The Sounds of Silence: A Structural Analysis of Academic "Writer's Block"

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THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE:
A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF ACADEMIC “WRITER’S BLOCK”

A Dissertation
by
LARA B. BIRK

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for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

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A Structural Analysis of Academic “Writer’s Block”

by

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A qualitative study based on forty four in-depth interviews with undergraduates experiencing severe difficulties with academic writing, this dissertation examines how structural factors—social class and race in particular—contribute to academic “writer’s block.” Writing block is more than the “personal trouble” it is typically conceived of being, it is also a “public issue” with definitive structural contributors. All of my subjects perceived writing as a high stakes performance, and their writing blocks can be understood as instances of “choking” in the face of these high stakes. For many working class students, writing block is an expression of dominant cultural capital disadvantage; while for many upper middle class students, writing block represents the psychological costs of privilege. For students with unusual class-race identifications, writing block embodies their liminal social status. In the current economic climate of uncertainty, class status for students across the socioeconomic spectrum has become relatively unstable given individuals’ increased risk of downward mobility. As such, academic writing blocks may be construed as angst experienced at the intersection of psychology and structure. This study contributes to and extends the literature on social reproduction in higher education as well as the literature on the price of privilege.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout the course of this dissertation, many people—friends, family members, fellow graduate students, guests at social gatherings, dentists, car mechanics, and hair stylists—laughed out loud when I told them I was endeavoring to write a doctoral dissertation on “writer’s block.” “Good luck with that!” was the response of a fair number of them. A PhD student knows she has taken on a dangerous topic when others find it downright amusing. Were it not for my most stalwart supporters, I might actually have become the butt of that joke. In fact, there were times when I struggled intensely with the dissertation process and was not sure if I would make it to the other side.

Fortunately, I have many truly phenomenal people in my corner who have rooted for me at every turn. They are the ones I wish to acknowledge, as they are the ones who saved me from “choking” in the face of this undoubtedly high stakes performance. In particular, I want to thank Sharlene Hesse-Biber for her significant theoretical and methodological contributions to the early stages of this project; John Williamson and Sarah Babb for their careful and thoughtful readings of my work and for their invaluable feedback; Lisa Birk and Morgan Baker for their reliable encouragement and kinship via our writing group, “the Grit Sisters;” Amalia Jiva for encouraging me to study this topic in my master’s paper; and my mother, Ann Birk, for her resolute and enthusiastic confidence in my intellectual abilities, which many times stood in for my own confidence when mine was flagging.

There are two people, however, for whom the old saying “I couldn’t have done it without you” is unreservedly true. To my advisor and long-time mentor, David Karp: thank you not only for your unwavering support but also for the gracious and undiluted quality of your attention. You have been profoundly generous with your time and your thoughts. I always came away from our lively talks brimming with ideas I would not have had were it not for the meeting of our two minds. And to Nat Armistead: there was not a single chapter that I did not get stuck on somewhere along the way, and it was, in each case, our conversations that clarified my thinking and got me going again. Thank you for being my ever steady intellectual partner. I quite literally could not have done it without you.

Last but not least, I dedicate this dissertation to the student whom I call “Tyrone.” I learned as much from you as you ever did from me. Thank you.
CHAPTER ONE

Academic Writing Block as Choking

Tyrone, a low income African American in his senior year of Boston College, sits staring at the screen on his laptop when I enter the room for our tutoring session. This is our fourth year of working together. I walk up to where he is sitting, throw my bag on a chair, and stand beside him. I can see that he has entered his name and the date in the top left hand corner of the page. The cursor is blinking just after the year, “2013.” Tyrone is motionless. His five page paper for his English class is due tomorrow.

“How is everything going?” I ask gingerly.

“Terrible,” he replies.

“What’s going on?”

“I can’t do this.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m just frozen.” After a long moment of silence, he adds in a rather dejected tone, “I have nothing to say.”
“I know that’s not true. When we met on Wednesday, you were brimming with good ideas about what’s going on with this character. You had a really good analysis of the scene where—”

“Yeah, but… I don’t remember any of that now.” He pushes his seat back from the computer and leans his head down onto the table.

Tyrone and I have discussed his “writer’s block” numerous times over the years. He has described it over and over again as “just being frozen,” and indeed, when I witness him actually going through it, frozen is exactly how he appears to the outside observer. Even his eyes seem to lack motion, glued to the computer screen. Every time, he tells me plaintively, “I have nothing to say,” even though I almost always have direct evidence to the contrary and have on several occasions observed him respond passionately to a paper prompt. He has something to say, he has ideas, he is capable of writing them out, but something blocks his ability to access his voice. Frequently, after staring at the computer “for hours” in his dorm room, he eventually “gives up.” Later, he often defensively declares, “this is stupid.” In the end, it is often the firm deadline breathing down his neck that ultimately compels him to write down something, anything.

As a writing tutor, I was trained to view “writer’s block” as an indicator either of a psychological problem (such as perfectionism, fear of failure, an overly harsh inner critic) or of a behavioral deficiency (poor time management skills and/or inadequate self-discipline). Over the years, Tyrone and I have talked openly about a lot of things. He has described how marginalized he feels being black and poor on a campus “full of rich white kids,” and he has even admitted to me that he has seen so much death in his life (several friends from home have been killed in gang- or drug-related activities) that it is
just “hard to relate” to most people at Boston College, and even, I suspect, to many of the academic requirements expected of him here. In short, I have had the opportunity to observe first-hand one young man’s writing block countless times. At some point in the course of our work together—and my work with many other struggling students—I have come to feel in my bones that, for Tyrone as with so many others, this is not merely an issue of perfectionism or time management. I got the feeling that Tyrone’s location in the social structure—as well as within the structure of the College itself—was like a kind of ghost haunting his every attempt to write. It is armed with this “feeling” that I initiated this project. I wanted to study academic “writer’s block” among undergraduates at Boston College to find out if there was something more to the equation than mere psychology as to why some students come to struggle so severely with academic writing.

Anyone who has ever sat for hours watching the cursor on their computer screen blink or who has written pages and pages of worthless text is acutely aware that “writer’s block” is an affliction that can cause profound dread and excruciating anxiety. Moreover, in the case of academic writing blocks, there are often concrete negative consequences for the writer. For undergraduate students, a stubborn block could result in a failing grade on a paper, an “incomplete” in a course, or even in extreme cases the inability to complete their academic program through to graduation. Moreover, experience with persistent blockages may lead students to give up on cherished dreams and forego certain career aspirations. Writing block, in other words, could change the course of a person’s life in a direction he or she would not necessarily have chosen were there no writing difficulties to speak of.
As common as writing blocks are, however, they have only relatively rarely been taken seriously as a topic of scholarship in the academic literature (Leader 1991; Boice 1993; Hjortshoj 2001). A recent doctoral student in an English program wrote regarding her project on writing block in film that her dissertation “opens a discussion that has been nearly abandoned since the 1980s” (Miller 2010: iv). There has certainly been a modicum of scholarly literature on the topic. However, while there are many different perspectives on the problem of “writer’s block”—whether psychoanalytic (e.g., Bergler 1950), psychodynamic (e.g., Boice 1985, 1993), cognitive (e.g., Rose 1985), neurological (e.g., Flaherty 2004), or practical self-help (e.g., Lipson & Perkins 1990)—very few scholars of writing blocks encompass a sociological or structural perspective. While some have looked at how gender impacts one’s likelihood of developing writing blocks (e.g., Cayton 1990; Clark & Wiedenhaupt 1992), my dissertation represents an innovative structural analysis and empirical study in that my primary focus is on social class and its intersections with racial and ethnic identities.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

My central thesis is embodied in the very language I use in this dissertation. Following cultural anthropologist Keith Hjortshoj (2001), I put “writer’s block” in quotation marks because I find the term misleading and potentially even destructive. As Hjortshoj points out, “writer’s block” has a rather “clinical ring” to it. I would take this critique one step further, however. The term “writer’s block” rhetorically implies the source of the problem lies solely in the writer him or herself (i.e., it positions the problem as an idiosyncratic one) without taking into account the social and cultural environment.
in which he or she writes. It is as if writing takes place in a vacuum, free from the social structural constraints of regular society. The writer, in this light, is an autonomous agent whose “success” (i.e. productivity) as a writer is wholly determined by his or her will alone, unhhampered by external constraints imposed by peer groups, parents, the larger community, or society at large. This omission implies that in one way or another, the problem boils down to a failure of will on the part of the writer. Such an interpretation may in turn produce shame in the blocked individual, further reinforcing the blockage. It is for this reason that I replace the term “writer’s block” with my preferred term, “writing block,” which focuses attention instead on the actual activity that has for one reason or another been forestalled or impeded.

To understand writing blocks, one must first define what is meant by writing in general and academic writing in particular. In the context of this project, when I refer to writing, I mean the organic process of an individual composing cohesive, coherent text for others’ eventual consumption. By undergraduate academic writing, I mean writing in response to an assignment, as a course requirement, or as part of a thesis or senior honors project. In terms of writing blocks themselves, whether academic or creative, there have been a variety of definitions, including “the temporary or chronic inability to put words on paper” (Nelson 1993:1), the experience in which “we cannot write in a fluent, timely fashion” (Boice 1993:19), the condition in which “capable, motivated writers who seem incapable of completing certain kinds of writing projects” (Hjortshoj 2001:8), and the phenomenon in which writers “do not write despite being intellectually capable of doing so and they suffer because they are not writing” (Flaherty 2004:80). Taking Flaherty’s (2004) definition above one step further, I put the suffering of the blocked writer front
and center in my own definition of writing blocks, which also borrows from each of the definitions above:

*Writing block is the condition in which motivated, otherwise intellectually capable individuals experience suffering because they cannot put or cannot keep words on the page to complete certain writing projects in a timely manner.*

Put simply, writing block is the suffering experienced when the writer is unable to write as he or she pleases. It engenders in its sufferers significant discomfort caused by the dissonance between one’s idealized writing goal and one’s actual output.

To be clear, academic writing blocks are not a single monolithic phenomenon, experienced in the same way by all people. Rather, I agree with Tucker (1997) who concluded in her unpublished dissertation that such blocks exist along a spectrum, incorporating everything from relatively mild, periodic, and relatively inconsequential writing difficulties to longstanding crippling paralysis with sometimes dire outcomes. Scholars and clinicians seeking to understand writing blocks of all kinds have often been quick to locate the problem in the individual writer’s idiosyncratic psyche, personal history, or disciplinary habits. Following Bloom (1985) and Cayton (1990, 1991), I posit here that it is critical to take into account the writer’s *social context* when trying to understand the nature and origin of a writer’s block. In particular, we must augment the empirical studies examining gender as a critical factor with those that explore how other social structural factors, such as class and race, contribute to the development of writing blocks.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Seeking to understand the role that social class and race play in writing blocks, I have conducted a qualitative exploratory study of a topic that has received little scholarly attention. My interest in conducting this study is to “sensitize” others to an important and sometimes devastating problem that will no doubt warrant further sociological attention. As such, my central research questions have been: Do structural factors—as opposed to merely psychological factors—contribute to individuals’ lived experiences with academic writing blocks? If so, how do they?

In other words, what insights can be garnered from applying a “sociological imagination” to the study of writing blocks in undergraduate students? C. Wright Mills (1959) defined the sociological imagination as the ability to take problems often understood as personal and particular to the individual and view them as expressions of larger structural, socio-historical, or socio-cultural currents. As a sociologist, I have found in my nine years of professional experience working with struggling college students that universities’ standard operating procedure with regard to academic writing blocks is based on overly simplistic interpretations of the problem, which of course lead to ineffective interventions. An individualistic approach alone is insufficient: if “public issues” are currently eclipsed by “private troubles,” a more sociologically informed approach would benefit all involved.

My specific questions going into this study included the following: Does low social class standing exacerbate certain instances of individuals’ academic writing difficulties and contribute to the formation of a particular type of block? Could it be the case, as an example, that young men and women from low-income neighborhoods have
more difficulty developing their academic voice? Indeed, scholars such as Mina Shaughnessy (1976, 1977) long ago sensitized college writing teachers to the idea that inadequate academic preparation for college due to severely underfunded high schools might well produce college students who are significantly under-socialized as serious academic writers. Could their awareness of this “lack” affect their academic confidence and make it difficult to commit words to the page? Similarly, does race play an important role? Could it be, for example, that a black student from a tight-knit African American community may feel trepidation at speaking in ‘academese?’ Such a stilted linguistic style could be taken by her peers as not merely pretentious but also as “acting white” (see Ogbu and Fordham 1986). Could this be a phenomenon that is reflected in a particular brand of writing block?

OVERVIEW OF METHODS

To answer these questions, I have carried out an in-depth qualitative study on the lived experience of individuals suffering from academic writing blocks. In particular, I conducted forty four interviews with thirty six undergraduates of Boston College who self-identified as having “writer’s block” and/or “significant or severe difficulties with academic writing.” In a gender breakdown reflecting the fact that women tend to experience writing block at higher rates than men (Cayton 1990, 1991; Latta 1995), twenty six of the thirty six respondents were female and ten were male. Eighteen identified as white, ten as Asian or Asian American, five as black (African American or South African), two as Latina, and one as Arabic. Twenty two of the thirty six identified as upper middle class, while fourteen respondents identified as working class, including
three who at times called themselves “low income” or “poor.” Nine of the thirty six were first generation college students. There was a fairly even mix of freshmen, sophomore, juniors, and seniors.

I went into the interviews wanting to know: What does writing mean to these students? What does being stuck feel like? What exactly happens when they try to write? How do they interpret what is going on with them? What does being blocked mean to them? What do they feel the consequences are of being blocked? What about the consequences of writing success? In analyzing subjects’ responses, themes began to emerge differentiating distinct types of block that certain subjects shared with one another. I had hypothesized going into the study that if there is a class or a race component to what is really going on with these students, the major themes that would become identifiable would also reflect underlying concerns specific to demographically similar groups of students. Indeed, as the reader will see, several themes did arise – in this case, particular to students of different social class standings.

The challenge of course would be that, as C. Wright Mills observed, people tend to see their lives through an individualistic rather than a structural perspective. If I am utilizing a sociological imagination when my participants are not, how will I gather data on whether or not there are structural contributors to individuals’ lived experiences with academic writing block? David Karp (1996), following Kai Erikson, eloquently observed this dilemma in his study on depressed persons in Speaking of Sadness:

[A] first-rate sociologist, Kai Erikson, provides a valuable example for illustrating how a sociological perspective is necessary to see social patterns that would be missed if we only look at things “up close and personal,” as they say on the Wide World of Sport. He has us imagine that we are walking along 42nd Street near Times Square. At the street level we can clearly see the faces of the
thousands of people who pass us. We can see their individual expressions, their particular body idioms, their apparent ages, and so on. At this range, they normally seem to take no notice of anyone around them. Each stranger appears as a solitary atom, buzzing along in a wholly independent way. Were we, however, to climb to the roof of a nearby 12 story building and look down on the flow of sidewalk traffic, we would see an extraordinary thing. It is true that from this vantage point we miss the particularities of each individual. However, we would instead witness a miraculous pattern—thousands of people moving along the street in an incredibly well-organized, efficient, and cooperative fashion. Moreover, each person on the street would likely be wholly unaware of their contribution to the web of behavior necessary to sustain such an enormously complex social order. It is as if each pedestrian is guided by an invisible social force, a kind of social gravity, about which they have only the vaguest awareness. (P. 167)

Karp concluded that most depression sufferers, however, “like street pedestrians, are only dimly aware of how the constitution of culture” may play into their depression (p. 167). Like Karp, I entered this study cognizant of the fact that many students may be “only dimly aware” of the invisible social forces and the undetectable pull of social gravity that are—in addition to their individual psychological makeups—inevitably guiding their behavior and shaping their thinking. It would be up to the outside 12th story observer to intuit these forces from the participants’ words and sentiments.

WRITING AS A HIGH STAKES PERFORMANCE

While my journey began with Tyrone in mind, somewhere along the line, the project also came to be about me. Prior to the start of my dissertation, I had certainly
struggled with writing block myself. In fact, I wrote about the experience at length in another article about a chronic pain condition which I had had since the age of 16.

At the height of my pain, I found myself time and again unable to find words that could articulate the shape of my suffering. It was as if I could not relay the coordinates of my existential location to others, no matter how many ways I tried. Arthur Frank (1995) writes eloquently in *The Wounded Storyteller* about the ways in which chronic illness, including pain, troubles the ability of the sufferer to share her story coherently and intelligibly. People in pain, like all seriously ill people, are in Frank’s words “wounded not just in body but in voice” (p. xii). Looking back, it is no longer a mystery to me why I suffered from “writer’s block” for so long. Virginia Woolf ([1929] 1991) legendarily argued that one cannot write without “a room of one’s own,” or the means to support a life uninterrupted by work and the tyranny of gendered expectations. I would add that it is also exceptionally difficult to write without a body that feels like one’s own, to write from an internal space that is constantly and unpredictably assaulted by the chaotic circuitry of a body in trouble. The shots of pain here and searing aches there cannot help but to distract the writer’s train of thought and so to punctuate the text in question (Birk 2013, p. 20-21).

I then described a situation in which an abstract I had written was accepted and I was invited to compose a chapter for a scholarly book on “wounded ethnographers.”

However, my writing block was so severe that I produced literally over a hundred pages without any of it being usable. The text was as elided and circular as the logic behind it, and I was unable to participate in the project. Retrospectively, I have come to see that I viewed my chapter for that book as my “one shot” to get into a good graduate school program and become the kind of scholar I longed to be. My writing for the project, in other words, was—at least in my mind—a high stakes performance. Furthermore, my experience with a medically unexplained chronic pain condition had so challenged my credibility in the eyes of others that I had lost confidence in my own voice. My own structural location as a temporarily disabled person—combined with the stigma
associated therein—certainly contributed in complex ways to my private troubles with writing.

Today, over a decade later, pain largely resolved, I have come again to struggle with writing. In the course of this very dissertation, there have been many moments when I have gotten so “stuck” that I could seemingly do nothing except stare, pit in my stomach, at the blank white page, occasionally scribbling nonsensical notes in my notebook. How could something that started off as a tribute in essence to Tyrone’s problem (as well as that of countless other students I have worked with over the years) end up causing me the very same problem? What do I, a white woman from an upper middle class upbringing, have in common with Tyrone, a young impoverished black football player from inner-city Hartford? We both damn the blinking cursor in our minds and feel panic rise up like bile from our guts as we stare into the face of a looming deadline. But why?

ACADEMIC WRITING BLOCK AS CHOKING

Of course, a dissertation is in itself—especially in today’s economy—a high stakes performance. For starters, if I were to fail to finish this document, I would not graduate and receive the doctoral degree I have been working toward for the last six years. I would flounder in the job market, unavoidably barred from the university jobs to which I aspire. Even if I complete this project, I know that it must exceed certain standards, and whether or not it does so will determine the kind of career to which I will have access. Painfully aware of the increasingly common “adjunct hell” to which many
eager, hard-working graduates have succumbed, I fear falling into a similar trap. Teaching four or five courses for a couple thousand dollars each without benefits is a very real prospect for any PhD entering the market today. In short, writing this dissertation has come to take on meaning as a high stakes endeavor with potentially severe consequences, were I to fail.

For Tyrone, he knows that each paper he does not complete results in an “F.” And each F he receives further jeopardizes his ability to graduate from this school with a bachelor’s degree. The college degree for Tyrone is his “ticket out”—out of his “bad neighborhood,” out of a life of poverty, and out of the possibility, so common at least in Tyrone’s circle, of prison or early death. Writing, in other words, is for Tyrone as it is for me: a high stakes performance. Albeit for very different reasons, we both “choke” in the face of this pressure.

In his classic article, “Choking Under Pressure: Self Consciousness and the Paradoxical Effects of Incentives on Skills and Performance,” Roy Baumeister (1984:610-611) defined “pressure” as “any factor or combination of factors that increases the importance of performing well on a particular occasion” and choking as “performance decrements under pressure circumstances” and “a failure to perform up to whatever level of skill and ability the person has at that time.” Of course, Baumeister was primarily concerned with choking in competitive sports performances, whereas I am concerned with writing. However, I view writing as a non-athletic performance that can nonetheless be experienced by students as “competitive,” especially given that evaluators inevitably compare students’ writing to that of other students. Baumeister concludes that competitions are “arousing” due to the usual presence of an audience and rival
performers and that this arousal heightens self-consciousness, which in turn disrupts the individual’s performance on certain tasks. Importantly, the author notes that whether or not an individual experiences a situation as a “performance” is “determined by the structure of the situation and the intentionality of the subject, not by the intrinsic level of the performance” (p. 611, emphasis added). In other words, if Tyrone interprets a paper to be a high stakes performance, then that paper will become the kind of performance that invites choking, regardless of the actual weight given to the paper itself. As W. I. Thomas (1928) observed, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” In the end, Baumeister found that offering subjects a reward for improved performance actually caused them to perform worse. In a way, the promise of social mobility for Tyrone and myself may be an inadvertent reward that actually increases the likelihood of our choking.

It is my thesis that writing can come to represent a high stakes performance to different students for different reasons, and their writing block is, in essence, “choking” in the face of this kind of performance. Of course, not all students in the same circumstances will experience choking. Indeed, there are many students who share similar structural locations with severely blocked students who never struggle with their writing. What differentiates those that block from those that do not? It is the meaning-making these individuals engage in that distinguishes one from the other. In other words, blocked students have both social psychological and structural triggers that result in their propensity to choke. To be clear, my intention in this dissertation is not to replace a psychological perspective with a structural one; it is rather to add a structural lens to our repertoire. Just as we should not point to psychological factors as the sole contributors to
writing block, neither should we hold structural factors as single-handedly responsible for a student’s writing difficulties. However, viewing the problem through a structural as well as a psychological perspective can bring greater complexity and accuracy to our understanding of what is actually going on with struggling students.

MY OWN STANDPOINT

Every subjective perspective, or “standpoint,” derives from a specific social position that both enables and limits one’s vision on the world, and as such, standpoint theorists emphasized the critical importance of the researcher’s laying bare her own positionality in relation to her research (Haraway 1988). Charmaz (1995:35) phrased this advice simply: “become self-aware about why and how you gather your data.”

A white woman from a relatively privileged upbringing, I came to this research not only with a history of my own “writer’s block,” but also with many years of professional experience with others’ blocks, as mentioned above. Specifically, from 2004 to 2008, I directed a large peer tutoring program in my role as assistant director of the Academic Resource Center at Tufts University, during which time I counseled dozens upon dozens of students who were struggling academically—many of whom were particularly hung up on writing. From 2009 to the present, I have also served as an instructional assistant in developmental education at the Learning Resources for Student-Athletes at Boston College.¹ In this role, I have tutored several “at risk” (i.e., enormously

¹ I am a College Reading and Learning Association-certified Master Tutor, which means I have had training at the highest level of tutor certification. I have tutored students in Sociology, writing, reading, study skills, and time management.
underprepared) students from underperforming high schools in tough neighborhoods, some of whom struggle mercilessly with academic writing. For a single semester in 2010, I also served as a professional writing tutor at Newbury College where I again worked primarily with severely underprepared students besieged by their writing assignments. As such, I came into my research project with vast experience with academic writing block, both personally and professionally. This experience no doubt has both informed my sensitivity to social class and race and deepened my empathy for my respondents throughout the project.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

In the following chapter, I take the reader through a comprehensive review of the literature. This section covers not only the scholarly literature on writing blocks per se but also tangentially related but directly applicable literature on composition studies (the scholarly field of English writing instructors), cultural capital, status anxiety, and stereotype threat. In Chapter Three, I discuss at length the methods I have used in the course of this project. Chapters Four through Six are the data chapters that delve deeply into an analysis of the words and sentiments of the participants themselves.

Chapter Four examines the experiences of low income, working class, and lower middle class students. Specifically, I show that many such students are painfully aware that they bring non-dominant forms of cultural capital to an institution of higher education that solidly prefers and rewards only certain kinds of cultural capital. The “inferiority complex” that results inhibits students’ ability to trust their own voices,
which is doubly consequential given that writing is seen—by both student and his or her family—as a vehicle through which the promise of social mobility becomes possible. In an effort to “pay back” the significant sacrifices that their parents have endured in order to launch their children into a place such as Boston College, these students choke in the face of this sharply felt pressure.

Chapter Five follows the experiences of upper middle class students to illustrate that privileged students also sometimes feel at a relative disadvantage to their even more privileged peers. This sense of “subjective disadvantage” triggers self-doubt and loss of confidence in one’s voice. Coupled with the abundant “achievement pressure” particularly endemic to upper middle class students, especially in light of the present economy, this self-doubt and pressure to achieve can often result in a paralyzing perfectionism that stymies students’ ability to put words on the page.

Chapter Six probes the experiences of two students in particular. I have chosen to utilize case studies in this chapter for several reasons. First, because most individuals experience their lives and decisions through an individualistic rather than a structural lens, it behooves us to do a phenomenological study of exactly how individual students idiosyncratically experience their own block. Only following the full stories of individuals can give us this phenomenological data. Second, the two cases studies chosen bring further complexity to the relatively simple pictures presented in the previous two data chapters. Race, in particular, complicates an otherwise straightforward narrative about social class. Finally, both individuals represent an increasingly prominent reality on college campuses across the country today: neither young woman fits the traditional demographic model that associates students of color with the lower class and white
students with privilege. Like these women, increasing numbers of incoming undergraduates are class-identified in unexpected ways. Through a close analysis of these two case studies, I explore how racial and ethnic identities intersect with social class to produce a smaller group of “atypical” marginalized students—or other others. The liminality of these class-race structural locations produces profound ambivalence about one’s place in the local social context and deep uncertainty about one’s ability to move either forward or backward. The onus of their liminal status triggers severe writing block for both students.

Finally, Chapter Seven concludes with a reflection on what my findings mean for students of higher education today, particularly those at relatively elite private universities. Given that I have found that there are larger themes relating to class and race that are reflected in qualitatively distinct types of writing blocks, then it will no longer suffice to treat writing blocks as simply the private and idiosyncratic problems of individual students. It is necessary to bring class- and race-cognizance to the table. In other words, those working with blocked students will need to look at the student and his or her struggle with a “sociological imagination” and understand how individuals’ private troubles at the micro level intersect with public or social issues at the macro level.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Writing block has been a topic of interest to a relatively small number of scholars, the majority of whom published their work in a wave of scholarship on the subject roughly thirty years ago. These theorists tend to fall into one of four categories: the psychoanalytically-oriented (e.g., Bergler 1950), the cognitivists (e.g., Rose 1980, 1983, 1984, 1985), the affectively-oriented (e.g., Leader 1991), and a very small group whom I will, following Cayton (1990), call the “contextualists” (e.g., Bloom 1985; Cayton 1990, 1991; and Clark and Wiedenhaupt 1992). The vast expanse of the literature on writing blocks occupies the first three territories and is decidedly psychological in nature. Even though I do not draw much from them in my own theoretical framework, I will cover these three terrains in depth in order to give the reader a solid sense of the landscape of writing block literature, as well as to illustrate the psychology-centric nature of that landscape. The psychoanalytically-oriented are those who see block as originating in the
psyche of the individual and therefore as something that is ideally suited to psychoanalytic treatment. The cognitivists, on the other hand, believe writing block is a reflection of cognitive problems of one variety or another, but the problem of course still lies solely within the confines of the mind of the writer in question. The affectively-oriented theorists view block as stemming from the individual’s problematic affective responses. The contextualists, on the other hand, are composed of a handful of scholars who have begun to situate the writer in his or her “social context,” whether in the sense of their immediate environment or their larger social networks.2 I will then discuss a set of scholars (e.g., Shaughnessy, Bizzell, and Bartholomae) whose work in composition studies can be productively applied to the problem of academic writing blocks. Finally, I will briefly overview the concepts that have been helpful to me in forming my analysis of the data—namely, cultural capital, status anxiety, and stereotype threat.

WRITING BLOCK

The first published use of the term “writer’s block” appeared in the work of Freudian psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler (1950) who, ironically, wrote prolifically on this and other subjects throughout his career in the early to mid-twentieth century. Bergler claimed to have coined the term, although this cannot be verified definitively (Leader 1991). He summarized his ideas on writing block in his book, The Writer and Psychoanalysis, in which he argued that writing is an articulation of intrapsychic

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2 One theorist that I will include in my review does not fit into any of the above camps (Flaherty 2004), as she is a neurologist who saw writing block as a sign of a neurological problem. However, she does share one assumption with the majority of the others: that writing block is a problem residing principally in the head of the individual writer.
conflicts. As he put it, “the writer’s pen is guided by subterranean forces” (p. 2), and writers write, therefore, “to solve an inner conflict” (p. 83). For Bergler, writing itself is a defense mechanism or a “sublimation” in which the person’s aggressive instincts are directed intrapsychically against his own super-ego, or what Bergler called the “inner conscience” (p. 37). The personality needs protection against the inner conscience, which Bergler described variously as “Frankenstein,” Hitler, and “the inner monster” on a “campaign of terror”—an entity that would destroy the personality if left to its own devices (p. 15-17).

According to Bergler, the writer writes in order to give himself his words and ideas as if they are gifts and to act out the way in which he would have liked to have been treated as a child. In particular, the author contended that all people suffer from the early childhood experience of weaning or being refused the mother’s milk. The torturing inner conscience, in an effort to masochistically punish the individual, plants in him the wish to refuse the mother’s milk even as he desires it. Writing is a form of resolving this conflict, and as such, writing is, for Berger, the “victorious episode” in the “battle of the conscience” (p. 83). Writing block, on the other hand, is what happens when the individual loses that battle, and Bergler theorized there are four reasons why such blocks develop: 1) the writer’s refusal of the mother’s milk (through the rejection of his own words), 2) too little distance between wish and defense (the written product mirrors reality too closely), 3) “scopophilia” (the exhibitionist wish to show oneself through writing that actually masks a deeper voyeuristic wish turned inside out), or 4) an increase in neurosis of any sort. Writing block is, at base, self-punishment, the implication being that the writer is at fault. In the end, Bergler claims to have successfully “cured” thirty-
six blocked writers during his psychoanalytic career. However, nowhere in his book does he divulge the specifics of his methods—beyond his implicit insistence on psychoanalysis—making it impossible to replicate or verify his results.

Of course it is Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who paved the way for the psychological and individualistic conception of writing blocks through his theories about the unconscious, the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Many scholars who followed Freud relied on Freudian notions to explain human behavior that is otherwise puzzling to the outside observer for its seeming irrationality. First, Freud’s foundational idea that individuals have not only a conscious self but an unconscious as well informs the popular notion that writing blocks originate in the unconscious. Our conscious self wants and needs to write—e.g., I have to get a paper written by Friday or else I am going to get an “F”—and yet something is blocking our ability to write as we wish. That something is often presumed to be the unconscious, and the block a conflict between the desires of the conscious self and the unconscious (Leader 1991; Nelson 1993). Second, Freud’s fundamental theory that the individual psyche has three layers—the id, the ego, and the super-ego—forms the undercurrent of the popular assumption that writing blocks are due to an overly harsh inner critic, or in Freudian language, super-ego. This inner critic, often seen as an internalized overly critical parent or teacher, jumps on our every sentence as we try to write, forcing us to become severe editors of our own work, rejecting words even before we can type them out (Clark and Wiedenhaupt 1992; Boice 1993). With respect to academic writers in particular, Freud might have surmised that the writer will have associations with the topic at hand and that any blocks with regard to that topic may actually be the ego’s attempt to protect the writer from some unconscious
association that he is not comfortable bringing forth into consciousness, in the form of his writings on the subject. Academic writing blocks, following this logic, may be seen as a form of resistance—the treatment of which would be psychoanalysis, to get to the bottom of the troubling associations and thus cure the blockage. One psychoanalyst humorously riffed on this idea when he published, “The Unsuccessful Self Treatment of a Case of Writer’s Block” (Upper 1974), and what followed was a blank page.

It was not until the 1980’s that the subject of writing block was seriously picked up again in the scholarly literature. This time, education scholar Mike Rose (1983:1), argued against the popularized notion of writing blocks as expressions of intrapsychic conflicts and “the common assumption that writers block because they are reluctant to reveal themselves or are fearful of evaluation.” Instead, Rose focused almost exclusively on the cognitive dimensions of writing blocks. In his seminal 1980 article, “Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitive Analysis of Writer’s Block,” Rose argued that writing blocks occur when the writer is operating under faulty assumptions that hampers the process of writing itself. For instance, a student who enters college from high school with the “5-paragraph essay” rule firmly entrenched in his mind as the paragon of all writing rules, will likely have significant trouble when he is expected to write a college-level critical analytical essay. The “rigid rule” of the 5-paragraph essay hamstrings him when it comes time to write a longer, more nuanced assignment, and his inability to get past his self-enforced rule triggers a writing block.

According to Rose (1983), it is cognitive, not intrapsychic, problems that underlie writing blocks, with premature editing, inaccurate assumptions, and inflexible planning among the most common cognitive patterns that cause trouble. Rose (1980) conducted a
study following ten UCLA students of varying backgrounds and abilities as they proceeded through college. Five of the ten became blocked, and Rose argues that the difference between the “blockers” and the “nonblockers” was due to the kind of rules each group applies to their writing. The blocked group used “algorithms,” or very precise and specific rules, in relation to their writing, while the other group used “heuristics,” which are closer to “rules of thumb” or general guidelines. Heuristics gave the nonblockers much more flexibility to change their writing goals when they encounter a situation in which their perspective shifts as they learn more about their topic through the course of writing. Rose noted that those students with the “least precise rules and plans have the least trouble composing” (p. 397). Arguing against the popular Romantic era notion that writing is a mysterious or inexplicable act dependent on the uncontrollable phenomenon of “inspiration,” Rose contends that writing is in fact a “problem-solving process” (p. 393).

Rose (1980:389) further argued that writing blocks have several ill effects—not only in the form of late papers and poor grades, which do not reflect the true ability of the student, but more importantly, the development in the student of “a growing distrust of their abilities and an aversion toward the composing process itself.” For this reason, he spent a good deal of time addressing composition teachers, whom he hoped would teach students how to avoid writing blocks. For instance, Rose (1983:6) recommended writing teachers evaluate and assess students’ processes of writing not merely their products, teach strategies for how to modify the “5-paragraph” essay format as needed, and convey
Drawing on the cognitive theories of writing by Flower (1979) and Flower and Hayes (1981), Rose (1985) further recommended that students be taught more positive self-talk (e.g., changing “I am not a good writer” to “I can learn better writing skills”), as well better cognitive strategies to head off the poor planning and goal-setting that hampers many writers (e.g. replacing “I am going to write everything about this topic” with “I am going to narrow my focus to a more realistic and suitable topic”).

Daly (1978) took a similarly cognitive approach to what he calls “writing apprehension,” or a frame of mind that he argued can with time lead to the distinct problem of “writer’s block.” He measured writing apprehension—which Tighe (1987) defined simply as “fear or anxiety about writing”—using an instrument he and a colleague had devised, called the Daly and Miller’s Writing Apprehension Test (Daly and Miller 1975). Unsurprisingly, Daly’s (1978) studies found that so-called “high apprehensives” avoid academic subjects and jobs that require a lot of writing, thus obviating the opportunity to improve their writing skills, and that “low apprehensives” perform significantly better on writing skills tests than their highly apprehensive counterparts. Likewise, Faigley, Daly, and Witte (1981) noted that high apprehensives scored consistently lower on writing related skills, had less command over written

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3 Other more obscure scholars have made similar arguments. For example, Oliver (1982:164) concluded that block occurs when students are “paralyzed by rules” and become “victims of the inappropriate instruction” from teachers that adhere to the traditional model of teaching writing, which focuses on the product over the process). In the case of cross-cultural students, Corbett (1998:6) argued that writing blocks develop because the student is “unable to negotiate the conflicting rhetorics of the cultures in which these ideologies are embedded and to accommodate these rhetorics to the unitary style of the expository essay.” In other words, the student has not yet learned how to translate his native language, complete with its inherent rules, ideologies, and rhetorics, into the required academic discourse.
conventions, and produced shorter and less “syntactically mature” or “fluent” text than low apprehensives. Faigley et al (1981) admitted, however, that “no causality is assumed” but maintained that either way, writing apprehension and poor writing performance are likely to reinforce one another.

Other scholars took up the work of Daly and began to differentiate between “dispositional” and “situational” writing apprehension, noting that situational writing apprehension arises when the writing task is highly conspicuous, the evaluation intensive, the assignment novel, the directions ambiguous, and the writer’s prior experience minimal (Donlan and Andreatta 1987). Tighe (1987), on the other hand, posited “adverse critical comments” from teachers as the central cause of significant writing apprehension. In any case, some students become so anxious and fearful that they feign disinterest in writing assignments, sleep through writing-intensive classes, and even become ill in the face of writing requirements (Baxter 1987). While all of these scholars on “writing apprehension” did distinguish apprehension from block, the former is an important concept to cover given its frequent correlation with the latter. Betancourt and Phinney (1988) even staked the explicit claim that writing apprehension leads to blocking rather than the other way around.

Later scholars, such as cultural anthropologist and writing instructor Keith Hjortshoj (2001), take up the cognitivist leanings of Rose and others in a more nuanced fashion. In his book, Understanding Writing Blocks, Hjortshoj draws on his vast experience with troubled student writers. Hjortshoj’s cognitivist perspective was in evidence when he argued that “writing problems often result from misconceptions—mismappings—of the writing process” (p. 13). He stated, for example, that writers often
“confuse product and process” and make the erroneous assumption that because the product is linear the process itself must be linear, whereas the process that leads to a good product is often anything but linear (p. 27). In the case of what Hjortshoj calls “syntactic blocks,” the writer gets blocked because she cannot make her ideas, which may be complex, nuanced, and highly layered, fit into the more linear, straightforward syntax of language (p. 100). In other words, because language is inherently limiting, one must commit oneself to specific words that can reflect only so much of one’s thinking. Thus, writing intrinsically involves a “settling” for inadequate language or a “giving up” on the dream that the writer can capture the complexity of all the connections and ideas in her mind (p. 101).

Expressing a more cognitive-behavioral perspective, Hjortshoj (2001) was also heavily influenced by F.M. Alexander, of the Alexander Technique. Alexander, who had been a singer that got “blocked” at performances, had studied videos of himself and realized that at the moment he needed to start singing he was unconsciously moving his body in such a way that constricted his larynx and cut off his ability to sing. He adapted his bodily movements accordingly and thus overcame his block. Influenced by Alexander’s experience, Hjortshoj contended writing is an “embodied movement,” in which the movement of the mind must be accompanied by the actions of the body at just the right time for there to be successful writing. Blocks are “psychophysical obstacles,” in which “something the writer is both thinking and doing interrupts movement” and stalls progress (p. 56). Hjortshoj elaborated:

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4 Hjortshoj’s use of Alexander here recalls Weil and Lane (1956) who called writing block “stagefright in writers.”
Blocked writers are often very industrious, and work on their projects several hours each day. Activities related to their work included reading, extensive note-taking, making schedules, gathering information, analyzing data, outlining, composing portions of drafts, and editing sentences… Blocked writers simply do these things at the wrong times or in the wrong proportions, sometimes for the wrong reasons. As a consequence their movements within the writing process do not lead to its completion. (P. 11)

In other words, writing blocks happen when the writer engages in what Hjortshoj calls nonproductive “stimulus-response” patterns (e.g., just as the writer begins writing with fluency, he or she takes a break and loses that momentum, or the writer stops to edit sentences at the same time he or she is composing them).

Taking issue with the more cognitive approach to writing blocks were those in the affectively-oriented camp. For instance, literary scholar Zachary Leader (1991) argued in his book, Writer’s Block, that blocks are psychological or affective in nature, and he critiqued Rose and other cognitivist scholars for not taking the affective dimension sufficiently into account. Leader noted that their conclusion that writing blocks are due to cognitive problems that are “vulnerable to teaching and reteaching” (Rose 1984:xvii) was convenient, given that their primary audience was writing teachers (Leader 1991:17). Moreover, Leader took Rose in particular to task for not actually addressing true “writer’s block”: for, Leader reasoned, if writing blocks occur because the writer has employed rigid rules or is engaged in premature editing, then the writer is merely an “unskilled” writer, not a blocked one. The interesting question, for Leader, was why writers who have already learned or been taught all of these skills still get blocked. His answer lies in the terrain of the emotions, not cognitions.
Leader (1991) went on to do a comprehensive review of the literature on art, writing, and creativity inhibitions, covering the psychoanalytic perspective, post-Freudian ego psychology and object relations theory, and the literary perspective. With regard to the psychoanalytic perspective, Leader’s conclusions resonate with the psychoanalytically-oriented theorists who contend that blockage occurs when there is an intrapsychic conflict. For psychoanalytic theorists, Leader noted, this conflict usually originates in the Oedipal stage, between the individual’s ego and his repressive mechanism, while for ego psychologists and object relations theorists, the failure to effectively negotiate one’s internal conflicting forces that inevitably leads to blockage indicates the individual had problems with separation / connection in very early childhood. From a literary perspective, Leader argued that conflicted writers have to cope with “the burden of the past” or “influence anxiety,” that phenomenon by which writers are haunted—and sometimes blocked—by the great works of those who have come before them. For Leader, all of the aforementioned perspectives maintain the basic foundational idea that the writing block occurs when the writer is torn by conflicting forces asking him or her to take two opposing actions: when the writer is unable to heal this rift, he or she gets blocked. He concluded, “Blocked writers fail to negotiate rival or opposing claims… These oppositions reflect a deep and basic conflict, one that the psychoanalysts argue is rooted in our earliest relations with the world” (p. 251). To be

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5 Other scholars put forth similar ideas in a series of unpublished dissertations. See, for instance, the quantitative dissertation, “The Effects of Separation-Individuation Conflicts on Length of Time to Complete the Dissertation,” that hypothesized that early loss or separation results in writing block (Stern 1985) or another quantitatively-based dissertation, “Writer’s Block and Blocked Writers: Disruption and Intervention,” which posited that writing, for some, is viewed as threatening to one’s relationships with key people and that block is what happens when one is overwhelmed by dysphoric affect (Barrios 1987).
pulled too far in the direction of one gravitational force over another results in the writer becoming off-kilter and blocked.

