

**The Inconsistent Curriculum
Cultural Tool-Kits and Students' Interpretations of Ambiguous Expectations**

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Abstract

This paper argues that inequalities can be better understood by bridging tool-kit theories of culture—which stress convergence between institutional expectations and individual behavior—with symbolic interactionism—which emphasizes the interpretive and situational nature of behavior. I base these arguments on an ethnographic analysis of students’ responses to ambiguous expectations around help-seeking. Teachers’ expectations shift across situations, creating *interpretive moments*. Middle-class and working-class students responded differently to these moments. Using a logic of entitlement, middle-class students saw ambiguities as opportunities for reward, and thus tried to seek assistance. Using a logic of appeasement, working-class students saw ambiguities as opportunities for reprimand, and thus sought to appease teachers by avoiding requests. Teacher responses to student behavior varied across situations, but helped to perpetuate inequalities. Such findings suggest that the activation of tool-kit resources and the stratified profits that result are more interpretive and situational than scholars typically acknowledge.

Keywords

Culture, stratification, social class, education, children and youth.

Culture is a key source of inequality. While definitions of culture vary (Lareau and Conley 2008), I treat culture as a “tool-kit” comprised of “strategies of action” (e.g., skills and habits—see Swidler 1986:273). These tool-kits vary across social classes, and inequalities result when some individuals have tool-kits that are better suited for a particular setting (Bourdieu 1977; Lareau 2011; Swidler 1986). Less clear, though, is how individuals decide to activate particular tool-kit resources. We know, for example, that what counts as appropriate behavior can vary across situations, even in the same setting (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Pace 2003). Yet, we know little about how these shifting or ambiguous expectations impact individuals’ activation of particular tool-kit resources or the consequences of doing so. Given such limitations, I argue that tool-kit models of inequality should incorporate social psychology’s insights. Symbolic interactionists show how interpretive (Blumer 1986; Mehan 1992; Ridgeway 2006; Schwalbe et al. 2000) and situational (Goffman 1982) processes guide interaction, and experimental social psychology shows that middle- and working-class actors assign different meanings to similar situations (Shepherd and Stephens 2010; Stephens, Markus, and Fryberg 2012). Building on these findings, I show that ambiguous expectations create “interpretive moments.” Compared to situations where expectations are explicit, these interpretive moments prompt actors to think and respond in more explicitly class-based ways and to reap stratified rewards for doing so. Such findings suggest that the activation of tool-kit resources and the stratified profits they generate are more interpretive and situational than scholars acknowledge.

I base these arguments on data from a multi-year, ethnographic study of social class in classroom interactions. Through observations and interviews in one elementary school, I found that teachers’ inconsistent expectations around help-seeking created “interpretive moments.” situations in which ambiguous expectations prompt conscious interpretation. Middle-class and

working-class students viewed ambiguous situations through different “logics of action” (DiMaggio, 1997:277). These logics of action are internal mental structures (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, and expectations) that shape actors’ interpretations of situations. Students possessed various strategies of action, but it was their interpretation of a given situation that prompted the activation of a particular strategy of action. These class-based interpretations and behaviors also had unequal consequences in the classroom, and thus helped to perpetuate inequalities. Such profits, however, were not automatic. Rather, they were contingent on teachers’ interpretations of the situation at hand.

As I will discuss, these findings have a number of implications. They show that cultural tool-kits include not only strategies of action, but also logics of action that guide the activation of strategies of action. This implies that tool-kit theories should include symbolic interactionist insights regarding the interpretive and situational nature of social interaction. By applying this expanded theory to moments of ambiguity, we can see how inequalities emerge through actors’ interpretations of situations. These findings also show that inequality stems not just from mismatches of individual and institutional orientations but from the activation of particular strategies of action and the interpretive processes by which those strategies of action yield stratified profits. Such profits, in turn, are not as fixed or automatic as “cultural mismatch” theories in social psychology (Stephens et al. 2012) and work on soft skills in education (Farkas 2003; Jennings and DiPrete 2010; Tach and Farkas 2006) tend to imply. Rather, behavioral rewards vary across situations.

