunity to separate from their families and begin anew in an environment far from home, lower-SES students understand college as a continuance of mutual family interdependence. As a consequence, higher-SES students are more likely to apply to public and selective private universities in other parts of the country, while lower-SES students tend to limit their choices to colleges – both selective and nonselective – closer to home.

Literature Review

While most of the research on social class differences in college application among high-achieving students has emphasized access to information as being a critical piece of the explanation, other research reveals that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face other constraints in the process of applying to college. Rational choice has been the prevailing framework used to explain why low-income, high achieving students are less likely to apply to selective institutions. This framework represents high school students as individuals choosing among different educational options on the basis of an evaluation of these options' costs and benefits (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Brand and Xie 2010; Beattie 2002). Rational choice explanations for why low-income, high achieving students are less likely to apply to selective institutions primarily center on the lack of two types of information: information about the different quality of colleges and information about the financial costs and financial aid of these institutions (Plank and Jordan 2001; Smith, Pender, and Howell 2013; Radford 2013). College quality information refers to knowledge about the different types of colleges available, knowledge about one's own ability relative to other college students, and knowledge about the

consequences of attending colleges of different quality (Dillon and Smith 2013). Financial information consists of knowledge about the costs of different colleges and the availability of financial aid at these colleges that would help offset their high sticker prices (Hoxby and Avery 2012).

While the rational choice perspective has advanced our understanding of the crucial role that access to information plays in relegating low-income, high-achieving students to less-selective colleges, it has not adequately addressed how social class affects students' decision-making when choosing colleges. Identifying differences in access to information among students based on social class and emphasizing this difference as the crucial factor ignores how such information actually figures into the decision-making of these students. For instance, how do students come to their understandings or interpretations of college based on the information they have? How do their experiences shape these understandings? By conceptualizing decision making as primarily an individual endeavor, rational choice explanations overlook how students are embedded in social or cultural contexts that may make some choices more likely and others less likely.

Indeed, research on social class differences in parenting as well as those on college choice decision-making point to the multiple ways that social class can shape college choices over and beyond information. Understandings of what it means to go to college and how much choice students have about where they can go have been linked to students' upbringing and experiences. Rosenbaum and Naffziger (2011) argue that disadvantaged students need not only information about colleges, but also specific cultural capital—the subtle, taken-for-granted understandings and skills needed to apply to college. These understandings are not just about information. Rather, they are about meaning and value, which are closely tied to access and

opportunity. For many middle-class students, part of the meaning of college is to live on their own away from their parents (Rosenbaum and Naffziger 2011: 18).

Whereas the upbringing and experiences of poor and working-class students tend to result in an emerging sense of constraint and obligation to one's parents, the experiences and upbringing of middle and upper-middle class youth lead to a greater sense of choice and autonomy. For instance, Kohn (1959; 1963; Kohn and Schooler 1983) finds that middle class parents value characteristics in their children that reflect an emphasis on self-direction, whereas working class parents stress conformity to external authority. This can be seen in the interactions children have with their parents and with outside institutions. For example, Lareau (2002) observed that interactions between working-class parents and children often consist of parents issuing directives and commands to their children. These interactions are more likely to instill a sense of powerlessness and frustration in children when dealing with professionals and institutions. In contrast, middle class children are often encouraged to speak up about their thoughts and feelings with their parents as well as with professionals. This leads to what Lareau (2002) calls a sense of entitlement in which students feel they have the ability to manipulate situations to suit their preferences.

Among middle class children, parents' emphasis on drawing out children's thoughts, feelings, and interests, particularly in the selection of activities, leads to parents instilling self-direction in their children. Chin and Phillips (2004) find that children of middle-class parents lead highly structured lives centered on activities that are customized according to the needs and interests of the children. Lareau and Weininger (2010) find that in the day-to-day business of childrearing, middle class parents tend to stress the importance of self-direction. Middle class parents place children in situations in which they must make decisions and then prod them to

provide justifications. Middle-class parents also tend to use leisure activities to promote children's nascent sense of curiosity and self-control.

Low-income children are likely to be bogged down by constraints such as family obligations. Several studies have found that a strong obligation to assist the family can involve responsibilities and activities that compromise the ability of young adults to pursue postsecondary schooling (Fuligni and Pedersen, 2002; Desmond and Turley, 2009). Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam (1999) and Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) found that young adults who believed in the importance of assisting their parents and siblings were more likely to live with their parents and contribute financially to their families. This, however, required these individuals to put work ahead of schooling in order to provide for the family. In a study of a poor African American community, Stack (1974) showed that African American families depended on patterns of co-residence and kinship-based exchange networks for survival. This means of survival, however, demanded the sacrifice of upward mobility and geographic movement because of structural constraints. These studies point to the need to examine other aspects of social class such as family relationships to better understand social class differences in college applications.

Research specifically on college choices among low-income students demonstrates the relevance of such constraints. Desmond and Turley (2009) examined the influence of a high school senior's preference to live at home while in college, a proxy for students' ties with their families, on their college application patterns. They found that, net of other factors, students who indicated that it is important to stay at home during college are less likely to apply to college, especially to selective institutions. Moreover, Turley (2009) found that some parents are locally oriented, preferring their children to live at home while in college and therefore consider only

options close to home, while other parents are globally oriented, open to the consideration of more distant options. College-at-home parents are most likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged relative to college-anywhere parents.

