Cultural Mismatches for First-Generation Students: How Conflicting Working- and Middle-Class Norms Contribute to the Academic Opportunity Gap

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Abstract:
Working-class norms are not inherently detrimental for education; rather, a strong sense of duty towards one's family can foster academic resilience and a sense of responsibility over one's own success (Azmitia et al., 2018). Family circumstances and hardships are often the inspiration for first-generation students to pursue higher education, and that is a great strength in and of itself. However, norms conflicts that arise between schools, which are driven by middle-class norms, and working-class families result in misunderstandings that damage working-class students' success in the classroom. These misunderstandings are examined from the parent perspective, student perspective, and teacher or school perspective. The emphasis of this paper is on exploring the ways in which working-class students and middle-class institutions can more effectively communicate in a warm and deliberate manner that supports the goals of both parties—helping students participate in and succeed in the classroom.

Introduction:

When I get on the bus to go home, I have four hours to change out of my
college skin. Even if I wanted to tell [family and friends from home] about things I'm learning, they'd think I'm acting superior… I feel like I am always acting a part to try to fit in somewhere.
> — Mario, a first-generation/low-income senior, in Azmitia et al., 2018, p. 4.

In the *New York Times* piece "I Was a Low-Income College Student. Classes Weren't the Hard Part", Anthony Abraham Jack recounts his story of overcoming adversity as a child–facing violence in the streets, surviving off of 29-cent fast food hamburgers, and desiring to prove wrong those who told him he was less-than. However, he then acknowledges that these are the exact kinds of stories low-income students "are conditioned to write for college application essays." He contrasts them with everyday life, quoting the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar: "[W]e 'wear the mask that grins and lies' that 'hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,' but when we write these all-important essays we are pushed … to tug the heartstrings of upper-middle-class white admissions officers.

'Make them cry' we hear. And so we pimp out our trauma for a shot at a future we want but can't fully imagine." Anthony Abraham Jack, now a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explains that including first-generation and low-income students on college campuses requires more than just tuition money. Rather, "colleges and universities … [must] question what they take for granted about their students and about the institutions themselves" (Jack, 2019).

Dr. Jack calls, in part, for a re-evaluation of the dominant cultural capital on college campuses. Cultural capital, a term coined by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, describes an individual's understanding of and ability to replicate the norms of a context. Capital is obtained by existing in that context, and it may take the form of deference to a particular social order, a particular style of communication with others, the values one expresses, as well as skills, tastes, or mannerisms associated with one's social status. Oftentimes, adherence to a set of norms translates to one's perceived competence, as judged by others, especially in the workplace or schools.

In the United States, up to fifty percent of all first-generation college students—those whose parents do not possess a college degree—leave after their freshman year. Those who dropout often describe feeling as if they did not belong, were unwelcome, or did not exemplify the campus "ethos" (O'Keefe, 2013). Three other classmates and I were tasked with addressing this problem directly for the class "Learn to Intervene, Wisely": we were paired with an organization called the East Palo Alto Academy Foundation—which primarily serves low-income, minority, and first-generation students—in order to better understand why students from their College Success Program drop out of university at alarming rates, even though the program ensures all students obtain enough scholarship money to finish. We proposed–and then explored through interviews with students and their college counselors–that part of the issue may have to do with a cultural mismatch between parents, students, and professors. In particular, a conflict arises when students both fear abandoning their family culture and are alienated by their lacking the knowledge and skills universities expect. We explored how this conflict experienced in middle-class universities puts working-class students in a difficult position, in between competing values.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which conflicting cultural norms that arise from different work and family environments create a cultural disconnect between parents, students, and teachers, which contributes to the opportunity disparity for working-class students attending higher-class institutions. In order to understand why being working-class causes students to utilize a unique set of cultural norms, we first have to understand the environment that dictates what kinds of cultural capital parents pass on to their children. I will exemplify this primarily through the differing ways that low-income versus higher-income parents relate to and interact with schools. Next, I will explore in

what ways university norms alienate and disadvantage low-income students. Then, I will focus on the goals and understandings of teachers in higher-class institutions. Finally, I will offer a couple of solutions for more effective inclusion and support of working-class students.

