

**Studying Up: Money, Class and Culture among
Financial Aid Students at Duke**

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Dedication

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Introduction

“You are aware that everyone is going to have a LOT more money than you, are you ok with being in that environment for four years?” The tone of my guidance counselor’s voice intimated concern, and I understood why she was worried. I had just spent four years being the poor kid in a very wealthy high school—was I ready to repeat the experience, but with an exponentially wider gap?

However the financial experience I have had at Duke is vastly different than that of high school. Instead of being in a school district in which you must have a significant amount of money to live, Duke is a private institution that has the means—and the desire—to cater to a fiscally diverse clientele. Duke, like many well-endowed private institutions, has the wherewithal to be need blind, meaning that it can accept any student it pleases regardless of what they can pay. Duke also promises to meet all of a student’s demonstrated need... in layman terms Duke will pay for whatever the parents cannot.

Financial aid can range from having a couple thousand knocked off of an almost sixty-thousand dollar bill to the student not having to pay anything and actually RECEIVING money for incidentals and travel. As of now 44.1% of Duke Undergraduates are on financial aid. This does not mean that 44.1% of Duke students are poor. Many financial aid students drive shiny new cars, live in big houses and take lavish vacations. And there are just as many non-financial aid students who rely on frugality to make ends meet. For the majority of Americans, even those in the upper echelons, almost a quarter of a million dollars spent on college is no paltry sum.

That being said, the opposite ends of Duke's financial spectrum have very different views of college. To some it means working 20 hours a week, to others it means not working at all, and that is ignoring the very large middle ground of working a bit, or sometimes, or a lot but not quite as much as someone else might. The subject of work is what first alerted me—in a very roundabout way—to the possibility of a financial aid culture. I had spotted a student known for her social and financial status going to and from work. I automatically assumed that her parents made her do this “for character”, or that she did it to add to her resume. It was not until I mentioned it to a friend that I found out the truth:

“She’s actually on financial aid.” He whispered in a conspiratorial tone.

“No way! But her family is so RICH.”

“They’re actually not... She works really, really hard to afford everything she does. Don’t tell ANYONE because she doesn’t want anyone to know.”

I was shocked by this exchange—a student, ashamed of their financial status? One who worked ceaselessly, but did not want anyone to know why? It was with this conversation that I began to ponder the idea of a financial aid culture. One of silence, and shame, where people refused to acknowledge their financial shortcomings, even to their friends. I was intrigued.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror one night, pondering the idea of writing my thesis about the underbelly of DukeEngage. I had brooded over the topic for quite some time, and had begun to collect materials. However, the subject was already beginning to bore me, a worrisome phenomenon for one planning to spend a year immersed in the subject. My mind wandered back to that conversation I had had with my friend, and a light bulb went off. I had been fascinated about the politics of financial aid for years; surely the interest would last me well through a yearlong project. Excited about the prospect, I began to frame my thesis: financial aid and the

silent culture around it. But the more I thought about it, the more I found that my initial thoughts were wrong. Besides the secretive working girl I could find no other examples of silence, no other instances of shame regarding financial aid. I had stumbled onto an anomaly, and it was that that piqued my interest, but to be as truthful as I could in my construction of the culture, I had to completely change my original thoughts.

When I began to think back to all the financial aid-related exchanges I have ever participated in or witnessed, they have all been relatively open. A little furtive at times, but I myself have never witnessed anyone hide their status. I revamped my first ideas, and came up with a new concept—perhaps a tangible culture of financial aid students does exist, and although there are neither clubs nor meetings directed towards students on financial aid, they do, nevertheless, have a sense of belonging to this little group.

Thus, this ethnographic study of Duke financial aid students examines group self-recognition and sentiment to understand the possible existence of a financial aid culture. It is difficult, as an undergraduate, to try to flesh out a culture that is not already formally defined. Most of today's cultures are taken for granted as being such—no one questions if there is a youth culture, or a black culture, or Peruvian culture because it has already been said that it is so. Then how does one actually define a culture that hasn't been defined yet? In the former examples recognition and naming play the biggest role. Recognizing a culture in a way creates and guides it. From an outside perspective, students on financial aid have been announced as a group as (but perhaps with less fanfare than other groups). There is outside recognition, but what about inside? Do people on financial aid actually feel as if they are part of this larger group, or is it just a forgotten identifier—a box they checked at the end of high school, and then stopped thinking about it? My goal then, is to flesh out whether students on financial aid feel any sort of belonging

or understanding with other financial aid students, any recognition of being a part of this group in a bigger way than just being a name on a list. If so then a financial aid culture may truly exist.

Site

Settled in Durham, Duke University houses about 7,000 undergraduate students on its campuses and in surrounding neighborhoods. The same number of graduate students also find themselves at Duke for business school, medical school, and various departmental graduate programs. Duke's "work hard, play hard" culture is often conveyed in everyday conversation and to prospective students who visit the campus. Referring to a competitive yet supportive academic atmosphere and the dedication of Duke students to carving out time to party in their schedule, this title is largely self-bestowed by the Duke population and may or may not be accurate. I heard someone mention a study they read which stated that the majority of Duke students did *not* get belligerently drunk each weekend, and that in fact many usually stayed in on the weekends. Furthermore, Duke students may merely have given an epithet to themselves that most other bodies of college students should have, and is not necessarily limited to Duke. Either way what is important is that this "work hard, play hard" attitude is how many students define themselves, although the meaning can range from going out four nights a week while maintaining straight As, to going out a couple nights a week and barely making Cs. The "work hard, play hard" attitude is something that every student has to define for themselves.

Furthermore, although competitive, the reputation of Duke's academic atmosphere is a far cry from other Top 25 schools, where rumors of crucial pages torn out of library books, erased files from computers left alone in the library, and students who only care about their own passions abound. Students who compete ruthlessly for coveted jobs and internships in one

semester turn around and help teach younger students how to follow in their shoes the next. Duke students are in constant contact with alumni who give them tips, critique their resumes, and vie for desired positions in their name, utilizing the position another Duke student may have helped them get to return the favor. Social by nature, competitive by necessity, Duke students freely contend with and assist each other.

Perhaps, instead of attempting to define one singular “Duke culture” it is wiser to define Duke as an amalgam of smaller cultures, where a student can belong to more than one. From the sorority/fraternity culture to the selective living group culture to the independent culture, from the Mac culture to the smaller yet vocal PC culture, from white culture to Latino culture to black culture, Duke students are not defined by one overarching term but rather a conglomerate of smaller, more specific ones. At a university where housekeeping can be seen lugging away hundreds of beer cans every morning—yet all of them were carefully disposed of in recycling bin after consumption, and where rape and sexual violence are increasing problems—yet the “I need feminism because...” campaign was lauded nationally, it is impossible to pigeonhole “the Duke student” into one singular category.

A Site Within a Site—Financial Aid

One needs only to look at the Duke financial aid online statistics page to see that Duke is committed to making matriculation for any student possible, regardless of financial need. Just over 50% of students receive some sort of aid—3.1% receive merit based aid, 3.7% athletic aid, and 44.1 % need based grants. Contrary to Duke’s reputation, the majority of students do not pay for their full education. The median package for a student is a grant of \$37,650, a \$3,500 loan, work study of \$1000 a semester, and an expected family contribution of

\$14,440. Thus, a student receiving the median package will graduate with only \$14,000 in loans to show for a quarter of million dollar education. Duke has also made an even greater commitment to students of lower socioeconomic status—if one's parents have a combined income that falls under \$60,000 the parents need make no monetary contribution to their children's education. (However the child will still be responsible for an approximately \$2,500 contribution each year, and a small loan) Duke financial aid students are also in high demand for campus jobs as the government pays 3/4ths of their salary, rendering it easy for a financial student to make money on campus and nearly impossible for a unspecialized non-financial aid student to do the same. Duke does a fantastic job at leveling the playing field in terms of who can afford to come—by shifting the monetary burden from lower SES parents to itself and the government it makes matriculation a financial possibility for almost every family. In fact for many lower SES families Duke (or other private colleges with high caliber financial aid) may be a cheaper option than a state school.

I argue the possible existence of a financial aid culture has thus far been ignored for two reasons, the biggest being that financial aid is meant to erase lines. With financial aid, students can not only attend private colleges such as Duke, but are also given the possibility of subsidized work so that they can create a monetary identity similar to that of their peers, if that desire exists. A hard working financial aid student can go on spring break trips, eat at a nice restaurant and buy fancy clothes, depending on the hours they are willing to work. Ultimately, financial aid is a tool for a poor person to create a self-identity that actually reflects how they view themselves rather than how society views their meager income. Thus, bringing attention to financial aid students would single them out and categorize them in a way that went against the fundamental meaning of financial aid as an institution. Secondly, to single someone out as being on financial aid could

be seen as calling them poor, a seemingly insulting word to anyone who is not poor (and to some people who are). No one wants to call attention to the financial lacking of certain students for fear of embarrassment or lesser-than feelings. In the end it is best to put everyone on an equal playing field and not point out their financial shortcomings.

Yet financial aid culture bears studying as it provides a glimpse into an almost intangible sense of moving and acting in a world of privilege (any university can be seen as one as it is a portal to a better future) by people who are largely unacquainted with privilege. For someone who grew up in a nice house in a stable neighborhood college is the next step in securing a similar life for one's family. But what about those whose hope for the future is the exact opposite of what they came from? Financial aid students are unique in that they quietly slip into a world in which they do not belong, and then surreptitiously create an identity for themselves until no one questions them being there in the first place.

As there is no set student financial aid site, it is hard to purposefully immerse oneself in the culture. The existence of the Undergraduate Financial Aid building is well established: it sits neatly across from the Admissions building, giving prospective students the impression that financial aid will play a greater role in their college lives than it actually does. In fact the financial aid building is just as relevant as the admissions building is to undergraduates—it is the first thing you see when you visit campus, but that is the last time you see it. It provides a physical reminder to visitors of Duke's commitment to financial aid, but also a promise to not impose on their college lives. You visit once or not at all, hash out the sordid details of paying for college, and most never see it again.

Thus, although I am a participant-observer in the literal sense of the word (I am on financial aid; I've been observing other people on financial aid) there was only a little in the way of going to a location, sitting down, and taking notes. All anecdotes, observations, and stories come from over four years of interacting with Duke financial aid students. I remember (or at least, think I remember) the more significant interactions in great detail, as they spoke to my situation and piqued my interest. I did spend various hours in the library observing students quietly laboring, impeccably dressed. Upwards of 90% used a Macintosh computer, which costs 3 times that of a decent one of any other brand. I also spent time in the Bella Union coffee shop, the library's hippy younger sister where the occupants wore more eclectic clothing, drank from water bottles, and carried laptops covered in environmentally-oriented stickers. However, the stickers could not obfuscate that they too were Macintosh brand devices. This reveals that even Duke student's with entirely different lifestyle share a desire for top of the line electronics, and perhaps to fit in. I also went to restaurants and observed how Duke students participate in moneyed activities: how financial aid students silently navigated going to expensive eateries yet maintained their budget.

However, this thesis relies more than anything else on interviews with other financial aid students, but a specific subset: I endeavored to include students with heavier financial aid packages, whose ability to matriculate at Duke rested on Duke's generosity. I purposefully exclude those for which financial aid is a blessed afterthought, and could have swung Duke's high price tag even if they had not met an obscure cutoff. I do this because, as I mentioned before, there is a chasm between the financial means of someone who only receives a couple hundred dollars in financial aid a semester and someone who has to pay nothing. Thus, the focus of this argument is meant to include mostly those students from lower income backgrounds.

Literature

Supporting the ideas of culture, class, redistribution of wealth, the American Dream, and college as the great equalizer that arise in this thesis are the works of various theorists, researchers and ethnographers. I first used Kath Weston's Traveling Light, On the Road with America's Poor. An anthology of her travels by bus, Weston seeks to gain a greater understanding of poor America by observing them as they engage in social (and physical movement). By marrying labor and poverty statistics with human anecdotes Weston attempts to disabuse the public of the notion that impoverished people's poverty is THEIR fault. By demonstrating the perseverant attitude of countless poor people as well as their painful, other-inflicted hardships Weston suggests that poverty is a plausible fate for many Americans, despite the almost religious insistence of society that one's situation is one's fault. Barbara Ehrenreich's popular work Nickeled and Dimed is also a staple of understanding modern American poverty. Ehrenreich demonstrates through participant-observation that living on minimum wage is not as easy as many lawmakers would like the public to think.

Pierre Bourdieu's argument on cultural capital also comes heavily into play in this thesis. Bourdieu argues that a man's capital is not merely what he has in the bank but the education, class, and societal position of his forbearers. This point weighs heavily on whether financial aid students can be considered purveyors of the American Dream, as a majority of them are already backed by significant cultural capital. I rely on the Comoroffs and Marcel Suarez-Orozco to detail the history and pull of the American Dream and its journey from American ideology to hegemony, and back to ideology due largely to the economic downturn and change in the fundamentals of immigrant life.

The Participants

Each financial aid student shared certain qualities yet differed greatly from each other. I interviewed 8 seniors, all of which had interacted with Duke as a financial aid student for over 4 years. All were grateful and no one mentioned any qualms with how financial aid was awarded or distributed. There were 3 girls and 5 boys; there were 3 interviewees on full financial aid and 5 on (significant) partial financial aid. As mentioned before I wanted to focus on students for whom their financial aid package made attendance possible; I gleaned this information by how they spoke of it but I never asked for the specific number knowing they might not be comfortable sharing or perhaps did not know themselves. 4 had immigrant parents and 2 were immigrants themselves. Every single one had at least one parent who had attended some college and some had parents who went to graduate school. Each interview was approximately an hour long.

Tyrone was my first interviewee. His interview was the most raw as I was honing and changing questions based on his response; he was essentially the guinea pig. Tyrone comes from a middle class family in the South. His family immigrated from Asia before he was born and puts great importance on education. He attended, and was a minority, at an impoverished high school where girls were often pregnant from middle school on. Tyrone has a low-key group of friends who spend most of their time in the dormitories or at sporting events. Tyrone noted that many of his friends were actually quite rich, but he did not find out about it until later because they never mentioned it. Fittingly Tyrone and his friends usually refrain from discussing money as it does not really affect their Duke lives. Tyrone thinks that this is different from how it would be to be in a fraternity or sorority. Tyrone stated multiple times that he was not a good interview candidate because he did not really think about being on financial aid.

Monica also claimed to be a bad interview candidate because she did not know that much about the subject. Monica is quite active on campus: she is in a selective living group, a community service fraternity, president of a large organization and is a member of many more. Monica's parents come from a high status in Asia but they sacrificed this to come to the United States to obtain Ph.D.'s. They now live a middle class existence but struggle a bit as they strive to pay for their children's education. Monica plans to attend medical school to make enough money to help them retire comfortably, but she has other loves that tug at her. Monica is pursuing her desire as well as medical school in a bid to have stability and passion. Monica has a tightknit group of best friends but a very large group of regular friends as well. Monica has many financial aid friends whom she bonds with over financial similarities.

Tom is an American whose family is dedicated to charity work. Due to this he spent the first decade of his life in a squatter town in South America. His parents were careful to move back to the United States when their children were in middle school, however, to ensure that their children were well educated. This puts Tom in a unique position as he is considered international, but unlike almost every other international student he does not come from great wealth. Tom has found this to be difficult, as it forces him to have two separate groups of friends. He has international friends with whom he shares a language and a love of travel, and his financial aid friends whom he relates to money-wise. To complicate matters further Tom's work ethic and highly-paid, skilled, work-study job results in him having almost as much play money as his rich friends. He knows that he can "keep up" with them but does not want to. Tom hopes to be a lawyer in the future but does not know what he would do with all that money. Tom is very aware of his privileged place in society as an educated, white man and is scornful of this privilege.

Ken's story is quite interesting, as it is brimming with paradoxes. Ken comes from a wealthy Caribbean family that fell from financial graces before Ken was born. They fled to the United States and quickly began to rebuild, although they have not yet reached their former splendor. A single child to his educated, divorced mother Ken watched her toil to secure a place for them in the middle class. A woman of sophistication, Ken's mother encourages him to travel and allows him to shop, and Ken also spent many summers and high school years working. Due to this, as well as Ken being an only child, Ken dresses in some of fashion's most renowned brands and is never one to miss a trip, club, or restaurant. Ken knows everyone at Duke, and everyone at Duke (including faculty) loves Ken. He spends most of his time with international students and is in a fraternity, although it is not a dominant part of his life. A former athlete, Ken seems to be in the upper financial echelons of Duke's students, yet due to his mother's low income receives a healthy chunk of financial aid. I included Ken because of his ability to seem rich, yet not be; to spend time with the richest students at Duke, yet not be ashamed of his financial status in a school where that seems to mean so much to so many. Ken is a curiosity in the way his financial aid status has almost no influence on his life yet he toys with multiple money strata daily.

Mann is an immigrant from South America. Until recently the only male of the family, Mann eagerly fills this role by relieving his mother of certain burdens, through anything from financing himself the best he can to supporting his younger and older sisters in their education and childcare. Mann has worked for years and spent many high school summers away from home to work in more lucrative areas of the United States. Mann has an active group of friends, rich and poor, and funds his debauchery with two jobs. Mann never seems to be burdened with work as it is such a fundamental part of his life, and he also finds camaraderie in those that have

to work as well. Although accustomed to the work Mann is very aware that his plight is quite different from the upper echelons at Duke, but he sees his work ethic as something that will put him ahead in the end. Mann's mother does not understand Duke's financial aid and Mann had to plead with her to come to Duke over a state school (also free). Mann's mother also makes huge personal sacrifices for her children to attend college affordably, something that burdens Mann emotionally. Mann sees his family as middle class, yet they have and still are receiving government assistance.

Ashley's interview took only 20 minutes. A human rights activist, she already had most of her opinions well-formed and well-rehearsed. Ashley's parents are African immigrants who came to the United States for educational purposes. She came to school with plans to be a doctor but has since switched and was recently admitted to law school. Ashley's financial aid status has not significantly affect her time here, but she is quick to "educate" someone who is misinformed on the subject of financial aid.