To summarize, research specifically on the topic of social class differences in where high-achieving students apply to college has primarily drawn upon a rational choice framework that emphasizes the importance of information. This approach overlooks the multiple ways that social class influences how students decide where to apply to college as evidenced by the research on how social class shapes the upbringing and experiences of students. In this study, I examine the college choices of high-achieving students from lower- and higher-SES backgrounds by paying particular attention to how social class-based experiences and especially family relationships inform students' understandings of higher education and appropriate colleges.

Culture and Cognition Framework: Narratives

My study draws upon a culture and cognition framework to examine the processes by which high-achieving students from different social class backgrounds in the Bay Area decide where to apply to college. A culture and cognition framework shifts the focus to the shared categories and classification systems individuals utilize to perceive and make sense of their environment (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). This perspective contends that how people behave is more an issue of how they perceive the world and act upon those perceptions. According to this framework, people from different structural positions attach different meanings to the same phenomenon, which then leads them to act in different ways in response. Cultural processes operate not only at the level of individual cognition, but also inter-subjectively,

through shared scripts and cultural structures, such as “frames,” “narratives,” and “cultural repertoires” (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014).

I specifically draw upon the concept of narratives to examine one aspect of how social class shapes where high-achieving students apply to college. As shared cultural scripts that shape how people interpret their social world, narratives are stories with a “causally-linked sequence of events” (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). Narratives are stories people tell that express how they make sense of their lives. Narratives consist of three elements (Ewick and Silbey 2003). First, a narrative relies on some form of selective appropriation of past events and characters. Second, within a narrative the events must be temporally ordered. This quality of narrative requires that the selected events be presented with a beginning, middle, and an end. Third, the events and characters must be related to one another and to some over-arching structure, often to an opposition or struggle. The temporal and structural ordering ensure both “narrative closure” and “narrative causality,” which is an account about how and why the events occurred as they did.

Narratives provide an account of how individuals view themselves in relation to others (Abelmann 1997; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). They affect one’s action because individuals choose actions that are consistent with their personal narratives. People act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives—however fragmented, contradictory, or partial (Somers 1994). As Lamont and Small (2008) write that the narrative perspective shows “that action is not an automatic response to incentive: it is made possible within the context of narratives around which people make sense of their lives” (84). A narrative approach assumes that social action can only be intelligible if we recognize that people are guided to act by the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded

and by the stories through which they constitute their identities (Somers 1994). Analysis of narratives can contribute to a better understanding of college-choice decision-making by highlighting how students' decisions reflect the narratives they have about themselves and the social world.

Method

This project is based on 45 in-depth interviews with high-achieving students in their senior year in high school. I define high-achieving students as those with GPAs above 3.7 and combined verbal and math SAT scores above 1260 or ACT scores above 27. Interviews allowed me to gather detailed accounts about how each student moved through the college application process. Students were asked questions that revolved around the following themes: individual and family approach to higher education, exploration of colleges, preparation for college, and application to colleges.

Twenty-three of these research participants were categorized as lower-SES and twenty-two were categorized as higher-SES. Lower-SES students were students whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree and were not working in a professional occupation. Students who participated in college preparation programs for low-income students were also categorized as lower-SES. Higher-SES students were those students for whom at least one parent has a bachelor's degree or higher and was working in a professional occupation. Among the lower-SES sample, there were three African Americans, fifteen Asian Americans, and five Hispanics. For the higher-SES sample, there was one was Latino, eleven Asian Americans, eight whites, and two multi-racial students. There were more females than males in each SES group.

Students in this study were recruited from several cities located in the East Bay of the Bay Area. The Bay Area is unique because of its proximity to two highly selective colleges, Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley. Moreover, it is a large urban area that has access to a multitude of college resources. Indeed, research has established that students from larger urban areas are more likely to apply to selective colleges than their peers from smaller urban or rural areas (Radford 2013; Hoxby and Avery 2012; Smith, Pender, and Howell 2013 Karabel and Astin 1975).¹

To analyze my data, I first transcribed the interviews. Then I selected six interview transcripts, representing students from both SES groups, for a detailed analysis. I then coded these six transcripts and identified main themes. Next, I applied the codes and themes from these interviews to the other interview transcripts, and I made sure to avoid trying to fit all interview responses into the themes identified in the initial six interviews. After new codes and themes emerged in later transcripts, I went back and applied them to the earlier transcripts. Based on this process, I identified themes around how schools, families, and programs shaped how students understood what colleges are appropriate to them. In this paper, I focus primarily on how social class influences students' understandings of college and their college application decision-making. Race and gender did affect what aspects of the narratives student emphasize in their stories, but it did not alter the fact that most lower-SES students presented a narrative of interdependence and higher-SES students expressed a narrative of independence.

¹ In subsequent research, I aim to look at the influence of region in the college decision-making process by comparing the experiences of Bay Area students with those from the Central Valley, an area that lacks much of the college resources and infrastructure available to students in the Bay Area.

Findings

My analysis of interview data reveals that social class experiences shape how students perceive higher education such that higher-SES students hold a conception of college that is different from that of lower-SES students, and these different conceptions influence students' decision-making around where to apply to college. Adopting narratives of interdependence or independence, students chose to present stories to answer questions about who they are and where they are heading. Lower-SES students spoke about dealing with family struggles and structural constraints, whereas higher-SES students told stories of how their parents set them up to make decisions about what they want to do growing up. Students were not just speaking about a single point in time. They referenced their experiences and upbringing during childhood, throughout middle and high school, and up to the point when they decided where to apply to college. They presented their stories in chronological order to demonstrate how prior experiences impacted their decision-making, and they ended their narratives by reflecting on how the events in their lives were related to one another and why they made the decisions they did about which colleges to apply to within the context of their experiences. Lower-SES students understood their decision as being intimately tied to the experiences of interdependence between themselves and their parents. These students were aware of their parents' struggles to provide for them and, in return, they were motivated to select and attend colleges that would allow them to provide for their family. This focus on interdependence served as a constraint that limited lower-SES students to applying to colleges in California only. In contrast, higher-SES students highlighted the initiative and autonomy they had in their lives, which enabled them to consider applying to colleges across the country.