HELP-SEEKING AND THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Cultural tool-kits may include not only strategies of action, but also logics of action for interpreting situations and choosing how to respond. Adopting this expanded tool-kit model and

applying it to moments of ambiguity, in turn, may bolster our understanding of inequalities. In educational settings, for example, these insights might show how middle- and working-class students activate different cultural logics to interpret and respond to ambiguous expectations at school, and how those efforts produce stratified profits. This study investigates these possibilities using three research questions:

1. How do students make sense of and respond to interpretive moments at school?
2. How do these efforts vary along social class lines?
3. How do interpretive moments affect the profits that result from these efforts?

I answer these questions by examining how social class shapes student responses to ambiguous expectations around help-seeking. Studies suggest that teachers usually want students to ask for assistance when they are struggling (Patrick et al. 2001), but do not always communicate those expectations explicitly (Calarco 2011). Research also shows that help-seeking tends to vary along social class lines (Ryan et al. 2009; Streib 2011). Even in the same classrooms, middle-class students ask for help more often and with greater ease (Calarco 2011).

These class-based patterns, in turn, might be amplified when expectations are vague or inconsistent. In such moments, students might draw on different cultural logics and interpret the same situations in different ways. Middle-class students may see help-seeking as a way to meet individual needs, while working-class students might see requests as an unnecessary imposition. These varied interpretations, in turn, might prompt students to activate different strategies of action, with middle-class students pursuing assistance and working-class students trying to appease teachers.

METHODS

I investigate these possibilities using data from a larger ethnographic study of social class in classroom interactions. To see each student with multiple teachers, I observed the same group of students in third, fourth, and fifth grade. The third-grade observations were preliminary and exploratory, and took place only during the final three months of the school year. Thus, I focus here on data collected during fourth and fifth grade.

Research Site and Sample

Maplewood (all names are pseudonyms) is a suburban, public elementary school on the East coast. The school has 500 students in Kindergarten through fifth grade, with four classrooms in each grade and about 25 students in each class. While the majority of Maplewood's students are middle-class, approximately one quarter are working-class (13% of students receive free/reduced lunch). Most Maplewood students (82%) are white, though the school also has working-class Latino (9%) and middle-class Asian-American students (6%).

Maplewood is in many ways an excellent school. The single-story, brick building is clean and bright, with inspirational posters and displays of student artwork adorning the wide hallways. Teachers arrive early and stay late. Students score above state averages on standardized tests, and parents speak very highly of the teachers and the school.

This analysis includes 56 students who completed fifth-grade at Maplewood in 2010. While minority students participated in the project, I focus on white students to avoid conflating race and class. This includes 42 middle-class white students and 14 working-class white students. Some of these students also participated in in-depth interviews, which I will describe below.

I determined students' social class backgrounds using parent surveys. While scholars debate the best ways to define social classes (Lareau and Conley 2008), I followed other tool-kit

scholars in focusing on parents' educational and occupational status (Lareau 2011). Middle-class children were those having at least one parent with both a four-year college degree and a professional or managerial occupation. Working-class children were those who did not meet these criteria. At Maplewood, working-class parents typically had high-school diplomas and worked in blue collar or service jobs.

The project also included Maplewood teachers. While the teachers varied in their demeanors and instructional styles, the students generally behaved in similar ways across all of the classrooms I observed. These teachers also exhibited similar situational variations in their expectations for student behavior.

Data Collection and Analysis

This paper draws on data from participant observations at Maplewood and interviews with teachers and students I observed. During the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years, I visited Maplewood at least twice weekly, for about three hours per visit. I divided observations between the four classrooms in each grade, rotating the times and days spent in each room. I generally sat in empty seats or circled around, listening and watching. I also kept jottings in a notebook, tracking the nature of interactions—who was involved and how long they lasted—and noting important dialog. After each three-hour observation, I then spent at least ten hours expanding the jottings into detailed fieldnotes.

I also conducted in-depth interviews with the teachers and students. I asked teachers about their students, their goals and expectations, and their teaching philosophies and experiences. Interviews took place in teachers' classrooms, and lasted fifty to ninety minutes. Teachers' busy schedules made it difficult to conduct longer interviews. Thus, I interviewed some teachers twice and supplemented formal interviews with informal conversations, documented in fieldnotes. In

interviews with students, I asked about their home lives and activities, their experiences at school, and their teachers and classmates. Interviews took place in children's homes, and lasted sixty to seventy-five minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Throughout the project, I wrote analytic memos describing emerging themes and patterns, such as "asking for help," "voicing expectations," and "teacher frustration." I then used ATLAS.ti to code excerpts from fieldnotes and interviews that aligned with these themes. During this coding process, I identified additional themes and patterns, which I then incorporated into the overall analysis. As I coded fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I also developed a series of data matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994) to clarify the patterns I had observed and to look for disconfirming evidence.