Shortly after Leader’s book, another seminal scholar of writing blocks, psychotherapist Robert Boice (1993), published an influential paper, “Writing Blocks and Tacit Knowledge,” in which he put forward a part cognitive, part affective (but wholly psychological) view of writing blocks. In this paper, Boice outlined what he argued are the six most common causes of writing blocks, chronicled the historical trends in treatments, and offered his own new treatment model. He asked why academicians let writing fluency go untaught and leave students and faculty alike without the skills and strategies to avoid the all-too-common experience of writing block. Boice argued that writing fluency is not taught because writing itself is seen as a form of “practical intelligence” or “tacit knowledge”—a skill which is essential to thriving in academia and yet is left to the individual to learn on his or her own. The consequence is that students often learn this skill poorly, if at all.

Boice (1993:24-26) went on to list the six most common causes of writing blocks as: 1) censors [the Freudian notion that there are internalized critics or “watchers at the gate” that reject what is written], 2) fears of failure [including the fear of success, fear of being found out as a fraud, and even fear of fear itself, which diminishes the writer’s perceived sense of self-efficacy], 3) perfectionism [the tendency to set immoderate or extreme goals and unrealistically high standards], 4) early experience [such as early traumas in the classroom with an authoritarian teacher], 5) procrastination [the vicious cycle in which the writer engages in self-disparagement following unmet good intentions, then sets more good intentions only to experience further shame, fear of failure, task-
aversiveness, and poor self-confidence and self-management skills] and 6) mental health
[the notion that writing in itself is unhealthy and writers self-select because they are already neurotic personalities].

It is interesting to note that while Boice (1992) reflected a cognitive approach when he lamented the fact that writing fluency is a skill that goes untaught, the reasons that he gave for writing blocks themselves are mostly affective and even psychodynamic in nature—a fact that suggests the breadth of perspective with which Boice, like Leader, approached the topic. Unlike Leader however, who only theorized about the causes of writing blocks and did not attempt to address how to treat them, Boice (1993:30-37) examined the historical trends for the treatment of writing blocks—automaticity (e.g., “free writing,” the oldest and most consistently utilized treatment for writing blocks, in which the writer is encouraged to “dissociate” from his conscious mind and write whatever comes into his head without pause); regimen (e.g., the notion that good writing is born of hard work and regular practice and the correspondingly behaviorist treatment that Boice (1985) had earlier called “contingency management,” in which the therapist rewards the writer’s progress with food and the like); cognitions (e.g., the writer’s need to attend to his thought patterns and self-talk); and social skills and supports (e.g., the most recent trend at the time in the treatment of writing blocks in which teachers need to explicitly model writing skills for their students).

In response to what he saw as the isolationism of these four historical trends—each model ignores the insights of the others—Boice (1993) put forward his own novel

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6 Here Boice (1993) echoed the obscure work of Passman (1976) who published an article on the successful elimination of writing block in a college student, which was accomplished largely using positive reinforcements and teaching the student to break his work up into smaller segments.
treatment model called “the IRSS Model,” which combined the collective wisdom of each of the earlier models. IRSS stands for Involvement [having students learn by doing within a social context], Regimen [or “task management,” teaching students to keep a regular writing practice], Self-management [helping students rid themselves of negative and maladaptive thinking patterns], and Social networking [making writing more social by arranging for collaborations and feedback]. The IRSS model is, again, based on the assumption that writing is a tacit skill that has not been taught well, or at all, but which is conducive to learning. In this way, Boice’s work echoed the earlier work of Rose and related cognitivist scholars in that he shared the notion that writing—and the thinking patterns which enable and support it—can be learned.

Like the psychoanalytic, cognitive, and affective theorists of writing block before her, neurologist Alice Flaherty (2004) viewed block as a problem intrinsic to the writer him or herself regardless of social context. In fact, the argument she made in her book, *The Midnight Disease*, implicitly defined the issue as being “all in your head” when she asserted that writing block has a neurological component. Namely, she maintained that writing blocks are, in some cases, linked to frontal lobe abnormalities. Brain state analogies of writing blocks, or neurological conditions that are related to writing blocks, include “writer’s cramp,” procrastination, depression, performance anxiety, and stage fright. Moreover, she asserted that cycles of productivity are sometimes connected to sleep, seasonal, or hormonal cycles. She cautioned, however, that linking certain cases of writing blocks to neurologically based phenomena should not trick us into thinking that some blocks are more “real” than others. The argument Flaherty did not explicitly make but which bears articulating is that in such cases writing block is not an expression of the
failure of will on the part of the writer; sometimes blocking is beyond the direct control of the individual, whether due to reasons that are neurological, or as I argue, sociological in nature.

There is a language of “failure” and “deficiency” in reference to the blocked writer throughout the work of Bergler, Rose, Leader, Boice, and other scholars of writing block. Boice (1993:44) defined writing block most starkly in these terms as “a failure of involvement in writing as an act of discovery, a failure of regimen, of practicing writing regularly and in moderation,…a deficit in self-management of the negativism and pessimism that can accrue to scholarly writing, and…keep[s] writing a private endeavor.” All of the scholars mentioned so far located the primary source of the problem solely within the writer him or herself, whether it be due to an intrapsychic conflict, a cognitive distortion, insufficient self-management, or a neurological deficit. While it is critical to attend to the writer and those of his or her internal problems that contribute to the development of writing block, I would argue, following the contextualists, that one must also acknowledge that there are social forces outside the writer that affect her ability to write in the kind of discourse expected of her. In other words, I contend that in some cases of writing block, the blocking agent is external to the writer. This is not to say that the writer cannot overcome the block. She can, but successful management of the block will entail more than attending only to any personal psychological conflicts or cognitive errors on her part—the writer will also have to learn to negotiate conflicting social forces and to speak in the language required of her.

It is time now to consider the social ecology of writing blocks and take seriously the many ways in which the social and cultural context in which the writer writes affects
and in some cases even triggers the block. Writing is not done in a vacuum or, once finished, ejected into a world innocent of power relations. Writing is, rather, a socially situated act that is accomplished by using a shared language, making reference to collective symbols, employing rhetorical tools learned through socialization, and gearing the product to speak to a particular external audience. When writing is released, it will be compared and contrasted to the world of others’ writings, and when it is read, it will be read differently by different readers and may even be used to advance or counter arguments of political or social import. In a word, writing is social—even political. It is not nearly so private and solitary an act as it is often conceived of being. I am not alone when I sit down at my writing desk. Rather, the voices of colleagues, family, teachers, and other writers; the ears of my imagined audience members; the eyes of those who will evaluate my work; and the stories of those in the world around me populate my head as I take pen to paper, fingers to keyboard.

As mentioned above, there is only a handful of writing block scholars whom one can call “contextualists,” and so I will consider each of them before turning to more indirectly related literature that can nonetheless sensitize us to the many ways in which a contextualist perspective is critical. In 1985, Lynn Z. Bloom (1985:119) argued explicitly for a “contextual approach” to writing in general and writing anxiety and block in particular, whereby researchers should examine the “multiple frames of reference” in which the writer is writing before concluding why he or she is having so much trouble. Indeed, she asserted, “an anxious writer out of context may be neither anxious nor a writer” (p. 119). Even so, she argued that writers are neither simply the sum of their various contexts – they bring individual differences in perception, abilities, and
disposition to the table as well. She considered both internal contexts (i.e., intellectual, artistic, temperamental, biological, and emotional factors) and external contexts (i.e., “social” and “academic”). For Bloom, gender is of primary concern, and she held that her contextual approach was particularly essential when trying to understand women writers. When she referred to a writer’s “social context,” Bloom cited Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen in order to delineate the ways in which a woman’s lack of “supportive contexts” and the “crushing” gender norms constricting so many women at that time to home-making and child-rearing can impede a woman’s ability to write freely. She went on to do a case study of two blocked graduate students, Sarah and Ellen, the first of whom became unblocked with Bloom’s help and the second of whom remained paralyzed in her writing despite much counseling. Bloom attributed Ellen’s stubborn block to “contextual interference.” Namely, Ellen’s husband was an assistant professor whose career the young couple assumed took priority over Ellen’s, and he moved her away from her graduate program and as such so attenuated Ellen’s vital connection to her dissertation chair as to obstruct her ability to move forward on her thesis. Bloom concluded that “to resolve Ellen’s writing problems would require a marriage therapist in addition to a writing specialist” (p. 131). In short, Bloom helps us to begin consideration of a writer’s “social context” but her brief study stops short at gender.

Shortly thereafter, Mary Kupiec Cayton (1990) took up the contextualist cause and did a small qualitative study on writing block, in which gender was again the factor of primary concern. In Cayton’s overview of the literature, she uses the term “contextualists” to describe not only Bloom, whose work focused directly on writing blocks, but also Bartholomae and Bizzell, to be discussed shortly, both of whom focused
on writing in general rather than block in particular. Nonetheless, Cayton depicted these scholars as contextualists because they considered such things as the writer’s immediate social environment, cultural expectations, and the norms of the local social context.

Writing block, from this perspective, could be viewed as the “problematic fit between cultural expectations and understandings that an individual brings to a given task and those that the environment demands for effective functioning” (p. 323). She argued that women suffer “more prolonged and overt psychological distress” over writing block than do men (p. 321). She attributed this gender discrepancy to the fact that women have a different, less privileged relationship to established knowledge and “conventions that transmit power and authority” in comparison to men. In her study, she found that blocked women suffer from four different problems: 1) difficulties with audience, 2) difficulties with ethical responsibility to the subjects of their projects, 3) difficulties utilizing research from secondary sources, and 4) difficulties with voice and specifically with “obliterating themselves from the project.” The problem with Cayton’s analysis is that it reflects a rather essentialist perspective on gender in that she presumed women possess an inherent connectedness with people and a natural relationality that men do not have. After all, it is, according to Cayton, this tendency to try to relate with people that causes all four of the above difficulties.

Cayton’s (1991) analysis takes on greater complexity in her second article on writing block. In this piece, she considered her own persistent and prolonged (nine year) struggle with block as attributable to her status as both a woman and an adjunct rather than a tenured professor. Being a woman in what she called the “academic proletariat” effectively stifled her ability to write: “I was incapable of speaking and being heard by
those who counted” (p. 649, emphasis added). In other words, entrance into a scholarly conversation entails several prerequisites that are not necessarily extended to female adjuncts. For instance, one must already possess sufficient status (vis-à-vis a suitable academic position, i.e., a tenure-track or tenured position) in order to “legitimately” both speak and be heard by those already involved in the conversation. Cayton blamed the “privatized and exclusive nature of academic discourse” and her subsequent marginalization from academic legitimacy as the primary source of her writing block. Indeed, she incisively concluded that to see her own block as a “simple manifestation of my lack of self-confidence (as it most assuredly was, to some extent) would be to considerably oversimplify a situation with complex social ramifications” (p. 649). As a result, she recommended that marginalized faculty unionize and recognize that “the vise in which we are caught springs from the contradictions in the academic system itself rather than from inadequacies within ourselves” (p. 657). Here Cayton’s insights paved the way for the current study. While she did not explicitly discuss social class, she did so implicitly with reference to herself using the Marxist term “proletariat” and with her discussion of adjunct professors as a marginalized class of faculty. Her insight that the “self-confidence” deficit at the root of some writing blocks has structural triggers is one which echoes my own interest in the structural origins of certain “psychological” states.

While Clark and Wiedenhaupt (1992) did not reflect Cayton’s (1991) fundamentally structural perspective, they also took up the issue of gender in relation to writing blocks. They conducted a single case study on one of the article’s co-authors, Sonja Wiedenhaupt, a young white woman who collaborated with her professor to write up her own case study. Sonja relayed her experience with a severe writing block she
encountered while working on her undergraduate honors thesis. Ordinarily a top student, Sonja found that she simply could not make progress on her paper. Moreover, despite the hundreds of rigorous hours she had spent researching her topic (including through an internship she conducted within the field) and the 180 pages she had generated through “free writing,” she could not come up with a single guiding thesis for the project. When she received negative feedback from her advisor on her early work, she “dumped” the whole thing and started over again. Sonja’s advisor was male, and he became in Sonja’s imagination a patriarchal figure with nearly supreme power to judge her worthiness. Sonja described her difficulty in writing for him and pondered the impact of his gender on her during the writing process:

I gave my advisor a godlike voice… I am now wondering about the fact that he was a man, and the effect that might have had on me. My father has always been very influential in my life. I never did anything before he approved it… I wonder about the role I gave to my father, whether I also give that role to other men… Maybe I did not perceive my advisor as a guide with whom I could agree or disagree. (P. 64).

Sonja’s perception of her advisor as a powerful, judgmental figure and her assumption that she would be met with his disapproval formed the basis of the evaluative audience she pictured in her mind as she wrote. The authors concluded that writing for such an advisor qua father meant Sonja would never feel she was good enough—a notion that stymied her so completely, she developed a severe block. In sum, in attributing Sonja’s difficulties to the gendered dynamic of her relationship with her advisor and to the way in which he, as a male, represented a “patriarchal” order, Clark and Wiedenhaupt concluded
that gender—and gendered power differentials – were largely to blame for Sonja’s block. In this way, they maintained the contextualist approach initiated by Bloom.

The only other contextualist scholars who have specifically focused their work on writing blocks are represented in a couple of unpublished doctoral dissertations. Drawing upon the critical composition studies scholars to which I will next turn, Susan Marie Latta (1995) defined “writing as a socially and culturally situated rhetorical act” and, much like Cayton (1990) and Clark and Wiedenhaupt (1992), concluded in her qualitative study on five blocked female graduate students that the women’s troubles were largely due to the gendered dynamics surrounding audience concerns and issues of voice and authority. While Latta’s primary focus was gender, she did importantly give mention to socioeconomic status and ethnicity as critical factors to consider in the case of blocked academic writers. Martha Trudeau Tucker (1997) similarly focused her dissertation on academic women with writing block, and she too concluded that social context was fundamental to understanding why women become blocked. For Tucker, social context included an individual’s acculturation into the academy, the explicitness or implicitness of cultural norms, family and social life, the presence or absence of direct instruction in the discourse of her chosen field, and the type of evaluation she had experienced during graduate school. In other words, unlike Latta, Tucker did not include social class or race into her consideration, but both Latta and Tucker moved the conversation forward into a more structural terrain.

While this concludes the review of those whose work focused directly on writing block, the next section will consider several scholars whose work can be readily applied to the issue of block in productive ways.
CRITICAL COMPOSITION STUDIES

There are several scholars within the field of critical composition studies—a more radical branch of the field of English writing instructors’ scholarship—whose work can be brought to bear on the problem of academic writing block, but I will cover three in particular: Mina Shaughnessy, David Bartholomae, and Patricia Bizzell. Mina Shaughnessy (1977a) wrote a watershed book in response to the “open admissions” movement in the 1970s called Errors and Expectations. A college writing teacher at CUNY at a time when the University instituted open admissions, Shaughnessy suddenly found herself in front of a classroom of students who were so vastly underprepared for college academics that she had to cover the most basic rules of writing. As a result, she called these students “basic writers,” a moniker which was adopted by the entire field of composition studies for the last few decades and sees continued use even today. By “basic writer,” Shaughnessy meant those students—often low income and minority—who came into college through open admissions and had very little exposure to writing in “formal English” because they had attended what we now call “underperforming” high schools. In today’s language we might call them “at risk” students (McAlexander 2009). Shaughnessy (1977a:2-3) characterized basic writers as “true outsiders” and “strangers in academia… unacquainted… underprepared” and “weighted by disadvantages of poor training, yet expected to “catch up” with the front runners in a semester or two of low intensity instruction.”
Shaughnessy’s aim was twofold: to give basic writing teachers the tools to help such students and to break the stereotype that basic writers were “handicapped.” Namely, she wanted to show that such writers were not hopeless or uneducable (as many of her fellow teachers had concluded at the time) but that their errors have logic behind them. Furthermore, Shaughnessy (1976) argued that the use of medical metaphors (such as “handicapped”) to characterize the basic writer’s command of English suggests that it is the student who is somehow defective. Instead, she insisted, teachers of basic writing must look critically at themselves and interrogate the ways in which their own teaching methods—not their students—are lacking and in need of change. After all, Shaughnessy (1976) noted:

The work is waiting for us. And so irrevocable now is the tide that brings the new students to the nation’s classrooms that it is no longer within our power, as perhaps it once was, to refuse to accept them into the community of the educable. (P. 238-239)

As such, she outlined the four-stage developmental model that basic writing teachers tend to undergo once plunked down into a classroom of basic writers: “guarding the tower” (the teacher reels from the initial shock of the sub-par writing of his students and tries in earnest to “protect the academy from outsiders”); “converting the natives” (the teacher capitulates that at least some of the students may be educable to the mechanics of good writing but treats them as “empty vessels,” failing to recognize the “competing logics and values and habits” such students bring to the table); “sounding the depths” (the teacher begins to observe not simply his students but himself as a writer and teacher and discovers a “logic of errors” in his students’ writing); and finally, “diving in” (the teacher decides to remediate himself and become a student of his students in order to more
effectively teach his students that “the rules have changed” and are no longer about simple “right-wrong testing” but rather reward those who can “sustain a play of mind upon ideas” (p. 235-237). In short, Shaughnessy shifted the onus of “remediation” from “defective” or “handicapped” students to teachers who have as much to learn from their students as they have to teach them.

Shaughnessy’s (1977a) scholarship can easily be applied to writing block in the sense that she foreshadowed the trouble many “basic writers” may run into in their collision course with college academics. Namely, she argued that academia requires entry into a particular discourse community that is often so foreign to the basic writer that he or she may experience the struggle to learn how to write “academically” as a fierce competition between college and her home community. In other words, basic writers may feel that college forcefully distances them from “their own worlds” and actually works to remove them from the point of view that they had established at home through their “experience as outsiders” (p. 292). As a result, such students may develop a fear around college writing that causes them to mistrust and psychologically resist the process of learning to write (p. 125). Over time, as the student makes “errors” and is corrected again and again, she begins to harbor deep anxiety about the writing process. In this way, Shaughnessy argues, “error is more than a mishap; it is a barrier that keeps [her] not only from writing something in formal English but from having something to write” (p. 11, emphasis added). Of course, it is just a short step from here to actual writing block.

In the field of composition studies, Shaughnessy is a definitive “icon.” Her scholarship on “basic writing” actually started an entire sub-field of the same name, and “Mina Shaughnessy” became synonymous with the caring, concerned teacher of writing.
Her work, widely perceived as “agonistic” to traditional academia, spawned many proponents and detractors alike (Gunner 1998). Gunner (1998) characterized the derivative scholarship as either “iconic discourse,”7 which faithfully reproduces the central arguments of the icon herself, or “critical discourse,” which transgressively challenges the former and is thus received with hostility by the traditional “basic writing” community. Either way, Gunner (1998:28) portrayed Shaughnessy as an extraordinarily powerful figure in that she was a “founder of discursivity,” producing not only her own texts but an “endless possibility” of new texts by other scholars. Indeed, Gunner called her the “demon genius haunting all who write about basic writing today” (p. 31). When basic writers had previously been seen as producing merely “deviant” and “unacceptable” language assumed to be reflective of some innate intellectual “deficit,” Shaughnessy was the first to recognize their errors as having a “linguistic logic decodable by the teacher” (Gunner 1998, p. 28) and to take such students seriously. It was this trait that made her work, as Gunner put it, “radically democratic.”

Two of Shaughnessy’s critics (those whose work represents the “critical discourse”) are worth mentioning. First, Min-Zhan Lu (1991:27) argued that Shaughnessy viewed language in an “essentialist” manner as if it were a “politically innocent vehicle of meaning,” thus overlooking basic writers’ need to “confront the dissonance they experienced between academic and other discourses.” At base, Lu believed Shaughnessy missed the deeply “political dimensions” of the linguistic choices

7 Among those whose work could be characterized as “iconic discourse” are Pamela Gay (1993), who took up Shaughnessy’s work from a postcolonialist perspective in which she called for a “decolonization of the classroom” through a “pedagogy of voice” made up from multiple locations and identities, and Laura Gray-Rosendale (1998), who held that Shaughnessy is often mischaracterized as “essentialist” when she can in fact be read from a social constructionist perspective.
basic writers make and as such failed to see the ways in which language itself is a “site of struggle among competing discourses.”

Because different discourses do not enjoy equal political power in current-day America, decisions on how to respond to such [discursive] dissonance are never politically innocent. (P. 27).

Lu went on to say that basic writers therefore experience the entry into academic discourse as a “betrayal of home,” even as most basic writing classrooms deny that learning academic discourse will affect how they relate to home in any way. Ultimately, Lu viewed Shaughnessy’s legacy as disempowering to basic writers because they will be trained to view formal English as “The” language rather than as a historically specific discourse of public transaction that is dependent on unequal social and political power relations. Lu wanted basic writers to know that they have the power to change the discourse. Ira Shor (1997), another Shaughnessy critic, went so far as to suggest that elite language instruction is an “apartheid” which includes some while excluding others. According to Shor, “basic writing” classes function as a “containment track” that is hierarchically inferior to regular freshman composition and that actually impedes rather than fosters basic writers’ progress toward a college degree. In sum, while both Lu (1991) and Shor (1997) appreciated Shaughnessy’s call for writing teachers to remediate themselves, they critiqued what they saw as a naïve perspective on what it means to some students to be inducted into the academic discourse community.

David Bartholomae (1986) is another scholar in critical composition studies whose work, coupled with Shaughnessy’s, is easily applicable to the problem of writing block. Bartholomae took up Shaughnessy’s notion that certain students enter college at a profound remove from the academic discourse community. In an influential article,
Bartholomae (1986) made the compelling argument that student writers do not yet have knowledge of and fluency with the various academic discourses into which they are asked to write, and so they must “invent the university” in order to complete the task:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the…various discourses of our community. (P. 4).

Because academic writing is required before the student has had the opportunity to learn the discourse, he must “dare to carry off the bluff” and write within the style and the logic of the appropriate discourse, despite the fact that he does not yet know what he is doing—which, notes Bartholomae, “understandably causes problems” (p. 5).

How does the basic writer embark on such a mission? First, Bartholomae (1986:10) contends, he “must imagine the privilege of being “insiders”—that is, the privilege both of being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak.” Then, he must make the translation from his “primary discourse,” or the way in which he speaks naturally, to the official discourse of the field, or the secondary discourse. In essence, he must “assume the privilege without having any” (p. 10).8

8 Moreover, as later scholars noted, the discourses of the university are heavily white, upper middle class, and male, and within this discursive reality, student writers—especially those who are not white, upper middle class, or male—must struggle to “obtain and maintain status and credibility within [the] Eurocentric masculinist cultural framework…of the academy” (Comfort 2000, p. 542). Echoing Bartholomae, Comfort saw student writers as “incomplete knowers” whose “right to speak must be learned—or perhaps more accurately, earned—through what is
As such, Bartholomae’s scholarship delves into what he calls writing “problems” or the antipathy certain students feel toward academic writing. Arguing against the cognitivists, who claimed that writing difficulties are reflective of fundamentally cognitive problems, Bartholomae asserted that students encounter trouble with writing because of “the way in which subjects are located in a field of discourse.” Therefore, writing problems are also social and political problems, according to Bartholomae. In this way, Bartholomae would likely agree that writing block itself is not due—or not solely due—to intrapsychic conflicts, cognitive errors, or neurological problems. He defined “failed writing” as what happens when the student is “not so much trapped in a private language as he is shut out from one of the privileged languages of public life, a language he is aware of but cannot control” (p. 9). The result is that the student must make “violent accommodations” to locate himself in a discourse that is not “naturally” his (p. 12) and “write [his] way into the university” (p. 12). In other words, the student has to set aside his “native” and “naïve” discourse in order to take up the “specialized language” of what is assuredly “a more powerful and more privileged community” (p. 12). Indeed, Bartholomae picked up where Lu (1991) argued Shaughnessy left off to show that writing is a deeply politicized activity.

Patricia Bizzell (1982, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1999) is the final scholar in critical composition studies whose prolific work on these “academic discourse communities” can be directly applied to the issue of academic writing block. Bizzell (1999) credited the aforementioned legendary scholar Mina Shaughnessy as helping essentially the effacement of subjectivity…. Significant problems arise with student writing precisely when the writers have not defined and located themselves as effective self-authorized knowers for their evaluative audiences” (p. 550-553).
composition studies as a field recognize that “basic writers” are not “remedial” (i.e., handicapped, deficient, etc.) so much as they are simply unfamiliar with “the ways of winning arguments in academia” (Shaughnessy 1977b, p. 319). In other words, basic writers are simply those whose social circumstances have prevented them from being initiated into the academic discourse community, which Bizzell (1986:296) defined as a community (the academy) that coheres because of its “shared language-using practices.” Specifically, Bizzell spent much of her career articulating her concerns about working class students, whom she saw as being at a steep disadvantage in the classroom in relation to their more privileged peers. After all, their “home worldviews” or the knowledge and discursive conventions that they bring to college from home are not only quite different from the academic worldview and its discursive conventions, but they are also seen as less powerful and privileged than that of the academy. Bizzell criticized composition teachers for what Shaughnessy (1976) had called “guarding the tower” of academia and opined that educators cannot admit basic writers into college only to bar their entrance into the academic discourse community. Bizzell (1992:7) attributed her sustained interest in the social justice aspects of the teaching of basic writing to Paulo Freire’s work, which played out the “connection between political oppression and academic disadvantage.”

Bizzell (1982a:194) sharply criticized traditional composition studies for having what she called an “individualistic bias” and for its “neglect of the student’s social circumstances.” For Bizzell (1982a:205), both writing and academic knowledge in general are “context bound.”

9 Later in her career, Bizzell (1999) capitulated to critics to acknowledge the academic discourse community is more complex and less singular than she had originally realized and that there are indeed “hybrid academic discourses” (plural).
One never simply learns to write. Rather one learns to write in certain social circumstances for certain readers, and the ability to do this is directly tied to the knowledge one possesses and shares with others in the writing situation (Bizzell 1989, p. 227).

In Bizzell’s (1982a) eyes, treating the writing process as if it is divorced from its social context is simply heaping social injustice on an already oppressed population of students. Writing, at base, is just as political an act for Bizzell as it was for Bartholomae.

In a review of the state of the field at the time, Bizzell (1982) characterized composition studies as mostly composed of what she called “inner directed theorists,” like Flowers and Hayes, who were interested in the development of language as an innate and universal process. These theorists viewed the role of writing teachers as being about teaching students fundamental, universal writing processes, and they therefore perceived students who struggled with writing as cognitively deficient or developmentally incapable of grasping these principles. Bizzell called instead for more “outer directed theorists,” who recognized that thinking and learning do not occur outside of a social context and who thus realize that the writing teacher’s job was to “demystify” the different discursive conventions of the academic discourse community for the unfamiliar student—and not to judge the student that stumbles as somehow personally defective.

Through discourse analysis we might offer [basic writers] an understanding of their school difficulties as the problems of a traveler to an unfamiliar country—yet a country in which it is possible to learn the language and the manners and even “go native” while still remembering the land from which one has come (Bizzell 1982, p. 100).

In essence, traveling to this unfamiliar country of academia and picking up its language requires that the basic writer become “bicultural” (Bizzell 1986). The problem is, Bizzell
(1986:299) noted, the academic worldview is “hegemonic” and “seeks to subsume other worldviews; “basic writers may feel they are being asked to abandon their less prestigious, less socially powerful worldview in favor of the academic” (p. 299).

However, Bizzell (1988:141) saw in this problem an opportunity: “change is possible.” In other words, working class students, given their distance from “academic dialect,” have the power to challenge academic discourse conventions and ultimately make the academy more polyvocal.

Taken together, the work of Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, and Bizzell goes a long way toward deepening our understanding of what students who could be considered “basic writers” are likely going through when they write. While these scholars only discussed students’ likelihood of experiencing what they call “academic difficulties,” e.g. low grades, etc. (Shaughnessy 1977b), “writing problems,” e.g. a rugged entry into the academic discourse community (Bartholomae 1985), or a “radical loss of self-confidence” (Bizzell 1986), we could extend their thinking to include academic writing block, wherein the student is so paralyzed with fear or anxiety that he or she cannot write at all. Indeed, their framework, coupled with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, which I will discuss below, does sensitize us to the many difficulties working class students might encounter in academic writing. However, such a perspective could lead one to believe that the only “basic writers” would encounter writing block or certainly that they would be much more likely to become blocked than their more privileged peers. In the section following the Bourdieu discussion, I will attend to the experiences of upper class students and, using Suniya Luthar and other scholars, I will articulate the kinds of issues that are peculiar to students of privilege.
CULTURAL CAPITAL

For many decades, scholars have argued over the reasons why students from different social classes tend to attain differing levels of education. In the 1960’s, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu contributed a concept that quickly changed the focus of this debate and has become integral to subsequent discussions of educational inequality. “Cultural capital” arose out of the theorist’s notion that “[e]conomic obstacles are not sufficient to explain” the disparities in educational attainment of children of varying socioeconomic statuses (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979:8). In his famous treatise, “Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu ([1986] 2010) recounted the impact this idea had upon his own thinking:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me…as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between classes and class fractions. (P. 82)

Cultural capital is one of three forms of capital, distinct from both economic capital (that which can be “directly convertible into money”) and social capital (those social connections or networks that can be indirectly “convertible into economic capital”), each of which make “the games of society…something other than the games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle” (Bourdieu [1986] 2010, p. 81-82). In other words, Bourdieu theorized that capital—due to its tendency to produce profits, to reproduce itself, and to become institutionalized as an objective entity—is the force in
society that makes life less like a game of Roulette and more like a game in which not all things are “equally possible” for individual members of society (p. 81).

For Bourdieu, cultural capital encompasses those intangible attributes or “cultural signals” (such as certain kinds of knowledge, values, traits, habits, tacit skills, preferences, or familiarities) that can be parlayed into economic value and that are transmitted to children through their parents with or without conscious intention. Children raised in upper class families will, according to Bourdieu, automatically attain more cultural capital than their less socioeconomically advantaged counterparts. Through conscientious effort, a lower class individual may increase their stores of cultural capital through such avenues as higher education, but she will find it never comes as “naturally” to her as it does to those from more privileged backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). At base, cultural capital, because it is transmitted hereditarily and becomes institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications and credentials, makes some people (namely upper class and upper middle class individuals) fare better in school. The system of education caters to the privileged classes and rewards their cultural capital and, as such, disadvantages those without it. Schools, in this way, are not neutral institutions but are mechanisms for the reproduction of the social structure.

Bourdieu ([1986] 2010) outlined three forms of cultural capital, each of which plays an integral role in the process of social reproduction. The embodied state of cultural capital is “in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” or what he elsewhere called the “habitus:” the “embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history, [and] the active presence of the whole past of which it is the
product” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 56). The objectified state of cultural capital refers to material goods such as paintings, writings, instruments, which are transmissible into economic capital so long as one presupposes the individual inheritor of objectified cultural capital also has the know-how or the embodied cultural capital to be able to effectively put such items to good use. The third type, the institutionalized state of cultural capital, often takes the form of academic qualifications or credentials, which possess a “performative magic” in that as soon as they are conferred upon an individual they impose recognition on him or her (Bourdieu [1986] 2010). In this dissertation, I am primarily interested in embodied form of cultural capital and to what extent it leads to institutionalized cultural capital, i.e., a bachelor’s degree. Additionally, Bourdieu (1974) emphasized the ways in which cultural capital works through a process of exclusion, and he delineated several forms of exclusion. Here I am chiefly concerned with Bourdieu’s notion of “self-elimination,” in which people modify their aspirations according to their perceived chances of success and exclude themselves from cultural settings in which they do not feel naturally at ease.

After Bourdieu, countless scholars have taken up the notion of cultural capital as at least a partial explanation for the differential educational attainment of upper and lower class students (e.g., DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; DeGraaf 1986; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, and Shaun 1990; Katsillis and Rubinson 1990; Lareau 2003; Carter 2003). Paul DiMaggio (1982:199), for instance, argued that cultural capital has a “highly significant” impact on students’ high school grades, even going so far as to say that in nontechnical subjects cultural capital’s contribution to explaining the variance in high school grades approached that of scholastic ability itself. He summed up the way in
which a student’s cultural capital (or lack thereof) affects their grades vis-à-vis teacher-student interactions:

Teachers, it is argued, communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital (p. 190).

However, as Lamont and Lareau (1988) argued, the clarity and distinctness of the concept of cultural capital has been “murky” at best, given that Bourdieu himself defined the concept multiple ways over the course of his work, and they cited methodological issues in much of the research on cultural capital due to the inherent difficulty of operationalizing such a fuzzy concept. As such, the authors offered their own definition, giving heightened attention to Bourdieu’s often overlooked emphasis on the relationship of cultural capital to exclusion. To Lamont and Lareau (1988:156), cultural capital is institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion, the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources, and the latter, to exclusion from high status groups.

Nonetheless, despite these attempts at clarification, later scholars continued to believe that there are too many conceptually distinct variables going on under the cultural capital “umbrella” for the great promise of the theory to be truly fulfilled (Kingston 2001).

Other researchers have brought forward many important critiques of the concept of cultural capital, two of which are worthy of particular mention. First, Lareau and Weininger (2003) reviewed the research on cultural capital and argued that much of the work has relied on what they call the “dominant interpretation” of Bourdieu’s concept, which they found flawed for two reasons. One is that scholars following the “dominant
interpretation” associate cultural capital with “knowledge of or facility with ‘highbrow’ aesthetic culture,” and the second reason is that these scholars assume cultural capital is largely analytically and causally distinct from “ability,” “skills,” or “achievement” (p. 577). Lareau and Weininger looked at Bourdieu in depth and found neither to be the case, but stated that because early work (DiMaggio 1982) took on this definition and “codified” it, other scholars simply followed suit. They did not want to downplay the research done based on this interpretation, nor did they wish to “advocat[e] fidelity to Bourdieu as an end-in-itself,” they simply wanted to advance a different interpretation (p. 577). Namely, they emphasized “Bourdieu’s reference to the capacity of a social class to ‘impose’ advantageous standards of evaluation on the educational institution” (p. 567).

In essence, Lareau and Weininger contributed the important point that scholars need to focus on the ways in which the dominant class exercises “symbolic violence” on the educational system by demanding individuals’ allegiance to the meanings and standards on which it insists, all the while erasing the power relations which lend it the ability to call its own meanings and standards legitimate and normative. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) put it:

> Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to the power relations. (P. 4)

In other words, researchers on cultural capital should neither passively and uncritically accept normative institutional standards as legitimate, nor should they merely investigate ways to get students and parents to better comply with these standards. They should,
rather, interrogate the mechanism by which educators come to assume certain standards as right.

Prudence Carter (2003, 2006) is a second scholar whose work underscores a key critique of traditional notions of cultural capital. Carter (2003) noted that researchers have tended to think of cultural capital as a rather one-dimensional, acontextual entity. Instead, she argued not only is cultural capital multi-dimensional and context-specific, but also that there are “dominant” and “non-dominant” forms of cultural capital, each of which contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities. “Dominant” forms of cultural capital are the “powerful, high status cultural attributes, codes, and signals,” such as a penchant for high art or classical music or a particular way of speaking, that enable people to “walk the walk and talk the talk,” and non-dominant cultural capital “embodies a set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understandings, accorded to a lower status group, that include preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles” (p. 138). Most lower status (and in Carter’s study, African American) youths negotiate both kinds of cultural capital – the first for use primarily in the school setting and the second to gain “authentic” cultural status amongst their other lower status peers. Carter argued that it is not merely dominant forms of cultural capital that are integral to the mechanism by which social reproduction occurs, as Bourdieu emphasized, but non-dominant forms are also key to this process:

Poor Black students’ non dominant forms of cultural capital yield social benefits and rewards within their communities, but within the school walls, students find that officials devalue precisely these cultural attributes. (P. 149)
Put simply, due to teachers’ prejudices against certain linguistic and interactional styles, lower status youths gain non-dominant cultural capital often at the expense of their academic success and thus their social mobility.

All in all, the relevance of the concept of cultural capital to a study on undergraduates’ difficulties with academic writing should be clear: returning to the concept of “basic writer” as outlined above, we can imagine that many “basic writers” (low income and working class students) arrive on elite college campuses with more non-dominant forms of cultural capital than the dominant forms that actually confer advantage in the classroom. The differential benefits yielded by these disparate kinds of cultural capital may contribute to the likelihood that many such students might have trouble granting themselves the “authority”—as Bartholomae (1985) put it—to speak in the discursive codes expected of them by the academy. Upper middle class students, on the other hand, presumably have a more “natural” comfort with and affinity for dominant forms of cultural capital given their socialization in class-privileged families (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Next, I will consider how even upper middle class students may have their own cross to bear.

STATUS ANXIETY

Unlike their working class counterparts, who may not have the economic capital or the “right” forms of cultural capital to make higher education a realistic goal, upper middle class adolescents are often expected to go to college as a necessary rite of passage en route to a privileged adulthood (van Gennep 1960; Karp, Holmstrom, and Gray 2004).
As Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray (2011) found in their study of upper middle class parents with college-bound children:

Upper middle class parents know that a college education can, and probably will, position their children to take their place among the privileged—broadly defined—of their generation…. [In fact] it is so taken for granted [that their children will attend college] that it hardly constitutes a conscious decision. (P. 273-274)

However, many scholars have argued that there can be negative consequences to the upper middle class drive to maintain one’s privileged status (Levine 2006, Deresiewicz 2008, and Lapour and Heppner 2009). Citing multiple “adjustment disturbances” among upper middle class students, one scholar, Psychology and Education professor Suniya S. Luthar, has even argued across several papers that children and adolescents on the high end of the socioeconomic spectrum are far from being “low risk” as is currently assumed, but are in fact the new “at risk” kids. She reasoned that “the near total neglect of affluent youngsters” reflects two assumptions: first that these individuals are not substantially different from the “amply studied” middle class majority and second that privileged lives must be “utterly benign” (Luthar 2003, p. 1581). Clinical psychologist Madeline Levine (2006) went so far as to say that there is, paradoxically, a “price of privilege” in her book of the same title.

Numerous scholars have cited excessive “achievement pressure” among the privileged class and have been warning upper middle class parents of the dangers of such pressures for over thirty years (Miller 1981; Pittman 1985; Elkind 2001; Luthar and Becker 2002; Luthar 2003; Demerath 2009; Lapour and Heppner 2009). Many have noted the “overscheduled” and “hurried” nature of upper middle class children’s day-to-day lives (Elkind 2001, Lareau 2003, Luthar and Latendresse 2005), which of course
includes what one scholar calls the “academic arms race” or the overzealous competition between upper middle class children to win acceptances to ever more selective colleges (Demerath 2009). Even after students have gained entry into college, they are often then confronted with the “resume-building culture of contemporary college life” (Stuber 2006, p. 307). Indeed, with startling frequency, many upper middle class students experience such pressure as a demand to be “perfect” (Luthar and Becker 2002; Luthar 2003; Levine 2006) and to prove themselves “the best” (Demerath 2009). For these students, successes are not extraordinary feats, rather they are so commonplace as to be expected, and as such, any failures become “highly visible” and seemingly “inexplicable;” in fact “to be average is tantamount to having failed” given the “unrelenting pressures to excel” (Luthar 2003, p. 1583). It is no surprise these expectations often lead to what Luthar and Becker (2002) call “maladaptive perfectionism.”

As they move through life, the driving sentiment increasingly becomes, “I am what I achieve,” with the chilling corollary of course, “Without my achievements, I will become a failure” (Luthar 2003, p. 1588).

Some time ago, psychotherapist Alice Miller (1981) warned in *The Drama of the Gifted Child* that if parents do not accept the whole child at an early age, then that child will become heavily invested in achievements as a highly precarious source of self-worth. As scholars such as Luthar have shown, the privileged child’s drive for achievement has only gotten worse over time.

All of these pressures have taken their toll on children of privilege. Levine (2006) claimed there is a “mental health epidemic” among upper middle class and upper class children due to a “toxic brew of [achievement] pressure and [parental] isolation,” a
claim which is amply evidenced in the research of Luthar and colleagues. Luthar and D’Avanzo (1999) did a study comparing the mental health of high SES suburban white children to that of low SES minority urban children and found dramatically higher levels of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (self-medicating) among the privileged set. Other researchers have even demonstrated an inverse link between SES and emotional well-being (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000; Myers 2000, 2001). Luthar (2003:1586) has explained why greater wealth has led to greater unhappiness by noting that “increases in experienced control are accompanied by increases in expectations about control.” In other words, life is supposed to be perfect, but it is not.

The problem is, these pressures lead to a “culture of competitive individualism” and “personal advancement” (Demerath 2009) that—because they are situated in an American “ethos” of individual achievement, meritocracy, and egalitarianism (Luthar 2003)—only encourage individuals to see their inevitable failures as due to personal rather than external causes (Schwartz 2000). In essence, upper middle class individuals tend to blame themselves when they stray from the perfect ideal. It is for this reason that many scholars argue there are significant costs to the culture of competitive individualism and personal advancement among the upper middle class: stress, fatigue, undue pressure, loneliness, “school phobia”, debilitating anxiety and depression, substance abuse, and “generation stress” (Luthar and D’Avanzo 1999, Elkind 2001, Luthar and Becker 2002, Elkind (2001:xvi) argued that the new metaphor for the child in post-industrial America is that of the “superkid” (or a child with “spectacular powers and precocious competence”) as opposed to the old metaphor of the child as a growing plant in need of parental nurturance. He stated that the new “middle class norm” of divorce, single parenting, two parent working families, and blended families trigger parents to rationalize their relative neglect of their children as forgivable given their child’s precociousness, but this only “hurries” the child to “grow up fast” and “unduly stress[es] young people” (p. xix).
Many see the developmental task of the college-bound adolescent as “attached individuation” or individuation from and yet also connection with parents (Karp, Holmstrom, and Gray 2004) and “the development of autonomy and a healthy sense of self” (Levine 2006, p. 14). However, under fire from intense external pressures, many such youth become “troubled” with “nontrivial threats to their psychological well-being” (Luthar and Latendresse 2005). Levine (2006:8-9) went so far as to argue that privileged youth are so “indulged and coddled on the outside,” that they are “deprived of the opportunity to develop an inside” and “they lack the secure, reliable, welcoming internal structure that we call “the self”.” Of course, any sociologist of the symbolic interactionist persuasion would counterargue that this is hardly possible, given that the self always develops in concert with one’s socialization in society, and thus a person cannot avoid developing a self except in extreme cases of social isolation (Mead 1934). Nonetheless, many scholars view the effects of achievement pressures and perfectionistic strivings on the self as “maladaptive” (Luthar and Becker 2002).