Narratives of Interdependence Among Lower-SES Students

Lower-SES students recounted stories that reflected what I call a narrative of interdependence. These stories included students' awareness of the sacrifices and struggles of their parents to support the family, students' family responsibilities while in high school, students' anticipation of their role in the health and success of their family in the future, and parental pressures (direct and indirect) for students to stay close to home for college. While not all of these themes came up for every student, some combination of these themes emerged in lower-SES students' discussions about their upbringing and experiences. Due to these experiences, students recognized the importance of mutual support between themselves and their parents in any future success. Consequently, lower-SES students viewed making decisions about college as an undertaking that required taking into account the real and perceived needs and wishes of the family. This framing imposed geographic constraints on many lower-SES students such that they only viewed California schools as viable options.

Interdependence Grounded in Immediate and Anticipatory Family Obligations

Jack² is among those students whose upbringing and family experience reflect a narrative grounded in immediate and anticipatory family obligations. He is the only child of a Chinese immigrant couple. Born in Houston, Jack and his mother moved to California to get away from his gambling-addicted father. From ages seven to ten, Jack lived in China with relatives to be in a safer environment until his mother could help sort out his father's issues. In high school, Jack's father moved back in with the family. Like many lower-SES students, Jack recalled the difficulties the family faced and the struggles his mother had to endure to keep the family together:

² Pseudonyms are used in place of students' actual names.

Those few years were also very difficult because there was still a financial issue in my family. My father didn't work and he couldn't. My mother worked 24 hours, full time, as a caregiver. She worked seven days a week, on holidays. I rarely see her.

During Jack's junior year in high school, his father developed terminal colon cancer, forcing his mother to cut back her work hours to take care of him. Due to their inability to pay rent, they were evicted and Jack had to help his mother find a new place to live. This theme of having to intervene on behalf of his family continued after his father passed away at the conclusion of his junior year. Jack complained about having to make so many decisions on behalf of his mother. While he does view these responsibilities as an inconvenience, he also understands assuming them is something he must do for his mother who raised him:

Jack: Yeah, I really don't like it [family responsibilities]. I know it's partially my responsibility to help her because, as her son, she's helped me as a mother...I help my mom to relieve this guilt of having to take care of me. She works so much and for so long and I respect her for that. I understand it's all for me. I don't like to but I do my best to help her.

Interviewer: Knowing that, how does it make you feel about your own life?

Jack: It gives me a guilt because she's working very hard as an immigrant [and she] doesn't understand English. She's working really hard to support us. I know that she relies on me a lot. Honestly, it is still a major issue weighing on me. What will she do if I go to college? She wants me to go to college. I want to go to college. The issue is I don't know

when I go to college, what will happen to her when she needs me. What if there's important mail or information like legal crap and she doesn't have anyone except me and I'm miles away.

In this excerpt, Jack acknowledges the sacrifices his mother has made for him. He has depended upon her for where he is at in his life. His mother, at the same time, has also relied upon him to keep the family going. This narrative of interdependence, his mother's support of the family and his own contribution to the family, shapes how Jack thinks about his future. The prioritization of his mother's needs in his decision about college is demonstrated in the following exchange when Jack is asked to reflect on the implications of his family responsibilities for his college and career trajectory:

Jack: That's the reason why I didn't apply to colleges out of state. I only applied to colleges in California. Only Stanford, the rest are California public schools. I know it'll be closer and in a sense easier to help my mom than out of state.

Interviewer: Outside of California, [is it] harder to help your mom?

Jack: Yeah, in state, I feel like I'll have a few good friends who will allow me to borrow or drive me back to help my mom out for a bit. Worse comes to worse, I always have this surplus amount of money to buy a ticket home. Out of state is not an option and plane ticket is not an option. I'm going to [certain colleges] for economic reasons.

Interviewer: Are there colleges that you considered but dropped because of these issues?

Jack: I didn't even consider [it]. Why research it if I won't be able to go. Why research it and if I really like it, I really want to go, it would just be worse. So I don't even consider

it. I recognize the possibility so I don't think about it. At most, for entertainment purpose, I looked up Princeton, yeah and Harvard. I heard about them so I'm like what's so great about them. I never thought once that I want to apply or go. It was just there. For entertainment or for comparison with other colleges.

Interviewer: Why not these colleges?

Jack: Not in California basically. If I even had a chance of leaving California, I probably would have taken interest. But I don't.

A narrative of interdependence is clearly evident in how Jack describes his upbringing, experiences, and in how he talks about his decision-making regarding where to apply. He is aware of his mother's struggle to provide him with shelter and opportunities. Moreover, he is responsible for many household obligations. As a result of this awareness and his ongoing family involvement, Jack feels constrained in his decision making about where he can attend college. For Jack, college means a continuance of family relationships and the possibility that he may be called upon to assist his mother while in college. Consequently, he has to confine his college choices to places where he can reach home within drive-able distance. In the end, Jack applied to four UCs, four CSUs, and Stanford, all colleges in California.

