

9-1-2008

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## Recommended APA Citation

Hurst, A. L. (2008). A Healing Echo: Methodological Reflections of a Working-Class Researcher on Class. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 334-352. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss3/2>

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## A Healing Echo: Methodological Reflections of a Working-Class Researcher on Class

### Abstract

College students from the working class have interesting stories to tell about the meaning and operation of mobility through education. The author, herself a “working-class academic,” explores some of the issues and dilemmas of uncovering and presenting these stories. Specifically, the author addresses: (1) the effects of interviewing those similar to one’s self; (2) the possibility of losing voice when interviewing too many participants; (3) the responsibility of the researcher to take seriously the importance of renaming interview participants to ensure both anonymity and integrity; (4) the question of audience; and (5) the issue of reliability.

### Keywords

Class Identity, Phenomenology, Insider/outsider Status, and Interviewing

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## **A Healing Echo: Methodological Reflections of a Working-Class Researcher on Class**

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*College students from the working class have interesting stories to tell about the meaning and operation of mobility through education. The author, herself a “working-class academic,” explores some of the issues and dilemmas of uncovering and presenting these stories. Specifically, the author addresses: (1) the effects of interviewing those similar to one’s self; (2) the possibility of losing voice when interviewing too many participants; (3) the responsibility of the researcher to take seriously the importance of renaming interview participants to ensure both anonymity and integrity; (4) the question of audience; and (5) the issue of reliability. Key Words: Class Identity, Phenomenology, Insider/outsider Status, and Interviewing*

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### **Introduction**

By the numbers, I probably never should have made it to college. I was the oldest daughter of teen parents who struggled to survive economically. We moved around a lot, sometimes when we moved to a new school district I would be given the same textbook I had used the previous year in a different school district. I began working outside the home before I was a teenager, doing odd jobs here and there, and then I worked full-time when I was old enough. I had teachers who looked down on me for being from the wrong side of town. I only took the SAT once, and that was more by accident than purpose. I only applied to one school because I was not aware that fees could often be waived if you were poor. My high school counsellor tried to encourage me to find an appropriate career that wouldn’t require a college degree. In fact, I had to start college twice. The first time, at a big state school, my scholarship was delayed and I was evicted from the dormitories. With no one to turn to and no place to go, I simply stopped going to class and never registered for the second semester.

Eventually, I did make it through college, law school, and graduate school. And it was while I was in graduate school, pondering choices for research, that I first saw my story sociologically. I remember exactly when this occurred. I was sitting in a seminar in which a book about female sweatshop workers in Los Angeles was being discussed. Some of the workers described their hopes for their daughters becoming educated so that they could come back and help them achieve economic justice. The idea was that education was to be a tool, a means by which their daughters could gain power to help in the fight against oppression. The daughters could help their mothers write petitions, understand the law, and speak eloquently in the master’s own language. And I thought, did they? Did they really come back? Why did I doubt that a happy ending would follow? And what was I doing in a comfortable seminar room, talking about sweatshop workers,

when my mother was getting carpal tunnel syndrome from her new “at-home assembly” job?

I also began to wonder about the continuing decline of a strong working-class politics. What happened to the idea that our democracy would be strengthened as more people from the working class became educated? Why did it seem that education *did so little* for the working class? Sure, I was getting educated, but what did that have to do with my brothers and sisters, cousins and neighbours? How was my education helping them? Another time, I watched a TV special about a struggling African-American family in New York City and how the single mother and the older sister worked double shifts to put the first son through college and business school. The TV special celebrated the American Dream, but I watched in frustration as the son became increasingly more arrogant, more distant, more condescending towards his family. They didn’t seem to mind all that much, but I did. What was happening to him? What was the point of higher education for those of us from the working class if it just made us leave everyone behind?

I wondered, too, about myself, what I was doing, how I was acting and behaving. What was really the point of me completing my degree if it didn’t help out my family in some way? Part of my academic success, I had always thought, belonged to my family. While I realized that writing a dissertation was in no way similar to an effectively organized labour campaign, I wanted my dissertation to *contribute something of value* to my family and the class from which I came. I realized that I could not continue until I had addressed the fundamental question behind my doubts; what was higher education doing to academically successful working-class students? I crafted my dissertation in response to that question. Doing so allowed me to allay some of my fears about the hegemonic power of academia through critique; for if it can be critiqued, alternatives can be put forth. This was my small contribution then. In this article I want to highlight some of the ethical dilemmas of such a very personal study. Because I do believe it is of the utmost importance as an academic to think about *who you are writing for*. I want to be clear about my standpoint, my position, and my motivations. I believe there is no such thing as a neutral social scientist, and that any attempts at such are simply power-evasive. Before addressing the dilemmas and pitfalls of such a study, however, let me briefly provide an overview of the study and its major findings.

### **The Study**

To address the concerns discussed above, I decided that I would interview students from the working class who were currently in college. There are some very good retrospective descriptions of what the process was like for working-class academics, that is, practicing academics raised in working-class households (Dews & Law, 1995; Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997; Muzzatti & Samarco, 2006; Reay, 1997; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993; Welsch, 2005; Zandy, 1995), but there are very few from those who are currently in the middle of such a journey. What interested me most about the working-class students I would interview was how they would understand, narrate, and make sense of the potential for social mobility through education. A great part of this was, admittedly, to help myself understand what had happened to me through education.