Bianca has had the most hardship out of all of the interviewees. The oldest of her siblings Bianca had little support while growing up—she is the only interviewee who has no parents that graduated college. After coming to Duke Bianca struggled to reconcile her background with her new found opportunity. She said it was difficult to be put in compromising positions in regards to money and her family—at one point she had more money in the bank than her parents due to scholarships, and when her parents used that money without her knowledge she was put in an even more difficult position. Now, Bianca is the only interviewee who has another person to look after. Emancipated around her college years (meaning that she was legally separated from her family and was completely on her own financially) Bianca soon found herself also supporting her younger sibling who also no longer lived in their old home. Bianca has had to balance a

difficult home life and monetary situation with doing well in school, and has seen people who have failed at doing this.

Charles is a thoughtful young man who is very aware of his finances. From a small family in the mid-West he has known what it is like to have parents out of work and barely be making it. Like Tom and Mann, Charles works long hours and is rewarded with a good amount of play money. Charles is very aware of Duke's money culture and has had many money-related experiences. Charles is also very aware that his experiences differ from many, and noted that not many Duke students knew what it was like to be in a family that sometimes did not have money for groceries.

Ultimately each student brought a different perspective to my thesis, yet their separate lives yielded some very similar themes.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 will reveal the participants reactions to class as well as where they see themselves on the class spectrum. Almost all find themselves to be middle class, a phenomenon explained by Wendy Luttrell as a reflection of societal ideas of the middle class being seen as morally fit.

In Chapter 2 I take a three-pronged approach to arguing the existence of a separate, lower income culture at Duke, by demonstrating that the existence of this culture can be arrived at in 3 different ways. To do this I first explain how a multitude of cultures acts upon each individual student, and that by rejecting the dominant Duke money culture Duke lower income students are positioning themselves in a culture of their own. I expound upon what Duke's dominant money culture looks like, touching on conspicuous consumption, image, and international students. I

then move on to the second prong, which explores whether lower income students see themselves as having a separate culture. Third, I assay the participants ideas of camaraderie as a form of creating a culture.

In Chapter 3 I outline the ideology behind the American Dream, and argue that it is in fact the American Myth. Almost all of the participants agree that one cannot merely pull themselves up by their bootstraps in America, even though the participants can be seen as proof of the verity of the American Dream. I then demonstrate how the American Dream does not apply to Duke's financial aid students as they already have cultural capital invested in their success.

In Chapter 4 I explore the participants plans for the future, and what salaries they desire. It turns out that most care little for a large salary, and those that want one want it for security purposes. The chapter concludes that most lower income students want to redistribute their future wealth to their families, most of whom made sacrifices for their children's education.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I look at the idea of college as an equalizer and argue that student's past experiences can never be fully equalized to match their wealthier peers. I then use Lee Baker's work with color-blindness to assert that lower and upper income students do not need to be viewed as the same, as they are vastly different, yet equal.

Chapter 1: Class

Class

Through being a lower income student in a private university many of Duke's financial aid students effectively straddle class lines. However "class" has become an obsolete term in the eyes of almost all that I interviewed. Not only could they not speak to class but most did not at first understand what I was saying, until I clarified that I meant socioeconomic status. While this term may have become a stand in for "class", the definition is not the same. While SES is considered an objective term, referring only to one's current income and thus not a reflection of their worth, it is not a synonym for class. Class is SES combined with culture, (Settle 2013) so while it cannot be considered the same, there really is no definitive replacement for class... while the idea may yet exist it seems as if the term itself has become too loaded to function in the American vocabulary.

The first response to a general question, "What do you think about class?" was sometimes met with confusion. Ken, who in the end had the most to say on the subject, immediately responded "What do you mean by class?" demonstrating that although he could opine at lengths on the subject it was not a term he used often. I mentioned SES but Ken decided I meant social class, though he brushed that off too with a casual "I haven't personally noticed too much."

Even the students who understood the question shied away from the subject out of ignorance. Tom, who waxed on the topic of white privilege, cross-cultural differences, and money performance was at first hesitant to dive into the subject. "Class is weird," he explained,

“I’m not very good at defining it, it’s hard for me to perceive class. I can perceive racial lines better than I can perceive class.”

Monica reacted the same way when asked how she defined class. “I’m a bad person to ask about this... Economic and financial status, and all the lifestyle and perspective that comes with that.” While she could succinctly define class she demonstrated a lack of attachment to the word or the meaning.

In the end there was no hard consensus about what class meant. Ken and one other saw it as social class, but most others agreed with the SES assessment, confirming that I was on the same page with my peers. Informal classroom polls in two classes ascertained that most students thought of SES when they thought of class. This brings up the notion of the emic and etic, a dichotomy first expounded upon by Kenneth Pike. The etic is “intrinsic ideas and categories meaningful to researchers” while the emic is the term that refers “to the intrinsic cultural distinctions meaningful to the members of a cultural group” (Headland & McElhanon 2004). Thus, the term an anthropologist might use to explain a phenomenon could be completely meaningless to the culture in which it is applied, as they already have their own word for it. In this case I tried to have the participants utilize the etic term of class, yet the term meant little and was met with blank stares. When I explained that I meant socioeconomic status, however, the responses began to flow. Again, while the two might not mean exactly the same thing class was a seemingly irrelevant term to the lives of the participants, even though the institution that it represents heavily affected their lives. They could all speak extensively on the subject, but the word itself engendered little to no reaction. I found that once the participants began to speak about socioeconomic status and class they revealed extensive knowledge and difference. Thus,

while class is something that works constantly in and on their lives it is not something they consciously ponder.

Many participants expressed apathy towards the word “class” even after it was defined, but some had developed thoughts on the subject despite their initial confusion. Ashley, however, was the only one visibly angered by the word itself.

“In *my* America I wouldn’t make an active effort to say there are classes, there are different SESs, different cultures, different backgrounds, but I wouldn’t necessarily put that in low, middle, upper class system. Because that does belittle a lot of people, it is offensive.” Ashley’s answer is revealing in two respects: firstly, she argues against making an “active” effort to say there are classes. Although she did not mean to speak with double meanings her use of active could be an admittance that class may exist in a *passive* manner. Although America no longer actively oppresses its lower class a structure is still in place that prevents ease of movement. The second part of Ashley’s statement is also revealing: she refuses to speak about it because it is insulting. Yet can something be insulting if it does not exist? In this way Ashley admits that there is a class system and its manifestation is offensive.

Ashley’s reluctance to speak of class echoed my response when I was told by my advisor that I should ask people about class—I did not want to do it because I was worried I might offend someone. Somewhere in history the word “class” has taken on a connotation so strong that some refuse to speak of it.

Ashley expatiated on her ideas of class, and her desire to separate class from SES became apparent when asked to describe her own class.

“It’s such a complex term, to me it’s about more than money. I don’t know if I could put myself in a class. Ok I’m on financial aid, were not poor, but were not rich in that sense, but I live a comfortable life, my parents are able to provide me with everything, it may have been hard for them but they work hard to provide me and my siblings with a comfortable life. In that sense I wouldn’t say I’m lower class even though we might have a lower SES, the fact I’m on fin aid is a clear indicator but I wouldn’t say we come from a lower class because of that.” Ashley struggled with the sentiment that while financially she might be lower class her college-educated family did not truly fit the term. Ashley’s response revealed that class may be a valued term, something I will explore in later chapters.

When pressed with a third question asking if her future class mattered she became visibly irritated. “No,” was her emphatic response, “Because I don’t agree with the sense of class, I feel it’s very outdated. It’s extremely outdated.” Not only did class not apply to Ashley’s concept of America but she fought against being put in that structure. Ashley also exhibits a clear disassociation with her monetary class, something echoed by Bianca.

“My background is lower class...the home I stay in is middle class...I’m about to step out on my own so we’ll see.” Bianca views class as monetary rather than evaluative, and fluid at that. She does not know where to place herself, as her past, present and future are separate. If Bianca saw class as a combination of SES and culture she might have a solid answer, but her response indicates that class means none of that—it is flexible enough to change over time, and determined by a mere paycheck.

Some students, however, balked at a purely monetary definition, going so far as to reject any relationship between class and money. Interestingly, both participants who felt this way count international students as one of their most significant friend groups. Tom, who noted that his wealthy, international friend group and his more average one almost never cross paths, does not see anything monetary in the concept of class.

“I can tell if someone is richer but that doesn’t mean they have class. I lump it together with good manners, being polite and well-raised, I don’t perceive it as a money thing. Personality-wise as opposed to social/economic class.” Tom sees class in the literal sense—having class, or being classy, rather than an obscure structure, even though he understands and subscribes to the belief of class differences.

Ken ascribes Tom’s definition of class to international students rather than American. He sees it as social, a way of carrying and conducting oneself. As he spoke of class Ken began to enumerate the differences between American class and class in other parts of the world:

“They aren’t flashy,” he explained, referring to the international students, “I feel it’s an American thing. I’m technically first-born American. Even when I traveled abroad, people would pull me aside and say I feel like there’s something about you that Americans don’t have, they call it class. It’s not the same way we use it in America, upper class, middle class, lower,—socioeconomic status, it doesn’t matter if you’re poor, rich, white black, it’s about class, conducting yourself in a way...you’re not flashy, sure you have a lot but you aren’t having your 16 year old drive around in a Bentley, wearing FendiPradaGucciLouis all over your body, tattooed, brands everywhere, it’s not your

identity. Your identity is how you conduct yourself; you try to be an upstanding citizen. That's class."

Ken not only sees class and SES as completely different but seemingly credits everywhere but America with truly understanding what "class" means. For Ken coming from a certain SES is not an issue because every individual has control over whether they comport themselves with class or not. And while Ken has seen his own definition of class played out in his travels and among his international family Ken does not feel that the United States has quite grasped that concept.

"In America, with our socioeconomic statuses, cultures don't transcend that. I feel that other cultures in other countries, when you get to a certain level of socioeconomic status it also comes with, you learn these things as a part of it. Here you don't learn it as a part of having money, having money just means you're rich and you continue to do what you do, because you can. Here, if you're rich you can get into the party. In other countries, that doesn't mean anything. It's who you know, and you're only going to know this person if you act in a certain manner."

Again, Ken stresses the difference between socioeconomic status and his view of class. And while he argues that anyone can comport themselves with class he feels that Americans often mistake having class with having money and flaunt their money as a substitute for class. Ken views other countries, like Europe, as being classy yet class-less (one's socioeconomic class is not prohibitive) and America as being not classy yet classed. Ken and Tom's points exhibit the transient nature of the definition of class—its original definition has become morphed and diaphanous to where it means different things to different people. Social for some,

socioeconomic for others, and both for yet others, it has become a word that can only be dealt with through connotations.

Unprompted, many participants also explained class as something that is or can be performed. The idea of performativity is perhaps most recognizable in Judith Butler's work on gender. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Butler explains "That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate" (Butler 1988:1). Here she speaks of gender as not a characteristic inherent in the human body but something that has to be consciously exhibited—and, in a way, proven—to the world. The human who performs the gender of their choosing therefore has "agency" in choosing how and what to perform. However, if the performance fails to meet society's standards (the performance is not good enough, the person is performing the "wrong" gender) then the person's performance will not be accepted.

Although gender may seem like a far cry from class, the two are very much intertwined. Gender is often a contributing factor of one's class, and the two are usually included in the same discourse. Thus it seems appropriate that Butler's ideas regarding performativity and gender can be extended to class. Class may be something into which someone is born, but if they do not perform it correctly they will not be accepted by members of their own class, nor will other members of society recognize their class. The way that one must perform class in order to be accepted is also at issue. Butler writes that "My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler

1988:4). Gender cannot be performed once and then forgotten about, and neither can class. One moment of conspicuous consumption, one instance of acting with “class” does not render the actor a part of that class forever. Instead, there must be constant consumption, constant movement with “class” to slither one’s way into whichever class they are performing and stay there. The instant these things come to a halt is the instant that the actor loses their membership of class, and it is apparent that society is well aware of this by the way “wealthy” individuals will go into debt to buy luxury cars or take international vacations: even though they cannot afford it they also cannot afford to be negligent and lose their aura of wealth.

Tom, whose hour and a half long narrative was laced with vignettes regarding wealthy students who conspicuously consume, spoke of becoming adept at navigating the two worlds in which he lives, partially through performance. When I mentioned growing up poor yet going to a rich school he vehemently agreed: “Me too... a dual existence, one foot in each world.” Tom saw his childhood and his school days not as a progression of time, but as two completely separate worlds, where he had learned to nimbly maneuver amongst the two, a move reminiscent of the participants observed by John L. Jackson in “Birthdays, Basketball, and Breaking Bread: Negotiating with Class in Contemporary Black America”. Jackson follows the movements of various black participants who grew up poor but eventually raised their lot. Faced with, as Tom put it, “a dual existence” they too had “one foot in each world” as they maintained relationships with their family and friends in Harlem while simultaneously building a new, bourgeoisie life. Paul, Jackson’s first interviewee, echoes Tom exactly when he states ““it’s really like I have two lives”” (Jackson 2001:269). Paul unpacks this statement when he reveals ““It’s like I have to be two different people”” (Jackson 2001:269). Paul has to perform correctly with both his work friends and with his street buddies, yet they require vastly different performances.

The same can be said for Duke lower income students, many of whom act in a completely different manner when at home as opposed to when at Duke. Tales of masking accents (especially heavy Southern drawls) abound, yet the meaning behind this runs deeper. Lower income students at any university can feel compelled to perform the class that they are learning to become a part of, rather than where they come from, yet simultaneous feelings of betrayal can occur. If they are not ashamed of their background then why do they not act and speak as they do at home? Why is it necessary to eschew colloquial language for the high diction of the educated if you know you are just as smart? Often, members of a student's home community will see the new persona as a rejection of that culture, and treat the student with disdain. Jackson notes that "Welfare kids turned first-generation college graduates and middle class professionals bespeak the quickly formed and often major social distances that can strain some of the interactions between parents and their children" (Jackson 2001:278). Students who return home with new ideas that might not mesh with the predominant culture in their hometown may feel as if they have to make a judgment on which is better. Whichever ideas they chose to adhere to demonstrate which ones they deem more valuable, and this can cause familial rifts. The most significant maneuvering that one has to do, however, is the constant changing between vastly different milieus. Tom explains this idea when he claims,

"At times I've been known to be a chameleon, I think everyone is, especially if you are in our position on financial aid. I have friends at home who are rednecks, and I can hang out with them or hang out with really rich people here, or with businesses men's kids at home. I have to wear different hats. This has made me break down distinctions. My perception of class is not prohibitive to me. But I do think that it is important."

“Chameleon”, *“different hats”*: all phrases used to describe someone changing to adapt to their environment. Tom does not feel that he is outwardly the same person everywhere he goes, but rather chooses his props wisely, and thus can ease into any “world” he chooses. Furthermore, Tom does not question the fact that he performs differently in different situations: he takes it at face value, as if it is the only way to proceed. For Tom, classes are so distinct from each other that the same person cannot transcend (or descend) through class on a whim—they must first change their colors.

Ken sees class performance a bit differently than does Tom, but he sees it as a performance nonetheless. Ken feels that to comfortably navigate different situations one must possess a sort of “adaptability”. Paul, Jackson’s main informant, chose his girlfriend, Laura, for this very reason. Although Paul, a successful architect raised in the inner city, has to keep his two circles of friends separate, Laura can accompany him either way.

“That is why Laura is so bad. That is what is so cool about her. She can roll anywhere. We can be at a hip-hop concert, at a, a play, at a business meeting, what have you, and she is perfect in all those places. [Sic] Someone who is just comfortable in all kinds of circles” (Jackson 2001:270).

Ken would most likely take to Laura if they met, as Ken, who moves frequently between classes in his family and friend groups, finds adaptability valuable in a companion. Ken also finds that determining someone else’s class is more difficult than one might think, and that the person can change other’s perception of them.

“I think people make assumptions. I know lots of people who say “this person has tons of money,” but I know for a fact that they definitely do not, or are on fin aid. I think it depends on

how you carry yourself. At the end of the day its ‘Can I take you somewhere, introduce you to my family, do you have the right attitude?’ I don’t wanna say have the “right” personality or say malleable, but are you adaptable, there you go. To different situations, are you cultured enough that you perform in a different setting.”

Here, Ken not only mentions performance of class but notes that it is essential to be able to perform differently based on the setting. Throughout Ken’s interview he made clear that he does not think putting on airs equals class, but rather the ability to fit in and act accordingly in any situation. Ken calls the ability to span classes being adaptable, while Tom refers to it as being a chameleon or wearing different hats. What both are saying is that the same person cannot move between classes, unchanged. Instead, each different class must be performed, by changing oneself—by adapting.

However, Ken does not see conspicuous consumption as a harbinger of class. For him class is a measure of comportment, one exhibited more so in other countries than in America. Ken notes that he often sees Duke students attempting to perform a higher class by conspicuously consuming, but he feels that they are missing the true meaning of class by doing so.

“...here you see a lot of Americans with money flaunting it left and right, I’ve seen people “throw” money at Shooters, ‘I’m going to show everyone I have it’. And that’s just not class, I feel a lot of internationals conduct themselves with this other concept of class, that’s why you don’t see them flaunting. That’s being at Duke, a lot of people may have a lot but they aren’t flaunting it like that. Maybe that’s another reason the culture here is like that, Duke is a very international school and you just don’t see

large displays of money, and if you do it's not in the open its behind closed doors in a small social group.”

Ken abhors conspicuous consumption as a means of performing class, and sees flaunting money as completely different than being cultured. It was apparent that Ken had thought about this before, as when prompted on the subject he deliberated on the cause of certain Duke student's conspicuous consumption:

“I think a lot has to do with insecurities, more from home than Duke. They come all the way from home. Say someone from their family has been living above...directly at their means, no savings, what you get in is what you spend. You're living in a beautiful million-dollar house, making a million a year, that's where money goes. A lot of kids can't afford other things—well there are other accounts a lot, people know how to work the system, but a lot of people living above their means, maybe they don't live in a nice house, don't let people come over, but dress really nicely, other things, but can't afford it. And I feel like that is brought from where they're from. And that kind of conception keeps coming. You learn too—like a lot of the kids who come from very rich, private school and are surrounded by it, so you say ‘I'm going to buy this too and fit in with the other girls and guys and what they can afford even if I can't afford it,’ I'm socializing with them. I think its deeper rooted, it doesn't start at Duke it starts long before, I can't stress that enough. I think people bring that here, you learn that behavior well before.”