Interdependence Grounded in Anticipatory Family Concerns

There are lower-SES students who do not have to actively support or intervene on their parents' behalf while they are in high school. Even with little to no current family obligations, these students still feel tied to their parents' well-being and worry about their family as they ponder their future. These worries about family also constitute narratives of interdependence.

One such student is Carlos, the son of Mexican immigrants. His parents divorced and he lives with his father and brothers. His father works as a construction worker fixing roofs in the area. At times, his father is the only source of income in the family. Recognizing how much his father puts his body through for the family, Carlos seeks to go to college so that his father does not have to endure it much longer: “From my perspective, I should actually get my dad out of what he’s doing to get him a better life.” While Carlos is committed to the idea of becoming the first person in his family to graduate from college, he has concerns about what that means for his family. He does not have family responsibilities, but he depends on his father for moral and social support. Moreover, recognizing how hard his father works, he is concerned about his father’s health while he is away at college. This narrative of interdependence, the belief that children and their parents are connected to the well-being and success of one another, has factored into Carlos’ thought process about where he should attend college:

I feel if I go far away, I’m going to miss my dad. I’m going to miss what he does. My dad cooks. I’m going to miss my dad’s food. I’m going to miss the presence of my dad. Me and my dad, we always laugh so I feel like those jokes and laughter I’m going to miss a lot. And then with his job, I don’t know [if] at the end of the day, when I go back home from school I’m never certain if he’s alive or something bad happened. When I go to college, I won’t know until I call him when he comes home. I’m kind of scared because I can never know if my dad’s okay or if he’s not okay.

The emotional support of his father and his concern about his father’s well-being play a significant role in how Carlos thinks about his future and where to apply. He sees the struggles

his father goes through to provide for the family. He recognizes the emotional support provided by his father and is afraid for the safety and well-being of his father while he is away at college. This concern for his father is driven by his father's work as a construction worker and his father's past history of brain cancer. Like other lower-SES students, Carlos' discussion of his upbringing and college choice decision-making is filled with concern and saturated with constraints about where he can go to college after taking into account the needs of his family. Carlos ended up applying to four UCs (LA, Davis, Riverside, and Santa Cruz) and four CSUs. Family constraints and the lack of experiences in out-of-state environments shaped his decision to only apply in state: "I didn't really want to apply out of state because even though I want to get out of Richmond, I don't just want to go anywhere else where I don't know anything."

Interdependence Grounded in Anticipatory Family Obligations and Family Resistance

Unlike lower-SES male respondents, female respondents were more likely to present narratives of interdependence in which their parents discouraged them from pursuing colleges outside of the local vicinity, which often translates into institutions that are more than a 2-3 hours' drive away. While these students managed to make sense of these constraints and made compromises with their parents, which allowed them to apply to colleges across California, applying to colleges outside California was not given much consideration.

The cases of Maria and Lily reflect this gender dynamic. Maria and her family came to the U.S. from Mexico when she was five years old. Her parents divorced and she is now living with her mother and step-father. They rely on food stamps to supplement her mother's wages and they currently reside in subsidized government housing. Recognizing the difficulties her family has faced, Maria is set on making her mom proud. She proudly asserts that she will go to college

and become the “first one to want to aspire to something higher than just staying home.” While the struggles of her mother have motivated her to obtain higher education, Maria is aware that the family is also a potential obstacle:

Maria: What if school gets hard? What if my family needs me? I can't just drop everything and leave. But honestly, I think I could do it. Cause my mom, she might need help and stuff, but she needs to understand that I am going to be away. There has to be another way for her to get help. My brother is going to be there, too. I just have to be prepared to be worried and stuff but be prepared to keep moving forward. If I stay stuck on those worries and stress, it's not going to get me anywhere.

Interviewer: Tell me more about the family thing? You say you might worry about your family?

Maria: So what if my mom gets sick. She has hypertension so I worry about that all the time. My brother, he's 14. What if there's peer pressure and he becomes involved with something. What if my little siblings get injured? I always think about different situations. What if a family member passes away? I recently had that and that was really hard because I was finalizing my senior project and obviously I had to take time to go to the funeral and all that stuff. I just think about different situations and as much as I wish I could just come back and everything will be okay. Let's be realistic, I can't just drop everything and leave it. We have to move on. Just like how I have moved on from all of my other struggles. I just have to be prepared. That's what I think about.

Given what has transpired in her life with her family's economic and health issues, Maria already anticipates that similar issues may arise in the future. Yet, she remains confident in her ability to try to overcome them when they do surface. Still, these past experiences and the concerns it brings have already impacted where she thinks she can go to college. When asked about what was important to her in deciding where to apply to college, she responded:

Maria: Honestly, I thought about financial aid, and how close it is and I thought about, like, how academically well are they doing. That's what I thought about.

Interviewer: When you think about a college, what makes you feel like it's good because it's close?

Maria: Being close to home is just, I guess if I ever needed help or just even emotional help, my mom will be there. Just being close to my mom is really valuable for me.

Like several other female respondents, Maria received pushback from her family when she told them about the possibility of attending UCLA:

My mom she was like, "You will go to Berkeley. You will get in." So she was like, "So you can be close and stuff." They know I'm her first kid going to college and I don't think she's ready to say bye...She was like, "Berkeley's a good school," just because she's not ready to let me go especially alone to a new city, new place. She's like, "Don't walk to bad parts of LA because there's different parts of LA. I lived over there." It's complicated. My brother, he really depends on me. Even though he tries to make it seem like otherwise. He and I have the same dad. The other four [kids] have different dads so we

connect more. I think he needs me. And when I leave it's going to be hard. They were really encouraging me to stay.

