Hostile Ignorance, Class, and Same-Race Friendships: Perspectives of Working-Class College Students

Sherelle Ferguson and Annette Lareau

Abstract
In the growing literature on upwardly mobile college students, there is evidence of students from working-class backgrounds experiencing exclusion on campus. Yet there has been insufficient attention to interactions between working-class students and their more affluent same-race friends. Drawing on 44 in-depth interviews with undergraduates from working-class backgrounds at two private universities, the authors show that Black, white, and Asian American students experience classist interactions with same-race friends characterized by what the authors term hostile ignorance. Although these interactions challenged same-race friendships for each racial group, the precise form they took was inflected by racial dynamics. Furthermore, tensions in intraracial friendships led students to withdraw socially, thereby shrinking their social networks. These findings clarify how racially homogenous social ties can provide support yet also feature class-based antagonisms. As we consider students’ sense of belonging on campus, we must be more precise about where working-class students are exposed to classism and who is responsible.

Keywords
higher education, first-generation students, classism, race, peers

In recent decades, there has been rising attention to the experiences of low-income college students from working-class families, particularly within selective colleges in the United States (see Rondini Richards, and Simon 2018 for a review). Approximately one third of students enrolled in U.S. post-secondary institutions will be the first in their family to earn a bachelor’s degree (Skomsvold 2015). Yet students from working-class families are less likely to accumulate college credits, experience academic success, and graduate compared with students whose parents have college degrees (Chen 2005; Pascarella et al. 2004). Although elite schools have created no-loan, “full-ride” packages for a small number of low-income college students, these students still often struggle economically, and many colleges do not have these generous packages (Jack 2019; Pascarella et al. 2004). Studies have also illuminated the subjective experience of students from working-class backgrounds in terms of having more difficulty integrating and creating social ties (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Reay Crozier, and Clayton 2009), participating in extracurricular activities (Hurst 2010; Stuber 2011), and managing academic choices and difficulties (Jack 2016; Nichols and Islas 2016). Many working-class students report feeling that they do not belong in elite college spaces (Aries and Seider 2005; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2007; Ostrove 2003; Warnock and Hurst 2016).

Researchers seeking to understand the factors that contribute to working-class students’ college outcomes have pointed in various directions. For example, many studies

1There are varying terms in the literature, including first-generation college students, low-income students, and students from working-class homes. In this article, we use the term students from working-class backgrounds or, to make it less cumbersome, working-class students. As our focus is on social class differences in students’ families, this is reflected in the key terms. Here we define students from working-class backgrounds as those who have parents who do not have college degrees from 4-year institutions and who also work in manual-labor jobs or low-level service-sector job with close supervision, or are unemployed. But because many scholars use the term first-generation college students, we report on these students with that term. There are significant differences in how researchers define first-generation college students, and how they are included in their analyses of student experiences. Thus, we report on these students using the term. The findings of this study are not limited to students who are first-generation college students.

1University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Sherelle Ferguson, University of Pennsylvania, Department of Sociology, 3718 Locust Walk, 353 McNeil Building, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.
Email: sherelle@sas.upenn.edu

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focus on working-class students’ academic preparation and financial hardships as major difficulties (Chen 2005; Engle and Tinto 2008; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nuñez 2001). Others focus on institutional practices and policies that disadvantage and alienate working-class students (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2019). These institutional forces include the operations of the university (e.g., funding, housing and cafeteria options, work-study policies, major pathways, on-campus janitorial jobs) as well as academic policies (e.g., advising, office hours). Numerous scholars have looked at “peer effects” in college settings, finding how much peers matter for academic outcomes and career choices (Sacerdote 2001; Zimmerman 2003). But by conceptualizing peers broadly, this body of research leaves several questions unanswered. Specifically, it is unclear the degree to which working-class students can forge friendships in which they experience a retreat from class-based stigma. Jack (2019) revealed how students from working-class backgrounds cannot escape overhearing students at the elite university “Renowned” casually discussing their expenditures of wealth. Jack memorably wrote,

invitations for overseas travel and offers of luxury goods are utterly ordinary here [and] in common rooms, cafeterias, and courtyards, you can no more escape these kinds of conversations than you can escape the cold in the dead of a Northeast winter. (p. 26)

In this and other research, the clear implication is that upper-class and upper-middle-class students are somewhat distant from the upwardly mobile college students, not part of their inner circle. Relatedly, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) showed that young women from working-class backgrounds were excluded from high-status social activities by others in their dorm. The implication is that after a short time, the young women from working-class backgrounds developed their own social worlds. To understand the campus experiences of working-class students, it is important to understand their relationships with more affluent peers who are part of their inner circles. Interactions with more affluent friends may contribute to working-class students’ experiences of acceptance or exclusion on campus, but this issue has not been sufficiently explored.

Furthermore, there is widespread evidence that students of color, including working-class students, experience discrimination and marginalization on college campuses (Allen, Epps, and Haniff 1991; Aries 2013; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Sánchez-Connelly 2018; Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso 2000; Torres and Charles 2004). As such, students of color often form same-race social networks and participate in affinity clubs and social groups organized by race (McCabe 2016; Torres and Charles 2004). Many studies show that these same-race interactions can provide comfort and social support for working-class students of color (Aries 2013; Harper 2006; Museus 2008; Samura 2018; Sánchez-Connelly 2018; Smith and Moore 2000), but the classed dimension of these relationships has not been sufficiently examined. Yet there are ample studies showing that friendships matter as social ties can be instrumental in providing access to jobs and other opportunities after graduation (Beasley 2011; see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Friendships built in college have the potential to be especially consequential for working-class college students.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with a racially diverse sample of 44 working-class college students from two private universities, we analyze working-class students’ reports of relational dynamics with their more affluent peers, particularly their friends. We find that students from working-class backgrounds experience classism from friends. Classism is a manifestation of class privilege and power whereby people from lower class backgrounds are treated in ways that devalue, discount, exclude, and separate them (Langhout, Rosselli, and Feinstein 2007; Lott 2002). In this article, we delineate an important mechanism through which working-class students of different races experience classism on campus routinely, including within intraracial friendships.

We introduce the term hostile ignorance to capture challenges working-class students, from a variety of racial and ethnic groups, face from students from higher social class backgrounds. We define hostile ignorance to occur when more affluent students ask questions or make comments to working-class students in a critical or hostile manner (rather than a neutral or positive one) on a matter connected to the class position of the students or their families. This includes upper-middle-class students’ passing judgment on the daily

2For discussions of other forms of hostility on campus, notably around speech, see Ben-Porath (2017).
lives of working-class students. Moreover, although studies report that same-race peers are a source of sanctuary from racial isolation on campus, we find, in addition, that students experience class-based antagonism from their same-race friends. We find that working-class Black, Asian American, and white students all experience hostile questions and comments from friends and roommates in their inner circles. In addition, racial dynamics sometimes shape these class-based antagonisms (as when Black women faced comments about their hair or white students did not reveal that they were working-class and “passed” as being from the middle class, benefiting from a widespread assumption that racial minorities are working class) (see Aries 2013). Our study suggests ties are working class) (see Aries 2013). Our study suggests the importance of broadening the conversation to increase attention to classism in peer culture, particularly among peers of the same race, and to specify more precisely where classism can surface on campus.