OVERVIEW

These analyses showed that teachers' inconsistent expectations created "interpretive moments" for students. Middle-class and working-class students viewed those moments through contrasting logics of action, and thus activated different strategies of action. When teachers' expectations became explicit, on the other hand, students tended to behave in institutionally-patterned rather than class-patterned ways. The profits of students' class-based strategies of action also depended on teachers' interpretations of the situation. To support these arguments, and in keeping with ethnographic convention (e.g., Hallett 2010; Lareau 2011; Vargas 2011), I present excerpts from fieldnotes and interview transcripts and discuss them as illustrations of larger patterns.

CREATING INTERPRETIVE MOMENTS

At Maplewood, "appropriate" behavior varied across situations. As I will explain, expectations around help-seeking provided one example of these shifting standards. While teachers generally

expected students to acknowledge when they were struggling, there were also situations in which teachers did not want questions or requests.

In some situations, teachers encouraged help-seeking and responded warmly to requests. During math, Mr. Cherlin passed out a “math vocabulary” worksheet for the state assessment tests. After giving his fourth-graders a minute to review the worksheet, Mr. Cherlin urged them to ask questions about confusing or unfamiliar terms. After calling explicitly for questions, Mr. Cherlin continued, adding: “It’s important to ask, because if you don’t understand something now, you’ll probably see it again on the state assessments.” That encouragement prompted a number of students to raise their hands with questions. Like Mr. Cherlin, teachers recognized that help-seeking could have real academic benefits (e.g., clarifying confusing concepts that will appear on a test). In light of that recognition, teachers were generally welcomed and encouraged help-seeking. Such explicit statements made it clear to students that requests were appropriate.

In other situations, however, teachers discouraged help-seeking or responded more negatively to questions. One afternoon in Mr. Cherlin’s class, the students were working on a science quiz. When they finished, they were supposed to complete a science worksheet, figuring out a set of science riddles. The riddles were very tricky, though, and prompted a number of students to call out for help.

About half of the students are still working on the quiz. A few of the students who are finished start calling out to Mr. Cherlin with questions about the riddle worksheet, saying “What’s this one mean?” and “I don’t get this.” Mr. Cherlin hears this and stands up behind his desk. Folding his arms, he says sternly: “Guys! Some people are still working and you’re not being respectful if you’re asking questions. You guys can figure these [riddles] out on your own.”

Teachers’ expectations were not fixed, but rather varied across situations. Like Mr. Cherlin, teachers sometimes explicitly denied or discouraged requests. Students, in turn, tended to respond to such overt discouragement by not seeking help.

At Maplewood, however, teachers rarely made shifting expectations explicit. Instead, they provided only subtle cues. As I will show, teachers used such indirect messages both when they were open to help-seeking and when they were not.

Teachers' willingness to answer questions was often apparent only obliquely or after-the-fact; it could often be seen only through teachers' positive responses to students' requests. During language arts, for example, Ms. Hudson instructed her fifth-graders to take out their copies of the novel they were discussing as a class and "read Chapter 7 silently to yourselves."

Hunter, a middle-class student, sits at his desk, reading silently to himself. After a few minutes, he stops, leans in, and peers down at the pages of his book with a puzzled expression on his face. Hunter then snaps the book shut, using his finger to save the page. He pushes back his chair and scampers up to Ms. Hudson's desk. As he approaches, Hunter calls out to Ms. Hudson, his voice quiet but expectant.

Ms. Hudson looked up from her computer, raising her eyebrows questioningly.

Hunter holds out his book and points, asking expectantly: "What's *this* mean?" Ms. Hudson slides her chair closer to Hunter, craning her neck to see. She pauses a moment, and then explains: "Disheveled... It's like... a *mess*." Hunter grins and says "Thanks!" Ms. Hudson nods and gives Hunter a warm smile.

Ms. Hudson did not encourage students to ask questions, so her willingness to grant requests was not automatically clear. When Hunter sought help, Ms. Hudson could have told him to use a dictionary. Instead, however, she happily provided support.