There is much that can be learned from listening to working-class students describe their experiences in college. These students occupy a unique social location. What difference did it make to these students that they were *unique* among their families and the majority of their working-class peers in their choice of attending college? Did they think about this in terms of class? If not, how did they explain their uniqueness? I was interested not only in how these students saw themselves as different from those in their home communities, but also the ways in which they saw themselves as different from others in the campus culture, and whether or not there was a relationship as to how students responded to these perceived differences with respect to their pasts and their futures. Does assimilation or acculturation take place, and under what circumstances and with what effects? Here I was really trying to understand why so few students from the working class returned to their home communities to fight oppression.

To explore these questions I interviewed 21 working-class students attending a moderately selective public university. Many of the students I interviewed were former students who had taken courses I taught as a graduate instructor. They heard I was doing this study and approached me, asking if they could be part of it. In fact, most of the students I interviewed were outspokenly excited about the fact that someone was doing a study on working-class college students. They were very eager to take part in such a study. This was an unrepresentative way to generate a sample. I make no apologies for that, although I recognize that some social scientists will be frustrated and unforgiving. It was entirely appropriate, I believe, to find students through word of mouth, a few strategically posted flyers, and snowballing for two major reasons. First, this was an exploratory study. I wanted to interview a diverse group of working-class college students, but I had no intention of doing a full racial or gender analysis. I was interested in the *class-based similarities* I would find among working-class college students. When I began, I had no idea I would find different navigational strategies. That emerged from the research itself. Second, many of the questions I asked dealt with sensitive topics. There is a lot of stigma associated with being poor or working class. Many of the students were really trying their hardest to *hide* their identities, and to *run* from their pasts. I think I would have missed much had I been completely unknown to all of the students I interviewed. The way I recruited subjects was useful for two reasons; only those students who were most willing to discuss class-related issues were interviewed, and, two, knowing me prior to the interviews (albeit on a very superficial level) gave them a level of comfort necessary to talk about some seriously painful (and potentially embarrassing) topics. I was always very upfront with my own class status. Everyone I interviewed knew that I was from the working class (as well as being White and female).

Because I was primarily interested in the meanings that these students ascribed to both their educations and their class identities (and how these two intertwined) it was appropriate to construct a qualitative study. Qualitative methods can “illuminate the meanings people attach to their words and actions in a way not possible with other methodologies” (Lareau, 2003, p. 219). I am here not interested in the frequency of behavior, but in the *meaning* of behavior (Lareau & Schutz, 1996). Because I was interested in meanings, I used a phenomenological approach. I wanted to demonstrate how,

phenomena come to have personal meaning, a lived-through significance that may not always be transparent to consciousness. The focus is upon involvement in a natural-cultural-historical milieu within which individuals discover themselves as subject to meaning. This tradition stresses that we can only understand human phenomena, such as language, in practice, or use. (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 3)

Phenomenology focuses on “how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). I was struck during the interviews by the ways in which working-class college students narrated their move from the working class to the middle class, and how this narrative shaped the meanings they had of class. Narratives can be useful meaning-making tools. I adopted this approach from Belton’s (2005) work, *Questioning Gypsy Identity*. Belton used personal narratives of British “travelers” (a community to which he belonged) to undercut academic theories of Gypsy racial identity, demonstrating in contrast the *material basis* of Traveler identity.<sup>1</sup> Narratives are particularly useful for an examination of people engaged in crossing (cultural, racial, class) borders because narratives serve a key function in helping to define identities.

The story is a net in which we try to capture experience. This gives narratives an almost sacred role; our sense of self and wider existence is made by these stories. Stories about ourselves and the world exist within the stories and are the building blocks of consciousness...The narrative is above all an interpretation. Interpretation is an effort to find meaning. Understanding always comes before interpretation, and without it there is no interpretation...The stories of others provide us with a means to develop meaning as we assimilate experiences into our own narrative of self. This makes narrative a ubiquitous and powerful tool in the construction of identity. (Belton, 2005, pp. 114-115)

Narrative is thus a perfect phenomenological tool for understanding identities in the process of becoming. Stuart Hall has argued that, “identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (as cited in Belton, 2005, p. 130). This approach,

allows room for explaining not only how identities come into being, but also how identities change over time. At the same time, the approach is helpful in explaining how identities and the interests that flow from them become gendered, raced, and classed. (Price, 2000, p. 19)

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<sup>1</sup> Belton (2005) argues that an ethnic/racial focus on Gypsies has given rise to an erroneous ethnic narrative of Gypsy identity. Instead, he stresses the social constructedness of Gypsy identity and seems to suggest that Gypsies are in actuality those who are living outside the dominant economic system - these people are then denoted Gypsies and this has taken on a racial meaning.