From Ken's perspective the image of the Duke student who spends and consumes cannot be attributed to Duke culture but rather lessons learned from home. Parents, overstretched, teach their child the value of appearances over security, and students who spent their grade school

years keeping up with their peers are already thoroughly trained when they enter the Duke arena. Ken does not see conspicuous consumption to be a problem at Duke, but others, like Tom, do. Either way, both sides agree that one's idea of class—and how to perform it—is taught at a young age and carried into one's adulthood.

Here, Ken recognizes (although he does not approve) that conspicuous consumption is a large part of how American's perceive class. Judith Butler asserts “But the more mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence” (Butler 1988:5). If we take class and gender to be almost interchangeable in the discourse of performativity then it can be understood that student's performance of class by means of conspicuous consumption is elicited by the “sedimented expectations” of how class should be performed—something they learned from their parents. And while they could attempt to break away from this type of performance, and instead perform in the way that Ken mentioned, they might not achieve their class distinction that way, as it is not the usual way of performing class in America. It is interesting to note that while Ken performs the “international” idea of class quite well he is also adept at the conspicuous consumption part. Although he does not indiscriminately consume like many of his peers, the way that he dresses and his material possessions mark him very clearly as high-class. Ken may not like the idea of American “class”, but he seems quite cognizant of what is required of him to perform it, and obliges.

Monica also mentioned class as a performance, but in a more personal form than either Tom or Ken. Monica had perhaps the greatest insight regarding class performance, as she was the only interviewee who admitted to performing it herself as a way to evade discrimination:

“The other thing is at least, that, whether we like it or not society cares a lot about your clothes and reputation and wealth. I know my mom will purposefully buy me brand names and dress me nicely. Things are on sale but you don’t know that! She wants me to look wealthier. We can afford it but she wants me to look like I’m perfectly well-off and I don’t have any problems so I don’t encounter any discrimination, especially because I’m a minority. If you look at what I wear it might look like I’m richer sometimes, but it’s part of the illusion. It’s also for the Asians in America... represent Asian-Americans...were worth your time. I’m a woman, I’m a minority, but I’m smart, I’m accomplished, I’m well dressed. I’m worth your time.”

If it can be reasonably assumed that most people are performing class in some way or another then Monica’s self-recognition is remarkable in that she is the only participant who conveyed that they realize their actions (perhaps others realize it but do not want to admit it or did not think to mention it). Although Monica hails from a family of well-educated individuals they do not see mere speech and comportment as a marker of class: clothes are also essential, leading Monica’s mother to painstakingly dress her daughter in a way that effectively occludes their socioeconomic status. Monica’s mother has imbued her with a sense of performing class not only to elude racism but to give their ethnic background a pleasing countenance. Monica represents her family’s country of origin not just by attending a premier university but also by being a proper, well-dressed woman. Even more, Monica displays Butler’s idea of constant acts of performance. She does not have one designer outfit, she does not wear nice clothes once in a while, she does it constantly, and knows that she must do so. Monica’s efforts to remain a part of her class are not only constant but conscious.

Ironically, although Monica is careful to perform class in a way that reflects positively on her culture her future class does not really matter personally to her. It does, however, greatly matter to social activism, and in her eyes the higher one's class the stronger the influence they have and the better chance for change. When asked whether her future class mattered to her the answer was very community oriented.

“Yes, I guess that has to do with my salary because they are linked. I guess I want to be in an upper class or higher class, but I guess that career-wise what I want to do kind of puts me there, if I still want to be a doctor. The other thing has to do with stability. Another... prestige and reputation. Not for my pride, but I think if you have a high rank or a lot of money and you have good intentions you can do a lot with that. It can be done from a lower class but people in higher class can make more of a difference. If I can walk into a room and instantly have respect and I have something I want to do people will listen to that rather than a random lower class person.”

Here Monica brings up the accepted but oft ignored concept that higher-class person's often have greater power. Bill Gates and the average soup kitchen volunteer may be equally generous, but it is the former who has exacted the most change and will touch the most lives. Monica recognizes this, and also recognizes that the best way for her to make more of a difference is to raise her class. “I don't want to be hindered if I want to do something for someone else. I would like to work in a clinic, or medical missions, but if I don't have money it's a lot harder to do that.” For Monica, class is not important to her as a label, but rather as a tool.

Middle Class

When asked what class they are a part of the participants gave different answers (partly because they do belong to different classes). The two who saw themselves as lower class, however, refused to be attached to the description, citing their current process of moving into the middle class. Furthermore, the third participant who would count as being in the lower class as his family receives government aid found himself to be middle class as well. It seems that none of the participants would willingly submit to the lower class label. Even more, some participants noted how even the richest at Duke deem themselves “middle class”. Tyrone noted a friend who reluctantly admitted that they *might* be upper middle class instead of middle class despite a family yearly income of a quarter of a million dollars.

In The Way Class Works Wendy Luttrell details the middle class illusion, where a majority of American’s find themselves to be middle class even though statistically this cannot be true. Luttrell explains the tendency of Americans who, socioeconomically, would be considered of a lower class.

“In both cases, the meaning of ‘middle-class-ness’ is associated with moral fitness, while ‘lower-class-ness’ is equated with moral weakness. Thus, it is no surprise that the vast majority of Americans identify themselves as ‘middle class,’ and are much more likely to recognize the power of personal initiative than the power of social class in determining social success or failure” (Luttrell 2008: 61).

Having a low income is one thing, but being “lower class” is an entirely different animal. As Ken and Tom detailed previously, class is not seen as merely monetary but has a value statement attached to it as well. Middle-class-ness connotes not only moral fitness, but also

intelligence, poise, and decorum. Calling someone low class does not refer to their checking account anymore, and has become a modern day insult. A simple internet search reveals that—just like the term “poor”—lower class is becoming a tabooed term. Authors oft prefer to use “working class”, which still confers a value judgment, just a better one. Lower class and working class may mean the same thing in the dictionary but working class connotes labor and bad luck while lower class connotes lazy and shiftlessness. Ultimately, it is not uncommon to hear someone whose income hovers around the poverty line call themselves middle class, for to do any different would be a self-insult.

There is also the issue of upper class Americans who refuse to admit their wealth, and also consider themselves middle class. This may be attributed to the fact that the upper class, like the lower class, also has some negative value judgments attached to its title. While the middle class is seen as hard working and down to earth (usually the product of lower class immigrants who, via labor and education, realized the American Dream) the upper class seems to be thought of as uncannily similar to the lower class—also lazy and shiftless, but with capital. A politically out-of-touch group of white men resting on the laurels of their forbearers is also not a class of which anyone wants to be a part. Instead, they wish to continue to be considered as middle class (though their off-shore bank accounts beg to differ), and thus their success is attributed to their hard work rather than their privilege. Luttrell sees this as Americans expressing a self-judgment, yet in a roundabout way.

“My argument in this chapter is that in the realm of discourse—the ways in which people talk and feel about themselves and others, and in the ever-so-subtle and everyday ways that people are oriented to understand their own success or failure—*the power of*

social class is hidden in notions of and feelings about individual worth, dignity, and respectability” (Luttrell 2008:62).

Here Luttrell brings power into the equation. Class is so important to Americans because it affects and proscribes how others should view them—and how they should view themselves. Being lower class is not poisonous, it’s the way that others judge you for it that is. A person who worked hard their whole life and provided for their family has earned self-love, but a person who is lower class has only earned self-loathing as it means they have failed at the American Dream, most likely due to their moral weakness. That the mere term “lower class” can turn the former description of a person’s success into the latter reveals the power of terminology. Class terminology also has power over how society views any college graduate. Often a middle class graduate is seen as hard working and intelligent, while an upper class one is viewed as privileged and riding on the coattails of their family’s success. This is seen especially at Duke, where students will wonder if a wealthy peer was accepted based on merit or based on the donations of their parents. Luttrell asserts that “class works at two levels—at the level of public discourse and at the level of individual subjectivities” (Luttrell 2008: 72). Although Americans read, write and speak of class often the effect that it has on one’s psyche and how one is judged is completely different. All levels of class are valued, and middle class usually connotes the best to the American public. It is due to this that the proportion of people who see themselves as middle class is higher than those who truly qualify.

Chapter 2: A Three-Pronged Argument for a Separate, Lower Income Culture

A Plethora of Cultures

The statements made by the participants regarding class also serve to prime a description of Duke's culture. It was hard to separate "culture" comments from "class" comments as the two are so intertwined, since the Duke culture in which they are immersed will logically inform how they see class. The illusion of middle class pervades Duke culture, yet so does the desire for advancement. When alluding to Duke culture many participants cited conspicuous consumption as a given, although some argued with the idea. The different focal points of each student's story assert that there is no one "true" Duke experience, student, or culture. Although similar threads ran through the participants narratives they demonstrated a diverse and sometimes opposing idea of a Duke and financial aid experience.

As much as the media, faculty, and researchers try to lump Duke students under one common experience there really is no one "true" culture. In "Towards a Theory-Based Measurement of Culture" Straub *et al* argues for the existence of "An alternate theory-based view of culture via social identity theory (SIT), which suggests that each individual is influenced by plethora of cultures and sub-cultures—some ethnic, some national, and some organizational" (Straub et al 2003:13). This applies directly to the Duke student, who does not function under the "Duke culture" but rather is influenced by many different cultures, all which amalgamate to form the student's individual "Duke experience". There are an almost infinite number of arguable cultures on and around Duke's campus, and while some cultures—like the Greek culture—have

a large member base, students who share one culture are simultaneously involved in so many other cultures that they will have entirely different experiences.

If I wish to argue the existence of a Duke lower income, financial aid culture I need to first give an overview of general Duke culture from which to contrast it. However, since there is no one Duke culture I will use the prevalent money culture of the majority—those who are not on financial aid, and fall in the upper middle to upper class. I will explore this culture as described by the students I interviewed. Whether it expresses the “true” majority money culture or not is largely unimportant: what is significant is how these financial aid students contrast themselves from it, if they find contrast at all. It is again important to recognize that one money culture will not cover all upper income students and the focus should lie in how financial aid students view the spending of their wealthier peers, and how their divergence from it reveals their own, separate culture.

Recent media attention regarding racially charged parties has the country assuming that Duke is brimming with insensitive, rich, white students. Bianca would vehemently argue against this description.

“I don’t subscribe to the “all Duke is rich” thing. I always had Duke on my mind, I came for TIP [a program for gifted youngsters] and Duke paid for that. I figured they did that for other people too, so I never thought you had to be rich, I knew they had great financial aid. I don’t really know people’s backgrounds until you talk to them, even then it’s hard to tell. Some people don’t give up that info, it doesn’t come up.”

Bianca was well acquainted with Duke’s generous financial aid years before she could apply and once there could not really distinguish between groups. “I don’t know if there is but I

think there used to be, the quintessential Duke student. I couldn't think of one, we're so dedicated to people being who they are." Here, Bianca notes a nuance that the media does not care to delve into—a student body where most individuals have higher means than the average American, but where differences are celebrated and difficult social issues are confronted. However, Bianca would not be shocked by the media's portrayal: "I guess the stereotype of a preppy rich white kid is there," she notes. Thus, although there exists a stereotype recognized by anyone acquainted with Duke, it is not held as a truth for all Duke students.

Prong One: A Rejection of the Dominant Money Culture

Image and the Dominant Money Culture

Ashley's account of Duke culture may explain the erroneous image of a "quintessential Duke student". Ashley has found that most Duke students fail to understand the significance of financial aid at Duke. "I don't think the Duke community is open, those who are not on financial aid don't necessarily understand that there ARE people on financial aid." Ashley does not see this as a problem, but rather a benefit. "But that's the great thing about Duke" she continues "you can attend this university and nobody would know, because, 1) Duke has good financial aid, you can live comfortably, everyone is in a dorm, meal plan, were all the same, but I would say some people are oblivious, because of the fact you can blend in so easily. They don't think that there are students of lower SES. There's an assumption that everyone comes from money." Ashley believes that most people at Duke do not realize the extent of financial aid that students are given each year and the prevalence of financial aid students on campus. While some may see this as insensitive Ashley views it as the opposite—because Duke equalizes its students in such a way that one's financial status can remain a secret if desired, students are not in danger of having

their socioeconomic statuses “outed”. Multiple students have admitted to purposely dressing and comporting themselves in ways that obfuscate their true financial status. Again, some may find this practice deplorable, but in reality it allows for each student to be seen as they wish to be seen.

Purposefully molding one’s image is not exclusive to financial aid student but is rather a fixture of the Duke experience. Image is a complex and constructed thing, and every person at Duke (if not the world) is guilty of playing with the structure of their own image. Tom feels that Duke as a whole plays with its image. “It seems like we’re more talk than action, bark than bite, for a lot of things. Academically we have this narrative that we’re a great school, we have this Ivy jealousy. Like were trying to create this image of this institution that is Duke.” Tom lays bare the awkward, yet widely known fact that many people who go to Duke also applied to certain top Ivy League schools and were rejected. Duke students are known for their competitive streak, which does not take kindly to being bested by another school. This can also be seen in the opposite direction when students revel in the advantage that Duke affords them as they apply to well ranked medical schools or enter into highly competitive fields like investment banking and consulting.

Tom notes that academic image also extends to what high school students attended.

“I went to an incredibly high ranked [public] school. I know that my education is at least better than everyone here’s. I don’t feel disadvantaged. I didn’t pay a dime. It was the best I could have asked for. I do notice when people are defined by their private schools... I don’t get along super well with them. For some reason. I can’t think of any friends who went to private boarding school.” Not only is a student’s image affected by

their Duke status but also by their high school. Reputations are sometimes doled out based on what famous private school someone attended.

Image is not only important to the Duke student in the academic sense but socially as well. “Socially too, with ACB, people would post about themselves.” Tom remembers, referring to the popular yet caustic social ranking site.

“There was an anonymous message board, I knew a freshman down my hall, was responsible for 1/3 of the posts. HE would talk about others, talk about others as a sorority girls: a big farce. I knew girls who posted about themselves, that got them into a good sorority, which then made them cool. All because they were being talked about on ACB. The only worse thing than being talked about is not being talked about.”

Interestingly, Tom does not see these as isolated events. For him they speak to a larger set of values.

“We have this culture, very image oriented, I don’t know how much is true, but if you can create a narrative around yourself, people will believe it. No one looks into it. People have money, but I don’t think that many have that much. But people like to come off on that. Maybe were so willing to not look into the details, were just willing to accept the images that people share with us.”

Tom and Ashley both agree that image at Duke is a malleable and important concept; Ashley because Duke’s structure does not “out” a student’s financial background, and Tom for mutually beneficial reasons—if a person wishes to bend their own image to their liking then it behooves them to ignore the bending perpetrated by other students as well. If each student turns

a blind eye to other's truths, then the "narrative" they create for themselves will likely go unchallenged.

Tom not only has ideas regarding the importance of image at Duke but also believes that he has pinpointed the reason for student's discomfort with their true reality. "I think it's more of a middle-upper class thing. When you're middle to upper class, you strive for upper class. [Sic] once you are up there you don't care. You don't have to prove yourself to anyone."

Tom's comments raise the issue that Duke may be a school in which some people are not quite comfortable with where they are or where came from. A boon instead of a bust, this results in dedicated and competitive students who are eager to raise their lot in life, even if it is already elevated. Yet these students are not bucking the trend mentioned by Luttrell to want to be in the middle class—if you are born in the upper class and fail to move up it is seen as a disappointment, yet a middle-upper class person who attains the upper class receives the benefits of both worlds: they are seen as having middle class savvy, yet the intelligence and drive to move up the ladder. Financial aid students, on the other hand, seem to not show the same hunger for sweeping upwards class movement, a phenomenon that will be addressed later.

The Dominant Money Culture: Conspicuous Consumption and Dichotomies

If students actively try to obfuscate their financial background, they must have a vehicle through which to do so. This comes in the form of conspicuous consumption, something that anyone who passes through Duke's campus is likely to encounter in one form or another. Conspicuous consumption comes by way of purchasing expensive items, many inexpensive items, or acting with a general wantonness towards money in a highly visible manner. But Tom, like Ken, does not see this as an effect of Duke but rather a symptom of upbringing.

“We have a lot of nouveau riche, we don’t pull that much old money. The spending habits of the nouveau riche tend to be more exuberant. The old money... you’ve been sitting on millions, ‘I can have anything I want, that’s just the way it is.’ But when you *just* got the money you’re like, ‘Look I have it, I can do this.’ It’s becoming part of your personality.”

For Tom conspicuous consumption comes not from the upper class, but the newly made upper class. Again, this does not so much reflect Duke as it does the background from which these students come. Here a dichotomy has already arisen—the spending habits of Duke’s elite are divided into new and old money.

This dichotomy reveals itself in the already dichotomized subject of Duke money habits. Regardless of class status Duke students (along with most of the world) can be divided into spenders and savers. This may seem redundant—the financial aid students will save, the non-financial aid students will spend. However, this assumption is erroneous. Ask Tyrone, who despite having a friend group that boasts some of the world’s money elites, has never felt uncomfortable with his limits. “I feel like Duke has a dichotomy. I feel like my friend group doesn’t place a large value on money. No one is going to view me differently. There is definitely a culture of people who are really intertwined, like the fraternities, who place so much value on a person’s possessions and wealth.” Tyrone’s Duke experience solidifies why it is important to not classify one culture or another as specifically “Duke”. Although Tyrone sees a significant spending culture at Duke he does not feel that it is a huge part of *his* Duke experience, highlighting that opposing ideals, backgrounds, and experiences create a different Duke experience for each individual. Tyrone’s friends may be in the top 1% of wealthy in their

respective countries, but their abhorrence of conspicuous consumption renders them the perfect friends for money-conscious Tyrone.