Parent Perspectives

The family's overwhelming influence on educational achievement is rather well understood, but the relative quantities of family versus classroom learning is not always as clear. To explore the family's and school's differing impacts, three Johns Hopkins researchers analyzed California Achievement Test math and reading scores for over 600 students and found that while score gaps between socioeconomic groups are relatively small in first grade--a difference of 26.8 points—that gap almost triples by ninth grade—a difference of 73.16 points (Alexander et al., 2007). More significantly, this discrepancy was not created by the classroom. Winter gains were almost equivalent, yet summer gains were substantially unequal: low- and middle-income students experienced modest or negative summer gains, and high-income students experienced substantially large summer gains—differences of -1.90, 4.12, and 46.58, respectively. These differing gains indicate that schooling, while unequal, is not the main source of academic disparities within individual schools. The authors explain that low-socioeconomic status (SES) parents, like higher-SES parents, wish to provide all the same high-quality resources and knowledge for their children, but they are often unable to do so:

> The school curriculum … is self-consciously pursued at home, as when … parents work with their children on letter and number skills or reading. Parents of means generally … understand the skills and behaviors valued there [in school] and exemplify them in family life. … [P]oor parents often themselves struggled at school and have low literacy levels, and thus they undoubtedly have difficulties cultivating valued educational skills in their children. (Alexander et al., 2007, p. 176).

Described here are two major factors driving the opportunity gap. The first, commonly cited, is that low-income parents lack the academic knowledge and resources to assist their children; the second, perhaps more significant but less emphasized, is the importance of cultural capital. The ways we communicate with authority figures—whether it is casual conversation, asking for further clarification, explaining an inhibitory situation, or requesting accommodations—are shaped by the norms of the environment, and following certain norms is key to success.

To a certain extent, it makes little sense in a country that believes everyone starts on equal footing to think that class is such a predominant factor dictating cultural capital. To explain, though, professors Stephens, Markus, and Phillips (2014) argue in the *Annual Review of Psychology* that because middle-class people exist in a certain world—one with few material constraints and a high degree of self-determinism—they form an "expressive independent" self, and because working-class people exist in an uncertain world—one with limited resources or control over one's

life—they form a "hard interdependent" self. Essentially, middle-class people are encouraged to advocate for themselves, while working-class people are told to remember their place in the social hierarchy. This variance is specifically because the human capital needs—or skills and traits that enable someone to produce monetary capital in a particular environment—for white-collar jobs involve originality, self-expression, and creative freedom, while blue- and pink-collar jobs require obedience, servitude, and deference (Stephens et al., 2014). In the workplace, middle-class people are encouraged to express their opinions, while working-class people are often fired for doing the same. These contrasting selves are reinforced in family, school, and work life. For example, styles of storytelling reflect the knowledge and skills parents want to instill in their children. Middle-class parents often emphasize happy endings and encourage their children to explore alternative realities: "[If] a child tries to rewrite a story by insisting that Santa Claus comes at Easter, a parent may ask: 'Really, does he? Tell me about it? How does that work?'" On the other hand, working-class parents often emphasize avoiding errors and the consequences of breaking rules: "[If] a child in a working-class context were to insist that Santa Claus visits at Easter, a parent might challenge the child's statement by saying 'No, he doesn't, don't be crazy'" (Stephens et al., 2014, p. 618). The first style instills the belief that the world is full of infinite possibilities, while the second cautions children against making mistakes, emphasizing the idea that "you can't always get what you want."