**Class on Campus**

In their analysis of social class and education, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) made it clear that students carry their social class positions into the field of education. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) highlighted especially the ways in which class provides middle-class students advantages in complying with institutional standards (particularly the content of the curriculum) as well as the ways in which working-class students may experience forms of unease and self-exclusion from college (see, among others, Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Weininger and Lareau 2018; see also Khan 2011). Empirical research supports, in crucial ways, the broad claims of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction. After all, students with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to graduate from college (Astin 1993; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009; Engle and Tinto 2008; Pascarella et al. 2004). In addition, students from higher class backgrounds are more likely to feel academically and socially integrated at their college (Tinto 1993), experience institutional fit (Bean 1980), and become engaged in campus life (Astin 1993; Kuh et al. 2005). These class differences matter because social integration, especially a sense of belonging in college, affects students’ college adjustment and academic performance, (Astin 1993; Ostrove and Long 2007; Pascarella et al. 2004; Walpole 2003). Overall, studies of higher education show that students from low-income backgrounds persistently experience feelings of not belonging, alienation, or isolation (Aries 2013; Hurst 2010; Lee and Kramer 2013; Ostrove 2003; Warmock and Hurst 2016). Lehmann (2007) reported that even when they have solid academic performance, low-income students are more likely to withdraw from university and that they commonly cited not fitting in or not being able to relate to other students as their reason for doing so. Some studies highlight working-class students’ feelings of being outsiders when they observe differences in cultural styles—dress, consumption, leisure, speech—between themselves and their peers and reveal how these disparities (i.e., forms of cultural capital) hinder their ability to integrate with their more privileged peers (Aries and Seider 2005; Jack 2014; Reay et al. 2009; Stuber 2011; Torres 2009). This literature has been valuable for demonstrating the cultural mismatch students from working-class families may experience on university campuses. Yet exclusion is an interactional process. Nondominant social class groups may feel excluded or even engage in self-exclusion (Bourdieu and

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4Class-based antagonisms also can occur when nondominant groups, including working-class students, engage in hostile ignorance toward more affluent students, but we do not take up that question in this article.  
5Of course, hostile ignorance could surface in other forms of interactions, including regarding citizenship, racial and ethnic background, and sexual identity. We also recognize that it is possible that some who engage in hostile ignorance may not intend to be hurtful, while others’ comments are rooted in classist or racist beliefs. The term is intended in a broad-minded way, as we cannot adjudicate each individual’s intention. We consider hostile ignorance around social class to be a type of microaggression (Sue et al. 2007). Nonetheless, because the purpose of our article is to show how peer interactions, particularly intraracial close ties, are characterized by classist dynamics, which we term hostile ignorance, a more elaborate discussion of microaggression is beyond the scope of the article. This includes the measurement of these incidents (see Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017; Sue 2010). Note that there does not appear to be a clear consensus in the field delineating the various forms of microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) highlighted microassaults, microcovert, and environmental (Sue et al. 2007). The contradictory nature of definitions of microaggression (Williams 2020) and the lack of conceptual clarity of the concept have also been discussed (Lilienfeld 2017). For a discussion of the related, but distinct concept of white ignorance, see Mills (2007).  
6As our goal is to add more nuance to the literature on the class-based barriers facing working-class students, we discuss the literature on class and race separately here. Of course, there is an extensive and valuable literature on intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; see Rondini et al. 2018 for intersectional studies of first-generation students), and in the following discussion, we highlight when our findings echo well-established findings in intersectionality. But given our goals, a more extensive discussion of intersectionality is outside the scope of this article.  
7Jack (2019) showed that working-class students’ feelings of belonging and reactions to economic disparities on campus vary on the basis of whether they went to an elite high school, including a boarding school, or a less exclusive public high school. In our sample, there was an insufficient number of students who could be categorized as members of the “privileged poor” to adjudicate whether there is variation in their experiences of class exclusion. Future studies might consider how these differing backgrounds affects students’ cross-class friendships. Still, our study builds on this work by conceptualizing the insensitivity and hostility working-class students experience in intraracial friendships.
Passeron 1979; Lamont and Lareau 1988). But there is also the other side of the coin: the dominant group, including peers, may engage in behaviors that are exclusionary, a point not developed by Bourdieu. Empirical research, however, has amplified this point. Langhout et al. (2007) showed that the vast majority of college students of all class backgrounds at an elite college report experiencing or witnessing at least one “classist incident” in their time on campus. Furthermore, being the target of classism was negatively related to a number of outcomes including academic adjustment and positively related to a desire to leave the university (Langhout et al. 2007). Lee (2017) showed that among undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty members there is stigma associated with being from a low-income or first-generation background. Despite the recognition that universities are classed contexts, there has been little work examining how working-class students experience class stigmatization from their peers and the ways in which this might vary for different racial groups.

Although the ways in which peers act to make working-class students feel uncomfortable on campus have not been fully explored, there are some indications in the literature. In an interview in Armstrong and Hamilton (2013), a white upper-middle-class woman uses class-infused language to describe a less privileged student who left the sorority: “You can tell [she was] just kind of like blue collar, just kind of like hickish type” (p. 82). Similarly, Stuber (2006) quoted a working-class student who says of her upper-middle-class peers, “The way they act is very much like an ‘I’m-better-than-you’ kind of attitude” (p. 298). Reay et al. (2009) documented a low-income student’s “visceral distaste for those she termed the ‘posh’ students” (p. 1111). Although these examples hint at dynamics of classism occurring on campus, such patterns have not been sufficiently analyzed, especially the ways in which upper-middle-class students make students from working-class homes feel uncomfortable. In a rare departure, Lee (2016) focused on daily cross-class interactions among students at a liberal arts college, showing that low-income students report discomfort when class arises with their peers and must strategize around how to respond. Low-income students’ responses varied: some avoided these difficult interactions, while others sometimes experienced conflict with their peers. Still, the specific interactions that created tension in these cross-class relationships are not always clear. Furthermore, Lee did not take up the issue of intraracial friendships and how class issues may inflect them.

### College Friendships and Race

Friendship is central to students’ lives in college. Friends can be a considerable source of both academic and social support. Chambliss and Takacs (2014) argued that even just a few good friendships are vital to a positive college experience. Studies have looked at how much college peers matter, showing both positive and negative impacts on behaviors such as drinking as well as how roommates’ academic performance affects students’ own academics (Sacerdote 2001; Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner 2006; Zimmerman 2003).

