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PUSHED WITHOUT DIRECTION: Privileged Problems and the Configuration of Class and Race. How Latent Class Differences, Supported Through Racial Inequities, Maintain the Achievement Gap for Upper Class Black Students

Jullian Harrison
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PUSHED WITHOUT DIRECTION:
Privileged Problems and the Configuration of Class and Race.
How Latent Class Differences,
Supported Through Racial Inequities, Maintain
The Achievement Gap for Upper Class Black Students

A thesis (or dissertation) submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Jullian Wade Harrison
B.S. in Economics,
The College of William and Mary, 2013

Advisor: Victor Tan Chen
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

PUSHED WITHOUT DIRECTION: PRIVILEGED PROBLEMS AND THE CONFIGURATION OF CLASS AND RACE. HOW LATENT CLASS DIFFERENCES, SUPPORTED THROUGH RACIAL INEQUITIES, MAINTAIN THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR UPPER CLASS BLACK STUDENTS

By Jullian W. Harrison, Masters of Sociology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for degree of Master of Science in Sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Thesis advisor: Victor Tan Chen, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology

Scholars for decades have studied the achievement gap and attempted to explain it in regards to race and class. Throughout the existing literature regarding the achievement gap between black and white students, however, there is a dearth of research exploring why the gap exists for upper-class black students; this population is largely ignored. This research seeks to explain why an achievement gap exists between white and black students who come from households of similar incomes. Ten students (five white and five black graduates) of a private, non-parochial school in Washington DC are interviewed about high school and post-high school experiences. Using cultural capital and labeling theory frameworks, this study follows the work of Billings (2011), Pattillo-McCoy (2000), Lacy (2007), and Khan (2011) in their focus on black students, cultural capital, and embodied privilege, and builds on that of Lensmire (2012), Dixon-Roman 2014, Orr (2003), Adams
(2010), and Tyson et al. (2005). Results uncover the uniquely complex configuration of class and race. Latent issues as a result of race can arise, and the research illustrates how they affect the achievement ideology and attainment of both black and white students. The study’s findings suggest that two mechanisms shape the achievement gap: academic support and social interactions and interpretations, with the former rooted largely in class differences, and the latter largely rooted in racial differences. This study aims to improve our understanding of the distinct role race and class play in influencing educational and professional outcomes for students from upper-class backgrounds.
The achievement gap between black and white students has been the topic of numerous studies across academic disciplines, from education to psychology to public policy. Much of this scholarship centers on the idea that black students have fewer resources or more external stressors as a result of poverty (Orr 2003). However, even controlling for household income (and other measures of class, i.e., inherited wealth), the achievement gap persists. In their most recent study, the National Center for Education Statistics noted that there was a 31-point achievement gap between 8th grade black and white students based on a mathematic and reading assessment after controlling for various factors (U.S. Department of Education 2011). In high school, black students earned lower a GPA than white students, with an average of 2.9 compared to 3.24. High-achieving black students also scored about an average of 100 points lower on the SAT than their white peers and pass Advanced Placement exams at lower rates (Maitre 2014).

“Test score gaps often lead to longer-term gaps, including high school and college completion and the kinds of jobs students secure as adults” states the National Education Association’s assessment of achievement gaps (U.S. Department of Education 2011). Even when accounting for socioeconomic status, for black students overall (particularly black males), achievement was lower (Bohrnstedt et al 2015). These statistics suggest that white students have advantages over black students that go beyond access to financial resources.

As Yeung and Conley (2007) observe: “At the individual level, it is related to one’s later life chances such as educational attainment, earnings...employment behavior, and health.... At the societal level, cognitive achievement gaps have
implications for raising the next generation, for the skills of the workforce, for racial
dynamics, and for international competitiveness. Understanding factors
contributing to this gap, therefore, is of paramount importance.”

Within sociology, scholars have extensively studied the ways that culture
exacerbates the achievement gap. One area of research focuses on factors that affect
the schooling experience of students: specifically, the lack of inclusion of black
culture compared to white culture into the classroom (Murray et al 2012; Skott-
Myhre and Richardson 2012); the ways that a dearth of black teachers may
reinforce this cultural inequality and exclusion (Lacy 2007; Billings 2011); and
acculturation and the strain that this may cause for black students who have to
juggle identities (Hooks 1994, Catellino & Darity 2012). Other scholars focus on
more macro-level factors, such as how the school system itself is shaped by white
middle-class values, leading to fears among black students of being cultural
defectors if they succeed in school (Fordam and Ogbu 1986; Pattillo-McCoy 2000).
Another body of work focuses on the upbringing of these students and how their
home environments can be dangerous, isolating, or void of role models (Thernstrom
2003; Pattillo-McCoy 2000). These various approaches help explain what may be
preventing blacks from achieving at the same level as their peers. But how relevant
are they, in a school where black and white students come from households with
similar incomes, there is already a constant inclusion of black culture through the
school curriculum and activities, the fear of acting white is all but nonexistent (due
to the presence of other wealthy black students), and the values that are reproduced
and rewarded are constantly being examined and revamped by the school to include all cultures? Is there still an achievement gap if all of these issues are addressed?

Though the achievement gap exists when income is controlled, it is not solely the byproduct of cultural differences: hidden class differences, in addition to cultural alienation and discrimination in interactions also contribute to the gap. These factors tend to be the way in which an individual develops their perception of self in a given environment. This is also the main factor that many studies argue leads to the development of one’s perception of self and how this perception hinders black students while bolstering whites. Thus, by exploring the role of self-perception in a school where social, racial, economic and cultural factors are held equal, I hope to better understand the latent issues that can still arise as a result of race, and how this affects the achievement ideology and attainment of both black and white students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

_The role of culture in the black-white achievement gap_

Culture affects the black-white achievement gap because it dictates ideology and affects race and class in other ways not seen. Education scholars on the conservative end of the spectrum, such as Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom (2003), suggest that “cultural elements” within the black community enable poor choices for black students, and that these choices in turn influence their subsequent choices within school walls. These cultural elements include family composition and size (single mother, many siblings, etc.), values, geographic locations (living in a poor
neighborhood, living in a wealthy area), and parenting styles. Yet, parenting styles tend to be dramatically different when class is held constant (Hill & Sprague 1999). Parenting styles matter because they, as a result of culture, directly impact a child’s school experience by the expectations and the mechanisms they provide to achieve those expectations for their children. Parents have different styles and desires when it comes to relating to their children, giving them advice or guidance or access to their own cultural capital.

The sociological concept of cultural capital provides a way to understand the role of culture in creating the achievement gap while at the same time recognizing the ways that the social structure determines access to that culture. As Bourdieu (1986) defines it, cultural capital is “a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power” (p. 248). Middle- or upper-class standing gives individuals access to high-brow, bourgeois knowledge—seen in cultural signals, attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials—which can be used to their advantage in certain settings, to bring about social and cultural control and/or exclusion.

Bourdieu argues that cultural capital enables academic achievement, and therefore explains how social inequalities are reproduced. Indeed, the community that surrounds individuals plays a pivotal role in their academic success. It is where they learn their first lessons and have social norms imprinted on them (Hardgrove, Rootham & McDowell 2014). Before schooling even begins, it is the community that molds and shapes the notions of life that people have. This particular culture is
reinforced (Sleeter 2004) once they enter school through the kinds of materials that are promoted and appreciated by their community. According to Foucault (2005), the categorizing and compartmentalizing of students creates a provisional social order. Students who do not fall into the prescribed categorization of the dominant group (white, middle-upper class) are educated in ways that facilitate conformity to the “norm.” However, if an individual does not share the predominant culture of the school, it can create a culture clash. The lessons they learned in the community can conflict with those of their educational environment, thus putting them at a disadvantage from the very beginning of their academic careers. Their identity and its associated sets of perceptions may lead to frustration and uncertainty about their academic or career goals. This cultural conflict can lead them to either abandon their own culture or adopt one that may alienate them from their community.

Because the instruction within most schools reflects middle-class values and bourgeois knowledge, lower-class children are at a disadvantage within these settings (Allen 2010). As Allen (2010) details, “students from middle-class backgrounds or students able to adopt and perform middle-class values and knowledge will find greater compatibility and success within the school. Those who fail to acquire such cultural capital will more than likely struggle to succeed academically” (p. 128). Likewise, Ferguson (2000) argues that the cultural capital that leads to academic success is created from values important to the white middle class. She suggests a “hidden curriculum” exists that dictates aspects of social control within schooling such as responses to authority and types of expression. White students take these “rules” for granted. The “inability” of black students to
follow these standards and embrace these values becomes the basis for diverting them, the “underachievers,” to decelerated classes, while white students, the “achievers,” wind up in advanced placement classes. In an institution that expounds white values, aspects of black culture are shunned, and even punished. Where quiet is expected, loud talking and voices are given demerits. Black students must conform to a different way of acting and thinking in order to succeed, abandoning their identity in the process (Hooks 1994).

Middle-class white values also appear within the school curriculum, alienating black students. Kirkland (2011) finds that black students perceive the typical mandatory readings in English classes to be unrelatable. Kirkland uses a clothing analogy to describe how certain academic material are cultural mismatches for students in the same way that the clothing of one culture may seem strange to individuals of another culture. Readings like Beowulf do not connect with many black students, he argues: they reject the subject matter because their culture does not align with that of Beowulf, and they feel the book and the acceptance of it into their academic life impinges on their identity. While the white student population may classify this book as a classic, black students view it as alien to their lives, not just because of the content of the book but also because of the way the information is being presented, whether it be the language or the perspectives expressed in that literature.

Black students are set up to fail within the confines of a school foreign cultural values with testing measures that consistently put them at a disadvantage. Nsiah (2010) calls black middle class students “incongruent” with white middle
class values and thus, their ability and inability to conform to these specific values leads to students being assigned different labels. Education, through institutional forces and classroom composition and interactions, consistently grooms and encourages black students to underachieve. The fact that they, in turn, underachieve in accordance with labels creates lends credence to the theory of labeling.

The social distance between white teachers and black students can also reinforce racial inequalities in educational settings. Across public and private schools, 81.9% of teachers are white [1]. Billings (2001, 2011) argues that even white teachers with good intentions frequently misunderstand black students and the social cues they use because of the difference in culture. For example, she describes how black students are treated not as children, but as adults, and they therefore receive harsher punishments than white students do. This double standard leads black students to shun their culture even as white students receive adulation and other rewards for simply having been raised and nurtured in the dominant culture. That culture, in turn, teaches white students how to question an authority figure and utilize the “appropriate” volume of speech or diction in class—all factors that give them an advantage over their black peers. Dee (2005) argues that white students are better able to find positive role models among their (mostly white) teachers, while black students tend to have a larger social distance separating them from their educators and are thus less likely to view them as such. White teachers, in turn, can more easily relate to, and are more likely to laud, the behavior of white students, even as they lower their expectations, and thus set the
achievement bar lower, for their black students (Commins & Miramontes 1989). Lensmire (2012) finds that the classroom environment is less hospitable to black student and that they tend to view themselves, their culture, their family, and their surroundings as being lesser or inadequate. The prevalence of white teachers in their schools reinforces this feeling of inferiority in another way, she adds, by highlighting the cliché of a figure from an outside culture “saving” the lesser and oppressed minority culture. Lensmire argues that the backstory of “white intervention” contributes to a racial inferiority complex among black students. This can be particularly confusing for students who had earlier believed that their culture was a positive aspect of their identity (Skott-Myhre & Richardson 2012).