Many years ago, researchers noted that the “declining fortunes” of the middle class (Newman 1993) coincided with a new “fear of falling” (Ehrenreich 1989) consuming otherwise relatively privileged people. Similarly, just prior to the recent economic downturn, some scholars began to notice that the new “bottom line economy” and its accompanying “lean and mean” economic practices (Callahan 2004) meant that white collar individuals, even those who “did everything right” (earned higher degrees, avoided teenage pregnancy, etc.), could suddenly become “losers in a classic game of bait and switch” (Ehrenreich 2005, p. 2). The subsequent un- or under-employment and even eventual poverty of those previously in the white collar set represent “a rude finger in the
face of the American dream” (Ehrenreich 2005, p. 2). When placed into the current context of even greater economic uncertainty, it is not surprising that upper middle class students might develop some anxiety about their future class status. Upper middle class students expect and want to earn more than their parents (Twenge 2006), but many know that they are much more likely to earn less than their parents and be unable to maintain the same privileged class position (Demerath 2009). Understandably, these new realities can lead to a profound status anxiety—a “great uneasiness” (Demerath 2009), a “deep anxiety and insecurity” (Callahan 2004), or a “congenital uncertainty” (de Botton 2005)—among the privileged class. De Botton (2005:vii-viii) defined status anxiety as a pernicious “worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung or are about to fall to a lower one” and “as a result may be stripped of our dignity and respect.”

It is the feeling that we might, under different circumstances be something other than what we are – a feeling inspired by exposure to the superior achievements of those whom we take to be our equals—that generates anxiety and resentment (de Botton 2005, p. 26).

After all, de Botton has argued, status has moral connotations today. In light of persistently held beliefs in meritocracy in America, people tend to think that any failure to maintain one’s status or achieve a higher status represents a moral flaw or a simple lack of effort on the part of the individual in question.

In this environment of pernicious anxiety, people tend to draw what Lamont (1992) calls “symbolic boundaries” between themselves and others.

Through their boundary work, individuals constitute the self, claim membership in a group, and draw a line between the pure (themselves) and the polluting (others). (Stuber 2006, p. 288)
In particular, while working class individuals tend to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and those above them on the socioeconomic ladder and derive a sense of superiority to upper middle class people by creating *moral* standards that “function as an alternative to economic definitions of success” and thus defining themselves as morally pure by comparison, and making meaning out of lives “in a land where the American dream is ever more out of reach” (Lamont 2000:3), upper middle class individuals tend to “draw up” and compare themselves not to lower class individuals but to people even more privileged than themselves (Stuber 2006). Of course, this not only neglects the experiences of those below them on the socioeconomic spectrum while “effectively minimiz[ing] their own, albeit relative, privilege” (Stuber 2006, p. 311). It also creates additional insecurity and pressure for the upper middle class individuals doing the unfavorable comparisons, thus further playing into their anxious striving for personal advancement. The overall effect of all of the upper middle class psychological tendencies described above is best stated by Demerath (2009:175): “The overall culture of personal advancement…contributes to achievement ‘gaps’ between students from different [social class] backgrounds” and points to the “profoundly balkanized nature of American public education.” In other words, the achievement pressure, so endemic to the upper middle class, may work to enhance privileged students’ drive for and attainment of academic success. Regardless, such pressures exact painful costs from privileged students’ psychological well-being. When one applies all of these scholarly revelations to the issue of academic writing blocks, one can begin to see ways in which upper middle class students, as advantaged as they are vis-à-vis their abundance of dominant forms of cultural capital, may in some cases be paying dearly for their privilege.
While this review has thoroughly examined concepts that pertain to individuals of differing social classes, it has yet to ponder concerns that have to do with race. It is to these concerns that I will next turn.

STEREOTYPE THREAT

Prior to delving into the data chapters that follow this review, it will be helpful to understand one final concept. “Stereotype threat” is a notion first developed by Steele and Aronson (1995) to help explain the academic achievement gap between white students and students of color (and African Americans in particular) and that was later expanded to explain situations of poor academic performance among other groups, including low-income students (Claire and Croizet 1998) and even white males (Aronson, Lustina, Good, and Keough 1999). This concept will become relevant in the final data chapter when I analyze the case studies of a wealthy multiracial woman and a poor white woman, both of whom exhibit signs of stereotype threat in ways that undermine their ability to complete academic writing assignments.

Stereotype threat occurs when one is a member of a group that one is aware others hold negative stereotypes about and that person is in a situation that he or she realizes has the potential to expose him or her as fulfilling that particular stereotype. For example, Steele and Aronson (1995) argue that African Americans are globally conscious of the stereotype that members of their race are academically and intellectually inferior to whites. In their study, they administered an identical test to both African Americans and white students. In one case, the test was described as a “measure of verbal abilities and
limitations,” while in the other case, the same test was described as a “study of psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems” (p. 799). The first mixed group of test takers, which included the African Americans who had been made aware that the test they were about to take purportedly measured the very quality they were stereotyped as being deficient in, showed a significant differential between the test results of the African Americans and the white students, with the African American students scoring lower than their white counterparts. However, in the second mixed group, which included the African Americans who had not been made to believe the test was going to assess their intellectual ability, the differences between the scores of the African American and the white students were erased. In another version of the study, one group simply had to record their race at the beginning of the test, while a control group did not. Unsurprisingly, the African Americans in the control group fared significantly better than those in the test group.

Steele and Aronson (1995:797) argued that these African Americans scored significantly lower due to stereotype threat, or the social psychological predicament perceived as a “self-evaluative threat” that is “self-threatening enough to have disruptive effects of its own.” In other words, African Americans know there is a negative stereotype about their intellectual or scholastic ability being seen as inferior to that of white students, and this knowledge creates a threat to self, especially as it persists over time. First, just taking a test that is purported to test intellectual ability can induce this threat. Second, over time, there is what Steele (1997) called a “cumulative toll” that may “pressur[e] these students to protectively dis-identify with achievement in school and related intellectual domains” (Steele and Aronson 1995, p. 797). The authors made an
important distinction: it is not necessary that the student in question buy into the negative stereotype about his group or believe that he or she lives up to that stereotype in general, only that he submits to frustration and pressure in the face of this self-evaluative threat. This threat in turn disrupts students’ scholastic performance by means of several different mechanisms, including “distraction, narrowed attention, anxiety, self-consciousness, withdrawal of effort, over-effort, and so on” (p. 809). Because the student knows he is at risk of confirming the stereotype with which he is threatened, his pressured attempts to counter it end up triggering his fulfillment of the very stereotype he seeks to resist. This is most acutely the case for those who feel strongly identified with the domain in question (in this case, the domain being academics). Steele (1997) succinctly summarized the concept of stereotype threat as follows:

It is a situational threat – a threat in the air—that in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists… Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening. (P. 614)

Later scholars built on Steele and Aronson’s (1995) work and tested whether or not the concept could be exported from a discussion of race and applied instead to social class. Claire and Croizet (1998) conducted a study of white students, half from a high socioeconomic status and the other half from a low SES. The low SES students who were told the test they were about to take was diagnostic of their verbal intellectual ability performed significantly worse than those low SES students who were not told this at beginning of the test. The latter group performed just as well on the test as the high SES group. The authors chose all white subjects so as to control for racial/ethnic
stereotype threat and isolate social class-related stereotype threat. They concluded that their study demonstrated the “situational context of performance.” In other words, stereotype threat is a situational and not a global phenomenon.

Aronson, Lustina, Good, and Keough (1999) followed up on this notion that stereotype threat is situational when they designed a study to induce stereotype threat in a group one would not normally associate with persecution of any sort: white males. In particular, the authors were testing to see if a long-standing history of stigmatization was a necessary condition of stereotype threat. In one group of white males, they invoked a comparison between whites and a minority group (Asians) who are stereotyped to excel in math; while in the control group, they said nothing. Indeed, the control group scored higher than the test group. The authors concluded that stereotype threat was not dependent on a history of stigmatization or marginalization, rather that it is context-specific and situational. This is a critical advancement in the concept in that it suggests that stereotype threat is not due to any kind of entrenched “internalized inferiority” on the part of the threatened subject. This is important because it is an optimistic finding given that it makes stereotype threat less intractable and more amenable to preventive measures. Aronson et al (1999) argued:

This situationist view of minority underperformance is an encouraging one because it locates the problem not exclusively within the person, but within the social circumstances confronting the person. Stereotype threat research underscores how changing those circumstances, even subtly, can have dramatically positive effects on performance. (P. 44)

Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002:113), noting that stereotype threat can “impair both academic performance and psychological engagement with academics,” confirmed this
optimistic notion that it can be effectively reduced with subtle tweaks to the evaluative situation. Namely, when African American students were instructed on the malleability and expandability of intelligence, they were less vulnerable to stereotype threat in subsequent test-taking situations and more likely to remain engaged with their academic lives more generally. They (and to a lesser degree, the white students who were told same thing) reported a greater enjoyment of the academic process, stronger academic engagement, and a higher grade point averages than the control groups, even after only three sessions. As the reader will see in the case studies laid out in Chapter Six, stereotype threat can contribute to a mindset that may bring about the very negative outcomes one seeks to avoid.

LESSONS FROM THE LITERATURE

Academic writing block has only rarely been the subject of scholarly study, and when it has, the majority of the work has been psychological in nature. An in-depth examination of the first three categories of the literature—the psychoanalytically-oriented, the cognitivists, and the affectively-oriented—has taught us a great deal about the psychological underpinnings of academic writing block. To fully understand this problem, it is necessary to have a solid foundation in its psychology before moving on to interrogate the structural contributors to academic writing block. Again, it bears repeating that my intention is not to replace a psychological framework with a sociological one; rather, I wish to supplement the more traditional understandings of the phenomenon with a more structural perspective. An overview of the fourth category of the literature on writing blocks—that of the contextualists—has laid the groundwork for
the more structural perspective that is taken up by this dissertation. Finally, an explication of three critical concepts—cultural capital, status anxiety, and stereotype threat—will enable the reader to more readily comprehend what is really going on in the data, as presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Before moving on to those chapters, however, we will first attend to the methodological particulars and the epistemological concerns of this study.
CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate when exploring a seldom-studied topic (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Lapour and Heppner 2009). Given that there have been very few empirical sociological studies of academic writing block to date, I chose a qualitative design for my project and set out to see what themes would emerge from the data. Of course, I entered into the field with certain “sensitizing concepts” or preconceived ideas about the phenomenon in question (Blumer 1969), but as this is unavoidable—one never begins research as a tabula rasa— it is the researcher’s responsibility to carefully examine her own ideological baggage and only draw from it if the data themselves call for it. For instance, during my many years of experience in professional academic support centers helping students struggling with writing, I had noticed that there seemed to be more going on than simple “psychological issues” when students suffered from “writer’s block.” In particular, I saw time and again ways in which social class and race seemed to matter in individual students’ lived experiences
with block. As it was, I entered into this project primed to see issues of class and race as salient. What I did not yet know was how exactly they would matter, how they might influence what is going on in a student’s mind when she cannot write, and how the individual makes meaning around class and race in ways that may contribute to her severe difficulties with academic writing. How, in essence, does social structure show up in the heads of individual students?

At base, my research question is a “how” question (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2010), and “how” questions, or questions that seek “to understand and explain social patterns and processes,” are best answered through qualitative research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2010, p. 39). Furthermore, my central interest in exploring the phenomenology of individuals’ experiences lent itself to the method of qualitative interviewing in particular in order to get at the meanings individuals make of what happens to them and what they do in response. After all:

Qualitative interviewing provides an open ended in depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight (Charmaz and Belgrave 2003, p. 312).

In depth semi-structured interviews enable the participant the luxury of sharing her narrative in response to open ended questions, and they position the researcher and the respondent together as co-constructors of meaning in the context of the interview (Charmaz 1995).

CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

This project followed a grounded theory approach in that I employed an iterative process of data collection, data analysis, and further data collection, and I allowed the
data to be my guide with regard to what I decided to do next at each step of the process (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Additionally, I utilized the constant comparative analytic method by continually comparing one respondent’s experiences with another’s, one group’s patterns with the others’, and working those differences into my evolving theoretical framework. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explicate the constant comparative method:

The constant comparing of many groups draws the sociologist's attention to their many similarities and differences. Considering these leads him to generate abstract categories and their properties, which, since they emerge from the data, will clearly be important to a theory explaining the kind of behavior under observation. (P. 36)

Indeed, the theories that have emerged from my analysis are deeply “grounded in the data” (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

That being said, there are important ways in which my method has diverged from traditional grounded theory. As Thomas and James (2006:29) noted, grounded theory is appealing because it “appears to proffer a map and a compass to navigate the open terrain of qualitative inquiry.” However, while the authors conceded grounded theory “made a major contribution to making qualitative inquiry legitimate,” they called it a “product of its time” (p. 27) and challenged its epistemological footing as a “discovery” of truth:

Discovery implies a clean lineage from thing to thought and an uncomplicated correspondence between the two. The thought is merely a doppelganger for the thing… [Whereas in reality, theory] is an invention dressed up as discovery.

Instead, Thomas and James advocated that “narrative [be] told simply and clearly with no pretense that by some methodological alchemy it will be transformed into something
more secure in its epistemic status” (p. 28-29). For these reasons, my work more closely follows that of sociologist Kathy Charmaz.

Charmaz (1995, 2000; Charmaz and Belgrave 2003) adapted Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) original grounded theory into what she has called a “constructivist grounded theory,” which views theory as something that is not “discovered” in the data but “constructed” by the researcher and her respondents. The constructivist paradigm’s recognition of multiple realities as opposed to one single, definable truth and its appreciation that interviewer and interviewee inevitably co-create meaning in the context of the interview return this methodology to its symbolic interactionist roots. Charmaz’ constructivist grounded theory “brings to the fore the notion of researcher as author” (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006, p. 31).

A constructivist grounded theory recognizes that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed. Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the 'discovered' reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts. Researcher and subjects frame that interaction and confer meaning upon it. The viewer then is part of what is viewed rather than separate from it (Charmaz 2000, pp.523-524).

Because reality necessarily arises from its particular context, rather than from an abstract vacuum, the constructivist emphasizes locating her data in the context of the specific interview, the individual’s life, the social setting, and the historical moment (Charmaz and Belgrave 2003, pp. 314-315).

My methodology also combined constructivist grounded theory with symbolic interactionism, narrative analysis, and critical race theory. My approach shares symbolic interaction’s central interest in the meaning individuals make of their own situations and
the subsequent realities they create from their meaning-making activities. Following recent symbolic interactionists like Sauder (2005:280), I believe that contrary to traditional belief, “interactionism can contribute to our understanding of social processes beyond the individual level of analysis” and so can indeed inform our interpretation of more macro level social patterns, such as social stratification. Similarly, I maintain that intensive attention to individuals’ narratives, such as that practiced by narrative analysis researchers, can tell us a great deal not just about the individual but about the social as well.

[For many sociologists] language is viewed as a transparent medium, unambiguously reflecting stable, singular meanings… [Instead, for narrative analysis researchers,] language is understood as deeply constitutive of reality, not simply a technical device for establishing meaning. Informants’ stories do not mirror a world “out there.” [Narratives] are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive…. To the sociologically oriented investigator, studying narratives is additionally useful for what they reveal about social life—culture “speaks itself” through an individual’s story (Riessman 1993, p. 5).

Individuals’ stories are important not just for the ways in which culture and social structure shine through, but also in their own right, as a way to give voice to those who may not otherwise have the platform to speak. In this way, I share with critical race theorists the themes of “voice,” “naming one’s own reality,” and “stories” (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). After all, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995:56) argued, “the form and substance of scholarship are closely connected.” I have given primacy to the voices of my respondents because voice—and the shame of its blockage—are at the very heart of my thesis. All four methodological trends—constructivist grounded theory, symbolic interactionism, narrative analysis, and critical race theory—hold that reality is a
social construction of interacting social actors and that, therefore, the reflexivity of the researcher is a crucial component of sound methods.

THE REFLEXIVE RESEARCHER

As mentioned in the Introduction, I entered into this project as a white woman from a relatively privileged upbringing with both a history of my own “writer’s block” and also many years of professional experience with others’ blocks. For the past nine years, I have worked with students on their writing in one capacity or another. As such, I came to view social class and race as important but often unrecognized contributors to students’ paralyzing difficulties with academic writing.

In addition to my experience with the subject matter, I should also note my training in research methods. During my doctoral coursework, I took a required class in research methods as well as a supplementary class in narrative methods with pre-eminent narrative analysis researcher and innovator Catherine Riessman. As an undergraduate at Amherst College, I took a rigorous qualitative research methods course and conducted several qualitative research projects, including a year-long senior honors thesis. My methodological training has been further solidified by my employment activities. Namely, I served as a qualitative interview for over a year at Dana Farber Cancer Institute, where I conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with young women identified as having a genetic predisposition for breast or ovarian cancer. I also served for several months as a research assistant for Professor Sarah Babb’s project on sociology professors’ experience with their universities’ institutional review boards. In this
capacity, I conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with faculty members about their IRB experiences. On the whole, I have had the methodological training and experience to enter into a qualitative dissertation on solid footing—in particular one in which I would conduct semi-structured open-ended qualitative interviews.

PARTICIPANTS, SAMPLING, AND DATA COLLECTION

Initial Sampling and Recruitment

All participants from this study were students of Boston College, a relatively large, private, Jesuit research university in the Northeast. The school’s web site reports that its acceptance rate is 29% and that 82% of its freshmen were in the top 10% of their high school class, making BC a relatively selective and elite university. Indeed, it is ranked the 26th and 31st in a list of best universities by Forbes Magazine and US News and World Report, respectively. Of its 14,600 undergraduates, 52% are female, 29% are AHANA (persons of African-American, Hispanic, Asian or Native American descent), and 3% are international students.11 According to the most recent data available, Boston College’s overall graduation rate was 91% for the class entering in 2005.12

I found respondents through several means. I emailed multiple deans requesting that they share the information about my study with their students and/or advising staff, and many of them followed through. I then emailed the First Year Writing Seminar program administrator and requested that she forward my email to all the instructors of the FYWS courses, which she did. I also sent information about my study to the AHANA Center, and the director shared the email with her staff, so they could in turn tell

11 See http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/about/bc-facts.html for more information.
12 See http://www.bc.edu/offices/irpa/ir/heoa/graduation_rates.html for detailed graduation rates by gender, race, and financial aid status.
interested students about the opportunity. Additionally, I emailed several faculty members of writing-intensive courses as well as the director of the Connors Family Learning Center, who forwarded the information on to all of her staff (including her student writing tutors) so that they could tell their students about the study. Finally, I put many flyers up around campus over the course of several weeks, focusing on the tutoring center, the library, and other major thoroughfares of student traffic.

Each person who responded to these solicitations or flyers contacted me via email, and I then gave them a general survey composed of eleven questions (see Appendix A), which each respondent took and submitted to me electronically. In this survey, individuals were asked a few questions about their class year, their major or intended major, their self-identifications vis-à-vis class, ethnicity, and race, and their parents’ highest level of education received. They were also asked on a scale of 1-10, how they would rate their difficulties with academic writing, as well as a couple of open-ended questions with regard to their feelings about and experiences with writing. In other words, I asked my respondents to self-identify the extent to which they had experienced severe difficulties with academic writing, and I did not require verification from parents or teachers. After all, it is the *subjective experience of suffering* in relation to writing that is primary to my own definition of writing block. I turned away only a couple of people whose problems were reported as being more about simple procrastination or a dislike of writing than about block per se.

*Consent Procedures and Incentives*
I gave all participants of the study the informed consent form, which had been approved by Boston College’s Institutional Review Board, and all were told that there was minimal risk to participation in the study. I gave each respondent my contact information and copies of the forms they had signed. Upon completion of the interview, each respondent was paid $10 for their time, with the exception of two students who refused to take the money after our second interview together. Should anyone have started but not completed a full interview, they knew they would still be paid $5. However, none of the participants failed to complete full interviews.

Participant Data

Of the thirty six participants with whom I completed forty four interviews, ten were male and twenty six female, reflecting not only the female majority on campus but also the previously mentioned likelihood that women experience and report academic writing block at greater rates than men (Cayton 1990, 1991; Latta 1995). I did not make gender a central issue of this study due to the fact that gender issues with regard to academic writing block had been adequately studied elsewhere (Bloom 1985; Cayton 1990; Clark and Wiedenhaupt 1992; Latta 1995; and Tucker 1995). Eighteen of the thirty six identified as white, ten as Asian or Asian American (including Chinese, Chinese American, Vietnamese American, Korean, and Korean American), five as black (including one South African and four African Americans), two as Latina, and one as Arabic. At least three students identified as biracial (Chinese American and white; Hispanic and white) or multiracial (African American, Native American, and white). Twenty two of the thirty six respondents identified as “upper middle class,” reflecting the majority upper middle class population on campus, while fourteen respondents identified
as “working class,” including three who at times called themselves “low income” or “poor.” Nine of the thirty six were first generation college students, and two were first generation on either their father or their mother’s side but not both. The respondents represented a relatively even mix of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Subjective Indices of Social Class and Race

Following researchers who call for a less “objectivist” variable-based approach in favor of a more of a “constructionist” or interpretive understanding of social stratification (Harris 2004; Sauder 2005; Lapour and Heppner 2009), my emphasis was on the participants’ own perception of their social class background and their racial or ethnic identification. In Stuber’s (2006:294) study of how undergraduate students talk about social class, she found that they discuss it in “remarkably complex and contradictory ways.” When asked directly if class matters, many students deny that it does while indirectly demonstrating all the ways in which they understand that it does in fact matter. Stuber hypothesized why this is the case:

Why do these students alternatively acknowledge and refute the significance of social class? One piece of this puzzle may be that the dominant American ideology is so deeply embedded in these students’ minds that rejecting the influence of social class is, for many of them, virtually automatic. A key part of this ideology is the emphasis on individual achievement, or the belief that, each member of society is in control of his or her fate. (P. 301)

Stuber concluded “social inequality [is] a process of meaning making,” which is why she believes it is “imperative that lay persons’ talk of social class be taken seriously” (p. 313). I would add racial and ethnic identifications to this equation. Harris (2001:458) argued that social inequalities, like all social problems, are “reflexively constituted by
those who think and talk about them.” It is therefore “important that some scholars try to understand the generic interpretive processes that make inequality a recognizable, experienced feature of the world” (Harris 2004, pp. 132-133, emphasis in original). After all, as Sauder (2005) noted, “the interactions that generate, symbolize, and maintain status position are also the building blocks of status systems.” In other words, it is critical that researchers take seriously subjects’ interpretive talk about class, race, and other systems of social status and inequality, for participants’ subjective understandings of their status necessarily mediate all of their other experiences.

Data Collection

I conducted forty-four semi-structured open-ended qualitative interviews, which lasted between fifty and ninety minutes. The interview protocol, which the reader can find in Appendix B, combined standardized and open-ended questions, along with rapport-building talk that varied from interview to interview. The first draft of the interview protocol was shared with my doctoral committee and used in the first interview. Most of the questions resonated and produced rich data, but I modified the order in which the questions appeared, resulting in a second and final draft, which was approved by the IRB and the committee. It was this final draft that was used throughout the rest of the interviews.

The interviews took place in various semi-private spaces on campus for the convenience of the participants. Each interview—with the exception of one, due to a technological malfunction—was digitally recorded and then transcribed. In the case of

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13 In each case, the participant was given the option of a private space, but no one requested it.
the unrecorded interview, I took copious hand-written notes throughout our conversation. Transcripts were kept confidential and assigned codes that were separated from the transcripts. I took field notes after each interview to provide additional data not captured on the digital audio recorder, such as emotional cadence, facial expressions, and hand gestures that were given during the course of our conversation. Finally, in a couple of cases, I contacted the interviewees after the interview with a follow-up question or two to fill in gaps in our conversation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Theoretical Sampling

One hallmark of both grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory is theoretical sampling, which is the practice of simultaneously collecting and analyzing data in order to decide which kinds of data to collect next, and memo-writing, which is in the service of the former. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to “develop the researcher’s theory, not to represent a population” (Charmaz and Belgrave 2003, p. 325). In particular, when I was in the process of conducting interviews, I took all comers who self-identified as having trouble with academic writing block. Over time, as different themes began to emerge between those who identified as upper middle class, and those who identified as lower income or working class, I returned in eight cases to participants who had yielded particularly salient aspects of my fledgling theories and requested to interview them a second time. Charmaz and Belgrave (2003:318) noted that the benefit of multiple interviews is that the “participant’s story gains depth, detail, and resonance.”
In each case, these second interviews enabled me the opportunity to follow up on gaps and unanswered questions from the first interview and gave my respondents the chance to give fuller, richer narratives than would otherwise be the case. Additionally, like most grounded theory researchers, I delayed completing anything more extensive than a basic literature review until after critical themes had arisen from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz and Belgrave 2003). Prior to my more extensive review of the literature, I wrote numerous theoretical memos to solidify my thoughts about the emergent themes, and I also met with my central advisor, David Karp, PhD, multiple times to engage in spoken versions of these theoretical memos, which evolved over time and took greater definition with each successive meeting.

Coding and Category Development

Another hallmark of constructivist grounded theory is coding the data first for initial “open” codes and a second time more selectively and abstractly with “focused” codes (Charmaz and Belgrave 2003). While open codes help researchers to “begin making analytic decisions about the data,” focused codes “represent recurrent themes” that enable the researcher to conceptualize larger amounts of the data (pp. 320-322). With regard to the open codes, I first did line by line coding of each transcript, in which I encapsulated the meaning of bits of text into two to four word summaries, such as “striving to be perfect” or “focused on grades” or “ashamed of block,” and the like. I then went through all of the transcripts together and identified over a dozen persistent and major themes (such as “perfectionism” or “focus on grades” or “inferiority complex”—some of these categories were derived from what Charmaz (1995) called “in vivo” codes, or codes that came directly from the words of respondents.) I devoted a unique color to
each theme or category, and I placed the corresponding color next to each of the open
codes previously notated. In many cases, this resulted in the same lines of text being
coded for two or three different themes simultaneously. Once I had concluded my color-
coding system for deriving the conceptual categories, I drew on David Karp’s method of
creating “data books” for each category of data (personal communication 2012). In other
words, I collated into one data book all of the excerpts of text from each transcript that
had to do with a given color-coded theme. Upon compilation of the data books, I then
analyzed each one, one at a time, for any additional complimentary or contradictory
themes, which then made their way into new data books.

Following Charmaz and Belgrave (2003:32), I conceptualized interviews as an
“unfolding story” which is “conversational in style but not casual in meaning.” As such,
I took seriously the specific words, exact phrasing, audible pauses, and even verbal errors
and obvious omissions of my respondents. Perhaps more than most researchers, I believe
each vocal cue has meaning, which can often be made clear by the context of the rest of
the interview or by the milieu of the social setting or even the historical moment. It is for
this reason that I have attended to the small and seemingly picayune details of each
person’s narrative, and it is why I gave, in Chapter Six, my sustained attention to the full
narratives of two individuals. Like Charmaz (1995:47) I peppered my own text
generously with the words of my respondents:

Unlike most grounded theorists, I prefer to present many detailed
interview quotes and examples in the body of my work. I do so to
keep the human story in the forefront of the reader’s mind and to
make the conceptual analysis more accessible to a wider audience.
Mills et al (2006:32) noted that this practice “demonstrates the value the researcher places on the participant as a contributor” to the final research text. In this way, I viewed my respondents as partial authors of the final product.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCERNS

As with any study that attempts to locate and define the intersections of the psychological and the structural, there are epistemological concerns that should not be taken lightly. Namely, how does the researcher investigate the structural aspects of a phenomenon when participants themselves may experience it in non-structural, more psychological terms? In the Introduction, I cited an analogy in which most people are like pedestrians on the street, who are thinking at the street level (i.e., through an individualistic framework) and who are often wholly unaware of the larger social patterns in which they are participants. From a dozen stories up, an observer (i.e., a sociologist) can, however, clearly see the ways in which these individuals are a definitive part of macro patterns. In much the same way, I have at times taken the narratives of those who view their situation in fairly psychological terms and superimposed the group-based patterns I have derived from my data as a whole. It is as if their narrative is a picture, and I have laid a transparency with another image on top of their original picture. Both images are clear, but the first is given depth and resonance by the superimposition of the second. Several interviewees asked me if they could read my final dissertation, which of course I agreed to, and it will be interesting to see how they respond to my superimposition of social structure over their individual narratives. Of course, in many
cases, respondents were themselves cognizant of and eloquently articulate about the structural aspects of their own personal experiences. I often found their analysis of the situation mirrored the larger patterns that were emerging across the data from my “twelfth floor” perspective. In those cases, I highlighted their structural analyses in their own words in order to substantiate the relevance of the structural perspective I had superimposed elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is only fair that the reader keep the question alive in his or her own mind: how can we ascertain the presence and shape of social structure in those cases when it is not visible to the individuals themselves?
CHAPTER FOUR

Devalued Voices: Writing Block as Dominant Cultural Capital Disadvantage

Last Friday our TA goes, “The first five papers I haven’t been looking for this, but from now on, I need a thesis statement.” And to me, that’s like—I didn’t know people wrote without thesis statements! I was, like, speechless. *Everyone* should know how to write thesis statements!

(Amal, an upper middle class Indian-American student)

In the chapter that follows, I will argue that most low-income, working class, and even lower middle class students at Boston College are cognizant of the fact that they lack what Carter (2003) calls the “dominant” forms of cultural capital that elite institutions reward and that comes so easily to their upper middle class peers. This consciousness, for some, can translate into a sense that the way that one writes—one’s voice—is not necessarily going to “cut it” in the world of academia. These students often
look around and cannot help but become painfully aware that their more privileged peers already somehow “just know,” as one young working class man put it, what one needs to know in order to succeed academically. In most cases, they clearly articulate their own undersocialization, as I will call it, and are acutely aware of the failure of their high schools to sufficiently prepare them to excel academically. Indeed Amal’s comment in the epigraph, which echoes the observations of many other upper middle class students, relates his shock that some of his peers do not even know what a thesis statement is, indicating that others do notice when students lack the proper preparation for college academics. As such, it is not surprising that many ill-prepared students have developed an inferiority complex of sorts, which results from their intuition that they do not already possess all that it takes to succeed in college. Moreover, such students often get the message that society does not value their voices as much as it values the voices of the already privileged. They know—and in many cases explicitly state—that school calls for a different voice than their own. Understandably, this knowledge can lead to a distrust in one’s own voice that can in turn trigger “writer’s block.”

This is not to say, however, that all non-upper middle class individuals will experience severe difficulties with academic writing, nor do I wish to imply that upper middle class students cannot suffer from this type of block. In fact, in the next chapter, I will discuss several upper middle class students in my sample who described similar feelings of inferiority, or what I will call “subjective disadvantage,” i.e., a sense of

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14 Here, one may recall Dennis Wrong’s (1961) notion that most modern sociologists tend in their theories to view people as “oversocialized” beings, leaving no room for the question of how it is that individuals come under the sway of social controls. In other words, if one is thoroughly socialized, there would be no dilemma; thus “oversocialization” theories deny the reality of most people.
inferiority relative to their even more privileged peers. Such students perceived
themselves to be at a disadvantage to many of their classmates and as such developed a
lack of confidence in their voice that often led to writing blocks.

In the first section of the chapter, I attend to the large group of non-upper middle
class students cognizant in varying degrees of their lack of dominant cultural capital. In
the second section of the chapter, I turn to a discussion of the burden of debt many such
students feel toward their parents, who have sacrificed a great deal in their lives—and in
some cases jettisoned their own dreams—in order to enable their sons and daughters the
opportunity to get a foothold in the relatively rarefied world that Boston College
represents. In the final section, I provide an analysis of these two sets of data and what
my findings suggest is really going on when some students encounter “writer’s block.”
For less privileged students, writing is a high stakes performance because their written
work can hold the promise (or risk the failure) of social mobility. These students tend to
feel this pressure keenly, especially considering their frequent sense of indebtedness to
their parents’ sacrifices on their behalf. Their writing difficulties, in this light, are a form
of choking in the face of this high stakes performance. In other words, they feel they are
at an extremely important juncture, which fills them with a sense of pressure or dread,
and they are unable to produce the necessary academic writing called for by the situation.

DOMINANT CULTURAL CAPITAL DISADVANTAGE

A significant portion (68%) of the sample of lower income, working class, and
lower middle class students and a full eighty percent of first generation college students
in the sample expressed substantial distress due to their sense that they have entered
college without the tools they need to succeed. In a study of first-year writing by Sommers and Salz (2004:131), one freshman described how college writing can make a student feel as if he or she is “being asked to build a house without any tools.” The authors note that such writers “are required to become master builders while they are still apprentices—to build as they become familiar with the materials and methods of construction” (p. 132)—an insight which echoes the claim of Bartholomae (1985), a scholar covered in Chapter Two, that such students need to “invent the university” each time they sit down to write. This is especially the case for students from less privileged backgrounds. For many such students, this distress resulted in their harboring an inferiority complex of sorts with regard to their more privileged counterparts, which itself triggered severe difficulties with academic writing.

Tasheena, a lower middle class African American woman who is also a first generation college student, describes her writing block in this way:

I just don’t feel like I have the answers, and I feel like to write a paper, you have to sit down, you have to figure something out. And I feel like—with papers, it’s not really supposed to be a big deal, but it really is. When you make a paper, you write a paper, you have to get it edited by somebody, and you give it to people, and they tell you it’s bad, and you have to edit it, and then you have to go back and fix what you already spent, like, hours writing! It’s such a, like, a difficult, like, a long process… I just feel like there’s people who can just sit down and go go go go go, but I’m just not one of those people…. I don’t know, writing has just never been my thing! (Laughs.)

Central to Tasheena’s difficulty with academic writing is the notion that somewhere out there are “the answers” that would unlock the otherwise secret code of knowledge required in academic writing— it is just she does not happen to have access to them. One gets a sense of her frustration even in the construction of her narrative: her description
reads like a single run-on sentence, suggesting the almost panicky speed at which her mind is racing. It is as if there is a “right” way to write and a “wrong” way to write, and she is afraid she only knows the wrong way. Becker (2008) argued that such notions hamstring young writers who do not realize there is more than “One Right Way” to approach one’s writing. Later in her interview, Tasheena states:

I don’t know, I just don’t like being—I don’t wanna be wrong! Like, I don’t wanna write something down that’s wrong. So, like, I guess some people don’t have that problem... [But if] your opinion’s wrong [then] that means what you’ve been thinking about this whole time is, like, wrong!

Here, Tasheena seems to be responding to the very real discrepancy between those whose writing and cultural knowledge are deemed appropriate, valuable, and properly “academic” and those whose writing is seen as “bad.” She knows “some people” do not have her “problem,” but she does not specify who they might be or why they do not seem to suffer in the same way. Instead, she focuses on her own perceived deficit, subsequently declaring the reason why she does not go to tutors: “it’s, like, my fault—I feel like it’s not, like, a problem that I need to fix, it’s just me being lazy or whatever.”

In short, despite the discrepancy between the notion of being “lazy” and the long hours she spends and great effort she exerts in attempting to write, Tasheena attributes her writing trouble to her own personal deficiency. In this way, she maintains a sense of agency—if it is her own fault, if she has the agency to do it wrong, then she also has the agency to get it right in the future. Perhaps this mentality, although costly to her current self-assessment, sustains the same American Dream-inspired optimism espoused by her mother—who Tasheena describes as a single mom that had risen from poverty to lower middle class status through hard work and determination. Throughout her interview,
Tasheena hints at her understanding that her own level of dominant cultural capital is not sufficient for that which is required by the academy [“I think I can write in my voice, but I feel like I’ve gotten better grades when I’ve written in a different voice”], but she is able to hold onto a sense of agency by simultaneously skirting around a more patently class-conscious view of her situation.

In some cases, students convey that they possess a consciousness of socioeconomic and cultural differences between their peers and themselves, but they do so through coded language. Steve, a lower middle class white student, who describes his relationship to writing as being “like a dog to a vacuum” where the open Microsoft Word document is a repellant “negative magnet” that he would do anything to escape, declares himself a “Type B personality” trying to get by in a “Type A environment.” Here “Type B” connotes a person who is slower-paced and more content to focus on one thing at a time, while “Type A” means “overloading” oneself with leadership and other opportunities that will help advance one’s resume, a practice many scholars have noted is prevalent among the upper middle class (Stuber 2006; Demerath 2009).

I’m a Type B personality, and I have to live in a very Type A environment, so that can be kind of difficult… There just are a bunch of things to do, and people love to incredibly overload here— without overloading classes—they’re volunteering hours, they’re President of, like, a few different, like, clubs that they’re running and they’re doing something else [too]. Um, it’s good that people are very involved, but they tend to, like, need to, um, make sure they’re scheduled up. [But] if you try to do too many things, you can kind of become collapsed. That’s why it’s very Type A [here] whether you are [Type A] or not.

Sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) famously describes this phenomenon in her book, *Unequal Childhoods*. Namely, the families of privilege in her study consistently over-scheduled their children with a vast array of activities and commitments, such as
violin lessons, SAT tutoring, karate, and soccer practice. This childrearing practice, which Lareau dubs “concerted cultivation,” is unique to the more privileged families. Meanwhile, the lower class families in the study practiced what Lareau calls “the accomplishment of natural growth,” in which children are frequently left to their own devices due to both cultural norms and economic necessity. As such, they end up spending their largely unscheduled free time in whatever way they choose, typically unstructured play. Over time, the middle class child who participates in a schedule tightly packed with privileged opportunities, Lareau argues, learns a “sense of entitlement,” thanks in large part to the parents’ accompanying insistence on encouraging their children to ask questions, look adults in the eye, and engage their elders as if they were equals. In this way, middle class childrearing practices strengthen and refine the child’s cultural capital such that he or she easily fits in to institutions that reflect the values and expectations of the privileged class. In contrast, the lower class child develops a “sense of constraint” from parents who themselves lack the cultural capital and sense of entitlement that might have enabled them to train their children to become comfortable with and adept at negotiating middle class institutions, such as the school.

In short, childrearing practices are class based, and dominant cultural capital is at the heart of what differentiates the privileged from the not-so-privileged. As such, creating an “overloaded” schedule is a defining characteristic of the upper middle class that represents an extension of Lareau’s concerted cultivation, and Steve recognizes the outlines of this phenomenon, albeit in the alternate, more psychological framework of “personality types.” Later in our interview, Steve draws a connection between his
economic situation and his not being able to be “Type A” in an environment that encourages a hectic schedule.

I kind of work the part time hours to, you know, have groceries, go out on the weekends, um, but some people don’t have to [work for their money]. It’s frustrating. So, I’m jealous. And I’m jealous of that because the hours that I do work at my job could also have been applied directly to my studies or whatever else. There are certain concepts of entitlement here [at Boston College]… I’m not sure how to describe it.

Steve resents that he needs to spend so much of his free time working in order to supplement his financial aid while his wealthier peers have the luxury of founding clubs, participating in campus groups, or performing community service—all of which, ironically, will augment their already significant cultural capital and thus exacerbate the pre-existing differences between students like Steve and students with more significant financial means. In other words, the initial lack of dominant cultural capital has an insidious and additive effect: it prevents the acquisition of additional cultural capital in college that more advantaged students have the privilege of leisure to obtain. When he tells me that he is a “Type B personality” forced to live in a “Type A environment,” Steve is essentially saying that the realities and contingencies of his situation are eclipsed by the norms, values, and expectations of the campus as a whole, which create a decidedly upper middle class environment for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

John, a working class white student who is a first generation college student on his father’s side, articulates one possible effect of the palpable disjuncture between an upper middle class-biased campus culture and those who are not of the upper middle class: a sense of not belonging.

I don’t really belong here. My background and class, they don’t belong here either. I feel this school is like a cookie cutter—it’s
the same mold, same everything, you dress the same way, you talk the same way, you come from the same place, so did your parents. And I don’t fit that mold... As I write, sometimes when I’m struggling, I’m like, “Well, other people, they had a different background and they had more advantages, and they’re taking full advantage of that, so they’re doing better than I am.”

When he looks around and sees so many people of privilege, John’s sense of belonging is ruptured. He knows he does not fit “the mold.” John’s sense of not belonging speaks to the subjective side of social mobility (Karp 1986). At home, he feels “there’s more similar people” to himself whereas at Boston College, “it’s a very different culture of people here than what I’m used to, the culture I’d say is very preppy…versus more Italian stereotypes, like, spiky hair, guidó, big cross, and everything.” For John, the disconnect that Steve describes in psychological language is visual. He can see how he does not belong, how he lacks the advantages others have due to their upper class backgrounds, and he associates his evident discomfort at this recognition with his writing struggles.

Later in his interview, John fleshes out the nature of his writing difficulties by describing the “false face” he has to “put on” when he writes academic papers. It is as if academic writing represents for John a false performance of self, in which he experiences the inauthenticity as deeply bothersome (Goffman 1959). “I can talk, like, back home to people easy enough, but then coming up here, I’m having to elevate to the academic level. I feel like I always fall short.” He talks about having to “get rid of the slang out of my language,” but even when successful, he feels a sense of unease:

It’s very uncomfortable… because it doesn’t seem authentic in that even if I do get a good grade, I don’t know how to duplicate that again because it isn’t me… It’s like having an out of body experience when you write a paper.
John personifies the “false face” he has to adopt in college writing as another person, so separate from himself that he does not even feel like he is inhabiting his own body when he has to write an academic paper. Of the person whose voice he must “fake,” John defiantly declares, “I dislike him, like, he’s not real. He’s an academic projection, and he’s not even a good one!” Evident from his comments is the fact that John feels he cannot simultaneously be himself and perform academically, and yet he is uncomfortable with the disingenuousness college academics seem to require from him. In the language of composition scholars, he is marginalized from the “academic discourse community” that is college. Time and again he finds himself stuck in this bind that leads to writing blocks on almost every paper he attempts to write. The cultural capital he must perform (or “fake”) in college writing is “not real,” “not me,” and in the end, not as easy to come by as it is for “those kids who could jump right into an English major or something.” In other words, every time he sits down to write, John must “invent the university,” as Bartholomae (1985) put it, or speak in the language of the academy, and he is deeply uncomfortable doing so.