In the excerpt above, Maria's mom wants her to stay close to home because UC Berkeley is a good school but also because her mother is afraid to let go of Maria. Maria also has concerns about the well-being of her brother when she is away from college. Given the difficulties of trying to convince herself, her mother, and neighbors that UCLA is the right choice, it was not surprising that Maria did not give serious thought to out of state institutions:

Out of state is an issue for me. I don't want to be states away from my family. Um, far away – it depends on how far away. I don't know, it just feels like being a whole set of states away is just too much. Like the whole, I don't know, it just seems like too far.

Maria is aware of her family's background and their struggles to make ends meet. This has motivated her to attend college. At the same time, Maria also recognizes that she needs her family, and her family, especially her younger brother, needs her guidance, too. Moreover, Maria's mother is concerned about Maria attending college far away. This narrative of interdependence shapes how Maria understands her college options. She wants to attend college outside of her immediate city but near enough so that she can travel back if some emergency comes up. As a result, Maria applied to only in-state universities: four UCs [LA, Davis, Santa Cruz, and Berkeley), four CSUs, and a couple of private colleges. Given that it was already difficult enough to justify going to college in southern California, out-of-state colleges were not really a possibility.

Lily is another student in a similar situation to Maria. However, unlike Maria, Lily gave serious consideration to out-of-state colleges. Lily's father is a retired clock assembler and her mom stays at home to care for the family. Lily grew up fully aware of the struggles of her family. Here, she recounts the experience of traveling to her homeland and having to borrow money from others to make the trip possible:

Because we always rely on my dad as the source of income. At the time for a family of four, it was enough pretty much. It was never, we never had excess to go on vacation. Even when I went on the Vietnam trip, we had to borrow money from someone and then repay them. Now, we rely on the government. We don't have any source of salary or any actual income.

Due to her parents' old age, Lily is worried about their health. When asked about future obstacles that could impact her goals, her family factored prominently:

As of right now, the only obstacle is losing my parents because they are getting older. I'm the youngest in my family and my sister is ten years older than me. [My parents] have seen everything that needs to happen in my sibling's life and for me I'm just getting started. One thing I don't want to happen is to lose them along the way. I want to be there to share the moment with them, to be successful in school and later on in my career.

At one point, Lily, did consider out of state colleges including some Ivy League schools. However, her parents resisted that idea and then she began to have doubts about her ability to

live far away from home. According to Lily, her parents pressed her to choose schools close to home so that they could drive to see her and she could come home whenever they called her.

My decision was also made based on how far away from them I will be. Number one they are getting older, I want to visit them as much as I can and to come back home when there's an emergency. And vice versa. Because they are afraid something might happen to me. They say if you are across the country, how are we going to get to you when an emergency happens...One thing they always remind me of is my whole high blood pressure. It comes up whenever I'm at it. "Being two hours away, if something happens, we can come visit you at the hospital if you are there. But if you are eight hours away, what if no one drives us." My dad is getting older and his driving is weaker so he can't make the trip out there with my mom. That was the main point in my decision.

Lily's narrative of interdependence as expressed by her acknowledgement of her family's economic struggles and anticipated health concerns, her parents' resistance to her going out of state, and her own concern about being near her family in case of an emergency shaped where she applied to college. Lily deliberated with her parents and made the decision that she would only apply to California schools. She recalled, "Eventually, it was that I would only apply to schools within California but my compromise was that I would apply to schools in SoCal and NorCal, which was more spread out, instead of being in one general area." She applied to four UCs, four CSUs, and three in-state private colleges.

Whether many lower-SES students' concerns about their family will be realized is yet to be seen, but it has taken its toll on many lower-SES students who have had to contend with the

possibility that issues like death or other family emergencies may get in the way of their future plans. Many lower-SES students often have to support their immigrant parents. The anticipation of these family obligations shapes where students think they should attend college. Even students without any current family obligations still feel the need to support their parents while in college. The anticipation of family support also affects how students think about their college choices, especially how far away from home they can be. These students fear that an emergency might befall their parents while they are away at college. Thus, they feel the need to choose a college close to home so that they can be available to assist when needed. In other instances, parents discouraged their children from considering colleges that are more than several hours' drive away from home. These elements of the narrative of interdependence framed students' understanding of college as continuing the interdependence already established between child and parent. This understanding worked to limit students' college choices to in-state colleges.

Narratives of Independence Among Higher-SES Students

In comparison to lower-SES students, higher-SES students expressed a narrative of independence that reflected an understanding of college as an individual endeavor, enabling them to consider applying to colleges across the country. Higher-SES students framed college as an opportunity to separate from their family and begin anew in an environment far from home. This is made possible by the fact that higher-SES students perceive a great deal of autonomy in their lives and with regard to their college choices. This narrative of independence emphasizes the student's initiative, and the fact that students and not their parents choose the types of opportunities or activities they become involved in. It also emphasizes curiosity, which can be initiated by the parents or students, but involves the student gaining exposure to a new set of

experiences. This often happens through family vacations, camps, or other organized activities that result in students developing an interest about places and things beyond their local environment. The third aspect that distinguishes student narratives of independence, and the one that all students emphasized, is autonomy. Students discussed how they are the ultimate decider in selecting what they want to do, and they emphasized that when it comes to choosing an activity or a college, it is entirely up to them and not their parents. These three aspects of a narrative of independence – initiative, curiosity and autonomy – shape how students understand their past and how they think about their future, specifically about where to apply to college and what criteria to use in their college search.