While white students are set up to succeed at school, with teachers who are more likely to relate to them and an educational system based on white middle-class values, black students are required to juggle two sets of responsibilities: the need to pursue acculturation and the need to engage fully in their academic lessons (Billings 2011). This inequity in activating cultural capital also creates a seemingly fixed hierarchy between white and black students at the same (predominantly white) schools, where black students constantly feel themselves to be in the wrong. They must try to thrive both at home, where their culture is promoted, and in school, where it is put down. This constant juggling creates a feeling of anxiety, placing black students in a difficult position where there is no clear direction, and where “failing to fall in place with this order leaves the student feeling odd, out of the ordinary, and uncomfortable in his or her own black skin” (Murray et al. 2012). Fearful of being disregarded and isolated, many black students choose to reject this
juggling act and instead choose a single identity, what Ogbu (2003) calls oppositional culture. Taking on this identity, however, can have negative consequences for their academic performance, Ogbu argues, as black students sabotage their own performance in school in an effort to separate themselves from the dominant white cultural group.

Colloquially, black students describe doing well in school and embodying white values as “acting white. Murray et al. (2012) and Catellino et al. (2012) suggest that black students must choose between being a good student and being accepted and appreciated by their peers—that is, between being “white” and being “black.” This pressure to choose intensifies as black students enter secondary schooling. In their study, Murray et al. administered three different tests to measure the perception among black high school students that race played a role in their school experiences, and found that those students who were directly confronted with the accusation of “acting white” experienced higher rates of anxiety in social settings. This led the black students in the study to avoid taking actions or presenting themselves in a fashion that would bring about this disapproval. In turn, by expecting or even demanding that black students use what is considered “appropriate” or “standard” English in the classroom, the school pressures students to suppress parts of their identity in order to fit in and succeed (Hooks 1994). Even as they comply, however, black students recognize that they are appeasing the sensibilities of the white middle class, a perception that only reinforces the racial hierarchy within the academic system and also increases the advantage that white students have over their black peers. Because the white middle class culture
created the standard, black students when they achieve, are reminded that they are not naturally of this persuasion. Cultural capital is a birthright of white students, as they are born into the controlling class. While black students doing well and achieving elevates both themselves and their white peers, it does not do so equally.

The accusation of “acting white” has an underlying message: for individuals to authentically “be black,” they must not incorporate the lessons learned at school. Steele (1997) finds this view of black culture as contrary to academic success, one held by both black and white students that leads to stereotypes, which in turn leads to further “dis-identification” with schoolwork and worse performance on standardized tests. Steele is focused on structural and macro-level factors, whereas Fordam and Ogbu are more concerned with individual factors. Fordam and Ogbu (1986) argue that the intentional embrace of an oppositional culture that is hostile to academic success creates and exacerbates the achievement gap: expected to present their culture defiantly in response to the ever-present pressure to acculturation, black students focus on other areas of interest that are more “black,” they argue, thus hindering their academic performance relative to white students.

Other scholars, however, have contested the relevance of oppositional culture. Harris (2011) empirically tested Ogbu’s theory and found the opposite: black students value school and learning more than their white counterparts do. Black students are not performing badly because they want to, Harris argues. Rather, they do not have the tools to succeed. His data show that the achievement gap starts to widen when accumulating socioeconomic and health disadvantages inhibit skills development, and when students start to feel the impact of lowered
teacher expectations. Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) show that black adolescents are achievement-oriented overall, and that racialized peer pressure against achievement is not as frequent as Ogbu suggests. They also find similarities in the school experiences of high-achieving black and white students, which suggest that the problems associated with high achieving are not race-specific but rather generalizable to all students, white or black, who are seen as high achieving (i.e., those who are stigmatized as “nerds,” “geeks,” etc.). Their findings support the claim that class-stratified school structures, and not culture, explain when such stigma emerges: low-income whites are stigmatized, too, but rather than “acting white,” their high-achieving behaviors are characterized as “being high and mighty” or “too good.”

In spite of the lack of evidence for Ogbu’s theory that black students intentionally underperform, their teachers readily believe this, turning it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Labeling theory is useful in explaining how teacher perception of a student’s oppositional culture, rather than the students’ actual adoption of that culture, may lead to differential academic outcomes. Labeling theory describes how labels are applied to people and how this process ultimately enables what Rist (1970) sees as “deviant behavior” inside the classroom. Once a person is labeled, they begin to behave the way they have been labeled. Frequently in school situations, a student is labeled a “troublemaker” or “at-risk.” Due to dynamics within the classroom as well as the values/operational behaviors expected within school walls, these labels are disproportionately applied to black students. These black
students, in turn, begin to act like troublemakers or at risk, as the label applied to them becomes the way they act and interact with the world.

*Cultural and social capital among affluent black households*

While the studies I have described give us a richer understanding of what factors bring about the black-white achievement gap, the research to date has tended to focus on the experiences of lower-income black students. But their culture is not necessarily applicable to upper-class blacks. Just like white middle-class culture in rural Alabama is not the same as white middle-class culture in New York City, inner-city black culture in Chicago is dramatically different from upper-class black culture in Atlanta. What the previous research on the black-white achievement gap has frequently overlooked, in other words, is the reality that black culture is not “one size fits all.” For African American students from more affluent backgrounds, the disadvantages they face in competing academically with their white peers take on different forms than they do in other socioeconomic settings.

Based on her interviews with black residents of a middle-class Chicago suburb, Pattillo-McCoy (2000) describes the ties that middle-class blacks have to lower-class black communities because they are often the first to have achieved upward socioeconomically status within their social networks, and their extended family members continue to live in those communities. As a result, many middle-class black students have a direct line into the culture and social problems of lower-class black communities. When they go through the typical phase of teenage rebellion, both white and black students may entertain fantasies about lower-class
culture, but the black students’ direct contact to these communities makes it easier for that rebellion to lead to serious real-world consequences: lower GPAs, more incarceration, and higher teen pregnancy rates, relative to their white peers. Pattillo-McCoy’s research also suggests that middle-class black adolescents suffer from a lack of a strong communal identity and therefore desire to find a group to belong to. Her research paints an overall picture of black middle-class youth as existing constantly on the boundaries of cultures—and, in fact, on the verge of being out of the picture completely.

Black households, regardless of socioeconomic status, are at a disadvantage compared to white students in the same income bracket: even black students from wealthy households still find themselves at a cultural disadvantage compared to their white counterparts. Lacy (2007) argues that affluent black households do not yet possess a cohesive or substantial culture. As a result, parents in these households must construct the notion of what it means to “be black” and “middle to upper class” for their own families. Lacy identifies households as “middle class” based on the neighborhood (average housing price) that each family is able to live in. She describes three black families that live outside of Washington, D.C., in a middle- to upper-class suburb, and finds that households like them, which have substantial wealth, nonetheless face segregation and exclusion. For example, even though they are surrounded by people of other races who have a comparable socioeconomic status, their neighbors do not include them in the community’s social life. In fact, white flight continues to occur when black families move into primarily white neighborhoods (Diamon & Bodenhamer 2001). As a result, upper-class blacks
may live in wealthier areas than lower-class blacks, but there is still a cultural distance separating them from their white counterparts (Pattillo 2005).

This distance progresses from high school, as black students continue to have unequal access to educational opportunities (Aud et al. 2012; Snyder and Dillow 2012); this is true, regardless of class. High school performance is considered an indicator of aptitude or success in college. This is especially true for black men (1994) whose college careers can be predicted from academic achievement during high school. This does not account or differentiate however for the levels of academic achievement between harder and less academically rigorous high schools. Many students take Advanced Placement and a hard course load during high school classes with the expectation of bettering college outcomes. Although the connection between a rigorous curriculum and bachelor’s degree attainment is clear, the research literature is less than straightforward regarding the long-term impact of gifted and talented programs and AP courses during the high school period (Rose 2013).

Families lay the groundwork for success long before black students get to college. In this study, the term family included extended family like grandparents, aunts and uncles, and fictive kin like neighbors, church members and friends (Herndon and Hirt 2004). Though Herndon and Hirt (2004) implied positive role models, this can also be true for negative. As stated previously, interactions with lower-class family members can provide an excuse for students to discount their own struggles as not being “real”. Lack of information regarding how and why to look for good colleges cancels the appropriate coping mechanisms to thrive in that
institutions. Furthermore, consistent negative messages of black male college students are "constantly reinforced in media, academic research journals, and educational practice" (Harper 2012 p. 1).

The importance of family and mentors is highlighted in literature for black students, whereas for white students it emphasizes networks and translating social capital into success. In Settling into Campus Life, Fischer (2007) notes having extensive ties to professors is positively related to satisfaction with college, indicative of the importance of mentoring relationships “which may be particularly important for students whose backgrounds are less congruent with the majority on campus” (p154).

Experiences during college are heavily linked with college and post-college outcomes. Allen (1992) studied African-American students at the critical stages between college entry, the election of a major field, and graduation by examining academic success, social involvement, and occupational aspirations. He found that academic achievement is highest for students who have high educational aspirations, who are certain that their college choice was correct, and who report positive relationships with faculty. These high aspirations can be quashed before even getting to college, as black students tend to rely on the guidance counselor according to Hinton and Adams (2006) who write that black students receive less resources (time, attention, help, information) from guidance counselors than their white peers and are therefore start from behind with regards to information and access to it.
Aside from the work of Pattillo-McCoy, Lacy, and a handful of other scholars, there is not much literature focused on upper-class blacks. Even with regards to research on the college experiences of black students, upper-class blacks are left out of the conversation. Though not entirely translatable, studies surrounding the middle class are appropriate as they speak to some of the privileges and issues that middle-class black students deal with. What studies exist do provide some insight into their culture and the distinct difficulties they face. They detail the ways in which upper-class black culture is just now starting to be defined. They describe the confusion that the children in these households often deal with, because they do not have an adequate or reassuring understanding of their racial identity in combination with their class. They highlight the misconceptions that upper-class blacks have about lower-class blacks and also the social distance separating the two groups, thus making clear the key differences between them. And they discuss the inability of upper-class blacks to utilize and embody their privilege in effective ways. Nevertheless, they fail to adequately address the ways that upper-class black students face distinctive disadvantages in school settings.

How do the unique experiences of more affluent blacks lead to worse academic outcomes relative to their white counterparts? Ogbu (2003) argues that their high social status, ironically, leads to constant frustration and a sense of isolation from friends, teachers, and society as a whole, taking time away from studying and focusing on school. Through the use of in-depth interviews with middle-class black families, Ogbu finds that while parents believed and stressed education and were lawyers and doctors, their children exerted “minimal effort” (p.
He posits that they purposefully do so because of peer pressure and a desire to be viewed as “cool” in ways rooted in racial stereotypes. Ogbu argues that these students will attempt to underperform academically—such as shooting for a 3.0 GPA—in order to not draw attention to themselves. A unique sense of isolation emerges among these black students as they attempt to fit in in ways that their white peers do not have to consider. As a middle school student quoted by Ogbu says:

You don’t have to ride home on the bus like I do...You don’t have to play in the neighborhood with all the other kids...I don’t want ‘em to know I’m smart. They’ll make fun of me. I won’t have any friends...Where I live, they’re gonna say I’m White. (p. 202).

Ogbu (2003) argues that more affluent blacks tend to be apathetic and to have a normalized behaviors of minimal effort because they lack both the cohesive black identity that lower-class blacks have and the cultural capital that upper-class whites have. Their financial advantages prevent them from being able to connect with and relate to lower-class blacks, while also preventing them from actively seeking help or guidance in doing schoolwork or navigating academic settings where they should be (in theory) well-prepared to do well.