Consequently, socioeconomic context shapes parental involvement in education, resulting in a cultural mismatch for working-class parents who have been taught not to challenge authority. While some, primarily middle-class, schools have adapted with changing times and human capital needs, many have not. The structure of schools, composed of a hierarchy with students at the bottom, often reminds working-class parents of the blue-collar work environment:

> [S]chool organisation, historically structured along factory production lines, continues today. … Many schools still bear the hallmarks of the formality, inflexibility and timetabling that characterised schooling historically, and which are counterproductive to forming parent–school relationships that require flexibility. (Hornby & Lafeale, 2011, p. 48)

The hierarchical structure of schooling is an issue because working-class parents associate teachers and principals with bosses, not equals, as middle-class parents more often do. In her book *Negotiating Opportunities*, Jessica Calarco (2018) interviewed both working- and middle-class parents of elementary school students in a particular school district and found that working-class parents frequently "cautioned their children that a lack of respect … could have serious, negative consequences," based on their own experiences of being reprimanded for "overburdening" teachers in schools (p. 37). This advice is obviously well-intentioned, with the goal of instilling in children the value of respect, but

it results in both parents and students being less likely to voice concerns. Consequently, Hornby & Lafeale (2011) discuss that a lack of an explicit invitation from teachers can lead parents to believe that their involvement is at best superficially sought out, particularly in secondary school, which "are often seen by parents as large bureaucratic organisations [that] are not welcoming to parents" (Hornby & Lafeale, 2011, p. 40). Any invitation extended towards parents is perceived as a courtesy, not a genuine desire to hear the opinions of parents.

However, the bureaucratic nature of schools could feasibly be, and to a certain extent is, a deterrent to parents of all backgrounds. What is more specific to low-income parents, though, is how the school's institutional nature creates differing levels of confidence among parents about their ability to create positive outcomes by involving themselves in their children's schooling. Many parents of first-generation students were themselves educated in working-class schools, whose goal is to instill the discipline and obedience required to maintain a blue- or pink-collar job. For instance, in Ta-Nehisi Coates's book *Between the World and Me*— written as a letter to his son about his experiences as a black man in America—he reflects on his own punishment-based K-12 schooling:

> To be educated in my Baltimore mostly meant always packing an extra number 2 pencil and working quietly … Educated children never offered excuses—certainly not childhood. The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? Algebra, Biology and English were not subjects so much as opportunities to better discipline the body … I loved a few of my teachers. But I cannot say that I trusted any of them. (Coates, 2015, pp. 25-26)

Coates's schooling experience instills fear that mistakes in school can be just as costly as mistakes in the street. Stepping out of bounds in the school or work environment can cost someone their job. Therefore, teachers must be treated as bosses to prepare students for the limited allowance afforded to those in poverty. This environment is inhibitory to relationship building between teachers and students or parents. If the world does not give second chances, why would parents assume their involvement would bring anything but punishment for their child? Rather than laziness or incompetence, a lack of involvement from low-income parents is at least in part due to negative associations with schooling, either from their own lives or their children's.

Student Perspectives

After conducting phone interviews with college-going EPAAF alum in the fall, three classmates and I sat around a small table with the head of the organization, Kate. We debriefed on conversations such as one in which a student told us he drives home every weekend to work all day Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in order to support his family; and another in which a girl said the hardest part of being away for school was her inability to care for her mother, who has cancer. As we discussed the role of parents in these students' lives, Kate told us that, while she has never met a parent

who did not want the world for their child, many were skeptical of all the promises associated with college. She also said it could be an issue when students inevitably face emotional and academic hardships during the transition to college, parents often say things like, "Oh, just come home for a bit, and we'll take care of you," which often results in students wanting to stay home more and more. One of the most difficult conflicts first-generation students face is leaving their interdependent culture in order to serve their community, yet experiencing guilt over all their previous family responsibilities left unfilled. Both the guilt and their family's high hopes for first-generation, low-income students pushes many to hide new academic and emotional hardships from their parents.

However, the combined impacts of working-class parents being deterred from engaging in their children's schooling because of the previously mentioned lack of confidence and also first-generation students' reluctance to confide in their parents is a rather serious issue. In a report for the University of Delaware's Center for the Study of Diversity, professors Covarrubias, Jones, and Johnson explain how student-parent conversations about college affect student confidence and academic performance ("Parent conversations about college", 2018). They found that while the number of conversations between continuing-generation students and their parents did not drastically affect confidence-- presumably because those students were already comfortable with university norms and expectations--conversations about college between first-generation students and their parents resulted in greater confidence and better grades. Even still, conversations about college occur less frequently between first-generation students and their parents due to parents lacking knowledge about what it means to attend university. Consequently, when first-generation students do converse with their parents about college, their conversation topics vary from continuing-generation students:

> [O]ne continuing-generation student shared an example of [concrete] support: "…When I took English, I would write something and then I would send it to my mom and be like ok revise this and send it back to me… And she would read it and change things." First-generation students, on the other hand, spoke about the absence of this support. Sandra, for example, said, "My whole family wants to give me that academic support, but they don't have that experience. I don't think I've ever gotten information from my family as far as "Can you help me with this statistics or chemistry homework?" ("Parent conversations about college", 2018, p. 7)

Even when parents lack the cultural capital to provide concrete support, they can still positively impact their student's academic outcomes by raising their child's confidence level. A similar effect was discovered by Frome and Eccles (1998), who found a strong correlation between sixth-grade students' and their parents' perceptions of the students' math and English grades. The authors theorize this correlation is at least partially due to parents' role as socializers, acting as interpreters for students' daily experiences. Through this role, working-class parents can

act as anchors during the turbulence experienced by their children trying to navigate university for the first time.

Slightly removed from students' relationships with their parents, though, is the cultural mismatch first-generation students experience in university. University culture often matches the middle-class norms of independence and self-expression, coinciding with the upbringing of middle-class children who are taught to explore their own thoughts and feelings and to pursue their interests. Working-class children, on the other hand, are raised to be especially mindful of others and to obey authority. This mismatch has significant biological and psychological consequences. For example, one study found that using an independent norms framing of university culture causes a greater increase in cortisol in first-generation students compared to continuing-generation students, as they were tasked to give a speech. This discrepancy disappears when using interdependent norms framing ("A cultural mismatch", 2012). Another study demonstrates that this gap is not a deficit inherent to first-generation students: The researchers presented either a university welcome letter emphasizing independent norms or interdependent norms and then tasked both first-generation and continuing-generation students with solving a series of anagrams and then ranking the difficulty. The results, illustrated in their charts below, indicated that continuing-generation students perform worse than first-generation students when presented with an interdependent message, while first-generation students perform worse than continuing-generation students when presented with an independent message ("Unseen Disadvantage", 2012).
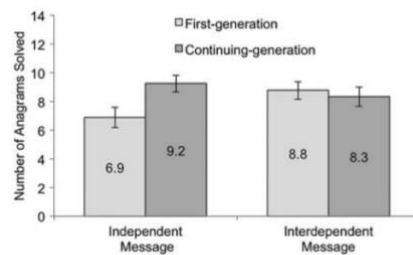

Figure 2. Mean number of anagrams solved by student social class and condition in Study 3. Error bars represent standard errors.
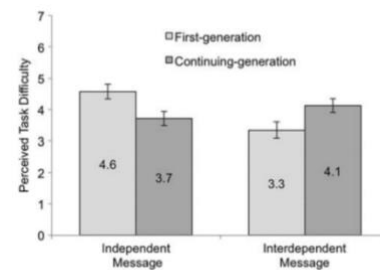
Figure 4. Mean perceptions of task difficulty by student social class and condition in Study 4. Error bars represent standard errors.

FIGURES 1-2. Graphs of results from "Unseen Disadvantage," 2012.

Moreover, middle-class children are often taught to view and address adults as equals, while working-class students are taught to respect authority. Through a series of interviews, Nicholas and Islas (2015) found that continuing-generation students often talked about "giving" their professors a second chance to improve, and—like their parents—they view themselves as equals or superior to their professors: "I enjoy going to class and I usually believe what she (biology teacher) says." Continuing-

generation students usually do not internalize failures as indicative of their own shortcomings, but rather due to the incompatibility of their learning style with the instructor's teaching, for example:

> She's (English professor) not clear when she says something and then—I think a lot of times when I try to raise something she'll tell me how to fix it but showing me her way of fixing it as opposed to letting me develop my own kind of way . . . I just don't agree with her teaching style. (Nichols & Islas, 2015, p. 81).