Some have looked at peers in terms of social integration or students’ “sense of belonging” (Tinto 1993, 2012). Others have specifically looked at the role of peers for ethnic minority and low-income students. Research has pointed to the importance of friends and other peers in facilitating the on-campus integration and comfort of students of color (Beasley 2011; Lasley Barajas and Pierce 2001; Martínez Alemán 2000; McCabe 2009, 2015; Willie 2003). Among racial minority students, those who perceived that they had sufficient social support from both family and peers had lower distress ratings (Rodriguez et al. 2003; Solberg and Villareal 1997). Instrumental peer support such as study groups, sharing notes, and giving advice can even outweigh family’s support for working-class students: Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that peer support among low-income ethnic minority students was a stronger predictor of grades and successful adjustment than family expectations. Furthermore, for Latinx students, friends not only helped protect against generic college stressors, but they were specifically helpful for protecting against distress associated with their minority status (Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Rodriguez et al. 2003).

To be sure, other work has fruitfully explored the racial marginalization of students of color often experience (Allen et al. 1991; Aries 2013; Feagin et al. 1996; Sánchez-Connally 2018; Smith et al. 2007; Solórzano et al. 2000; Torres and Charles 2004). Studies show that Black, Asian American, and Latinx students face discrimination and discomfort in racialized campus environments (Suárez-Balcazar et al. 2003). Some researchers have used the construct of microaggressions to characterize the slights and insults that students of color experience; these microaggressions contribute to students feeling isolated or like they do not belong (McCabe 2009; Morales 2014; Solórzano et al. 2000). Sue (2010) defined microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate
hostile, derogatory, or negative . . . slights or insults to the target person or group” (p. 5). Smith, Mao, and Deshpande’s (2016) study showed that graduate students experienced “classist microaggressions” from peers and faculty, while Lee (2017) showed that upwardly mobile faculty members experience microaggressions in routine interactions with colleagues. Still, we have not seen sufficient empirical studies of the particular ways in which this form of exclusion manifests and must be managed by undergraduates. After all, a microaggression from a friend or roommate that is based on ignorance is different than other forms of microaggressions, such as those based on overt racist attitudes toward strangers.

Another line of research has looked at the role of homophily in students’ friendships (in terms of race, class, and gender). This research has often focused on the racial composition of students’ networks, particularly the high level of same-race and same-ethnicity friendships among Black students (Antonio 2004; Fischer 2008; Stearns, Buchanan, and Bonneau 2009; Thelamour, Mwangi, and Ezeeofor 2019). Black and Latinx students (especially low-income students) are more likely to build strategic networks either through friendship groups or by joining affinity groups (McCabe 2016). Often, students of color form these friendships because they offer a needed home base in the face of the racial marginality they experience on campus. Racial composition and climate of a university can contribute to students seeking same-race relationships.

As a result, many minority students immerse themselves in campus “subcultures” of coethnics (Museus 2008; Museus and Park 2015). This self-segregation is often not the students’ preference but rather emerged as a solution to seeking a safe space with same-race friends to provide support and security (Museus and Park 2015). These safe spaces may include ethnic studies departments, race-themed residential halls, minority preparation programs, and racial affinity groups. Studies show how affinity groups, especially, are sources of comfort, solidarity, advocacy, and self-expression (Aries 2013; Harper 2006; Museus 2008; Samura 2018; Sánchez-Conally 2018; Solórzano et al. 2000; Smith et al. 2007). According to Harper (2006), high-achieving Black men in particular report significant support (“most encouraging and validating”) from same-race peers and attribute their academic and social success to membership in Black student organizations, including fraternities, where many find leadership roles. Sánchez-Conally (2018) showed how through these organizations, students of color find academic and career help from upperclassmen. Yet, as Harper noted, there can be some drawbacks to these affinity groups: many of the men in the study reported that their same-race male peers were academically disengaged (not pursuing extracurricular involvement or leadership, struggling in classes, playing video games). Still, many find these same-race groups important for other types of support.

However, other studies point to ways that intraracial relationships can be less harmonious. Samura (2018), for example, described some Asian students’ criticizing their Asian peers as “FOB” (“fresh off the boat”). Smith and Jones (2009) showed intraracial harassment among students that is based on the degree to which students associate with out-group members. Smith and Moore (2000) showed how class can matter: they found that there are low-income Black students who become socially distant from the Black community on campus and participate less in minority organizations. These low-income students perceive class differences in relation to the “main” group of Black students on campus who were middle and upper middle class (Smith and Moore 2000). Although this work recognizes low–socioeconomic status students’ perceptions of difference, it does not elaborate on dynamics around class that occur among students of color. In a study at a selective urban university, Torres and Massey (2012) found that Black students who came from both segregated and integrated home environments were taken aback by the diversity among Black students on campus. Students from predominantly segregated areas experienced “culture shock” in the face of the relative privileges of other Black students and felt alienated from them. Although Torres and Massey provided insight into the mutual disappointment students felt when their expectations were not met, there is little indication of how class difference manifests in everyday interactions between same-race peers. In short, the research suggests that intraracial relationships offer solace on predominantly white campuses. The possibility of class-based antagonisms within these same-race affiliations has received scant attention, particularly in terms of how these antagonisms might surface within working-class students’ inner circle.

Data and Methods

This study draws on 44 in-depth interviews with working-class college students from two private institutions in the United States: “Easton,” a highly selective institution with an acceptance rate of about 12 percent, and “Sullivan,” a university with a strong reputation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields that ranks in U.S. News and World Report’s top 100 national universities but accepts a majority of applicants (see Table 1). (All names in the article are pseudonyms.) At Easton, approximately 45 percent of
students are white, while at Sullivan, approximately 52 percent are white. Although schools such as Easton and Sullivan serve fewer working-class students than public universities, these settings gave us analytic leverage to investigate interactions that reach across wide class divides. In all, 21 students were interviewed from Easton, and 23 were interviewed from Sullivan (see Table 2). All students in the sample come from working-class families. Following others in the literature (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011), students are considered to be working class if neither of their parents has a degree from a four-year college and if their parents work in manual or low-level service-sector jobs that are closely supervised (e.g., construction workers, security guards, waiters, taxi drivers, minimum-wage retail clerks). In a few cases, parents attended community college for a year or two or technical school. Many of the students had faced significant economic challenges in their families of origin, including food shortages, and reported living in low-income neighborhoods. Both universities are relatively expensive: Easton’s estimated cost of attendance for the first year, including room and board, is approximately $78,000, and Sullivan’s is approximately $68,000. At Easton, all students received comprehensive financial aid packages in accordance with the university’s “no-loan” policy; most had annual family contributions of less than $5,000. About half of Sullivan students in our sample were recipients of significant merit scholarships that covered their tuition and living expenses; others financed college through a combination of grants, scholarships, and loans.