Teachers also tended to be indirect in communicating their unwillingness to answer questions. At times, they playfully teased students for asking "lots of questions," or became increasingly gruff in their replies. Mr. Fischer's fifth-graders, for example, were taking a social studies test. One question asked them to "Write a diary entry about an event during the Revolutionary War from the perspective of a patriot." Many students were confused by this question and got up to ask Mr. Fischer for help. Mr. Fischer, however, seemed to believe that students could make sense of this question on their own.

Nate, a middle-class student, gets up and moves quickly to Mr. Fischer's desk, gripping his test paper in both hands. As he approaches, Nate calls out hopefully: "Mr. Fischer?" Mr. Fischer hears this and looks up from his computer, asking lightly: "What's up?" Nate launches into a long question about the diary essay, asking whether they are supposed to write about a specific person and what they did during the Revolution. As Nate continues his meandering question, Mr. Fischer interrupts. He responds gruffly, in a loud, insistent whisper: "No! Diary entry! You. You're that person." Nate looks up at Mr. Fischer with a puzzled stare and Mr. Fischer shakes his head in frustration.

By this point, Lindsey, Colin, and Kal, all middle-class students, were lined up behind Nate to ask the same question, and they all started calling out clarifying questions.

Kal asks if he should pick a specific person and use quotes that they said and Lindsey and Colin chime in, talking over each other as they ask questions about the question. Mr. Fischer hears this and holds up his hands, palms out, as if to say "Stop!" Looking overwhelmed and dismayed, Mr. Fischer interjects sharply: "Guys!" Nate, Kal, Lindsey and Colin all stop and look up at Mr. Fischer expectantly. Mr. Fischer lets out a long sigh and then continues, explaining in a low growl: "Diary entry. You *become* the patriot. You were *there*." Nate, Kal, Lindsey and Colin stare back blankly at Mr. Fischer, Nate, still looking puzzled, jumps in, asking: "But do you mean..." Mr. Fischer lets out a frustrated sigh, folds his arms, and launches into a longer explanation.

Eventually, Nate, Kal, Lindsey, and Colin seemed to understand. After they went back to their seats, however, Joanna, Melanie, Anna, Ashley, and Kelly (all middle-class students) got up to ask Mr. Fischer the same question.

Mr. Fischer responds in a gravelly voice. He instructs the girls to "problem solve" – thinking about what a "diary entry" is, and about what a patriot would write in a diary about the Revolutionary War. When Anna tries to ask a follow-up question, Mr. Fischer interrupts, telling the girls to "go back and read it [the question] again" if they are still not clear.

Like Mr. Fischer, teachers often wanted students to "problem solve" on their own. In these situations, teachers often became frustrated with persistent requests. Despite these frustrations, however, teachers were rarely explicit in instructing students not to ask for help. Instead, teachers tended to convey these expectations only obliquely, through body language and through their tone in responding to students' requests.

Now, teachers did not want to confuse students with their subtle cues. In the classroom, for example, teachers often spent a great deal of time explaining directions and reviewing tricky concepts. They also went out of their way to provide unsolicited assistance to students who appeared to be struggling. One morning, Mr. Potter carefully reviewed the instructions for a fifth-grade geometry test. After passing out the tests, he went through each of the “tricky” problems, one by one, saying things like “If you find yourself writing more than six angles, you’re doing it wrong.” During the test, Mr. Potter circled around the room, answering questions and checking on students who appeared to be struggling. When the students got up to hand in their tests, Mr. Potter first looked over their answers, pointing out their mistakes and encouraging them to go back to their seats and revise their work. Like Mr. Potter, the teachers at Maplewood worked hard to support their students and ensure their success. Thus, teachers’ vaguely stated expectations did not seem to reflect a lack of concern with students’ understanding.

Those ambiguities and inconsistencies did, however, put the burden on students to determine which behaviors were appropriate in a given situation. In doing so, they created what I call *interpretive moments* in the classroom. In those moments, teachers’ expectations were not clear or explicit. As a result, students had to look for and decode more subtle cues about which behaviors would lead to reprimand or reward. In doing so, and as I discuss below, middle-class and working-class students adopted different logics of action for making sense of situations with vague or inconsistent demands.

ADOPTING LOGICS OF ACTION

The middle-class and working-class students at Maplewood came to school with different cultural tool-kits. These tool-kits included not only particular strategies of action, but also

particular logics of action. These logics of action (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, and expectations) shaped students' interpretations of situations and varied with social class.

