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The Great Divide: A Review of Paying for the Party

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Abstract

Despite the ubiquitous presence of mass media hailing the value of higher education, these societal messages fail to acknowledge the complexity of contextual factors that influence the outcomes of college educated young adults. Through in-depth personal descriptions from students, the researchers Armstrong and Hamilton for *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality* examine the structure of academic and social life on a college campus, exploring the impact of the organization of college on student experiences during college and class trajectories at exit. While previous literature may describe a student's inequality in college as simply a statistic, the qualitative nature of this work allows the emergence of a meaningful narrative, making visible the embedded class disparities permeating our college culture.

Keywords

Ethnographic, Class Projects, College Pathways, Organizational Imperatives

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The Great Divide: A Review of *Paying for the Party*

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*Despite the ubiquitous presence of mass media hailing the value of higher education, these societal messages fail to acknowledge the complexity of contextual factors that influence the outcomes of college educated young adults. Through in-depth personal descriptions from students, the researchers Armstrong and Hamilton for *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality* examine the structure of academic and social life on a college campus, exploring the impact of the organization of college on student experiences during college and class trajectories at exit. While previous literature may describe a student's inequality in college as simply a statistic, the qualitative nature of this work allows the emergence of a meaningful narrative, making visible the embedded class disparities permeating our college culture. Keywords: Ethnographic, Class Projects, College Pathways, Organizational Imperatives*

Go to college, get a high paying job, buy a house and raise a family. From the viewpoint of the “American Dream,” a college education leads to a life full of purpose and success. On a daily basis, we are inundated with mass media hailing the value of higher education. The pro-con list is short: if you attend a four-year university, you will receive a higher salary, gain a job that you would not be able to get without a college degree, and you will have the best years of your life through the “college experience.” However, these social sentiments fail to acknowledge the complexity of contextual factors that influence the outcomes of college educated young adults.

The impact of my background on my decision to attend college and graduate school became immediately clear when reading *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. As an “achiever,” I was raised with “achiever” parents encouraging me to engage in “self-discovery” from a young age, assisting me in identifying a field of study that fit my interests and abilities. As trite as it may sound, the words describing the “achievers” felt as though they were written about my college experience, with stories of achievers attending study abroad, not having to work through the school year, and receiving academic guidance and financial support from parents. As Armstrong and Hamilton write, “Achievers were the products of successful social reproduction: Parental resources— time, money, social connections, and familiarity with college and the professional world— helped them to extract the credentials and experiences they needed from the university’s professional pathway” (p. 197). I was, similarly to the 7 achievers, primed and well positioned to move into the middle to upper class. Given a willingness to meet my potential in the university setting, the road had been paved for me, and as I stepped onto my college campus on the first day, I had little doubt of my ability to accomplish my goals.

The personal stories of the “achievers” forced me to contemplate the fact that success for achievers is not the result of independent efforts. As I realized the extent of my background’s influence on my success in college, I could not tear myself away from the stories captured by Armstrong and Hamilton. Using an ethnographic and longitudinal approach, these researchers were able to engage in an in-depth exploration of 53 women beginning their first year at a large Midwestern University. However, the authors were able to transform a research study into a bold and addicting read, offering raw material from the young women, sparing no details.

Indeed, the researchers reveal eye-opening personal reactions to the women, in a way rarely captured by academic literature regarding the college experience. Through this five-year ethnographic and interview study, the researchers lived on the same residence hall as the women for the first year of the study, “hanging out, watching television, eating pizza, studying, and providing company as they got dressed for parties or other social events” (p. 6). Five years, 202 interviews, and over 2,000 pages of field notes later, the researchers were able to gather rich data, attempting to bridge the gap between educational stratification and college cultures.

Moreover, the analysis of the data was intertwined with the data collection, as analysis shaped the questions to be asked. Armstrong and Hamilton comment on the influence of analysis on data collection when they write, “as we developed a deeper understanding of student life, we grew more sophisticated in our questioning” (p. 270). Data analysis began as soon as the researchers interacted with a participant for the first time. As interviews were conducted, transcripts were created and encoded by the team, memos were written, and text was drafted, shaping the next questions to be asked. The authors comment on the cyclical process of data analysis, stating that “where the new analyses conflicted with the earlier ones, new iterations of reading and coding took place,” creating a recursive process until consensus was reached (p. 273). The authors admit, “at times we were forced to entirely reassess early analyses, leading us to be skeptical of arguments based on a single snapshot of students’ college experience” (p. 270). These meticulous methods for data collection and analysis allowed the researchers to capture voices and experiences not typically represented in the literature surrounding college students.

Through in-depth personal descriptions from students, the researchers sought out to examine the structure of academic and social life on a college campus, aiming to explore the impact of the organization of college on student experiences during college and class trajectories at exit. Specifically, the researchers argued that the organization of the college experience at Midwest University, and other large state schools, “systematically disadvantages all but the most affluent” (p. 3).

Based on these research questions and the data collected, the researchers developed a theoretical model in order to understand the intersection between “individual characteristics” and “organizational characteristics,” which, the authors argue, shape both the college experience and, ultimately, class trajectories. Through this theoretical model, the researchers delineated 3 main components that influence why some students in higher education may fare better than others: class projects, college pathways, and organizational imperatives. Drawing on my own personal college experience, I saw the ways in which these 3 components impacted my college experience and class trajectory: class reproduction through achievement, a mobility pathway, and the organization of my large, public university that creates and maintains these pathways.

Indeed, the results of the research suggest that the organization of large public universities may reinforce or even exacerbate inequality. While society hails the value of a college education, Armstrong and Hamilton conclude that these universities may be far from equalizers. While achievers, such as myself, and socialites, with heavy parental subsidies, may be bound for a reproduction of their parents’ privilege, less privileged women may leave colleges, like MU, with their mobility projects at risk. Women in this sample who stayed at MU were expected to land in approximately the same social class from where they came from. However, Armstrong and Hamilton argue that challenging the “party pathway” and investing in the “mobility pathway” may allow universities to meet the educational needs of less privileged students. By providing more transparent routes from the classroom to careers, universities may be able to alter their organization in order to compensate for differences in family resources.

As a beneficiary of the “mobility pathway,” I find it imperative to recommend this book to those in pursuit of graduate degrees in higher education, as well as academic advisors, and those involved in the enhancement of student success on college campuses. Beyond the bubble of higher education, the enthralling stories of these young women should capture the attention of everyone interested in understanding whether, or not, college education is an equalizer in pursuit of the “American Dream.” While previous literature may describe a student’s inequality in college as simply a statistic, the qualitative nature of this work allows the emergence of a meaningful narrative, making visible the embedded class disparities permeating our college culture.

References

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Author Note

Amelia Hoyle is a doctoral student at the University of Georgia pursuing a degree in Counseling Psychology. Amelia has a Master’s degree in Professional Community Counseling from the University of Georgia. She is also a graduate assistant in the University of Georgia’s Division of Academic Enhancement, where she assists undergraduate and graduate students in improving their academic performance. Research interests include feminist theory and therapy and psychotherapy treatment for eating disorders with women of color. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: alhoyle@uga.edu.

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