Although the primary focus is on class identity (and working-class identities in particular), class identity is only separable from identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in the abstract sense, and never as lived by individuals. For this reason, I pay particular attention to how other identities intersect with class identities in the narratives of these students. I focus on class primarily,

not because it is the predominant identity but because in recent scholarship it is, in practical terms and use, the missing identifying principle. Like a ghost, it is there but not there, mentioned but not really welcomed into the multicultural conversation. (Zandy, 1995, p. 10)

A phenomenological perspective, strengthened by the use of narrative analysis, can greatly expand our understandings of class. This is because class is about lived experiences and lived experiences always entail an element of interpretation. Thus it was very important for me to see the ways in which working-class college students told their “stories” of academic success and social mobility. Although I had general points and issues that I wanted to ask my respondents, I generally let them tell the story of how they got to college and what this meant to them. I allowed my respondents to tell the story they wanted to tell, and to focus on the areas that were of most importance (often those that were most troubling) to them. I paid special attention to how they began their stories; a difficult childhood, their parents’ struggles to make it in America, or their arduous college applications? Particular images of themselves developed in the stories they told of their educational careers. Some considered themselves lucky, for example, while others considered themselves special. These were often connected to how they perceived class and inequality in society. As one student eloquently explained to me, her parents were poor not because they were lazy but because they were oppressed. In contrast, a student who strongly believed in the American Dream felt that working-class people simply got what they deserved. Thus, I paid a great deal of attention to the particular words and evaluations of working-class and middle-class people and institutions, and any references to emotions in particular. Some, for example, used only positive attributes and emotions (happy, proud, strong, wise, funny, love) to describe the working class and only negative attributes and emotions (sad, mean, ashamed, egotistical, hate) to describe middle-class people and institutions. Other students did the opposite. Finally, I noticed where students used words like “we” and “they” to connote closeness or distance from certain populations.

What I discovered is that each of the 21 students interviewed had her/his own particular narrative of class identity and educational achievement that reflected the meanings the students held about class and class relationships.<sup>2</sup> There were three overarching patterns, related quite clearly to political alignment. One group, whom I designate “Renegades,” stress the importance of “becoming middle class,” while a contrasting group, designated as “Loyalists,” stress the importance of “finding home/roots/community.” For Renegades, a key motivation was proving oneself to a world that otherwise denigrates people from the working class. Loyalists, in contrast, were primarily concerned with “keeping it real” and avoiding assimilation and cooptation. A third group, whom I designated “Double Agents” told stories of refusing to

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the different patterns that emerged, see Hurst (2007).

“take sides,” of being “the middleman,” of enjoying the freedom to roam. These students were trying hard to have one foot in each camp, while Renegades were trying to leave the working class and Loyalists were pained at potential alienation from family and old friends. Each of these narratives was a way for the students to make meaning of their lives, identities, and class trajectories. In all of these stories the college experience played a key role in (re)defining class identity and, to a lesser extent, affected class consciousness.

In other words, students react differently to the *classifying* processes of educational achievement. Loyalists strenuously *reject* reclassification and make extra efforts to maintain connections with working-class family friends and community. At times, this becomes a near-impossible project, as the pressures to conform to a middle-class world are great. Loyalists can be in danger of failing academically (or, more accurately, of not sharing in the economic rewards of proper educational credentialing) to the extent that they reject middle-class norms and behaviors too strenuously. Renegades, on the other hand, long for reclassification. This, too, can sometimes be an impossible project, what is asked of these students to truly “belong” or “pass” into the middle class is awesome. They must reject friends, family, past selves, long-standing values, and embrace new norms and behaviors. What keeps many of these students going is the complete and utter faith that all of this will pay off. If it does not, these students are left in limbo, without a home in either camp (culturally speaking). Double Agents, unusually charismatic, were often able to accept and retain cultural aspects of both the working class and the middle class even as they strove to achieve (like all the students) a better class *position* (not necessarily, however, *identity*). These stories, of loss, betrayal, hope, and fear, are important to some extent simply because they do exist, to displace official accounts of education as a thornless path of betterment. Every such story serves to displace another (possibly hegemonic) account (Lipsitz, 1997; Plummer, 2000; Steedman, 1985).

### **Methodological Dilemmas and Pitfalls: Lessons of Echo**

Let me introduce Echo here. Echo, according to Classical Western Mythology, was a young woman who was punished for talking too much. Her punishment was never to be able to initiate a conversation, or dialogue, but always to be consigned to repeating what others said before her. She led a tragic life, frustrated by her inability to hold a conversation, particularly with her object of desire, Narcissus. Allegedly, she exists now only in the distant echo of lonely and forgotten places, her preferred home. There was a real danger for me in this project that I would be listening for Echo, and that the students I interviewed would respond Echo-like to my questions. As a working-class academic myself, I was predisposed to believe that I knew what it was like to be a working-class college student. I had to be very careful when crafting my questions and soliciting my interviewees not to let these preconceptions initiate the study. Thus, I had to become, in a sense, Echo. The metaphor may be a particularly apt one for the interviewer, as Echo, unlike Narcissus, wants very much to communicate fully with others, but is barred from initiating conversation. This makes Echo an ideal interviewer of sorts, completely open and understanding, and yet holding her tongue. This was the goal I set for myself, and it



was a good thing I did, as the main finding of the study was how differently working-class students navigate multiple class identities and trajectories.

Having provided some detail about the study, I would now like to turn to a discussion of the methodological difficulties this project entailed, and the particular dilemmas of studying a subject that you think you know well, or the difference between listening for the Echo and becoming Echo. There are five aspects that I would like to address here: first, the interview relationship itself (what it means to be standing in the position toward which your interview subjects themselves are working); second, the issue of numbers (Are 10 interviews enough? 20? What happens if you lose their voices? – another aspect of the Echo problem); third, the issue of naming and anonymity (specifically how do you rename your subjects with integrity?); fourth, audience (for whom are we writing? Are we writing in such a way that we are echoing only to ourselves in the lonely hills and caverns of academia, or are we writing in ways to be read by a greater audience?); and, finally, the issue of reliability (how can you be sure that you are not soliciting interviews that echo your own experience and understandings?).