Independence Grounded in Initiative and Autonomy

Scott's case exemplifies the centrality of initiative and autonomy in higher SES-students' narratives of independence. Scott's parents own and operate a small business. His mother received a bachelor's degree from a four-year college and his father briefly attended college before dropping out to start a business. Scott fondly remembers his father working with him in elementary school to help him overcome his speech impediment:

When I was in first grade, I used to have a speech impediment. I couldn't make a hard f sound. My dad just sat me down and, back and forth, taught me how to pronounce fire truck. It's their presence and support. They gave me the confidence to say that I can do it. I took care of my own stuff. My schooling, when we sign up for classes, they need parents to sign up for class, they just sign it. They don't look at it. I set my own track. It's very self-motivating.

While Scott recognizes his parents' involvement early on in his life, Scott emphasizes his own initiative in directing his life while in high school by referencing how he was the one who took the steps needed to register for his coursework. This can be further seen in the following exchange when Scott talks about his parents' support during the college application process. Scott once again emphasized that he was the one making things happen; his parents just supported whatever decisions he made. This is different from how lower-SES students speak of the college application process. They view the lack of parental involvement as a constraint in that they are unable to depend on their parents for guidance, while higher-SES students like Scott frame it as an instance of their independence or autonomy:

Scott: My dad never went to college so he doesn't involve himself too much. My mom, they are relatively hands off with me. I'm the only person who filled out the FAFSA and college applications by myself. The College Board. FAFSA. Since I was very young, they were like, "Fill out the paperwork and we'll sign the check for you. Just tell us what you are doing and why." I learned a lot of these things by myself.

Interviewer: What did you think of that growing up, given that other kids have parents who are more hands on?

Scott: On the one hand, it was a bit intimidating. On the other hand, it was relatively liberating in that I understand how paper works, you have due dates, you have to manage your own deadlines, turn in stuff for yourself. That's very...I hate to use the word, but it's very adult of me...something I learned very early on. That was just expected in the real world. No hand-holding. I have no complaints. I feel like I am better off for it...I think

they're hands-off because they trust me. They set me up initially. I wouldn't call them hands off in elementary but when I got to middle school, I was a Boy Scout. This is the thing. For instance, I used to fly out to San Diego to visit my grandparents. From an early age I packed my bag. They just tell me what to do. It's like, "What do you want to do for the summer." I'm like, "I want to do this and this over the summer." "So circle them on the booklet and tell me what weeks you want to do what." It's like I knew, I chose what I did by myself and I organized it. They just provided help, finding me a ride or something. I also signed up for ice skating. I spent a couple of weeks on the rink for a few hours. I had no interest in ice-skating besides just wanting to know how to ice-skate. It was like okay. Then I asked my mom if I could do it. Of course, she says yes. She'll always say, "Of course you can." And then there is the, "But you have to figure out, you figure out what you want to do less this summer. You don't have the time to do it. What are you going to have to sacrifice?"

The childrearing approach of his parents helps Scott develop a sense of independence. He still depends on his parents in that they pay for his activities, but Scott is more focused on the fact that he is encouraged to choose his activities, which gives him a sense of freedom and independence. Scott is the one who identifies the types of activities that are available, and he is the one who decides what activity among the different options he will choose to participate in. Being able to choose what he wants to do reflects his autonomy.

His sense of independence is further supported by the lack of any geographic restrictions placed upon him by his parents. He remarked that attending a college far away from home was not an issue because "I never expect to come home more than Thanksgiving, Christmas, and

maybe even Spring Break.” This comment is reflective of his understanding of college. Whereas Scott views college as an opportunity to detach from his family except when he needs to go home for holidays, lower-SES students often have to worry about the need to be home during unexpected family emergencies. Scott is unconcerned about such things or the cost of a plane ticket. The narrative of independence is what allows him to think about college possibilities beyond California and across the country. This understanding of the kind of individual he is due to his upbringing shapes his decision-making in that he perceives no family constraints about where he can apply to college. Scott ended up applying to one CSU, multiple UCs, an in-state private university, and multiple out-of-state public and private universities on the West Coast and the East Coast.

Independence Grounded in Curiosity and Autonomy

Unlike Scott, Lan’s parents were more active in shaping his direction in life. His parents decided to move the family to the U.S. from China so that he could take advantage of the educational system from high school through college. Yet, despite the greater involvement on the part of his parents, the consequence was not a sense of constraint but rather a developed sense of curiosity accompanied by a sense of autonomy in his decision-making. His curiosity enables him to consider opportunities and colleges across the country with few concerns.

Lan was born in China, but briefly lived in the Bay Area from fifth to seventh grade when his father was a visiting scholar at one of the local universities. Once the program ended, he and his family moved back to China, before returning to the U.S. during his sophomore year in high school. His father is an editor and his mother, a former accountant in China, is working towards her accounting certificate. Lan occasionally accompanies his father across the country and even

abroad when his father gives lectures at university campuses. The result is a developed sense of curiosity:

My parents. I think they've always tried to expose me to different things, especially my dad. He takes me on his trips to see different parts, see different things. I get to see his environmental work in Tibet. So you know he's showing me that I can do whatever that I like to do. That's also good for college. I think generally they are pretty open. They didn't force me to do anything that I didn't really want to. I'm very happy about that.