Other working and lower middle class students express with acuity an explicit awareness of their differential cultural capital that Tasheena, Steve, and John merely gesture toward. Clara, a lower middle class Latina woman and first generation college student on her father’s side, is acutely aware of and able to articulate her lack of dominant cultural capital. When I ask her whether or not she feels she can write academic papers in her own voice, she thinks about it for a second and responds:

Um… no. But I feel like I should. Cuz I know personally that my vocabulary isn’t that advanced. I think it’s just, like, the background that I come from. Like, my parents—like my dad
probably has, like, a high school vocabulary. Maybe like a middle school vocabulary.

She then makes reference to her friend whose father is a lawyer and mother is a Boston College graduate in Philosophy, and she tells me that they use “big words” in his household. She continues:

So in my own house, none, none of these words were used… A lot of times, I just don’t know what they mean. So like, he’s the one I always ask to help me with my papers because, like, the thoughts that I try to communicate, like, he knows how to put them in a different voice. And, I just like, I’m just not there yet. And I feel like it’s really—it’s really hard to build vocabulary independently. Like, if you’re raised with it? It’s something that almost comes naturally, you just, like, know?

Clara recognizes her dominant cultural capital disadvantage and responds strategically by singling out a friend who more “naturally” possesses the kind of cultural capital she senses she lacks. She makes him her translator of sorts because she feels he can elevate her thoughts into the “different voice” her college teachers expect. Clara goes on to describe herself as “definitely below” her Boston College peers, a sentiment already implicit in the fact that she uses her upper middle class friend as her go-to person to help achieve a “more academic” voice. When she talks about how difficult it is to “build vocabulary independently,” she intuitively understands Bourdieu’s point that the cultural capital one may acquire through hard work and education is unlikely to come as easily or have as much inherent value as the cultural capital privileged students simply inherit from their parents. Clara goes on to comment on the other students at Boston College:

Cuz I feel like a lot of people here—my mom even said this to me, she’s like, we don’t have, like, education-like dinner-table conversations. Like, we talk about how our day, our days [went], simple things, but we—we don’t talk about what’s going on on the
news necessarily, or, like, politics. Like philosophical ideas. Like, I know other people actually do talk about those things!... My mom, like, always stressed that to me. She was like, “You have to expose yourself to these things yourself.” But um, a lot of times when people are saying things, like they’ll say words that I don’t really know...I always just look it up. But if one of my friends says something, I’ll just, like, pretend I know what it means, but I really—I (laughs), I really don’t know what it means!

The “education-like dinner-table conversations” are a clear indicator of Clara’s acute awareness that she has not been raised in a family with the same kinds of dominant cultural capital as friends whose parents attended college and graduate school. Her mother clearly possesses sufficient class consciousness to share Clara’s uncomfortable awareness of being different from her classmates and tries to help Clara make up for it by suggesting she “expose” herself to “these things” – presumably the knowledge, preferences, traits, and behaviors that our culture values more highly than that which she has access to in her own environment. However, it is as if both mother and daughter understand that mere “exposure” is not the same as immersion in an “education-like” environment from the beginning. After all, looking up and learning a new word after the fact is not the same as knowing that word in the moment. The act of “pretending” – or passing (i.e., trying to pass oneself off as something other than what one is) – adds significant stress to the life of the person trying to pass because of the ever-present danger of detection (Goffman 1963). Clara knows she is faking it, and she knows she could easily be found out. She tries to play catch-up in her spare time, but she understands that others do not have to spend time on the same self-education project she does.

For many non-upper middle class students, particularly first-generation college students, writing blocks are inextricably intertwined with – but not reducible to – what I
call “undersocialization,” or a lack of know-how. In these cases, the writer is unable to take on the “academic voice” required of her because she lacks the skills and knowledge to do so. I borrow here from Robert Boice’s (1993) notion of fluent writing as a “tacit knowledge” that is not explicitly taught in schools. These students then struggle to speak the language of the academy and conform to the new discursive requirements over and above what was expected of them in their secondary schooling.

Several low-income, working class, and lower middle class students are aware of their undersocialization in this regard and echo Clara’s uncomfortable awareness of being “below” her classmates with regard to dominant cultural capital and the academic “boost,” as the student below puts it, that such capital bestows. Cai, a low income Vietnamese American woman and first generation college student, states:

I’ve always noticed and took, like, extra attention to how people spoke, and like, how they form their words—it’s just interesting to me, you know? I always compare myself to them when I wanted to better myself. I don’t know, I feel like I just have a general lack of confidence in that area, whether speaking or writing…I started noticing [how I differ from my classmates] more now that I came here [to Boston College], and I realize how well people spoke and that also came from the fact that they came from a more privileged background than I did. So they kind of have that, like, boost.

Cai’s interest in the rhetoric of those around her stems from the desire to “better” herself, which, for her, means more closely approximating the speech patterns and writing styles of her “more privileged” classmates so that she too can not only earn better grades but also achieve a higher social status. In her admission that she has a “general lack of confidence” in speaking and writing, she links her emergent negative self-assessment directly to her matriculation into Boston College. She argues she did not suffer from a significant lack of confidence when she was in high school, in large part because
everyone around her was from the “same background” (i.e., low-income). However, being thrown into a more socioeconomically diverse environment with a predominance of upper middle class students was all it took to spark her crisis of confidence and her realization of her “disadvantage”:

[I]t’s obvious when you look around…for the most part, a lot of people are—they do come from a better off background. They have, like, resources available to them. I’ve heard some kids here who complained about their high school about how they didn’t have enough money for, like, a bigger swimming pool… My high school? We sometimes ran out of paper, or, like, bulbs caught on fire, and all that crazy stuff… I definitely feel a lot less confidence just because of where I come from.

Multiple others voice the same process of realization: they went to underperforming high schools in poorer districts, but it was not until they entered college that they began to perceive their backgrounds as disadvantageous in the context of an elite institution of higher education. Emina, a working class Bosnian-American woman and first generation college student, notes her classmates are extremely smart people who come from “the best schools.”

This is definitely intimidating… Just knowing that they are going to write very well, um, it’s just very hard because I’m trying to think how they are going to write, and then I’m trying to think what I want to say… It’s definitely a lot going on in my head.

Emina recognizes that her mind is populated not only by her own thoughts of what she wants to say—i.e., by her own voice—but also by negative comparisons of how she will “stack up” in relation to her better-prepared peers.

Similarly, Maria, a working class African American woman and first generation college student, considers herself a “terrible writer” who was prepared “worse than most” at Boston College, even in spite of the fact that she attended an all-girls Catholic high
school on scholarship. It was, in her eyes, the “crappy” education she had through middle school that permanently set her back.

I think it’s cuz I didn’t really learn [grammar] that well… You’re supposed to learn it [in elementary school, but], like, I didn’t pay attention, like, I was sleeping through all the classes. Now…it’s like, “Ouch, this is, like, college.”

Much like Tasheena, Maria maintains her agency despite what it means for her self-assessment. After all, she chose to sleep through her classes. Instead of focusing on any of the structural reasons her school failed to hold her attention, she lays not just some but all of the blame at her own feet. In this way, Maria does a delicate dance: she is aware of her own “crappy” educational background and subsequently sees her academic preparation as deficient through no fault of her own, and yet she also holds tight to her agency by viewing herself as the person ultimately responsible both for her past and her future education. “I know I should go back and teach myself, but I don’t know where I would start.” In sustaining a sense of herself as an individual with agency, as one who could teach herself how to write better, she adheres to the hopeful notion that she may yet set right things gone wrong. Of course, this is not at all to suggest that Maria could not begin to rectify these matters, only that if she yielded to a more structural perspective, she might lose an essential element of her individual psychology: her sense of self-efficacy.

Psychologist Frank Pajares (1996), following social cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura, discusses “self-efficacy beliefs” as individuals’ beliefs about “their abilities and about the outcome of their efforts [which] powerfully influence the ways in which they will behave” (1996: 543). For Pajares, positive self-efficacy beliefs are predictive of increased academic performance, but for some students, like Maria and Tasheena, having a positive self-efficacy belief—believing in one’s own power—can often paradoxically
translate into *poorer* regard for oneself. If I had the power to master the “right” way to write, why didn’t I? I must be “lazy,” as Tasheena puts it, in spite of her hard work to earn a spot at Boston College, or I must be a “terrible writer,” as Maria frames it, despite the good grades she earns on many of the papers she is able to turn in. Such psychological, individual-centric attributions, after all, reflect a larger cultural schema about “pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps.” In fact, a majority of the students in this subsample reflect the ideology of the American Dream, which makes sense given that, for them, the dream of surpassing one’s parents socioeconomically still has the potential promise of becoming their reality. This ideology associating hard work with inevitable reward is reflected in the comments of Jakabo, a working class black South African student:

> There are people who are naturally more gifted at [writing] than others, but I mean, it’s like anything—if you work at it hard enough and long enough, then you’ll definitely get better at it. It’s not just set in stone if you’re a bad writer! (Laughs.)

Indeed, many non-upper middle class students shared this philosophy and framed their lack of dominant cultural capital as a temporary, albeit unfortunate status when they describe that they have “not yet” learned “the academic voice.” Recall that Clara said about achieving her academic voice, “I’m just not there yet.” Again, this is not to say that Clara and others will *not* one day achieve an improved status as a writer through assiduous effort, only that this deeply held belief tends to eclipse a more nuanced structural view of their circumstances. There is, after all, a balance between structure and agency; the purpose of this thesis is to attend to the otherwise largely invisible structural elements of individuals’ experiences. In other words, through this framing of their situation, these students maintain the hope that they will one day learn the appropriate
voice and develop the necessary cultural capital to achieve social mobility. However, in doing so, they lack empathy for their own struggles against structural obstacles.

Sometimes, it is only through the course of the actual interview itself that students began to connect their discussions of their writing difficulties with their social class backgrounds. For instance, Melissa, a working class white first generation college student, describes ideas as coming easily to her but the writing process itself as painstakingly slow [“I’m just having trouble putting anything on paper—or you’re always hitting the erase button. You’re like, “No! This is just not good!” Erase, erase, erase…”]. When I ask her what makes her feel like she must constantly erase sentences she has worked so hard to write, she responds:

If I think it’s poorly written, so if I think that it’s not up to academic standards, I guess? I think here at Boston College it’s different for me, because, like, people use so many smart terms all the time! And it’s like, I don’t always know what they mean… I do feel intimidated a lot of the time because a lot of [my classmates] have had a lot of, like, private school prep and APs and me, I’m like… a public school girl… I think sometimes my writing difficulty comes from not having a lot of help, I guess. Not, like, help from others, but more help, like, educationally?... My high school didn’t offer APs…so I think that’s a big part of it for me.

Through the course of our interview, Melissa became aware of the role her school’s lack of resources may have had on her confidence as a writer. When she said her writing trouble may stem from “not having a lot of help educationally,” she is hitting on a structural contributor to her over-reliance on the erase button. Her writing, in her estimation, is “not good enough” and “not up to academic standards,” which she has concluded from the plethora of people around her using “smart” terms. Here, Melissa connects the concept of intelligence with the individual’s access to quality schooling—a conflation several other non-upper middle class students make—as if structural
advantages such as access to high-quality education actually increases one’s intrinsic intelligence, rather than simply improving one’s academic preparedness. Similarly, one low-income student bemoans how much “smarter than me” everyone around her is, while in the next breath noting how many “kids from prep schools” attend Boston College. Another low income woman makes explicit the connection between her sense of being academically underprepared and her own difficulty writing:

Sometimes I feel like in college, um, I’m a little judged? Like, these are professors who are, like, grad school [educated] and they know a lot about writing, and I’m just afraid to make a mistake where, you know, you should know this by now.

In point of fact, all of these students are being judged, and they are expected to possess certain kinds of academic knowledge by the time they reach college.

The refrain that haunts so many underprivileged students—you should know this by now—can engender a sense of class shame. Julia, a low income Chinese American first generation college student, acknowledges her lack of dominant cultural capital but then calls it an “embarrassing flaw.” She sustains substantial fear that she will be “found out” to be inferior to her more privileged peers. She spends a lot of time imagining what people will think of her when they read her writing:

You know, it’s nice to know philosophical quotes and just show that you can write something well, and you know, these things always come up in life, and so if someone sees [about you that] “they can’t write,” then it’s kind of, like, a flaw. And they kind of—like, I would think that people would think, “Oh, if they had a good upbringing, they would know how to write!”

To clarify, I asked Julia if she means that if someone judges her writing as not very good then they would make assumptions about her upbringing.

Yeah! Because it’s like—I’m in [undergraduate] business school right now, so it’s like, I know everything I need to know about
business, but once I get out there, you know, in the business world, there’s a lot of people who came from prominent backgrounds and that’s how they’re in business today. Not because they’re actually good (laughs) at business sometimes. So say… you had to write something, and then they see that, you know, [and they think] “They can’t write, they don’t know the technical, the basic technicalities of writing?” Then they’ll say, “where did you go to school?”

Multiple times, Julia utilizes a third person voice when speaking of herself. It is as if she is trying to distance herself from the hurtful conclusions she imagines others will make about her because of her writing. Here, Julia’s language recalls Cooley’s (1902) “looking glass self” in that she derives an assessment of herself from an imagined picture of herself as seen through the lens of those around her. She is cognizant that in many cases cultural capital accounts for the reproduction of privilege among the individuals from “prominent backgrounds,” but this awareness does not translate into a slackening of expectations for herself. Rather, she feels she has all that much more to prove; for when she gets out into the “real world,” she views her class background as a major liability.

Already, in the context of school, Julia has experienced her class background as a burden. She describes her shame when a teacher told her class to underline the theses in their papers (although Julia’s actual term, “thesises,” points to her undersocialization in this arena, exactly what she is so ashamed of), and she admits she did not know what a thesis was at the time.

It was just obvious all the students knew what it was… It was a little intimidating… I [didn’t] know who or where to ask. I guess I would probably ask my professor but it would feel, I don’t know (laughs sheepishly)—I’d be a little afraid to… Just the way she said it…she expects you to know. So I feel like asking her [would be] a stupid question.
Julia fears her background will be revealed through her “stupid questions,” such as when in her freshman year she had to write a paper about Socrates although she had never heard of him before. When I ask her what exactly she worries others will conclude from that. She states simply, “That ‘she wasn’t raised well, she wasn’t as privileged and therefore—I don’t know—maybe she shouldn’t be with [laughs softly] other privileged people.’” Again, her use of the third person distances Julia from the painful recognition that others may pick up on the very real fact of her undersocialization and lack of dominant cultural capital and make negative conclusions about her as a person as a result.

For students like Julia, it is not simply that they recognize their own disadvantaged status as inadequately academically prepared, they also are aware that others recognize their lack of college readiness. As one upper middle class private school-educated white man said, “I recently took a freshman writing class, and I was—I was actually pretty shocked, at the level of the writing, the [poor] quality of the writing.” Another upper middle class privately-educated white woman admitted:

What amazed me when I got to college, and like, we’d peer-edit things, was that some people just don’t know how to write an essay! And it’s not a matter of them being a poor writer—it’s just that they never really learned how to put things into a coherent structure… I went to a private school, and I’m definitely better prepared than a lot of people. As I said, it really amazed me when I got to BC that, like, how bad at writing some kids were! (Laughs)… It really did shock me freshman year… because even just the basic concept of, like, having a thesis and, like, supporting paragraphs where an entire paragraph was about the same thing—these were things that some people just didn’t stick to.

While the woman above begins with an awareness that there is a distinction between being a poor writer and being an inadequately trained writer, she has by the end of her comment conflated the two ideas such that underprepared writers were “bad” writers who...
willfully “didn’t stick to” “basic” rules of writing. It is as if sustaining a structural perspective on her peers’ writing was more difficult than reverting to a more individualistic explanation that he or she is just a “bad” writer. For many of the upper middle class students who articulated “shock” at the writing of some of their peers, their initial astonishment often translated into a confidence boost for themselves. Many well-prepared upper middle class students were able to articulate this phenomenon:

So I feel like [noticing my peers’ trouble with writing] helped me a little bit. I knew in my head that I was probably better-skilled I guess than a lot of the people, although that’s probably a terrible assumption to make! It just kind of put my mind at ease a little bit. It kind of took a little bit of the pressure off.

(an upper middle class white male)

It lessened the pressure [to see the writing of other students] just because it sort of made me realize, at least in writing, I was coming in at a very, like, acceptable level. And it wasn’t something I had to put extra time into, um, which some people did.

(an upper middle class white female)

One upper middle class woman even called such propitious realizations a kind of “superiority complex.” In other words, some students’ disadvantage becomes other students’ advantage, seeming to indicate a “zero sum” mentality. Individuals in the former category are supremely aware of the dismay of those in the latter. They know their level of ignorance about matters like thesis statements is in danger of being on full display in the classroom, especially whenever public writing (e.g., “peer editing”) is required.

It is for this reason that many inadequately prepared students employ a multitude of coping strategies for dealing with the indignities of such exposure. One obvious strategy that many non-upper middle class students adopt is not to share their writing.
with others unless absolutely necessary. One low income student insists on sharing her essays only with her teachers and never with friends or even tutors. However, even sharing with the professor is “scary” for her:

> I guess when it comes to, like, an essay, it is going to be criticized and it’s going to be graded. And you know they’re going to say *something*… And I think I’m just very worried about that. I think a lot about the future, and what someone will say to me if I write this. Like, the teacher will say, “Oh, this isn’t correct, um, don’t use a period here, don’t use too many commas, you use this word way too much…”

Similarly, another student describes profound apprehension about sharing his work. As a result, he never shows his writing to anyone, that is until due to a peer editing requirement he can no longer avoid it—at which point, he looks for a partner “like me.” He describes seeking out “working class kids” as peer editors:

> I feel like I could relate better to someone who was working class background, than from an upper [class background]… It would [be easier to exchange papers] because I felt like, even if I didn’t do well, he’d understand why. Or she’d understand why.

Even after they have mastered the fundamentals of writing in college that they “should” have learned in high school, many students still avoid sharing their writing. One low income junior, who had during the course of her college career come to be seen as an “excellent” writer, framed it this way:

> I *never* am willing to let my, even my friends read my work, cuz I just feel so nervous about it. I don’t want them to—I know they won’t, but I guess it’s just kind of a personal paranoia where…I don’t wanna give them proof as to how or why I’m not [a good writer].
In some cases, this “personal paranoia” extends even to the point of refusing to share one’s paper with the professor who assigned it, which, understandably, can cause serious problems.

A second coping strategy for ameliorating the shame inherent in the public nature of college writing is to choose classes where only reflective writing, rather than academic research papers, is required. After all, as several students note, “I can’t be wrong” in personal writing based on one’s subjective experience. Consequently, they prefer to write reflective or personal essays over papers that require extensive “objective” information. Of course, it is unfortunately the case that many of the classes that allow for more “subjective” writing also tend to be in the “softer” fields, such as English, Film Studies, and the like, that are not as strongly associated with remunerative careers as are fields in the hard sciences or pre-professional programs. As a result, if students gravitate toward classes that require less “objective” writing, they may also be setting themselves up at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to break into lucrative fields after college, thus risking their ability to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Nonetheless, several low income and working class students voice the ease and “naturalness” with which they can write subjectively or reflectively:

Writing that [personal essay] felt so natural. Like, I loved writing that paper. It just wasn’t hard. It just came naturally... I was just talking for myself; it was my own experience, and like, I know how to [write] something I experienced.

(a working class white woman)

I think [I prefer reflective writing] cuz it can only be right. Whatever I say is right. I can never be wrong, so I just put it all out there, and I can make any type of connection I want. Cuz it’s like, what I think… but in writing something for Philosophy or Theology, I feel like I can’t express it the way I wanna express it.
(a working class white woman)

[Reflective essays] come from my mind (laughs). I can do with it what I want, you know? There is no wrong answer on those.

(a working class African American woman)

If a student feels empowered in her writing because she can write about her “own experience,” then it makes sense that she would feel more comfortable and even “love” writing. If she “cannot be wrong” because there is “no wrong answer” in personal, reflective writing, she can only feel emboldened because her “own voice,” often devalued in more “objective” writing, is prized for its authenticity here. These sentiments echo Shaughnessy’s (1979) observation that many “basic writers” prefer “subjective” or narrative writing for the authenticity of voice it permits. By strategically avoiding research-heavy courses in favor of courses which encourage personal reflection, students can avoid the shame of “being wrong.” Of course, evading such courses may also contribute in its own way to the reproduction of inequality for students coming in at a disadvantage in terms of dominant forms of cultural capital.

Finally, some students respond to their exposure as undersocialized for college academic writing by turning shame into pride. Sociologists call this “subjective status” (Rosenfield 2012) or the creation of “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont 1992): when one’s “objective” status is low, one can build up in their own minds the importance of alternative factors to measure one’s status—in these standards, one has a higher status relative to those with a better objective status. For some students, this takes the form of secretly preferring their own voice over “the academic voice” because it is more concrete, simple, and “down to earth” than the “philosopher-type” voice expected in academia.
I feel like if he [an upper middle class friend] handed in a paper and I handed in a paper—he uses so many, like words… that takes away from the meaning. Like, there’s no meaning anymore, cuz there’s so many voices, so many, like, words in this other voice, this academic voice? And *mine* is just kind of, like, straightforward and relatable.

(a lower middle class Latina female)

[My mom] tells me, like, Nikki, just say it out loud and if it doesn’t sound like something you would say, don’t say it. Cuz then you’re just trying to sound like this really informative, like, over-arching—um, sort of like God in a way. Like you know everything about the topic. So… I need to make sure that *I’m* speaking more in my papers versus letting the topic speak for me. [The reader] needs to be able to hear *your* voice, and not just here this sophisticated philosopher-type person.

(a lower middle class white female)

Here, being “straightforward and relatable” takes on a subjectively higher status than being too “academic” or “wordy,” which is similar to the familiar cultural narrative that working class people are “salt of the earth” types who will “tell it like it is,” “call a spade a spade,” and do not “beat around the bush” (Lubrano 2004). After all, it is seen by many religiously oriented lower income individuals to be a serious “sin” to try to sound or act like God, and one should never even flirt with the pretense that one could be as all-knowing as God. Some may learn their subjective status from their parents, as suggested by Nikki’s description of what her mother advises her when writing papers. As with both students above, one can recognize that academia calls for a different, more “sophisticated” voice but still value one’s own voice for personal reasons. In some cases, one’s lack of academic preparation can result in lower academic confidence but higher confidence overall, as well as an explicit class pride. Cai, the low income Vietnamese American student discussed earlier, describes how poorly her dilapidated high school

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15 The reader may recognize in Nikki’s mother’s words the echoes of C. Wright Mills’ (1959) advice in the appendix to *The Sociological Imagination*. 
prepared her for college writing and how this affected her confidence, first freshman year and then later on:

Sometimes [your peers] judge you by the way you speak or write, and at first... in general I kind of lacked confidence in myself as a person. But then, I quickly overcame that because I started realizing that I, I guess I kind of, um, began to appreciate myself more? And I kind of like found myself more, understood myself better? And despite the differences between myself and the general population here, I still feel, like, valuable? Because I know my values, and I know where I come from, and I’m proud of that.

That Cai states that she has come to “still feel, like, valuable” indicates that she once felt herself to be something less than valuable. This late-blooming sense of self-worth seems inextricably tied to “know[ing] my values” and knowing “where I come from”—an obvious signifier for her class background. Cai is proud of the values she represents, which she implicitly prizes more highly than the values of “the general population here” of her upper middle class peers.

While it may be true that “writing just isn’t my thing” for many of these students, there is more to the story of their academic writing blocks than a purely psychological or individualistic explanation suggests. Specifically, in the cases of students who express varying levels of awareness of their disadvantaged status vis-à-vis the dominant cultural capital of their classmates, “writer’s block” is both a psychological problem and a problem with hidden structural roots. When the average student is blocked, however, universities tend to treat the problem as a reflection of either a cognitive deficit or a psychological pathology. Many students buy into this philosophy, as is reflected in the embarrassment of students like Julia or the fear of exposure in students like Tasheena. Such students may develop a sense of shame or self-blame over their “not yet” being able
to achieve the “proper” academic voice when they hold onto their sense of agency and cling to the American Dream-related narrative that they can one day teach themselves “the voice” they need to excel in college and beyond. Even students like Cai, who have managed to turn class shame into class pride, have paid a price: it is painful to recognize that one’s “objective” status is lower than one’s peers, whose abundant dominant cultural capital helps to make their “academic voice” come more naturally to them.

A BURDEN OF DEBT

In the following section, I will attend to a secondary theme that arose from my interviews with non-upper middle class individuals. Namely, many such students expressed an intense need to meet the obligations they felt they had to their parents and, specifically, to do well in school for their parents’ sake. However, because of their sense of being at a disadvantage vis-à-vis dominant cultural capital, these students have a dilemma: they desperately want to excel in college to please their parents, and yet they are not confident they have the “proper” tools to do so. The resulting anxiety that they might default on their “debt” to their parents perpetuates a persistent block-inducing state of worry.

John articulates a sentiment that the majority of working class and low income students express, especially those who are the first generation in their families to attend college: namely, that writing papers is a “high stakes game.”

I feel like [writing] is a high stakes game that you can’t win. Cuz even if you do good on this paper, there’s still another one. So there’s no way—you’re just losing. You have to keep doing it and
Many such students want to do well and achieve good grades in order to honor the sacrifices their parents have made to get them to a place like Boston College, whose promise of social mobility is the ultimate goal behind their family’s striving. Of course, when John tells me that even if he can “do good” on one paper it is no guarantee he will succeed on future assignments, his poor grammar is a stark reminder of the dominant cultural capital deficit that he brings with him to college. In this way, his assessment is accurate: doing well, under such circumstances, is a tall order—sometimes even impossible—and yet it is something he must do. Between a rock and a hard place, John feels he “can’t win.” He does not, however, ultimately succumb into the “why bother” attitude he briefly entertains. He cannot afford to give up. He must keep pushing himself toward the final end: a college degree and the attendant doors it will open for him, as a proxy for the rest of his family. Writing, then, is an extremely high stakes performance. How well a student carries out his performance in paper after paper can determine his future prospects and effectively shape the contours of the rest of his life.

Writing is a high stakes performance because it can make or break one’s ability to achieve social mobility. For many working class individuals, college is more instrumental than experimental and one’s attitude towards college must be more utilitarian than indulgent (Aronson 2008). College, after all, needs to give disadvantaged students the platform to get a good enough job that they can “buy a ticket” out of their old neighborhoods and out of their class of origin. Whereas upper middle class individuals
can more readily afford to view college as a period of identity exploration and “extended adolescence” (Bettie 2003), non-privileged students are intrinsically aware they do not have the same luxury (Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray 2002). Julia, the low income Chinese American first generation college student mentioned above, clearly articulates a notion implicit in the interviews of all the working class and low income students, particularly first generation college students:

Well, it always goes back to the fact that, you know, you’re in college to get a career and to get a good job and to make money, and so I guess the end goal is money… [It’s all about] good grades, [a] good GPA, and then [a] good job.

For students like Julia who carry the investment of their families’ hopes and dreams, there is little room for college to be a place to “find yourself.” Identity exploration must take a back seat to a more practical, strategic approach that treats college as more instrumental, a means to an end, wherein the end is upward mobility and a future financial security to which many students are unaccustomed.

While most lower income students feel the weight of their parents’ expectations regarding the vital importance of education, they are also acutely aware of the cost of that education. Financial aid often fails to cover the entire cost of a student’s expenses at college, and students frequently lament the monetary burden their attendance at Boston College places on their family. In the words of one working class student, “I have financial aid, but it’s never enough—it’s very expensive here.” Cai describes the impact of this burden on her family as a whole:

Especially where we’re from, like, a low income family—we already sent my brother off to college, and we’re still, like, paying off his debt there. It was kind of a financial strain to send me,
especially to, like, this school. Luckily, I got a lot of aid, but still, it puts a dent in the pocket.

Cai’s use of the first person plural underscores the extent to which she feels personally responsible for the financial burden her education represents to her entire family. That it is “we” and not “they” who are sending a sibling off to college and paying down the subsequent education costs, indicates Cai views her family as a team and holds herself at least partially accountable for the expense of her education in the grand scheme of her family as a unit. This is a view common among working class and lower income students that contrasts starkly with the way most upper middle class individuals discuss their parents as solely responsible not only for their educational costs, but also for “extras” like allowances for going out with friends or ordering take-out. Cai’s sentiment echoes Lubrano’s (2004:19) argument that many working class individuals value collectivity over individual achievements, while the opposite tends to be true for upper middle class people.

Familial sacrifice is a salient theme among less privileged students and came up in a full one hundred percent of the interviews of low income and first generation college students, while it only came up in my conversations with two upper middle class students (one whose father died when he was young, leaving his mother with some financial instability, and another whose parents had been working class and had relatively recently achieved upper middle class status). For some students, their parents’ sacrifices include coming to America for the sake of their children. Emina is a Bosnian-American working class first generation college student whose parents fled Bosnia during the Bosnian War in the early 1990s and came to the United States expressly to give their only child a better life and a chance at an excellent education.
The reason they came to this country is for me, so getting that education in… BC is the way to accomplish my goals. It’s not just—I worked hard to get here, and I’m gonna work hard to finish here, so. [My parents] encourage me a lot, and definitely my mom and dad both coming to a different country—like, that took a lot of courage and a lot of hard work. So it wouldn’t be right for me just to give up despite all their struggles. The struggles I’m facing are minimal compared to them.

Although Emina sees “BC [as] the way to accomplish my goals,” she describes having an “absolutely horrible” time with writing college papers, and she admits that her “writer’s block” is “painful.” As she puts it, “seeing that blank piece of paper… definitely gets the adrenaline running.” As we talk further, a clear theme emerges: she feels a tremendous sense of responsibility toward her parents in the wake of their enormous sacrifices on her behalf.

We should go to school for us, but I feel like I’m going for my parents because I want them to be happy. They’ve done so much for me, they’ve always been there for me, supporting me no matter what, even when I fail—everything! So in my head I want to finish BC, I want to get a good job, so I can start giving back to my parents to show them how much I appreciate everything they’ve done. Like, they left their whole families in Europe to come here for me! So I feel like it’s my duty to take care of my parents—and I think that’s why I have that internal voice or conscience telling me, “You can’t give up now, you need to push yourself extra, it doesn’t matter how much work it is, you do it! It’s not for you, it’s for your parents…” I should be making sacrifices too.

In her comments, Emina acknowledges the more mainstream notion of higher education that predominates, especially among the upper middle class (a group by whom Emina says she feels “surrounded” at Boston College), that college should be for me, the individual college student. Yet this idea flies in the face of her experience, in which she feels in debt to parents that have given “everything” for her. In Emina’s subjective experience, it is her duty to do well at and complete her degree from Boston College. She
makes it clear that this mandate does not come from her parents [“They constantly tell me, ‘Don’t stress, we’re behind you no matter what, your health is more important than anything else!’”]. Rather, the pressure comes purely from herself. Emina’s internal sense of duty and obligation clashes with the dominant cultural narrative on college as a site for identity exploration and a form of extended adolescence that is so prevalent among her more privileged peers (Aronson 2008).

It is no wonder Emina feels such extraordinary pressure when it comes to writing: after all, her writing is a performance that will be evaluated and graded, a process which itself can determine so much of her future.

I think my dislike of writing stems from the fact that there is so much pressure, grade-wise, GPA-wise, everything put together—your future, I guess. Sometimes it feels like your future is dependent on this one paper. Because it can change everything.

If she owes her parents for their sacrifices, Emina must achieve excellent grades and, correspondingly, the upwardly mobile career options such high marks make possible.

I know everyone says they don’t worry about grades, but we’re being graded! … I wanna study abroad next year, I need my GPA to be a 3.2. I’m not there yet, so I need those [good] grades! So they do matter!... And that kind of takes away my attention from the paper because I’m worrying about that, and all that anxiety builds up into a mental block. So that grade you get on that one paper is going to contribute a lot to your [course] grade, and that grade is gonna affect other things, like…scholarships…or if you want to study abroad… So if you mess up on that one paper, that’s going to affect your class grade, and if you keep doing that, that’s going to affect your overall GPA, which is going to influence everything else.

Although “everyone” tells her “don’t worry about grades,” Emina observes pointedly that they are always being graded. The implicit question is how could one not obsess about grades when the domino effects of one’s grades are so far-reaching? Even Emina’s
construction of this excerpt in a long, run-on sentence exemplifies the very real way in which she feels every single assignment is tied to a series of significant consequences. She is nearly breathless in this statement, indicating that she feels she cannot afford even to come to a full stop in her description of writing’s import. Writing, in short, is a high stakes performance. Emina understands, every paper matters. Is it any surprise that so many students, especially those who connect doing well with “doing justice” to their parents’ sacrifices become blocked?

Tasheena feels this pressure, and she not only wants to get good grades for her mother, who has worked so hard for her daughter’s sake, she also wants to inspire pride in her mother.

My mom, she does pay a good amount, it does put her out of her way, so I mean, I…feel like she shouldn’t have to do that. But I mean, I think it makes her proud—that’s why I try to get good grades and all that stuff—because I think that makes her feel like it’s all worth it… I remember I showed her, like, my grades, and she went around telling everybody, like, “My daughter got this! My daughter got that!”…. She goes out of her way to do all this kind of work, I should be doing, like, well. She does it all for me, all I have to do is get good grades.

Tasheena recalls her mother’s pride in a singsongy tone and smiles. Clearly, it makes Tasheena proud to think she has brought her mother pride. When I ask her specifically what “good grades” mean to her, she replies, “I just feel like they mean I’m doing well, like, I’m not wasting anybody’s time—like, I’m not wasting my mom’s time, I’m not wasting my time, my professor’s time—I’m doing well.” Conversely then, if Tasheena does not perform well on a paper, she feels like she is not only wasting her own and her professor’s time but she has not made good use of her mother’s hard work. In this light,
each of Tasheena’s papers present an opportunity either to bring pride to her mother or to squander her mother’s sacrifices.

Sometimes students whose parents have sacrificed a great deal to give their children opportunities they themselves never had can lead to a subtle sense of what could almost be called “survivor’s guilt.” Julia’s parents moved from urban New York to rural Vermont to provide a better and safer life for their family, and both her mother and father work extremely long hours in a restaurant to enable Julia to go to a school like Boston College. Occasionally, she thinks about what they could have done had they been given the same opportunities that they have worked so hard to provide her:

Sometimes I feel like, you know, like they wish that they were in our position, and I know, like, my dad said a while ago he’s very interested in Political Science, so. It was kind of interesting to think about that. You know: what could they have done, if they had the same chances?... You know, it’s kind of one of those things that you wonder a lot about… [You] wonder, “What if?”

What if her father had had the chance to attend a college like Boston College and study Political Science? It is not long before Julia’s musing takes on the hue of survivor’s guilt.

If I don’t do well here, they’re, like, the first thing I think about. Not because I feel they’re judging me… but it’s because you know they’re working really hard to get me through [college], and so I just feel like, you know, this is one thing that I could be giving back to them.

One gets the feeling that if Julia were to do poorly in her coursework, she would feel significant guilt or even shame. After all, she knows her parents are working this hard for a higher purpose: her advancement in the social hierarchy.
Prior to beginning my research, I had made the read many authors whose work triggered me to hypothesize that part of what may be going on for working class or low income students who were blocked in their writing was that perhaps they were ambivalent about doing well in school and thus surpassing their own parents (London 1989; Lubrano 2004; Rodriguez 2010). Journalist Alfred Lubrano (2004), author of the memoir *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*, argues that individuals who come from the working class and are the first in their family to go to college sometimes face significant pressure from home to remain close to their family culture. Lubrano calls those who have blue collar roots but who are headed for white collar futures “Straddlers” because they are straddling two worlds, but Straddlers never feel completely at home in either world. Thus they are in limbo. For young college-aged Straddlers, Lubrano notes, oftentimes the effect of college is profoundly alienating. College not only changes a person, in Lubrano’s eyes, it can “corrupt.” In a chapter entitled “The Shock of Education: How College Corrupts,” he observes:

[B]lue collar parents can’t know how college can change someone. They can’t know that college isn’t just a tool you work with; it works on you. And the alchemy is unpredictable and often disturbing for people who couldn’t possibly be prepared for the molecular-level metamorphosis they will behold in their son or daughter. College makes one understand there is no single way to look at things. That can be an unwanted revelation in a blue collar place, where the rules are pretty much cast in concrete, and the primary colors are black and white (Lubrano, 2004, p. 59).

Lubrano notes the profound ambivalence many blue collar parents feel about their son or daughter’s education and the deep friction and sometimes explicit antagonism this ambivalence can generate. The common warning, “don’t think you’re any better than us,” from parent to child can produce in the student the same deep ambivalence. Lubrano
notes “there will always be separation issues when any child, regardless of class, leaves the family to go to college…[b]ut such issues are exacerbated when a person enters another culture” (p. 68). Indeed, some students may resist this wrenching away from the family that college represents and use writing block as a refusal to participate in the cleavage. For Julia and other students like her, writing block may sometimes represent her unwillingness to surpass, through education, the family she loves. Her refusal to make progress in her work would help to keep her close, at least symbolically, to the mother and father, brothers and sisters she has left behind. In this light, writing block embodies the inherent ambivalence about social mobility and the subsequent feeling of limbo—you can’t move forward, but you can’t go back.

Students like Cai illustrated the other side of this intrinsic dilemma. You must move forward or you waste all the sacrifices your parents made on your behalf:

I’ve always wanted to do that [do better than my parents], and that’s what they want for me, too. Just for the kids to do better. And I’m trying to do that. Because if I don’t do that, then it kind of—I don’t wanna let them down… I just feel like they work so hard and they raised me so well, that for me to do better than they did is a reward in itself, for them.

In this way, Cai shares Tasheena’s motif of putting substantial effort into her coursework so as not to waste her parents’ sacrifices. To squander their efforts would be, quite literally, a shame. Yet their choking in the face of such pressure suggests their deep ambivalence about actually “do[ing] better” than their parents.

That parents want more for their children than they themselves had is a theme that resonates across this subsample. Some students, like Sean, a working class Korean student, interpret their role in helping to make this happen quite literally. For Sean, the
onus is on him to repay his parents’ sacrifices through not only hard work and good grades but also in actuality, with money. His father is a pastor, and his mother helps her husband in his work.

I see their sacrifice, like, as a pastor, they serve other people—but it’s not what I would do. Because I know that my parents went through a lot, and I don’t want to actually go through it again. Yeah, I don’t think my parents would like me to go through it either. I mean, they know that through all that hardship that we would be able to, like, get God’s blessings and all, but I would rather approach it in a different way: like, by starting a new company, like a venture enterprise [and] with that money, I’ll be able to help them financially maybe. I may not be able to help them spiritually but at least financially.

Sean sees himself as being at Boston College to get good grades, graduate with honors, and launch a lucrative career in the business world. To do so, Sean has to give much less weight to that which has been at the very center of his parents’ lives and careers, God. In his eyes, Sean is going to trade “God’s blessings” for financial security, not just for himself but, perhaps more to the point, for his parents. In the face of such a profound trade off, Sean *must* do well on his papers if he is to “do justice,” as he puts it, to his parents’ sacrifices in his own alternative, non-religious way. The pressure Sean feels to get his writing “right” is subsequently rather dire. When he looks around at his friends who can “just start typing [a paper] on their laptop… and boom, they’re finished!,” he considers his own substantial writing block and wonders out loud “Why am I like this and not them?”

To return to John’s statement at the beginning of this section, writing papers “is a high stakes game” in which “you *have* to do well if you wanna, like, make people proud of you back home.” Many students, particularly low income and working class men and
women, are acutely aware of the sacrifices their parents have made to get them to a place like Boston College. Likewise, they tend to understand that, given their class backgrounds, they are coming in with a dominant cultural capital deficit that makes writing feel like a game “you can’t win,” as John put it. It is no wonder that so many students feel substantial pressure to do well academically in order to honor their parents’ hard work and consequently experience block in the face of the blank screen and its blinking cursor. Furthermore, the fact that these students suffer from significant difficulties with academic writing means they risk the very outcome (poor grades) they are so afraid will disappoint—and more importantly—dishonor their parents. The resulting guilt surrounding one’s writing block is evident in the stories of so many students. In John’s words:

I feel like I’m disappointing my family if I can’t improve [my “writer’s block”]... They worked hard to send me here... and I feel like I let them down in some sense... It’s just, as I’m struggling [with writing], I’m always like, “Oh, I’m letting them down now,” and it’s like a snowball effect going on.

So not only is there pressure to achieve good grades, which can have deleterious effects on one’s ability to get words on the page, there is also extraordinary pressure, once one has developed “writer’s block,” to get over the problem so as not to do wrong by one’s parents. This double bind only triggers continued writing struggles in a “snowball effect” and encourages ongoing “choking.” In some situations, as is the case with John, writing exemplifies a performance that is very high stakes for other reasons: his father has told him if he “doesn’t make it” at Boston College, he cannot transfer to another school. His only other option is the military: [“My dad, as he quoted—and [so did] every one of my friends—“Well,” he said, “You can transfer to Afghanistan and that’s it!””]. In other
words, John has to do well at Boston College because this is his one and only chance to do so, or the military—and the threat of injury or death that it represents—looms as the alternative. High stakes indeed.

As a few respondents noted, children of privilege tend not to have to worry about such things and thus have “more leeway,” as Tasheena put it, than do lower class students. Jennifer, a low income white student who is a first generation college student, observes, with some bitterness, that upper middle class students could, if they were doing poorly—or even if they simply did not like it at Boston College—could simply transfer to another school.

I don’t know if they’d care as much because they, you know, they have a lot of things to fall back on. They’d be like, “Oh well, it doesn’t really matter because I’m still wealthy—I don’t have to worry about that, paying for school, or I could afford to go to a different school…I could transfer schools and afford it.”