### **The Interview Relationship**

I am a White educated woman from the working class. It is important that I be clear about exactly what this means, as it is important for explaining the interview relationships I developed in this study. Much of the following story parallels that of the students I interviewed. My father's father was a bricklayer, originally from Louisiana, who had moved to California during the great Post-War construction boom. My father's mother was a secretary at times and a homemaker when there was enough money. My mother's father came from a long line of Midwestern farmers. After the war, he went to work as a clerk in an office of a manufacturing company in Southern California and for a time seemed to have reinvented himself as middle class. He wore a suit and tie to work, but money was always tight. In the 1980s, when I was a teenager, the world crashed in on them. He lost his job, my grandma went to work in a succession of factories, eventually getting breast cancer, and my grandpa tried to commit suicide. It was a horrible time. Completely broke, they moved in with my family just as I was leaving it.

My own childhood was one of great economic struggle and close family ties. I was the oldest of four. I think my siblings may have had it a little better than I did, as conditions improved over time. We lived in a succession of apartments when I was very young, many of them in "not so nice" neighbourhoods. My Dad supported the three of us, and went to high school, by working at a fast food restaurant. My parents were absolutely wonderful, even though they were just high school kids. Later, my Dad spent six or seven years working full-time (mostly as a janitor, at nights) to put himself through community college and then a small state school so that he could support us. My mom worked at a bookstore to help out, but her primary job was mother, wife, and homemaker. She *really* knew how to stretch a dollar. She made all my clothes by hand. Sometimes we couldn't quite make it, though, and we'd go live with various family members; grandparents, an older aunt (how exactly she was related I still don't know), and even friends.

There were no jobs waiting for my Dad when he eventually graduated from a four-year state college. I was in third grade then. After a lot of thought, a lot of discussion, and some really hard times, he joined the military. He was bright and was sent

to the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, where he was taught Russian. For the next eight years he was a Russian linguist for the US Army, eventually making it to sergeant status. We moved all over the place (by the time I graduated from high school I had gone to 22 different schools). My Dad often was not home. Because the Army really didn't pay so well, he sometimes took a second job, usually as the night-time clerk at a local convenience store. We had military housing, but we also needed food stamps to get by, government cheese, and free school lunches. My Mom did crazy things for money, including a really scary period where she sold her blood on a regular, too regular basis; she was always close to passing out. I got used to selling the presents that our grandparents gave us. However, I remember being proud to do that; a Barbie doll could be turned into money for a meatloaf; that was a good thing.

Eventually, my family did "make it." Things paid off for them. I know that other families are not so lucky. When my Dad got out of the Army he went back to school for a teaching certificate. They bought a house and settled down for the first time in their lives. I left home about this time and struggled through college, law school, and graduate school. My Dad became a high school teacher and, just recently, moved up to administration (what he called, with much trepidation, "going over to the dark side"). My oldest brother works for Albertson's (a large West Coast grocery chain) and his wife works in a factory. My sister also worked for Albertson's for a long time, in the bakery department, but is getting her teaching credential now. Now that my Dad is such a bigwig in the school district she wants to follow in his footsteps. My youngest brother recently graduated from college but could not find a job. He worked at *Home Depot* and *Pizza Hut* for a while. Now he has decided that his only choice is to follow the family path and get a teaching credential, too. My Mom continues to work 70-hour weeks, though, being a wife, grandmother, and homemaker. Without her as free childcare provider to her two grandsons, my sister would not have been able to go to college *and* work full-time while doing so. Things are still not *easy* for my family. But they are intact, safe, and happy. Other than me, they all live in the same town, within miles of all my aunts, uncles, and grandparents, too. They don't really understand why I am *here*, and not *there*.

I've engaged in this lengthy biography because I believe it is important to know, especially in a study such as this, the background/standpoint of the researcher. One of the demands of reflecting on our research processes is that we, as researchers, "point to our own subjectivity, acknowledge that it undoubtedly shapes the story we tell, and – most importantly – recognize the fact of the power we wield, the power of interpretation" (Bettie, 2003, pp. 22-23). The fact that I identified as a White working-class woman, and that I shared many of the same class experiences as those I interviewed, definitely affected the relationship I had with potential interviewees. And even though many of the details I gave above were not known to the students I interviewed, there were shared moments of revelation in the interview process; discovering that we both knew and remembered the taste of government cheese, for example. This was both a strength and a potential weakness. It would have been easy for me to allow a mutual understanding to get in the way of explicit descriptions. Certain nods of the head routinely followed the proverbial question, "you know what I mean?" But I made an effort, in those circumstances, to stop the head nodding and say, "well, I might, but the person reading this probably doesn't. Can you explain this a little more?" This was my first engagement with Echo. A shared background can facilitate this kind of exchange. Without the initial

understanding, I am not so sure that many of those I interviewed would have *wanted* to explain. It's easier to just give up sometimes. I know. I've done it.<sup>3</sup>

How I was *read* (similar, different) depended upon each particular person I was interviewing. I don't think it was an accident that I interviewed more White women than any other group. For some students of color, especially those without a very strong class consciousness, I probably appeared quite different. In those interviews, I often felt a greater reticence on the part of the students. I tried to reassure them that I was *not* going to make judgments about them or their families. That seemed to be a major concern. Most were reassured. In one or two cases, I don't know if I ever truly made it through. Those cases reaffirmed my belief that it matters a great deal who the researcher is in relation to those being interviewed.