Interestingly, for both lower-class blacks and upper-class whites, their class identity can be something to draw upon for strength (Dixon-Román 2014). They have a well-defined community, and they want to improve their status within it. This gives them strong incentives to achieve according to the community’s shared notions of what success is.
The nature of that positive cultural identity, however, differs among lower-class and upper-class whites. In his study of a prestigious New England boarding school, Khan (2011) argues that the main difference between minority students and white students in the same (elite) class comes down to privilege. Specifically, Khan addresses the way in which white students are able to embody privilege. This embodiment, he explains, is the “ease” with which students are able to assert themselves and feel confident that their identity entitles them to success—in other words, the ways in which they are able to access, utilize, internalize, and exploit the benefits of their privilege. Furthermore, the embodied privilege of these students is perceived to be a sign of their leadership ability. While upper-class blacks may have economic advantages that are comparable to those of their white peers, they are less likely to feel the same sense of privilege or know how to effectively utilize it.

The literature on affluent black students and their culture of “minimal effort” seems to be overly determined, however. As Allen (2010) points out, Bourdieu assumes that a parent’s cultural capital is automatically transferred to the children in ways that ensure their later academic success. In other words, the children have the same amount of cultural capital as their parents, and they are able to employ it in academic settings to their benefit. But this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the role of situation and context in determining the extent to which students can deploy their cultural capital—situations and contexts that are, in turn, shaped by social structure. Here it is useful to draw upon Lareau and Horvat (1999), who propose a “non-deterministic method” of relating cultural capital to social reproduction. This more complex understanding of cultural capital recognizes that various factors that
determine whether such capital is effective: a person’s efforts to make use of their capital, the skill with which they use their capital, and the response by the institution and others to their actions. also opens up space for understanding how structural factors like the makeup of social networks lead to different abilities to utilize cultural capital, which, in turn, bring about academic non-achievement for certain black students. This study takes a multifaceted approach to cultural capital and understanding why it matters.

Indeed, even if black and white students go to the same school, they are not privy to equal schooling experiences. Santelices and Wilson (2010) show that this difference arises due to the extra consideration that even affluent black students (both high- and low-achieving) have to deal with in majority-white schools, including name-calling and the sense of isolation that black students feel that can occur as a result of being an isolated minority in advanced classes. Unable to relate to those around them, upper-class black students begin to question their own identities. More so than other black students do, they struggle to understand what role race plays in their identities, given that the popular conception of “upper-class black culture” is so vague and unhelpful in providing a sense of identity or community. In short, the social context of the school environment matters: the effects of their isolation along with the questions that arise about their identity being deviant from the white norm, are linked to low levels of effort, inattention, poor task persistence, class cutting, and high rates of other disciplinary problems (Ekstrom et al. 1986; Goldberg et al. 2001). The fact that black and white students have very different experiences in school has created interest in educational
strategies that focus on incorporating the “lesser” culture and trying to remove the stigma faced by black students in these majority-white schools (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2004).

Furthermore, it is important to recognize the ways that class differences are not captured simply by the measurement of household income. Whites have 12.9 times the net worth of blacks, and that trend has worsened in recent years (Kochhar & Fry 2014). Beyond differences in generational wealth, white families have, due to historical racial advantages, been better able to develop extensive and useful social networks (Shapiro 2006). Focusing on wealth reveals a qualitatively different pattern of inequality. This is crucial because parental social capital can to be used in various ways that improve their children’s academic and professional prospects (Lee and Bowen 2006). For example, social connections to members of school boards can lead to information, skills, access to resources, and sources of social control, all of which can help parents promote their children’s school achievement.

Ignoring differences in household wealth also cause us to miss the subtle ways that class shapes black students’ feelings of alienation. After all, labeling theory depends on two things: the labels themselves, and comparisons or relativity. To have a troublemaker, you must also have those who don’t cause trouble. In order to be deviant, you must deviate from the norm, meaning there must be a norm to deviate from. You must also have one who is making the labels. In school settings, this is frequently teachers or administrators making labels. However, students can also create and reinforce labels. In school settings (particularly high school, where
popularity is currency), comparisons abound—from clothes to cars to grades. Cool and uncool, popular and unpopular, are frequent labels teenagers worry about.

In elite schools in particular, these labels can be tied to relative differences in family wealth. As Orr (2003) writes in her study of the black-white wealth gap, “Underlying conceptions of poverty often rely on a notion of relativity.” Conceptions of poverty or lack thereof, therefore, are directly related to and dependent on their immediate environment. A student whose family makes $200,000 a year is considered to be in the top income quintile. But if that same student lives in a wealthy area, she might be at the bottom of the income distribution compared to her peers. If labeled “poor” within her peer groups, the student might internalize this label. She might begin to act how her label dictates—as “poor”—despite the fact that her family is well-off by most measures.

The ways that relative deprivation lead to negative self-perceptions is important because the research to date points consistently to the relationship between self-perception and academic achievement. High self-esteem is tied to better academic success (Purkey 1970; Pajares & Schunk 2001; Caprara et. al 2008). Teenagers’ self-perceptions, in turn, have been found to be largely tied to income and wealth, with material possessions and cultural experiences being markers of status (Orr 2003). Students’ perceptions of their family’s wealth, therefore, can impact academic performance.

This has interesting implications for students in upper-class black communities. After all, feelings of relative deprivation would seem to be prevalent among upper-class African American students in particular, given that they tend to
lack the family wealth of their white peers. Furthermore, it is likely that these students have direct knowledge of, and ties to, poor black communities (largely due to relatives), which may intensify this feeling. Given that “poor” black kids are stereotyped as poor students who are apathetic about academic achievement, the upper-class black student labeled as “poor” might act “poor” by underperforming in school.

As I began to try to better understand theories that could explain this difference I found that one: there was very little data on upper class blacks, so all the theories regarding schooling experience were centered around factors that likely did not affect those students and; two: that many of the studies focused on high school G.P.A. or college admissions as the sole indicators of an achievement gap.

This study builds upon this previous work to help explain why an achievement gap exists between white and black students who come from households of similar incomes. Following Lacy (2007), I explore the ways that cultural exclusion and isolation can worsen outcomes among upper-class blacks, but in line with Khan (2011), I expand the scope of the analysis to consider the school environment and the interactions that take place there. I also tie in understandings of the social rebellion that Pattillo-McCoy (2000) discusses, thereby showing that upper-class black students do not intentionally seek to “minimally achieve,” as Ogbu (2003) would suggest. Finally, I use labeling theory to further our understanding of how upper-class black students understand their social position and how it can affect their academic achievement. Latent class differences, disguised as racial differences, are detailed and explored as cultural alienation and racial
discrimination form a complex configuration which results in inferiority, lower achievement and lower college and post-college outcomes for upper-class black students than their white peers.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the nature of the achievement gap between upper-class black and white students and the possible reasons for it, I conducted interviews with graduates of the Georgetown Day School (GDS). GDS is a private non-parochial school in Washington D.C suburbs. GDS was chosen as the source of my respondents because it has a high tuition ($38,000 annually) and is relatively racially diverse for a private school. At Georgetown Day School, a school that proudly and continually points out that they were the first by choice integrated school in DC, the focus is on diversity and the acceptance of all races, cultures, genders and financial backgrounds. They do this by openly admitting and proclaiming that everyone is different and create programs, and the infamous assemblies, to highlight that though different, every student is on equal footing and that every culture should be appreciated and understood equally.

Looking at students from an elite private school allows me to control, to a limited extent, for class: thus any of the families whose children attend the school are likely in the upper class, given that they must be able to pay $135,000 for a four-year high school education. Ten participants were interviewed; five white and five black students who attended the high school and graduated within the last ten
years. While GDS does not release statistics on its racial and ethnic diversity, a pilot interviewee estimated that 1 out of 10 of the students at GDS are African American based on his own knowledge—not too far off from the African American share (12.1% in 2010) of the overall US population. I should emphasize that such racial diversity is hard to find at a school at this price level and without any students supported by scholarships.

Data collection

To obtain detailed data on the experiences of upper-class black students, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted. This approach was used because it provides the psychological detail necessary to understand a person with very different life experiences (Delgado 1989). Institutional Review Board approval was needed for this study, as all human subject research must be reviewed by the IRB. The application for IRB approval was submitted on 7/31/2016 to the Office of Research Subjects Protection (ORSP) at Virginia Commonwealth University. The ORSP authorized the study (HM20005428: Habitus and Cultural Capital of Upper Class Black Students) qualified for exemption on 8/27/2015, allowing recruitment of participants to begin.

I used snowball sampling to find interviewees, asking each of my respondents to give me the contact info for other people who went to GDS. In addition to the ten interviewed, two were contacted who did not respond; zero declined to participate. Interviewees were contacted and conducted via phone. The interviews were recorded and lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours.
Data analysis

Interviews were listened to from recordings and transcribed. Once transcribed, the interviews were input into nVivo. The nVivo application was used to determine patterns and trends in the data.

Using grounded theory with open coding allows for themes to emerge without any preconceived notion. Due to the nature of this research in the attempt to undercover latent race and class differences in educational outcomes, open coding was chosen to enable themes to appear organically. Themes were uncovered detailing the support a student received (including from whom) during high school, compensating class with other social status markers, insecurity and inferiority, blame. Different outcomes were organized into three categories: high school, college, and post-college. For this publication, pseudonyms were given and used to ensure the identity protection of the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As noted in Table 1, I did not find the dramatic differences in achievement that I had expected going into my research. The GPAs of the black and white students were similar, as were their acceptance into “good” colleges based on ranking for the first institution that the interviewee attended. Black students have the upper hand with regards to college selection, as all went to traditional four year institutions, while two of the five white respondents (George and Henry) went to smaller community colleges initially. The biggest difference that I found was in the graduation rate, with only two of the five black students
graduating college, while all five of the white students did so. One possible explanation for any difference in college completion rates is the greater sense of academic fatigue observed among the black students: even those performing at a high level had particular reactions to their high school environment that appeared to be related to race. Four white students finished in four years, while only one black student did. The average amount of time to obtain a bachelors degree for white students was 4.3 from the sample of five, and 4.5 from the two black participants with bachelor's degrees. This might have something to do with the transfer rate: one of the white students transferred colleges, while three of the five black students had. These findings suggest that a gap exists but, that it is more insidious that just high school, as the disparities in outcomes in college and post-grad are evident.
Table 1. Participants’ high school and college details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>High School GPA</th>
<th>College Attended</th>
<th>Years to college completion (graduation)</th>
<th>Attended Grad School</th>
<th>Moved home? Y/N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Washington University St. Louis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Morehouse University (dropped out/transferred)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Syracuse University (transferred)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Tulane University</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Howard University</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Reed College</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Unnamed community college</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Tulane (transferred after a year at community college)</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Iowa State (transferred to NCSA&amp;T)</td>
<td>Still attending (5+)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>College of William &amp; Mary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
High School Achievement Gap

James’ mother was the president of the parent-teacher board. With the support from her husband, she made sure that her family had the same understanding of the school system and the same ability to navigate it as any of the families of white GDS students had. Beth held so much power that she was able to, according to James, “fire” a teacher who gave James a D in high school. Unlike most of the other black students, this provided James with a similar experience during his high school years to that of his white counterparts, who largely had tools available to them to achieve or work toward the expectations that were set for them.

That said, with the exception of the high achievers Brandon and Alex, all the students in the study—James included—had GPAs between 2.8 and 3.2. Tools such as tutoring or access to teachers outside of school did not seem to be a decisive advantage. For example, while both Frank (white) and Alex (white) had the same tutor to help with their time management, they had comparable GPAs to Brandon (black) and Eli (black), who did not receive tutoring.