Whereas for most low income and working class students, the choice to attend Boston College was predicated on the fact that it was the school that offered them the best financial aid package. If they do so poorly that they need to transfer schools, their options are then quite limited. They do not have the luxury of simply transferring to an equally ranked school. Rather, options tend to include only state schools or community colleges, which students understand represent a lower status and promise fewer opportunities than an elite institution such as Boston College. If one needs not only to maintain sufficient grades to stay enrolled but also to achieve excellent grades to “do justice” to one’s parents’ sacrifices, then every paper a student write either helps or hurts their chances. Each assignment poses a threat, putting their most deeply held goals and dreams at risk.
What happens when, in the face of such high stakes, students simply cannot put words on the page? Maria, the working class African American first generation college student described earlier in the chapter, has a story I am going to tell in depth to give the reader a sense of the extreme lengths to which a blocked person will go in order to avoid writing. Maria gets so upset with herself when she is writing papers that she sometimes gets physically distressed: “The other day, I, like—I was, like, almost on the verge of screaming, and I kicked over a trash can. I was like, “I can’t get it right!” Um, yeah, it frustrates me.” Maria’s frustration with her writing often results in her not turning in the papers she views as beneath her own standards. Consequently, she tends to “just take the zero” on written assignments “at least once a semester in each [writing-intensive] class,” which understandably has brought her overall grade point average down significantly. However, it matters more to Maria that she “get it right” than she get an assignment in on time (or, frequently, at all).

I’d rather, like, not have anything, than to have something and then the teacher will be like, “This is bad.” Like, if they don’t have anything of my work in front of them, they can’t really say if I’m a [bad] writer or not! (Laughs.)… Cuz I feel like, uh, it like tarnishes your name, you know, what they think about you? I’m better off with them just thinkin’ that I didn’t do it.

In Maria’s internal calculus, handing in something that is not “right” will reflect poorly not only on her as a person even more than turning in nothing at all and looking as if she does not even care. For Maria, it is a point of honor to refuse to hand over anything that could be taken as evidence that she is not capable. To say sub-par work “tarnishes your name” may suggest that Maria is worried about how her behavior will reflect not only on her but on her whole family. It is curious that she feels that appearing to lack ability is
worse than appearing to lack motivation, given how many students fear projecting an
image of the “slacker.” Nonetheless, her high personal standards have already cost her
dearly and promise to cost her even more down the road. To wit, she relays a story in
which she met with an employer that came to campus, but because she was not sure how
to compose her follow-up email to him so that it was “correct” and “appropriate,” she
simply gave up and “moved on to the next employer.” Her copious laughter in response
to this story suggests she is either unperturbed that she is literally passing up career
opportunities because of her writing struggles or that she is so uncomfortable with her
situation she does not know what to do about it. Maria even admits that she actually
shreds her old papers because she does not want “anyone” beyond her teachers to read
her writing, communicating something of her angst around being judged on her writing.

When I ask her why she thinks she is so concerned about her writing,

Maria responds:

    I think it’s more, like, the pressure I put on myself, so like, I set a
    high standard, and if I don’t feel like… I’m going to accomplish
    that, like, goal, then I’d rather not [try]. Cuz It even happens the
    same with [my job]—I do, like, flyers for the office I work in, and
    my boss would be like “This is perfect! We’re going to put it up to
    the press tomorrow.” And I’m like, “No! No, I don’t think you
    understand, that’s crooked, and that’s, like, [not right].” So I won’t
    put it out, or I’ll take it home with me tonight and work, even
    though [she] won’t pay me the hours.

In other words, Maria sees herself as a perfectionist,\textsuperscript{16} and “that’s just me.” She puts
pressure on herself and at least initially cites no other sources of pressure. I followed up
by asking her, “What would be the negative consequences of your not being perfect or

\textsuperscript{16} In the next chapter, perfectionism will be discussed at length. It is sufficient to note here that
the structural underpinnings of Maria’s perfectionist tendencies vary significantly from those of
the upper middle class students in the study.
falling short of perfect—why is that so bad?” Maria sucked a sharp breath of air and looked somewhat stricken.

Cuz then people relate that to me! So like with the flyers—I walk around campus and someone sees a flyer, and they’re like, “That’s a terrible flyer!” and I’m like, that’s my flyer—like, Oh my god, I can’t believe I did—or you see my writing and [think], “Maria’s not educated” or something like that. So it’s, like, very important that, you know—I’d rather be coming across as being, like, lazy or, like, forgetful, rather than, like, unprofessional or… um, something like that.

At this point in our interview, Maria appeared rather upset. Even her language intimates a level of distress I had not anticipated. Her statement is full of ellipses, as if she does not care to even finish the thought, especially when she imagines what others might think of her in the face of sub-par writing. She speaks in such a way that she italicizes several words (me, my, writing, not educated, very, unprofessional) dramatizing the level of importance she places on this general point: I cannot appear uneducated.

When I responded by asking what if someone did come to the conclusion she was not well educated—what would be so horrible about that, she exclaimed, “Everything! Everything! Hopefully that never happens!” I jumped in and clarified that I was only suggesting a hypothetical, but she interrupted me, “See, that’s why I cringe when I submit papers! Yeah, that would be, like, not the end of the world, but really close to it.” I could tell from Maria’s face that she was not joking, and I wonder if her horror stems in part from her feeling herself to be in a serious bind.

In the end, Maria views her writing struggles as her own private problem: “I don’t really like blame it on my background or the demographics. More so the fact that I just didn’t, didn’t care, didn’t put the effort into it. It was like a personal thing.” Again, in
spite of their fleeting mention of their educational disadvantages, many students, such as Maria, insist that their writing blocks are simply their own fault. They hang onto their agency even though doing so sheds negative light on their character as a person. It is as if they ransom one part of their identity to save another. They would rather fall on their sword and take the blame for their writing difficulties than admit structural factors may contribute to the fear that blocks them. In a word, maintaining a sort of false consciousness enables students to preserve the agency they need to protect their image as a capable student. So be it if they seems lazy or lacking in discipline to others, so long as they do not come off as unable. Such students tend to prize their agency above all else.

CLASS MATTERS

In sum, for many non-upper middle class students, severe writing difficulties can be viewed as choking in the face of a high stakes performance in which nothing short of one’s social mobility lies in the balance. Where college represents a rite of passage from their home culture of a blue collar life to their potential post-graduation culture of white collar aspirations (Lubrano 2004), the “writer’s block” of many non-upper middle class students may represent their liminal status between being at a dominant cultural capital deficit on the one hand and having the cultural capital one gains upon attainment of a relatively elite college degree on the other hand. These students do not yet have the language of the more highly valued forms of cultural capital required by academic writing, and yet they are struggling to get away from the language of their originating class status with its accompanying devalued forms of cultural capital. In many regards, they are haunted by the prospect of having to return, shame-faced, to their home culture
and blue collar roots should they fail to succeed in college, and yet they are in many cases also ambivalent about surpassing their parents in this process. This dilemma thereby ends up letting their parents down and dishonoring the sacrifices their family has made in order to enable them the opportunity of social mobility. Academic writing block, in this way, embodies nothing less than a threat to reproduce the structure of class inequalities and to definitively prevent a lower class individual from reaching the upper echelons of the socioeconomic ladder.

It is likely not a coincidence that so many less privileged students carry the burden of their writing difficulties on their own shoulders. This brand of “false consciousness” is in keeping with a critical component of hegemony. That is, if the ruling class wishes to remain in the dominant position in the social structure, they must produce in the lower classes the sense that their inability to achieve social mobility is no one’s fault but their own. Were they to sustain a truly structural perspective, non-privileged individuals may come to see—as well as resent and even rebel against—the ways in which they are forcibly held down by a mechanism that seeks to ensure the reproduction of structural inequalities and a class system from which they do not benefit.
CHAPTER FIVE

Pressured Voices: Writing Block as Status Anxiety

I read [the paper] and was just like, “This is just not strong.” So I rewrote it. Like, I wanna hand in the best work I can, something I’ll feel good about, so yeah, I’ll just throw it out… I am a perfectionist, which really sucks because I’m honestly my own worst enemy. I am so hard on myself with, like, everything I do. I usually will not stop doing something until I feel like it’s, like, perfect, or as perfect as I can make it…. I can’t slack! I don’t know why.

(Elise, an upper middle class white student)

As with the students in Chapter Four, those whose voices are presented in this chapter also approach writing as a high stakes performance, albeit for very different reasons. Writing block can again be understood as a form of choking in the face of the overwhelming—and at least subjectively—consequential risk of failure. For the individuals in the previous chapter, writing block represents an awareness of one’s disadvantage vis-à-vis dominant cultural capital in relation to one’s classmates, and
failure to conquer the block can contribute to the reproduction of social class inequalities. In this chapter, we will hear the voices of students whose writing blocks can be viewed as an expression of status anxiety or uneasiness about the solidity of one’s social class standing. While the students in the previous chapter were individuals in the lower echelons of the socioeconomic hierarchy, students in this chapter are exclusively upper middle class individuals, some of whom experience a sense of subjective disadvantage relative to their peers and the vast majority of whom experience paralyzing perfectionism that frequently produces significant writing blocks. That “writer’s block” can be caused by perfectionism is not a new argument (Boice 1993). What is novel is my contention that perfectionistic writing block is a psychological cost of structural advantage. In other words, perfectionism has deeply structural roots and is not merely a personality trait peculiar to the individual. The individuals in this chapter suffer from a psychological state that reflects not only their privileged socioeconomic standing but also the fragility of that standing in today’s uncertain economic climate. I am not suggesting that most upper middle class students struggle with a perfectionistic writing block or with any writing block at all for that matter; I am merely showing that for those upper middle class students in my study who experience academic writing blocks, a significant majority (79%) exhibit signs of perfectionism and fear of judgment.

Nelson (1993) cites what is commonly discussed in the popular psychology self-help literature—namely, that fear of evaluation, fear of failure, and fear of success are inextricably linked with perfectionism as major causal factors in the development of writing blocks. Boice (1993:26) defines perfectionism as the fear of not being able to meet the “unrealistically high” standards of the writer, who has set goals characterized by
their extremity and immoderation. In each case, fear is believed to be the heart of perfectionism, fear that would largely be classified as psychological in nature. Indeed the literature tends to view perfectionism strictly as a personality variable. What I would like to propose is that the fear that these perfectionistic students experience is not merely a psychological or personality variable but that it is structural too. In other words, the upper middle class students in this study—some of whom feel at a subjective disadvantage to their even more privileged peers and all of whom express an anxious response to the pressure they are under—exhibit a perfectionism that represents their status anxiety.

Today’s upper middle class college students are in a liminal period. They are, in the words of Victor Turner (1987), “betwixt and between” two sets of class-based expectations. On the one hand, the privileged classes are accustomed to viewing college as a time ideally suited for the exploration of one’s identity, passions, and aspirations (Aronson 2008). On the other hand, there is abundant evidence surrounding today’s students that the current economy offers them no guarantees for upward mobility or even class status stasis. They thus harbor varying degrees of awareness that college as a time for identity exploration is a luxury they may no longer be able to afford if they want to secure a future of financial stability. Thus the drive to be perfect derives not only from the significant “achievement pressure” endemic to the upper middle class (Luthar 2003; Deemerath 2009) and the traditionally “future-oriented” nature of individuals of privilege (LeShan 1952; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Rubin 1976; Messner 1990; Lubrano 2004), but also from these students’ nascent understanding that their achievements or lack thereof in college can have long-ranging consequences. Their writing becomes even higher stakes
in an emergent era of economic uncertainty: to maintain their class status, they must pursue high achievement in college, earn good grades, and write better than their classmates. Not all upper middle class students experience this particular brand of anxious and even defensive perfectionism, but all those in my sample who experienced it were upper middle class. This concept differs from the popular conception of perfectionism in that it acknowledges the social aspects of the condition.

There is a lot of pressure on upper middle class students to strive for perfection. As Damien puts it:

I definitely strive for excellence in all aspects, you know? If I don’t feel like something is good enough to turn in, I won’t turn it in… There is a lot of pressure—not just [on] me, but [on] people around me that I know—to be perfect.

I will argue that this pressure, whether students understand it or not, is not only endemic to the upper middle class but is also particularly acute in the present-day economic climate of uncertainty. In fact, as I will show, most students remain unconscious of the structural components of their private anxiety. By and large, they believe that their perfectionism is “just me” and an indicator of their personal faults. This particular brand of false consciousness, however, only serves to perpetuate the misleading notion that writing blocks are purely psychological in nature. This belief in turn masks writing block’s role in the potential reproduction of class inequalities in the case of their less privileged peers, as well as its potential role in the instigation of downward mobility of which these upper middle class students are at risk.
The economy today’s college students face is not nearly as forgiving as the one encountered by their parents or even students just five years’ their senior. Economic sociologist Sarah Babb crisply framed it this way:

These kids are entering a much more Darwinian world of “survival of the fittest,” a result of massively increased socio-economic inequality over the past thirty or so years. The top is higher, the bottom is lower, the middle is smaller, and you have to work harder to stay on top.17

Indeed, not only has the gap between the richest and the poorest Americans never been wider, but according to the Brookings Institution, this gap is also becoming a permanent divide, substantially reducing the possibility of social mobility for the less socioeconomically advantaged.18 The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 haunts recent memory as an indisputable embodiment of the unrest caused by these profound inequalities. Similarly, frequent stories of unemployment, foreclosures, and precipitous losses in personal savings have dominated national newspapers and public radio air waves ever since the great economic crisis of 2008. After hovering near a low point of 4.4% in 2007, the unemployment rate shot up to a high of 10% in 2009 just one year after the housing crisis.19 Jobs are being irretrievably shipped overseas at a dangerous clip, leaving many workers staggering in the wake of the outsourcing and downsizing. With massive state budget cuts becoming more and more commonplace, careers, such as teaching, that once guaranteed job security, decent benefits, and healthy pensions can no longer promise the solidly middle class lifestyle they once embodied.

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17 2013, personal communication
The cost of college itself has risen sharply in the past several years with no sign of slowing down in the near future, which has translated into the need for even middle class families to take out larger and larger educational loans to afford higher education for their children—and this at a time when it is ever more necessary for citizens to attain college degrees in order to avoid being relegated to a lifetime of unstable low status and low wage work. As such, student loan debt has climbed dramatically in recent years with an estimated $1 trillion in total student loan debt today, disproportionately impacting women and minorities due to both gender and racial wage gaps.\(^{20}\) Complicating this picture is an emerging trend among employers who complain that today’s college graduates are poorly trained and thus respond by hiring them at lower rates than in previous years\(^{21}\). In a word, today’s graduates face a “scary” economic picture, as one young man put it—one that is as uncertain as it is unstable. It is no longer the case that college graduates can rely on easy entry into careers that promise economic security. Upper middle class students face uphill battles to maintain—much less improve upon—their originating socioeconomic status. Whether or not students are cognizant of the specifics of these economic contingencies, they are certainly coming of age in a period of economic angst.

A SENSE OF SUBJECTIVE DISADVANTAGE

While it is not altogether surprising that many less privileged students suffer from a loss of confidence due to their recognition upon entering Boston College that they are


ill-prepared for college writing, it is notable that a sizable number (52%) of the upper middle class students in this study echo a similar “inferiority complex” or sense of being underprepared in relation to their peers. Despite their privileged backgrounds, such students are aware that they are now in an environment where they are surrounded by students even more privileged than themselves, whose superior cultural capital and academic preparation position them at a relative disadvantage in relation to those peers of even higher socioeconomic status. The theory of relative deprivation, which has helped to resolve many paradoxes or inexplicable trends (Walker and Smith 2001), can explain the conundrum in which these otherwise extremely privileged students can feel at a disadvantage to others. Namely, relative deprivation is when a person compares himself to those around him and finds himself lacking objects of desire that he sees others possess (Runciman 1966; Bayertz 1999). It is different from absolute deprivation in which a person experiences objective deprivation regardless of the experience of others. A significant subsample (roughly 32%) of all of the upper middle class students in the study reported significant distress due to their subjective sense of having a handicap vis-à-vis the “all the kids from boarding schools.”

Jaime, an upper middle class Puerto Rican student, recalls her last instance of writing block: “I couldn’t think of anything so I was stuck there on that page for, like, one whole day.” She goes on to describe her public high school back home in Puerto Rico as “pretty bad.” When I ask her if she feels the school prepared her well with regard to writing, she laughed.

I don’t feel high school prepared me well at all! Because just the fact that I had never written a research paper before college, before my freshman year in college, just shows a lot… All my friends had
written, like, 15, 20 page papers already, and my longest paper in high school was, like, 3 pages. So that was just—it was just kind of a shock that I had so little exposure to writing in school.

When Jaime refers to “all” of her friends, one gets the distinct feeling that she feels outnumbered by students with superior training in academic writing and fears she is almost alone in her lack of sufficient preparation. Her laughter in response to my question suggests she feels her high school was literally laughable when compared to the secondary schools her friends attended. It is likely, given Jaime’s description of her friends, that they fall largely into the upper middle class category, and in fact, Jaime later notes that many of them went to private high schools or “really good” public high schools.

While Jaime cites lack of exposure to writing in general as a reason for her unpleasant “shock” upon coming to college, others describe having significant writing requirements in high school but much lower standards of assessment than what they are finding at Boston College. Ben, an upper middle class Jewish student elaborates:

I went to this public high school where, um, there was a much lower curve (laughs) than there is at Boston College, and the teachers didn’t care much in particular if your writing was good or bad (laughs again)… High school writing was the worst because, um, high school writing is very much about putting in as many words and complex sentence structure—I had a thesis statement I handed into a teacher, and she marked it with a lower grade, and then I just added more clauses to it without expanding substance and made some words longer, and she gave me an A+… Whereas good writing in college is very much about reduction and making it as cohesive as possible.

While Ben begins with a declaration of the poor quality of his high school’s writing standards in particular, he soon expands his discussion to high school writing in general. In this way, he works to normalize his own experiences, as if everyone around him is in
the same boat. Of course it does not escape his notice that while his friends (whom he later confirms are largely from private schools) do not struggle with writing, he does:

Starting [to write] takes a while, and then it will take me sometimes hours to write an intro paragraph. (Laughs, embarrassed.) I’ll write it, delete it, write it, delete it... There’s very much the artistic aspect, because sometimes it’s just fortuitous—you’ll luck upon a pretty sentence or a logical flow of words, um, and that’ll work really well. And then, other times, you just can’t do it. You know, writer’s block.

It is clear that Ben holds himself to a higher standard, wherein writing is an art form—a standard that reflects a privileged perspective on writing as, at its best, an aesthetically pleasing artistic expression rather than merely an instrumental, functional, or mechanical exercise. It is as if Ben is stuck between an upper middle class set of assumptions and the reality that his own secondary education did not prepare him to meet those expectations. Not only is Ben unable to articulate the bind in which he is caught, he also cites himself as the reason for his failure. In his eyes, it is “luck” that enables him to write fluently when the writing does come easily, while he blames himself (“you just can’t do it”) for those times he gets blocked. He gives his agency away when he is successful but retains it when he is not. It is no wonder he finds writing, as he puts it, “painful.”

Like Ben, Maggie, an upper middle class white woman who attended a public high school prior to coming to Boston College, describes at length how she was not well-prepared for analytic college writing, and yet she blames herself for her struggles.

I’ve always hated [writing]. (Laughs.)... I don’t know, I, I don’t mind writing, like, in a reflective way, or just writing my thoughts and stuff, but when it comes down to ‘analyze this book’ or something, I start to get shook up about my writing in general because I think that I have a less analytical way of writing... I don’t have the, like, right vocabulary and the right way of writing,
you know, an academic type of paper… in an intellectual type of way.

In Maggie’s misuse of the term “shook up,” she unwittingly underscores her own point about not having the “right vocabulary.” However, she seems unaware that to have the “right” tools for higher-level analytic writing, one needs to have been given those tools and taught to use them in an appropriate educational setting. Instead, like Ben, she places the blame entirely on herself rather than holding her prior schooling at least partially responsible. This attributional tendency might explain the severe distress she feels around writing tasks.

The idea of it just being a complete blank page—like, I can envision how many papers I’ve had where, you know, my name is there, the [name of the] class is there, space, space, center, make up some title to fill in, and then having, like, no place to go… that’s given me anxiety.

If Maggie sees herself as at fault for her inability to write in the “intellectual type of way” that college papers call for, it is unsurprising she describes having deeply low regard for herself in relation to college academics.

One might sensibly conclude that privately educated upper middle class students are exempt from the sense that they have been ill-prepared for college writing, and in the context of my sample, this is largely the case. Alena, however, serves as an exception. An upper middle class woman of Middle Eastern descent, Alena gives me the definitive sense that her high school, though a private boarding school, is not one she held in high esteem. I ask her directly if she believes her school was not as “good” as the schools some of her peers had attended.

Oh, definitely! My school is [names school]? It was, like, the number one, like, football team in the nation. And very,
like, *athletic* focused… Sometimes, like, the football coach would, like, teach English class! Which I, I, I don’t know. I wouldn’t want to be in a football coach’s class. I’d want somebody who majored in Education *and* English to teach my [English] class.

The fact that Alena cites her school by name indicates both that she is confident I have heard of her school (which I had not) and that I associate its name with athletics over academics. Perhaps she had somehow guessed that I myself had attended a private high school and would thus be familiar with the elite world such schools represent. More likely, she herself exists in a social environment where this world is taken as a given (indeed I found out later most of her friends attended boarding schools as well) and thus needed little explanation. She nearly shudders when she considers that she might have had to take a class with the football coach, clearly delineating a sharp divide between “athletics” and “academics,” with the latter far superior in status to the former. Later in her interview, Alena links her misgivings about her own secondary education with her less confident sense of herself as a college student:

> It might just be because everyone here is, like, super brilliant, and everyone came from *really* good high schools… In [my] high school, it’s like if you did well, it was, like, *exceptional*. Versus, like, here, [where] if you do well, it’s just like, “Oh, you’re one of the many.”

Alena’s comments here recall Luthar (2003:1583) who stated that “to be average is tantamount to having failed” given the “unrelenting pressures to excel.” She feels that outstanding achievement is so commonplace at Boston College as to be rendered rather ordinary.

> Many others echo Alena’s sense of having been a big fish in a relatively small pond and then becoming a relatively small fish in a big pond. Elise, an upper middle
class white student who attended a public school in a “very good school district.”

nonetheless views her school as “not as good” as the places many of her friends attended.

“I just really enjoyed [high] school. And I was so good at school… and I, like, liked
doing well. I liked impressing the teachers to get the A. I don’t know.” I stop her to
clarify: “You made that past tense. Do you—” at which point she energetically
continues:

Well! Once coming to BC—I was at the top of the class in high
school and elementary school, and when you’re going to a college
like BC, it’s kind of like—I don’t know—the top percentages of
whatever class are coming here, and there’s other schools that are a
lot better than us, don’t get me wrong, but it’s still, like, a
somewhat prestigious university—it’s smart people competing
with smart people. And so you don’t feel like you’re at the top
anymore… It was difficult for me [freshman year], just trying to
figure out… how am I gonna make this? How do I wanna pave my
path in college? Because it’s not just gonna fall into my lap.

Like Alena, Elise suffers from a newfound sense of relative inferiority. However, unlike
her less privileged peers, who tend to view Boston College as an extremely prestigious
university, she is quick to point out that Boston College is not as prestigious as it could
be—thus suggesting Elise is all too cognizant of the fact that there are a multitude of
people out there, say, in Ivy League schools for instance, that she is now somehow
below. While good grades and recognition may have come easily to her prior to college,

college is a different game altogether, where she has suddenly had to adjust to the fact
that “it’s not just gonna fall into my lap.” Elise feels she has to work harder than ever for
approbation, and she struggles in particular with writing. She describes spending hours
and hours attempting to improve her papers, and she is apprehensive about the
conclusions her professors may come to if her writing is not excellent.
The professors that do know me—I want them to respect me for being, like, intelligent and engaged…. And so when I’m writing these papers, I’m like, this has to be really good because…I have to prove something! Like, I should be getting an A on this paper because I’m so much smarter than all these freshmen! Again, I think it’s just the need to prove myself.

As a senior, Elise’s assessment that she should be “smarter” than “all these freshmen” stems in part from remembering the “shock” she experienced upon coming to Boston College. Her own freshmen year, she recalls, was full of little injuries to her confidence, where she had to come to terms with the painful notion that she was no longer a “big fish in a small pond.” However, over time, she has experienced improvement and now expects herself to “at least” be “smarter” than the youngest, most inexperienced students. In other words, while Elise feels she may have been “behind” in terms of her cultural capital and academic preparedness relative to her peers upon her entry to college, she retains the belief she can and will “catch up” and prove herself yet.

Other students who share Elise’s initial sense of being “behind” their BC classmates do not necessarily maintain the same optimism with regard to their ability to make up for lost time. Rob, an upper middle class African American man, attended private high school in Wisconsin, but before that, he spent three years in his parents’ native Nigeria and received his middle school education there. While many of his peers feel the shock of their relative educational disadvantage when they first enter Boston College, Rob already experienced this rocky transition when he entered his private high school, where both the workload and pressure were much more intense than he had been used to. When I ask him about his difficulties with academic writing, he tells me:

Maybe [my writing trouble] was just not being as prepared at a young age, and [that’s] kind of something that follows you.
throughout—throughout your life, and throughout your high school, and then onto college. You don’t really realize it until, like, I don’t know, you have to write a paper, and it’s like, “Oh shoot! I don’t know how to start this, like, I don’t know what to do…” It’s definitely hard for me to write a thesis… That’s what most people, like, learn I believe in their middle school years. Um, I feel like I went to a school where we just talked about grammar, and…I’m worried that maybe I didn’t get, like, the best training for [writing]… It’s definitely hard to catch up… Definitely at BC, everyone, I feel like a lot of people are really good writers and they, like, prepared a lot and they’re trying to be nice [when they peer edit your papers] but…I’m always kind of afraid of [their feedback] a little bit.

Rob’s repeated use of the word “throughout” when describing how his underpreparation in academic writing has followed him wherever he goes suggests his perception of and perhaps frustration with its stubborn persistence in his life. He has not, as yet, been able to “catch up” in a way that he is fully satisfied with, and it is this nagging sensation that drives his fear when in a situation where his peers have to read his work. Rhetorically, in using the word “prepared” not as an adjective but as a verb, Rob imagines his peers to be active agents who intentionally prepared themselves for college, rather than as students who happened to receive the advantage of more adequate preparation than he did. Meanwhile, when speaking about his own academic preparation, he uses prepared as an adjective (thus removing his agency in his educational process). One gets the implicit sense that Rob’s embarrassment about his writing is made all the more acute because he imbues his better-trained peers with not only a superior academic preparation but also an agency that he seems to deny himself.

Elizabeth, an upper middle class Korean American student who attended a large public high school, echoes the “inferiority complex” implicit in the interviews above,
only she explicitly correlates her peers’ more privileged educational histories with higher intelligence—setting herself up to feel not as “smart” as her classmates.

Sometimes, like when I’m in class, sitting there, and I hear people talk, I notice that a lot of kids in my classes who come from boarding schools, um, they have, like, different experiences than I do? And um, some of them talk more—I don’t know—*smarter*? They talk a little bit smarter than what I’m used to hearing in my [high school] classrooms.

It is important to note that it is not merely that Elizabeth perceives her peers as being able to “talk smarter” than she can, but that she also recognizes they have had “different experiences” than she has had. Here again, there is an inchoate, unarticulated awareness of the differential cultural capital with which her more privileged peers enter college. Raymond Williams (1977) called such inequalities that people subjectively feel but cannot necessarily articulate “structures of feeling,” and we can clearly see Elizabeth’s structures of feeling here. When I ask Elizabeth how this feeling affects her in the classroom, she admits that she is often “afraid” to speak up for fear her professors will judge her as somehow inferior. Again, the inferiority complex so common among the students in Chapter Four has indeed found residence in several students of privilege due to the *relative* nature of cultural capital. While they certainly tend to have more abundant dominant cultural capital than their working class counterparts, they perceive themselves as having less than their even more privileged peers. However, in the face of this subjective disadvantage, many such students in my study imagine their comparison group as including only other upper middle class students and excluding those with less privilege. In a study of how college students talk about class, Stuber (2006) found a similar pattern: upper middle class students tended to “draw up,” as Stuber put it, and compare themselves not with less privileged working class students, as the subjects in
Lamont’s (1992) study had done, but with their even more privileged upper middle class peers. Stuber (2006:310-311) went on to note the unintended consequences of drawing up:

Compared with their rather anemic descriptions of less privileged students on campus, these [upper middle class] students exhibit a wealth of interest in and knowledge about the lives of other privileged students. This way of looking at social class becomes potentially problematic to the extent that the construction of such boundaries results in greater invisibility for those below. These students remain unaware of the existence of less privileged students, their day to day experiences, and the challenges they may face within a college environment. Furthermore, as they position themselves in relation to more privileged students, they effectively minimize their own, albeit relative, privilege.

It is as if upper middle class students feel that to maintain or solidify their positions of privilege, they need only be aware of their already privileged competitors and are only dimly if at all cognizant of their up and coming working class and lower income peers. Were they to fully understand that their less privileged classmates can, through the vehicle of higher education, climb the socioeconomic ladder, perhaps their status anxiety would take on an even sharper edge. In the following section, I will move on from this subsample of upper middle class students to discuss a much larger subsample – those who experience often paralyzing perfectionism in the face of ever higher class-based expectations for achievement.

PERFECTIONISM
A large majority (79%) of the sample of upper middle class students expressed significant perfectionistic tendencies and/or fear that they will be judged severely through their writing. Larissa, an upper middle class white senior from the Northeast, is a prime example. Below she describes her perfectionism and the associated procrastination and writing block she suffers as a result.

I have a really hard time turning in something that’s not—most things I turn in nowadays are not as good as I know they can be. And that’s very difficult for me. That’s very uncomfortable, and makes me kick myself quite a bit… There’s definitely a lot of self-abuse…. I’m very bad at finishing a paper and being done with it. Like, if I finish it more than twenty four hours ahead of time, it’s hard for me just to print it out and just put it in my backpack to turn in. [LB: “Because it could always be better?”] Exactly! Like, I’ll keep on reading it and editing little things and then going through it, and then, like, printing it out ten minutes before class. Yeah, I have a hard time declaring myself done with something, which is part of the reason why I put it off for so long, because then I have to be done with it… Since I’ve gotten to college, it’s definitely gotten worse, and I don’t really know why that is.

Larissa was actually admitted to an Ivy League school, but chose to attend Boston College despite its lesser prestige because she was opposed to following in the footsteps of her parents, who had both attended the school to which she had been accepted. She was then admitted to Boston College’s Presidential Fellows program—the highest honor for incoming freshmen. While one might imagine such a highly regarded status would give Larissa confidence, for her it has only ratcheted up the pressure she experiences to achieve at the highest level.

Pretty much all of us [in the honors program] turned down Ivies to come here, we’re all in very similar boats in that sense… Part of that mentality though [means] the program has in some ways encouraged, um—A) [it] makes me feel that I should be doing better work, which could be paralyzing at times, and B) [it] makes me feel that I can put these things off, that I can give in to my
writer’s block and still be able to do perfectly fine because…I should be able to get that A without trying.

For Larissa, receiving the school’s only merit scholarship has actually produced a good deal of academic angst, even “paralyzing” her ability to complete her work at times. Though Larissa herself “do[esn’t] really know why” it is that her writing block got so much worse upon entering Boston College, it seems clear from the outside that her matriculation triggered impossibly high expectations with regard to her academic life.

Larissa herself appears to view her “writer’s block” as a self-induced handicap to help prove to herself that she is indeed good enough to “get that A without trying” very hard. For her, to say she “gives in to” her block suggests she believes she has the power to resist and her not doing so is simply a failure of discipline. In framing her writing problems in this way, Larissa holds onto a view of self that is entitled with a sense of agency. It is as if she could choose otherwise at any time. However, there are times when she cannot seem to break through her block no matter how hard she tries.

There was one paper I just couldn’t bring myself to write… It was just, like, impossible for me to sit myself down and actually finish it… I just couldn’t bring myself to write that paper… I had this weird theory that if I get an extension or, like, turn in the paper late…that it then has to be incrementally better than it would have been otherwise, and so I think part of it was, like, it was sooo late that it would’ve had to be, like, publication-worthy!

In the end, she had to take an incomplete in the course, and despite being given an extra semester to complete it, she was never able to finish the paper. She is not, in other words, as in charge of her block as she would like to believe. The high standards Larissa holds for herself as a result of the extremely academically prestigious context in which she defines herself come with a psychological cost.
Larissa is not alone with regard to the exceedingly high standards she has set for herself. Many other students express similar struggles with perfectionistic tendencies.

[My parents and friends] are expecting me to be perfect. They’re expecting me to get, like, 100%, and if I get a, like, 99% out of 100, they’ll say, “What happened to you?” It’s kind of a burden… I have the pressure of, like—Okay, if you want me to be perfect, I’ll be perfect, so I have to be perfect.

(an upper middle class Korean woman)

There are definitely times when I will just x out an entire paragraph, and start the paragraph over… People always say, “Oh, just write down anything,” but it never sounds right.

(an upper middle class woman of Middle Eastern descent)

I read it and was just like, “This is just not strong.” So I rewrote it. Like, I wanna hand in the best work I can, something I’ll feel good about, so yeah, I’ll just throw it out… I am a perfectionist, which really sucks because I’m honestly my own worst enemy. I am so hard on myself with, like, everything I do. I usually will not stop doing something until I feel like it’s, like, perfect, or as perfect as I can make it…. I can’t slack! I don’t know why.

(an upper middle class white woman)

The words of the three women above suggest students who submit themselves to such high standards that it is nearly impossible to achieve them, and yet they continue striving for the unattainable. There is in all of these sentiments a recurrent theme of entitlement: this particular brand of perfectionism, it is my contention, is largely a luxury of the upper middle class. Despite a subset of students feeling at a subjective disadvantage to their peers, these students largely have the basic dominant forms of cultural capital that the lower income and working class students in Chapter Four feel they lack, and armed with this tremendous resource, upper middle class students can afford to be particular in ways that their less privileged counterparts cannot.
Abraham Maslow (1943) famously argued that human beings have a “hierarchy of needs,” the most basic level of which is the satisfaction of physiological requirements, such as food, water, and shelter. One cannot concern oneself with the needs of any given level unless the needs of the more basic level have first been fulfilled. Beyond physiological security, there is in ascending order safety, love and belonging, esteem, and at the peak, self-actualization. While Maslow was a psychologist studying the optimal growth and development patterns of individuals, one could also apply this model to social class. While many of the students in Chapter Four were focused on securing more fundamental needs, such as the late acquisition of dominant cultural capital, the students in this chapter have already been bequeathed all the “right” cultural capital necessary to move onto the next rung of achievement, namely, the drive for “perfection.” In this way, perfectionism is a privilege—a privilege with psychological costs, but a privilege nonetheless.

It is not surprising that students in this subsample expressed significant entitlement. For instance, most individuals told stories in which they were unafraid to ask their professors for extensions or even to question the professor’s rationale for any given assignment. In an extreme example of this entitlement, one multi-racial upper middle class student even described challenging one of her professors directly:

There was one teacher where I literally went up to him and was like, “I don’t see the value in this assignment. If you can explain the value of this assignment, I’m happy to do it.” And he couldn’t explain the value of the assignment… He canceled the assignment for the entire class. I’ve had a lot of luck like that. I’m not afraid to go to my teachers and say, “I don’t understand why we have to do this,” or say, “Look, I’m having a lot of trouble with this—can I have more time?”
Not only does this young woman feel entitled enough to ask for extensions and challenge the authority of her professors, she even uses language in such a way that she demotes her instructors from “professor” to “teacher,” as if to deny or defy the inherent power differential between herself and her college professors and to treat them instead as mere service providers. While this may be an exceptional case of entitlement, many students echoed a similarly strong sense of self. There were those, for instance, who were adamant about maintaining their “own voice” when writing. On some level, the ability to speak in one’s voice is a privilege afforded by having sufficient cultural capital that one is not required to change one’s voice to speak in the “right” academic language.

[When I write papers], I want to be myself, and that’s kind of what I hold true to… I always try to be myself first.

(an upper middle class white man)

I feel pretty confident that I can use my own voice when I write because it feels weird not to do that.

(an upper middle class Latina woman)

I feel like I can [write] in my own voice… I definitely recognize that I have a very strong—or, I don’t know—distinct voice and style that is different from how other people write.

(an upper middle class white woman)

Such students place a high premium on being “true” to “myself” and using “my own voice.” Unlike the students in Chapter Four who often felt that academia called for a different voice than the kind of voice they possessed, many individuals in this chapter feel no compunction about simply writing in their own voice. In fact, it may feel “weird” not to—a good indication that these students do not perceive a significant gulf between their own voice and the voice required by college-level writing, or what composition scholars call the “academic discourse community.” Again, with the lower level on a
Maslowian hierarchy of needs met—i.e., with sufficient dominant cultural capital under their belts to personify the voice of academia—these students have the luxury of “just being myself.”

There is a cost associated with this privilege, however. Namely, as soon as a student feels like he is writing in his own voice, his writing becomes a proxy for himself, and critiques of his written work take on the significance of a rejection of something much more personal—even of who he is as an individual. Most students in this subsample articulated identifying strongly with their writing. In other words, writing for these individuals becomes a high stakes performance in which injuries to the self are a major risk. Below are a few examples of the many ways students articulate how closely they identify with their writing:

I think that [writing] is a reflection of you, like, I mean, when I’m writing…it’s just, like, your thought process, and you’re, like, kind of just spewing everything, and um, it’s definitely, like, my identity… and I hope that they understand and can relate to it.

(an upper middle class African American man)

If I was just an outright terrible writer, then there wouldn’t be a lot—laughs—there wouldn’t be much left [for me]. Writing is everything.

(an upper middle class white man)

I feel like if I fail a paper, I fail a part of myself. I don’t know. I’ve talked about it with friends that are like, “It’s senior year, and I care about school but…this is not worth stressing over—it’s something I’m writing about but it doesn’t mean that it’s me.” But I don’t know….

(an upper middle class white woman)

I definitely, definitely identify with [my writing]… Even though I know I [am] writing to turn it in to a professor, one of my least favorite things in the entire world is when a professor reads something you’ve written in front of you. Um, that’s just, like,
absolutely miserable! (Laughs.) Cuz it’s almost like any judgment they’re making on that writing is also a judgment of you and, like, your intelligence and capabilities or whatever.

(an upper middle class white woman)

Contrast these statements with the comments frequently made by the lower income students in Chapter Four [“I just write to get it done,” “writing is just writing,” “writing is just about getting from, like, point A to, like, point B”] in which writing is much more of an instrumental task. Writing for those students tends to be viewed as an important tool one must skillfully use to get a particular job done or as a vehicle to get a person from where they are to their desired destination. In other words, writing is not necessarily something in which you heavily invest your naked self. Writing is certainly still high stakes for the students in Chapter Four, but not because they see writing as an embodiment of themselves. For less privileged students, writing is, rather, a high stakes performance because of not in spite of its instrumental nature: if the person cannot get from point A to point B, it may start a cascade of unfortunate outcomes that can lead to a lower income student not being able to honor his or her parents’ sacrifices by achieving social mobility through education. However, for the students represented in this chapter, writing is high stakes because writing is perceived to be a reflection of who you are, an expression of your “identity,” and a clear window into your mind that exposes “your intelligence and capabilities.” When writing is, in a word, “everything,” it is no wonder that it can become a loaded and frightening endeavor.

Ben, the upper middle class white junior from earlier in the chapter, calls his family “extremely high achieving,” noting that his family’s aspirations on his behalf fall in line with the Ivy League set. As such, Ben feels caught between the projected
ambitions of his family and the relatively “mediocre” academic reputation of Boston
College by comparison. His father, who had been the editor of the school paper at
Harvard University in his own college days, was disappointed when Ben decided to go to
Boston College. He saw BC as “beneath” his son, and Ben clearly has carried some of
these sentiments with him throughout his college career. He describes his father’s notion
of a “successful life” as one filled with great academic achievements, and he sadly
concludes he must not be living up to his dad’s expectations—a prospect which he admits
“is pretty intense” to bear. Writing has become, for Ben, an activity laden with the
overwrought burden of the “achievement pressure” so pervasive among upper middle
class families.

That’s always the thing where, uh, the thoughts in your head seem
much more profound and insightful, and then when you put them
on paper, they’re, uh, not quite as good. I’m kind of a perfectionist
with essays. I’ll write something down and then keep writing, and
then I’ll go back to it a half an hour later, and then I’ll read the
sentence and be like, “What idiot wrote this? That sounds
terrible!” … [You’re] always rethinking your idea, um, because
between the conception and the reality, there’s always, uh,
something lost in translation. Anything you write could be better
in a thousand ways.

Even Ben’s oral description of his writing ritual is tortured (and “torture” is indeed a
word Ben has associated with academic writing). He describes what he does whenever
he has to write a paper with a series of “and then…,” “and then…,” “and then…,” almost
reenacting for me the arduousness of his writing process. He uses the first person up
until calling himself an “idiot,” at which point he switches to the third person (“anything
you write”), such that even his language embodies the very ritual of self-objectification
he is relating to me. Perhaps it is too painful to remain in the first person when he judges
his own writing and finds it deficient. In any case, Ben clearly subjects himself to what
Larissa called the “self-abuse” so common among the perfectionist writers with whom I spoke.

Later, in our second interview, Ben shares with me his view of intelligence:

I view [intelligence], I don’t know, I view it almost as a binary thing? Like, there are people who have it and people who don’t have it? And I think you can develop it, but it’s sort of the ability to have that insight—like being a good chess player—[it’s] just when you can see things that a lot of people don’t see. I mean, I don’t think people are smart or stupid, but you either have that...kind of mind or you don’t. [LB: “Does seeing intelligence in this way sort of make it scary to write papers, where you are sort of showing—”] Yes! (Laughs.) You’re always trying to convince people that you’re smart? It’s kind of like: damned or saved. (Laughs.) I guess [one’s writing] is either good or bad, and if it’s not good, then there’s not much point. There’s also, like, the “you can’t fire me, I quit” kind of sentiment. I mean, if I don’t try my best, then my best could be anything?