Tom disagrees with Ken in that he *does* think that Duke itself may have something to do with the large spending culture.

“It might be a cultural thing. I was raised that not spending money is saving money. At Duke you don’t hear people saying ‘I saved 3 bucks,’ they don’t care. At Duke, if you think about it, the way our meal plan is set up, it teaches us to spend money. Easily people spend 30\$ a day. And you get indoctrinated into it. Were also being bred to spend money. There is also a culture for who can outspend other people.”

Tom thinks that the very system that Ashley believes creates equality also breeds equality of a more negative kind—equal, overzealous spending. The rich students spend, and the poor students learn how to spend for when they hopefully become rich. A student like Tom who arrives at Duke conscious of each dollar in his pocket will quickly learn the spending habits of the upper class, preparing him for his future. In fact many financial aid students use their work-study jobs to fund their social life, another way that Duke’s structure allows them to create their own reality. Duke does not force a financial aid student to be frugal just because they come from a lower income, Duke ensures the relative equality of spending across all students.

However, Tom’s comment reveals an interaction between Duke bred spenders and students who may already have a tendency to spend: perhaps it’s not one or the other, but the two reacting against each other. Yet unlike Tyrone, Tom’s friends do not all fall on one side or another. He is close with both spenders and savers, and oddly the two groups never mix.

“I have a good mix of fin aid and non fin aid friends. I have a group that’s mostly on fin aid, another group that is incredibly rich. The kids are slightly different. I talk about money with people on fin aid more. If I go to dinner with non-fin aid people, they spend a lot on dinner and think it’s cheap. I hear friends make comments about not taking the bus, the half-breds take busses. They drive to East and Central, and they eat off campus. \$2000 in food points is mostly for protein shakes at the gym.”

Obviously Tom’s two groups of friends might not mesh well, and for that reason Tom does not attempt to bring them together. The dichotomy between spenders and savers at Duke becomes stark in this case, where the two are so separated that even a mutual friend cannot create a common ground. And it is Tom’s spending friends who conspicuously consume in a way that would surprise even those well acquainted with Duke’s consuming culture. Tom recalls a friend who

“went to the liquor store and he dropped \$250. Then he called his Dad and said ‘I have to make an emergency alcohol run, sorry.’ Usually he doesn’t call his dad for purchases under \$400. The Dad said as long as it’s under \$500. The Dad thought a phone call meant \$700, probably. Money just didn’t matter to him. This guy only buys Ciroc, a handle of that is \$80. Stuff like that. I don’t know how much he has, but this is what he does. This is how he is trying to come off as. I think that Duke is very image oriented.”

This is where image, consumption, and the nouveau riche collide. Tom, whose spectrum of friends might span farther than the average student’s has very poor friends as well as friends who are allowed to spend \$500 on one liquor run. Tom does not believe that this friend is spending just for the heck of it—Tom sees it as a calculated performance of the friend’s money.

This friend does not need top shelf alcohol to drink, but he needs it to portray himself in the way that he wants to be seen. Furthermore alcohol is one of the easiest products to conspicuously consume: this young man's friends might not be able to see if he flies first class or how nice his home is, but they can certainly see, and judge, the alcohol that he serves. Tom does not mention whether this friend was nouveau riche or not, but it logically follows that he is, based on Tom's assertion that he only has a couple old-money friends. Tom's nouveau riche friend conspicuously consumes in a direct effort to keep up his image, something that Tom assumes he cares deeply about.

The Dominant Money Culture: The Internationals

In an attempt to dichotomize Duke into "rich" and "poor" students one group evades being classified: the internationals. International students by rule cannot receive financial aid and must have the funds to foot the entire quarter million bill. However, as both Tom and Ken have pointed out, a quarter of a million American dollars means something entirely different in places like Sweden, where the dollar is weaker, or in South America, where the dollar is quite strong.

Tom notes

"I hang out with a lot of internationals too. It's weird, they are rich by their country's standards, by America's standards they would be wealthy, not rich. But they have the baggage of being rich in their country. They expect certain things, it's weird sometimes. It's an entirely different culture than on financial aid. If you can afford Duke from your home country, you're a big deal at home."

This special circumstance creates an intricacy that only country borders can produce—an international student from one country may find Duke's fee a pittance, yet still be "poorer" by

their country's standards than the next international student who struggles to pay tuition. A majority of Duke's international students come from money, but the way in which money is expressed may vary.

Tom is a difficult person to pigeon hole into one opinion or the other. An American raised abroad he has carved a niche for himself in the international group, but sometimes does not feel comfortable with their spending habits. His second and separate group of friends is the non-rich, mostly financial aid students, and according to Tom, they never interact. This knowledge adds a deeper intricacy into our previous knowledge of Tom. Tom has rich friends and poor friends, with the rich ones being mostly international and the poor being American. To complicate things more, although Tom is international, he himself is one of Duke's lower income students. Thus he matches his one group of friends in money, and the other in international status. Despite Tom's international friend's conspicuous consumption Tom sees something in them that he does not in Americans—the willingness to, as he says, “slum it”. Tom talks about a rich Puerto Rican friend who despite being wealthy has no qualms with spending time with poor people, a concept that he fails to see in the US. Tom's friend believes that “US people are more conscious about status.” Tom agrees with him.

“I don't know what happens in the states. I notice it too... Those two groups are completely different. If I was with one I wouldn't even run into the other, I would have to make an effort to switch. I don't know what it is about this culture but it separates people and keeps them separate.”

Tom's Puerto Rican friend reveals the extent of the spectrum of Tom's international group; some designate buses for half-breds, yet others prefer to “slum it” and spend time in the

impoverished parts of their countries. Perhaps Tom and Ken's international friends do not all subscribe to the un-monied idea of class as they described before: some, like Americans, chose to prove their class through consumption, while others chose their company regardless of income.

Even though Tom may applaud his international friend's views on an un-monied class he does not subscribe to their spending habits. "I can keep up with the international kids because I work a ton." Tom explains. "If I wanted to I could keep up, but they legitimately spend \$1000 a month. I don't try to spend all that money. If I tried to keep up my budget would have to be that... they just put it on dad's credit card and don't worry about it." Tom's has many anecdotes that revolve around wealthy international students spending money, and so do many people at Duke. However the extent of this spending might surprise some as it is usually not highly publicized. It could be that said students are merely keeping up with each other, or that impressing one's friends rather than the masses is most important. It could also be that this is normal spending to them and really not an occasion for fanfare.

Perhaps they have different international friends, perhaps they have had similar experiences and interpret them different ways, but Ken's experience with his largely international friend group utterly and totally opposed Tom's. "[Internationals are] very good about their money," Ken proclaims, citing numerous examples. Ken's experience with his friends is that of a give-and-take relationship. Everyone is generous with their money and at the end of the day no one is taken advantage of. "Someone's going to get them back one way or another. 'You did something so nice, you paid for everyone's drinks last night, I'll get your appetizer, we'll all band together and get you dinner.' Always reciprocity." Ken asserts. I brought up an example of a dinner with American Duke students (half on financial aid, half not)

in which a non-financial aid student ordered an expensive entrée and drink for themselves, and then expected everyone to split the bill, asking how comfortable he would have been in that situation to communicate his limits. Ken immediately asked if the person was American (he was right) and said that this sort of thing would never happen in his group of friends, giving an example:

“Say you go to a tapas bar, you all get a tapa and share that. That’s fine you agree to it. Maybe this is biased, maybe it’s just my friends, but they would NEVER get the most expensive thing on the menu knowing we’re all going to split it. I’ve never seen someone go ‘Oh, I’ll get the filet mignon’ [and everyone else is saying] ‘I’ll get this salad, I’ll get this burger.’ We all got something around \$13, split it, we all shared a bottle of wine, split it.” For Ken and his friends splitting a bill is not an issue as they all are conscientious of each other’s pocket books. However, it is important to note that Ken and Tom’s idea of what is expensive is most likely very different.

I interviewed Tom after Ken, and relayed Ken’s stories of international frugality to Tom, who was shocked.

“Really?” Tom asked incredulously, “Because the ones [internationals] I go out with.... Sophomore year I think they went to Cheesecake Factory every week, spent \$30-40, and then Fuji every other day. That’s where they had dinner. Or PF Chang’s. [Sic] The key is not going out very often with them. But yah they spend a lot of money. They value food... they also come from cultures where meals are more important. They make it a 2 hour event, talk and talk and talk. I don’t know what they wouldn’t spend money on though... but [meals are] a bigger deal for them though so spending money on it isn’t a problem.”

Tom recognizes that spending money on a meal may relate to its cultural importance, but he does not see his international friends skimp elsewhere. The clash between Tom and Ken's opinions is interesting, and the reason for it is unknown. However, the backgrounds of the two could have something to do with it. Tom was raised in an environment where every dollar mattered while Ken's childhood may have been more middle class. The difference could be as simple as the two having almost identical experiences but different backgrounds—a \$30 meal for Ken may be a reasonable splurge and for Tom an extravagance. Or perhaps the reason is something else entirely, and cannot be ascertained by studying snippets from either conversation.

Tyrone is a completely different case although he also calls some of Duke's wealthy international students his closest friends. Tyrone is not afraid to state facts: "All the other international students, you know they have money. Depending on their country they are probably the top percent of their nation." Yet the wealth of Tyrone's friends is kept under wraps, to the point of him sometimes not even being aware of it. "My international friends have never flaunted wealth. The other day one of my friends mentioned that my other friend is really wealthy and everyone was really surprised." Here, we again see dichotomies at play. Tom and Ken have had dichotomous experiences with international friends—all are obviously rich but differ on how they spend (and flaunt or hide) the extent of their wealth. Yet Tom and Ken's international friends can be seen as dichotomous to Tyrone's, who spend so little (or spend so little publically) that their closest peers have no concept of their wealth. These three students all have an intimate relationship with groups of international students, whom they all see as affluent, yet their experiences are completely opposite from one another. Their interpretation of an "international culture" would vary to the point of being unrecognizable, even though many of the individual experiences are the same. This speaks to the role of interpretation in how one emotionally

experiences something, and how an agreement regarding the international culture could never be attained.

Ultimately, the way in which the financial aid participants spoke of the internationals, conspicuous consumption, and image as they relate to the dominant money culture reveals a disconnect with it. The participants did not situate themselves within this dominant money culture, but seemed to work outside of it. This rejection of the dominant money culture argues that perhaps lower income students work inside their own, separate money culture.

Prong 2: Self-identification Regarding a Lower Income Money Culture

An important factor in the argument for a lower income culture is demonstrating a tangible separation between the lower income/financial aid students and the middle-to-upper income students. And while this can be achieved in a variety of ways I chose to first ascertain whether the former felt a separation from the latter. This is apparent in the way they talk about the spending habits of their non-financial aid peers—they do not include themselves in it. Another way to ascertain the existence of a separate culture is by directly questioning participants if they believe that they are part of one. Doing this got a mixed response and revealed another dichotomy: some felt it strongly and others not at all. Ultimately, most fell on the side of feeling that there is some culture difference or another between them and students not on financial aid.

Most participants expressed tangible ideas of belonging to a different money culture than their higher-income peers. Ashley finds that many other students are not acquainted with her socioeconomic background and willingly disabuses them of their oblivion. As previously noted, she states that:

“I’m comfortable with the fact that I’m on financial aid but I don’t feel the need to publicize it, but I will make a point of it if someone is being oblivious or ignorant, because we do have a lot of people who weren’t exposed to things because they grew up with a privileged lifestyle so I would say it to educate them on life.”

Ashley does not see herself as exposed to different environments than higher-income students but rather sees higher-income students lacking in knowledge in fundamental aspects of “life”. This introduces an innovative perspective: maybe it’s not lower income individuals who need cultural education but the upper income ones. This harkens back to programs such as Friendlytown where poor children spend a week or two with rich families, but the opposite does not occur. Ashley’s story supports her argument—a lower income female, she has experienced travel, education, and upper class culture since coming to Duke, yet none of her upper income peers have seen or experienced lower-income culture. This phenomenon refers to the argument previously made regarding class as a valued institution. Middle and upper class things like travel and education are seen as an essential part of a Renaissance man or woman’s experience, yet learning how to “slum it”, as Tom called it, is not considered valuable. This demonstrates society’s abhorrence of anything to do with the lower class, even though many of its experiences (such as living on a budget) are objectively valuable.

Tom argues against this sentiment early on in his interview, although he unwittingly echoes it near the end. Tom first stated that

“a poor person can’t relate to a rich person the same way a rich person can to a poor person. You can always move down... I think it’s easier for someone who’s interacted with the upper class to interact with the lower class rather than the other way

around. If someone is poor they aren't going to go to a fancy restaurant and know things. But if you are rich you can go and hang out with poor people.”

Tom may believe this, but his personal story states otherwise—a person raised in poverty who now has the ability and wherewithal to communicate with any echelon of society. Later, Tom echoes Ashley when he notes that “I just think it's difficult sometimes to open up about that stuff... poverty is foreign to some people, it's not safe, not comfortable.” Here, Tom reveals that it can be hard to share poverty with those who have never seen it, as it makes them ill at ease. To counteract this discomfort Tom simply does not share his experiences often. Both Tom and Ashley's statements reveal society's judgments regarding the class and culture from which it is better to hail.

Financial aid students, on the other hand, do not escape Tom's critique.

“I noticed that people on financial aid make money more of an issue than they have to, and they don't have very good spending habits. I can think of 3 friends, 100% on fin aid. They went abroad, one got thousands of dollars from Duke and spent it within a month. He went to every country in Europe, would spend 150-200 euros a night on vacation. He had to borrow money. But this guy doesn't have money... maybe because he didn't have money and now that he had it he was willing to spend it. It didn't seem like the people with the least amount of money have the best spending habits, sometimes the kids with money seem to understand it better.”

Here, Tom is careful to not blindly subscribe to the common idea that those who make less money wield what they have more adroitly than those who never have to worry about a budget. Tom's indiscriminant scrutiny of all aspects of society rendered him an astonishingly

educated informant as he was careful to never blindly follow some ideology or another without evidence of its veracity. Even though Tom is on financial aid his background diverges in terms of other financial aid students—unlike most financial aid students who grew up without money but wanted for more, Tom’s family *chose* to have less. For them money was never something to covet, but to pass around and save. Perhaps that Tom and his family eschewed money rather than lacked it contributes to his unique attitude towards money. Either way Tom notices a difference between himself and certain lower income students, one that could be explained by a number of different factors—perhaps these students are so excited to finally have something to spend that they spend it recklessly, or, maybe as Tom mentioned, they still do not quite “understand” it.

For Ken, it is his classroom experiences rather than personal ones that truly reveal a separate, lower income culture. Ken notes that

“some professors bring it up—‘How many people are from a single parent family, how many are on financial aid, raise your hand.’ It was funny because people raised their hand and she counted. Then we did a secret poll and it was different. It was skewed towards people who didn’t say it in the class. That was interesting.”

Ken’s anecdote reveals an ideation of difference—if the single-parent and financial aid students felt their background was of equal value as everyone else then why did they refuse to raise their hand? The fact that they did not shows they feel that they are different from their upper income peers, something that highlights the existence of a separate culture.

Many participants answered whether they felt there was a separate financial aid culture or not through allusion, and while some said no, many agreed that there was. Mann explained that

“The typical students with jobs here are on financial aid. For you not to be on it you have to be really wealthy. There is a difference of worlds... I don't want to stereotype the people not on financial aid as spoiled but a lot of them do have certain tendencies...there is a difference in culture, we come from different backgrounds. I don't want to stereotype either side, but we tend to be more appreciative of what we have while others take it for granted. Story—two male students walking around, one said ‘Of course I'm rich, I drive a BMW’”.

Here, Mann describes the difference between him and upper income students in a variety of ways: tendencies, culture, worlds, and backgrounds. Each a different word, but all connoting the same thing. Mann recognizes that some of his feelings might not be politically correct, but he backs them up with powerful anecdotes to the point where one cannot really blame him. Mann does not merely see himself as different from his upper income peers, but sees his *culture* as entirely different from theirs. This sentiment is echoed by Monica. When asked who she related to better she immediately responded

“Definitely students on financial aid. The fact that money is more of a consideration is really big in everyday life... going out to dinner, the things you buy, events you can go to. If money is not an issue it's a very different atmosphere. I know one of my really good friends isn't super rich but he pays full, and he tried to be conscientious and modest but sometimes there is an obvious disconnect.”

Here, Monica names the feeling Tom has when he tries to explain poverty to rich students: *disconnect*. And a disconnect between two different groups raises an immediate red flag that perhaps two cultures are in existence. When asked straight out if there exists a tangible

culture difference Monica had an equally straightforward answer: “I think there is. I’m guessing it comes from attitudes, interests, abilities, because it’s not a conversation topic. I think people on fin aid or off end up doing different things.” Like Mann, Monica sees the ways in which lower and upper income students differ as numerous and vast. Monica also agrees that finances may have influenced the friends she chose.

“I talked about this in my friend groups. Duke has rich kids but I don’t know them. My friend group is middle class or upper middle class, not billionaires. Could be people in my dorm or premed classes, but also I met people that I could connect with because we couldn’t afford the same thing.”

Not only does Monica see Duke’s money cultures as separate but she sees herself and her friends situated in a culture determined by their income. Monica’s various friend groups came about through similarities: living in the same area, having the same major, and coming from the same class background. Monica belongs to many different cultures, and the culture defined by her lower income is apparent in this list.

However, some participants balked at the idea of a financial aid culture and had precise arguments against it. Bianca’s answer to a financial aid culture was simple: “Do Duke kids on fin aid band together? I don’t know, I haven’t seen it, I like to think they don’t.” Bianca is open to a financial aid culture, but has never been privy to it if it exists. Tyrone on the other hand sees differences between the two dichotomous income groups but does not see that as a source of a whole separate culture.