With respect to college admission, most of the interviewees ended up at universities with high rankings, with the exceptions being George and Henry. Henry (white) ended up at GDS “because my best friend Devin” was also applying, and his parents “felt that he should go where he could be happy.” While his parents expected that he do well in school, they (more prominently, his father) felt that grades were less important than knowing to “ask for help when it was necessary and learning how to utilize tools to make it through” any given environment. His parents, who owned their house (with no mortgage) in a prominent DC area and made around $120,000, told Henry that his goal was to really
“enjoy” his experiences with his friends and high school. As a result, he threw himself into sports.  When Henry’s father compiled a list of colleges for him to attend, all of the schools had in their criteria that he had to be able to try out for a sports team. He decided to go to a Division III Community College.

George (white) had a similar experience, though because he was a transplant from Connecticut, where he “knew no black people,” his motivation seemed to be a bit more related to social and racial considerations. His parents were wealthy as a result of a $10 million apartment complex they inherited in New York City. They chose not to work continuously until right before his freshman year at GDS, when his father, after going back to college himself, became the head of technology at the school. Besides being wealthy, George’s father had been in education on and off for most of his adult life. This may have been one of the reasons he placed a larger emphasis on George enjoying high school and finding “his path.” According to George’s father, school performance was “not an indicator of success.” This, in conjunction with feeling awkward about the black portion of his friend group and basketball team due to the high volume on the basketball team and the egg shells he felt he had to walk on in his friend group, led George to “want to prove that I was good at basketball even though I was short and white.” This passion led him to care less about whether he went to college: “I would not have gone to college if I could not play basketball.” He applied to his community college and got in; he did not apply to many other schools.

Henry and George selected not to apply to high-ranking colleges in part because of their family’s high socioeconomic status, which shaped their expectations for their children’s future success. Here class, and not race, seemed to be more important in
determining outcomes. Nevertheless, all of the interviewees went on to attend what would be considered “good schools” based on ranking, prestige.” These tended to be smaller schools, and their parents expected them to maintain grades in the As and Bs there.

Across the indicators of high school success that I examined—GPA and college admissions—there did not seem to be of an achievement gap between the white and black students at GDS. The GPAs for both groups were in the B range (with the exception of Brandon and Alex, who were in the A range). Thanks in part to GDS’s excellent academic reputation, they applied for and were accepted into highly selective and prestigious.

**College Achievement Gap**

While I did not see an achievement gap between the white and black students in high school, in college the difference was stark. None of the interviewees reported having to worry about paying for college, as their parents assured them they had it covered. Yet three of the five black students have yet to receive their undergraduate degrees, while all five of the white interviewees have received bachelor’s degrees.

Corey, who self-identifies as black, entered GDS in the sixth grade. He has two doting parents who are both extremely successful in their given fields. His father is one of the main real estate developers in DC, part of the team that converted the MCI Center into the Verizon Center. His mother is a human resources supervisor at a prominent magazine in DC. Corey’s parents, like those of the other interviewees, expected he would do well in high school, and he met those expectations “with only a couple of slip-ups.” However, once he entered Syracuse University, he began to “party a lot” and ended up becoming depressed, a condition he blames on the constant cold and grey weather in New York. While he intended
to go to school to study business, he ended up “jumping around” between different majors. He ended up leaving Syracuse and attending Howard University in DC. In retrospect, though, he feels that Howard did not “help me at all...they wanted me to do everything on my own, and so I felt like I was alone...They talk about a community all the time because it’s all black, but they don’t care.” He believes that this lack of community and his other frustrations about the school contributed to his decision to drop out of school again and focus instead on what was his part-time job (and is now a full-time job) as a “supply room stocker” at Crate and Barrel for $8.50 an hour. He now is attempting to get his personal trainer certification. He hopes to go back to school in the fall to continue his studies in business.

Brandon, unlike Corey, actually enjoyed going to an all-black university. He was finally around a variety of black students, “which was something I was unaccustomed to, thanks to GDS.” As a student at GDS, Brandon was a “social butterfly” who interacted with many of the school’s different populations. “I hung out with everyone. I thought they all had their own stories and that they were all individual, you know?” he says. Brandon came from a divorced family. His mother was a manager at a law firm who she earned up to $130,000-140,000 a year. His father was an entrepreneur whose salary fluctuated but averaged, according to Brandon’s estimates, between $180,000 and 250,000 a year—a total income that was higher than the self-reported income of any other household in the study. But because Brandon’s parents were divorced, his father routinely moved between different kinds of self-employment, which allowed him to falsely report his earnings and therefore enable Brandon to received financial aid, making many of his classmates believe that
Brandon was poor. For example, George felt that Brandon was not, as he put it, “I-can’t-eat-poor, but definitely on the lower end of the economic spectrum.”

To a certain extent, Brandon did have to think about getting money more than his classmates. “My parents didn't give me, you know, money for the Metro, so I was always trying to find money so I could get to school and get lunch or whatever,” he says. But for the most part, Brandon looked at his family situation in a positive way because it allowed him the ability to navigate different environments and people who may have grown up with a different socioeconomic status. “I could relate to the hustle of [Lil’] Wayne—like, you know, not making any excuses and just getting yours.” At the same time, Brandon says, he knew he wasn’t poor. “I used it to make me try harder at school, so I didn’t mind having to find my own way.”

Another misconception about Brandon among his peers was that he did not do well in school. He recalls his classmates’ reaction after learning he did very well—according to his teacher, the highest ever for the class—on a chemistry test. “The next day I went to school, [and] everyone asked me if I had cheated or would say ‘Wow, I didn't know you were like smart-smart.” Peers assumed that Brandon partied all the time, but he actually did not drink or smoke during high school. “I would hook up with girls, but had to stay focused.” According to Brandon, he focused intently on school and abstained from substances in part because he wanted to do well and was “naturally interested in learning.”

Also, Brandon felt an obligation to the black community. “Since kindergarten, when I got to GDS, I always felt I had to represent black people correctly. Like both sides, I wanted to wear what I thought was cool, but also, you know, do well.”
Brandon ended up going to Morehouse University, with plans of becoming a doctor. At first, everything went well. At one point, he even considered obtaining a second major, or a minor, in philosophy. While he was not in a fraternal organization, he received the social benefits of rooming with his freshmen roommate, a member, in the Alpha (Omega) house, where Brandon was permitted as the only non-member to stay due to the fact that it was their non-official house. After his freshman year he spent two-and-a-half years living with his friend and “casually partying,” but more so “enjoying school and hanging out with different people and hearing their stories.” With his high grades, it looked like Brandon was a shoe-in for medical school.

However, his academic success stalled one night when he was studying for an exam. To help him focus, he asked his roommate to “hook me up with an addy [Adderall].” The friend asked his younger brother, who promptly supplied Brandon with a pill that he said was Adderall. But what Brandon had actually been given was a pill containing bath salts, a switch that Brandon feel was retaliatory for him not being in the fraternity. What ensued was 12 hours of “hell” for Brandon, who ended up “freaking out.” After coming down from his bath salt high, Brandon felt confused and frightened about “reality and my friends.” He believed his friend’s brother had deliberately given him the wrong pill, and he felt betrayed. “I really could not trust anyone, you know.” Distraught, he called his father, who immediately drove down and withdrew him from the school.

Back in DC, Brandon tried to regain his composure. At home, though, he had to constantly defend himself against the recriminations of his father, who could not understand “why I had messed my life up over drugs” and felt “like I threw away my future.” At one point, the verbal fights led to violence. Angry after arguing with Brandon,
his father went over to the garage, turned on the car, and tried to run over Brandon, he says. Brandon and his father eventually reconciled, and they recently have started a cycling therapy endeavor together. Brandon still wants to get his degree. “I mean, I went too far not to finish. I am going to go back, I just don’t know when yet.” Nevertheless, He admits he is apprehensive about the prospect of returning to school.

The other black students I interviewed also performed poorly, relative to their white counterparts, once in college. Isaac is attending North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and expects to receive a master’s degree along with a bachelor’s degree once he graduates. Nevertheless, his enrollment at NCA&T only came after a rough five years of bouncing around to three different educational institutions and having to leave two of them because “all I was focused on was fucking girls and partying.” Even James and Eli, who graduated from highly ranked schools (William and Mary and Howard University, respectively), seemed to struggle more than the white students did with uncertainties about whether they would be successful in college. “I was exhausted from focusing so hard in high school,” says James. “I just wanted to chill when I got to college, so, you know, I focused a lot more on the social aspects of school.” Eli took five years to complete his BA in economics at Howard University. At times, Eli says, he seriously questioned finishing.

The college experiences of the black students I interviewed point to some of the difficulties that even black students from wealthy families face after leaving the environment of an elite high school. The white students also had their share of setbacks, but the option of not graduating never arose—a key difference in expectations that may account for some of the gaps we see nationally in college enrollment and graduation statistics.
Alex, who identifies as white, was a self-described “nerd” who had “a near breakdown” while applying to colleges. When he received his letter of acceptance from Washington University in Saint Louis, he felt that he “could finally openly talk about my college search with my friends.” Once in college, Alex studied physics and enjoyed the social aspects of campus life. However, he was thrown a “serious curveball” toward the end of his senior year. He suffered a seizure and was hospitalized for weeks. Afterward, Alex became depressed and was unable to fully take care of himself for six months. His parents were very supportive, and he was able to enlist the help of his roommate/best friend, who ended up living with him to take care of him after graduation. Unlike Brandon, whose academic plans were derailed after his crisis, Alex managed to graduate with a 3.3 GPA—thanks in part to all his social support and resiliency in the face of adversity. While both Alex and Brandon had a natural desire to learn and to do well, Brandon “had to find a way to pay for the meter” and did not have parents who attended college. Alex’s parents, however, supported him in his decision, and when he was down on himself, they used their social connections to help boost his confidence. The stability of Alex’s family income allowed for resources not available to Brandon. They also had a level of financial comfort in dealing with challenges, which revealed itself in support.

Henry, another white student, also had his share of setbacks and ended up taking a nontraditional route before finally graduating from Tulane University. It did not help that his only real interest in college was playing sports. “My college list was focused on where I could play,” he says. He was recruited to play for a community college, but the coach who had signed him up departed in his freshman year, leaving Henry in limbo. He soon realized that he likely would not be able to actually play on a sports team at the collegiate level. “I
just realized I wasn’t good enough, and the new coach didn’t like me.” Henry took the rejection hard and moved home. Nevertheless, he spent the next six months productively, training twice a day every day to become a better player. After he returned home, Henry’s parents covered the majority of his financial obligations, both his living situation and his tuition. “I ate at home and would just wake up and work on becoming better [at basketball].” All of Henry’s hard work eventually paid off. Getting into Tulane, a Division I school, was a “humungous” accomplishment for him, Henry says.

As for the other white students, Frank, George, and Devin had relatively typical college experiences. They each received one or two bad grades (low Cs and Ds) throughout their entire college career, explored the social scene on campus, and adjusted well to their greater freedoms as adults. All of them graduated in four years and did so with GPAs that were pretty close to the ones they achieved in high school.

Post-Graduate Achievement Gap

Out of the ten interviewees all but one (George, a white student) moved back home to live with their parents after they graduated from college. Five of the five white students reported that their parents expected them to return home after graduation. “Seeing as I didn’t have a job lined up or anything, it was kind of expected,” said Henry. In contrast, all of the black students said their parents had not initially expected them to return, but were welcoming nonetheless (with the exception of Brandon’s father). "My mom wasn’t expecting me to come home, but tried not to make me feel too bad about it,” said James.

After graduating from Tulane, Devin (white) moved back home with his family and helped to tutor and teach kids at high schools in DC. In a spur-of-the-moment decision, he
decided to relocate to California, where he worked at In-N-Out Burger for six months, until he ran out of money and moved back home, he says. “Moving out there [California] was hard, it just was not enjoyable.” While his parents accepted his move back, Devin felt that he needed to “get out of the house,” so he applied, after he was informed about the opening by his old coach, for a full-time job teaching tennis at a prestigious tennis academy in New Orleans, where he lived with James.