When we began the study, we expected to see discernible differences between the experiences of working-class college students at the two campuses. After all, Easton is very selective, whereas Sullivan is less so. The institutions also differ in the presence of clubs for first-generation students. For example, Easton University had a well-established group for first-generation students (although some had not heard of it and others knew of it but were not active). Sullivan, by contrast, had only recently formed a first-generation group, so only a few students were involved. Still, in our interviews, there were important similarities in the experiences of the students across the two campuses. To be sure, Easton students volunteered the phrase “culture shock” to describe their adjustment to life at the institution, while the term did not come up much at Sullivan, but the descriptions of key events offered by students at both colleges were similar. In short, despite our expectations, the accounts by the students were strikingly similar, and we failed to find substantive and dramatic differences between the two campuses regarding experiences of classism.

Like many qualitative researchers, we faced hard choices in designing the study, particularly on the issue of racial and ethnic diversity. We wanted to study racial groups in which there were sizable populations of working-class and upper-middle-class students. At both institutions, the Latinx population is much smaller than other racial and ethnic groups, and there are very few native-born American Latinx students who are upper middle class. In the end, we settled on white, Black, Asian American, and multiracial students (Table 2). All of the students were born in the United States or arrived before the age of five. Almost all of the Easton students had participated in QuestBridge or another program aimed at helping low-income, high-achieving students apply to college. A few had attended elite private schools or magnet schools, but many had come from comprehensive public high schools. All of the Easton students had grade point averages higher than 3.9 in high school as well as high test scores. Sullivan students had grade point averages higher than 3.5 in high school and standardized test scores around the national average.

We recruited students through a variety of means: we posted announcements on the Facebook pages of first-generation

### Table 1. Characteristics of the Colleges.

|                        | “Easton” University | “Sullivan” University |
|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Acceptance rate        | <15%                | 75%                   |
| Number of undergraduates | ~10,000            | ~16,000               |
| Top 20% income distribution | 70%                | 55%                   |
| First-generation students | ~10%               | Unavailable           |
| Legacy students        | 15%                 | Unavailable           |
| Incoming grade point average | 3.9                | 3.5                   |
| Tuition and fees (2019–2020) | ~$58,000         | ~$55,000              |
| Average SAT score      | 1460–1550           | 1200–1380             |

### Table 2. Student Race and Ethnicity, by College.

| Race/Ethnicity | Easton | Sullivan | Total |
|----------------|--------|----------|-------|
| Black          | 9      | 7        | 16    |
| White          | 6      | 8        | 14    |
| Asian American | 4      | 6        | 10    |
| Multiracial    | 2      | 2        | 4     |
| Total          | 21     | 23       | 44    |

*aAll of the Asian Americans are Chinese Americans with the exception of one multiracial student whose mother is Vietnamese and father is white; he identifies as Asian American.

*bTwo of the students are Black/Hispanic; one is Black/Indian; and one, as noted above, is white/Asian.
groups, recruited students through dorms and the student center (at Sullivan), used informal networks, and asked others to recommend us. Easton students were also recruited by a student active in the first-generation group. However, efforts were made to reach students not active in the group, and many students had not attended a single meeting of the group. Interviews lasted approximately two hours and were carried out by two researchers. At Sullivan, the first author, a Black woman in her late 20s, conducted a total of 23 interviews, which were part of her dissertation research on how students forge social capital at Sullivan. The second author, a white, older female professor, conducted 21 Easton interviews (interviewing only students with whom she had not previously crossed paths). At Easton, interviews took place in an office, and at Sullivan, interviews took place in cafes, offices, and empty classrooms. Interviews ranged from 75 to 150 minutes, with most taking approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The interview guide focused on respondents’ academic and social college experiences. During initial data analysis, we read the interviews to discern key themes (i.e., belonging, insults, financial strain). Students’ experiences of class exclusion emerged from diverse lines of inquiry, such as describing dorm life, extracurricular activities, or academic setbacks. Interviews were coded in Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis program, to focus on students’ interactions with their peers and experiences of class exclusion. As the thesis of the article gradually came into focus, we searched the interviews for disconfirming evidence.

One limitation of our study is that we did not observe the interactions between students in our sample and their peers. Consequently, we do not know the precise class backgrounds of the students with whom the students in our studied interacted. Students occasionally reported interactions with families who appeared to be upper class in that they owned and controlled large businesses. Nevertheless, national data show that more than two thirds of students at Easton University come from families that are in the top 20 percent of the income distribution; and the median income for students’ parents at this type of institution is $171,000. Similarly, at Sullivan, a majority of students come from the top 20 percent of the income distribution. Where possible, we solicited information about peers’ financial situation and their parents’ occupations; in many instances, for example with roommates, the respondents knew key details. It is entirely possible that the students from working-class homes misunderstood, exaggerated, or distorted the comments of more affluent students at their colleges. Given the hostility to the poor by many in the United States (Lott 2002; Pimpare 2017), we think that this is unlikely, but our data do not permit us to adjudicate this crucial point. Furthermore, as the Thomas theorem states, “If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Merton 1995). Following research on perceived discrimination and experiences of racial stigmatization, we take respondents’ subjective experiences seriously: interpretations and narratives shape action. The perceptions by students from working-class backgrounds about how more affluent students act are important to understand.

Findings

Racial Commonalities

Extensive research has documented how intraracial friendships and race-based affinity groups can provide valuable forms of solace for college students. Although students in our study had close relationships with friends of a similar racial background, we found that Black, Asian American, and white working-class students reported forms of classism in their intraracial friendships. In particular, working-class students’ more affluent friends expressed hostile ignorance in everyday interactions around money, academics, and students’ backgrounds. Although working-class youth are invested in these friendships, simmering tensions evoke feelings of frustration, deficit, and, at times, shame. We found that there were forms of hostile ignorance that occurred for each racial group (i.e., hostility about generous financial aid packages) and others that seemed racially specific. As we show in the next section, although there were common elements among the racial groups in the form of hostile ignorance, there were also forms that had a clear racialized dimension. For example, Black women were harassed about their hair, Asian American students’ interactions took up stereotypes of high academically performing Asian students, and white students sometimes had “stealth” status, as their peers presumed that they were from middle-class backgrounds. Hence, we found evidence of hostile ignorance by more affluent students toward Black, Asian American, and white respondents in their intraracial, close relationships, but the precise nature of the challenges was also racially inflected.

Black Students.

Students varied in the degree to which they forged close relationships with more affluent peers. As students began moving around campus, Black students from working-class families at both schools reported feeling different from more affluent Black students on campus. Some students built friendships only with working-class students. For example, Matthew, a Black student at Sullivan who commuted from home, reported that he was taken aback by the differences between him and other Black students on campus:

They are from rich families, and I don’t know, the Black people that are here . . . I don’t know, they act funny. . . . They are all like “white” Black guys. They came from Boston and all those things. . . . The towns they came from in Boston, it’s all white people, not Black people.

As a city kid from a predominantly Black, low-income area, Mathew perceived that other students were from more
affluent families who lived in predominantly white areas, which affected his ability to relate to them. The only friendships that he reported were with two other young Black men from the city who also commuted. Similarly, Lettie, a young Black woman at Sullivan, met other low-income Black students through the Dream scholarship program, which offered full scholarships to underrepresented students from the city. She immediately created a circle of six friends from similar backgrounds. Still, many Black students also built friendships with more affluent Black students who were classmates and roommates.