“Um, I mean I would just assume—not to sound presumptuous I guess—but I would assume that people who are on financial aid are obviously people from lower

income families, right? So there's probably a slight difference in culture in terms of where they grew up and how they were raised. But I feel like, in the sense that everyone at Duke is much smarter than the average person, that it's not really as strong of a presence, like a clash of culture, just because everyone is more "refined", (for lack of a better term) than the average person." For Tyrone the similarity of mind that Duke students share supersedes any division that could be created by income. There is no separate financial aid culture to "clash" against an upper income one because all students are a part of an intelligence culture that supplants anything else.

Thus far support for the existence of a financial aid culture has been presented in the ways that financial aid students feel separate from the majority spending habits at Duke as well as if they self-identify as being a part of a lower income culture. However, this can become a problem of the emic and etic, as mentioned before. Something that I may call "culture" in an interview might not resonate with the participant, because perhaps they would see it more as a "friend group", though either one would support the argument. Students may not necessarily identify themselves in this culture or that. If this is the case then a more colloquial and accepted term must be used to delve into the true feelings of the participants, in this case the term *camaraderie*. A feeling of camaraderie with members of a group or with a group as a whole can reveal the presence of a culture.

Prong 3: A Culture Defined by Camaraderie

Many participants felt some sort of camaraderie or another with financial aid students, but this camaraderie interestingly meant something different to each one. For Ashley, the import given to her camaraderie with other financial aid students was in the understanding.

“I would say there is a camaraderie and understanding. I know my friends on financial aid understand when you don’t want to waste your money on certain luxuries, things you don’t need. I would say camaraderie in that sense, we can’t blow off money like most people at this university can.”

Ashley does not have to explain to her financial aid friends why she cannot do this activity or another and does not have to explain why she likes to save her money. Monica’s perspective agrees with Ashley. When asked if she feels camaraderie between her and other financial aid students she responded, “Those are my close friends. Not necessarily all friends. I think we do, (kinda the day to day), we have the same concern of finances.” Monica calls this idea of financial solidarity “concern” while Ashley calls it something different, yet both connote essentially the same idea—that with their financial aid friends there is a mutuality about money that warrants no explanation or discussion, an understandable relief to anyone who is acquainted with the feeling of trying to explain one’s meager finances to someone who just does not quite get it.

Bianca sees her status as a financial aid recipient as a link to other similar students.

“There would be people who post Facebook statuses ‘I’m going to be UGA if I don’t get this fin aid straight’ [signifying that their income is low enough that they are dependent on financial aid to attend Duke] I am always looking for reasons to connect with someone.” When asked if there’s a camaraderie or understanding between financial aid students Bianca did not fully take one side or the other.

“I think it’s there, maybe not super fleshed out. It’s a sensitive topic, your monetary situation. There’s that ‘Yeah girl’ kinda of thing. Working, if you have a job.

Chit-chatting with people at the job. I'm not super social and there's a couple of kids I met through that... there are people around this age who might be transitioning from being more independent financially. Depends on the student, what kind of independence they want or care to have. One kid who pays for his own med school application, I don't think he had to but wanted to because he is an adult. I think I would connect with a person responsible for themselves, who tried to be, regardless of financial aid."

While Bianca might feel a camaraderie with other financial aid students it is not simply because they share a title but an experience. Bianca would feel just as close with a high-income student whose parents cut them off (a not uncommon phenomenon at Duke) as with a financial aid student. Bianca's camaraderie comes through shared experiences, not shared labels, and the answers given by some of the other participants seem to agree with this notion. "I think even a person who is/isn't on fin aid, I can connect with a person who had to pay their own bills, because I do." This comment sheds light on Bianca's unique situation. Even though Bianca may share a label with other zero-parental-contribution students many of those students still receive significant financial support from their parents, rendering them vastly different from Bianca despite the shared epithet. Due to this Bianca is careful to search for people similar to her in deed, and not just name.

When Mann answered who he relates better to I was a bit shocked by his answer, knowing his amity with many wealthy international students.

"A lot of my friends are on fin aid" he remarked, "... I don't really see anyone who isn't. It's hard to know everyone's situation. The majority of my close friends have jobs and seem to be on fin aid. But we relate because we have more in common, we have

to juggle things like work and school work, ‘Oh I have a shift tonight but a midterm tomorrow’. The pressure that come with it, we cope with it by talking about it and helping each other out.”

Perhaps he was not thinking of his wealthier friends, or perhaps he truly feels closest with his lower income friends. Either way, Mann sees his financial aid friends as a support group. Like Monica and Ashley, Mann finds that his financial aid friends are more understanding of his work schedule and the stress that he is under. When asked if his being on financial aid shaped his chosen friend group he wholeheartedly agreed.

“I think that the fact I am on financial aid means that I came from a low income background, and that shaped me where I have certain characteristics, and I value certain characteristics in other people, hard-working, motivated...not spoiled. Maybe my experience growing up like that made me favor people who are alike, kinda like me, from the same type of background. So, yes.”

Mann not only sees his financial aid friends as a support group but finds that their friendship stems from similar characteristics that hark back to their upbringing. He cherishes the ideals of his hard-working, immigrant family, and seeks them out in others. Yet while Mann and his friends exhibited a camaraderie, he was wary to call it that. “I don’t think it’s black and white like that. I do think that I have more in common with a student who is on fin aid because we have similar experiences and similar lifestyles here at Duke.” Mann exhibits every sign of camaraderie with his financial aid friends, but here we run into the emic and etic—he is not quite sure if that is the label he would bestow upon his friend group, and thus balks at doing so.

Some participants, on the other hand, were unequivocally against the idea of a special

camaraderie reserved for just their financial aid friends. When Ken was asked if he felt a camaraderie with those on financial aid, or no more so than anyone else his immediate response was “no more than anyone else” and that subject ended there. Ken firmly believes that friendships are not constrained by money but rather by comportment, and he himself has never had any trouble being a part of the wealthier crowd. Tyrone also recoiled at a money-driven camaraderie. “I don’t feel like there’s more camaraderie between me and any financial aid students compared to non-financial aid students.” He explains. “It might not be the same for everyone else but I feel that on a personal level I don’t identify as a financial aid student.” He goes onto to explain that being a financial aid student is not his “label”. Tyrone’s apparent lack of camaraderie with financial aid students comes largely from him not seeing himself as a financial aid student. Logically, he would not label others in this way either, so even if he did share a camaraderie with other financial aid students no one would know due to a refusal of labels. Also, Tyrone’s friend group achieves what Tom’s does not: a mutual appreciation by wealthy internationals and low income Americans that is unencumbered by money. The most monied activity that Tyrone and his friend group will participate in is going to various fast food restaurants, something that cannot alienate anyone based on finances.

In the end, more participants felt a camaraderie with other financial aid students than those who were staunchly against it. If camaraderie can be a precursor, or symptom, of culture then the financial aid students at Duke clearly have one. Throughout this chapter I argue the existence of a lower income culture through a rejection of the dominant money culture, a separate sense of culture, and a sense of camaraderie. All three have clear proponents and few opponents among participants, supporting the idea that, either through rejection, self-recognition, or camaraderie, Duke lower income students do create their own money culture.

Chapter 3: The American Myth and Cultural Capital

The American Myth

As old as this country is the adage that hard work results in riches, labor becomes financial might, and perseverance will always leave one better off than where they started. A tenet that attracted the predecessor of almost every citizen in the US, the American Dream is also a myth that has effectively been debunked. Video-show host Daniel Tosh jokes that “the American Dream is something only foreigners believe in” (Tosh 2013).

Yet many still cling to this moribund fairytale—adhering to it, perpetuating it. If you are knocked down, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. And if you don’t succeed, the only one you have to blame is you, for your obvious laziness. The only thing that prevented your success was your abhorrence of hard work. The only thing, and nothing else.

The working poor are quite aware of this hypocrisy, that 60 hour work weeks or working two jobs can paradoxically do nothing to alleviate poverty. Yet the fable persists, for this American ideology has long since wormed itself under the population’s skin and has entered into the hegemonic, only to have recently been brought back to consciousness, where it has become a challengeable ideology once again. Jean and John L. Comaroff cite the work of Raymond Williams to explain this complex interplay between ideology and hegemony. The Comaroffs combine their ideas with Williams, explaining ideology as “an articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] ‘worldview’ “of any social grouping” (Comaroff 1991:24). For Americans, this is the belief that anyone that works diligently can improve their lot in life, and the value attached to this idea—Americans like thinking this, as it

renders the impoverished citizen's life more bearable, and removes the class guilt from the wealthy upper echelons.

The Comaroffs also note that “the regnant ideology of any period or place will be that of the dominant group” (Comaroff 1991:24). Thus, the American upper class perpetuates the American Dream as an ideology because a) it reflects positively on them as a group, and b) removes them from any responsibility from the plight of the lower class. However, the public is aware of an ideology. They know what it is, perhaps even where it comes from, and can therefore contest its viability. But, “as we have said, the more successful [the dominant group is], the more of their ideology will disappear into the domain of the hegemonic; the less successful, the more that unremarked truths and unspoken conventions will become remarked, reopened for debate” (Comaroff 1991:26). According to this standard the ideology of the American Dream is quite successful: for over a hundred years it has remained unquestioned (evidenced by the hordes of immigrants who came and come to America for this very promise) and so powerful that its truth was automatic—no one questioned it because few even realized that it was there, working on the collective psyche of the American people. The Comaroffs also note that “Hegemony, as we have said, represents itself everywhere in its saturating silences or its ritual repetitions” (Comaroff 1991:30). The idea of the American Dream was silently upheld by every pauper who spent their existence laboring in quiet exertion with the expectation that their life would somehow improve. Every day that they rose early and dragged themselves to a low paying job, waiting for the time to come when they struck it rich as so many had done before them, they reinforced the power that the ideology had over them, and reinforced its hegemonic power over society. Yet today's society differs greatly from that of yesterday, and the hegemonic current of the American Dream that attracted hordes of immigrants is dissolving back into an ideology; an

ideology that is struck at over and over again by the millions of poor Americans who hold steady jobs and still cannot pay their bills on time.

However, this transition leaves two significant questions: how did the American Dream become so automatic that it transformed from an ideology into hegemony in the waves of immigrants that came to America from Europe, and why has this hegemony been recently yanked back into cognition, rendering it an ideology? Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco answers these questions in “Everything you Ever Wanted to Know about Assimilation but Were Afraid to Ask”. Suarez-Orozco speaks of how “the immigrant journey to success was the stuff of the American Dream” (2000:10). The American Dream did not come from current residents but rather European and Asian masses, attracted to promises of a better life. He explains that “One hundred years ago, low-skilled immigrant workers with very little formal schooling could, through floor-shop mobility, attain living wages and a comfortable lifestyle” (Suarez-Orozco 2000:19). One hundred years ago the American Dream was not only plausible, but achieved by many. Anyone willing to work long hours (and often, sacrifice their health) could “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and better their lot at least to the point where their children had more opportunities. It was in this point in history that the American Dream stopped being an ideology and entrenched itself in hegemony. It was no longer hoped that an impoverished foreigner could come to America and make more money than they ever could at home, but expected, as it happened over and over again. Even those who did not “strike it rich” still found themselves in a vastly better situation than in their home country—an Irishman might ruin his lungs in the coal mines but at least his children were not starving in the potato famine; a Slovak who spent his life coaxing sustenance out of a farm could at least do so knowing that his child could attend college, a mere dream back in the old country. No matter how they fared,

immigrants almost always ended up better off than from where they came. Even more, many embodied the rags-to-riches story that attracted even more immigrants en masse. The ideal of the American Dream was so ingrained in the American –and global—psyche that it could not even be identified as an ideology: it was completely hegemonic. The new Americans raced to “the prize at immigration’s finish line: the middle-class, white, Protestant, European American framework of the dominant society” (Suarez-Orozco 2000:8), and a majority succeeded, evidenced by today’s suburbia, filled with middle class, white, Protestant, European Americans. Whatever part of that description the original immigrant did not fit and could change, he did, and reaped his just rewards.

However, the attainability of this ideology was doomed to stagnate, rendering the hegemonic assailable, and thus no longer a hegemony. Suarez-Orozco notes that

“It may be no longer useful to assume that immigrants today are joining a homogenous society dominated by the middle class, white, European American Protestant ethos. The new immigrants are entering a country that is economically, socially, and culturally unlike the country that absorbed—however ambivalently—previous waves of immigrants” (Suarez-Orozco 2000:12).

Unlike the America of yore that had endless land and resources, modern day America has reached an impasse, something engendered mostly by the faltering global economy. The American Dream is no longer a promise, something that immigrants have detected, revealed by the declining numbers of foreigners hoping to make a life in the United States. The once hegemonic American Dream is now an ideology, and it is being contested, attacked, and bemoaned for being left unrealized. Suarez-Orozco argues that

“Furthermore, in the new economy there are virtually no bridges for those at the bottom of the hourglass to move into the more desirable sectors. Some scholars have argued that unlike the low-skilled industry jobs of yesterday, the kinds of jobs typically available today to low-skilled new immigrants do not offer serious prospects of upward mobility” (2000:12).

Whereas before an immigrant could work in a factory and move up to management, or save up enough money to buy a farm and turn a profit, they are now forced into jobs where advancement is not an option. An unskilled immigrant who comes to the US might find themselves laboring for the rest of their life at a low paid job while their child attends an impoverished school, doomed to follow in the footsteps of their parents, and many are starting to take notice. While the dominant class may choose to believe that rags-to-riches stories are still probable, the lower class no longer subscribes to this ideology as they once did. The American Dream was a hegemonic idea successfully perpetuated by immigrant success and the upper class, but, due to the economic downturn has transformed back into an ideology challenged by America’s subordinate groups.

In “On the Road” Kath Weston observes a transient population that travels by Greyhound bus. Some travel for pleasure, but most are seeking new opportunities and better luck. Few find it, and shuffle from place to place, their bodies growing old yet their story never changing. These people know that the American Dream is truly an American Myth. Barbara Ehrenreich solidifies Weston’s argument in Nicked and Dimed, where she attempts to live on minimum wage and finds it nearly impossible (not to mention that her whiteness and English skills provide her with

an advantage that most lack). As the Comaroffs put it, “other, subordinate populations, at least those with communal identities, also have ideologies” (1991:24). This is visible in the Duke financial aid population, where almost all of the participants eschewed the American Dream as a falsehood. Their communal identity as lower income, financial aid students reveal an opposing ideology to the dominant one.

If the American Dream is actually the American Myth then the lower SES students at Duke are an anomaly that proves its existence. They come from a lower class, have worked hard, and are expected to emerge—born again—into their new, higher society. If anyone would be justified in believing in the American Dream it would be this small sector of America. Yet they also arrive at college with knowledge that most undergraduates in private schools lack—the awareness that lower SES citizens who work continually but cannot get ahead do exist. As an elite few who are intimately acquainted with both sides of the argument, do these underprivileged students see the American Dream as a reality for all, or something that they were just lucky enough to embody?

Tom best answered this question. Having grown up in a squatter community in South America (as a member of a family of aid workers, not actually as a squatter himself) he later found himself in one of the best public schools in his state after the family returned to the US for educational purposes. Thus, Tom has been subjected to the meanest forms of poverty (he once saw a dead man lying in the street at the age of seven) but has also experienced the lives of the upper class, as he is friendly with senator’s children and the offspring of foreign country politicians. When asked if Duke assured their student’s social and financial mobility (a key component of the American Dream), Tom responded favorably.

“Duke guarantees you a middle class to upper middle class existence.” He explained. “It guarantees you a 60k to 70k job. You aren’t guaranteed much more than that. If you work hard you’ll be fine. Duke doesn’t promise anyone riches. If you graduate with 70k, you are in the middle or middle upper class. For one person it’s so much money.”

Although Tom does not see Duke as a vehicle to riches, he recognizes the part it plays in securing a “middle class-upper middle class existence”, which for him and other students of lower SES can be considered financial mobility, as it is a definite step up. I then probed Tom on his opinions regarding social and financial mobility for the rest of America, knowing that he could go either way—his parents had chosen to be of a lower SES so Tom would not necessarily be swayed one way or another by their lack of wealth.

“The American Dream is a myth.” Tom answered quickly and forcefully. “Ask any black person about it, they’ll tell you it’s a big lie. It’s a joke. The best forecast of your earnings is your parent’s earnings. We have this myth, the American Dream, where you work hard and it works out. A lot of structures, systemic privilege, keeping people down, if you start ahead, you stay ahead. I think its super complicated and systemically broken. I don’t know where I fit in there. I don’t know how I feel about it.”

Tom does not see the American Dream as a promise but rather a facade used to obfuscate a sordid structure of class in which obtaining a “good” place is largely a matter of family ties. Furthermore Tom refuses to allow his white, male privilege to obscure what he sees as the truth of the American Dream. Tom then spoke a bit to his future salary, but returned quickly to the

idea of financial mobility. He thought for a moment, and then carefully fitted financially-rising students of a lower SES into the structure of the American Dream.

“I think that you and I,” he explained, gesturing to me “those on financial aid, are in a special position. America might be a little more mobile for us than for people not in our privileged position. I think we may experience social mobility a little more. Maybe, knock on wood. Hopefully we experience it a little more, not saying we will. I don’t think we are a representative sample. Maybe I’m wrong, I highly doubt... I think we get it a bit more.”

Here Tom recognized his own financial mobility, but was quick to add that it did not extend to everyone. What Tom circuitously points out is the argument against the flawed logic of those who insist that since colleges will pay for outstanding poor students, then it is the student’s faults who fail to apply themselves. The issue Tom raises, however, is that some poor students are already working in the context of privilege—a poor student whose parents encourage education (such as Tom’s), or whose parents understand the convoluted process of college applications is already ahead of a poor student whose parents see no need for college, or would rather have their child earn money than get straight A’s. A few of the interviewed students had parents who did not see the benefit of a university such as Duke, but the majority of the interviewees had parents who pushed and sacrificed for their child’s education. Thus, even though the lower SES students at Duke may embody the American Dream very few did *not* come from some sort of position of privilege to begin with. All of the students on financial aid that were interviewed had at least one parent that went to college, and the majority had parents with graduate degrees.

One such of these students was Monica, whose parents both earned PhDs. Immigrating from an Asian country and having to battle a language barrier provided obstacles, but through sacrifice they assured a comfortable life and respectable education for their children. When asked about how she viewed herself in terms of social and financial mobility Monica's answer betrayed a keen perception that mobility is not always limited to a generation.