This student and many of the other interviewed continuing-generation students were fully comfortable with criticizing their professors and viewing themselves as the ultimate authority on their own education. On the other hand, first-generation students typically internalize failures, blaming themselves or their lack of belonging in an academic environment for performing poorly. Nichols and Islas (2015) discuss how only one first-generation student came close to criticizing his professor, yet in the end he assigned blame to his classmates for not studying enough:

> He (chemistry professor) sounds mean and he's just like, he doesn't really explain things well with his words—I don't even know how to say it. But so I think I mean just think like that I think maybe that's their problem or maybe, you know, they're not studying. (Nichols & Islas, 2015, p. 81).

The reluctance to view difficulties as anything but one's own fault inhibits a student's ability either to work through issues to find solutions with professors or to seek out other resources. In this way, middle-class cultural capital disadvantages working-class students through no fault of their own.

Teacher and School Perspectives

Every week, I am afforded a tiny lens into the life of a teacher while I coach about fifty students at a nearby middle school for debate. Specifically, I gain perspective on what it means to teach in a rather wealthy school district. Never before have I seen so many parents involved in their children's schooling--at practices, tournaments, parent meetings, group chats, and over email. Further, I have never met students who are so accustomed to speaking directly with their teachers. At one point, I was shocked by an email from a student who said something along the lines of "I would appreciate it if you would leave feedback on my case. Please have it done by Thursday so I can make corrections for practice." I knew he was perfectly reasonable with how he articulated himself--he was clear with what help he needed and by when--but I could never, especially not when I was twelve or thirteen, imagine speaking to an authority figure with such a forward request.

However, variants of this behavior seem to be expected and appreciated in upper-class institutions, resulting in a cultural mismatch between working-class parents and schools, which were historically designed to serve the white middle-class. Teachers are often led to view

the methods of middle-class parents—who have more money, knowledge, and power to ensure their children have a positive schooling experience—as the ideal and other methods as evidence of laziness. In the third chapter of Stanford sociology professor Michelle Jackson's book *Manifesto for a Dream,* she explores how institutions' interactions with and reliance upon each other, which forms a web or network, disadvantages lower-class people who lack both the necessary cultural and financial capital to navigate this web. For example, upper-income schools can rely on their students having access to medical institutions that provide adequate care and to parents who assist with preparing them to enter the school system, working through difficult schoolwork, and studying for standardized tests (Jackson, 2020). In this way, the web of institutions provides compounding benefits to middle-class students, while working-class students are faced with the multiplying ramifications of worse medical care, overcrowded schools, and more financial instability.

Both concerning and related to the aforementioned assumptions is the prevalence of a deficit model among teachers, "whereby parents are viewed as 'problems', 'vulnerable', or 'less able' and are therefore best kept out of schools (Hornby & Lafeale, 2011, p. 45). For example, a Chicago school board--described in the ethnography *There Are No Children Here*, which follows two Black boys living in the Projects--went as far as actively discouraging parental involvement by omitting "the telephone numbers of individual schools in the city's phone book, so parents couldn't reach their children's school by phone" (Kotlowitz, 1991, p. 63). However, schools can be much more subtle in devaluing interdependent norms. For instance, the following statement is from the 2004 Stanford University Student Handbook: "It is not the task, first and foremost of an advisor to tell you what to do.... Your advisor should be seen as a compass, not as a roadmap" (Stanford University, 2004, p. 15). While being seemingly harmless advice, the message is interpreted by first-generation students to mean they should already understand and have planned out their future goals "without too much reliance on others" ("Unseen Disadvantage", 2012). Thus, whether intentionally or not, middle-class schools often alienate working-class parents and students through institutional actions, not just individuals' pre-existing associations and personal psychologies explored in the previous two sections.