It was in these close friendships in which class-based tensions were particularly painful. As friends planned social activities together, working-class students could receive pointed criticism from their same-race friends when they canceled plans because of economic constraints. For example, Lydia, a Black Easton nursing student from a family of five, had been evicted as a child when her mother, a housekeeper, ran short of money. In college, she sometimes used her work-study funds to help her family. She found it “hurting” when her middle-class friend was critical of her spending habits:

One of my friends [is] . . . more middle class. . . . My other friend [and I] were going with her somewhere and she was like, “Oh, we should stop by and . . . buy this.” I don’t know what it was, but it was a little expensive, and me and my friend were like, “Oh, we can’t get it.” We’re like, “We don’t have money for it.” And she’s like, “You guys never have money.”

Lydia took her friend’s complaint—“you guys never have money”—as a wound. In this and similar scenarios, more affluent peers responded with hostile ignorance: in their dismissive responses they revealed their ignorance of their working-class friends’ economic circumstances; further, the response was often hostile, even accusatory, when friends clashed over money.

Although deeply involved with other Black friends, the working-class students in our study were keenly aware of the class disparities in intraracial friendships; their awareness created feelings of alienation. For example, Brianna’s mother had worked as a cashier before she died, and her high school-educated father worked in a low-level computer job. Brianna was deeply proud of her parents and yet also felt “ashamed” as she heard more affluent Black college students at Easton talk. She explained her reactions to her friends’ discussions of their parents:

For example, in terms of when people brag about what their parents did, at first it definitely made me feel shameful. It made me feel ashamed because I was like, well my parents don’t do that, I can’t really talk about the cool things that my parents have done.

Brianna sustained these friendships but was frustrated. Beyond the tension caused by class disparities, Brianna also experienced interactions with her wealthier Black friends that she found deeply wounding. For example, among the Black women on campus, hair was a sign of status that they regularly tended to. The wigs, weaves, or braids that were trendy among Brianna’s friends were difficult to afford: they could cost anywhere from $150 to $300 each time they were styled. Brianna would stretch out wearing her braids a month longer than she felt she should because the upkeep was too expensive. Yet part of Brianna’s anxiety about her hair was perpetuated by her Black friends, who would directly confront her about it. She described the hurt she felt when her more affluent Black friend would judgmentally appraise her hair:

My best friend and I, we had so many problems with this freshman year. . . . She’s a critical thinker, but at times you could tell she was raised in a wealthy household just because she says some class-y [classist] stuff. I would tell her, “Telling me that my hair looks a certain way not only hurts my feelings, but it’s also just a very big problem.”

By contrasting being a “critical thinker” with being from a wealthy household, Brianna underlined her friend’s ignorance of others’ circumstances that was born from her class privilege. Again, her friend’s reaction went beyond mere ignorance to a response that Brianna found hostile; focusing as it did on the presentation of her hair, the criticism also was inflected with a complex racialized dynamic. In this case, Brianna stayed friends with her freshman roommate by educating her friend about comments she considered inappropriate. But Brianna’s feelings that she was unable to “brag” about her parents or easily maintain the “going rate” for appearance created enduring tensions in her close friendships, tensions that reduced the comfort and ease the friendships offered to her on campus.

Asian American Students. Working-class Asian American students reported similar patterns as their Black peers. In many cases, Asian American students came to the realization that throughout their lives, they had been surrounded by members of their racial group from a similar social class background. At college they began to recognize class disparities in economic resources. Tammy, an Asian American woman at Easton whose family members were restaurant workers, reported,

I’ve never encountered well-off Asian Americans before. I’ve never met Asians whose families were professionals who—you know, I knew people from Chinatown. I knew factory workers, seamstresses, chefs, construction workers, the concept of someone looking like me, but not being poor was like another—that’s like another dynamic.

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11In the extensive literature on Black women’s hair, see, among others, Banks (2000) and Byrd and Tharps (2002).
Asian American students also reported hostile ignorance from Asian American peers. Working-class students found that when they did reveal details about their class backgrounds, their more affluent friends would exoticize or discount their experiences. Yuan, an Asian American Sullivan student, reported being taken aback when a friend casually told her, “Oh, you don’t look like you come from a poor community.” Yuan interpreted the comment to mean that there was something undesirable in coming from a poor community. In the interview, she angrily recounted that her (unstated) response was, “Excuse me?” Furthermore, Yuan lamented that when she tried to share about the challenges her high school friends faced at home, her Sullivan friends could not even conceptualize them as “real.” Her friends belabored their surprise. Their shock showed that they were completely ignorant of these patterns occurring, which, crucially, they viewed as bizarre:

And now my friends at Sullivan . . . I talk to them about people in my community like my friends dropping out of college, what happened in high school like people dropping out and getting pregnant, you know stuff that’s normal actually in American life . . . [Sullivan students] say “oh that’s so weird,” “that’s like from a movie,” “that’s so dramatic,” “that’s crazy.” I’m like “I don’t think it’s crazy.” I think the majority of the U.S. is dealing with stuff like this but the other people [at Sullivan] don’t even conceptualize that that’s real.

Students in our sample felt that more affluent friends challenged their definitions of “normal,” exoticizing struggles that are commonplace in lower income families.

Another form of hostile ignorance that working-class students experienced was when their friends expressed resentment over their financial aid. Rachel, the only child of factory workers, described how she occasionally felt a “vibe” from her roommates, particularly one who was the Chinese American daughter of doctors living in a prosperous suburb but whose parents were taking out loans to pay for her college:

You could feel a vibe whenever you talk about financial issues like [when I say,] “Oh, I sometimes have a semester where I don’t have to pay,” or, “My contribution’s really low.” I think I feel resentment from them sometimes. Like “Oh, why do you get to be here on a full ride, but my parents have to take out loans?” Or, “My parents have to pay full tuition for me.” So, it’s sort of a resentment thing. And that’s really annoying because how could they possibly understand why we are in a situation where we can’t even afford Easton?

For Rachel, feeling this resentment was uncomfortable. In her interview, Rachel spoke of the racial stereotype for Asian American students to be high-performing students, and this dynamic with her roommate further reinforced Rachel’s own insecurities about her weak academic performance. Rachel feared that her roommate was insinuating that she was less deserving of financial help, especially because she was struggling academically.

White Students. With one exception, discussed in the next section, a similar pattern of hostile ignorance also emerged for white working-class students. For example, white working-class students also found resentment from their friends over the working-class students’ relatively large financial aid packages. At Sullivan, a white working-class man, James, was angered by his roommate “making a comment” when James’s financial aid refund check was larger than his roommate’s:

People don’t know people’s background . . . I’m like low-income even for Dream. I get one of the higher Dream funds and my roommate always makes a comment. So I’m like [thinking], “It’s my financial aid, you shouldn’t be making a comment on it.” I feel like people think we are all the same bracket, but I know that some people aren’t . . . and I just think it’s a judgment on so many levels.