In the rest of Ben’s interview, he tended to use a declarative rather than an inquisitive tone of voice, but I found this excerpt to be of particular importance given how many times he ended his sentences in question format. It was as if Ben was trying his theory of intelligence on for size or even testing it out on me to see my reaction. His frequent nervous laughter at this juncture in the interview also seemed to suggest Ben felt some level of anxiety that if intelligence is a “binary thing,” then what if he fell on the unfortunate side of the equation? In several oft-cited studies on individuals’ view of intelligence, researcher Carol Dweck (2006) argued that people tended to fall along a spectrum between two distinct categories when it came to their understanding of intelligence: those with a “fixed mindset” believe that a person has an innate level of intelligence at birth that cannot increase or decrease over the course of one’s life, while those with a “growth mindset,” believe that intelligence is malleable and can increase
through hard work, education, and training. Ben evidently holds a “fixed mindset,” which Dweck has shown can decrease a person’s academic performance over time. By discrediting the role of hard work, individuals with fixed mindsets tend to avoid practicing and actually end up “self-handicapping,” as is clear from Ben’s remark about his “you can’t fire me, I quit” mentality. In other words, it is possible that Ben’s father, a familial representative of the high standards, expectations, and aspirations—i.e., the “achievement pressure”—so fundamental to the upper middle class, coupled with Ben’s fixed mindset regarding intelligence have driven him headlong into a recurrent pattern of severe writing block and a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. This persistent block has undoubtedly hurt his grades throughout his college career, thus appearing to confirm his deep fear that he does not have the innate intelligence or ability it takes to live the “successful life” expected of him by his father, who is himself a major conduit for the structural burden of upper middle class achievement pressure.

While Ben’s notion of writing determining whether he is “damned or saved” is extreme, many of his peers echo his profound fear of being judged based on their writing, which again they tend to see as a proxy for themselves. One young woman worries aloud about what her professors will think of her:

It’s like there’s immediate judgment occurring… Even if I have put in the time, I know that, like, my papers aren’t perfect. Like, there’re definitely problems. Particularly to someone who’s been in academia for however many years… I mean, part of their job is to judge what they’re reading and to put, like, a value on that… I can tell myself over and over that I don’t really care what the professor thinks of me, but I very much do. Much more what the professor thinks of me than the final grade that they give me. Like, the thought that a professor would think that, I don’t know, [I’m] not a good writer or not a good student or whatever, that’s very uncomfortable. I would much prefer them to think that, I don’t
know, that I have [writer’s block] (laughs), rather than I’m actually just incapable of doing [the assignment].

Like Ben, as well as many of the students in Chapter Four, the majority of students would rather their professors think of them as troubled or obstinate or lazy than simply “incapable.” In this case, one’s writing block serves as a defensive form of perfectionism. The professor who will read and grade the paper becomes what George Herbert Mead (1934) called “the generalized other” to the student, or the representative of the expectations of one’s society at large. Many students imagine this generalized other as both powerful and potentially condemning. To attempt perfection is one strategy for dealing with one’s anxiety about being judged.

Suzette, an upper middle class biracial (Chinese and white) sophomore, is a celloist in the college orchestra. She views academic writing as deeply personal and likens it to a solo musical performance.

Writing is so personal, I guess. Whether [the paper is] actually about yourself or something else, like, it’s completely your own thoughts, your own way of wording, so it’s pretty personal I think. (Laughs.) Even though it shouldn’t be…. Music is kind of similar to writing in that it’s, like, extremely personal, like you’re producing sounds from this instrument, and you’re, like, playing in front of an audience. They’re going to be judging you, whether it’s good or bad, and it’s strictly just you and the instrument, and there’s only so many times you can say, like, “Oh, the instrument isn’t good for her” or something like that. So I think [writing] kind of parallels with my music… Because [with writing] you know there’s an audience. You don’t really know what they’re expecting sometimes or what they’re looking for… It’s just like, “Oh my God, I have to do this, and it has to be good!”

It is clear from this excerpt that Suzette views writing as a performance and a performance whose personal stakes are high. One can sense her fear that she will be judged harshly or negatively by her “audience.” She has in essence taken on herself the
role of her imagined audience and as such has put a good deal of pressure on herself to achieve a *good* performance. Here, she echoes Ben’s binary thinking in that she believes her performance will be judged as either good or bad and not anything in between. Of course, it is this kind of binary thinking that only increases the intensity of pressure to which one feels subjected. Baumeister (1984) argued that anything that intensifies the pressure one feels in the face of a performance of some kind increases the likelihood that the individual in question will “choke” during that performance. Finally, it is interesting to note that so many of the upper middle class students talked about writing as “personal” and were thus all the more apprehensive about the personalized judgment that would follow, while many of the less privileged students discussed writing as an activity where you “put on” a different voice or “acted out” the role of the academic. The students in this chapter, however, tended to have a more *intimate* relationship to their writing, as no significant pretense stands between their words and their selves. Therefore if their words are judged to be lacking, it is the *self*—and not one’s “false face,” as John from Chapter Four put it—that suffers the negative consequences of this judgment.

The upper middle class students in my sample had often inherited the traditional view that college is a time to explore one’s passions, experiment with a variety of different interests, and “figure out” one’s identity. Many scholars have noted that this perspective is common among both upper middle class students and their families (Aronson 2008). It is actually so pervasive a view that many who hold it assume “everyone” else does as well, and indeed it is a commonly cited refrain in our culture (Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray 2011). However, in point of fact, this is a perspective that has been afforded only by a significant level of privilege—both in terms of social class,
and as I will argue, also in terms of generational status. In other words, one must be of a relatively high socioeconomic status to have the luxury of treating college as a prolonged period of identity exploration. Those in the working class cannot necessarily afford to indulge their children with an extended adolescence such as that (Bettie 2003). Rather, college, if one gets there at all, is more frequently regarded from an instrumental perspective: it is your ticket “out,” and so you had better negotiate your choices wisely to increase your chances of social mobility upon graduation. However, it is just as surely the case that only previous generations of upper middle class individuals could bank on college as an exploratory stage of one’s life. Today’s upper middle class students, whether they have come to terms with it or not, face a drastically different economic picture that does not necessarily allow for such luxuries. In short, “good” (read: upper middle class) jobs are much harder to come by today, and it is no longer safe to assume one will land such a job upon graduation, thus leaving much less room for “play” than in previous generations of privileged students. Moreover, it is also the case today more than ever before that students of privilege are not only in competition with each other for such jobs, but also with those socially mobile working class and lower income students who have successfully attained sufficient dominant cultural capital through an elite education.

Many upper middle class students today are “betwixt and between” the old notion of college as a time of identity exploration and a more instrumental view of college as a place to secure one’s economic future. Several still subscribe to the former view. Rob, the upper middle class African American junior from earlier in the chapter, describes this more idealistic view of college:
I don’t know, I feel like college is very timeless. I mean, no matter what generation, I believe it’s very important to kind of find yourself, um, kinda just take different classes, make mistakes, kind of get back up, and see what you really like. It’s kind of a place, a place to kind of see what you like and what you don’t. [LB: “To explore your passions?”] Yeah. Passions, majors, yeah.

For Rob, that college is “timeless” seems to imply that it is a kind of bubble, a safe haven in which to explore one’s interests, to “find yourself, and to “make mistakes” in an inconsequential context. Rob associates “finding yourself” directly with “making mistakes” and “getting back up” again, as if discovering who you are is like learning to ride a bike: it requires a lot of falling down and a lot of picking oneself up and starting over again. In other words, figuring out one’s identity is an iterative process that itself necessitates the privilege of time and a forgiving environment. Rob presumes both. Yet soon after these comments, Rob returns to the discussion of college and seems to express some anxiety and a nascent sense that his idealistic views of college may not necessarily line up with “the real world.”

I don’t want college to be like that—the real world. I mean, I want it to be, like, a place where you can kind of learn and grow. Um, I think college is more where you can try different things? And… if you don’t like it, you can just completely change, and no one really like—I mean, it’s not, like, hurting you in any way. But once you’re out of college and you’re in the real world, then it’s more, like—you kind of have to know what you wanna do. And if you kind of change or switch or [do] something completely different, I mean, [then] it’s back to square [one]… but in college you can come back, you can change all you want, and it doesn’t really matter.

Rob’s wording is telling—*I don’t want college to be like that, I want it to be like this*—indicating he has at least some awareness that “the real world” may be creeping in on the “bubble,” as he calls it, that is college. Rob would likely not say he does not want college to be like the real world nor would he call college a “bubble,” unless he felt that
his view of college was in some way under threat. However, in this quotation, Rob soon eclipses this initial glimpse of awareness of “the real world” with a return to his more idealistic vision of what college *should* be like. By the end of this excerpt, it is as if Rob is trying to assert that in college, those mistakes he mentioned earlier “do[n’t] really matter.”

Similarly, Joanna juxtaposes a brief mention of “the real world” with the “fun” and lack of “responsibility” of college, echoing the same tension between a harsher adult world and college as a forgiving environment in which to grow up that Rob’s comments intimate:

> I view college as the transition from being a kid to being an adult. I see it as a way to prepare for the “real world,” but also four years of fun without much responsibility.

For Joanna, college is literally a period of extended adolescence free from the responsibilities of adulthood. She is aware of a looming reality, but in her language she remains within the cocoon of college.

Many students are similarly aware of but do not wish to fully acknowledge the oft-cited “real world.” Elise, the upper middle class white senior from earlier in the chapter, is especially articulate about her foreboding sense of uncertainty and insecurity. As such, I will spend significant time in the subsequent pages documenting and analyzing Elise’s words. When discussing what she feels college is all about for her, Elise says:

> Yeah, I mean, I’m still trying to figure it out. I mean, I don’t know exactly what makes me tick, and, like, what I love doing and what I’m good at, I’m still trying to figure that out, because—I guess, you’re supposed to have some of that figured out when you graduate, but also, like, [college] is the beginning of the figuring that out, too.
I reply by asking Elise, “How would you define college?”, and she answers:

Um, I’m not gonna say to find my, like, exact career? Um, I think it’s—for me, it’s been more exploration and figuring out who I am and, like, what I like to do and what I’m good at… Especially in the Arts and Sciences, it’s been just about exploring, like, how to think, how to write papers, how to, how I wanna live my life from now on. And I feel like—that’s kind of scary. I don’t know. I think it’s really beneficial because you don’t, you honestly don’t know enough about yourself, I don’t think, before going to college to figure out what you wanna do… Yeah, it’s been totally an exploration experience for me.

Here Elise resists the instrumental view of college more common among her less privileged counterparts: “I’m not gonna say [college is] to find my, like, exact career.” The fact that she starts out her definition of college by explaining what she thinks it is not seems to indicate alternative definitions of college are present in Elise’s imagination. However, she chooses to hew to the traditional liberal arts philosophy of a college education (a perspective which she cites specifically when she says, “especially in the Arts and Sciences”) as a place to “explore how to think,” “how to write,” and “how to live life” — in short, as an “exploration experience.” [Other students echo this line of thinking when they make statements, such as Paul does, “The reason I am studying History is simply because I enjoy it, and I don’t think I’m going to have the opportunity to study it at length beyond college, and I also find a lot of value in the skills you develop from studying History.”] Indeed, in a renowned study of college students, William Perry (1970) concluded that the acceptance of a multiplicity of perspectives and the ability to appreciate learning for learning’s sake were the apex of college student intellectual development—an increasingly outdated viewpoint that still has many devoted adherents among today’s upper middle class parents.
What seems to be so “scary” for Elise is the notion that she must eventually settle on a series of choices that will make her identity slowly become less fluid and amorphous and more like a fixed or established entity. Later in our interview, Elise makes the connection between this fear or apprehension and her writing block. Writing, for Elise, is too much of a commitment at a time when she is not yet ready to declare definitively who she is and what she believes in.

If anything, I feel like I have a hard time expressing myself. I mean, speaking sometimes, but more so through writing, because [in writing] you can be as precise as you want to, and it is on paper, and it is somewhat permanent? And, I don’t know, sometimes I feel like writing can hold me back from expressing myself because I’m, like, nervous about writing it the wrong way, or I don’t know. I’d much rather, like, talk it out with a professor—like, “This is what I’ve learned and this is—” I don’t know. Yeah, just a conversation would be easier with some of these papers, rather than trying to structure it in this perfect way…. It’s just cuz I feel like I’m still figuring things out! And the permanence [of writing]—it is permanent. And I mean, you can rip it up or whatever, but it’s still in front of you… I think because I’m so unsure about things, I don’t have the time to really commit to doing it, yeah.

It is as if Elise believes that writing up an opinion in a paper is a pledge that she indeed feels that way, that she believes in her own ability to determine the very best argument, and that she can and will defend her stance if challenged. The number of times she worriedly says “I don’t know” suggests how little she wants to be held accountable for standing by her utterances, even just in our interview. Still, “talking it out” is preferable to Elise because she maintains the wiggle room to change her mind, to be persuaded by her conversation partner’s point of view, and to follow alternative avenues if she deems them worthy of exploration. Writing, to the contrary, is “too permanent.” From Elise’s standpoint, writing literally affixes words onto the page and in so doing fixes her identity.
One almost imagines a butterfly being pinned down for examination in an entomological exhibit. Her “nervousness” about writing something “the wrong way” and her desire to “structure it in this perfect way” indicates her sense that there is a right and perfect way to write. She fears that if she writes in a manner that others view as “wrong,” then she will be exposing her very identity as somehow “not right.” From this perspective, writing papers can even be dangerous. To the extent that writing works to foreclose one’s options for future identity development, writing holds a great deal of power over the self. Writing, in a word, is scary.

At the same time, Elise feels tremendous pressure to develop a particular identity both through her writing and through her college career in general. She spends a lot of time in our interviews trying to determine out loud which Elise is the Elise she will ultimately settle on. When I ask her, as I do of all my interviewees, “Do you feel like you can write academic papers in your own voice or do you feel like you take on another voice in your writing?” Elise gets visibly upset:

Honestly (laughs, nervously), I don’t know! I don’t know if I have, like, a certain voice. I don’t—that sounds so sad! (Laughs.) I guess I wouldn’t really know how to classify my academic voice. I feel like I don’t have one, in a way! But of course, I do. I just don’t know how that would differ from anybody’s else’s, like, academic voice. Like, maybe that’s something I haven’t looked into enough or, like, really realized…. Do I have a voice? What is that? Like, that’s kind of scary to me, thinking about that and realizing that I could [have] come to this age and have that [trouble]… I think, I think [I don’t know my voice] because I have a hard time, like, trusting myself? And therefore trusting my voice? And what I have to say?

While many students in this subsample feel relatively confident in their academic voice, Elise is unsure of hers. I get the distinct feeling from Elise’s tone and her hurried,
exclamatory cadence that my question has caused her a not insignificant amount of
distress. Again, she uses the word “scary” to describe how she feels when she thinks
about writing. Indeed, the number of times she ends her statements with a questioning
intonation embodies the very lack of self-trust of which she speaks. At the end of this
excerpt, she equates her written or academic voice with her own self—she has a hard
time trusting her self and therefore a hard time trusting her voice. Whereas many of the
working class students from Chapter Four described “taking on” or “putting on” a
“different voice” in order to write their papers, Elise reflects a sentiment widespread
throughout the students represented in this chapter in which one’s voice is not at all
distinct from one’s very self. Voice and self become one and the same.

In our second interview, I return to this discussion by remarking to Elise that she
seemed “troubled” in our last conversation by the idea that she did not know how to
characterize her academic voice. She replied by saying:

I just think that after writing so many papers in college and having
this time of exploration, I should—or society tells me I should—
like, have a better idea of [my voice]?... This sounds silly too but
just, like, not really knowing exactly what “academic voice” is,
[or] how I, like, portray myself, or... the “authority” I have in a
paper—like, I don’t really know what that means... I think part of
it also is, like, a big part of it stems in not knowing myself or
trusting myself and realizing how much that affects me writing
papers.

Elise articulates that she feels external pressure surrounding this issue [“Society tells me I
should have a better idea of my voice”]. However, if she does not even know what voice
“means,” how can she trust herself to respond to the demand to “know” herself and
declare a set and stable identity? As a senior, she feels that all the writing experience she
has had in four years of college “should” have given her a defined sense of who she is by
now, and yet she is about to graduate still unsure of herself. It is no wonder she exhibits distress at my questions regarding voice. Voice to Elise represents self and identity. College represented the time in which she had the opportunity to explore her various selves and settle on a relatively secure identity. Perhaps she feels she has blown her chance at “figuring [herself] out.”

While many upper middle class students echo Elise’s perspective on college as an “exploration experience,” there are also a small minority who are beginning to view college explicitly as a high stakes competition. Damien’s comments below connote how important grades have become in the increasingly competitive environment of college:

I feel like my financial future, my economic future, my well-being is so tied to my grades at the end of the day. So there is pressure for me to get good grades. For sure! I definitely try—I put a lot more effort into getting good grades than I—than anyone—should! But, and I know—I mean, I don’t put in nearly as much effort as other kids, which is, like, really upsetting. (Laughs.) Yeah, and I would definitely say that, like, out of the whole, like spectrum of people, I put—especially at BC—I definitely am on the lower end of people who truly care about, like, grades. But at the same time, I care about them too, because I have to. Like, my future depends on that stupid little grade [my GPA], on that stupid little piece of paper [my diploma], at the end of the day of my time here.

Unlike many of his fellow upper middle class peers, Damien is not only aware of but articulate about the high stakes nature of college, and he views grades as a high stakes commodity. He equates his “economic future” and his “well-being,” and he sees good grades as the avenue to achieve a secure future. Alicia, an upper middle class Korean American student, echoes Damien’s sentiment in another rare articulation of the high stakes nature of college when she describes the pressure she feels from her parents to achieve good grades in college:
[My parents] are like, “I just want you to be happy. But you need money to be happy in this world. So you need to earn a lot of money, and if you wanna earn a lot of money, you need to have a good degree.” So then they’re just basically [saying], like, through the transitive property, they want me to have good grades. I mean, no, they do honestly want me to be happy…but then they’re worried because—well, they’re very realistic, they’ve a very jaded view of life, so they’ll, like, [say], “I’ve lived through this world so much longer than you, and you need money to be happy…” So I wanna prove something to myself, and to my parents. And if I do well in college, then my life is so much easier in general, so.

Through “the transitive property,” good grades equal stable financial future equals happiness. Achieving good grades, in this equation, is the same thing as securing one’s future well-being. Returning to Damien, it is clear that this equation is not perceived as the best way to approach one’s college career. In the following excerpt, Damien combines the more idealistic view of college as a period of exploration so common among the upper middle class with the more instrumental view of college as preparation for one’s future more common among the working class:

Ideally, I think [college] should be a place where you’re preparing for a job after college and—not necessarily just for a job, but for life after college… I was kind of disillusioned when I came here. It seemed like sort of a contrived rate race, essentially. I don’t know, I was a little disappointed when I figured out what college was really about. It’s about getting that degree, and that’s really all there is. There’s not a lot of, at least at BC, there’s not a lot of—or in my experience—passionate and driven students who really care about what they’re studying… it seems to me, that they’re here because their parents want them to be here and they kind of just go through the motions… [Before college] I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew I loved to learn, and I wanted to be with some of the best minds in the country, and I wanted to just really dive into academia. But I wasn’t able to do that…. [Worrying about grades] ruin what college is—should be all about, in my mind.

One can feel the stark tension in Damien’s language between what he feels college should be and what it actually is or has become. Damien wants to affirm the beliefs of
students like Elise, who see college as an “exploration experience,” but he feels that the anxiety over grades “ruin” what college “should be all about.” Damien’s disappointment suggests that he entered college with a firm belief in William Perry’s (1970) conception of the liberal arts education as a place to cultivate one’s mind and develop one’s identity as a thinker. While he wishes college presented the opportunity to “learn for learning’s sake,” he has come to the conclusion that it is instead just another “contrived rat race.”

Indeed, though Damien and Alicia are unusual in their perspicacity about the ways in which the reality of college does not necessarily match up with the ideal of college, there are many students who voice the competitive nature of Boston College that comes about as a result. One young woman observes that this culture of competition is readily apparent not only in the classroom but even within the realm of the extracurricular clubs, service programs, and other activities that students engage in to boost their resumes, recalling Stuber’s (2006:307) characterization of the “resume-building culture of contemporary college life.”

I think in general the BC culture is very competitive, whether it’s, like, in classes or—I mean, I feel like a lot of people do really well in classes, and I think that grades are, like, such a big deal. But even in, like, the service programs, everybody competes to, like, serve in these prestigious programs, and I’m in some of those, and I get the value of the application process and interviewing people [to make sure] they really wanna be in programs like that, but it can be really frustrating. People get really turned off by the competition in all their extracurriculars. And I think that, like, takes part in the classroom, too.

Another student states, “I feel like, in college especially, they kind of train us to be competitive—and when you’re competitive, you kind of—if someone else got first place,
you know you’re not going to get it.” In other words, college can sometimes feel like a zero sum game.

Several people note that this competitive environment has significant effects on one’s writing habits. Larissa describes the attitude among their friends that “pulling all-nighters” to finish papers is a normative part of college:

A lot of my friends have similar [writing] habits, which is not conducive to changing them. I mean, when pulling an all-nighter to finish a paper is, like, something that is thought of as normal? Then you don’t really have the inspiration to change that, per se… [I started having more writing difficulties] when I was seeing my friends have similar problems, because when I see my friends being able to, like, pull an all-nighter to finish a paper… that’s sort of a badge of honor! You are a real college student because you stayed in [the library] until 5 in the morning!

Only “real” college students stay up all night to write a paper, and it is a “badge of honor” to be punitive in one’s writing habits. It is as if she is arguing “everybody’s doing it,” thus giving her an excuse for her own difficulties with writing. If “putting off” a paper until the “last minute” is an academic norm to publicly uphold amongst one’s peers, it is easier for students with severe writing blocks to coast along without confronting their problem. The amount of time they spend agonizingly staring at a blinking cursor could, from the outside, simply look like the more normative practice of procrastination so rampant among college students (Schouwenburg, Lay, Pychyl, and Ferrari 2006). In a culture of competition, one’s block itself might even be considered a “badge of honor,” giving the sufferer little reason to change.

As noted above, it is not surprising that as a result of this culture of competition, many students express a tremendous amount of anxiety about grades, implicitly (if not explicitly) recognizing that they are a high stakes commodity in the context of one’s
increasingly uncertain economic future. This anxiety is multiplied by the fact that so many students feel that grading is very “subjective” and in some cases reflects the capricious nature of professors’ evaluative practices.

Grading is such a subjective thing. I mean, it has to be done, but sometimes I think the way that it’s analyzed and assessed by the professor isn’t really fair sometimes… You just know there’s a specific way that [your professor] wants you to think about [the material]. But she won’t tell you!

(an upper middle class white woman)

I could tell when [my professor] read my paper, like, from his comments, that he disagreed with it, but luckily, I think he’s a good professor and took it academically and, like, read it like an academic paper and [was] not, like, opinionated? So I got a good grade on it, but there are definitely a lot of teachers who don’t do that.

(an upper middle class Indian American man)

When I got to college, I did the Freshman Writing Seminar, and it was good in a way and bad in a way. Because sometimes I felt like it was subjective. I don’t know, [the professor] would just give us criticism, and then whatever he said, if we did it, we would get a better grade, and so it was like that.

(an upper middle class Korean American woman)

[Grading is] very subjective. From professor to professor, it’s totally—for one class you might [write] an essay that totally clearly and concisely expresses your views and you get an A, and… you can do the same thing in another class, but maybe the professor doesn’t agree with you and will give you a D…

(an upper middle class white man)

Like the speakers above, many students described similar situations in which they strongly suspected their professors had “one thing they really wanted to hear,” and it felt like the student’s job to “figur[e] out what they want and giv[e] it to them.” If they learn something new along the way, they welcome the opportunity, but “at the end of the day,” for most of these students, “it’s all about that grade.” The fact that one’s professor may
grade in a subjective rather than an objective manner is therefore a significant and very common source of grade-related anxiety.

With grade inflation on the rise, top notch grades across the board are increasingly required to be deemed “successful” in college and to have a shot at competitive jobs upon graduation, even as the “signaling power”—or the meaning—of grades is reduced by this same pattern (Pattison, Grodsky, and Muller 2013). The resultant anxiety has become a norm in itself, as can be seen in the comments of one white upper middle class man bemoaning the current state of affairs:

There is so much pressure on getting the best grades you can, so you can get the best job you can. I mean, I don’t know. For example, in the finance world, Goldman Sachs, it’s like the Harvard of, you know, financial institutions. In order to be even considered for a job there, you have to have perfect grades.

For upper middle class students, there is an intense expectation that is simply “in the air:” you should come out of college prepared to maintain or even expand upon your status of privilege. Students know that they are not supposed to be downwardly mobile. Consequently, at least for this young man, it is no longer enough to get a good job or to earn good grades—he must aim for the “Harvard” of jobs and the most “perfect” of grades in order to stand out from the crowd and live up to the tremendous achievement pressure so prevalent among the upper middle class. In this context, it makes sense that so many of the students of privilege in my sample suffer from perfectionism. While perfectionistic tendencies may be a psychological trait, they are certainly structurally supported and encouraged. Perfectionism, on the one hand, can be seen as a luxury afforded by a certain level of privilege—many in the working class tended to display a different flavor of drivenness, one more focused on proving oneself just as capable as...
(rather than better than) one’s peers. On the other hand, perfectionism is also the price of privilege. Indeed there are significant psychological costs to trying to be “perfect.” For instance, maladaptive perfectionism is highly correlated with lowered self-esteem in the literature (Ashby and Rice 2002).

The professors that do know me—I want them to respect me for being, like, intelligent and engaged…. I think the confidence thing is huge... I want to do really well in papers and be, like, perfect… I feel like I need to prove myself—that I am, like, an intelligent person.

(an upper middle class white woman)

I consider judgment on myself based on my grades. Sometimes I feel like a good writer, if I get a good grade, and sometimes I don’t, if I don’t get a good grade, so that kind of fluctuates with that, too.

(an upper middle class white woman)

You pretty much have to do [weekly papers graded with a check or check plus], but those are hard for me to write because I’m handing them to a professor who’s going to be judging my intellect—my academic ability—based on the work that I produce.

(an upper middle class white man)

Yeah, I mean, I think, like, every time I get, like, back a paper and I don’t do as well as, like, I want, I obviously feel, like, bad. I feel really, like, frustrated, and I think just, yeah, my confidence…has significantly gone down [after a bad grade].

(an upper middle class white woman)

In the face of enormous pressure to be perfect, several students developed a similar strategy. Namely, they have begun to put a premium on being “well rounded” or on “balancing” well one’s academic life with one’s social life. This phenomenon could be viewed as an extension of the “concerted cultivation” form of child-rearing (Lareau 2003) in which children are encouraged to develop multiple aspects of themselves simultaneously. It is as if these students are saying, “If I cannot be perfect in one arena,
at least I can appear to be pretty good across several arenas.” As one young woman puts it:

BC has a culture of, like, being “well-rounded” people and, like, kind of having everything “together” and [if] you kind of look around and think that everybody has every part of their lives together—we know that’s not true. I mean, I’ve just seen—you’ve seen people open up and [you’ve] made friends who’ve admitted to, like, struggling a lot freshman and sophomore year… I think it’s good to want this, like, to have this, like, well-rounded life. I think that’s really healthy, [because] I think when you, like, focus too much on the part that isn’t going perfectly, like, “I’m not getting, like, straight A’s in all my classes, if, like, all my papers aren’t like…A’s, and then, like, my life is over.” That’s when it gets dangerous.

The comments of this woman reflect the feelings of many students when she notes that Boston College has a “culture” in which everyone looks like they have “every part of their lives together,” even if once you scratch the surface, that façade crumbles. There is pressure to at least appear as “together” as possible across as many facets of one’s life as possible. In other words, there is not only pressure to be perfect but to be “well rounded,” too. However, being well rounded has its risks at both extremes. If a student is not well rounded enough, she can become consumed by the areas of her life that are not perfect in a way that “gets dangerous.” Yet if she is overly well rounded, it can go “too far,” as another young woman frames it below, and she can lose her academic edge:

I think at times perhaps the students are not particularly academically focused? No matter how smart they are… I mean, it’s always the argument of how well rounded is good. We [at Boston College] have a really strong, like, sports fan base, and you can go to [the local bar] any night of the week and there’s gonna be a lot of people there. So I think that’s in many ways a good thing. But it can go too far.

A third woman commends herself on achieving just the right balance between her academics and her social life. However, in her remarks, the expectation is evident that
academic achievements alone are not sufficient for making college a worthwhile experience, suggesting again the pressure to be “well rounded:”

Yeah, I think I balance [college life] pretty well because, I mean, you can go through college without, like, having good friends and good experiences, so yeah. I guess that’s how I see it. It’s just you have to be able to balance both for a really rich experience in college.

One young woman even has a name for this pressure to achieve just the right balance between academic and social expectations, “perfect imperfection.”

I think it’s like perfect imperfection. Like, you wanna be the academic, but, like [also] the funny friend, and you wanna be someone who’s there for everyone, but still busy enough to show you’re invested in a lot of different things. So you wanna be like, I don’t know. You wanna go out, but you also wanna be a good student…. I guess it’s just like trying to be, like, a really well rounded person and have, like, every area of your life kind of together…but [also], like, not having everything together…[or] perfect all the time, but [having everything at least] somewhat stable in all those areas, if that makes sense.

Even in her imperfections, Serena, an upper middle class white woman, strives to be perfect. Serena’s strenuous efforts toward a perfect impression management recall Goffman’s (1959) discussion in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life of the way in which people often attempt to control every possible impression that they give off to others. In the discussion that follows, Serena links her difficulties in writing in part to this pressure to be “well rounded” and decries how difficult it is sometimes to simply land on a single position in a paper when the expectation is to be open-minded on the one hand and to make a strong argument on the other.

I think I can very easily see both sides of any, like, issue or situation. So when someone, when something is stated in the book, and you have to defend it, and I’m like, “Yes, I can totally see this,” but, like, I also think of these things that go completely
against [the argument]. So I feel like for a lot of different papers...I’m supposed to do this one thing, but I wanna, like, say all these other things to try to be, like, well rounded, while [still] staying on the same topic... You make one statement, and [then] there’s, like, a million different directions to go, and I have trouble choosing one and going with it and writing on it. I think that it’s the pressure to take a stand. I’m not good at that... And, like, somehow if I completely miss a point [in a paper], then I’m, like, completely missing big points of my life... Everything I do really, like, reflects who I am.

One can feel the inordinate amount of pressure Serena is under: *everything I do really reflects who I am.* Not seeing or understanding a particular academic argument in a particular writing assignment then stands in for “missing” something essential about life in general. What is implicit in this fear of “missing something” is that Serena is “missing out” on something that *other people* are getting, which is likely why she explicitly seeks out “friends that have the same issues—not just with writing” but also with life. Serena, a senior, looks sheepish when she admits that all of her friends are not only from the same socioeconomic background as she is, but they are also people who also tend to be, as she puts it, “seekers” or people with personalities focused on searching for meaning.

I feel like all of the people I’m describing are, like, still trying to figure things out and seeking and none of them have jobs lined up for next year, and they’re all doing things that are kind of learning experiences—like going abroad to teach for a couple years... I feel like these people I’m describing are people that are, like, trying to figure out who they are and trying to—yeah, while they’re writing a paper, they’re, like, really thinking about it because they know it’s part of themselves that they’re putting on paper... because that’s a statement of who they are right now. And that changes so much at this point.... There’s some quote like—“Discontentment is, like, super important because it always pushes you to, like, better things, and it doesn’t allow you to be, um, complacent”—and I totally agree with that. But I think there’s something to be said for, like, pushing yourself and continuing to learn more, but also just kind of being OK with where you’re at. I just don’t think you can be happy unless you can find some peace in that, too.
Serena’s language toward the end of this excerpt, “but…but...” embodies the two opposing forces exerting pressure on her: I must always push myself to be better, and yet I should be “OK” with the fact that I push myself so hard. I must strive and never be complacent, and yet I must “find some peace” with my striving. All of these forces play themselves out in students’ academic writing. As we have seen before, Serena observes among herself and her friends how writing papers becomes a proxy for the student’s very self, and it is that close identification between writing and self that make academic writing such a high stakes endeavor for so many people.

The flavor of Serena’s discussion above is echoed in many other upper middle class students’ narratives. Long ago, LeShan (1952) noted that working class individuals tend to view the self as something that already is what it is, while middle and upper middle class people tend to see the self as that which has yet to become. It is clear from my interviews that many upper middle class students in my sample reflect LeShan’s old notions of class-based identities. If the self is something one has yet to become, it is understandable that upper middle class students would feel some significant anxiety around securing the right conditions for their future development. If in turn grades are seen as the key to the promised land, so to speak, of a secure and stable future, then through the “transitive property” Alicia described earlier in the chapter, grades become a high stakes commodity and writing a high stakes performance. It makes sense that so many upper middle class students see the grades they get on their papers as intimately tied to their academic self-confidence and even self-esteem. Returning to Damien, he observes:
Some kids, if they don’t get the grades they wanted a specific semester, they’ll feel horrible about themselves. Like, it’s a noticeable self-confidence change… How they feel about themselves is totally directly linked to how well they do in school. I mean, I’m a little bit like that, but not, I would say, not as severely as a lot of people are.

Here Damien places himself largely in an observer rather than a participant role. He uses third person language (“them”) and discusses from a safe distance what “some kids” are like, being careful to at least partially distinguish himself from the crowd.

From this detached standpoint, Damien begins to muse philosophically about college in general and during the course of our interview develops a critique of the system as a whole. Not many students in my sample were able to take this kind of wide angle perspective on their situation, but given that Damien was particularly astute as well as articulate, I will spend a moment playing out his critical analysis. Damien views the process of writing academic papers as a “numbers game” or a “political game” as opposed to an academic or intellectual process:

[Writing papers is] more about, um, how can I choose my—excuse the phrase—bullshit to make my professor give me an A. It becomes a numbers game as opposed to an actual academic process… So I’ve realized it’s more of a political kind of people game. Figuring out what they want and giving it to them.

Damien’s cynicism, coupled with a twinge of anger or possibly hurt, is evident in his explicit use of the word “bullshit.” He soon makes it patently clear he does not like the entire “system.”

I think, I think that it’s horrible. I don’t think the emphasis should necessarily be on grades, because, at the end of the day, all of your performances boil down to a little number [the GPA] that is supposed to represent your entire college experience?? That doesn’t make any sense! You know? That’s absurd! I think it should be more of a, I don’t know, teacher recommendation
In the process of our interview, Damien gets somewhat worked up. It is clear that being “boiled down” to a “tiny little number” offends his sense of being a whole person, especially given the fact that this metonymic process is all in the name of efficiency or being “cheaper.” Metonymy, in which one thing stands in for another, is at the heart of Damien’s critique. How can a number represent a unique and complex individual? In this light, the stakes of each paper are high, for students want that little number that will come to represent their work to be a good one. The fact that he emphatically decries the “absurdity” of it all seems to suggest that his cynicism has not yet reached the level of resignation—he can still get upset by the thought of the injustice of the system and the gulf between what college is and what he feels it was supposed to be.

I definitely feel like the system is very unfair and [it] doesn’t work. I mean, I guess… I feel like kids nowadays are like, “Oh, whatever, it’s just a game.” You know, you play the game, you don’t have to care about learning, you don’t have to care about studying, you don’t have to care about the actual material. It’s just—play the game, write the paper, and do what they ask you, so that they’ll give you the grade [you want]. It’s not about actually thinking and discussion—that why I was, again, so disillusioned.

Damien’s level of excitement during our conversation seems to indicate that he found the interview itself intellectually rewarding, and as he thanked me profusely after the fact, I suspected that college really had left him hungry for an intellectual challenge.

When I ask Damien where, if anywhere, he places the blame, he responds:

Not in terms of, um, the people necessarily. Because individually, each member of, like, the administration I’ve met is super
wonderful and the professor themselves individually are wonderful, but I think it’s the overall structure of the school? That really needs reworking… So I guess the blame lies with the top, the people who actually control the organizational structure of how things are done. Maybe it’s the Jesuits, I don’t know. It’s that, that invisible guy in some office somewhere that actually makes decisions!... I don’t know, it’s almost like [Boston College] feels like—it’s a corporation essentially… I definitely feel like they bring us here, they take our money, and they provide a service, and it’s really—you’re really paying for that little piece of paper [the diploma], not actually for your college experience.

Here Damien takes a decidedly structural perspective, unlike most of his peers, and draws upon a critique becoming increasingly common today: the corporatization of higher education (Mills 2012). At the end of our interview, Damien discusses how “insecure” his future feels in light of the current economy. He concludes that “it makes sense—writer’s block is kind of an economic problem.” In other words, many students feel paralyzed in the face of a system that they know will boil them down to a “tiny little number” and that will do so in the context of an economy that calls for “perfect” grades in order to get the kinds of jobs that will secure a stable financial future—or at least stave off downward mobility.

Again, Damien is unusual in his adoption of a more structural perspective on his situation. Most of the students I talked with placed the blame regarding their writing blocks squarely on their own shoulders. Joanna states, “It’s just totally myself. That’s just my personality,” while Alicia concludes, “I think [block] just happens cuz I’m lazy.” Paul notes, “It’s just hard for me personally to sit down and [write].” Elise contends, “I don’t know, I think it’s just—I wanna say—it’s my, like, crazy mind! I think it’s totally just me putting pressure on myself.” Along similar lines, Laura remarks, “My parents always tell me I, like, judge myself more than anyone else [judges me], and, like, I create
all this stress for myself—like, no one is putting stress on me. It’s just all me. It’s just me. Like, the way my brain works.” Larissa gives extended thought to whether her writing block is more like an illness or ailment she suffers from or just a “self-discipline thing.”

It’s one of those things that, like, I don’t know—it’s weird because it’s, like, a self-discipline type of thing [and] I absolutely hate the fact that I do that. But it’s also been so consistent and so regular that, like, you run into that issue: it is a self-discipline thing or is it just the way I work—or is writer’s block actually, like, I don’t know something that I, like, suffer, rather than something I do to myself, you know? Like, a personal failing of mine?

Much like with the medicalization of certain mental illnesses, wherein depression, say, is seen as a problem of brain chemistry rather than a failure of individual will, Larissa is trying to figure out whether her writing block is something that is out of her hands or not. If it is, she can in some sense be more forgiving of herself, but if it is indeed a “personal failing,” then she must put enormous pressure on herself to “get over it.” For each of these students, hewing to an individualistic perspective on the causes of their writing blocks prevents them from seeing their situation through a more structural lens. One could argue this brand of solipsism serves a function for the structural status quo: namely, it is a form of false consciousness in which individuals take the full weight of the blame for their difficulties while protecting those structural forces that are driving their status anxiety.

What are the long-term consequences of writing blocks for students who feel a class-based pressure to achieve at ever higher levels? For Maggie, the penalties have been steep and promise to grow steeper still once she leaves college. When I ask her if
she has ever had any negative consequences due to her difficulties with writing, she replies:

I guess I’ve been, like, in a broader way, like—even looking for jobs and stuff, like internships... I’ve just always worked someplace, not, like, gone and done an internship? Some of the [internship opportunities] get posted through the Department, and I’m like, “Oh, I’m never going to be qualified for these!” Like, “Oh, you have to write stuff for this one?” Then I just literally breeze past them. So I have never even applied, I guess.

Maggie’s lack of confidence is palpable here as it is throughout our interview. Even the way she speaks—her ellipses and unfinished sentences are emblematic of her fragmented dreams and missed opportunities. Later Maggie takes up this line of thinking again, which she admits she had not really thought about until we talked about it during our interview:

Now I just try to, like, distance myself from [writing]. Like, I was a Philosophy major, but I, like, dropped it because of [writing]. So I was like, “Drop that!” because it was just, it will just be a long road, you know?... It’s funny because...when I was in high school, I wanted to be a doctor... but then, my parents were like, “you have to write for that,”...and I was, like, “Ok, well, let’s drop that then!” (Laughs.)... I mean dropping science was like—that was, like, my dream. Just like all the different—like slowly, the possibilities close in cuz, like, I really don’t wanna be writing at all! (Laughs.) It starts to close off some doors, you know?

While not all respondents suffer the same severity of consequences as Maggie has, most describe avoiding writing-intensive courses and steering toward careers that will not require much or any writing. The fact remains that Maggie’s comments—and the devastating effects of writing blocks they signify—are haunting.

STATUS ANXIETY
For the upper middle class students in this chapter, writing is a high stakes performance because they so closely identify themselves with their academic writing. In this light, their writing difficulties are a form of choking in the face of the tremendous pressure to achieve at the highest levels in order to maintain one’s privileged class status. In today’s economic climate, a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity looms like a shadow over these students. For privileged students, college is supposed to represent a rite of passage between who one was—a largely unformed and uncharted identity—and who one will become after this period of identity exploration. Yet the present day economic environment means that college, even at a relatively elite liberal arts institution, is beginning to signify a rite of passage between the old and the new economic orders and the norms and expectations associated with them. In a way, many privileged students’ identities as blocked writers represent this liminal status: they are trying to operate in a new structural context but with old and now inadequate tools. Many upper middle class students are haunted by the internalized expectation of excellence so common among families of privilege, but in the context of a more uncertain economic future, their subsequent tendencies toward perfectionism suggest a deep status anxiety that may, in producing severe writing blocks in some, paradoxically risk the downward mobility they are beginning to understand is a real possibility. This is not to say that every upper middle class student who experiences status anxiety will develop academic writing block—merely that those who do become blocked may be victims of a perfect storm of the structural and psychological factors that lead to severe writing difficulties.
CHAPTER SIX

Othered Voices: Writing Block as Social Liminality

Two Case Studies

When I first came here [to Boston College] I was overwhelmed by the homogeneity. I felt like everyone was—this was my original reaction when I came here: everyone was the same! Like, everyone came from a wealthy suburban, like, suburb, everyone’s white—you know, everyone—there’s no diversity!... It must be that feeling for everyone who comes here. Everyone looks the same. Everyone acts the same. Everyone does the same thing. But I don’t know—I was in a class where the professor was like, “It’s diversity of experience that matters, you’re all from different experiential backgrounds,” and I was like, “Well, it’s sort of hard to come from different experiential backgrounds when we’re all from, like, white or predominantly white suburbs!”