After Alex’s traumatic seizure he spent a “hazy” six months in his parents’ basement “smoking marijuana and being taken care of by my friend and mom and dad.” While his parents were “happy” to have him home, and his health necessitated the rest, “they felt like I needed to get out of the house.” This prompted Alex’s mother to call her friend (a prominent attorney), who spoke with Alex on the phone regarding a job. After a fifteen-minute conversation, she offered Alex the job. “It was definitely because of my mom,” he says of getting the job, “which I know speaks to privilege.” After working at the law firm for five months, Alex learned from the friend who had taken care of him after his seizure that a startup company was looking for someone to help with bookkeeping. After speaking to the owner of the startup, Alex was offered a job. Unfortunately, the company folded shortly thereafter. Two days before it officially went under, Alex was at a bar and started talking to another bar patron. “We got drunk together and we started talking about how he was looking for someone to help with managing his inventory and coding...Even though I didn’t know anything about coding, I told him I could learn quickly and then he gave me his card.” Soon afterward, Alex was offered the job. He works at the shipping company to this day. While Alex finds the job “a bit boring,” he is satisfied with the salary. “I may go back to grad school to study physics, but I want to save up some money first,” he says.
After graduating from Reed in five years, Frank (white) also works in the technology industry, working on coding for new websites. While he lives in Colorado, he works remotely around the United States for a small company that is comprised of him and his boss and a few other administrative personnel. Frank is relatively happy with his job, saying “I had to teach myself coding, but other than that, it’s a pretty easy job.” Frank says he is content with his position and hopes to simply work and enjoy his life.

Although George (white) points out he “would not have gone to college if I couldn’t play basketball,” he ironically ended up having the greatest academic success among the interviewees. He obtained the highest level of education in the shortest number of years, entering into a five-year master’s program in education. Following his father’s occupational example, George after college (the name of which he asked not be noted) attended a conference for future teachers, where he met a scout from GDS. While he seemed to have an advantage in getting the position (George’s dad is the school’s head of technology), he was told in his “mock interview” that he would probably not be offered a job at GDS because “I was not diverse enough.” They told George “that they [GDS] were interested in hiring people who brought something different and new to their environment.” George says this experience showed him that “being white has it challenges”—a position that he says has led to him being labeled as a “racist” by his friend group—and it also left him feeling a bit rejected. However, he didn’t end up dwelling much on it, he says. “I brushed off. It wasn’t a real interview.” George was later hired as a middle school teacher in upstate New York, where he worked at an upper-class private school with “super-rich foreign kids.” After that, he transferred to teach at a school where the “economic disparities are more drastic than anything at GDS...Unlike a poor kid like Brandon and Eli, who used it to be popular or
part of his identity, these kids are can’t-pay-for-lunch poor.” Having this experience has given George “a different perspective on wealth and privilege,” he says. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I think that it is important to at least discuss the issues so that we can have a better understanding of them.” As he prepares for his marriage in the next two months, George feel like he is “in a good place in my life.”

After playing his last year for Tulane, Henry (white) graduated with a 3.5 GPA, moved home, and taught sports to high school and middle school students for five months. “My parents expected me to come home, and it was easier than going out and renting a place, spending money on food and rent.” While his dad does “ask what I am planning to do every now and then,” Henry is enjoying staying at home, as he sees it as “part of the process” of “figuring out what I want to be successful at.” He is considering traveling to “somewhere” in Asia to teach English. “I think it will be cool, something to do.”

White respondents post-college are “doing me”, discovering the world and exploring their opportunities. Their focus is largely on happiness or enjoying life, with goals reflective of doing so. These jobs were largely obtained via networking (Devin’s tennis coach, Alex’s bar friend, George’s conference, etc.). While their respective job positions are not the highest, they are higher than that of their black counterparts, who reported different goals and desires.

Isaac, the black student now in a master’s/bachelor’s program, is disappointed that he has not had the same success so far that his peers (including white peers like Alex) have had in making money. “Man, I could use some money…I’m not broke or anything but they don’t pay your boy anything on this stipend,” Isaac says. “But that why I got that side hustle at the race track.” Isaac works as a mechanic on a local racecar pit crew. He points out that
he is “in good with the owner,” which has led Isaac to believe it will eventually be a fruitful career move beyond simply getting a salary. “He doesn’t have any kids or nothin’, so who do you think is going to get those cars?” Isaac started working there after he dropped out of Iowa State due to his low grades. After moving back home, he entered a transition program (a program where he could improve his GPA and enter into a master’s program after a year) at North Carolina State. Even though Isaac was getting a 4.0 there, he missed deadlines for some of the program’s requirements—which he blames on their failure to keep him informed—and he dropped out. He eventually transferred into a five-year engineering program at NCSA&T, where he plans to get his master’s degree and eventually a PhD. Even though he isn’t making as much money as wants to at this point in his life, Isaac is content in his current program. “Man, your boy likes this place,” he says. “They actually take care of me and it makes me work harder.” He feels that the program provides the sort of assistance that he wishes he had from his social network when he was in high school. “I feel like I have the support Beth gave James in high school.”

Beth, James’ very involved African American mother, did give James “my space,” he says, when he attended William and Mary. James pursued a dual major in economics and psychology after realizing he “was going to fail out if I stayed on the pre-med track.” After trying to find a job during the last couple of months before graduation, James moved back home with his parents and took up a job helping with “paperwork and scheduling at this lawyer’s home” while he “kept looking for anyone to hire me” for a longer-term position. Eventually, he found a job as an intern and sales person at Living Social in DC. “It was cool but I was not being paid,” he says, so he “went to an old PE teacher at Georgetown [GDS] and asked if I could help out.” James then became an assistant cross country teacher and
girls’ basketball coach at GDS. When his best friend Devin told him he was moving to New Orleans, “I figured it was about time to leave DC.” He moved in with Devin and Henry and did “a bunch of random jobs,” including working as an extra on the television show *NCIS*, being a lifeguard, and eventually working at an internet advertisement company that specializes “in making sure your company is number one on Google.” While he plans on “finding a job where I am more passionate,” he says that he is pretty good at his job, which he gauges from the fact “that most people work here right after college for only four month, and I have been here for a year.”

After graduating from Howard with a degree in economics, Eli (black) lived at home. After only a month, though, he moved out to Miami to become a deacon. “I wasn’t able to get a job anywhere else and I felt like I was a failure. Luckily, my church had a subsidiary in Miami and was there to help me.” He felt that working for the church was important. “I just felt really blessed and decided I needed to work to give back.”

After resolving issues with his father, Brandon is focusing on developing his therapeutic bicycle company (“It’s a company that allows for you to talk and get exercise at the same time”) with his father’s help. While he is passionate about it, and it allows him to follow in his dad’s entrepreneurial footsteps, Brandon still hopes to finish his schooling. He expresses regret and disappointment about the fact that he left school and is now forced to create his own business as a viable career. “It’s cool, but you know, I really wanted to be a doctor,” he says. However, after the “betrayal” he allegedly experienced in college, he is a “little weirded out” about going back. Role models and visible examples of success are needed in every community; Brandon always considered himself a good one. He enjoyed the idea of people looking up to him, inspiring others and showing them what they can do
with hard work. He was always aware of the impression and the responsibility he had to represent his race, a pressure white students never reported during interviews. “I felt like I let down my family….Since Pre-K, I had to be an example of an upstanding black male, and now my dad thinks I screwed up my life on drugs.”

The difference in job outcomes and opportunities post-college for the participants also speaks to the difference in privilege between white and black students. Though still reliant on networks for job opportunities, the networks for the black students were noticeably slimmer and less robust. While a white respondent was able to expand their opportunities via a network that extended to friends of friends, black respondents’ opportunities via networks extended mostly to their immediate family or circle. Today, the black participants are creating their own jobs via entrepreneurial endeavors; they are still in school or have bounced around from job to job. Their focus, as illustrated by Isaac, is to “get money, man.” Exploring or discovering their place in the world seems like an abstract, lofty goal to them, one that doesn’t produce money and thus, one that they don’t have time for. Opportunities for careers instead of just jobs have not presented themselves.

Support

Academic outcomes differed largely by race in both college and post-college. Black students took longer to finish college than their white counterparts while also attending what would be considered less academically rigorous schools. Post-college, while difficulties were expected due to the economy, was more difficult for black students. Their success, or lack thereof, was directly related to the amount of support that interview participants believed they had. Support for them broke down into three general categories:
parents, school and teachers, and the college counselor. Support was a dominant theme in the interviews. These three categories seemed to be foundational for students and helped shape their goals and their perspectives on their own abilities.

*High parental expectations, but little guidance*

For my black respondents (Isaac, Corey, Eli, James, and Brandon), their parents had a direct role in establishing what the expectations were with respect to their performance in high school. All of the black students interviewed had been told directly that they need to stay within the A and B range. “My mom expected nothing besides As and Bs; anything else would be a problem,” Isaac says. “My parents would become involved in my academic life if I slipped below the B range,” says Eli. If James brought home less than a B, his mother would limit his video game time, as was also the case for Corey, Isaac, and Eli. Brandon was the only outlier among the black students with regards to this sort of parental support and punishment: his parents, he points out, “weren’t really around.” Additionally, their parents were clear that they expected their children to go to college: “You have to go to a good school” was a constant refrain in their households, all of the black interviewees said.

While there were many stated expectations within the black families, there were no clear or direct instructions or guidance on how to obtain these goals, much less firm definitions of what a “good college” was. “My parents could not really help me with the college application process, because they hadn’t gone to college at that time,” says Brandon. Isaac points out that his mother was a single mother and was overburdened as it was. “She didn’t have time to be showing me how to do my homework or to pick me up right after school... The white kids would get picked up and taken home and had to study... We [the
black kids] were waiting in after school [program] playing basketball.” Corey says that his parents would offer any help they could, but often defaulted to his opinion. This is not to say that the black students were simply left to their own devices. In spite of the clear goals their parents set for them, however, they were left with a path that was opaque at best.

Furthermore, black students were placed in a position where their parents made their expectations and the “all or nothing” stakes very explicit, yet provided little guidance. This was unique to the black students and parents. This was in part due to the small black population at the school: “I mean, I was one of, what, eight black kids at the school” says Isaac. Other peers were in similar situations and also did not receive direction; the small population made it less of a possibility that there were more avenues to take or role models to follow. It also was related to the fact that the black parents made it extremely clear that the financial cost of GDS was great, and that this $38,000 price tag was not to be taken lightly.

“I had to make sure I did not take all that my parents were paying for for granted,” says Corey. “I mean, it’s a lot of money to spend on a kid.” This sentiment was shared by Eli: “I couldn’t look at my mom, who was working her ass off and tell her I had a bad grade,” he says. While the white students also were aware of the school’s high tuition, it was not interpreted and internalized as a dichotomous challenge to live up to—that is, one where they would either succeed or fail.

All the white interviewees had parents whose focus and expressed expectations had more to do with the holistic aspect of school. “My parents did not care about grades as much as me searching for help when I needed it,” stated Henry. “I was always a hard worker so my parents really just wanted me to focus on learning and having a good time in
high school,” claimed Alex. George (who was focused heavily on basketball) said that he would have likely not even considered college if he could not play basketball, and that his parents would have been okay with that decision because “my dad had been in education all his adult life and knew it was about finding yourself.” “School success was not indicative of life success,” George’s dad stressed to him.

None of the white interviewees could remember being reprimanded for not doing well in school. Even Frank, who received Ds (the lowest grade of any of the interviewees), said that his parents’ response was trying to figure out how they could help him do better, and making sure he stayed positive. As a self-described “nerd,” Alex was “always stressed about my grades” even though he was “mostly receiving A’s”; his parents, however, told him to “not take school that seriously”; they said he should “enjoy” it and “the experience being at such a unique place.” This sentiment was shared by Henry’s parents, who wanted him to “enjoy being a kid.”