But even with a shared background, things became more complicated because of my present position. I was, after all, in a position of authority as interviewer. I was also a college graduate, soon to be (hopefully at the time) a Ph.D. Sometimes I felt as if the students were looking at me and wondering, "could that be me someday?" After the interviews were done I spent a lot of time with several of the students encouraging them to think about graduate school, or explaining what a Ph.D. is and what the process is for getting one. I would also carefully explain the process of the dissertation, and explain how their willingness to be interviewed was also instrumental in helping me achieve my educational goals. Sometimes these conversations lay uncomfortably close to earlier discussions and critiques of education. One Native-American student, who was concerned that all education was a form of cultural brainwashing, for example, was also interested to hear how the graduate school process worked. More than once, I found myself completely confused as to whether I should be encouraging students to "get more education" when I had such an ambivalent relationship with education myself. I decided it would be hypocritical of me to discourage education just because of my own doubts, given that I was a graduate student. Instead, I tried to be as honest as possible with students about the costs of education as I've experienced them, but encouraging them all the same, because too often working-class students think they are not smart enough and I wanted to disabuse them of that notion.

One of the ways that this shared background positively affected the interview process concerned the issue of "airing dirty laundry." Although it is always striking how much some people are willing to divulge to practical strangers, many students also worried about how certain facts would be misunderstood or misinterpreted by a more general audience. They were concerned that some facts, descriptions, stories might reinforce negative working-class stereotypes. I share this concern. There were several instances where I refrained from including a story that I believed was more likely to be misinterpreted than not. Obviously, these are personal judgment calls. I don't believe I

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<sup>3</sup> The relative strengths of insider/outsider status in the interview process has been much discussed in the methodological literature. Foley's (1995) decision to interview the people from his hometown was partially premised on his belief that sharing the same cultural history would allow him to understand and better represent (interpret?) what his respondents had to say. See also the classic account of Rabinow (1977) and the strong theoretical discussion in Collins (1991). I do believe that where underrepresented subjects are involved, especially those for whom shameful stereotypes often apply, the benefits of having an interviewer with shared experiences and cultural background outweigh the disadvantages. "Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices" (Haraway, 2003, p. 31). For a fuller discussion of the possible disadvantages of knowing too much about the group one is studying, see Johnson-Bailey (2001).

would have made the same calls had I not had a similar background. There are also several instances where I have chosen *not* to report things students said, if I felt that, by doing so, students or their families would be unduly embarrassed. Sometimes I have reported stories but disconnected them from any specific person<sup>4</sup>. One of my biggest fears is that one of the students I interviewed will show his or her family this study and they will end up embarrassed about something reported about them.

Being working class myself made hearing some of these stories especially painful, as they brought up feelings and memories from my own past; another lesson of Echo.<sup>5</sup> I think this is a good thing, as it made me more attuned to the emotional context of what was being reported. I am sure that it also, inadvertently, made certain stories stand out more to me than others. Thus, I was particularly struck by issues with younger siblings (being the oldest of four myself), and issues women had with not wanting typical working-class gendered jobs. Had I been from a different class or gender position, these stories may not have stood out to me as much as they did. Here, I would call attention to Plummer (2000), who pointed out a similar issue that happened when interviewing fellow (female) working-class academics,

The personal stories we tell of our lives – the way we select, construct and describe our realities – throw light on how we construct our sense of self in relation to our gender, class and ethnic backgrounds...The stories we tell...are incomplete, internally inconsistent, subjective and contain an inevitable bias, both in their selection and presentation of content. It is the nature of the bias in research that is important. (p. 87)<sup>6</sup>

### **You Can Have Too Many!**

My original design for this study had called for doing interviews with around 35 working-class college students. I ambitiously considered interviewing students at different sites (community college, state university, elite liberal arts college) or, alternatively, at different points in their college careers (perhaps comparing those who stayed in to those who dropped out). I hoped to get a sample that was as diverse as possible; by race, by gender, and by age. Questions of time and resources eventually required a one-site, smaller sample. But as I was conducting the research I also became uncomfortable with the idea of trying to get a representative sample, or trying to get “enough” students so that I could reasonably make comparisons about race and gender. The interviews were really amazing to me; the students were individually amazing as well. The idea of categorizing them into well-established sociological boxes and losing

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<sup>4</sup> See Kaplan (1997) for further discussion of the issue of airing dirty laundry.

<sup>5</sup> See Richardson (1998) for a further discussion of personal location's impact on the interview process.

<sup>6</sup> Plummer's (2000) study, in fact, was one of my role models in some respects. Plummer interviewed six white female academics of various religious and ethnic backgrounds (Irish, English, Eastern European, Italian) who were working-class girls in the 1940s-1970s. Plummer was actually a friend of all these women at the time of the interviews, far surpassing the superficial relationship I had with most of the students I interviewed. She makes no apologies for interviewing friends, pointing out the importance of trust in this type of research. Furthermore, she makes no claims that these six women are a representative sample; rather, their accounts are valid in their specificity, an issue I will address below.

some of the individual flavour of their lives made me increasingly uncomfortable. After the 15th interview I began to seriously worry whether increasing the number of students was not actually doing harm to the project. What I was adding in terms of comparability, I felt I was losing in terms of *quality*. I was afraid that the *individuals* of the study would be lost, that I might be able to say more about the influence of race, but less about the serendipitous influence of finding a cache of books in one's rented house. Against the advice of some excellent advisors, I decided to end with 21 interviews.