Nevertheless, it is essential to understand the motivations behind teachers' and schools' actions in order to facilitate more inclusive adaptations. Hornby & Lafeale (2011) point to schools', parents', and teachers' differing goals for parental involvement: First, governments and schools view parental involvement "as a tool for increasing school accountability to their communities"; second, parents involve themselves with the goal of aiding their children's comfort and performance in school; and third, teachers focus on the role of parents in helping with homework and attending parent-teacher conferences. These varying purposes for parental involvement, though not entirely contrasting, can potentially

create a disconnect between schools, parents, and teachers who have differing expectations of each other. Hornby & Lafeale also emphasize that, more often than not, teachers genuinely want to connect with parents to work towards solutions. However, teachers are "increasingly held accountable for children's achievements … and are often required to assume responsibility for tasks for which they have received little or no training, including working closely with parents (Hornby 2000; OECD 1997)" (Hornby & Lafeale, 2011, p. 44). Much of the rhetoric around teachers today focuses on blameworthiness for students' poor achievement, and many are generally distrusting towards teachers' ability and desire to effectively do their job. This lack of trust--from governments, schools, and parents--is rather counterproductive because teachers cannot be expected to effectively engage with parents without proper support from schools. Therefore, the focus on teacher accountability is a short-term and unsatisfying solution to perpetual cultural inequalities.

Moreover, cultural mismatches are often non-obvious from the teacher's perspective, such as the role of feedback. To a teacher, it is evident that they want nothing more than their students improving and learning; feedback is meant to reach that aim. Nonetheless, intentions are lost in translation. A *Journal of Experimental Psychology* study explores how minority students often internalize feedback as an indication of the teacher's belief that the student does not belong in an academically rigorous environment (Yeager et al., 2014). The authors' solution is as simple as more explicit communication, such as attaching a note to feedback that reads something like, "I'm giving this feedback to you because I have high expectations, and I know you can meet them." Contrary to the strategies of withholding feedback or offering empty compliments, this message enables students to succeed through how it communicates both an explicit purpose for the feedback and affirmation of the student's abilities. The results of this intervention were that minority students were more likely to submit multiple drafts of an assignment, when given the option, and they showed greater improvement in their final drafts.

Conclusion

Rather, 'families and schools as partners' is a way of thinking about forming connections, not about how educators can 'fix the family.'

— Christenson, 2003

While I have alluded to certain solutions, here I will directly point to Covarrubius and colleagues' suggestion ("Parent conversations about college", 2018) that it is beneficial to create more family-inclusive college messaging and include more explicit invitations for family to be involved in the lives of their college students. These reforms have the effects of increased student confidence and thereby student outcomes. Additionally,

it is essential that universities make a concerted effort to admit and support first-generation graduate students and professors who serve as mentors for working-class students facing new and unique challenges. I recently heard from a friend of my former research coordinator that one of her readers for a doctorate program she was rejected from commented that her first-generation status indicated she probably would not be competent enough for the program. That mindset is inexcusable at institutions that claim to care about social mobility and the well-being of their working-class students. It is inevitable that there will be miscommunications, but it does not have to inevitable that first-generation students are unwelcome in institutions of higher learning.

Lastly, universities and professors must remember that inequalities do not disappear once students reach campus, but also that they should not view those inequalities as signs working-class students do not care or do not want to form relationships with faculty. More often than not, a failure on their part to connect is because students are acting according to deeply internalized values and norms, whether they know those norms to be beneficial or not. Even when professors extend invitations for office hours, certain interactions still seem unthinkable to working-class students. For example, Bailey B. Smolarek recalls for a piece for *Inside Higher Ed* that a friend simply walked up to a professor on the first day of class to ask for a spot off the waitlist: "To me, it was unthinkable to go to the professor and make such a request… [S]uch an action was presumptive, entitled and disrespectful. Why would someone ever think they were superior to the others on the wait list?" (Smolarek, 2019). Not only was she confused, but afterwards she felt foolish that she somehow did not know to do that in the first place. Further, when a professor was being unkind to her in graduate school, her mother's only counseling was "Sometimes bosses aren't nice" (Smolarek, 2019). These seemingly insignificant scenarios further enforce the illusion that other students are simply more responsible and capable of handling the stressors and challenges of university—that they belong, and you do not. Less obvious is that middle-class students are trained and supported to succeed in university because they have the advantage of growing up with similar norms. If progress is to be made in closing the opportunity gap, institutions must learn to facilitate effective and welcoming communication between their professors, students, and parents.

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