As with Black and Asian American students, James, a white student, found his roommate making a “judgment” about him.

In some cases, the “ignorant” statements of their more affluent friends were not directed at them, but the working-class students were deeply bothered nonetheless that their friends were so clueless. For example, Sara, grew up in a household in which her father was unemployed, the family relied on food stamps, and their car was repossessed. Her mother, who served food in the school cafeteria, would be the one to ask Sara for money ($50) from Sara’s high school savings. At Sullivan, she enjoyed her friends, but found their comments about their economic situation to be annoying and “ignorant”:

Sometimes, my friends make remarks like, “I need more money. Gotta call dad,” Sometimes it gets annoying because sometimes my friend, she’s like, “Oh, I’m poor.” [I think] “No, you’re not. Just because you didn’t get your allowance doesn’t mean you’re poor.” People say things that they don’t realize is ignorant in a way. One of my friends was saying, “Oh, I wrote an essay about how I need extra funding for the summer . . . I need funding because if not I’m gonna go home, work at Stanford, and study for the LSAT.” She’s like, that’s my tough circumstance. I didn’t say anything, but there’s people . . . their hard summer is working at a fast food restaurant. It’s like, you don’t even know the difference.

Although white students reported an occasional Black or Asian friend, most of their friends were of the same race. In their interactions with their friends who they had met in a variety of circumstances, white working-class students reported a persistent feeling of deficit. Even when the working-class students trusted their friends, asking them about basic “rules of the game” in this new world was difficult.
They feared a hostile response when they revealed that they were ignorant. For example, Emily, a white woman from Appalachia, was raised by her grandmother (who had an annual income of $15,000) when both of her parents became addicted to heroin. Emily found that she did not understand key terms bandied about, such as “literature review” or “grad school.” Although Emily had a trusted a friend to ask, she also found it humiliating to be in that position:

We were close friends and I had expressed to him before, “I feel like I don’t get it. I feel like I don’t know. I usually wouldn’t ask somebody a question if I thought they might judge me for it, but I knew this guy and I knew he wouldn’t. [So] I said, “What’s grad school?” And he just looked at me like—it wasn’t judgmental, it was just disbelief a little bit and then sad, and then he just explained it.

Hence, despite his lack of verbal judgement, Emily’s friend’s nonverbal reaction of disbelief and sadness provoked feelings of gratitude but also inadequacy: “It made me feel good, like, ‘Thanks.’ But then it also made me feel . . . like, an Easton student explained to me what grad school is as though I’m no one.”

In each racial group, working-class students had this reoccurring feeling of deficit in light of the abundance of resources and expertise in the lives of their friends.

**White Students: Stealth Status.** As Aries (2013) would predict, we found that white students reported that they were not expected by their peers to be from the working class; the white students were often presumed to be from middle-class families, and these white students had the privilege of shielding their class background from their friends. Although this form of “passing” created its own challenges, it also created a shelter that the Black and Asian American students did not report. James, for example, pointed out that because he was white and “preppy in terms of appearance and style,” he often had the option of withholding key details regarding his family’s circumstances that he believed would lead his friends to be “shocked” if they knew. James had a difficult relationship with his father and his mother, who was disabled from a heart attack. He preferred to stay at school rather than go home on breaks, a choice some of his Sullivan friends did not understand:

I don’t talk about my home life that much because I don’t think it’s relatable to a lot of people that I am friends with. . . . I don’t have the best home life; I just think people are generally shocked.

Most of my friends know I am lower income ‘cause I have the scholarship, but I don’t think they know to what degree of money. . . . I think if people knew more about how I grew up, they [would] get surprised, they [would] get shocked.

In this case, James’s friends’ shock was a subtle but powerful form of exclusion for James. James’s solution was to avoid talking about his home life because he feared judgment or awkwardness when his peers did not know what to do with the information. He withheld information and was shielded from possible hostile ignorance.

In addition, as the white students would “pass,” there were ramifications. For example, Chloe, a white student at Sullivan, found that other students had a sharp eye for additional supports the white working-class students had, and her friends would express hostility to them: “They’re like, ‘Why do you get all this extra help and I don’t?’ What is it about you?” Furthermore, this invisibility could affect white students by causing them to become unwitting audiences to denigrating comments about other working-class students that made them uncomfortable. Chloe comments on this dynamic:

In terms of them [more affluent friends] making comments, it’s more so that they don’t expect me to be a first-gen student, so they will say things about other people that they presume are first-gen students to me, and they have no idea. I find myself not necessarily fitting in with that, but . . . how I look makes a difference. I’m not stupid. I understand that that works that way, unfortunately.

Chloe felt that her status was a hidden part of her identity, but she still felt alienated from some of her peers because she observed how more affluent students felt about working-class students. White students acknowledged that because their white peers often conflated race and class, their experience of class exclusion had a different quality.

Not every white student encountered these issues. Brandon, a white student at Sullivan, denied the relevance of class disparities between himself and his friends. He was integrated in a group of middle-class white men with whom he played hockey, and he felt that in his group of male friends, it was neither necessary nor relevant to raise the issue:

It’s kind of just one of those unspoken things. You know which people have a lot of money, and you know who’s paying for

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12Although beyond the scope of this article’s focus, this example clearly illuminates a form of cultural capital—highly valued knowledge—held by Emily’s friend but not her. These problems of not having highly valued knowledge surfaced frequently (as she explains, when she arrived at college, she wondered, “What the fuck is a literature review?”). For more on cultural capital in education, see Davies and Rizk (2018). The example also highlights the benefits of faculty members’ briefly defining taken-for-granted terms.

13In his thoughtful comparison of the “privileged poor” and “doubly disadvantaged” elite college students, Jack (2019) argued that white working-class students could often “pass” as more affluent, though they would occasionally get “outed” by programs that, for example, required students to line up separately for discounted event tickets. His work highlights that otherwise the white students would “pass.” Our work makes related but distinct points by focusing on how the passing led white students to be exposed to class-based hostility.
college and who’s not. But it’s just one of those things where if you don’t bring it up, then it’s not something that could impact your relationship with that person.

For Brandon, only his closest friends knew that he was from a working-class family, but he did not indicate that he was intentionally hiding this information from everyone else. He felt he simply chose “not to bring it up.” But he also suggested that if he did bring it up then it “could impact your relationship.” It is likely that much like other white students who noted the invisibility of their class status, this is a position Brandon could more easily adopt compared with working-class students of color. Hence, peers created an environment in which race and class were interwoven so that white peers presumed that other white students were from middle-class backgrounds. On one hand, white working-class students appear to have important privileges in the navigation of their friendships that are not accessible to the Black and Asian American working-class students in their relationships. However, peers also contributed to white working-class students’ feelings of invisibility on campus. It also made them witnesses to hostility expressed by more affulent students regarding the extra institutional support students from working-class families received.