Many of my influences for this study have been phenomenological studies, focusing on the *meanings* of lived experiences to particular groups of people. A phenomenological perspective is one "which attempts to describe the ways in which phenomena appear, and to relate these modes of appearance to subjective processes of consciousness" (Thompson, 1981, p. iii). Many phenomenological studies have limited the number of their interviews to less than 15, for reasons that I have described above.<sup>7</sup> Creswell (2003,) advises limiting phenomenological studies to "long interviews with up to ten people" (p. 65). From my own perspective, I much prefer reading richly-detailed accounts of individuals (preferably those that tell us something about how they *live* their lives, or experience their social contexts), than summary overviews of large groups of people clumped together by sociological markers. To those who are frustrated by "small ns," I can only say that mine was simply *not that kind of study*, and that I found that interviewing a handful of students rather than a large sample *is* a useful contribution to the emerging study of working-class academics (or individuals).

First and foremost, this was a study about *class identities* and, in particular, how different class cultures are navigated. Some will argue that my small number makes it impossible to make any meaningful comments about race or gender. To some extent, I agree. That was not the primary purpose of this study. On the other hand, class is not lived in isolation from other social identities and markers. So I was careful to look for race and gender inflections on class experiences and navigational strategies. I believe there are definitely some indications here that a fuller understanding of class can deepen our understanding of both race and gender. Further research *should* be undertaken to explore these intersections further, particularly how the relative costs and benefits of certain strategic orientations are weighed. I could only begin to broach that subject here.

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<sup>7</sup> One of the most successful of such studies I believe is Brantlinger's (1993) study of high-school dynamics. She interviewed a small number of educated White mothers to produce "a glimpse of how middle-class mothers rationalize this imbalance [of school resources]" (p. 30). Because she limited her sample of mothers, she was able to incorporate literary criticism concepts such as verisimilitude, metaphor, and prototypes to describe the rhetorical images and stories used by participants. She also attempted to evaluate affective tone of discourses as well as the significance of the sequence in which topics were addressed. I have also adopted much from Kastberg's (1997) dissertation on professional women from the working class and Belton's (2005) work on "Gypsy Identity" as described earlier. Bowl's (2003) interviews with 10 working-class women returning to higher education are also instructive, as are Plummer's interviews with 6 female working-class academics, Levine and Nidiffer's (1996) interviews with 12 first-generation college students, Steinitz and Solomon's (1986) study of 20 high-achieving working-class high school students, McDonough's (1997) attempts to understand the college decision-making processes of 24 variously classed female high school students, Price's (2000) study of 6 African-American young men who "stay in school" despite the odds and Finders' (1997) study of five adolescent girls, two middle class and three working class.

## The Issue of Naming: Anonymity and Confidentiality

Qualitative studies walk a fine line between adequately and honestly representing those interviewed, and providing anonymity and confidentiality. Perhaps I was more concerned with this because I was a member of the same campus community. I worried throughout the writing process that perhaps I was including too much personal information, even though a project such as this depends upon a great deal of very personal information. I was also concerned that excluding some information might materially *misrepresent* some of the students I interviewed. Where necessary, I gave detailed personal information. Obviously, I changed the names of the respondents (more on this below). Where I used a quote or a description given by a person more to illustrate a general point rather than to help understand that particular person, I tended not to use names at all. I also avoided names when describing what I found to be potentially sensitive material. This has the disadvantage of giving an incomplete representation of some of whom I interviewed, but it has the much greater advantage of protecting them. For similar reasons, I sometimes tried to obfuscate facts or descriptions that I thought would give too much away. For example, a person whose father belonged to the US Navy may become a person whose father “joined the military.” I also disguised the names of all locales and specific places of business. I did not provide any physical descriptions of the respondents, even though descriptions of appearance (clothing, style, state of general health, teeth) would have added greatly to the overall picture. Once again, I did this to protect the identities of those involved in this project.

I would like to discuss the issue of naming. I have searched diligently in many methodological sections and treatises for reflections on this issue but have failed to find any satisfactory answers. Briefly put, I am concerned about the power of the researcher to rename his or her respondents. Obviously, renaming is necessary to provide anonymity.<sup>8</sup> But there are no good guidelines that I have seen, of how to go about doing the renaming. Personal names *do* matter. To give but one example, Anglicizing a person’s ethnically-identifiable name, say renaming a German named Jürgen “John, ” can become a serious misrepresentation. Even more so if a German named John is renamed by the researcher as “Jürgen.” I struggled with this issue a great deal. Is it wrong to rename a woman named Candy “Catherine”? Isn’t something lost or mistaken in this transposition? How about calling a person named Norman “Cal”? Or is “Frank” a better match? I dealt with this issue in two ways. First, I simply asked the students what they would like their pseudonyms to be. A surprising number demurred. For those who offered one, however, this is the name I used. For the others, I tried to come up with names that I intuitively felt would be of similar meaning and connotation. The pseudonyms I gave to students with nicknames were nicknames themselves. New names roughly matched original names in length and complexity. I made an effort to rename students that had unusual names (uncommon either within or outside of their home communities) in such a way as to give the reader a sense of uncommonness.<sup>9</sup> Students who had names either representative or

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<sup>8</sup> But see Duneier (1999) discussing why he elected to use real names of those he interviewed.