This focus on enjoying the moment seem to run parallel with a notion that the white students referenced interpreting their parents as wanting them to appreciate the unique situation and “diverse” environment at GDS. In contrast to the black parents, whose children interpreted them as valuing the school as being useful and important because of the prestige and ability to get them into a “good school,” the white parents seem to want the student to really engage with the school’s message and environment. This led to a more multifaceted view of education and the educational experience, which could be enabling the white students to not view setbacks as permanent and a reflection of their abilities, but instead that they needed to, and knew where and how, to ask for help, and that there was not a fault but just a fixable problem.
While the white students did interpret their parents’ expectations as more flexible when it came time to applying for college, all five of the white students had direct input from their parents, especially in compiling the list of the school they were interested in. “My dad created my list based on where he thought I could play,” stated Henry. Henry, Alex, Devin, and Frank went on campus tours with their parents. “My dad and I went to around 5-6 different school before I settled on Reed,” recollected Frank.

Conversely, out of the black interviewees, James was the only one to have input from his parents; the other black students felt as though they were on their own. “My mom didn’t have time like Beth [James’ mother] to show me where to go. I just listened to the college counselor because I figured he knew where I could actually get into,” complained Isaac. Corey shared the sentiment: “My parents just said that I needed to go to a good school so I just looked up rankings and where there were parties.” While the black students also went on tours, the schools they did visit were dictated by the ones that the guidance counselor had selected and thought would help to best increase their chance of getting in.

Unlike the other black students, James alone could count on practical, active assistance from his family, which helped him succeed in college and his post-graduate career. Like the white students, he had a parent—his mother, Beth, who learned how to garner the necessary cultural capital to be able to directly influence her son’s learning experience at the school. She worked her way onto the Parent Teacher board and ended up being elected president, which gave her direct influence over the hiring and firing of teachers, a power that she utilized when a teacher, according to James, unfairly reprimanded him and gave him a D in the class. “After I received the D, I am pretty sure my
mom got her fired. After which, teachers always were offering to give me extra help.” Like George, the white student whose father actually worked for the school, Beth had arranged her son’s education so that he could take advantage of all the networks available to him. She guided her son through his schooling and pointed him in the right direction to help him utilize the full range of the school’s resources. This is something that the parents of the other black students couldn’t do, a situation that left Isaac, for instance, frustrated. “My mother did not have the time to make sure I was successful,” he says. “Henry’s parent and James’ mom knew how to guarantee they were going to be successful.”

Relied on guidance counselors, but benefited little

The guidance counselor’s role differed by the race of the students. All of the interviewees utilized the college counselor. However, the white students saw the counselor’s role as way less important and impactful than the black interviewees did. In perhaps the most telling quote with regards to the difference of the role the guidance or college counselor takes, Henry stated, “I talked to the counselor, he was really cool. We came in with my list, but they weren’t like there to push you any certain way, just there to provide information: this is a good school, this isn’t…they were more just there as a tool…and would just help to mail out your applications and stuff.”

The black students’ relationship with the college counselor was much more involved. The black students felt as though the counselor had direct power over where they were going and in many cases “messed up” their college process. “You know, like I don’t know where I want to go, and my mom does not have time to figure it out, so when he [college counselor] told me to look somewhere I figured that was the best I could do. If he
had he told me I could have done better I probably would have,” stated Isaac. Brandon shared similar sentiments: “I had no idea where to go. I just listened to my cousin who told me how cool Miami was because of the parties, you know. When I met with the counselor he didn’t give me any new advice. He just told me where I could get in and that’s where I applied.”

The black interviewees perceived the counselors’ words as truth instead of, as the white students saw them, as suggestions. Thus, although their parents clearly instructed them to go to a good school, the black students did not have the materials or knowledge to achieve the goals their parents had set, therefore they relied heavily on the guidance counselor to point them in the right direction. This is in complete agreement with Hinton and Adams (2006), who write that guidance counselors are not a positive for black students: they receive less resources and time from guidance counselors, suffering from a lack of access to information. Black students rely on the guidance counselor, who is their most trusted or only resource for college, yet they are getting less resources and information than the white students, creating different positions for them from the beginning.

It is important to note that the navigation of the college application process was likely easier for the white parents as seven out of ten of them had advanced degrees. This may have provided comfort with, and understanding of, the college process and allowed them to help their children in ways that the black parents (none of whom had advanced degrees) could not.

The fact that the black students had a greater reliance on, and belief in, their guidance counselors speaks to Foucault’s labeling theory, for the black students match the
low expectation set by the counselor. They only applied to schools that the counselor recommended and felt that this recommendation meant they weren’t the brightest, leading them (even with their GDS training) to take the collegiate setbacks as confirmation of their lack of ability. This reliance on the guidance counselor also speaks to studies that have shown that lower-class blacks take the opinions of authority figure much more seriously, as fact, and that the upper class blacks at GDS are operating similarly. With the idea that they must get into a “good school” constantly emphasized by their parents, the black students found themselves pushed into turning to an authority figure who pointed them in the direction they thought would lead to a good school, even though that college counselor (as the white students knew, and as the black students later learned) was simply providing “generic” information. As a result, when they look at their lack of knowledge and the ineffectiveness of their counselors in retrospect, the black students (aside from James) say they feel as though they had already failed before they even applied to school.

The competitive nature of GDS seemed to make the ineffectiveness of the counselors all the more harmful for the black students. “It was extremely competitive and you knew were everyone was getting into or going,” Alex explained, adding that his application process was “truly traumatic.” He continued, “everyone would talk about where they were going and you didn’t want to be the guy who got into a terrible school.” All of the interviewees described how they weren’t the ones “getting into Harvard” and while George stated that he “honestly would not have gone to Harvard had I gotten in,” the rest assumed that their peers were getting into the Harvards of the world. This was a fair assumption according to the students, as many from GDS went on to Ivy Leagues and reputable schools.
"I knew a good amount of kids who got into Brown, Stanford and Princeton. It was annoying as shit," said Eli.

"GDS kept promoting how that year something like 89% of their applicants had been accepted into an Ivy League or top school and me and George did the math and realized that it must have been only our friend group that didn’t," laughed Henry. Others like Alex, Eli, Brandon, Frank, Corey and Isaac felt the pressure brought on by competition. "It was tense because our parents had spent all this money and to not go somewhere known made you look terrible"—a sentiment stated by Corey but shared by all of the aforementioned students. What is interesting is that while this sentiment was shared across races, it is important to consider the fact that the black students were taking information from the guidance counselor as law. They were not able to even apply to the same schools as their white peers, a situation that buttressed the black student’s perspective that they were at a constant disadvantage.

Focus on social status and feelings of inferiority

All of the interviewees placed themselves in some way near the middle class. However, where the interviewees placed themselves within the middle classed differed by race. The white students always put themselves in the upper middle class, whereas the black students said lower or just middle. In comparison to their white peers, all of the black students aside from James placed themselves as being comparatively poorer and would readjust their status to lower middle class. Additionally, the black kids perceived themselves as being viewed at as poor by their peers and it made them feel “as though I had to prove I was at least not poor,” according to Isaac. This is the opinion of a student who
was in a group where not only was his mother making $130,000 a year, but also as in a group where the self-reported incomes of both the white and black parents were all relatively within the same range. Even Corey, who had parents in high-profile jobs—his mother was head of human resources at National Geographic, and his dad was one the lead contractors on the MCI/Verizon Center construction project—labeled himself as being in the lower middle class when asked how his family’s wealth compared to his peers.

Even with GDS’s focus on wealth equality, the black students likely due to the aforementioned fear of being perceived as poor were much more aware of social markers. Black students also felt that they had to, but couldn’t, keep up with the social markings, creating a constant feeling of “being judged” according to Isaac, which was only intensified as they felt like they were “representations for my whole race.” Brandon said this was “always on my mind when I thought about taking making any type of move, I mean I would not let it stop me from dressing how I liked, but I knew people thought of me as the black guy.” This shows that Brandon may have had even more of a comfort with his appearance than his black peers, whose attention to social markings led them to change even their attire.

For the white students, however, these questions of wealth were not as much on their minds. “Class was not a real factor at GDS,” says Alex. “I mean I guess I should have thought about that, but it seemed like outside of the super-rich kids nobody was doing poorly,” Frank says. “Everyone was pretty much at the same level. I am sure there were some differences, but it was not a big thing,” said George. This was a prevailing view among the white students, even when they brought up tangible examples of the school’s disparities in wealth. For instance, “super rich” students were categorized as such based
on their houses, which were visible as house parties became more frequent and attending house parties became more popular. However, while the white students saw the houses of the super rich kid as having “nice stuff” that they "hoped to get" one day, they nevertheless maintained that they were like everyone else and that these students were the anomaly. However, the black students did not completely differentiate their white friends from the people with the nicer houses. This sense of inferiority was only reinforced as these material representation of wealth and the expectations set for the black students by authority figures began to blend—and then were reaffirmed as it bled into their social life.

The black students who attended GDS also faced a very particular form of relative deprivation relevant perhaps only to well-off households: access to a high-end tutor. The best private tutor used routinely by GDS students cost $350 an hour. The unwillingness of their families to pay for this service was seen by the black students, again with the exception of James, as another way they could not compete with their white counterparts. However, what they did not realize was that while it was true that this private tutor was used for SAT prep and did cost “a lot of money,” according to Alex, tutors at the school itself also helped students with severe learning disabilities—including three of the white interviewees in this study and were thus a necessity. Alex, Frank and Henry all had learning disabilities or time management issues that were hindering their academic performance. However, this reason for using a school tutor was not openly discussed and as a result the black students perceived this as something financially driven: “My parents just weren’t going to pay for that, which I understood, but still felt like I was not going to perform as well as those kids,” Corey explained.
Overall, these various indicators of wealth and status seemed to be less important to the white students, who because they were “good” and “did not have to worry about eating or paying for school,” view exceptional wealth as singular. This is unlike the black students who described seeing the wealth as omnipresent and continually highlighting the fact that they were not wealthy. This feeling led them to feel insecure not only in dealing that they perceived to directly deal with wealth, such as house parties, but also in their understanding of their abilities in to interact in the social scene.

Social gap

Sensitive to their perceived low status, black students spent more time trying to improve it. “I knew I did not have money to buy everything Polo, so I had to really become that stylish guy so that I could make up for that...my mom didn’t have $70 to spend on a shirt for me, so I would come in with that fly shit” said Isaac about style and clothing during high school. Eli furthers this by saying, “I was blessed, but to try to keep up with the clothes was something that I always tried to do, but it also was a constant reminder that I did not have that type of money.” As for white students, showing their status through proper attire was not as crucial. Alex stated, “I honestly never thought about my clothes, I was never a fashionable guy it wasn’t me, it wasn’t like I cared though I was trying to do ace my exams.”

Of course, not all the black students could convince their parents to buy “fly” clothing. “Bro, my parents weren’t going for that, they were already sending me to that expensive ass school,” says Corey, laughing. But there were other ways to compensate for low status. Corey started lifting weights twice a day in order to “make myself noticeable, because I knew I could not compete with the money that was at that school...I guess, yeah I
guess, that’s why I really got into the gym.” Because they had a confidence about their status that was missing among many of the black students, white students seemed to care less about activities that would elevate that status. “It wasn’t like I picked up basketball because I thought that I needed to prove anything to my peers, outside of people thinking I would suck at basketball because I was short and white” said George. But George was the only white interviewee who expressed a need to prove himself through a skill set. In fact, unlike black students like Brandon and Eli, who also played basketball, Eli was explicit that he played basketball solely “because I was good at it and because skill was all that mattered on the court, not all the other stuff...other stuff meaning dough or like your parents’ job”. George’s focus on becoming good at basketball was solely to be good within the confines of the sport: “I just wanted to become better and better at basketball because I was not naturally good at it.” Even after being questioned about a potential connection to school, George responded “It really had nothing to do with my school work ethic or anything my parents thought me.’