**Small Circles**

In our interviews, a striking number of respondents reported having small circles of friends. We were impressed by how many students were isolated or had simply not made good friends in college. One student reported that he “kept to himself” in college. Blair, a white, working-class Sullivan student had fought hard to live on campus (even though it was more expensive) rather than commute. She found that even though she hung out with people in the dorm and had joined a sorority, she had not made good friends in college. She remained closest to her high school friends: “I’ve never had a huge group of friends, so the people that I had in high school are still my people.” Other students had friendships only with students who were also from working-class families, whom they met in scholarship programs or through friends of friends (see McCabe 2016). For example, Julie, an Asian American Sullivan student who had attended a racially diverse high school, lamented that her friend network had shrunk and become less diverse: “[At Sullivan] I have a very diverse group of acquaintances, but close friend wise . . . just first generation college-goers, Asian.”

One way students broaden their social networks is to join clubs or affinity groups. But within our sample, given their feelings of discomfort from their interactions with more affluent students, working-class students we interviewed avoided certain opportunities—opportunities that might have broadened and deepened their social ties. For example, although sororities and fraternities are renowned for creating close ties among members, our respondents generally did not participate because they were too expensive, and notably, they felt a sense of unease. Brianna considered joining a sorority in which many of her friends were legacies. As she explored this social opportunity, she found it off-putting:

A lot of these girls in these particular sororities were legacies. Their mums went to college and had pledged the exact same sorority, so they were doing it because their mums had done it. They were very bougie about the fact that, “I’m legacy and my mum did this in the sorority and did this for the sorority.” And it was just not something I wanted to be a part of. It wasn’t a sisterhood.

In the end, she did not pledge.

Tensions also surfaced when Black students sought to join race-based campus groups. Faced with these tensions, students chose to withdraw. For example, Octavia, a Black Easton student, was surprised to learn that there was an elaborate process for joining a social justice club at Easton run by Black students (i.e., an essay, a long interview with the entire board, an orientation for an entire morning). Octavia was ultimately accepted to the club, although her Black friend was not. She declined to join and was outraged:

Half of them are upper-middle-class Black kids that just learned what revolutionary meant when they got to college. I’m like, “You’re sitting here tryna protect the marginalized but you won’t even let me into the club?” . . . That’s basically how I feel about Black Easton as a whole. I feel like they’re all like “Oh yeah, we’re all so Black.” . . . But most of them grew up in the white suburbs . . . most of them were conforming to white standards before they got to Easton.

Having grown up in the “hood” (as she called it), she felt that she had expertise that was not recognized by more affluent Black Easton students. Octavia felt that she had firsthand knowledge of urban social issues that students from a suburban environment inherently did not (e.g., unemployment, violence). She saw them as ignorant and hostile to seeing her as having legitimate knowledge:

Most of the things they talk about are “hood culture” yet I wouldn’t be expected in those spaces. Most of them have opinions about things and they’ll be like “Oh because I’m a Black girl, I have this opinion.” And I’m like, “Well I’m also a Black girl, and I don’t have that trash opinion.”

Thus, Octavia also found that the opinions of the more affluent students—whom she perceived as less experienced—not only prevailed in this extracurricular space, but they assumed that their experiences were shared by Black people from other social backgrounds. Not all students reported this pattern, but given the difficult comments they faced from more affluent students, some working-class Black students chose to withdraw from intraracial student groups.

Asian American students in our study also alluded to the ways in which their experiences led them to withdraw from
minority organizations. For example, an Asian American Sullivan student explained to them why she had decided to participate less in these affinity groups:

I think people just have different priorities from us and different backgrounds. It may not seem like it, we’re all Asian, but it just seemed like we’re never going to fit in because we don’t value the things that they do.

Other students knew that they should try to gain “social capital.” However, they were ambivalent about strategizing to secure resourceful relationships. They saw other students who pursued high-status friends as “shady” and very “instrumental.” For example, Rebecca, a Chinese American student who had been a star in high school, was floundering at Easton. An engineering major, she had received low grades in science courses (“which I feel like Asian-Americans are very pressured to major in”) and, was put on probation. She felt disconnected from those around her and complained of their not being authentic:

You go to a school where it’s like the top 1 percent in terms of students and overachievers and things like that. If you want to gain social capital, now is that time to do it. . . . I’ve never approached someone because I want something from them. And I think that’s a huge mental obstacle that I have. . . . [But] they’ll only become friends with people if they can benefit them somehow. And I see it as, like, fake, but other people see it as just a way of life, or what you have to do to get by. . . . The ultimate goal is very shady.

Rebecca felt alienated from the “social climbers” on campus and avoided them, including by remaining out of affinity groups for Asian Americans.

Although there were clubs that were predominantly white, there were not race-based affinity campus groups for white students in a comparable fashion to groups for Black and Asian Americans students. Instead, white students reported exploring groups on the basis of interests (e.g., running, volunteer work). It could be difficult for white, working-class students to find other white students who had a similar background. Betsy, a white student at Sullivan, reported that her biggest challenge as a freshman was social. As part of the Dream scholarship program for low-income students in the city, she lived with other scholarship students who were primarily ethnic minorities. She found that as a lone low-income white student in the Dream program, she struggled to make friends and that minority students formed “cliques”:

A lot of people in Dream are just either clique-y or really rude. . . . I thought that I would find friends there but it’s really hard to find them. I feel like we all don’t match up. . . . [We’re] from different backgrounds, right? Too diverse, I guess. . . . They find their people. . . . then they’re very clique-y, so it’s hard to be friends with them.

As such, in a racialized dynamic, affinity groups for students from working-class backgrounds were not always a comfortable resource for white students.

In sum, a number of our respondents simply had not created many friends in college. In addition, as clubs can be a way for college students to meet others, it is striking that our respondents also told us that they withdrew from clubs in part because of the topics, displays, and taken-for-granted assumptions of more affluent students toward the working class. To be sure, there is an important difference between hostile ignorance, where working-class students face direct accusations, and a more general sense of feeling of not belonging. But one clear consequence is a foreclosing of social ties in clubs and, possibly, with other future friends. Yet other research has definitively shown the positive impact of social ties, particularly in the labor market. Thus, one implication of these results is the degree to which these displays by more affluent students toward working-class students can contribute to smaller, rather than larger, and more diverse social networks.