<sup>9</sup> Even deciding whether a name is unusual or not poses some methodological questions and obviously depends upon my knowledge and understanding of what names are “normal” in the first place. To clarify a little, names that were idiosyncratic (named for an unusual flower the mother admired at the time of the birth; misspellings by

unrepresentative of their ethnicity (this applied primarily to students who had ties to another language culture) were renamed in a similar fashion. “John,” for example (whose name can be read as an Anglicized form of “Juan”), was renamed as another Anglicized name of a common Spanish personal name. I think this issue of naming is an important one for qualitative researchers to address. It is another example of the power that resides on this side of the interview process, and one that we should be cautious about exercising.

### **To Whom Am I Speaking? For Whom Am I Writing?**

The original research described here was undertaken for completion of my dissertation. Obviously, the primary audience for this was my committee, academics in the field of sociology. As I engaged in the analysis, however, and turned my attention to navigational strategies, I began to consider the question of audience more carefully. This shift in my focus (from describing experiences of working-class college students to analyzing class navigational strategies) was also a shift in my audience. It informed my methodology because it made me ask quite different questions of those I interviewed. At first, one of my un-stated goals was to show (middle-class) academics that we (working-class academics) are real and present. I was addressing the middle-class institution of academia and academic research in general. The question of how working-class college students make sense of their working-class identities goes beyond merely getting the attention of the research community, however, and reaches out to those of us who have found ourselves in this unique position. I realized that I wanted to address this research to other working-class academics (including those I interviewed), with the hope that uncovering these strategies may help others in their endeavour to refashion academia in a way that brings us out of the margins. For I do believe that a working-class perspective can go a long way to eliminating the class bias that I think is inherent in our current academic system.

This choice of audience greatly affected my choices in arrangement and style. In general, I wanted to write in such a way that the study could be read by nearly anyone. For one, I adopted Brantlinger’s (2003) technique of splitting up each substantive chapter into two parts, findings and literature review. I did this, against the objections of some of my committee members, to allow a reader to skip the more academic literature if he or she so chooses (or, alternatively, skip the findings). I wanted to write something that my mother could read and understand. Thus, the first sections of every substantive chapter I wrote could be read on its own; they are heavily descriptive, hopefully engaging, and with minimal use of footnotes. I believe allowing the findings to have this room (rather than burdening them with a lot of academic references) made them more readable in general.

Secondly, my awareness of audience influenced the way I wrote up the findings. I quoted the students far more extensively than some the members of my committee would have liked. I did this because I wanted to allow the students to speak for themselves wherever possible. I also tried not to use quotes simply to make theoretical points. I tried to show the complexity of the process of identity (re)construction by giving contradictory evidence wherever possible. I tried very hard not to “take things out of context,” even

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hospital personnel; names of common objects not usually associated with persons) were given parallel idiosyncratic names. Thus, I would not have turned “River Phoenix” into “Joe Smith.”

though the nature of this type of writing is to make selections. Sometimes I gave additional material in footnotes for just this reason. My analysis and understanding of what was theoretically salient is prone to errors, but the words and commentary of those I interviewed are not. So I let them speak as much, and as often, as worked within the bounds of readability. I spent a great deal of time arranging the quotes in a sensible order, one that allowed the reader to follow a “story” of what it meant to be a working-class college student. In this way, I wanted the written version to be as faithful of an echo of the original as possible.<sup>10</sup>

Let me provide one example here; John, whom I introduced above, was very bitter towards his family. He perceived them as wanting to cash in on his current educational success, after years of neglect and contempt. Saying that to you is fairly straightforward, but you miss the hesitations, the real agony John seems to be experiencing here.

I wanted to prove to my mom that, and it's stupid, but to prove to her that I was better than her other kids, that I was smarter than them, that I could do more things than they could, you know, because, I don't know, they were always like, like my older brother he always got everything, he's lighter than me, he's very light skinned, he's almost white, you know? He always got everything -- so for me it was always to prove myself to people. Of my worth, you know? And now, now my brother tries to give me words of wisdom and it's just like, it goes in one ear and out the other, because a lot of stuff he tells me -- it's almost sad. Now a lot of people are proud of me and I think that's cool but I really don't, it's almost like, I don't know, it's kinda frustrating to hear them, they're always like, well, if you ever need anything just tell us, you know, we are so proud of you and I was so rejected when I was younger so it's like where were you when I needed you? And I don't really need you now.

John also believed that academic success (and with it, the expected move up the class ladder) would erase skin color as a factor in his relationships with others. John was not very concerned about racism at the time of the interview because he truly believed his future success would make it disappear. In this way he brushed off harassing comments by his White fraternity brothers. John's understanding of *lightening* through academic and financial success coupled with his feelings that he was unwanted as a child was unique in this study. There comes a danger when we over-generalize or use our research subjects as exemplars only, and forget the rich story of identity that they have already created for themselves. Including as many quotes as were readable is one way to remind the reader that we, the writer/analyst, may not be infallible or omniscient. In other words, it allows the reader direct access to the story, which is another way of ensuring that the complexity of *lives* is truly represented.