(Damien, an upper middle class white student)
In the previous two chapters, the focus was predominantly on social class – the dominant cultural capital disadvantage of lower income, working class, and lower middle class students and the status anxiety of upper middle class students and how those phenomena variously play into students’ experiences with writing block. Because I found that my data divided fairly starkly along class lines, I decided to organize the previous two chapters to reflect the consistency of those findings. However, while socioeconomic standing has been the most robust factor in my findings, it is by no means the only one. There are also many ways in which this apparent simplicity is significantly complicated by other factors. I have chosen to write this sixth chapter as an extended exploration of two case studies for several reasons. First, I have chosen individuals whose stories bring nuance to my arguments thus far about social class. In particular, the experiences of each of these students exemplify the important complexities of class when race is brought into the frame.

Second, up until this point, I have presented my data through the use of largely disembodied voices and relatively decontextualized snippets of individuals’ interviews. In this chapter, I have chosen to relay in depth the full narratives of two students, not only to tell some compelling stories but also to develop for the reader a clearer picture of how writing blocks play out holistically in the lives of individuals. After all, each blocked writer tends to experience their writing difficulties through a personal rather than a structural lens, and as such, it is befitting for us to attend at this juncture to the phenomenology of the issue under examination—how does writing block affect the lives of individual students, and how do they subjectively experience their own difficulties?
Third, the two students I have chosen here can and do fit into the previous categorizations. Certainly, Jennifer’s narrative fits into Chapter Four in that she expresses an awareness that the cultural capital she possesses is not of the variety valued most by elite institutions of higher education, and she longs to do well in school in order to honor her parents’ sacrifices. Likewise, Simone’s narrative follows many of the themes of privilege, entitlement, and status anxiety raised by the students in Chapter Five. However, neither Jennifer nor Simone fit squarely into these categories. In this way, I aim to bring complexity to my own categorizations of the data as laid out in previous pages in order to illustrate the nuanced nature of individual cases when one moves from a macro to a more micro perspective. By zooming in on these two cases, I also intend to demonstrate how it is not merely that structural factors have gross, monolithic effects on individuals. Rather the structural contributors to an individual’s writing block are intimately and inextricably bound up in her personal, idiosyncratic psychology. It has never been my goal to argue that writing blocks are reflections of structural issues alone. Instead, I wish to reveal that structural and psychological influences work hand in hand to produce blocks—it is just that we tend to see only the latter and remain unconscious of the former. This chapter aims to make visible what is largely invisible and to give voice to the inchoate forces that populate individuals’ minds.

Finally, I have selected the case studies as a way of underscoring a central point I want to make—namely, in a world of increasing diversity particularly vis-à-vis race and ethnicity, as well as the growing uncertainties regarding socioeconomic standing in today’s economy, the old sociological models that have tended to link certain races and ethnicities with certain classes clearly no longer hold water. In this way, this chapter
corroborates newer sociological constructs of race and class that emphasize the hybridity of race (Hochschild and Weaver 2010), the relativity of class (Stuber 2006), and the intersectionality of race and class (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000). As such, the class-based generalizations that I have made in the previous two chapters would not on their own do justice to the complexity of students’ individualized identifications. Therefore, I have chosen each case study to illustrate the many ways in which N = 1. In other words, although my sample may divide relatively neatly along class lines, these social class identifications as I have already shown are insecure and potentially in transition, whether up or down. This research is after all only a snapshot in time, freeze-framing individuals’ social statuses as if they were stagnant.

Moreover, as we shall see in the following pages, my sample is even more difficult to organize along racial or ethnic lines, especially considering traditional associations between color and class. Simone, for instance, is a woman of color, but she is not simply “black,” as she appears. She is a racial hybrid – part African American, part Native American, part white – and yet the color of her skin, as she tells me over and over, consistently confuses others as to her social class standing. While many assume she is from a low income background, she actually comes from an extremely wealthy family due to the extraordinary successes of her two highly driven parents. Jennifer, on the other hand, is white, but she too defies common expectations regarding the color of her skin in that she is not well-off but very poor. She has however had the opportunity to augment her familial cultural capital via a scholarship to a private Catholic education through middle school. In this way, both students defy stereotypes about how race, color, and class are supposed to work. Both young women, in different ways, straddle two
worlds, neither of which wholly accept them. They embody the liminality of their social statuses through their writing block: they must write, but they cannot. Neither here nor there, they exist in a kind of limbo.

For both of the students portrayed in this chapter, writing is a high stakes performance in which one is at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about her group through one’s written work (recall the concept of stereotype threat from Chapter Two), whether that stereotype has to do with just race or with other factors as well. These students are working under the threat of validating hurtful prejudices that would be a significant detriment to their identity and self-esteem. As with the students in Chapters Four and Five, we can construe writing block as a form of choking in the face of this high stakes performance. Writing is simply high stakes for the students in this chapter for different reasons. In each case, the student’s family is a conduit for the structural burdens of idiosyncratic combinations of race, ethnicity, class, and even (dis)ability status, and as such, the familial messages each student has inherited have come to haunt their internal lives.

College, as with the students in previous chapters, is a rite of passage for Simone and Jennifer, but for them, it is also a transitional period between old familial narratives about one’s structural burdens and a new era in which they seek to fashion their own identity. In this way, their current identity as a blocked writer represents their liminal status between their family’s expectations and their own, between wanting, needing to write and being afraid or refusing to write. As with the previous two chapters, writing block continues to signify the potential for the social reproduction of structural inequalities. For those in Chapter Four, their cultural capital disadvantage plays itself out
in their writing difficulties, which puts them at risk of not achieving the social mobility so critical to their being able to honor their parents’ sacrifices and achieve social mobility.

For the students in Chapter Five, their significant trouble with academic writing reflects a pervasive status anxiety, which ironically threatens to trigger the very downward mobility they would seek to avoid. For Simone and Jennifer, their active resistance of various stereotypes has contributed to their becoming blocked, and it is this block that carries the ominous potential that they will confirm the very stereotypes they seek to fight, thus further marginalizing them from the rest of their peers. Moreover, for both women, their profound feelings of ambivalence about their liminal statuses has caused them to feel deeply ambivalent about writing as well, leading, of course, to a writing block that only works to reify their own social liminality. They straddle different worlds, home in neither. Writing, which could have provided them a transitional home of sorts, is not even a refuge, for they want to write but cannot.

SIMONE

As mentioned above, Simone is a part white, part Native American, and part African American young woman from an extremely wealthy family in the Northeast. Her mother, a woman of mixed Native American and white parentage, has a degree from an Ivy League business school and is a top executive at a national corporation. Her father, a Black man from Kenya, holds a law degree, an Engineering degree, and a doctorate in Philosophy. He is an elite legal executive in another large corporation. Her parents both worked their way up from relative poverty, and so Simone is the first generation in her
family to “have been handed absolutely everything.” She considers herself to be in the “top 1%” of American households socioeconomically speaking, and her family lives in a ten bedroom house with a pool in an affluent and almost all-white suburb outside of New York City. She has always gone to private schools, including an elite boarding school for her high school years, where she has always been, as she puts it, a “token minority” among predominantly white populations. That being said, Simone sees herself in a liminal status because she is not a minority who is “like the other minorities,” nor can she fit in completely with the white students. As we shall see, her liminal social status translates into ambivalence about writing that makes it exceedingly difficult for her to attend to her writing assignments.

While Simone is extremely intelligent and a high scorer in standardized tests, her grades have been spotty due to her struggles with severe writing block. Sometimes she writes fluidly and turns in extraordinary papers, while other times she is unable to—or in some cases even refuses to—turn anything in at all.

I think staring at a blank computer screen is probably, like, the scariest thing ever! It’s like, Oh my God! It’s completely daunting, it’s crazy. There are times when I’m like, I’m gonna die before I get this paper done. There are times when it’s just awful, where it’s, like… I can’t. There are times when I just can’t—I’ll lay down, I’ll go to dance practice, I’ll come back, I’ll lay down again, I’ll look at—it’s just a hellish process…. If I don’t like it, I’m gonna re-write it, re-write it, re-write it.

The hyperbole in Simone’s speech (“the scariest thing ever;” “I’m gonna die”) simultaneously indicates her extreme discomfort with regard to writing and signals to me, her interviewer, that her statements should not be taken literally, a device which effectively introduces a modicum of distance between herself and me (and any future
readers of this research). She is not, in this instance, inviting me into her psychological space with her as many other interviewees do, grateful as they are that someone will really listen. Rather, she is buffering herself from my entrance. All the while, however, her frequent use of repetition (“I can’t, I can’t” and “I’ll..., I’ll..., I’ll..., I’ll...” and “re-write it, re-write it, re-write it”) demonstrates her struggle for me in such a way that I can almost feel her anxiety myself. In this way, her speech about her writing block actually embodies ambivalence. Her hyperbole suggests “don’t take me too seriously,” while her repetition demonstrates, “but I’m really suffering here.” My interpretation of this early moment may at first seem strained, but my observations are borne out over the course of our conversations together. These themes, in other words, are sustained throughout Simone’s interviews. In this moment above, both in itself and as a reflection of our conversation as a whole, Simone’s tone strikes me as almost angry (see how much I suffer?) and ambivalent at the same time (I want you to feel my pain, but I do not want to let you in). She, in effect, places me into a liminal status myself: I cannot come inside her world, but neither am I allowed to be a total outsider. This is my first clue that ambivalence and liminality may be at the heart of Simone’s story. Before too long, her narrative unfolds in such a way that I begin to understand why.

When we talk about what writing means to Simone, she raises a set of issues that both demonstrate and begin to explain the origin of her mixed feelings on the subject.

Writing [is] something reserved for, like, a certain class of people, and it makes me resent it a little. But at the same time, it also makes me feel like I have something to prove. Both of my parents were educated, but they were—they worked very, very hard for their education and they both put themselves...through school. I am, like, the first generation that’s really just been given
everything. And so I feel like because I’ve been given everything, it’s, like, harder. It’s, like, an expectation…. 

On the one hand, Simone is critical of writing because, as she astutely recognizes, it tends to be an endeavor “reserved for…a certain class of people.” Her use of the word “reserved” almost suggests that there is an entity out there that is intentionally inviting some people, while restricting others. As we will see, this notion is in keeping with the critical class and race consciousness Simone inherited from her father. On the other hand, Simone has to recognize that she is—no matter how she feels about the fact—a member of this “certain class” thanks to the “very, very hard” work of both of her parents. Here Simone expresses a central theme in her narrative: writing is a privilege which she is not sure she has earned the right to bear, and yet it is also a privilege she must exercise in the name of all those who are not given and will never have the opportunity. Simone articulates the difference between these two classes in stark terms:

I think writing is reserved for people who have the time to write. And people who have the time to write are people who get paid highly for their other time so they have extra time to spare—no one in the lower class, no one in the working class has time to sit next to a lake and ponder the universe and write about it. That’s just not the reality of the situation. So [writing] may not be explicitly reserved for the upper class, but literature that is respected comes from the upper class because they [are the ones who] have the time.

When she implicitly refers to the “upper class” writers who “sit next to a lake and ponder the universe,” the “resentment” she made reference to is clear—but it stands in glaring counterpoint to the sense of duty she feels toward those before her and around her who have not “just been given” the same privileges she has been bequeathed. It is as if she is saying, “I must write!” and “I refuse to write!” simultaneously, wherein writing represents both the great hope and promise of social mobility for everyone she feels that
she represents and the indulgent excesses of the entitled privilege of the “upper class” of which she must admit she is now a part.

Simone is ambivalent not only about the privilege writing exemplifies, but also the privilege it may ultimately engender. Her parents have promised to share some portion of their abundant wealth with Simone on one condition: she must earn “200 grand a year” on her own for at least three years. If she does this, she will have access to a vast inheritance and “would never have to work a day in [her] life.” If she does not, they will give her nothing, aside from the higher education for which they have already paid, and “then,” as she puts it, “I’ll have to work every single day for the rest of my life.” Simone’s construction of a stark binary—literally an “all or nothing” scenario—suggests that she sees no middle path. This agreement has been written into her parents’ will. In Simone’s words, “So that pressure to do very, very well is, like, documented. Like, unless I am incredibly successful, I don’t get anything from my parents.” Of course, Simone recognizes that doing “very, very well” is “intimately connected with writing” well. Simone seems to feel her chance at fulfilling her parents’ promise is a losing proposition [“I’m definitely never gonna get that money!”], while in the same breath, she declares, “There’s no doubt in my mind I’m going to be applying to some sort of MBA program.” Her ambivalence about the situation is further apparent when I ask her what her parents’ will makes her want to do with her life.

Well, I mean, it makes me want to, like, just go through what I have to go through to get that kind of [high-paying] job. Because, like, I’ve thought about it a lot, and, like, what I would do if I didn’t go that way, is I would want to work at an NGO or help people and work for, like, the Peace Corps or something—but the reality of the world is the way that I could help people the most is if I, like, will do my work and get my inheritance—then I can, like,
really, really help people that way. So it’s like, yeah… if I give my effort now, everything I do now in college…and everything I would do in whatever job I would decide to do, like, whatever that is, it isn’t for me. It’s for what I would be doing after.

In her mind, Simone ultimately wants to “help people”—and her vagueness here may indicate that her ideals have not necessarily been matched yet with the level of specificity that implies commitment—but she also knows to get that money, she needs to do “that kind of job” that pays an exceedingly high income and effectively precludes any of the “helping” professions. But her money-making plan, she insists—perhaps to me, perhaps to herself—“isn’t for me” but for the service work she will do “after” when she will then be able to “really, really help people.” Simone’s assertion that she will deny herself the work she actually wants to do now in order to be of service to others later is a theme of ambivalence regarding her privilege that is reflected throughout her interviews. In any case, writing (as a central means of doing “really, really well” in school) is an extremely high stakes endeavor. In Simone’s imagination, it is quite literally either all or nothing: either she writes well and excels in college and gets into the kind of MBA program that will enable her to earn her inheritance and later engage in service work, or she stumbles in her writing, thus dropping her grades and limiting her chances of ever fulfilling her life plan.

Early in our first interview, Simone turns her attention to race, giving me a hint of another reason why she struggles so feverishly with her academic writing. For instance, Simone complains that her white classmates—both from her elite private high school as well as at Boston College—have often been confused by her light black skin and the mixed racial heritage it reflects.
People are always like, What are you?... My [racial] hybridity, I guess, makes people, like, not know what to, like, think about me?... I feel like I’m always having to prove myself.... I’ve always been the token exotic one to my white friends... and to my black friends, I’m “not black enough.”

It is clear Simone feels in a liminal position with regard to her racial status: she is not white enough, nor is she black enough. She equates this racial ambiguity with the need to “prove” herself to others. Other black students articulate the same pressure Simone expresses that they have a “point to prove.” For instance, Jakabo, the working class black South African man from Chapter Four, wants to disprove the stereotype that black students must be at Boston College either because they are there to play sports or because they have gained admission due to affirmative action.

It’s always like you have a point to prove, no matter what. Because you look around you... and it’s like, [Boston College] is predominantly white, and as a minority here, you know, you don’t wanna be, you don’t wanna fit into that stereotype of, “Okay, like you’re just athletes... or they’re not quite as academically good and they don’t really deserve to be here, like, it’s really just a scholarship-based thing.” So (laughs) no matter what you do... you feel like you have something to prove, you know? ...For me, it’s to prove that I deserve to be here, and I belong here academically.

These excerpts recall W. E. B. DuBois ([1903] 1961), who famously wrote, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

Simone remarks that her professors often ask her to speak in class on behalf of either African Americans or, less frequently, Native Americans, depending on the context, and yet she is never asked to speak on behalf of her white heritage: “Nobody, nobody, would ever come to me and be like, ‘How do you feel, like, Nova Scotian people
would feel about that?” Her facetious tone suggests an undercurrent of bitterness that is consistent with the subterranean anger critical race theorists argue commonly results from minorities always having to carry the burden of explaining themselves to the majority (Hall 1996). Despite the liminality of her racial status, Simone, like other racial minorities, is expected to represent not only her own views but those of her race(s). In other words, Simone suffers a double stigma: her racial hybridity excludes her from full admission to both white and black friend groups, while her non-white coloring means society at large will treat her in a certain way and subject her to certain negative stereotypes, glossing over her hybridity and the complex story to which it refers.

Regardless of the actual nature of her ancestry, Simone is aware of the negative stereotypes that others—classmates and professors alike—tend to associate her non-white skin color. In particular, she knows that others assume that she is academically inferior, as is in keeping with the negative stereotype that black students in particular are not as intellectually capable as their white counterparts (Steele and Aronson 1995). As she recounts her classmates’ surprise when they learn she has excelled academically, there is a subtle sting in her voice:

My peers, some of my friends even, will look at me—and I won’t study as much as them, but I will get the same [good] grade—and they’re like, “Huh?!” [Simone mimics their perplexed voices before switching into a sarcastic tone.] “Funny story! I’m smart!...” My dad’s like, “Look, white people will try to tell you that you are not smart. But you’re smart.” So I always have that in my head, I’m like, “Everybody thinks I’m stupid.” (laughs.)

There is anger sublimated in Simone’s laughter that seems to suggest both the depth of her resentment and how long she has been coping with these racially loaded assumptions about her academic capabilities, which is, as Simone puts it, “forever.” Solorzano, Ceja,
and Yosso (2000) call such subtle, often unintentionally racist comments “racial microaggressions,” and it is evident Simone has had to mount a defense against such injuries not only for herself but on behalf of other students of color.

I always feel like I have to work ten times harder so that the next one black kid or the next one Native American kid that walks into [a] professor’s class, that professor won’t have the assumption that they’re, like, dumb.

In essence, Simone unwittingly carries the burden of non-white races on her shoulders.

Simone raises a second prejudice that those around her tend to be unconscious of but that she feels she must consciously resist: what she calls the “ghetto” stereotype or the conflation of race and class, dark skin and poverty.

My white friends don’t know enough black people to see that I’m not like other black people. I’m completely confident that there are some of my white friends that think I am from the projects, ghetto America…. [But] it’s like, “I’m not ghetto. I am from an upper middle class neighborhood. I live three blocks from you, why do you think I know how to dougie? Cuz I don’t!…” A lot of people have a very one-sided view of what, like, African American culture is. I have to say, like, “No! African American culture is just as diverse as white culture…” I’m trying to prove there’s more to African American society than the ghetto.

It is as if Simone is trying to distance herself from “ghetto” African Americans when she declares her lack of knowledge of the “dougie,” a dance made popular by a black rap artist. It does not escape my notice that during Simone’s protestations that she is “not ghetto,” she switches into using the word, “you.” [“I live three blocks from you…”]

Clearly, she is not literally referring to me, as I do not live three blocks from Simone, but as a white upper middle class woman, I could very well stand in for the other white upper middle class women to whom Simone is directing her heated comments. In this way, Simone’s “I-you” sentence construction makes her accusations very personal on one level
(as if she were directly instructing me on how to not to see her or perhaps on how not to portray her in my research), and yet impersonal on another level (“you” can also refer to a more generalized other).

Simone goes on to relate a story in which a white classmate visited her home for the first time, and “her jaw hit the floor” when they ascended the long winding driveway, entered into the gated property, and stared up at Simone’s enormous house. The friend was shocked and said, “I didn’t think any black people lived like this.” Simone said that she was defensive in response and adamant in her attempt to educate her friend: “I said, “Yeah, well, it’s a small community of, like, very upper class black people, but it exists!”” However, even as she defies the stereotype that all black people are poor, live in the projects, and act like rappers, she declares herself to be the exception to the rule (by claiming her upper class status). Unfortunately, this unwittingly reinforces the rule itself. This tension between resisting and reinforcing racial stereotypes comes up repeatedly throughout the course of our time together. Later, Simone states in a matter of fact tone:

I don’t act like a typical African American person, and that’s mostly because of the way I was raised. I wasn’t raised in that kind of environment, of the, like, stereotypical Black environment, and like, after I realized that a lot of people expected me to act that way? It was, like, even clearer to me that I had to act against that… I was like, “No! That’s not right.”

When I ask her what she meant by the “typical” black person, she replied, “I mean like the stereotypical black identity… like not very educated, not very well off… just kind of below.”
Simone then tells me a story about three other black girls from her high school, “Tashika, Terenika, and I forget the other one’s name, honestly,” who were all on scholarship and who were the “perfect picture of Ghetto America.” Again, her facetious tone in listing off stereotypically “African American-sounding” names—and forgetting one—intimates something of a lingering feeling of rawness and resentment. She said they were not academically motivated or gifted, and that they frequently associated only with themselves and did not let even Simone in because, as they told her, she was “not black enough.” In relaying this story to me, it is as if Simone is winking at me: you and I both know what “they” are like, but I am not like them! In this way, she unintentionally leaves the damaging stereotype itself intact and only tries to remove herself from association with it. One wonders how many of the racially loaded assumptions Simone herself is unwittingly holding onto so that she can place herself at a distance from them. After all, she admits to me that she often looks around the majority white campus of Boston College and claims, “I don’t know why this is, but I’ll look at someone, and from how they look, I’ll be like, “Oh my God, they’re so smart!”” Equating whiteness with intelligence, Simone feels herself at a disadvantage—needing to prove herself on the one hand, and being angry at the injustice of it all on the other.

The rending tension between her desire to differentiate herself from the “typical” African American and her fervent need to puncture and dismantle whites’ stereotypes about blacks plays itself out in Simone’s academic writing. As Simone herself realizes, she cannot do anything without the haunting message of her father’s warning to her:

The thing about, like, stereotypes about black people being stupid and stuff like that, is [it’s] always in my mind. Because my dad is like, “You have to be three times smarter than a white person to be
considered as smart as them.” So that’s always in my mind, like, throughout school. Throughout everything…. A lot of the times when I wanted to do well [academically] was just because I, like, could hear my dad saying in my head, “They’re gonna think you’re stupid if you don’t do well on this test!” So I think that definitely affected my academics in a very concrete way… There will definitely be times when I have written something, and I will be like, “This is not good enough!...” I consciously say to myself, like, “This is not good enough!” I guess when you asked if I compared myself to other people in the class, I do compare myself to other people in the class—like, “What is a white person gonna write?”

I responds, “And when you say to yourself what would a white person write, does that mean you want to say something different or that you want—,” and Simone interrupts and answers without skipping a beat, “It means I want to say something better, so it can be seen as equal.” Simone repeatedly refers to her father’s voice echoing her head, and it is his influence that reminds her that she cannot rest on her laurels or submit to regular standards: she must outdo even the best of her white counterparts to be seen just as capable. However, her father is not the only specter seeming to haunt Simone’s thoughts while she is attempting to write.

The summer before her entry into college, Simone went on a volunteer service trip to Rwanda where she worked with local schoolgirls to teach them how to write. She recalls how they arose early every morning to attend school by 5 a.m. and applied themselves to rigorous study. Yet, she knows that given their economic and political circumstances, these girls will very likely never have the opportunity Simone has had to attend college and fulfill their dreams. One girl in particular was severely injured and was going to be flown into the area by a charity so that she can benefit from Boston’s world-renowned medical community. Simone will host the girl for a week or so once she
arrives. Suspecting some guilt in her voice, I ask Simone how it would make her feel if her friend saw her struggling with writing.

I would feel *awful*. If, like, I have the *opportunity* to go to college, and she sees me slacking off or even if she doesn’t see me. Whenever I’m slacking off in general, a lot of times the girls in Rwanda come to my mind because I was there with them. I *know* how hard they work. I know these girls so personally—and I know they are working so hard, and they probably won’t get the opportunity to go to college, and so if I *do* have this opportunity, and I’m sitting in my dorm room [watching TV], then I’m just kind of, like, a shitty human.

In Simone’s mind, she’s “slacking off” whenever she is not writing. She allows herself no room to see the extraordinary pressure she has put on herself in honor of her father and in honor of these Rwandan girls. I ask her if thinking of the girls makes it harder or easier to sit down and write, and she admits, “I mean it makes it easier to *sit down*, but it makes it harder to *write.*” Herein lies Simone’s dilemma. “There are a lot of times when I’m saying, like, “Am I doing the best I can?”” Simone feels a profound debt to these African girls to whom she already feels some kinship via her African father, and yet this debt weighs so heavily upon her and so ups the ante with regard to her personal standards that she cannot begin to meet the challenge. Furthermore, her own paternal and maternal ancestors, like the Rwandan girls, did not have anything close to the kinds of opportunities Simone has had. In fact, many, like her maternal grandfather, could not write a word, except to sign their own names, and most were never even recorded in history. Simone’s mother, in the process of tracing her own genealogy, discovered just how short the trail is.

Not even the experience, but the *existence* of [my mother’s] ancestors is not even recorded. It goes back, like, three generations, and then it’s literally *gone!* A generation back was still slaves, and
beyond that, there’s no records of that person’s mother or father…or anything like that.

For Simone, writing is clearly a loaded endeavor.

Not only has Simone “just been given everything,” including a good education—a gift that lies in stark contrast to all that she knows of her parents’ upbringings—but she has a privilege that is not available to whole classes of people, people like the Rwandan girls, her grandfather, and her ancestors, whom she knows are no less (and who perhaps, in her mind, are more) deserving of this privilege. It is no wonder she feels ambivalent about writing. Like the working class and first generation students portrayed in Chapter Four who feel the burden of their parents’ sacrifices driving them to just make it through and get that degree for their family, Simone is carrying a banner for her people, too. Only for her, she is a banner-carrier not merely for her family but for an entire race of people. She has “something to prove” because she has been given an opportunity historically rare among her lineage, and she feels that she must make something of herself with that opportunity.

I ask Simone, “And how does that make you feel that you do have that [privilege], you do have that ability—you are at BC… how does that affect you?” To which she responds with a pale look on her face, “It’s really scary, honestly. Because if I fuck it up, then it’s just like, “Well, you’re stupid! You were given all this and, like, what did you do with it?”” From a certain perspective, Simone has everything—financial security, access to an excellent education, the ability to do things her ancestors had never even dared to dream of—yet at the same time, she is in the throes of a profound struggle. The burden she carries is immense. The weight of a people lies on her shoulders—not merely
all those who do not have her class privileges, but all those for whom racial stereotypes are still an obdurate obstacle.

The Rwandan girls, her father’s voice, her illiterate grandfather, her ancestors’ unrecorded genealogy—all of these specters haunt Simone’s mind when she sits down to write. She has been given everything, she tells herself, so why is she not happier? Why does she struggle? At the end of our first interview, when I ask, as is my routine, if there was anything that we had talked about that she had not thought about before, Simone replies:

The connection between, like, the fact that people in my family, now that I’m thinking about it, like my grandfather couldn’t write, there are some of my aunts…I just don’t think I really ever thought about that and how that connects to what I do here.

By the end of our second interview Simone sees something she had not articulated before. She stops me before I turn off the recorder to say, “I mean, the connection between the girls in Rwanda and, like, my education…I think it’s a very interesting connection.” I ask if she feels that helps explain at all why she has the relationship to writing that she does.

Yeah, I do. Because a lot of them are in a kind of tangentially similar relationship to writing that I am, because, like, my grandparents couldn’t write, their parents can’t write, their sisters can’t write. So I think that has affected my experience with writing.

Something seems to have become clearer to Simone. She can recognize something of the burden of others’ denied access to opportunity, of their consequently unfulfilled promise, of their haunting, unvoiced plea that she speak, at last, for them. And yet it is a burden she feels honor-bound to carry.
JENNIFER

Jennifer is a sophomore from the Northeast who recently chose English as a major. A first generation college student, Jennifer and her family of four subsist on the disability payments her parents receive from the government, relegating them to a life of relative poverty and profound insecurity. Both her mother and father became, at different times, disabled at work, and so they can no longer hold the working class jobs they had prior to their injuries. Jennifer attended both Catholic and underperforming public schools in poor neighborhoods in Florida and then New York, where she nonetheless proved herself a capable and promising student. She applied to Boston College on a whim even though she knew nothing about it. Because she did not have to pay for her college applications, she applied to thirteen schools, adding Boston College only after she found out that they did not require any supplemental materials to the common application. She chose BC because of all the schools she got into, it was ranked the highest academically, and they gave her a full scholarship. She pays just $60 per semester to attend, in addition to her employment on campus as a work study student.

Jennifer has an extreme case of academic writing block that is most pronounced whenever she has to do any kind of “subjective” analytic writing or personal narratives. She muses on why this kind of writing is so difficult, while her block is a bit less intense with more “objective” research papers. “Yeah, it’s more, like, you’re dealing, like, I think psychologically, you’re dealing with your self, so it’s harder—as opposed to dealing with, like, Beowulf… or the Spanish Inquisition.” As we shall see, the link between writing and self is strong for Jennifer, making her block all the more insidious.
Jennifer first became aware that she had significant trouble with writing when she tried to draft her college application essay. She remembers that she wrote upwards of five versions of that essay, and when she had to rewrite it yet again for an early assignment for her Freshman Writing Seminar, she actually chose to write instead about the block that plagued her. “I talked about how, like, I’d written this paper again and again and again and, like, I just keep looking at this blank screen.” She described the panic she feels when staring at the blinking cursor and how she edits herself before she even has a chance to get anything down. “I, I just think I sound stupid (laughs), and I, like, worry... Yeah.” Despite her sometimes deafening inner critic, Jennifer always manages to turn her papers in on time. Unlike many of the students in Chapter Five, Jennifer does not feel entitled to ask for extensions just because she happens to struggle with assignments.

Even if it sucks, I have to [turn it in]. I’m more scared of not finishing it and, like, the consequences of not turning it in. Because [not handing in a paper to a professor] is really disrespectful. Like, “You didn’t even care enough to try and write my essay?” It’s a disrespect thing.

In Jennifer’s eyes, her obligation to others takes definitive precedence over attending to her own needs. Her writing block is simply her own personal problem.

The catch is that Jennifer feels her writing is what precipitated her getting into Boston College. In other words, she has a strong suspicion her college essay is what cinched her acceptance [“I feel like it’s actually what got me into BC, is my personal statement”], and she is subsequently preoccupied with the idea that “writing’s my one thing, [so] I can’t blow it.” She feels she does not have academic strengths in other areas. Moreover, she describes how her parents taught her the utmost importance of education
while growing up—a parental message that, as we have seen, reverberates throughout the interviews of the low income students in this study. For Jennifer, however, the message was particularly poignant, given that the source of her parents’ financial distress was her father’s accident on the job as a carpenter and the permanently disabling injury he sustained as a result.

My dad god injured when I was around five. So he was in a wheelchair for a couple years… and so I spent a lot of time with him growing up. So he was always there to help me with my homework and stuff, and he always really stressed education because he, he, he’s really smart, too, but he’s, like, you know, “I never thought I needed to go to college or anything… I thought I’d always be able to depend on my body for work.” And then, it was just, like, taken away from him. So he thinks it’s much more reliable to depend on your mind for work, rather than your body. So I think that made me want to do well [in school] a lot.

It is not surprising that Jennifer, whose high school teachers and college professors have called her “excellent” at writing, is terrified of losing her status as a “good writer.” She has learned through her father’s experience that one’s identity and even one’s livelihood can be “taken away” in an instant, through no fault of one’s own. Later, she even uses the same language (“taken away”) with regard to herself. She admits:

I feel like I’m a good writer, so I guess, like, I’m scared of having that, like, title taken away. Like, how can I make [the paper] better? How can I say something that hasn’t been said before, like, say something different about it…. With writing especially, you can be a good writer to someone, but a bad writer to someone else? And I think… that’s the part I’m afraid of—I just don’t want to run into anybody who is gonna tell me I’m a bad writer!

It is as if being a good writer is not a quality or skill possessed by or inherent to the individual but a fragile, externally imposed status based on the capricious and subjective whim of others. In this way, the explicit message from her father that one can more reliably count on one’s mind than one’s body has been trumped by the implicit lesson
from his experience: one cannot truly count on anything. Her father intended her to trust in her ability to find and sustain stable, profitable work by using her mind, and yet the moral of his story, in her eyes, was that there is nothing one can stake one’s identity on that is not fragile and vulnerable to damage. In short, Jennifer seems to have been traumatized by her father’s trauma. Nonetheless, Jennifer feels she can best honor her father’s trials in life by pursuing education and dedicating herself to being the best student she can be. However, because she feels that “I don’t think that I have, like, any other talents” and that being a good writer is an inherently fragile status, writing is a high stakes performance each and every time she sits down to start a paper.

Fragility is a theme that comes up multiple times in our conversations together. Because Jennifer’s subjective sense of writing competency seems entirely caught up in others’ opinions of her, it is unsurprising that Jennifer describes a virtual rollercoaster of emotions regarding her writing:

I don’t feel confident as a writer because—well, I feel confident that I’m good at...rewording things to make it sound better...but I get really nervous and think that I’m an awful writer—until I turn [the paper] in and then I usually do well, and then I’m like, “OK, I’m a good writer”—until I have to write my next essay, and then I’m like, “Oh, I’m a bad writer!” (Laughs.) I’m always scared that, like, my last paper—that I’ll never write that well again, cuz I always try to write better than what I just wrote, so I’m always scared that I just lost all my talent, that I’m talentless and I have nothing to do. It’s very dramatic.

Even the construction of her sentences here—“I feel… until…and then…and then I feel”—has the feel of a wild ride up from the height of confidence down to the low of despair and resignation. Jennifer’s description reminds me of a famous proverb, “Lean too much on the approval of people, and it becomes a bed
of thorns.” Later, Jennifer even articulates this theme of externalization explicitly [“I only think I’m good because other people tell me that I am”]. It is evident that no matter how many times she is told by teachers and professors that she is a good writer, Jennifer never fully internalizes this approbation and instead empowers others to judge her with or without mercy, as they deem fit. It makes sense then why the theme of fragility is so prevalent in her interviews—she does not hold the power to moderate her own feelings about her writing. In this way, she lacks the self-determination that might lend her more lasting confidence. After we explore what kinds of writing Jennifer personally deems “good” and “bad,” we will return to this theme of fragility and its connection to her writing block.

One of the tenets of “good” writing, in Jennifer’s book, is being “technically” good, vis-à-vis grammar and sentence structure, and she is well aware this competency comes more easily to those from more privileged backgrounds than she. Like the other non-upper middle class students depicted in Chapter Four, Jennifer is painfully aware that she is at a disadvantage relative to her peers and that the cultural capital she possesses tends to be devalued by the elite institutions. When I ask her how she perceives the general population at Boston College, Jennifer responds simply, “I assume most people come from a better background.” She describes how neither of her parents write and how she is therefore unable to share any of her academic work with them. I inquire whether or not this affects how she feels as a student.

It’s different to be, like, taught something at school than, like, taught something at home, I guess. So like, in school, it’d be very academic, but, like, at home, [their] parents [would] encourage [them] to, like, write…. I feel like [more privileged students] probably know how to write, like, well, and they know how to
write, like, academically well…. I feel like most of the time, they’re much smarter than I am, so… I feel like every time I write a paper… I always have to [assert] that I’m not, like, upper class.

This statement recalls the student, Clara, from Chapter Four who understood that not having “education-like” dinner table conversations at home with her family was a handicap from which her upper middle class friends did not suffer. Jennifer’s refrain of the qualifier “I feel like” before several of her statements suggests that she either lacks confidence in her observations and experiences or she is afraid to assert a point of view that goes against the status quo at Boston College. As she describes it, BC has two discrete and often unfriendly populations: those in what she calls the “typical BC student” category are white and upper middle class, and the much smaller group of those she terms the “atypical students” are students who do not, for whatever reason, fit into the former category. Jennifer sees herself not only as an “atypical” student, but as an “atypical atypical” student. Perhaps because she perceives herself to be a minority within a minority population, she does not feel she can simply proclaim her assertions without a qualifier such as “I feel like…” due to the fact that her perspective so clearly deviates from both the “typical” student population and the traditional “atypical” (i.e., minority) population.

Jennifer’s sense of herself as an “atypical atypical” student is not insignificant. Deep into our first interview, she expands on this concept and begins to discuss at length what seems to be a secondary source of her paralyzing tendency to block, in addition to the ambivalent tension bred by the moral lesson of her father’s disability. Namely, as it turns out, Jennifer experiences herself as a person without a home anywhere in the school, or as we shall see, anywhere in the world. Her liminal status is exemplified by an
anguishing story she tells about her first days on campus. Jennifer is a part of a program at Boston College called Options Through Education (OTE), which is a bridge program for poor and minority students to acclimate to the academic and social environment of the college, which is presumably much less racially and socioeconomically diverse than were many such students’ high schools. OTE accepts a group of students to attend Boston College on the condition that they participate in the program and that prior to their enrolling as freshmen they attend the mandatory summer session ahead of when the rest of the students arrive on campus. Older OTE undergraduates serve as “preceptors,” which Jennifer describes as a mix between a mentor, an orientation leader, and a resident assistant. These preceptors run the very first meetings introducing OTE students to Boston College.

And my preceptor told me, like, after our first meeting or whatever—because we had preceptor group meetings—she was like, “Oh, you know, like, are you nervous?” And I was like, “Yeah, I guess.” You know, it was a new summer program. And she was like, “Oh well, you know, are you nervous because you’re like one of the only white people here?” And I was like, “No, you know, it’s fine!” (Laughs) I didn’t know what to say. I was like, “What?!” I hadn’t really thought about it… [But] she was like, “Oh, well, you know, at BC, a lot of the white people won’t accept you because you’re poor, and a lot of the [minorities] won’t accept you because you’re white!” And I was like, “OK, cool!” (Laughs) So I think just her saying that to me, like, *so explicitly* and from the beginning? [It] shaped the whole way. I’ll never know how I would’ve seen BC otherwise.

According to Jennifer, this one encounter colored her perception of Boston College and influenced the entirety of her experience here because, in the end, Jennifer found that her preceptor was right.

So I definitely came into [the fall] thinking, like, “Oh, like, these stuck up white people are gonna be like blah blah blah.” But I
I respond by asking Jennifer if she felt excluded, to which she replies, “Yeah, but it’s not just from them.” She proceeds to tell me that she is a member of the Filipino Society, where “I’m ‘in’ enough to hang out and talk and stuff, but I’m not in-in” (presumably because Jennifer is not Filipino) and the GLBTQ Leadership Council (although Jennifer is straight), where “it’s the same thing—they won’t let [me] into their circle either.” That Jennifer, a white, straight student, has tried to find kinship with people in groups as diverse as the Filipino Society and the GLBTQ Leadership Council speaks volumes about the desperate quality of her loneliness on campus. She has tried numerous groups with the same outcome: “I don’t really feel at home anywhere.”

In sum, Jennifer is a white student who cannot fit in with the other white students because she does not share their privileged class status, nor can she fit in with other poor students on campus—who are predominantly racial and ethnic minorities—because she is white. Her liminal status extends beyond her campus life to her home life in her relationship with her parents. She tells me, “They put a lot of pressure on me to be happy here” because, as her parents put it, she “should be thankful for the opportunity of education.” They believe that if Jennifer is successful at school—and they define success as Jennifer “keeping [her] head above water and not failing out”—then she should also be happy at school and in life. As a result, there is a growing distance between herself and her parents.
I don’t particularly like it here. But I tell them I do! (Laughs)
Well, sometimes, I’ll, like, bring up [my unhappiness] a little bit,
but then later I’ll be like, “I’m feeling a lot better here.” But that’s
[not true.]

These little lies seem to exacerbate a gulf between Jennifer and her mother and father that is increasingly difficult to bridge. In other words, she feels her lack of a “home” on multiple fronts. The popular saying, “You can never go home,” articulates a common sentiment among lower income first generation college students like Jennifer that college can irreparably separate a person from her high school-educated parents (Lubrano 2004).

In this way, her liminal status is overdetermined and only enunciates her loneliness.

Jennifer’s liminality is underscored by the double stigma she feels on campus as a poor white person. She describes how there is a “definite stigma against white people” among the “atypical” Boston College minority student population, and yet, as she later admits, there is among affluent white students also a stigma against the low income students who were accepted to Boston College through OTE.

A lot of people will stigmatize OTE, like, “Oh, you aren’t even good enough to get in [to Boston College]. You’re only here because of x, y, and z.” And then I also get, “Oh, you’re in OTE? But you’re white—why were you in OTE?” Like, one girl said, “How are you a minority?”

In essence, Jennifer is not only stigmatized for being “atypical” (i.e., poor) but for being an “atypical atypical” student (i.e., poor and white). It is as if she is othered not once but twice and becomes, in a word, an “other other.” It is this doubly marginalized status that I would argue contributes to Jennifer’s profound ambivalence toward writing. As I will show in the following pages, Jennifer feels on the one hand that she is a member of a marginalized group that her father taught her she must work her way out of by “relying on [her] mind and not [her] body.” On the other hand, she has mixed feelings about
climbing her way into a group [white and privileged] that is not only stigmatized by her non-white friends but that also stigmatizes her for her current lower class status. She is stuck in a stigmatized status whether she moves forward or backward.

In response to her twice stigmatized status, Jennifer seems to have a dual strategy. First, she thinks of and presents herself as “white, but not white” in order to remove herself from the category of “stereotypical” and “stuck up white people.” Second, as I will address in a moment, she inverts the stigma placed on low income people in general and people in OTE in particular such that being a member of these groups has some cache in her eyes. That her non-white friends see Jennifer, as well as her non-American white friends, as part of a special kind of non-white race, too, is clear:

My [non-white] friends will say things like, “You know, white people blah blah blah. But not like you. Like, people who are like this, not people who are like you.” Cuz even my other white friends [two of whom are refugees] who aren’t from America, they’re like, “No! I’m not white! I’m European, I’m not white. Like, you’re all white; I’m not white.”

Jennifer’s comments are echoed closely by Melissa, a younger student who is another one of the very few white people in the OTE program. Melissa observes:

I feel like, when you think of OTE, you don’t think of a white person. It’s just not common…. Some of my friends like to say, “You’re white but you’re not that white. You’re a different type of white…” One of my [Latina] friends likes to make a joke—she’s like, “I call you ‘Whitey’!” And she’s like, “Because you’re the white girl that’s not like a white girl. You don’t count! You don’t look like them either.”

This kind of racial liminality inevitably contributes to what Pinel (1999) called “stigma consciousness.” Closely related to the theory of stereotype threat previously mentioned,
stigma consciousness refers to the degree to which a person expects to be stereotyped by others and signifies the importance of combatting such threats to self.