Lan makes it clear that he does not feel coerced by his parents to go on these trips. Instead, he views them as an opportunity to explore and to be exposed to new things and places that can influence his choices in the future. In doing so, he puts his autonomy at the forefront. This developed sense of curiosity motivated him to become involved with an organization at his school called BuildOn that takes students around the world to build schools in developing countries. With this organization, Lan has traveled to Nepal and Haiti. His father is supportive of the work he does. When asked what his parents expect of him, he responded:

I talk to him and I tell him I want to make an impact on the world, make it a better place. So we talk about different ways I can do that. He says, "You've done a lot of social work, like helping people build schools and stuff, you are pretty good at that. I can see you doing more focus on the social side, dealing with non-profit or policy or law." I was like, "What about engineering. What if I make something?" He says that he doesn't see me do that with my life.

The exchange is reflective of previous findings that middle class parents are more likely to engage in dialogue with their children about their different options rather than imposing a particular option (Lareau 2002; Lareau and Weininger 2010). Lareau and Weininger (2010) argue, “For these parents, ‘exposure’ and ‘choice’ are linked. The more varied a child’s experience, the more he or she will be compelled to evaluate ‘options,’ deciding which activities to pursue, which to abandon, and why” (689). In the case of Lan, his conversations with his father along with his travels around the world help to reinforce his sense of freedom to explore his interests and cultivate his sense of curiosity about new places. This is also clear in his discussion about the need to get out of his local environment for college. Among Lan’s criteria, attending a school on the East Coast is a priority. He rationalizes his decision in the following way:

I think just expanding my horizon. Maturing as a person. Learning practical skills. I feel like I am pretty mature, think for myself but I don't have any practical skills that I can apply in a job situation. Getting some of that, expanding, getting to know the world better. I just think it brings a lot of different opportunities. If I don't go, I would be stuck in Albany. Not much going on in here.

Lan frames college as an opportunity to move beyond this comfort zone and to experience as much of the world as possible. This framing is made possible by his trips across the country and around the world and his upbringing, which has instilled a sense of curiosity of faraway places and a sense of autonomy about choosing his path. Lan applied to five UCs, six

Ivy Leagues, three out-of-state and one in-state liberal arts college, and another private out-of-state university.

Independence Grounded in Initiative, Curiosity, and Autonomy

Anna comes from a household in which both of her parents, who are European immigrants, have a Ph.D. Her parents foster her curiosity and sense of independence by encouraging her to explore her interests. Anna also views her parents as relaxed, laid-back, and hands off. They encourage her to have fun and give her the freedom to figure out what she wants to do with her life. She reflects on her upbringing:

They didn't tell me. I don't think they ever force me to do anything. I'm lucky. I got to figure that out for myself. I think they got this from Europe or something. They are like, "You will get to what you want to do when you get to college. You can do anything and it's completely fine. You don't have to figure it out until you are 21." Because they knew that this pressure wasn't there, and they had to experience the pressure of deciding what to do at age 18 because they were in the European system. They are like, "We are not going to bother you until you are 21." Because of that I have the freedom to figure out for myself what is it that I want to do. It's helpful because I would stick to this and be more motivated to do because it's my idea and not someone else's idea.

In the excerpt above, the themes of curiosity and autonomy are present. Anna's parents encourage her to explore different interests and leave it up to her to decide what to explore. She brings up an example of her initiative to show that she is in control of what she does and that her

parents are primarily supporters, and not decision-makers. While her parents encourage her to explore her different interests, Anna is adamant that it is not them but she who initiates these activities, a common theme in the narrative of independence among higher-SES students. The theme of her parents encouraging her to explore and Anna taking the initiative to identify activities that fit her interests is evident in the discussion below about her participation in a program:

Anna: They often point out things that I like. “You like this” and make sure that I explore it, which is pretty helpful. I probably wouldn't have gotten into biotech had they not mentioned it to me.

Interviewer: Tell me some examples of how that happened where they noticed something you are interested in and then pushed you to pursue that?

Anna: Technovation I came up with myself. Once that was done, they were like, “Anna you are good at this. You should look into this.” It was when I did something, I’ve done a lot of things in school. When I’ve done something well, and then because of that, they compliment me about that.

Through her parents’ social connections, Anna was able to explore Europe. According to Anna, “I’ve been to most of Europe, including Hungary. I haven’t yet traveled outside of Europe and the U.S. It is annoying to me because there is so much to see.” While some visits have been with her parents, her recent trips have been by herself. She was in Switzerland for a whole summer during her most recent trip. These experiences away from home combined with the cultural logic her parents utilize to raise her leads to a developed sense of independence. Her

upbringing, particularly her travels, has shaped her curiosity for new environments and a sense of independence away from her parents. This sense of independence gives her the freedom to choose but also the comfort of knowing that she will not be apprehensive if she chooses to attend a college far away from home. When asked about her level of comfort being away from home, she responded,

I didn't think about it as I'm going away from home. It's like I'm just going someplace different. I'm comfortable there, you can say. But it didn't feel like that...I have absolutely no problem going to school there [far away]. I want to go on adventures. I want to experience the world. That means I have to leave California. I love traveling to new places so I'll be fine.

In this excerpt, instead of viewing her attendance at a college out of state or out of the country as being away from home and her family, Anna frames it as an opportunity to be exposed to a new set of experiences. This framing is made possible by her narrative of independence, which has been shaped by her upbringing and her experiences in Europe traveling with her parents and by herself. Anna applied to over 20-plus colleges, including in-state colleges like the UCs and private colleges, out-of-state colleges such as Ivy Leagues and liberal arts colleges, and out-of-country colleges in England.