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<sup>10</sup> See Oakely (2003), who interviewed women as a “strategy for documenting women’s own accounts of their lives” (p. 253). Chase (2003) argues that social researchers have too often failed to pay attention to the “narrative character” (p. 273) produced during interviews. See also Mishler (1986) and Riessman (1990).



### Ensuring Reliability

From the first time I realized that I was seeing different navigational strategies among the students I interviewed, I never stopped questioning my reading of this. In accord with Bogdan and Bilken (1998), I define reliability as a fit between what I record and what actually occurs. I believed I was seeing (and recording) the emergence of different navigational strategies linked to particular understandings of class and inequality. I wanted to ensure that I was not making this up. The first Renegade emerged in the sixth interview, and I was shocked at how different her story was from the ones I had heard before. Somewhat like John, she was bitter and angry towards her family, resentful of her parents' poverty, and condescending towards the working class. To me, she seemed to blame all the wrong people. I became very uncomfortable during this interview. I was faced with a dilemma at this point; do I focus on this variation in narratives, or do I overlook the differences and focus on the overall similarity of experience operating among all the students I interviewed (i.e., the hard work they engaged in, the classism they experienced, the isolation and alienation they felt)? I chose the former, as that seemed to me the more problematic and less obvious story.

But that led to the big question, was this distinction between *Renegades* and *Loyalists* all in my head? Was I just hearing echoes of my own psychic dilemma? To ensure the reliability of my analysis, particularly the tripartite typology I was theorizing I took several steps. First, I made detailed plots and graphs comparing and contrasting the three "types" of students on various indices. One of these, for example, plotted affectivity. I made a list of emotional buzzwords; love, hate, envy, ashamed, guilty, and intimidated, to name just a few. For some, like love and hate I further subdivided according to object – thus, "loved middle-class parents of my best friend," versus "hated the way my parents lived their lives." What I found was a very clear correlation between navigational strategy and a particular configuration of affectivity. *Loyalists* expressed pride and love towards the working class, some intimidation at school, and a lot of anger towards the middle class. *Renegades* expressed admiration towards the middle class, dislike/hatred toward the working class, much intimidation and embarrassment at school, and a lot of envy towards the middle class. *Double Agents* avoided the emotional poles and, when they talked about their emotions at all, focused on feelings of intimidation. This was only one such exercise I did to ensure that there were actual differences among the three types of students (not just hunches on my part).<sup>11</sup>

Another step I took was to compare my findings with as many other studies of marginalized groups in college as I could reasonably find. These included theoretical essays as well as novels (e.g., D.H. Lawrence's (1997) *Kangaroo*, for example) and journalistic accounts such as Anson's (1987) tragic account of Eddie Perry, a boy from Harlem who's tapped for an elite prep school). I also carefully read biographical accounts

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<sup>11</sup> I worry about the reliability of my work, whether the navigational strategies are as "real" to the respondents as they appear to be to me, especially because working-class people have too often been seen as manipulable objects by middle-class researchers, with middle-class assumptions and biases (to my mind) clearly affecting the presentation of these people (see Wray (2007) for one long historical example of this). For this reason, I tried to establish an "audit trail" to verify the rigor of my fieldwork and to "minimize bias, maximize accuracy, and report impartially" to the extent possible (Patton, 2002, p. 93).

of working-class academics, looking for any sense that this typology existed beyond my small sample. I did this not so much to be able to *generalize* my findings, but so as to ensure some reliability of what I was discovering through triangulation.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, I asked other people what they thought about this typology. Not just anybody, but other working-class academics. I presented preliminary findings at two conferences, one of which was the Annual Working Class/ Poverty Class Academics Conference. The feedback I received from that presentation was tremendously helpful and positive. I have also raised these issues on an international listserve of working-class academics. There has been very little disagreement that (a) there are different ways of navigating between one's home working-class culture and the middle-class culture of academia, (b) one can either reject the working class or reject assimilation, and (c) there are a few people who seem able to keep a foot in both camps. Since finishing my dissertation in the Spring of 2006, I have continued to look for supportive and contradictory accounts, and feel satisfied that what I heard the students tell me was in fact what they were really saying.

### Concluding Thoughts on Echo

Going through school I was often too busy myself to give serious consideration to the issues raised in this study. It was a great opportunity and an honor to be able to interview these 21 working-class students. In many ways, my lonely echo had found the voices to which it had always been responding in isolation. Many of the students I interviewed expressed great joy and satisfaction as well at being able to spend time thinking about their experiences and answering questions about themselves and their place in the academy. Many were pleasantly surprised by the idea that their story was something that others might share, and that many would certainly be interested in hearing. It was as if a roaming Echo had finally been confronted with someone who wanted to have a conversation and she learned that she could actually answer in her own words. The spell had been broken.

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<sup>12</sup> These include the collections edited by Ryan and Sackrey (1984); Tokarczyk and Fay (1993), Dews and Law (1995), Mahony and Zmroczek (1997), Welsch (2005), Adair and Dahlberg (2003), and Muzzatti and Samarco (2006).

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### Article Citation

Hurst, A. L. (2008). A healing echo: Methodological reflections of a working-class researcher on class. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 334-352. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-3/hurst.pdf>

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