Middle-class students adopted a logic of entitlement. They believed teachers should respond to students' individual needs. They demonstrated these beliefs, in part, by asking teachers to check work for them before turning it in. During math, for example, Ms. Dunham's fifth graders were working on geometry problems. Kelly, an average-achieving and somewhat shy middle-class student, was struggling with the protractor, trying to draw the correct angles.

As the other student work, Kelly gets up from her seat. Her face set in a tight frown, Kelly strides quickly toward Ms. Dunham, her math journal clutched tightly in her hands. Approaching Ms. Dunham, Kelly holds out the journal. She explains dejectedly: "I think I messed this up. Is this right?" Ms. Dunham purses her lips tightly, leaning in to check Kelly's work. After a pause, Ms. Dunham gives Kelly a reassuring smile. She explains, pointing at the journal: "You're on the right track. Just erase this part here, and you'll be okay." Kelly nods, giving Ms. Dunham a grateful smile and saying: "Thanks!"

Middle-class students expected teachers to answer questions and check work for them. In interviews, even lower-achieving middle-class students said things like: "I have to get good grades so I can go to college." They recognized that such requests could help them earn the best grade possible on each assignment or exam. Those efforts, in turn, reflected middle-class children's logic of entitlement, which privileged personal accomplishment and recognized the benefits of compelling others to adjust to individual needs.

Working-class students instead adopted a logic of appeasement. They were deeply concerned about being respectful of authorities and felt they should adjust their behavior to others' needs. In an interview, I asked working-class student Amelia how students should behave in the classroom. She explained:

They should just try to be polite and respectful and things like that. Like, if they need something, they should just patiently be sitting there with their hand raised. Cuz they don't wanna upset the teacher.

Even outgoing working-class students tried to respect teachers. Jared, for example, was a “class clown” who enjoyed making his peers and even his teachers laugh with funny remarks. Yet, Jared was also very careful about how his jokes might be perceived. In an interview, Jared compared himself to Christian, a middle-class student in his fifth-grade class. Jared explained that while Christian would often get in trouble for making jokes, he would try to judge the teacher’s mood in order to avoid such reprimands:

Christian’s the funniest kid in the grade, but he’s funny because he gets in trouble and does funny stuff. And he’s not afraid to get in trouble. But I don’t do actions that are really disrespectful or something. I usually just make jokes. Like, I poke, I don’t like, stab. So I really don’t do anything to make fun of someone, or to make them feel bad. And I wouldn’t do it if Ms. Hudson was in a bad mood, or if Christian just got in trouble.

Working-class students were carefully attuned to the moods and temperaments of those around them, and especially to those of authorities. This sensitivity, in turn, seemed to reflect working-class students’ logic of appeasement, which established the imperative of adjusting individual behavior to the needs of authorities.

These patterns were not perfect. Some middle-class students were shy and more deferential. Some working-class students were less cautious, and occasionally got in trouble (e.g., for talking out of turn or being off-task). Overall, though, students’ logics of classroom action tended to divide along social class lines. As I will show, drawing on these varying logics also led middle-class and working-class students to interpret teachers’ shifting expectations in different ways.

INTERPRETING AMBIGUOUS EXPECTATIONS

Students’ logics of action shaped their perception of interpretive moments in the classroom. Because these logics varied across social classes, they led middle-class and working-class students to have different views of similar classroom situations.

Adopting a logic of entitlement, middle-class children tended to view shifting expectations as opportunities for reward. With help-seeking, middle-class students felt that in the absence of explicit instruction, they could assert their needs and preferences. Ethan is a high-achieving but somewhat shy middle-class student. In an interview, Ethan explained what students should do if they are confused or struggling, noting:

If I don't know what to do, I just go ask Mr. Fischer. And he normally tells me, like: "You're not reading the problem correctly." So I read it again. Then I get up and ask him again, and after a couple of times of saying "read it again," he'll eventually say: "Well, it's like this."

By repeatedly saying "read it again," Mr. Fischer was likely trying to persuade Ethan to work through the problem on his own. Despite this subtle discouragement, however, Ethan persisted, and eventually convinced Mr. Fischer to provide detailed explanations. In the interview, I asked Ethan why he persisted in such situations, and he explained:

I don't want to guess and risk getting it wrong, because then I won't get as high a grade as I should have gotten.