In conclusion, the type of narrative students adopt when describing their families and their futures shape the constraints or autonomy they perceive in deciding where they can attend college. Because higher-SES students express a narrative of independence and a cultivated sense of curiosity, they are not bothered by the prospect of going across the country for college. They

speak of it in glowing terms, as it represents an opportunity to explore a new environment and be away from their parents. Lower-SES students, who offer a narrative of interdependence, are concerned about the issue of distance in their selection of colleges. They do not have the luxury of considering colleges across the country; instead, the distance between their home and college is one of the key criteria they bring up. The narratives students express also reflect their understanding of college. How students understand the meaning of college shapes the locations of colleges that they seriously considered. In contrast to lower-SES students, who tend to frame college as a new phase in their life that still requires their close attention to the needs and support of their family, higher-SES students view college as an opportunity to go into the world unencumbered by their parents or family obligations and to experience distant places and new environments.

Discussion

In this paper, I sought to explain the role played by social class differences in shaping where high-achieving students apply to college. By comparing the application decisions of high-achieving students from lower- and higher-SES backgrounds, I found that what distinguishes one group from the other is not the quality of colleges (they all applied to selective colleges), but where these colleges are located (whether they are near or far from home). Higher-SES students were more likely than their lower-SES counterparts to apply to selective public and private colleges outside of California.

Students' decisions about where to apply to college are intimately linked to the experiences of their social class background. Drawing upon a culture and cognition framework that explains behaviors based on the meaning individuals from different structural positions

attribute to an action or phenomenon, I show that the way students perceive their relationship with and responsibility to their family in the present moment and once they are in college affects whether or not students deem an out-of-state college to be a viable option. Students' narratives about their lives are shaped by the involvement of their parents in their lives, the absence or presence of family struggles, and the absence or presence of parental restrictions on where students can attend (or apply) to college. These three sets of experiences, a product largely of the family's social class, mold what role students think they will play in the family during and beyond college. This in turn influences their understanding of which colleges are appropriate for them to apply to.

Higher-SES students adopt a narrative of independence when talking about their upbringing and their decision-making about college. They perceive a great deal of freedom in deciding where to apply to college. Moreover, as students from well-to-do families, they benefit from multiple experiences traveling outside of the state and even outside of the country. These experiences in new environments provide them with a sense of comfort about spending time away from home and cultivate their curiosity of new places and people.

In contrast, lower-SES students adopt narratives of interdependence. While some talked about their upbringing and the process of selecting potential colleges within the context of family responsibilities they had while in high school, others spoke about their families struggling to make ends meet, and most anticipated such challenges to continue while they attend college. Their college choices were constrained by a combination of parental concern for student well-being and student concern for parental well-being. Consequently, lower-SES students' decisions about where to apply were influenced by a desire to be near family while in college so that children and parents could continue to support each other.

In the narratives offered by students from each social class group, both highlighted certain aspects of their upbringing or experience. Moreover, students were not simply responding to objective social circumstances associated with social class. A case could be made that lower-SES students, given their responsibilities and what they have had to overcome to be high-achieving students, are just as prepared to be independent as higher-SES students. Yet, in the stories they told, they rarely focused on their resilience or independence and instead spoke more about interdependence and family obstacles. Even though higher-SES students chose to highlight themes of independence and initiative, their lives could also be construed as dependent on their parents. Many of the activities they participated in required the financial support of their parents. While some students mentioned parental financial support, this was overshadowed by their emphasis on their own initiative and independence in deciding what to participate in.

While this paper has focused primarily on the role of family relationships and social class in enabling or constraining student choices, it does not refute the conclusion of previous studies that information matters in where students apply to college. Information does matter. Indeed, in another paper based on this research, I find that college preparation programs and schools offered information that influenced how students understood their college options. For instance, higher-SES students and the few lower-SES students who did apply to out-of-state colleges were more likely to have learned about these colleges from their college prep counselors or through their participation in college prep programs. This paper, however, complicates the conclusion of such studies that social class differences in college application choices can be reduced to a matter of information. As I have shown, social class constrains lower-SES students beyond that of just access to information. Narratives of interdependence add another dimension to how lower-SES

students make decisions about where to apply to college by making some college options seem possible and others – like applying to out-of-state colleges – out of reach.

The sample of students interviewed in this study may result in some limitations. First, students from lower-SES backgrounds consisted of mostly individuals from Latino and Asian backgrounds, with the overwhelming majority of students (20 out of 23) being children of immigrants. Future research on this topic should investigate the extent to which narratives of interdependence are prevalent among non-immigrant families. It may be the case that narratives of interdependence still exist among such populations, but other aspects of interdependence are emphasized rather than those found in this study. Second, students from this study are from the Bay Area, a region that is home to two highly selective colleges. Moreover, all students from the sample applied to in-state public colleges that are highly ranked in the country. Further research should look at how students from regions in which in-state colleges are not among the highly ranked make decisions about which colleges to apply to. If there is not a selective public or private university option nearby, are high-achieving lower-SES students more inclined to apply to selective colleges out of state?

Given the importance of college destinations in addressing social stratification, this study points to things that can be done to encourage lower-SES, high-achieving students to apply to selective colleges that may be located out of state or far away from home. Selective colleges interested in recruiting lower-SES, high-achieving students should do more than provide information about these institutions to students. Funding programs that provide subsidized travel and residential programs for lower-SES students at such institutions would be a step towards addressing the constraints these students face. The lived experience of being at these institutions will also help students develop greater knowledge and comfort about being in these

comparatively “foreign” social settings, allowing them to transcend some of the limits of their prior environments and experiences. These interventions will not be able to address the deeper constraints that some students and families face, but they can help to change how lower-SES students understand college and their ability to thrive in an environment far from home.

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