“I was about to say I think I have mobility” she hesitantly began “but I don't know if I could be extremely rich, but it could be because I'm not interested in pursuing that. I think I'm privileged so I think it's difficult because I'm not trying to go from rags-to-riches. I have mobility but my parents had to sacrifice a lot for me to have it... easy for me, but hard for parents.”

Anyone could use Monica as an argument for the American Dream—a first generation American who goes to a top university, and is then accepted into even better graduate schools, yet Monica refuses that association. She argues that she already comes from privilege, and even more, that her success is a product of her parent's sacrifice. I asked Monica if anyone in America could have social mobility and she disagreed, explaining that the lower class you are the harder it is to move around. Upon being prodded as to the difference between people without financial mobility and her being here, her elaborations echoed that of Tom's:

“There is a race thing, if you're black or Hispanic you automatically have something going against you... it's ingrained in your psyche. Or if your family has had generations of lower status, that is hard to leave. If you grew up in a bad area, without a lot of opportunity it doesn't matter how hard you work, if the opportunity isn't there it's

not there. If you don't have guidance how do you even know what hard work can get you?"

Monica spoke of the role of privilege in gaining privilege, and echoed Tom in his thoughts on race, an obstacle to the American Dream that many do not want to admit to, as it speaks to still existing racial problems in the US: ones that people prefer to sweep under the rug. Monica also refused to attribute the failure of other low income teens to their work ethic, and instead repeats Tom in blaming it on their place in society's structure. Monica does not believe that it is fair to compare a teenager from an educated family to one whose family eschews education, and thus does not find the American Dream to be an ideology equally accessible to all.

Mann agrees with both Monica and Tom. "Another thing is the problem that yes, the environment around you does have an impact, because if you're in a low level neighborhood with a failing school even if you work hard environmental factors are working against you and can harm you or your opportunities." Despite having to work all through high school AND working two jobs in college Mann does not maintain that all underprivileged students have the capabilities to do so. Mann's situation sheds an interesting light on the difference between how the upper and lower class see the American Dream—the upper echelons cite lower income youths such as Mann as proof that all one needs to get ahead is hard work, yet the actual person that they are citing rejects this idea. This reveals a divide between an American ideology and its implementation, a divide that creates a chasm between ideals and reality. As Tom succinctly put it "It's easier to maintain a level of money than to break into it". While this may seem like a commonsense statement it clashes drastically with the ideology of the American Dream. Tom was not the only one to espouse this thought: when asked whether anyone in America can have

social mobility Monica bluntly refused the idea. “I definitely don’t think that’s true unfortunately. It’s a nice ideal. The more “up” you are the more you can move around, the lower, the harder it is.” Monica, Tom, and the rest of the participants do not subscribe to the American Dream ideology, signifying that what was once previously hegemony is no longer as powerful and automatic as it was in the past, and is now an ideology in question. The Comaroffs explain that hegemony can be challenged by “gestures of tacit refusal and iconoclasm, gestures that sullenly and silently contest the forms of an existing hegemony” (1991:31). Perhaps now that this American hegemony has been challenged to the point of rendering it and ideology it will be further challenged until one day it is debunked.

Ashley gave the term “glass ceiling” a new meaning in her response. When asked about her ideas of class mobility and the American Dream she paused at length as she gathered her thoughts.

“I’m an optimist and I feel that if you work hard enough yes,” she began slowly, “but I’m also aware of the sad reality of America. A lot of times no matter how hard you work networking and connections is what gets you into places. There is a glass ceiling. You can work as hard as you want and will only get so far, what gets you past the glass roof is your connection up there. The sad part is a lot of that comes from higher SES or a family of wealth.”

Ashley’s reappropriation of “glass ceiling”, a term usually utilized to describe the unfair disparity between men and women in the work place is interesting as it hints towards the lack of agency that the lower class possesses when it comes to elevating one’s financial and social status. The glass ceiling is understood as something unfair and largely unsurmountable, despite

the competence of the women who try to conquer it. Here, Ashley's comparison suggests that the lower class's inability to raise themselves has nothing to do with their efforts and everything to do with a structure working against them. Ultimately, Ashley echoes the rest of the participants—class begets class and moving up is much harder than most would like to believe.

I did not begin to ask about the American Dream until the second interview, as an afterthought brought up by my advisor. I expected that since these were the very students that proved the American Dream they would wholeheartedly believe in it. Thus when my second interviewee, Monica, quickly dismissed it, I was flabbergasted. It took no small amount of societal awareness and self-knowledge of privilege to come to a conclusion like that, and every time after I got the same response from all of my interviewees, except for one: Ken. Ken's background differs from the other participants by the velocity with which his family ascended the American ladder. His family came from great wealth in the Caribbean, but suddenly lost everything a generation or two before his. They came to America, penniless, in hopes for a new start, and in a mere generation have already built up enough wealth to place them firmly in the middle class while Ken seems to be on an even loftier trajectory. Ken sees his family's success as proving the American Dream. When asked about his views his answer was immediate and assured:

“My family came from a lot and dropped to nothing and came back to whatever THIS is. I personally do, I think there is always a way. I think in America there is a sense of apathy, ‘this is my area this is where I come from’. The beaten wife syndrome—‘He loves me, I’m going to keep going back to him and expect different results.’ Same thing:

‘I live in this area, it sucks, it’s horrible, I hate my job I hate my life. But I am going to go to that job tomorrow because it’s the best I can do.’ America is big: move. ‘But I don’t have enough money!’ You can find a way. Save a little bit every day and in five years, you’ll have a couple hundred dollars, get in that car and just start over somewhere else. There’s a way to do it, I don’t care what anyone says, no one should die unhappy. If you do that’s very unlucky. I feel that our country is the best in the world. It’s not headed that way right now... it’s heading to a disparity between the rich and the poor but right now you can do better. Wherever you can find something to be better. You can be an entrepreneur and be better. I do not take that people are in their situations, stuck there. Even the love of my life comes from that mindset. [Sic] like he was telling me that one of his teachers, tenured up his ass, teaching for 40 years, was making 26k a year. In my area 60 years you’d be making 130k. HE had multiple degrees. You could definitely move and get a better job but he sat there and was poor and unhappy his entire life. You can do better. You can do better.”

Although Ken recognizes the disparity between the rich and the poor he feels that the poor still have agency and control over what occurs in their life. For him the problem is not an inescapable destiny perpetuated by a veiled ideology but rather a lack of motivation and creativity. Ken’s family persevered, and achieved relatively quickly, and he believes others can do the same. Ken attributes much of the problem not to not working hard but to not working *smart* and cites examples of people who are too complacent with their lot in life (like the teacher) to take initiative and find what they deserve. Ken’s beliefs make sense in light of his background, but Ken, Tom and all of the rest of the 8 interviewees save one have something in common that the average low income American does not –cultural capital.

Cultural Capital

It seems odd to call the American Dream a myth when every single financial aid student appears to support its existence, but there is another layer to the argument. A majority of Duke's financial aid students cannot be seen as American Dreamers because they do not fit the first part of the description—they do not “come from nothing”. Many may wonder how having a familial income too low to send one's child to college does not constitute “coming from nothing”, but that assumes that money is the only capital one can have. Pierre Bourdieu argues in “Forms of Capital” that other parts of one's life can be considered capital as well. Bourdieu finds that cultural capital, the force passed down from educated parents and achieved through education itself establishes another form of capital that is equally as powerful as the monetary kind.

Bourdieu begins his argument by supplanting the common notion that a person who does poorly in school or does not go to college is to blame for their lack of motivation and intelligence when he states that “This starting point implies a break with the presuppositions inherent both in commonsense view, which sees academic success or failure as an effect of natural aptitudes, and in human capital theories” (1986:47). Bourdieu does not believe that an impoverished child who fails to receive adequate grades can be blamed for a lack of motivation but that there is a whole structure working upon that child. He maintains that “the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family. Moreover, the economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up” (1986:48). Here he makes two separate and important points: firstly, a child cannot be expected to do well merely from intelligence and motivation—previous cultural capital must have been invested by the family. This means that not only does the family itself need to find import in education but they should be educated themselves. Secondly, even if a

person is able to attain education without any previous familial investment they still will not receive the same benefits as someone who had it. This idea can be seen in the interviewees who feel equal to other students in general but feel disadvantaged in the job market as they watch their peers obtain employment through family ties.

Bourdieu's writings not only explain the idea of cultural capital but also unravel the mystery of why financial aid students are so easily touted as proof of the American Dream when in reality they are fraught with cultural capital. Bourdieu clarifies (regarding cultural capital) that,

“Because it is thus linked in numerous ways to the person in his biological singularity and is subject to a hereditary transmission which is always heavily disguised, or even invisible, it defies the old, deep-rooted distinction the Greek jurists made between inherited property (*ta patroa*) and acquired properties (*epikteta*), i.e. those which an individual adds to his heritage. It thus manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition” (1986:49).

Bourdieu explains that physical property such as a house or art can be easily categorized into inherited or acquired property, and each has its separate merits: inherited property speaks to an elevated lineage while acquired property speaks to individual success. Cultural capital, Bourdieu argues, cannot be thus categorized and subsumes both categories. In this way, an individual's education, poise, and achievements are seen as not only individual merits but markers of high breeding. Furthermore, Bourdieu notes that “it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e. to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence”—this is the reason that an individual's success is attributed purely to their own motivation rather

than a combination of that and their background: cultural capital that has been invested in a child since before their birth is incorporated into their very self and becomes attributed to their motivation and intelligence (1986:49). It is in this way that successful lower income students are lauded for their individual triumph while unsuccessful ones are blamed for their failure when there are other factors at play. A lower income student whose parents attended college versus one whose parents (or lack thereof) see no value in education will likely have very different outcomes which truly cannot be attributed to only the individual. Yet, by the nature of cultural capital, the cultural capital that the former has and the latter does not will remain invisible and blameless.

Bourdieu's theory explains why lower income college students at Duke often cannot be used as anecdotal support of the American Dream –a majority of them have at least one college educated parents. Out of every single interviewee only one did not have a parent that completed college, but even that interviewee had a parent who had attended *some* college. There was *no* interviewee who completely lacked cultural capital; none of my participants could be used to support the American Dream. Tom's educated parents were lower income by choice, as they chose a life of charitable works. Mann, who did not learn English until he arrived in the US as a youth, and who has held down a job since he could work, still has a mother who attended college in their native country. Ashley, a child of immigrants, noted that her parents came to the United States for an education. Every single one of them had cultural capital invested in them before they were born.

There were those interviewees who explicitly recognized the role of cultural capital in their life, although they did not use the term directly. Bianca, despite having to fund her younger sibling while being a student still does not see herself as coming from nothing: "Again I'm a bit

of a special case,” she argued, “I’ve had a special scholarship since thirteen, it exists to fill in those holes, whatever I needed. I should have asked for more. Private school never crossed my mind, I went to magnet school. But that scholarship helped me do a lot that got me here.”

Although she notes that she did not take full advantage of the program (something she might have done had she had a bit more cultural capital to prompt her) Bianca might not agree with someone who tried to use her story to support the American Dream.

“They would pay for summer programs,” she continued, enumerating all the benefits that she had despite being from a lower income family “they paid for TIP [a Duke program for gifted youngsters]. I went to California. You get an individual learning plan. Leadership positions that cost money. I should have done more, but I felt undeserving. I didn’t want to use their money even though that was the point. I should have started taking lessons. I was too meek and meager about it. Academically I had some other factors.” She again mentions her regret at not taking full advantage of the program but makes sure to repeat that she had “other factors”. Bianca had an advantage over her peers, and she not only recognizes it but is careful to point it out.

Monica is even more zealous than Bianca in adamantly attributing her success to multiple factors outside of her control. When asked what she thought was the difference between people who did not have financial mobility and her being at Duke Monica responded with every answer except her own intelligence and drive.

“My parents came from fairly well off in Asia. Fairly well off for the times. Their main struggles were financial, not because of education but because of language barrier and that they were students. Other people don’t have chance for education. They don’t

have parents who invest enough in them for them to have a chance. I guess for my parents, after the PhD they're fine, they're well dressed, well-spoken Asian immigrants.”

Here and throughout the interview Monica attributes her success almost solely to her parents: their high level of education, their drive to provide opportunities for their children, their sacrifice of comfort by moving to the US to secure a better life for their children—Monica is essentially attributing her success to cultural capital. Monica finds that the crucial difference between her and less successful lower income students is that they do not have parents that “invest” in them. Monica inadvertently uses language reminiscent of Bourdieu’s argument and in doing so supports his claim that, “On the other hand, the initial accumulation of cultural capital, the precondition for the fast and easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital; in this case, the accumulation period covers the whole period of socialization” (1986:49). Bourdieu believes that the transmission of cultural capital begins at birth and Monica’s story supports that. Her well off, educated parents immigrated to the US and upon having children raised them with the utmost care in regards to opportunity and education, pushing Monica eons ahead of her lower income peers who lacked such dedicated parents. Monica’s parents pushed and supported her academically from the moment she was born, putting their own needs on hold to send Monica to expensive academic summer programs, all of which gave Monica the edge that got her into Duke. The cultural capital invested in Monica dates back to her parent’s education in Asia, perhaps farther, and Monica recognizes that *that* more than her own intelligence is what got her here today.

Monica’s opinions become even more theoretical when she speaks about her mobility.

“I was about to say I think I have mobility but I don’t know if I could be extremely rich, but it could be because I’m not interested in pursuing that. I think I’m privileged so I think it’s difficult because I’m not trying to go from rags-to-riches. I have mobility but my parents had to sacrifice a lot for me to have it... easy for me but hard for parents.”

Monica lacks monetary capital yet she feels privileged, a product of her cultural capital. Monica also notes that she is not going from “rags-to-riches”, a comment that on the surface seems to be about money, yet looking deeper could also be seen as further understanding the capital that her parent’s education gives her. Despite an average financial background Monica refused to attribute her success to her own hard work and the idea of the American Dream. She cited generations of familial struggle, and her privileged place in society because of it.

Ken, the sole proponent of the American Dream spoke of his cultural capital too; interestingly, he was very aware that he possessed it. When asked if being brought up politely, and with “class” helped him, he unwaveringly agreed.

“100%, that’s who I am and it’s the only reason I’ve gotten this far. It’s something that people recognize, I really think so, whether you even know what it is or not, it’s that little something extra that almost endears you better, makes people want to know you better. Makes people understand where you’re coming from, that you are a true person, its desirable. I feel like whether people realize it or not.”

Ken not only attributes his success to his cultural capital but asserts that “it’s the only reason I’ve gotten this far”. Even though Ken believes that anyone can achieve the American

Dream he realizes that his lineage afforded him an advantage. Ken outlines the family's cultural capital even more when he explains the circumstances from which they came.

“For me when I hear sob stories ‘My parents tried so hard and failed’... Mine came from very well to do back on the island, maybe that's another cultural class thing because they could adapt when they got up here, they could be with the people they needed to be around and be in that situation. Came from a lot, lost it all, came to America because they had nothing left, had nothing in America, re-built, and the next generation later here I am at Duke. It can be done.”

Ken cites his own story as anecdotal evidence of the American Dream, yet he is clear that because of his parent's class they could “adapt” and “be with the people they needed to be around” to raise themselves up. Ken later goes on to explain the importance that his family gives to attending a quality university. Ken's family members were well to do, lost all of their money, and then immigrated to the United States. They rose quickly socially and financially, something Ken attributes to their “cultural class” and not merely hard work. This is interesting as, despite recognizing that his family had something extra that most impoverished people do not, Ken still touts the American Dream as attainable. Ken goes against his fellow financial aid recipients by adhering to his belief in the American Dream, yet he is comparable in that he recognizes his own cultural capital.

By the tone of the interviewees it is safe to say that the American Dream has been drawn from powerful hegemony into arguable ideology, at least amongst Duke financial aid students. Despite their personal stories that seemingly support the American Dream these students instead reveal the role of cultural capital in social and financial mobility. Furthermore these students

recognize their possession of cultural capital, even though they may not call it as such. And while the lower income students may not enjoy the same amount of cultural capital as higher income students they still do so in amounts that create a viable matrix for their financial and social evolution. Most Duke financial aid students do not embody the American Dream, something that they will readily admit.

Chapter 4: Future Salary and Redistribution of Wealth

Future Salary

Lower income, financial aid students are expected to emerge from Duke newly minted and prepared to join the elite ranks of Top-10 school alumni. However, while they now hold a diploma in their hand their aspirations may differ from their non-financial aid peers. A career counselor noted that often lower income students return to their hometowns in an attempt to help its inhabitants, which often results in them not rising out of their beginnings. She also sees many lower income students who take on helping careers: the kinds that fail to pay as much as other careers might. John L. Jackson's "Birthdays, Basketball, and Breaking Bread: Negotiating with Class in Contemporary Black America" supports this idea. Many of the interviewees that Jackson followed who had improved their lot in life were somehow financially tied to their old neighborhood through helping out old friends and family.

The counselor's sentiments are echoed by many of the participants, who care little about their future salary. While it is important to them that they are secure, luxury means little. Bianca answered simply when explaining how important her future salary is: "I don't want to struggle. I have racked up a bit of debt." Her outline for what her salary would cover is simple as well: "I want to make enough to make ends meet and have a bit of play money, I want to visit my friends, things I want to experience, I don't want to struggle. I want to make enough to be ok, with enough for some fun experiences." Bianca's future goals focused on experiences rather than money, an impression she cemented when she declared "Is it my goal to make a certain amount of money? No."

Tom, whose family background consists of humanitarian aid workers refuses to see money as the most important part of his future. “But there is no shame in being poor,” he asserted at one point in the interview “Because you can go from poor to rich overnight.” For Tom money is transitory and does not carry the same weight that it does for some people. During the interview Tom toyed with what his future financial goals are.

“I don’t want to be poor. But I don’t think anyone wants to be poor. If I end up having a lot of money, great, I’ll give away most of it. If I make extra money I’ll probably donate it to a church, they would find way better ways to use it. Or I would put it in a retirement fund. If I have everything I need, I don’t need extra.”