Like other middle-class students, Ethan was not dissuaded by his teachers' vague or inconsistent expectations. Instead, Ethan saw these ambiguities as opportunities to get the rewards (more information and subsequently better grades) that he desired.

Adopting a logic of appeasement, working-class children tended to view teachers' shifting expectations as opportunities for reprimand. When help-seeking expectations were not explicit, these students worried that teachers would chastise students at will. Jared—described above as a class clown—is a high-achieving and outgoing working-class student. Despite his confidence, Jared was uncertain about seeking help, particularly in situations where teachers' expectations were unclear. In an interview, he recalled:

Most of the time, [teachers] explain too much, and you can't follow it all. So, I get lost, and I would just ask the person next to me. But, half the time, the teachers

don't want us talking. So it's hard. Like, I don't know if I should go up and talk [to the teacher], or if I should ask the person next to me. So, sometimes I go to the teacher and say 'I don't get this.' But she might say: 'Ask your partner,' or 'Ask your neighbor.' So, I don't know if she'll get mad, or if she wants me to do that.

While working-class students like Jared recognized that teachers' assistance could be beneficial, teachers' ambiguous expectations made it hard for them to seek support. These students were keenly aware of teachers' frustrations, and tended to interpret teachers' dismissals (e.g., "ask your partner") as anger even when teachers did not seem to mean them as such. As a result, working-class students worried that teachers might reprimand them for making requests at the wrong time, or in the wrong way.

These interpretations, in turn, reflected working-class students' greater sensitivity to teachers' moods and temperaments (even when teachers' frustrations were directed at others students, as with Jared and Christian above). This was not, however, because working-class students more often "got in trouble" for seeking help. Rather, as I have previously shown using data from this same project (see Calarco 2011), working-class students were almost never reprimanded for help-seeking; it was generally middle-class students who frustrated teachers with their excessive requests. While teachers did occasionally punish working-class students, these were typically sanctions for coming to school unprepared (e.g., without their homework, projects, books, or binders), or for being off-task when they were supposed to be listening or working (e.g., talking with friends or playing with toys in their desks). Regardless of whether they or their classmates were the targets, however, working-class students tended to be more sensitive to reprimands. This greater sensitivity, in turn, appeared to reflect working-class students' logic of appeasement, which encouraged them to be wary of the possible consequences of making demands on authorities, and to calibrate their actions to others' needs.

ACTIVATING STRATEGIES OF ACTION

The interpretations stemming from students' logics of action also shaped their responses to teachers' ambiguous expectations. Because interpretations varied with social class, middle- and working-class students reacted differently to interpretive moments at school.

Middle-class students, for example, responded to ambiguities by activating a strategy of negotiation. With help-seeking, they typically pushed back and persisted even when teachers seemed reluctant to grant requests. One morning during math class, Ms. Dunham passed back tests her fifth-graders had taken the day before. Ms. Dunham had not graded the tests, but she had marked each correct answer with a large, blue "C."

Ms. Dunham explains to the class that they will have fifteen minutes to work on the test and correct their mistakes. With a wry smile, she adds: "Now, I don't want you to come up to me and say: 'I don't know the answer is!' I'm gonna send you away if you do that."

Despite this discouragement, Greg, a middle-class student, asked for help anyway:

As the other kids work silently, Greg looks up from his seat. He calls out to Ms. Dunham in a pained voice saying: "I can't figure out if this one wrong or not. There's a mark next to the number, but it looks more like a dot than a "C." Ms. Dunham hears this and frowns. She heads over to Greg, squats down, and peers over his shoulder at his test. After a moment, Ms. Dunham reaches out and taps the paper, whispering: "Check that one. You reduced wrong." Greg furrows his eyebrows for a moment and then looks up, saying: "Oh! Okay. I get it now."

Ms. Dunham was fairly explicit in discouraging students from asking for help in correcting their mistakes on the test. And yet, even when teachers did not want requests for help, middle-class students like Greg often tried to push back and negotiate for the help they desired. They did so by exploiting ambiguities in teachers' expectations. In this situation, for example, Greg seemed to recognize that Ms. Dunham said nothing about clarifying questions, and thus adjusted his approach accordingly.