Jennifer’s likely unconscious strategy in light of her awareness of others’ stereotypes about her as a poor white person is to invert the stigma such that she in turn stigmatizes those who might stigmatize her, namely privileged white people. She does this by an intransigent fixation on the notion of “cliché.” In the course of our interviews, Jennifer uses the words “cliché” or “clichéd” twenty five times and refers to “cookie-cutter” writing or writing that is “all the same” or “totally indistinct” many more times. Even when I asked her what is going through her head when she’s staring at the blank screen unable to write anything, Jennifer replies without hesitation, “I guess I think about, like, how not to be cliché, cuz that’s always—you never want to do that.” At first, I did not put it together whom Jennifer was talking about in her diatribe against the use of “clichés” in one’s writing. Rather quickly, I came to realize that she was referring to “upper class” students, as she calls her more privileged peers at Boston College. Returning to an earlier quote, I will now add the rest of Jennifer’s words:

I assume that most people come from a better background… They probably know how to write, like, well; they know how to write, like, academically well… They probably write better than I do, but I. I think that they were maybe also taught—like, a lot of times, they’ll have me read their papers cuz people will pay me to proofread or whatever, and a lot of times it’s really, it’s just really, like, not…that…good? Like, there’s no—they’re, like, interchangeable, like, they’re all the same, like, they’re all just writing the same way over and over again.

Contrast Jennifer’s above comments with her discussion of her (less privileged) friends’ use of clichés:
I met a lot of my friends through Options Through Education, and I—it’s obviously a program where you don’t come from a great background. So a lot of my friends, English isn’t their first language, so when they write things like clichés, it comes across differently because they usually haven’t heard that cliché before, so it’s just—to them—like, real. So I won’t correct that or anything [when I proofread their papers] because it doesn’t come across as fake.

Here, Jennifer is creating a positive “subjective status” (Rosenfield 2012) from the more negative objective status she and her less privileged friends have been assigned by the dominant group. Namely, Jennifer initiates a class-coded binary between “real” and “fake.” As our discussion continues, Jennifer spends a lot of time talking about how the privileged students on campus can be “so fake,” which she obliquely contrasts with her characterization of her (low income) friends as “more real.” When she describes her fellow English majors, she refers to them again as “upper class.”

A lot of them, I feel, are very pretentious? And very like, “Oh, well, I know so much literature, and I know…” I don’t know. I don’t know that they think they know, but they think that they know something that other people don’t. And they just act very, kind of snooty. But I mean, a lot of them are just, like, really “cool”… I guess, like, stereotypical “artsy” college students, and they’re the very pretentious, very kind of proper people… So a lot of them, I assume, you know, they’re probably, like, a good writer, and they probably use bigger vocabulary than me, and they use, like, I don’t know, more complex, like, structuring, but they probably sound like every other essay that the professor has ever read! (Laughs)... But I do think a lot of them think that they’re good writers just because they write according to the rules.

Implicitly, Jennifer has linked in her narrative several otherwise distinct concepts—privilege, pretentiousness or snootiness, advantaged cultural capital and knowing how to “write according to the rules,” and unextraordinary writing that lacks a unique voice.

Here, her anti-privilege bias, the inversion of her own stigmatization, is palpable. She is working to stigmatize those who would stigmatize her.
Jennifer’s strategy of inverting her own stigmatization was only made possible by her relatively recent realization that she has a “distinctive voice.” In the Freshman Writing Seminar Jennifer took in her first year at Boston College, she had a professor that she recalls as being “kind of like me—not from a great background.” This professor taught in the Options Through Education program, and so she and Jennifer got to know each other fairly well. As previously mentioned, one of their early assignments was for the students to take their college application essay and revise it heavily according to certain specifications the professor requested. Jennifer remembers with a smile:

And she, like, she was the first person who ever said, “Oh, like, you are a good writer! This is really good—like, you have such a distinctive voice that I don’t see in most other kids’ writings!” So that’s where I first got [real recognition for my writing], and my TA also told me, like, “Yeah, you know, yours is a lot more, like, accessible than, like, other writing.” So that’s where it all started.

Even just from this statement, it is clear that Jennifer links “good” writing with “distinctive” or unique writing, and implicitly, “bad” writing with clichéd writing, a sentiment which is no doubt shared by many a writing instructor. However, it is important to note that her voice not sounding like “other kids”’ is a point of serious pride for Jennifer. Moreover, she is pleased because others find her voice not only unusual but also “accessible,” a word that may also embody a class-coded critique of the inaccessible or “pretentious” and “uppity” writing of more privileged students. “So that’s where it all started,” Jennifer concludes, whereby “it” refers both to her identity as a “good writer” and her difficulties with writing block.

In this surprising way, Jennifer bears more resemblance to the privileged students in Chapter Five than her non-upper middle class counterparts in Chapter Four in that she
has come to heavily identify with and invest herself in her writing. Perhaps Jennifer’s fortitude and personal perseverance in the face of her class disadvantage enabled her subsequent symbolic victory (i.e., her declaration of English as a major) over this socially constructed “handicap.” Nonetheless, just as with the students in Chapter Five, identifying with one’s writing is often inextricably coupled with an intense fear of judgment because it is essentially a judgment of one’s very self. This makes further sense of Jennifer’s increased writing block when dealing with more subjective subjects where “you’re dealing with your self” more than with “Beowolf or the Spanish Inquisition.” However, Jennifer is gripped by a fear that she will somehow invalidate her status as a good writer; lose touch with her authentic voice; and become “fake,” “clichéd,” and “just like everyone else.” When I ask her “What’s the very worst thing you could imagine someone thinking about your writing?” she does not hesitate to respond, “Oh, you’re just like everybody else! Like, there’s nothing different [about your writing]—you’re not any better.” Again, being “clichéd” is the sine qua non of bad writing, even more than technical mistakes, mechanical clumsiness, or intellectual inaccuracy.

Jennifer ponders again why she started to struggle with writing block, “I mean, I think the trouble has always been, like, being afraid of being bad? So you don’t wanna start because, you know, you don’t wanna be bad! If you don’t do it, you can’t be bad at it!” Just as Jennifer shares with the students of Chapter Five a profound investment of self in her writing, she also unwittingly echoes one of their themes: the “you can’t fire me, I quit” mentality that Ben had articulated. Her fear of being “bad” is so intense as to make her crave not turning in anything at all. The difference, however, between Jennifer
and the students of Chapter Five, is twofold. First, as we have seen earlier, Jennifer does not feel entitled to simply quit. She feels it is profoundly disrespectful to the professor if she fails to turn in a paper and, moreover, to her parents, who are relying on her to climb out of her family’s poverty. Second, as is evident above, being “bad” for Jennifer is intimately tied up in being “just like everybody else,” wherein “everybody else” is a referent to the majority white upper middle class students at Boston College. It is for this reason why she both takes pride in being recognized for her “distinctive” and “accessible” voice and is so very fearful of what she calls losing her “authenticity.” Jennifer concludes, “So I guess there’s always a fear of losing part of your identity.”

I ask Jennifer if she can explain how one might “lose touch” with one’s identity as a good writer. “What do you think it is that could threaten that? Is there something in particular that you fear would cause you to lose that status or skill?” Jennifer responds:

I don’t know. I think—I guess anything could! I guess it’s a fear because 1) I don’t know… if I’m good at [writing]. I know I’m not bad at it, but I don’t know that I’m good at it. So there’s a fear that I might never be good at it… But then there’s also the fear that, like, just because you write something well once? [That] doesn’t mean you’ll ever write something as well again… I guess because you’re always changing? Like, I might lose—I might change and not be in touch with whatever gives me my voice? I might become very, like, clichéd? Like a clichéd person, living my life, just not real, like, trying to fake something.

Here again we see Jennifer’s dichotomy of being “real” versus being “fake.” In this excerpt, I could tell Jennifer was getting worked up because while she had articulated her points in the form of lists at many points during her interviews (“1)…, 2)…,” etc.), in this case she forgets to proceed from point number one to point number two. Instead she seems to get carried away by the very fear of which she speaks, thus illustrating the
power this fear has over her. Interestingly, Jennifer is nuanced in her thinking about the quality of her own writing—it exists somewhere between the otherwise simplistic binary between “good” and “bad.” However, she is not able to sustain such nuance in the face of her terror that she will one day lose her authenticity. It is as if she will suddenly lose hold of her status as a “real” person and become—as if there are no other locations on a spectrum on which she might fall—“fake.”

I respond to Jennifer’s palpable anxiety by trying to ascertain how it is a person might lose touch with their “real” selves. “How do you think that comes about, someone losing their authenticity?”

Ummm, I don’t know! I think that’s the scary part! You don’t know. I think it could happen to different people different ways, and you don’t know what’s, like, what, like, your kryptonite or whatever is. [LB: “And do you know anyone who you feel has lost that?”] I don’t know anyone that has lost that, but I think there are a lot of people here who give off the impression that they’re not being authentic, that they’re being fake, and just being what everyone else is—like, they just like Longchamp bags and, I don’t know, whatever else they do!... But I don’t know if they lost [their authenticity] or they never had it.

Jennifer’s use of the term “kryptonite,” a signifier of Superman’s one weakness despite all his other superpowers, suggests that she feels that no matter how many kudos she receives for her competent, even gifted writing, she will always possess an ultimate, potentially lethal weakness. She knows she has one; she simply does not know when it will show up. This hypervigilant certainty of the ever-present potential for her own demise echoes the statements of victims of trauma. Like trauma survivors, Jennifer (perhaps due to her secondary traumatization through her father’s disability), is “always waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Through her reference to the designer-brand
“Longchamp bags,” Jennifer again connects in her narrative those most likely to lose (or never to possess) authenticity with students of privilege, as they are the only ones, after all, that can afford such everyday luxuries. In other words, in Jennifer’s mind, “upper class” students tend to act or be “fake.” Perhaps Jennifer worries that she too might become “fake” because she knows that she is, after all, at school working to climb out of poverty and, ideally, into the privileged class she so scorns. Maybe this is why she is so consumed with anxiety about becoming “clichéd” in her writing and in her very persona. As Jennifer has said many times throughout her interviews, she feels “all I have” is her unique writing voice.

That Jennifer feels alienated from everyone around her – a consequence of her double stigma – is evident from two stories she tells. First, she is alienated from the white upper middle class students that dominate campus. As is clear from the following narrative, she does not speak their language. In the small writing class Jennifer took her first year, “there was this girl, who was the typical BC student—like a house in Martha’s Vineyard and everything.” The young woman brought up “Lululemon” in class, and Jennifer said, “What is a Lululemon?” Apparently, her classmates were astonished at her ignorance of the upscale clothing store that is so popular on campus—at least among students who can afford it. “Everyone was like, GASP!, you don’t know?!” The girl then threw her leg up onto Jennifer’s desk and demanded Jennifer feel how soft her yoga pants were. Jennifer was of course embarrassed by all the attention being drawn to her ignorance and, essentially, to her lower class status. However, Jennifer’s strategy for dealing with this humiliation is apparent in the fact that immediately after telling me this story, she relays something she found very “sad” about this same girl, named Marguerite.
Namely, this young woman’s mother was so concerned about keeping up appearances that she hardly showed her daughter any warmth or love:

We all had to read our essays out loud, and I don’t even know what her essay was about, but she was talking about Martha’s Vineyard and her, like, seven different houses, and in passing, she was like, “We have a room just for looking—you can’t sit on any of the furniture.”…But at the end of the class, the final class of the semester…the teacher was hugging everyone goodbye, and Marguerite was the last one, and she was like, “You know, my mother never hugged me like that because she was always afraid of wrinkling her clothes.”

Jennifer’s inclusion of this rather pathetic story of the often unacknowledged deficits of privilege is, I believe, her attempt at humanizing those she has otherwise stigmatized in response to their stigmatization of her. [“So ever since I heard that, I don’t hate stereotypical BC students as much because—obviously you never know what someone’s experience is like.”]. With this mature stance, she has inverted their pity for her such that she now has pity for “them,” perhaps as a way to deflect the stinging shame of stigma implied by their “gasping” at her illiteracy in their world. It is as if her previously unspoken empathy for “these people” helps her feel closer to a group from whom she is otherwise hopelessly and profoundly alienated. No matter how “sad” she finds them, however, she still cannot speak their language, nor does she truly want to.

Jennifer does not want to be aligned with the white upper middle class students so much as she does the students of color, who tend to be closer to her socioeconomic status. When she recalls with disgust the many “racist,” “homophobic,” and otherwise intolerant remarks white upper middle class students have made to her friends at Boston College, she makes the sophisticated observation that “they” probably make such comments
because “they’ve never been on the other side.” Moreover, even if they had been, the privileged still have “much less to lose” than students like Jennifer do:

Even if they were, like, made fun of or something? I don’t know if they’d care as much because, you know, they have a lot of things to fall back on. They’d be like, “Oh well, it doesn’t really matter because I’m still wealthy, I don’t have to worry about paying for school… [Even] if I hated everyone here, I could still transfer schools and afford it.” They might say, “Oh, well, they are the weird ones because there’s so many more of us than them!”

Here Jennifer constructs herself as a part of the minority “them” that the majority “us” opposes. However, in spite of these alliances she feels with her fellow OTE students, Jennifer herself—clearly unknowingly—uses a very racially loaded term to describe minority students in a way that indicates she does not speak their language either: “Most people in the program [of OTE] are colored, so I don’t have many white friends here” or “A lot of the white people won’t accept you because you’re poor, and a lot of the colored people won’t accept you because you’re white!” Of course, Jennifer may have innocently picked this term up from historical readings and mixed it up with the current, more politically correct term “people of color.” However innocent the cause of her terminology, if Jennifer were to use such a loaded word with her friends—as she surely has considering how frequently it came up in her interviews with me—she might unwittingly alienate herself from the very friends she sees as on the same side of the “us versus them” divide as herself. The irony in her mistaken use of an ignorant and even racist term in the process of identifying herself with racial minorities is lost on Jennifer. However, the resulting alienation she must feel from being a part of neither the “us” nor the “them” cannot escape her notice.
As Jennifer herself has said, she is at home nowhere. She is comfortable relying on nothing. Her ambivalence with regard to writing—she must write for her father’s sake, for the sake of lifting herself out of her family’s situation, and for the sake of maintaining her authentic voice. Yet she cannot write for fear of following in her father’s footsteps and losing everything, for fear of being “bad” and “clichéd” like the students of privilege she enviously pities, and for fear of losing that voice that gives her “distinctive” value in spite of her relative lack of dominant cultural capital. Her writing block is her ambivalence and liminality embodied. She can go neither forward nor backward. She cannot move without regret into the inauthentic world of privilege, and she cannot retrace her steps back home, lest she dishonor all that her parents have asked of her. It is as if she is only truly at home in her writing, and yet her block keeps her from inhabiting a home even there. Thus the intransigence of her block—it exemplifies the liminality of her very status. The “neither here nor there” quality of her social position is of course a doubly stigmatized status: she is neither us nor them; she is the other other. Pinel (1999) noted, “Paradoxically, people’s excessive concern about their stereotypical status can actually have the unintended effect of spoiling their opportunities to move beyond it” (p. 127). In other words, if an individual has a high level of stigma consciousness, they will tend to avoid situations in which they have the chance to either validate or invalidate the stereotype for which members of their group are known, thus foregoing the opportunity they have to defy and prove wrong others’ negative associations with them. Jennifer, as one with a high level of consciousness regarding her doubly stigmatized status, may long to avoid writing in particular and self-expression more generally because she fears she
might unwittingly validate others’ marginalization of her. However, it is this avoidance that prevents her from overcoming her fears.

TWO CASE STUDIES

Both Simone and Jennifer, in different ways, exist between a white and a non-white world, and they are a part of neither. Simone is haunted by her ambivalence about privilege: her family has always been denied privilege, and yet now that she has it she must make the most of it. She resents the privileged class for marginalizing her people, and yet she recognizes herself as among that same class. Jennifer is haunted by her fear that she will one day encounter her “kryptonite” and lose her voice, her authenticity, her one super power (i.e., her status as a good writer) to the clichéd world of those “snotty upper class” people who stigmatize her for her lack of upper middle class status. In these two case studies, we have seen the ways in which writing block, born of ambivalence and stereotype threat, can embody a kind of social liminality.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Academic Writing Block and the American Dream

A generation ago, going to college largely represented a promise. Of course, that promise was often still limited to certain kinds of people. To those for whom higher education was accessible, however, college brought tangible rewards. If an individual made it through to receive a bachelor’s degree, he or she could compete handily in the national economy, secure his or her own future, and even be a contender in the elite world of privilege. If such individuals came from a modest background, they would certainly have a good shot at surpassing their own parents’ social class standing. Essentially, if a college graduate had the talent and put in the time and hard work, he or she was all but guaranteed a place at the table, so to speak.

Today, college offers no such assurances. In a world where many accomplished PhDs work as part-time adjuncts to teach for $2000 a course with no health benefits and equally intelligent JDs must pick up work as low wage “temps” post-law school, college no longer represents the promise it once did. In many ways, college today is the high
school of yesteryear. It is an expectation, not a guarantee. Graduate or professional
school is the new baseline for people who aspire to the privileged set. Even that cannot
promise an upper middle class way of life forevermore. However, as citizens of this new
economy, our aspirations have yet to catch up with the emergent realities. The American
Dream, in other words, is much more elusive than it once was, but it is no less
hegemonic. Visions of one day owning one’s own house, earning enough to support a
family, and being financially “comfortable” still dominate many a college students’
imaginings, despite the fact that not one of these mileposts is as achievable as it was for
their parents. There are fewer foregone conclusions for today’s college graduates, and
little by little, this awareness is creeping into students’ consciousness.

The rising cognizance that the American Dream may now be more “dream” than it is “American” can be seen in the recent eruptions of conversations large and small all across the country about the “value” of the college degree. In April of this year, the
Chronicle of Higher Education published a column called “What is College For?” in
which multiple college presidents weighed in on the matter. The words, “Is College
Worth It?,” has graced the pages of Time Magazine, Forbes Magazine, the New York
Times, the Washington Post, CNN.com, and many other national news outlets. WBUR,
an affiliate of National Public Radio, has just dedicated a new program to investigating
the plight of early twenty-somethings, called “Generation Stuck.” On their home page,
they ask, “How does it feel to be young in this struggling economy? For the average
twenty-something, it means feeling overqualified, underemployed, and overwhelmed.
Stuck.”

Recent college graduates’ “return on investment” has come under serious
scrutiny and has become a widespread topic of national conversation ever since the

22 http://genstuck.wbur.org/
Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 brought the student debt crisis into national consciousness. Indeed, the zeitgeist is catching up with the reality on the ground.

The increasingly elusive yet ever hegemonic American Dream—coupled with the push in many colleges over the last decade to be less exclusive and recruit low income and minority students—has begun to result in an emerging scarcity mentality. Today’s ever more diverse and inclusive contingent of college students is competing for the same basic resources, the same upper middle class careers, the same dream of economic security. One inevitable outcome of these changes is, as I have shown, the trend toward college academic performance—and writing in particular—becoming a very high stakes game. Sports commentators call athletes who flub high stakes performances and make mistakes in areas of skill otherwise second nature to the performer, “chokers.” Those athletes who get “the yips” are frequently unfavorably compared to those who are seen as “clutch” – reliable performers in high stakes, high pressure moments that can be the difference between winning and losing the game. In fact, the career of many a “choker” has been decimated by repeated (or even single) lapses into “yips” territory. (Bill Buckner, who failed to catch a simple ground ball and lost the 1986 World Series for his team, is far better known for being a “choke artist” than for the illustrious career that preceded his unfortunate misstep in that game.) College students today face an increasingly high stakes performance when they sit down to write a paper. If they “choke” (or get what I might call the “academic yips”) and succumb to writing block, they will inevitably flounder. If this happens time and again, they will certainly not earn the grades they need to land the “decent” jobs required to secure their economic futures. If their block becomes debilitating enough, they may not even see their way through to
attain the all-important college degree. Block, in essence, carries some significant risk. Like Bill Buckner’s missed catch, students with persistent academic writing block may eventually see their prospects dimmed in light of their intransigent difficulties.

In the face of increasingly high stakes, why, one might wonder, do only some people “choke” and struggle so severely with academic writing? If college no longer holds the promise it once did, and if conceivably everyone is fighting for an ever smaller number of places at the table of privilege, why don’t more people stumble? Why is it that Tyrone, my low income tutee from Chapter One, so often succumbs to block when others from his background—who share Tyrone’s hope that college is the ticket out of the same dangerous neighborhood—do not? Of course, just as in sports, some individuals choke in the face of pressure while others thrive on it. This is one reason that I have never intended to suggest that we replace a psychological framework of academic writing blocks with a structural one. Instead, I have insisted that we supplement the more traditional individualistic approach to the problem with what C. Wright Mills (1959) called a “sociological imagination.” Tyrone’s block cannot be explained simply by his idiosyncratic inability to thrive under pressure, but neither can it be understood as a mere reflection of his demographics. The two explanations, when taken together, make much more sense than either one alone.

LESSONS FROM DEVALUED VOICES: BLOCK AS SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The blocked low income and working class students from Chapter Four taught us that their struggles with academic writing block may represent both the awareness that they lack the kinds of cultural capital elite universities reward and also the pressure they
feel to repay the debt they have to their parents. After all, if their parents sacrificed so much to get them to a place like Boston College, the least they can do in return is to excel academically and try to achieve the social mobility their families sent them off to college to attain. However, as we saw in the case of Julia, a low income Chinese American woman, students often harbor some significant ambivalence about surpassing their parents in social class and status. Julia knows her parents slave away in their restaurant business in order to send her to Boston College so that she can have a more “comfortable” life. She is also haunted by the question of what her father might have done with his life had he been afforded the same opportunities Julia has had. Her resulting guilt certainly troubles her ability to decisively stride forward in her studies to achieve all that her father could not. Nonetheless, she knows that is her “job.” As we know from the literature, such ambivalence is not uncommon among low income and working class students (London 1989; Lubrano 2004; Rodriguez 2010). Indeed, many scholars have talked about the subjective “cost” of social mobility (Karp 1986; Lubrano 2004). Perhaps being a blocked student is a performance of one’s ambivalence. A student can attempt to move forward, but she is prevented from achieving at the level that might instigate her social separation from her family. Of course, the longer she is blocked, the less likely it is that she will be able to perform in a way that promises her the social mobility that she knows her parents want for her and that, in most cases, she wants for herself.

Recall Maria, a working class African American woman. Maria was so hamstrung by her writing block that she was unable to even reply via email to potential employers who had expressed interest in her on campus visits. She simply gave up on
anyone who required her to write something—and one has the sense that this would yield very few remaining employers—and went on her way. She was hobbled by her block in her academic life to such an extent that she frequently got zeroes on her writing assignments. In her own admission, Maria estimates that this pattern was starting to result in at least five zeroes a semester across all of her courses. It is easy to project a scenario in which Maria’s grades would seriously falter. It is not out of the realm of possibility that Maria would accrue so many zeroes that she would even fail one or more of her courses. If she keeps this up, there is no guarantee Maria will make it through to graduation. Coming from a working class family, what would Maria do if she failed to walk away with a college degree? Chances are, it would be difficult for her to get her family to sponsor her at another elite university, similar in stature to Boston College, given how tough she reports her parents are on her about not “messing up” at BC. Were she to do just that, Maria would likely have to work her way through a local community college. The odds that this path would lead her straight into an upper middle class career are not terribly high. In essence, Maria’s writing block is a severe liability. It may translate into her inability to achieve the social mobility she knows her parents want for her. In a word, Maria’s block could work to one day reproduce her disadvantaged social class status.

Many people still tend to view higher education as the great leveler, the key to social mobility, but as we can imagine with students like Maria, higher education may in some cases only work to reinforce class boundaries. Academic writing block may prevent low income and working class students who struggle with it from climbing out of their originating social class and into a higher one with better life chances. In short,
writing block can contribute to what scholars call “social reproduction” or the reproduction of class-based inequalities in society (Bourdieu 1977).

LESSONS FROM PRESSURED VOICES: BLOCK AS A PRICE OF PRIVILEGE

Meanwhile, the blocked upper middle class students from Chapter Five taught us that academic writing block can also represent a price of privilege, a cost of structural advantage. The drive to achieve at the highest level that is so pervasive among the upper middle class—and that has become even more sharply felt in the context of the current economy—can trigger a paralyzing perfectionism in students who are prone to “choking” under pressure. In light of present day economic contingencies, many students exhibit a haunting anxiety about their current status and their ability to maintain or improve their status in the future. Some even become convinced that they are at a disadvantage to their even more privileged peers. The risk is that this subjective handicap may become a real one. In other words, academic writing block may work to objectivate (or to make an objective reality of) a subjective disadvantage. The paralyzing pressure all the students of Chapter Five experienced and the block this pressure elicited can lead to the very thing they most fear: loss of status and, ultimately, downward mobility. Academic writing block may, in essence, embody a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. Robert Merton (1968:477) described a self-fulfilling prophecy as “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true.” Students may begin with what is merely a fear or anxiety, but the effects of that anxiety can actually work to bring about the very situation they fear.
Ben is a good example of this. Ben’s father attended Harvard University and saw Boston College as definitively “beneath” his son, and Ben was painfully aware of his father’s expectations: if he is going to go to a school such as BC, he had at least better be at the very top of his class academically. Ben’s biggest fear, he told me, was letting his father down and losing status in his dad’s eyes due to his own “inability to be anything other than mediocre.” Yet Ben’s status anxiety, in the face of this enormous pressure, only succeeded in paralyzing him. He viewed writing as “something you either have or you don’t,” and as such, academic writing became for him a kind of divining rod for detecting whether or not Ben was worthy of attaining his father’s goals for him. In the end, Ben’s academic writing block was so pervasive that his grades have suffered gravely, and he has resigned himself to the “mediocre life” that he believes he deserves.

If one plays this pattern out to its natural end, as one can see happening in the case of Maggie, the story does not end well. Maggie is the upper middle class woman who entered college wanting to study Philosophy, until she realized how much writing was involved in that major. Frankly assessing her own handicaps with regard to writing, Maggie quickly catapulted her dreams in favor of going pre-med. This was of course until her parents helped her realize that even being a doctor requires some regular writing. It is primarily for this reason that Maggie today finds herself a Drama major. As she put it, her block is persistent enough that it effectively “starts to close off some doors.” Even Maggie admits that the odds are not necessarily in her favor for becoming a well-regarded, well-paid actress. Her chances of maintaining her upper middle class status in the world of acting are, in a word, slim. For Maggie then, we can see how academic writing block can start to “close in” on a person, narrowing down their options
and leveling their aspirations, and can even lead to a scenario wherein one’s downward mobility becomes a real liability.

LESSONS FROM OTHERED VOICES: THE NEED FOR AN INDIVIDUALIZED STRUCTURAL APPROACH

While Chapters Four and Five paint a largely straightforward picture of social class, the case studies in Chapter Six complicate an otherwise perfectly plausible class-based storyline. Simone and Jennifer remind us that race and other demographic factors make for a relatively unpredictable situation that is more like a chemical reaction with its resulting chaos than it is like a simple additive model in which inert forces are combined. In other words, race, ethnicity, and other factors, such as disability status or sexuality, when added to the picture, do not yield strictly foreseeable outcomes. The combinations of these factors can result in the creation of more people on the margins, or as is the case for Simone and Jennifer, the margins of the margins. Increasingly, places like Boston College, with its ever more national reputation, are going to attract more and more diverse students with unusual combinations of various demographics. This increasing diversity means that each student, and the specific blend of demographic factors that she represents, may come to embody the equation, N = 1. In other words, the rising hybridity of race (Hochschild and Weaver 2010), along with the growing instability and relativity of social class status (Stuber 2006), will make it more and more difficult to retreat to a simple demographics = destiny storyline. As we have seen, it is not class or race per se that cause block; it is what class or race mean to the individual that affects his or her relationship to writing.
However, despite these demographic changes, the very same argument that Julie Bettie (2003) made a decade ago—that people tend to conflate color with poverty and whiteness with privilege—is still very much true today, as Jennifer so aptly reminds us. Jennifer recalled the reactions that she got from others as a very poor white woman on a campus largely dominated by white upper middle class students. Her preceptor had told her white students would not accept her because she is poor, and students of color would not accept her because she is white, relegating Jennifer to the never-never land of perpetual ostracism. Doubly marginalized, Jennifer’s liminal status as an other too easily became embodied in the equally liminal status of the persistently blocked student. Whether she realizes it or not, Jennifer may be an ambassador for other very poor white students. Institutions such as Boston College may take the performance of students like Jennifer as a bellwether of the prospects of future such students. Her writing block may thus translate into the perception that those students cannot “hack” a school like BC.

Simone knows she is an ambassador for other students of color, citing as she does that she has to prove herself in the classroom so that “the next black or Native American kid” that walks into that room is not subjected to the same stereotype of academic inferiority that she was. The profound ambivalence she feels as a result of her being both a student of color and a first generation member of the ultra-rich triggered in her an equally profound ambivalence about writing, which she sees as a privilege that was not afforded to her forebears. The resultant academic writing block she experienced makes sense in a world of meaning in which Simone simultaneously must write to make up for her ancestors’ lack of access to writing and refuses to write in protest of such injustices. Simone and Jennifer are case studies chosen to show that increasing numbers of students
are not going to fit the neat class-based narrative presented in Chapters Four and Five. It is for this reason that universities are, on the one hand, going to need to remain cognizant of the class-based pressures students feel, while on the other, universities will need to treat all comers as if \( N = 1 \) if they truly wish to help students. There is need, in other words, for an individualized structural approach.

LESSONS FROM BLOCKED VOICES

The students whose voices we have heard in this study, taken together, have much to teach us about social structure in general. First, as we have seen in the data time and again, an individual’s psychological state—as represented by his or her “writer’s block”—reflects not just the individual and his or her own psyche; it reflects the social structure as well. It just so happens that most people tend to see the world through a prism that refracts all issues as if they were idiosyncratic to the individual in question. The vast majority of people do not usually see the world through a sociological imagination that would overlay on top of this relatively simplistic picture an image from the sociologist’s “twelth story” vantage point (to continue the analogy discussed in Chapter One). This secondary image, which superimposes the outlines of social structural realities, economic contingencies, and historical contexts over the individual’s story, brings complexity and nuance to our understanding of that person’s plight.

Second, we have learned that students across the entire sample tend to take on this brand of false consciousness. Failing to recognize the structural contributors to their writing dilemmas, students instead attribute the problem solely to themselves. Of course, such personal attributional styles have been correlated with self-blame, depression, and
ultimately, lower self-esteem (Seligman 1975; Schwartz 2000), none of which will help the student achieve social mobility, resist downward mobility, or fight social marginalization. In blaming themselves, students allow the social structure—including their institution—to get away scot-free, as if it bears no responsibility for helping them to overcome their block. The overwhelming majority of the students in my sample embodied a false consciousness in which they would rather hold onto their agency and see themselves as personally at fault for their problem than recognize the structural contributors to their problem and relinquish the idea that it was simply all within their personal power to change. A few students, Damien in particular, broke through this false consciousness to embrace a more structural perspective. Without students like Damien, the attribution of the problem to the individual would contribute to the hegemonic individualism that currently legitimates universities treating writing block as a psychological failing and that justifies their ignorance of structural factors.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO UNIVERSITIES

With this in mind, I will now segue into answering the question of “Now What?” Now that we better understand the depth and nuance of the problem of academic writing block, what can we do to reduce the suffering associated with it for students who struggle with writing? My recommendations for institutions of higher education are threefold. First, while universities should be sensitive to the class-based expectations that color students’ experiences in college, they would do well to also remember the lessons of Simone and Jennifer and treat students as if N always = 1—but not in the way that they are currently doing. At present, universities tend to treat blocked students as individuals,
but as individuals who have a strictly psychological problem. Instead, institutions should treat each student as an individual with a unique background and an idiosyncratic set of concerns. Policy makers in universities should remain cognizant of the ways in which students’ experience may vary depending on their social class upbringing. They must also take care, however, not to make rigid assumptions about students’ experiences based on his or her demographics alone. Again, it is not class or race per se but the meaning an individual makes of her class or race background that shapes the contours of her experience with academic writing.

Second, universities should teach students to embrace a sociological imagination with regard to their experience with academia. Specifically, the first year writing seminar and its equivalent offer schools an opportunity to train students to engage a structural perspective. This calls for explicit training in how to view oneself from a structural vantage point and how to understand the ways in which large-scale social realities, economic contingencies, and historical contexts affect the everyday lived experiences of individuals. A major advancement in the treatment of academic writing block would be to couple this training with allowing blocked students to meet in support groups that combine people who suffer with writing for a variety of reasons. The existence of the support group would wordlessly communicate to the struggling student both that he or she is not alone, as so many of my respondents felt they were, and that there is no reason to keep the problem a secret as if it were a source of shame. Instead, through the insight they gain in hearing the stories of others, students may begin to see in others, if not yet in themselves, the inadequacy—and the potential harm—of purely psychological explanations of academic writing block. If Sally listens over and over again as her peers
blame themselves for their problem, in spite of recurring themes of the challenges they face from the outside world, she may begin to recognize the structural obstacles she herself confronts.

Third, in addition to teaching a sociological imagination in first year writing seminars, universities could also use such seminars to train students in what Carol Dweck (2006) has called a “growth mindset.” In other words, during a first year writing seminar or any other writing intensive courses, professors could teach students to see that the brain is a plastic rather than a fixed organ, that intelligence can grow with effort and practice and is not a static quality, and that writing is a skill that can be learned rather than a gift that one either has or does not have. Even tutors at writing centers could be trained to instruct students on the growth mindset when they come in for writing assistance. To recall Ben from Chapter Five once again, remember that he viewed writing as a talent a person either possessed or did not possess. For this reason, he felt that every time a paper of his was to be judged by a professor, he was going to be either “damned or saved.” Ben’s either-or mentality embodies what Dweck has called a “fixed mindset,” in which one holds to the belief that intelligence is a fixed trait not conducive to improvement through education. Imagine if Ben were instructed to view writing as a skill that one can develop, just as one can strengthen one’s muscles through exercise. He might have a different attitude toward writing, which might in turn reduce the amount of pressure he feels in the face of each high stakes performance.

In essence, I am recommending that universities teach students that it is a benefit to them to maintain the American Dream mentality (if I work hard enough, I will achieve and reap rewards), so long as they simultaneously remain structurally conscious (I do
face certain obstacles through no fault of my own). In other words, students would profit from an education that balances both sides of the age old debate within Sociology: agency versus structure.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP

As with any study, my project on academic writing block has several significant limitations that are both critical to note and helpful in delineating areas for future study. First, this being an exploratory qualitative research project, I collected data from a relatively small sample. My focus has never been generalizability. Rather, I have been interested in sensitizing scholars to a poorly understood, seldom studied, and yet often devastating problem. As such, future scholars of this phenomenon would greatly enhance the insights garnered here with a qualitative or quantitative study of much larger proportions.

Second, the interviews that I conducted were from a single, relatively elite private Jesuit institution. It remains to be seen to what extent the conclusions I have drawn here are relevant to other institutions. I would hypothesize, for instance, that the obstacles faced by the low income and working class students of Chapter Four would shape shift dramatically were they plopped down in the context of a community college, or even state school, where the majority of their peers would be “like me” vis-à-vis class background. I would contend, however, that the understanding I have come to on the basis of my interviews with students at Boston College retain relevance for schools other than Boston College. I would hasten to guess that elite or relatively elite private
institutions with a predominantly white upper middle class student body face many of the same issues. Nonetheless, future scholars could help to resolve these questions by conducting comparative studies across other kinds of institutions.

Finally, due to the inescapable constraints of an exploratory doctoral thesis, I kept my primary focus on social class and, to a lesser extent, race. The drawback of such a study is that it eclipses the importance of other structural factors, such as gender, disability status, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and age. It would be a profound contribution to the field for future scholars to widen their purview and to consider what role these and other factors, in addition to class and race, have on the phenomenon of academic writing block. As it stands, we can only conclude that there are indeed structural contributors to writing blocks. We cannot adequately account for the inevitable variety of such contributors.

That being said, the current study may still provide beneficial insights to individuals not directly implicated in my sample (i.e., to people other than undergraduate students at relatively elite private institutions). Namely, graduate students—in particular those for whom English is a second language as well as those whose undergraduate preparation in writing was weak—may find their own struggles echoed in these pages. Similarly, young professors may experience related forms of block, especially in light of the increasingly dire “publish or perish” ultimatum, which makes writing a very high stakes performance. Even more senior faculty members, who understand that their promotion to full professor is contingent on their success as a writer, may struggle with writing block. Outside of the field of academia, there are of course professionals in many fields for whom writing is a critical component of their working life—novelists,
journalists, grant writers, business consultants, among others—and one can certainly imagine situations in which they might “choke” in the face of a high stakes assignment.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

If we continue to largely ignore the structural factors that play into it, we effectively imply that “writer’s block” is merely a hiccup of the individual psyche, a socially insignificant issue idiosyncratic to the sufferer herself. The incidence of academic writing block has not yet been adequately measured, but one long look around a college campus suggests that it is a common as well as pernicious problem. Long ago, one scholar noted the large number of people who suffer from writing block and lamented, “What is lost?” (Boice 1985). What may be lost are the voices of those that have been culturally devalued, overly pressured, and effectively othered. If academic writing blocks continue unabated, we will hear less and less from those who “choke” under pressure. Do we wish to listen exclusively to—as sports fans call them—the “clutch”? No doubt, those who do not thrive under pressure need to have their voices heard as well. Silence is often fertile with meaning, life, and the insights of those whose voices have been stilled by the various structural crosshairs in which they find themselves. If we listen closely, we can hear in the sounds of silence truths unspoken. Superimposing a sociological vantage point on a problem otherwise viewed through a purely individualistic perspective, we can begin to trace the outlines of the haunting yet underarticulated intersections of psychology and structure.
APPENDIX A

Screening Questions

1. Class year?
2. Parents’ highest educational degree attained?
3. First generation college student?
4. Is English a second language for you?
5. Racial or ethnic identity?
6. Social class? Upper class, upper middle class, middle class, working class or low income?
7. How many times have you experienced difficulties writing?
   a. Once or twice
   b. Three or four times
   c. Five to ten times
   d. It happens every or almost every time I try to write
8. Have you ever missed a deadline, received a failing grade, or suffered any other negative consequences for your difficulties with writing?
9. Do you have more trouble (check all that apply):
   a. Starting assignments or getting words on the page
   b. Sticking with or completing assignments
   c. Keeping what you have written (as opposed to erasing/editing out)
   d. Having confidence in what you are writing
   e. All of the above
10. Have you ever sought help for your difficulties with writing?
11. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the worst), how bad/unpleasant would you say your difficulties with writing are?
Background Information

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself (i.e., your year, your major, where you come from, what you hope to do after BC)?

2. I know you answered this on the screening questions email, but perhaps you could reiterate what your social class background is and whether or not you are the first person in your family to go to college.

3. What has been your parents’ or your family’s stance on your going to BC (i.e., have they been supportive, encouraging, discouraging, demanding, etc.)?

4. Do you feel your family is sacrificing anything for you to come here?

Thoughts about Academic Writing in General

1. How do you feel about academic writing in general? (Do you dread it? Like it? Hate it? Think it’s important? etc)

2. Do you consider yourself a “writer”? Why or why not?

3. Do you think of yourself as a good writer? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel confident as a writer? Why or why not? What about your confidence in general?

**The Experience of Writing Difficulties**

1. When was the last time you experienced significant difficulties with writing?

2. Can you tell me about a specific instance in which you ran into trouble with writing? Include whatever details you feel are relevant (i.e., what it feels like, what happens when you try to write, etc.).

3. Do you have more difficulty starting a paper, finishing it, keeping what you do write on the page, handing it in, some combination?

4. How frequently do you experience this problem?

5. Some people describe feeling a lot of anxiety when they look at a blank page or the blinking cursor on a blank screen. Do you resonate with this?

6. How do you respond when you run into writing difficulty?

   Have you ever had a time that you just couldn’t break through the logjam? If so, can you tell me about it?

7. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the worst, most unpleasant, how would you rate your difficulties with writing?

8. Would you call the difficulties you experience “writer’s block”? Or something else?

**Patterns and Cognitions about Your Writing Difficulties**

1. Can you detect any patterns about when it does or does not happen to you?

2. Can you tell me what thoughts are going through your mind when you have difficulties writing?

3. Why do you think it happens to you?

4. When you run into trouble writing, do you assume you are going to get through it or do you worry you will never find a way past it?
5. Some people describe feelings of perfectionism as being a problem for them. Do you resonate with this?

**Voice**

1. When you write academic papers, do you feel like you have to write in a way that you would not normally express yourself?

2. When you look at your writing, does it feel like your “voice”?

**Awareness of Others**

1. When you are writing, do you think about your “audience,” the professor who will read your writing, etc?

2. Do you worry about how your writing will “stack up” against the writing of other students? If so, can you tell me more about that?

3. Do you ever share your writing with friends or parents? Why or why not?

4. Have you talked about your writing difficulties with anyone (i.e., a professor, advisor, tutor, mentor, friend, family member, pastor, counselor, etc.)? Why or why not?

5. Have you ever sought help for your writing issues? Why or why not?

**Consequences of Writing Difficulties**

1. Do you feel there have ever been any negative consequences of your having significant difficulties with writing?

2. How do you respond emotionally when you run into trouble writing?

3. Have there been any long term emotional effects of your having writing difficulty?

**Race and Class**

1. Compared to your peers at BC, do you feel you are better prepared to be a good writer, worse prepared, or about the same? Why?
2. Is there anything about being on a predominantly white campus that affects your feelings about writing or about yourself as a writer?

3. Do you ever feel pressure because of your race to perform at a higher level academically?

4. Is there anything about being surrounded by so many upper middle class students that affects your feelings about writing or about yourself as a writer?

Wrap-Up

1. Is there anything I haven’t asked you about that you feel is important for helping me understand your difficulties with writing?

2. Have we talked about anything today that you have never thought about before?

Debriefing

1. Do you have any remaining questions? If you think of questions later, please feel free to email me at birk@bc.edu at any point.

2. Would it be OK with you if I contact you in the future in case I have follow-up questions either by email or to do another interview? How shall I contact you, email or cell phone? (Get info)

3. Do you have any friends with similar issues? Can you pass along my email to them?

Thank you so much for your time.
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