A social marker of status that the black students paid an enormous amount of attention to when compared to their peers was the way in which they got to school. Due to the required payment for parking at GDS, cars were used as an indicator of wealth. The black kids discussed at length how it was a constant reminder that they were not as well-off. They aspired to have a decent car in order to at least be seen as average. “Man, I didn’t have like a nice car, but you know it was good. People didn’t think it was shit or anything, but I tried to get something I could work on and could go faster than all of those nice ass car they were driving” said Isaac. James articulated, “yeah I had a new car, I mean my mom knew most of the other kids had cars and I didn’t want to be that kid without
Comparatively, Alex drove a vintage 1987 Mercedes Benz that his parents bought him because it was “safe because it wasn’t plastic”. When asked about how he felt about driving a Mercedes, Alex says, “Maybe it’s my white male privilege, but I never thought about what type of car it was. Like I knew it was a nice car, but I didn’t care about that stuff like clothes or my car. I just needed a way to get to school.” This was a reaction that seemed to be shared by one of the white interviewee, who recited the GDS rhetoric about race ad nauseum and with a sense of boredom, but seemed unaware and frustrated by questions about class. Three of the five black interviewees had cars, compared to two of the five white students. The white kids viewed it as a practical issue. “I lived right down the block from school,” said George, a sentiment shared by Henry. “I liked to watch people on the metro” mentioned Frank. Not having a car was internalized by the black students as their going without something important and as a social marker that they weren’t as well-off. In contrast, the white kids did not consider it an issue of any real significance. The internalization of the black students as ‘going without’ eventually leads to worse college and post college outcomes, as their attention and energies during college preparatory period (high school) have been focused heavily on combating the inferior feelings and less on school work. This leads them, once in college, to take rejections (which may be more likely due to parental guidance and the juggling of more social and academics) as reinforcement of their inferiority. Instead of learning how to deal with those setbacks in high school, they’re learning now with a much larger learning curve. They rejections they experience serve as validations to themselves of their ‘lesser than’ status, while white students are able to let rejections roll off of them.
Also found during the research was that both white and black students partook in racialized jokes within their friend groups, even when there were both races present.

While white students were able to laugh it off like Henry who said, “I’m a tall goofy white kid and I can’t really jump” or George who used the same point as motivation on the court: “I wanted to prove I was good, even though I was the white guy on the team.”

Black students, upon hearing racialized jokes of the same fashion (negative, about their own race), seemed not only to internalize them and distance themselves, resulting in further isolation, as the jokes seemed to hit home harder. Black students seemed to take the jokes more seriously and withdrew socially even more because of them. “Man, it felt like I was [when engaging in jokes] invited to a poker game, but only there to deal out the cards so they always had the advantage” said Isaac. “The black jokes would really just piss me off,” said Corey.

While the assemblies are good in intention, it seems that this approach does not bring students together and that both black and white students appreciate and learn the rigmarole when it comes to equality, but that on the topics of race and class, they become embarrassed, frustrated, divided and eventually after years of being bombarded with equality ideology, grouping themselves with people who they won’t have to worry about offending.

The school has come out said that you are different and that is okay. But the cases they use to show that they are different are examples that are lesser than, not equal. The black students are pointed out as black and only black, leaving them different and inferior, the opposite of the assembly’s alleged intentions.
It is not any better for the white students. They saw the assemblies as awkward and felt they were “paying the cost for others mistakes” after the assemblies. Before the assemblies, all students reported not paying much attention to race, just hanging out with who they got along with.

Outside of the aforementioned reactions, the black student seem to walk away from this experienced exhausted. The black students, who albeit perform well, but on average with respect to GPA and college admission, have a high school experience that is filled with a feeling of inferiority and attempts to buttress their own self-worth. This situation is only made worse by the continual self-blame and internalization, as they feel they cannot blame a structure, since their self-made parents have the ability and agreed to pay $38,000 a year for a school founded on diverse equality, a price tag that is well known by all students.

This experience, in comparison to their white counterparts, who view everyone (with the exception of the extremely wealthy students) as being on equal footing, and who only find some frustration in the constant badgering about their race. Overall, these white students are experiencing high school as a place to learn and have fun with their friends and while they still have stressors, they have parents who constantly reaffirm their value and importance of enjoying their experience in an environment they perceive as having equal footing as everyone around them. This situation provides them with resiliency to the challenges that can occur once a person leaves a secluded, small and sheltered environment, as seen in the differential experience that white and black students had in college and the resiliency they had when things did not go their way.
Blaming themselves, and not the social structure

The sense of inferiority that permeates the lives of black students at GDS arises due to class differences. They have seen the lower class, largely due to their extended families. They are able to recognize their advantages, while simultaneously existing in a world where their peers’ families own baseball teams. This understanding, in combination with the lack of direction and support they received, would suggest that they would blame structural factors for their frustration. This, however, is not the case.

For one thing, they saw themselves as relatively advantaged, making it harder to blame structural problems for their failures to succeed. All the black students stated that their households had a higher income level in comparison to their extended families, and that they still had constant interactions with those family members, even those with much lower socioeconomic standing. “Even though my uncle was a literal pimp and ruined his life [after getting a scholarship to Julliard] by drinking and doing drugs, my mom and dad still made sure I hung out with his kids and even him if we were supervised,” recollected Corey. Many of the black interviewees had similar stories where they were close in proximity to lower-income environment through family.

Only one white interviewee, Alex, said that his extended family was not as affluent as his household was. “We would just not bring up the beach house often, because we would not want to feel awkward asking my dad’s side of the family (his mom’s family was all well off) for rent for the beach house if they asked to go.” While Alex’s situation is still awkward, is not nearly as drastic an experience of poverty as Corey. Outside of Alex, the
rest of the white interviewees stated that they were close to the income level of their relatives.

As Brandon pointed out, he “knew people who had real problems and couldn’t afford to go to a good school like GDS.” This viewpoint reduced the willingness of black students like him to blame structural obstacles. Consequently, when things went wrong for these students, instead of looking at the broader social structure, they would emphasize that they had a lot of opportunities and that they had just “failed” “or messed up”—just as Isaac said when he described dropping out of Iowa State. While they are able to identify that things were not fair, all of the black students eventually came back to the fact that they had been given an opportunity that others were not granted and that they were “lucky to have a family that would pay for such an expensive high school,” as James clearly laid out.

While good in its intention, it seems that this approach does not bring students together. Both black and white students appreciate and learn the rigmarole when it comes to equality, but in regards to the topics of race and class, they become embarrassed, frustrated, and divided. After years of being bombarded with equality ideology, they eventually group themselves with people who they won’t have to worry about offending.

CONCLUSION

Building on the research of Billings (2011), Lacy (2007), Pattillo-McCoy (2004), and Khan (2011), this research provides a more detailed understanding of the hidden class differences and their interactions with race. The way in which these factors interrelate is complex. The study’s findings suggest that black students do not embody privilege their class would lead one to believe because they don’t see themselves as being in that class. As
a result, they fall victim to an overreliance on authority figures (e.g., guidance counselors). Inferiority, bred and reinforced as the high price tag something all students are aware of, leads to a bigger emphasis on markers of social status. White students are largely unaware of class differences, seeing super rich as anomaly, while black students are hyperaware and view super rich as norm.

The study’s findings suggest that two mechanisms shape the achievement gap: academic support and social interactions and interpretations, with the former rooted largely in class differences, and the latter largely rooted in racial differences. Examining them together allow us to uncover relationships that are typically misattributed to race. It also allows us to understand how cultural alienation and latent class differences work in conjunction with one another to create a permeating sense of inferiority that is more troubling than even the achievement gap itself.

The black GDS students I interviewed were in an environment that allowed them to achieve what the school had set out for them to do. GDS, as a small, academically rigorous school, was able to push them through to reputable institutions of higher learning. With its small class sizes and individual attention, the first integrated school in DC was able to develop a system in which both black and white students were able to thrive. While this is an admirable accomplishment for any school, the relatively poor academic and professional outcomes of the black students after high school should be cause for concern. National statistics show the average GPA for black students to be lower than that of whites, even when class is controlled for. In my small sample, the GPAs for both races were relatively equal; no gap was found. With regards to college acceptance, another gap identified by national statistics, my data also showed no gap: both the white and black students were
accepted to schools that were their first choices. However, the black students did do worse than their white peers in college and afterward in terms of their academic and professional success.

This study has attempted to understand possible causal mechanisms that explain why black students might perform worse than their white counterparts, even after attending an elite private school among peers with families of similar (though, as I discussed, not exactly the same) financial resources. These factors did not seem to make a difference in high school, where all the students were overprotected but pushed to achieve. But they created a different set of experiences for the black and white students that became consequential in their later college and professional careers. This could be an explanation for the higher college dropout rates we see nationally among black college students, even after controlling for parental household incomes.

The different outcomes for the white and black students I studied cannot be attributed solely to a lack of financial resources among the black households, my research suggests. Indeed, the black students in this study were more likely to come from high-earning families (at least in terms of their immediate family). Nevertheless, they felt as though they were the lowest-earning in their peer group. This may be because the general sense of inferiority they had as black students at an elite private school skewed their perspective on their own status within the student community. Access to forms of financial, social and cultural capital for these students, despite being in the upper class, are unequal with their peers due to historical inequalities. These black students simply do not embody the privilege that their class would lead one to believe their class would have because they don’t perceive themselves as having that class, nor as embodying much privilege due to
their comparative surroundings. As a result, they fall victim to an overreliance on authority figures in the same way lower-income blacks do, also echoing the work of Lareau (2003), who makes the point that lower-income households are less willing to challenge authority figures even when it is in their own interest. They are held to even higher expectations placed on them by their parents and themselves, due to the monetary investment that has been put into their education. While the white students were often unaware of class differences, black students universally fixated on them and felt as though they were lower down on the socioeconomic ladder—even though the white and black students had similar self-reported family incomes.

Because of this feeling of inferiority, black students seemed to focus more than their white peers on activities that would enhance their social status. However, this difference between the two groups did not appear to lead to worse academic outcomes in high school because the black parents pushed their children to succeed academically.

Once they left high school and were on their own, however, the consequences of this sense of inferiority became apparent. These students were no longer in a small community where there was constant affirmation regarding their equality: where even if it was not fully internalized, the school (in being small and prestigious) could help push the black students in the right direction. Instead, they were at large colleges where a big component of success relies on resiliency, a trait that had already been worn down by the constant feeling of inferiority that the experiences at GDS produced. Thus, when it occurred later, not only did they not have the GDS machine behind them, but they also had a lingering feeling of inferiority that was seen as being validated by their setback.
Ironically, higher expectations among their parents for academic success only exacerbated this sense of inferiority among the black students. Told to “do well” they tried, but without material means or tools of achieving these stringent roles, they were put in the position where they seem to be perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their parents demanded high grades and model behavior, and the students felt added pressure knowing how fortunate they were, compared to their extended family, to be able to get a $38,000 education. Furthermore, black students interpreted their parents’ expectations as “all or nothing”: either they were going to succeed, or they were going to fail—nothing in-between. At the same time, black parents were not willing or able to provide more concrete instruction in their children’s academic lives; outside of James (who went on to have the best career outcomes), the students were simply told to “do well.” This simplistic, vague direction seemed to intensify their frustration. When they inevitably fell short, as all students do sometimes, they had to fight against the idea that they were not only failures to their parents, but also to their culture. They viewed themselves as inadequate, and through their attempts to find alternative solutions while also attempting to reach their goals, they ended up falling into the position they had feared the most. What was worse was that they only blamed themselves for being there. A combination of hyper-awareness of the high tuition, an under-awareness of actual wealth, the constant feeling of inferiority at school reinforced by social mechanisms (transportation, tutors, dating), and opaque goals with no direction ensured that, as they saw it, the blame lied with themselves alone.