Tom admits that he wants to be comfortable, but for him riches are not an asset he desires. Despite all of this Tom plans to attend law school, and knows that any success will most likely be accompanied by (what he would consider) a windfall of money. Tom confesses that he has no idea how he would spend his fortune.

“I could give a rat’s ass about a nice car. I think making a difference in people’s lives is a lot more important than having a high salary. I think making a difference in people’s lives is a lot more important. If you have money great... I want a small apartment (less upkeep), I want a fuel efficient car. I think my family brought me up ... excess is not what I want.”

Tom’s goals are anything but monetary. It becomes apparent through his answers that his plans to study law are engendered by his charitable ideals rather than an aspiration for capital gains. Tom has no need for a high salary as he has no desires for anything that would require a

high salary. Although Tom is not taking a low paying job as mentioned by the career counselor and will earn a large salary he still has no need and no desire for the extra funds.

Tyrone has the same dilemma as Tom—he does not know what he would do with a large salary. “I thought about what I’d do being upper class.” he explains,

“I realize I would spend on a nice house and car, but I wouldn’t buy multiple cars, I would use the one car for 10 years. I might spend on something big, but I wouldn’t repeatedly spend on big things. I would get electronics, but not get a new computer every year. Assuming I make a lot, I don’t know what to do with the money. Would I invest it? Donate it? Probably donate it?”

At this point Tyrone is visibly at a loss with what a big salary would bring him. Although he might splurge on a nice car or electronics he would continue to use them in the way that he was taught: until they no longer function. Tyrone’s current laptop bears the bulky markings of older models from half a decade ago, yet he refuses to buy a new one until it dies completely.

Tyrone sees his independence from money as a blessing—“I feel like people in the upper class can’t survive without money,” he states, seeing his middle class childhood as a boon in this aspect. Tyrone, like Tom, also wonders how he would spend a large paycheck should he earn one. “I guess I could invest it...” He ponders, “but then I will have even more money, and then what will I do when I was investing because I had too much money? I really don’t know.” Tom and Tyrone both believe that their Duke degree may afford them a luxurious salary, but neither of them have any clue on how to use it. They both grew up being able to afford what they needed and due to this never developed extravagant wants. If their salaries can afford indulgence then they are out of their experience zone and are in uncharted waters when it comes to what they

should do with the extra cash. This situation is both beneficial and detrimental to a lower income student; on the one hand they will be able to skillfully maneuver within a meager salary, something with which more affluent students will have trouble, yet on the other their lack of desire for money may lead them to pursue it less, and could result in them not achieving as much as someone motivated by money might.

There were also participants who revealed an ambition for a high salary. Ashley, another future law student, explained “I want to live comfortably, there are things I like to indulge in, I want a salary that will allow me to do that.” When asked what her ideal salary was she answered that she would be happy with a starting salary of 70 or 80k, yet “I do want to go into 100s not gonna lie.” Compared to an average college student Ashley certainly has high aspirations, yet when her desired salary is held up to what a well educated lawyer would make its drastically lower. While Ashley does realize her potential, she sells herself short compared to her peers. She could be being modest, or perhaps she means she would be happy with 100k but expects more, yet nowhere does she mention her earning potential (Tom, on the other hand, expects to make at least 200 thousand). Again, Ashley’s lower desires will allow her to live well within her means but may also mean she is not reaching as far as she could.

Out of all the interviewees Ken is again the anomaly. Ken not only desires to make good money, but he wants a lot of it. Ken decides that he would be “comfortable” making 700k a year. It would seem that Ken has bucked the lower income shackles the most completely out of all of his peers, yet when he explains his reason for wanting that much he reveals that he is perhaps not an anomaly after all. Ken explains that his desire for a high salary is “not a flashy thing. It’s not because I want to buy this or do this. I want to make sure I can afford the things that are necessary, have a good time, have fun, but if something does go wrong I want a blanket,”—the

main goal of Ken's aspirations is not so he can live in the luxury that the other students eschew, but so that he can have a "blanket" of security, a desire most likely begat by his family's painful fall a mere generation ago. Ken explains that,

"What happened to my family was bad, and very public. All the money was gone and that's when they said 'We need to get out of here'. It's a 'You need this to be secure' kind of thing, and send your kids to great colleges and give them the best life they can possibly have and have options. I am learning that I also need to focus on my passions. I just changed my life course a bit because I wanted to do something safe where I could make a lot of money but I also want to do something important to me and still be secure."

Ken yearns for a huge salary yet it comes from the desire of evading the events that befell his family. Ken enjoys travel and shopping, and may indulge more than the other interviewees but his fear is perhaps the most real as it altered his career plan. Throughout the interview Ken spoke of his struggle to pursue his passions over a career with certain money attached to it. He now feels that he is leaning "more towards passion, but I'd still sacrifice a lot for salary". Ken is similar to upper income students who might covet money, yet where their motivation comes from is different—while some people are drawn *towards* money Ken is fleeing *from* poverty. Both have the same ends, but very different impetuses.

Two important traits of a financial aid culture can be gleaned from questions regarding future salary: the first is that, for the most part, lower income financial aid students have a low desire for a high salary. The second is that they are all driven by security rather than a longing for luxury or wealth. A third trait comes from what many of the students plan to *do* with said future salary. While most recent graduates will spend their newfound salaries as they please the

lower income students have something more important weighing on their mind—the redistribution of wealth, and how they will support families who have sacrificed much for their opportunity.

Redistribution of Wealth

Many of the financial aid students I spoke with wanted to express their gratefulness to their parents through monetary means, felt the need to support them, or felt a soft form of indebtedness. Whatever the reason, almost every single interviewee had some plan to share their wealth with their family; sometimes purely out of love, and sometimes out of necessity. Financial aid can ease or almost completely remove the burden of paying for a college education from lower income parents but it cannot eradicate the memory of sacrifice from a student's mind.

When asked how important his future salary is to him Tom felt torn:

“That’s a tough one, I go back and forth. I don’t see the point in a high salary. I just want enough money so my parents can retire and be happy. Knowing that my family won’t need anything. If I can make sure my family is fine and I am fine, I don’t care, I just want to make that happen.”

Tom’s statement reveals that his concern for his parents eclipses his concern for his own wellbeing. He claims that he wants his parents to be taken care of, and adds himself only as an afterthought. Tom shares a passion with Ashley, another prelaw student. They also share the intentions to use their large salaries to aid their parents. “I’m gonna shower my parents with things once I start making money,” Ashley declared, “that’s why I wanna make a lot of money, so I can do that.” Ashley is adamant about making a good salary, but not necessarily so she can luxuriate in her riches. She and Tom intend to pursue lucrative careers, but not for their own

personal gains. Monica adds credence to this statement: when asked how important her salary was, she gave a typical “Duke” statement, yet for a surprising reason.

“[It’s] pretty important. I definitely want to be in a career where I have a steady/stable income and probably a high income. Part of that is because I am not only thinking about myself but also my parents, and also because my sibling is not going to have a lucrative career and one of us needs to. They never put pressure on me but I put it on myself.”

Monica’s case is even more extreme than Ashley’s and Tom’s—she chose a career specifically to be able to take care of her parents. Although her brother is also in school Monica knows that he might not have a career that can properly fund their parent’s retirement. Monica’s dream future career and the one she plans to pursue might not be the same, but it’s a sacrifice she wishes to make in light of her parent’s numerous sacrifices for her sake. Mann echoes Monica, claiming that “I know that my family has made sacrifices to put me through here. Even though money isn’t the most important thing in the world I do want to thank my mom for giving me this opportunity and for all of her sacrifices.” But Mann, like Monica, does not feel that the simple thank you received by many parents is enough. Mann believes that “The best way is [sic] to make enough money so that I may repay my mom, the only way that I can, which is return all that money.” For Monica repayment comes by way of ensuring a pleasant retirement, but Mann sees it as more of an exchange. This difference could stem from where their respective families sit on the financial spectrum. Monica’s parents are not rich, but they do not struggle either. Monica clearly states that “They never put pressure on me but I put it on myself”. Monica is also the youngest sibling, and her self-sufficiency will release her parents from any monetary responsibilities besides themselves. Mann, on the other hand, was used to being the male of the

household for quite some time, a role most likely entrenched in his psyche by his culture. Besides looking out for his sisters and mother he may also see any money that he receives as being taken from his siblings, one of which is still learning to talk. Mann's role seems less like a young student and more like a provider, and he abhors asking his mother for money. Through working and financial aid it has cost Mann's mother almost nothing to send her child to a top 10 university, yet ironically Mann seems to feel the most burden, even though his future job will most likely allow him to pay his mother back many times over. Mann's guilt might also originate from the fact that his mother wanted him to go to the cheaper state school. He notes that his mother thought it would be less expensive for him to stay in state and he had to finagle his way into attending Duke. Thus, every dollar she gives him is another reason he should have stayed put, and he most likely wants to prove Duke's worth.

However, Mann has the burden of a second, perhaps bigger sacrifice that his mother made for him and his siblings: not getting married. When asked why he thought the interviewees all brought up repaying their family, unprompted, Mann alluded to his personal experiences.

“I think it comes out of recognizing the sacrifices that your family is making. The non-financial aid kids take this opportunity for granted and see it as their lives, it is more of their right for being high class and doing well in school. We see it as a great opportunity that we can barely afford—for them they can just get in and do it. For us it's, we got in (both groups did the hard work) but we have that extra variable of we have to figure out how to afford it and stay in it. Example: my mom right now can't get married because it would change my financial status because his money would count towards me because he would count as my guardian, so I would get less money from the government and Duke and I couldn't afford it. Right now we can barely afford it. If they take away

any money it would be very difficult for me to stay in school, so I know that is a huge sacrifice she is making, or at least I feel like it is, and the other kids don't have that.”

Here it becomes apparent that Mann's biggest difference from his non-financial aid friends is not money but burden from sacrifice. While upper class students have only to worry about getting admitted Mann notes the plethora of even bigger obstacles that would prevent a student from matriculating. Despite Duke's expansive financial aid Mann hints that his mother (and other parents) do not have enough of a handle on it to not worry—he admits that even he gets nervous whenever new financial aid awards come out, even though the family receives government assistance, which should be a good indicator that they will never actually have to pay a dime. However, from a family—and a lifetime—of money worries, old habits die hard. It can be difficult to trust that a faceless institution has one's best interests at heart.

Nevertheless, the most wretched burden that Mann has to carry is knowing that it is his (and his sibling's) education that is postponing his mother's marriage. It seems unfair that someone's new spouse would also be expected to contribute to their grown children's education; either way Mann's mother cannot marry unless she wants her new husband's salary to become her eldest children's debt. She put her children's need first, sacrificing her stability for their good, and Mann is keenly aware of this. How does one repay someone for a grave yet monetarily intangible sacrifice? Unlike upper income students Mann will probably spend many years, and perhaps the rest of his life, making up for this by helping his younger siblings and sharing his salary with his mother.

Mann's role in his family brings up the idea of culture in how a redistribution of wealth would pan out. Although Monica comes from a vastly different culture than Mann her culture also plays a heavy role in her post-graduation plans.

"I think ethnicity has something to do with it as well." She explains, referring in this case to her Asian heritage. "Not to generalize but in America we care a lot about the individual, there's bigger emphasis on family elsewhere. Financial aid non-Americans don't buy into 'you should do what you love', it has its limits, it would be nice but you need to take care of business. A lot of us have other passions, but need a stable future. We won't do something we hate, but we might not take that art class."

Monica's statement is propped up by a cornucopia of books, articles and studies that deem the American dedication to the individual as almost obsessive. Although Monica's parents want her to be happy she is also part of a culture where family security trumps individual desires, and she does not balk at what this entails. The idea of culture was raised in multiple interviews, as half the participants were immigrants or had immigrant parents.

Ken, who is all too familiar with his Caribbean family's fall from financial grace perhaps most obviously demonstrates the intersections between redistribution of wealth, repaying a sacrifice, and culture. Despite a mother who has done quite well for herself, Ken sees an even brighter future for her that he plans to provide. Like Monica's parents, Ken's mother and father have reassured him that his education is not an excessive burden.

"Ideally I don't think about that, they tell me every day 'You don't have to worry about that we will be fine. Obviously it's a bit of a strain to send you to this school and pay for you but it's doable, were doing it'. They can retire just the same as before.

Obviously I'd love to be able to...this is where my culture is...the ultimate goal is you take care of your parents later in life. They don't want you to but obviously they'd love that. My mother never got the dream house she wanted. We live in a beautiful suburban house, I love it, I have the car I want but it's not what she wanted, or ever saw, but we had to make sacrifices and this is the best she could do. And she didn't see herself divorced either but that's financially for the best too...that's a whole 'nother story. I'd love to be able to give her everything that she wants. I'm a mama's boy."

It becomes apparent through his explanation that Ken's mother is a bit better off than the other lower income financial aid student's parents. Ken even brings this up himself, noting that while the family receives substantial financial aid based off of his mother's middle class salary, because it is just him and her they live quite comfortably. Nonetheless Ken still feels compassion for his mother who had to deal with the brunt of the family's fall. A self-proclaimed "mama's boy" Ken would not use all of his desired half-million salary only on securing his own children's future but also to lavish his mother with her family's former financial abilities. In fact, Ken deems it the "ultimate goal" of his culture to care for one's parents, and like the typical Duke student Ken sees this as a challenge at which he intends to excel.

Ultimately the interviewee's answers reveal that lower income student's future desired salaries and plans to redistribute their wealth are just another facet that demonstrates a cultural difference between them and their upper income peers.

Chapter 5: College as the Great Equalizer

Compared to other southern colleges Duke University is notorious for the wealth and privilege of its students. However the privilege of some students is so great that they are able to attend a university to which financially they really do not belong. Duke surpasses most other universities in the financial aid it offers, allowing students without homes, without parents, with a single parent, or with unemployed parents to attend, live, eat and study abroad with almost the same luxury afforded to the children of a politician or oil tycoon. And while the latter inevitably have more room to indulge, Duke has created an environment in which a student from a lower socioeconomic status can go through all 4 years without ever divulging their financial aid status.

Using Duke as a model one could then say that college *is* the “great equalizer”, as many have called it—Duke’s lower SES and financial aid students can reap almost all of the benefits as students from the upper echelons. Duke does the best that it can to level the playing field, and for the most part succeeds. However, it is a wrongful assumption to expect a mere four years of someone’s existence to override the lessons they learned and the milieu in which they existed for the past eighteen. Although Duke can create an equal space for its students while on campus it can do nothing to equalize childhoods; it cannot mitigate the effects that previous homelessness, child abuse, money troubles or absent parents have on one’s past or modify the experience a student has when they return home. It is nearly impossible to take a psyche already molded by money worries and the knowledge of familial sacrifice and render it the same as someone who grew up without financial troubles (or the difficulties that often accompany financial troubles). Although Duke can create an equal space for students across the financial spectrum college ultimately cannot equalize the before-and-beyond of students of different financial statuses.

Although Duke's lower SES students find a level playing field while at Duke, do they emerge psychologically changed from how they were before? Are they now mentally and emotionally equal with their upper echelon peers? The answer is that they do not and are not, as lessons they learned and tribulations they had prior are not erased and remain salient in their minds as they approach graduation.

. As noted in the introduction, Duke's claim of commitment to ensuring that every potential Duke student can afford their education is not mere lip service. Full financial aid student's joke that they will have a hard time finding a job that pays them as much as Duke, some 60k a year. It is difficult to find a full financial aid student not enamored of the Duke policy, or one who does not feel taken care of. A Duke lower income student on full financial aid may not have as much "play" money as the billionaire heir in their class, but through work study and financial aid stipends they can attain quite a nice chunk per semester.

Yet Duke's role as an equalizer does not stop with matriculation. The way in which it organizes, houses, and feeds its students attempts to create an identical environment for all involved. Freshman are randomly assigned to dormitories and all have similar eating plans. Thus a billionaire's daughter could be put in a roach infested dorm like Jarvis or Aycock while a pauper's son could live in Belltower's brand-new, air-conditioned facilities. And while affluent students can afford to eat at the expensive places more often, a frugal student who spends wisely can do the same. Also, since students have to live on campus for their first three years there is no way for financial hierarchies to develop based on who is living in what luxury apartments. When that time does come for seniors to choose apartments financial aid student's housing allowances are generous enough to permit them entrance to almost all Durham abodes. Duke's commitment to equality amongst financial strata was proved in the spring 2012 housing lottery for the

returning study abroad students. All returning students were gunning to gain entrance into K4, the new LEED-certified dormitory with the largest rooms on campus. One would expect the children of donors and more affluent families to be given preference in such an occasion, but the process truly was random. While wealthy students were placed in K4 so were many high-need, low SES students whose spots could have been used for other high SES students that had ended up in some of the more undesirable locations. Similarly a Facebook movement started by some minority students accusing Duke of purposely giving racial minorities bad housing lottery numbers was immediately quelled when another minority student revealed that she had the number one pick. Thus Duke's commitment to financial (and racial) equality can be seen in numerous events and systems. Duke gives every student the possibility of never being forced to reveal their financial status—a poor student can spend their whole Duke education masquerading as an affluent one or vice versa. The point is that Duke allows the student to make the decision of how much they want to reveal, and how they want to be perceived. Tom echoed this idea.

“We have this culture, very image oriented, I don't know how much is true, but if you can create a narrative around yourself, people will believe it. No one looks into it. People have money, but I don't think that many have that much. But people like to come off on that. Maybe were so willing to not look into the details, were just willing to accept the images that people share with us.”

Negative or positive, Duke students are free financially and socially to create their own identity. A student who desires to be rich can emulate wealth and no one will question them just as no one will question the billionaire's son who tells everyone that they are middle class. Some circles at Duke create a symbiotic relationship of image—you believe what I tell you and I will

believe you in return. Duke financial aid and Duke's system of boarding students allows this by not ousting anyone's true status.

Throughout my interviews it became apparent that Duke students felt equal to their non-financial aid peers.

Tyrone, a first generation American, had a blasé response.