Working-class students, on the other hand, approached interpretive moments by activating a strategy of avoidance. With help-seeking, for example, they tended to manage uncertainty around teachers' expectations by choosing not to ask for assistance. In an interview, working-class student Shawn recalled the following incident:

Like, one time Ms. Dunham said to me: "This test is pretty easy. You probably shouldn't have any trouble on it." But then I did kind of have a lot of trouble on it. And it [what she said] made it a lot harder on me, cuz I didn't want her to be mad that I didn't get it. So I just tried to do my best.

In telling Shawn the test would be "easy," Ms. Dunham was likely trying to boost his confidence. Shawn, however, interpreted this as a subtle effort to discourage help-seeking. He worried that Ms. Dunham would be "mad" if he acknowledged his struggles, and thus opted to just try his best rather than ask for help.

Now, working-class students did sometimes set aside their logics and strategies of action in order to seek help, but they did so only when teachers' willingness to answer questions was very explicit. This included when teachers directly encouraged help-seeking, when other students had successfully made similar requests, and especially when teachers approached them to offer support. During art class in fifth grade, the students were creating collages. As the students worked, Ms. Cantore circled around answering questions and offering advice. During this time, Haley, a working-class student, was struggling, but did not ask for help.

As the other students work, Haley digs frantically through the project bin at the back of the room. She repeatedly checks each folder, looking for her collage. When Ms. Cantore circles past, she notices the worried frown on Haley's face and asks gently: "You okay?" Haley does not look Ms. Cantore in the eye. Instead, she shrugs and admits quietly: "I can't find my collage. It's not here." Ms. Cantore gives Haley a reassuring smile and explains: "I put the ones without names on the table up front. Lindsay [a middle-class student] just found hers up there. Let's see if we can find yours, too." Haley nods gratefully and follows Ms. Cantore to the front of the room, where they search together through the nameless collages and eventually find Haley's.

When Lindsay could not find her collage, she immediately asked for help. Haley instead searched on her own until Ms. Cantore offered assistance. Offers of assistance made the outcome of a help-seeking exchange far less ambiguous. With this uncertainty reduced, logics of action were no longer necessary for making sense of situations, and working-class students like Haley could ask for help, confident they would not be reprimanded.

SITUATING STRATIFIED PROFITS

Students' class-based strategies of action were important in that they tended to produce stratified profits. As I have shown elsewhere using data from the same project (see Calarco 2011), middle-class help-seeking efforts were often successful in securing support from teachers. This assistance allowed middle-class students to complete assignments quickly and correctly and to avoid problems at school. Working-class students, in turn, were more reluctant to seek help. As a result, they tended to spend more time struggling, and were sometimes perceived by teachers as less motivated to learn. That said, when working-class students did ask for help, teachers (like Ms. Cantore in the example above) were generally very warm and welcoming of such questions.

Simultaneously, however, and in contrast to the fixed-profit assumption of both tool-kit and cultural mismatch theories of inequality, I found that the consequences of children's behaviors were not automatic. Rather, as I will explain, the profits associated with particular logics and strategies of action varied across situations. Such variations reflected teachers' interpretations of student behaviors in light of the situation at hand.

At Maplewood, the same strategy of action often had different payoffs at different times. Middle-class students' negotiations for assistance, for example, sometimes led to praise and reward; in other situations, they provoked reprimand. In Mr. Potter's class, middle-class students were often able to negotiate for the assistance that they desired. One day during math class,

however, Mr. Potter became frustrated after spending twenty minutes answering questions about a set of word problems.

All around the room, middle-class students are calling out, waving their hands in the air and shouting: “I don’t get this one!” and “Is this right?” Mr. Potter seems frazzled. When Julie, a middle-class student, asks for help with Question 8, Mr. Potter responds gruffly: “All you have to do is read the instructions.”

Despite Mr. Potter’s apparent frustration, the requests continued. Eventually, Mr. Potter hit his breaking point:

Mr. Potter suddenly stops, growling: “Fifth grade!” As the students look up, startled, Mr. Potter gestures wildly and laments: “Every time we do word problems, you guys say you can’t do it! You guys who are so used to getting it immediately, you say ‘I don’t get it’ and you give up!”

This reprimand finally made Mr. Potter’s expectations explicit, prompting students to cease their requests, at least temporarily. As such examples suggest, however, the payoff of students’ strategies of action was not fixed or automatic. In some situations, middle-class students’ help-seeking got them the rewards they desired. In others, middle-class students did not get the answers they wanted, or even got in trouble for making too many requests or for doing so at the wrong time or in the wrong way.