In contrast, white parents taught their children simply to enjoy high school and learn the academic system. As a result, white students viewed GDS as an experience that should be cherished. They also learned to take advantage of their academic environment.
Their parents instructed them on the tools and resources they could use to achieve the more tangible goals of education—for instance, not just “doing well” but getting into the college they wanted. For instance, Henry’s dad told him he had to be able to speak to authority figures in order to be successful later on in life, so that was what Henry focused on in high school.

All the white parents took their kids on college tours and were directly involved in the formation of their child’s college list. In comparison, the black parents (again aside from James’), left their children to their own devices and to figure out what “doing well” meant in that context. As a result, they had to ask cousins, friends, and other family members (who had not even been to college) what a “good college” was. Furthermore, they had to rely more on GDS’s guidance counselor, and they were sometimes directed by those counselors toward less prestigious schools—or at least some of them believed this happened, in retrospect. In contrast, the white students saw their guidance counselors simply as guides to help point them in the right direction and help fill out paperwork; they relied more on their parents to guide them in their college decisions, making full use of their family’s cultural capital to bring about the best outcomes.

For black students, the guidance counselor was more than just a giver of advice; her recommendation was an important signifier of their academic success and a non-negotiable, seemingly permanent designation of their college potential. GDS is a competitive school where lunchroom conversation revolved around test scores and which Ivy’s their peers were applying to or getting into, the guidance counselor’s verdict could further heighten any feelings of inadequacy. Overall, the black students I interviewed felt
underprepared and inadequate in economic and racial terms, which seeped into other aspects of their lives.

Ginwright (2002) details how interference by the upper class black community and their ignorance of the lower-class black community ruined the program. Specifically, the upper class blacks could not see the importance of technical skills, because they believed them ‘common’ or universal and in response, attempted to remove the courses in order to make room for “Afrocentric” teachings. This led to participants in the program not performing as highly as they once had and eventually the dissolution of the program.

Ginwright shows how the inclusion of black culture is not as simple of a solution as it may seem. Additionally, in conjunction (and independently) with showcasing the complexity of the inclusionary solution, the research illustrates the underling importance of class and how it affects the achievement gap. Just like the authorities in Ginwright’s study, who didn’t understand the needs of lower-class black students, these upper class black parents don’t realize the mechanisms that are necessary for upper-class black students to achieve academic success and social mobility. They are unable to provide their own kids the mechanisms in a schooling and social environment they don’t fully understand.

In their social lives, my upper-class black respondents were not able to fully interact because of what they perceived as their lower status. In addition, their parents’ high but vague expectations—an inferior form of cultural capital that arose from the lower socioeconomic status that black families had across generations, even when the family itself had a high income—affected their ability to see themselves in a positive light by intensifying their self-blame when they fell short of expectations. Normally in these situations, an oppressed or marginalized group has the ability to look at or place blame
externally. However, the black students I interviewed were well aware of how fortunate they were, given the high tuition their parents were paying, their parents’ career success, and the existence of extended family members who had to “deal with real problems.”

The elite and exclusive nature of GDS further worsened this sense of guilt: being one of ten black students in the school contributed to the feeling that they had to be model representatives of their race. While GDS did a great job of providing a quality education to all and therefore removing some of the structural barriers that black students as a whole face within an unequally resourced educational system, it could not remove the broader cultural narrative of the plight of the black student (“acting white”), and the fear among its black student body of being a part of that narrative. In fact, the school reinforced that narrative. While the school stressed equality, it took an approach that aggrandized race, which seemed to lead to categories that did not fully include the black students. If black people are suffering from being oppressed and the student realizes that they are at a $38,000 a year school while they have cousins who are poor, how can they relate to the race being presented? Further, if they are also not white, and the white students are simultaneously feeling awkward about being labeled as victimizers, the black kids, again, cannot fully relate to their immediate surroundings, as the white kids have a different history and experience of these assemblies. Putting on assemblies that preached that everyone was equal led to the logical conclusion that a student’s success was directly related to not only their efforts but their actual abilities. Their constant battle to validate themselves and their race in the face of this individualistic ideology took a toll on these students, one that did not seem to produce an achievement gap in high school, perhaps
because of GDS’s involved approach to learning and their parents’ immediate presence in their lives, but that visibly wore on them by the time they got to college.

More specifically, the narrative of black academic inferiority seemed to affect them more in college than in their sheltered high school environment, influencing how they perceived and interpreted their successes and failures after graduating from GDS. Their white peers took setbacks in stride and were able to view them as part of the process—even if that process involved the humiliation of losing your money at In-N-Out Burger or living at home with your parents. Black students internalized their setbacks as personal failures, in part because of the demanding ways in which their parents viewed their successes or failures. Getting their first C or D in college or getting off track due to an accidental trip on drugs was viewed as evidence that maybe they didn’t actually belong in college. Due to their unique positioning in the upper class, they, perhaps more so than black students from less privileged backgrounds, internalized feelings of self-blame and frustration, while their white peers were able to view negative occurrences as not necessarily reflections on their character or ability.

Of course, this study is qualitative, with discernible themes and patterns to contribute to theory as the aim. More quantitatively oriented lenses might focus on the lack of generalizability with a small sample, such as this. However, the choice of GDS as a case study sacrifices generalizability but allows for the ability to conduct an in-depth examination of the causal mechanisms that might bring about the achievement gap. The patterns identified here may not be representative of those that exist among black upper-class students at a national level for a number of reasons, which include: the study’s nonrandom method of participant selection; the focus on male students; and the use of
snowball sampling, which meant the interviewees were from similar social groups and might as a result have had common experiences that cannot be extrapolated beyond their friend group. Furthermore, I interviewed only students, allowing them to describe the views of their parents. It may be the parents expressed attitudes that were misinterpreted by their children, whereby the students, having observed the parents’ work ethic or heard about their rise from a lesser class background, took the “get a good grade” mantra to mean that they could only do well in their parents eyes by scoring a A or B, when really the parents meant they should figure out the system.

The use of interview data is another limitation. Not only may students have mischaracterized events in retrospect, but also simply asking about experiences relating to race or class may have made these aspects of their experiences more salient to them than they otherwise would have been. (That said, the frustration or lack thereof that an interviewee experienced may have presented itself only once the interviewee was able to contemplate his experience from a standpoint more distant in time.) Furthermore, all interviews were held remotely via phone, as the interviewees were located in places like New Orleans, Colorado, and New York. Though this was preferred by all parties, being able to see the respondents physically react to questions might have gleaned further information, in addition to possibly deepening the rapport I had with them, and therefore their willingness to talk candidly about their experiences.

While this study contributes to our understanding of the achievement gap that persists even between black and white students from upper-class backgrounds, future research needs to address the gaps that exist for high-income households from other racial and ethnic minority groups—especially Latinos, who are already the largest minority
group and whose numbers are expected to grow considerably in the decades ahead.

Additionally, this research looked at students whose parents were of the same race: with the increasing numbers of interracial marriages and biracial children, any achievement gaps that exist for this population—which are perhaps more complex, given the additional social factors at work—are ripe for exploration. Likewise, future research should address the achievement gap as it relates to other types of families: one-parent households, families residing in different parts of the country, the children of non-heterosexual couples, and so on.

A more fundamental limitation of my study is that I have defined upper class rather broadly, with the main criteria relating to a family’s ability to pay a $38,000 annual tuition for an elite private school. Of course, household income is just one aspect of social class. For example, generational wealth also plays a large role in determining whether an individual or family possesses the “embodied” privilege that Kahn discusses. Interviewees at times experienced the divide between their newly rich households and families with generational wealth. For instance, the house parties, which were almost exclusively held at the very very wealthy kids houses, were all put on by white students, thus in this environment making “not-super-rich” synonymous with black, which factors directly into the racial divide. Many studies tend to cite race as the main contributor to the achievement gap, but I found that to actually be class as its underlying cause. As a result, further delving into the class basis of the racial achievement gap would be worthwhile.

The idea that exists within most education policy is that giving students financial resources will mitigate the differences in achievement between race. School vouchers and scholarships operate under the premise that if a student simply had access to these schools,
it will make them successful. This study adds to the literature the notion that putting kids in an exclusive environment does not necessarily guarantee success for students, for aspects of race still influence important social interactions. Class, even with smaller disparities at play within an elite setting, is ever-present in a latent form, continually shaping students’ social and cultural capital. Policy addressing these issues should be more sensitive and take into account the effect of not only race, but also the less visible differences often ignored in the broad social categorizations we make based on income.
Work Cited


[Add Lareau 2003]


Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Demographics

How old are you?

What year did you graduate from GDS?

What race do you consider yourself?

Do you identify as a male or female?

Did your parents go to college? If so, which?

What was the approximate income of your parent while you were in high school?

What did you parents do for a living?

Where were you raised? What type of neighborhood was it?

Did you have neighbors who were of the same race as you?

Do you have relatives or family members who are not in the same economic class as you?

Probe: what is your relationship with them?

Did you feel you had to act differently with them?

Upbringing:

Did your guardians want you to attend GDS? Did you want to attend GDS?

What were your parents’ expectations for high school years?

Probe: How did you figure out that this was what your parents wanted?

How did they support you in achieving these goals? Did they provide any suggestion or information on the best way to accomplish these goals?

What kind of school did they expect you to attend?

Personal goal (self identity):
What was important to you while at GDS?

What were your goals during your years at GDS?

Are the previous goals important to you? Why or why not?

What made your guardians proud?

Peer group:

Who were your closet friends? What race were they?

Did you feel comfortable in your friend group? Did you ever have to act differently in order to fit in?

Did you feel comfortable voicing your opinion with your group?

Did you all study together?

Did their college or career goal differ from yours?

School Work and Culture (High School):

Did you talk about race in school? In what ways?

Did you learn about race in school? In what ways?

Did you learn about other cultures? In what ways?

Did you see aspects of your culture in your readings or lessons for school?

Was race important to you? In what ways?

What are some stereotypes you encountered at school?

Did feel you were stereotyped in school?

Did you feel you engaged in stereotypical activities?

Were you worried about perpetuating stereotypes when you interacted with other students? with teachers?

On a scale from 1-10, how much effort did you put into academics during high school?

Why do you say that?
Experience With Teachers (High School):

Did you feel your teachers were focused more on keeping order than teaching school materials?

Did race play an effect the way your teacher treated you?

Were you close to any teachers?

Did you feel your teachers cared about your success?

College Experience:

How did you feel about doing classwork/homework?

What books do you remember reading? Probe: Who were your favorite characters? What did you like about them?

Could you relate to these characters?

What college did you attend?

Was this college your first choice?

Was ranking important to you when selecting your colleges?

Did you graduate from college?

Were you employed directly after graduation?

Did you focus more on social activity or schoolwork?

What was your experience in college like?

How did it compare to GDS?

Did you notice your race while at school? How?

Did you discuss race in class?

Probe: How did you feel about discussing race in class?

Did you worry about being treated fairly?
After College:

Were you employed directly after college?

What is your current position at your job?

What is your salary?

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Will you seek further education (Masters program, law school, business school?)

Have you ever been arrested?

By 30, will you be on track to make a similar income to what you parents made?