“To be honest I don't feel like there's that much of a difference between being a financial aid student and not. Cuz I don't feel like it really defines me compared to people who are or are not. I know people that are on financial aid and I know people that aren't, but I don't feel like there's any split between the two groups.”

As previously noted Tyrone's mixed friend group supports his words. Perhaps it is Tyrone's sensible personality, perhaps it is every safe guard that Duke has put in place for financial equality on campus, but the theme of Tyrone's interview is that he did not feel different from anyone else as a financial aid student. Money (or lack thereof) is a nonissue for Tyrone, and he neither thinks nor worries about it in regards to his time at Duke.

Tom, whose schedule is brimming with his work study job, feels that his time at Duke is NOT equal to those not on financial aid—he thinks he has the upper hand. When I asked him about his school/work balance and how it affects him he admitted,

“I think it actually put me at an advantage. Every semester that I've had a job I get straight A's. It added structure to my life. I had to do stuff early because I was so busy. If you want something done, give it to a busy man. I had to be more on top of my stuff... I

had to do it now because I couldn't do it later. I didn't expect it but that's what I noticed. It doesn't happen to everyone but it's my experience."

Going into my interviews, I expected a negative response towards work study, a necessity that takes 5-20 hours out of one's week. I saw it as a divider between the rich and the poor, one that gave the rich an advantage, as they had more time to study, but this proved to be an erroneous assumption. Tom was not the only one with this sentiment. Mann worked just as much at Tom, and at two separate jobs. Besides having the typical work/study job Mann also found time to wait tables at a local restaurant. Mann's opinion on work/study was more multifaceted than Tom's. Mann decided that "It is a disadvantage to have more work here. Sometimes it can be overwhelming, like with midterms and exam weeks. If you don't work you don't get paid. You might have a shift right before an exam which puts you at a disadvantage because its time not spent studying." He sees the reality that students who work inevitably have less time to study or have a social life. But Mann later reveals that his many jobs are not solely a burden, and that he plans to see long term benefits from his overwrought schedule. "(Sic) I can juggle everything. Later all of these experiences will be an advantage because later, going to school while having a job looks good on a resume, to be doing all of this. People will see me as well rounded." Mann is well aware that he is overworked compared to many students yet he find the morality in his situation—being forced to juggle two jobs and the workload of a Top 10 university, in his eyes, is also forcing him to be a better person. Whether he would think this if he did not have to work or whether his is a case of cognitive dissonance does not matter, he sees the benefit in his lot, and plans to use it to his advantage. Mann knows that even though he may have to juggle more than a more affluent Duke student he will have the upper hand when it comes to balancing his future life and career.

Duke University thrives in creating the most equal environment that it can for its students. Some may have to work two jobs while others take weekend vacations to their parent's yacht but ultimately Duke is quite successful in leveling the field across the spectrum from students who are homeless to students whose parents are on the Forbes billionaire list. While in real life these diverse types of people might never meet, Duke creates an environment where they can live, dine and prosper together without ever revealing how truly rich or utterly poor they are. Duke *is* a great equalizer.

BUT...what about everything that happened before college? Can college mitigate how a student grew up, and equalize their psyche? This question comes from a few important statistics. Trickett *et al* noted that "Evidence indicates that socioeconomic status affects family stability, including parenting practices and resulting developmental outcomes for children". Ondersma found that "Poverty is a reliable predictor of child abuse and neglect". People of lower SES also have "Higher levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties, including anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and conduct disorders" (Weissman *et al*, 1984; Goodman, 19999; Spencer *et al*, 2002). One could argue that in escaping their SES through going to college, these students will evade such effects. However childhood is the most formative time of one's life, and experiences during this time are not likely forgotten. Chen and Paterson (2006) also note that adolescents of a lower SES have higher physiological markers of chronic stressful experiences. It is impossible to expect these markers to disappear simply because one goes to college.

It is difficult to recognize the many ghastly situations that some Duke students have gone through, and anecdotally, a majority of them are on financial aid. These students, generally happy, do not often speak of their troubled childhoods, making it seem like less of a problem

than it is. In my 4 years at Duke I have heard numerous stories of students being abused by their parents and of students who became depressed or anxious during their schooling as a result of problems at homes. Stories of family members in jail, absent parents, and supporting family members despite being a full time student also abound. All are incredibly personal tales, and the fact that I heard so many highlights the frequency with which they occur in the financial aid population. A student who has undergone one of these negative and transformative events cannot be expected to emotionally or memory-wise “equalize” with a student with an upper middle class background and a two parent home. Equalization at college, in the financial sense, can be readily achieved. Social, emotional, and psychological equalization, cannot.

An example of such experiences comes from Tom. Remembering his childhood in a squatter community, Tom relayed a brief, yet telling story as he attempted to convey what his time there was like: “We had a little store blocks from my house and two people were having a fight outside of it, and on the way back one was dead. Shit like that. I was 7.” Despite being an outstanding Duke student Tom has relics from his past that almost no one at Duke has. And facing murder at a young age is not something that can be leveled in a mere four years. Upon graduation Tom will have a Duke diploma backed by top level instruction and opportunity, just like all his wealthy peers. Yet he will have something extra—the knowledge of the basest human capabilities, performed before his eyes. His peers will not have this. How can they be truly equal, when one is burdened so heavily by memory?

The attitude towards money that was indoctrinated into Tom since his childhood has not left him either. He explains that,

“While I wasn’t poor, in that sense the fact is that I could live comfortably without having a lot of money, I don’t value it that much. I know people who want to make a lot of money and get a really good job even if they hate it, I don’t feel like that is my case. I’d rather do something I like and not make that much.”

Tom’s experience at Duke is fraught with heavy spending peers, yet Tom has not adopted these ways. His childhood lessons still remain strong, and despite having the ability to “keep up” with the wealthier students due to his lucrative on-campus job Tom refuses, as that was not how he was raised. And even though his future career as a lawyer will afford him luxury, Tom maintains that “I want a small apartment (less upkeep), I want a fuel efficient car. I think my family brought me up ... excess is not what I want.” The ambitions of other Duke students have not transferred onto him. Emotionally, Tom’s traumatic experiences have not been “leveled” nor has the way in which he was raised been eclipsed by a less money conscious culture. Here we see that college has failed to be an equalizer for Tom, perhaps to his benefit.

As seen before, Monica is also an example of college’s inability to fully “equalize” a student. Duke created an equal environment for Monica and her peers, but it failed to mitigate the responsibilities with which Monica came to (and will leave) Duke. When Monica graduates she and her peers will step into a world of endless opportunities. Monica will also step out with a responsibility already chained to her psyche. While she might have been “equalized” educationally Duke cannot provide for her generous parents and secure their retirement, and thus failed to truly “equalize” Monica’s life. She now has a better chance than ever at adequately caring for her family, but the burden itself is not gone.

Mann also can be readily included on this list. Mann's mother's sacrificial decision to postpone her wedding creates a burden that he must endure for the rest of his life. Upon graduation the majority of Duke students will not walk across the stage remembering how their mother lost four years of her married life so that they could attain their education. And while Mann is a happy, young adult poised for success, he will not soon forget his mother's uncommon expense.

While Duke and any college that offers such extensive financial aid packages does everything it can to mitigate financial burdens, it is powerless in the face of inborn money anxieties, relationships, and wearying emotions like guilt and fear. Although Mann will never lose his financial aid based on his steep need (a constant worry for him and his family) that rational knowledge is not enough for someone raised with a fear of not having enough money. Despite Duke's unwavering financial support Mann is still plagued by "worry every year after filling out FAFSA—will I get enough money to cover it?" A nebulous combination of the government, formulas, and Duke decides his fate every year as a college student, just as his mother's job security and how much governmental assistance they received decided his fate every year as a child. Mann is used to being without financial agency. Mann is used to his future being in the hands of providence—wealthier students are secure in the knowledge that if they work hard they will do well and be alright but Mann knows better than this; he is privileged to the more sordid details of the American Dream and like Eve in the Garden of Eden cannot erase this knowledge. It has followed him from his childhood all the way to Duke, and will pursue him after, no matter how much job security he obtains. When Mann is 40 years old and a successful lawyer, entrepreneur, or whatever he chooses to become, he will still remember what it felt like to sometimes not have enough food, and that he is one misfortune away from experiencing that

poverty again. Unlike the oblivious middle and upper class that feel immune to such drastic monetary downturns Mann will not share in their delusions. Through examples such as Mann it is easy to see that in many ways college is not a great equalizer.

Ken's fears echo Mann's—he has seen the ease and indifference with which fate can allow the failure of an entire family's finances. Ken watched as his mother struggled to make it to the middle class, and never attained the financial status she had previously enjoyed. Ken carries with him the fear of falling, leading in part to his astronomical salary desires. He wants “security”, and he knows that that is obtained through money. Duke can give Ken the ability to make a salary large enough to avoid that fear, but it cannot erase the fear itself.

At the same time Duke could not possibly hope to erase such recollections if the holder does not want to lose them. The only way to truly “equalize” students from a lower socioeconomic status would be to erase their previous class-related memories and troubles, yet most students seem happy to have them. Mann articulated this thought in his interview: regardless of the worries and guilt that he must face as a product of his childhood class he would not lose it even if it meant letting go of the emotions that plague him.

“My class now is part of who I am and what shaped me. Even if I do enter into another class I will still identify with those values and where I came from. My goal is to help my Mom and family, in a way, indirectly the goal is to ascend directly up the social ladder, but without losing the values that the lower, hard working ways created.”

Wherever he may end up his humble beginnings will continue to mold his future and Mann wants it that way. Mann faces difficulties that more affluent students would only dream of yet he can never be fully equalized because he will not allow it.

Although Duke manages to be a masterful equalizer of students while in college it can never fully expunge lessons of the past from an underprivileged student's mind. The student will emerge from Duke with an unassailable diploma and new ideas, but old habits die hard. Worries that plagued lower income students as children will continue when they are adults. Even though they now have the power to provide for future families it is impossible to unlearn the harsh facts of reality that most affluent Duke students will never learn first-hand—that even the hardest working of individuals can be doomed to a life of fruitless toil.

Colorblindness

The way financial aid students are viewed as equalized is reminiscent of the idea of colorblindness. In From Savage to Negro Lee Baker explains the role and development of “colorblindness” in America in regards to black citizens. The book notes the struggle between being “colorblind”, where everyone is deemed the same, and noting racial differences but advocating that everyone is equal. Baker explains that “Critical cultural anthropologists are rarely called on to explain that even though a biological category of race is meaningless, the social category of race is very real, meaningful, and still dictates life chances and opportunities” (Baker 1998:227). Here, Baker is arguing that blacks and whites do not have to be the same to be equal. The white experience and black experience is so different that it would be useless to categorize them as the same, yet that is what many do-gooders do in an attempt to erase society's racial lines. Instead, they can be recognized as separate and distinct categories, yet still equal.

This idea extends to class and socioeconomic status as well as financial aid students in the college realm. Activists will charge children or students from different classes as being no different for one another in a bid to assert their equality. However they are *not* the same. Their

cultural capital, background, and upbringing are vastly dissimilar. Despite this, they can still be *equal*. Baker writes that “Biological anthropologists were used as influential spokespersons to argue that Blacks were not racially inferior to Whites, but cultural anthropologists were not used to explain how African American culture is rich, unique, and just as ‘legitimate’ as any other culture in the United States” (Baker 1998:227). In a concerted effort to proclaim the intelligence of blacks they were compared to the whites and found equal, yet no one knew how to also recognize their separate culture. Afraid of America seeing blacks as inferior, they were lumped into the white category so there could be no discrimination, yet making this judgment reveals the prejudice that black culture cannot stand on its own as equal. It also reveals that white culture is deemed the model that all other cultures should emulate, and be absorbed into.

The same can be said for socioeconomic status. Poor students are said to be just as smart as rich ones, yet this elevates the rich student as the paradigm to which the poor students cling. The rich student sets the bar for what is smart, and in an effort to recognize their abilities the poor student is hoisted up to meet them. They are given the same resources and their success proves their equality through sameness. In fact, the idea of college as an equalizer should be reworded and known as college as the same-creator. The idea that poor students might not be equalized (i.e. made the same) when they leave college threatens this model because it assumes that they did not perform the same on equal footing. However it is not necessary to say that the two are the same to say that they are equal—poor students can come into college and leave just as grown and educated, yet *still* be different: different but equal.

Nevertheless a change in vocabulary and expectation would have to be preceded by a change in stereotype; poor still is, and will be, considered a bad word. A poor person, or a lower income person will know the epithet reflects only what is in their bank account yet others see it

as a judgment, which is why they refrain from using it. To some members of the upper class poor could easily be a euphemism for lazy or stupid, and even the people who do not think this at least know that others do. Thus, the word poor is avoided and because of this a student who enters college with a “poor” mindset cannot leave with a “poor” mindset and be considered successful. If poor was recognized as being equal yet different than rich by society then universities everywhere would not have to go to such great lengths to obfuscate student’s true financial background.

Society tries to force colorblindness on race as a poorly executed attempt to render all races equal by erasing their separate meanings, but what ends up happening is everything is “equalized” towards whiteness—blacks, Hispanics and Asians are held to white standards, but generously told they are the same. Economically, society tries to force colorblindness onto class as a poorly executed attempt to render all classes equal, but in reality this just means that lower classes are held up against the classes above, and generously deemed the same. Instead, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and the lower class should be viewed as equal, because sameness has nothing to do with it. Same does not mean equal, but the two often get confused.

Conclusion

In the end, I argue that a financial aid and lower income culture at Duke truly exists. Not only do a majority of the participants reject the dominant Duke money culture, but they also recognize themselves as being a separate culture, as well as feel a camaraderie with their lower income peers. Even more, they all share a desire to redistribute their future wealth to their families, and they almost all reject the notion of the American Dream, realizing that even their stories cannot support the dying ideology as they are all fraught with cultural capital.

The significance of this thesis, however, is not the existence of a lower income culture, but what this existence means. That there are enough lower income students to form a tangible campus culture means that they are a significant population on campus, and should be treated (and treat themselves) as such, rather than an addendum to the dominant money culture. Furthermore, the unique past experiences of those belonging to this culture means that they cannot be completely assimilated into the largely non-financial aid student body. These students can learn the trappings of the upper class and land impressive jobs, but their (sometimes) sordid backgrounds will continue to affect them and render them different from their upper income peers. However, this is not something that necessitates “equalization”. The two groups are already equal in their value and what they bring to the university; to hope that one would assimilate into the other only places a judgment on which is more valuable. Instead of trying to make them the same, the equality (but not sameness) of the lower income student experience and the upper income student experience should be celebrated and further explored in order to create an environment in which both can be comfortable and gain from the other’s experiences.

The most sought-after aspect of Duke is not the academics, but rather the social and cultural capital that it imparts with each passing day. Many an anti-establishment movement has condemned colleges for commodifying education: a motivated woman sitting in front of her computer can often gain just as much knowledge as a woman sitting in a classroom at a top 10 university, yet the latter will be hired over the former in almost every instance. Americans realize the importance of a diploma, and those at elite schools often learn it better than anyone when they receive job offers from companies who refuse to hire students without a prestigious college’s name attached to their resume. Duke does not merely acquaint students with the arts and sciences, but educates them on how to “be” a member of the credentialized (upper) class.

What this reveals is that class and money are separate, yet also intrinsically intertwined. A person who goes to Duke and learns how to act with class can navigate the upper echelons without any money. Yet the purpose of possessing this sense of class is often with the ultimate goal of gaining money. In this way, they are connected. However, a disconnect can be seen between class and money in lower class families who win the lottery and can spend with the upper class, but would not be welcomed in their circles due to a lack of other types of capital. Class and money thus resemble a strand of DNA: two separate pieces twisting and twining around one another, connecting at various points, and viewed as two parts of a whole rather than separate entities.

Ultimately, the fate of the lower income, financial aid student can be viewed with optimism or pessimism. The American cultural and economic zeitgeist have evolved into something previously unexperienced. The morally-sound, persevering middle class is shrinking and becoming poorer, and more people have become uncomfortable with looking down upon the middle class as they realize that the only thing that separates them from the beleaguered poor is not intelligence or hard work but rather one serious misfortune. The upper class is viewed as lazy and out-of-touch, and many of its members are scurrying to dis-identify themselves with this image as well.

The role of the lower income, financial aid graduate in this new landscape is undetermined. They now have social and cultural capital comparable to their upper class peers, yet their background and psyche—remain largely unaltered. Which class do they belong to? Perhaps, by failing to covet and obtain the lucrative jobs of their peers they are refusing to break the cycle, and their children will be doomed to be on financial aid in college, just like them. Yet, though they may be underpaid, they still possess the skills to navigate the upper class. By this

way they should be considered upper class. Yet if this is true, it signifies a rejection of the class from which they came—a betrayal, by finding more value in the class opposite of their parents and childhood peers. This view, the view of financial aid students struggling to situate themselves into a class where they do not truly belong while simultaneously battling feelings of betrayal is the pessimist's view.

The other side is a bit cheerier, and outlines a radical change in America: perhaps the lower income students are reaping the benefits of both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, they now have the knowledge of how to “be” upper class, but on the other they have retained the survival skills begat by 18 years of poverty (or at least, by not being rich). They can enjoy high society, but still live comfortably on their average salary. They help their children get into top schools just like they did, but do not fret if they have to be on financial aid, because it was usually a positive experience. If this is the case, then the lower income, financial aid students of today may be creating a new culture of their own through an amalgam of desires and backgrounds that diverge from the lower, middle, and upper class. While it is quite possible that an American who does not fit neatly into any of those categories will spend a lifetime attempting to ascertain where they belong, the fact remains that there are thousands upon thousands of other Americans just like this one, courtesy of the rise of financial aid. The preponderance of these low-class-turned-high young adults will warrant their own category in society as they struggle to buy a house and put their children through college with the rest of the middle class yet wax about Nietzsche and Foucault in a way that warrants an upper class classification. In the end, the fate of the lower income, financial aid student will vary depending on the viewer, but their divergence from any currently defined social class is evident and will most likely lead to their own branch in the taxonomy of class.

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