Discussion

An extensive literature has shown the importance of same-race peer relationships on college campuses, yet the ways in which students from working-class backgrounds can be exposed to class-based hurtful comments, what we term hostile ignorance, have not been sufficiently examined. Yet broader theories in sociology, including by Bourdieu, show us the importance of social class in daily life, particularly the ways in which benefits are linked to class position as children raised in middle-class families are more familiar with key institutional standards. This familiarity and ease create important benefits not available to those from working-class families. Working-class youth can also, as Bourdieu reminds us, engage in self-exclusion. In the growing empirical literature on college students from working-class backgrounds, much of the attention has been on exclusionary processes embedded in institutional dynamics, such as work-study policies, dining hall policies (Jack 2019), and academics (Collier and Morgan 2008; Stephens et al. 2012). But Bourdieu’s theoretical work does not take up the mechanisms of peer interactions as a form of exclusion, particularly the ways in which class-based antagonism in daily life may create challenges for sustaining social ties. As others have shown, working-class students struggle with a sense of belonging on college campuses. We know that both academic and social integration is crucial for students’ persistence to graduation and their academic performance (Pascarella et al. 2004; Tinto 1993; Walpole 2003). College attrition models (e.g., Tinto 1987) specifically discuss the importance of social integration for student’s progress. Indeed, Lehmann (2007) showed how working-class students who struggled to relate to other students were more likely to withdraw from college. Many
students discussed a “cultural clash” with the institution and other students that contributed to their decision to drop out. These findings also raise the question of whether students who struggle to manage the stigma of being working class are more likely to leave college. Furthermore, Goldrick-Rab (2006) showed that socioeconomic status predicts whether students will move among colleges or experience interrupted schooling. Although researchers often focus on academic preparation and finances as contributing factors, future research should consider the role of class-based alienation in these decisions. Feeling like one does not belong—estranged from peers and extracurricular involvement—may more globally affect working-class students’ experiences. As Ostrove and Long (2007) noted, feeling that one does not belong may affect participation in class, willingness to seek help, and other behaviors that contribute to success. Although the role of peers is certainly noted as part of more generalized concern about working-class college students not feeling as if they belong on campus, the ways in which peers create an environment warrants more attention, particularly the ways in which more affluent college students act to make college students from working-class homes feel estranged.

Our findings suggest that it is important to consider the source of hostility for students from working-class backgrounds. Rather than overhearing alienating comments from peers or receiving barbs from strangers or acquaintances, working-class students experience hostile ignorance from their close circle. As we consider students’ sense of belonging and their networks on campus in their experience, we must be more precise about where they are exposed to classist comments and who is responsible. Our study highlights the power of close peers in shaping students’ experiences, including their desire to constrain their campus participation and network. Further research could clarify other flashpoints that working-class undergraduates may encounter.

In our interviews, we found that working-class college students experience difficult peer interactions within their intraracial friendships as well as in campus group settings. Black, Asian American, and white students reported difficult, alienating interactions with same-race peers. We see these as classist interactions that are characterized by hostile ignorance. White students also reported feeling alienated from same-race peers, particularly when their peers assumed that they were middle class. Because of their “stealth status,” they would inadvertently overhear hostile remarks about other working-class students. This experience led to feelings of estrangement. A number of our students also had small social networks; there were signs that they were relatively socially isolated. We still have more to learn about the interactional process in which more affluent students’ behavior creates a social environment for their same-race peers that may push working-class students to the margins compared with working-class students’ self-segregating into more homogeneous networks or reducing participation in campus social life. This is particularly significant given that an extensive literature has suggested the importance of race-based campus ties for providing solace to students of color.

Furthermore, although a number of Black and Asian American students in our study were active in racial affinity groups and extracurricular activities, the shared racial membership did not prevent them from experiencing estrangement connected to their class positions. Notably, the hostile ignorance the students in our sample reported came not with strangers but with their closest friends. As a result, these interactions were hard to avoid. Thus, our findings suggest that when examining the challenges faced by upwardly mobile students of color, we must address not only racial discrimination but also classism in intraracial encounters. In addition, in some instances these classist incidents are clearly inflected by complex racial dynamics, as there are racially specific signals of class position on which more affluent students commented (e.g., Black women’s hair). Drawing on widespread racial assumptions about whites, white working-class students had the option of maintaining a stealth status. In our data, there were signs that resentment over financial aid packages, which suggests a deep belief in meritocracy, was reported by Asian American and white students, but not Black students. Other research has shown that Black respondents are more likely to acknowledge structural inequality; this issue is worthy of further analysis.

As research on friendship stresses the importance of trust, comfort, and reciprocity, these class-based antagonisms have the potential to undermine the quality and, possibly, the quantity of friendships working-class college students may develop with their more affluent classmates. Yet without friendships with more affluent classmates, working-class college students have fewer resources for navigating a competitive labor market. These social networks can provide important resources for the labor market after graduation (Gee, Jones, and Burke 2017, Granovetter 1995). Hence, sustaining cross-class close friendships has the potential for a valuable payoff, but our paper shows working-class college students can face the challenge of hostile ignorance from their more affluent friends.

Peer interactions are also important because, in crucial ways, they are less amenable to policy change linked to higher education policies. Indeed, in recent years, Ivy League universities have altered financial aid policies to offer additional resources for “highly aided students” to include covering the rental of a cap and gown at graduation and lending libraries for textbooks. Dining hall policies have been rapidly transformed to provide meals during holiday breaks. Administrators have been added. Yet historically, peer interactions on college campuses have been less subject to administrative intervention, as students’ partying, practices in extracurricular groups, and other peer interactions are granted significant autonomy. Peer dynamics, including the social networks tied to peer relationships (McCabe 2016) have a distinctive character.
The design of the study allowed a comparison across institutions of the experiences of first-generation college students. As noted above, at Easton there was a first-generation student group and more funding than at Sullivan. Thus, it was a surprise that distinct institutional cultures did not surface in the interviews. Despite the differences in the students’ academic performance in high school, and the elite status of the university, the patterns they described in their peer dynamics were similar. It is difficult for us to assess the meaning of this pattern, for example, whether it is connected to our sample or part of a more general pattern. Hence, the role of institutions in altering peer dynamics is a topic for further study.

Finally, this study helps remind us about the striking level of racial segregation in social ties on many college campuses. These segregated networks are not unexpected, as beyond college, interracial friendships among adults continue to be relatively rare (Berry 2006; Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2016; McPherson et al. 2001). In the studies of college peers, there are signs of the strengths and weaknesses tied to this racial separation for the students themselves. For example, McCabe (2016) found that working-class minority students were particularly strategic in seeking out same-race friends. As they formed “tight-knit” networks, these ties provided both advantages and disadvantages, particularly in terms of academic engagement. In a different vein, Supreme Court decisions supporting affirmative action have been linked to the benefits of racial diversity on college campuses. These forms of racial diversity clearly exist in some settings, such as classrooms and sports clubs. But many aspects of college life remain racially segregated. Although same-race friendships offer valuable forms of support for racial minorities, these relationships do not shield working-class students from hurtful comments or difficulties. Providing support for students from working-class backgrounds as they navigate same-race social spaces remains an ongoing challenge in college settings.

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ORCID iD

Sherelle Ferguson https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8868-0287

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**Author Biographies**

**Sherelle Ferguson** received her PhD from the Department of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. She is a postdoctoral research fellow at Temple University’s College of Education and Human Development.

**Annette Lareau** is the Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Endowed Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of the award-winning book *Unequal Childhoods*. She is the coauthor, with Blair Sackett, of the forthcoming book *Seeking Refuge, Finding Inequality: Refugees Navigating Institutional Barriers* (University of California Press). Her most recent book is *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up* (Chicago 2021).