These variations reflected situational influences on teachers’ responses to student behaviors. In some cases, structural constraints and competing classroom goals led teachers to respond more negatively to a given strategy of action. With help-seeking, teachers often became frustrated with requests when they felt pressed for time or overwhelmed by student demands. One morning in Ms. Dunham’s fifth-grade class, for example, the students were working on grammar exercises.

As the students work, Ms. Dunham bustles around, collecting homework and setting up for a language arts lesson. Meanwhile, Diana, a middle-class girl, repeatedly gets up from her seat and goes over to Ms. Dunham, peppering her with questions about the grammar exercises and the schedule for the day. At first, Ms. Dunham is patient with Diana. She pauses, turning to face Diana and answering her questions with full sentences (e.g., “The science test is this

afternoon” and “If you don’t finish the test during science, you can work on it during flex time.”).

As Diana’s requests continued, Ms. Dunham’s replies became shorter and gruffer.

Ms. Dunham continues working while Diana asks her questions, and does not look up as she responds with a simple “Yes” or “No.” Eventually, Ms. Dunham turns and looks at Diana with a tired frown, asking in a pained voice: “Can this wait? We have a lot to get through this morning, and I need to get set up.” Diana initially starts to protest, but then nods and heads back to her seat.

Diana gave up her negotiations only when Ms. Dunham snapped “Can this wait?” This negative response eliminated the ambiguity of the situation, allowing Diana to fully recognize that Ms. Dunham did not want any more requests. Teachers did want to support students, but the need to stay on schedule left teachers feeling rushed, and made it hard for them to give detailed responses to student questions. In light of these competing priorities, teachers often adopted vague or flexible standards around help-seeking that allowed them to respond to situational constraints. They used gruffness, for example, to end ambiguity and curtail unwanted requests.

In other cases, teachers’ responses to students’ strategies of action reflected their interpretations of student motivation. With help-seeking, for example, teachers tended to reject requests when they felt students were not working hard, not paying attention, not using critical thinking skills, or not reading and following directions. One afternoon, Mr. Fischer’s fifth-graders were taking a social studies test. The test included eight fill-in-the-blank questions accompanied by a nine word “word bank.” As the students worked silently on their tests, Mr. Fischer sat at his desk, typing on his computer. Meanwhile, Melanie, a middle-class student who struggles in school, got up from her seat.

As Melanie approaches, carrying her test paper, she asks anxiously: “Should we have extra words in the word bank? Or do we have to use them all?” Mr. Fischer lets out a loud breath and responds in a gruff whisper: “You should be able to figure out the answer to that question yourself.” Melanie hears this and blinks, puzzled. Sputtering, she asks: “But how are we supposed to know?” Mr. Fischer

sighs again and continues wanly: “There are eight fill-in-the blank questions. So what do you need to do with the words in the word bank?” Melanie thinks for a long moment, and then responds tentatively: “Count them?” Mr. Fischer nods dramatically, giving Melanie a forced smile. Melanie begins to count the words aloud to herself as she turns to head back to her seat.

Melanie could have continued to push back, but did not because Mr. Fischer’s gruff response clarified that he expected her to think critically before seeking help. During the same test, however, Mr. Fischer more patiently answered questions from other students about a confusingly worded essay question. As with other teachers, Mr. Fischer’s negative responses to help-seeking varied in part with their assumptions about the motivation behind students’ requests.

The profits of not seeking help also varied across classroom contexts. In some situations, avoiding requests had benefits. When teachers were frustrated or time-strapped, for example, working-class students avoided frustrating teachers by not seeking help. They also tended to be perceived by teachers as more polite than middle-class students, saying things like: “Jared is one of the most likeable kids in the class. He’s got great character, and he’s very respectful.” Yet, when teachers were not time-pressed or frustrated, a reluctance to seek help prevented students from getting support they could have received. In Mr. Fischer’s class, for example, working-class student Zach opted not to tell Mr. Fischer that he was confused about directions for a project, and received a lower grade because he completed the project incorrectly. Such reluctance, in turn, also caused teachers to perceive working-class students as lacking in motivation. Describing working-class student Shawn, for instance, his teacher recalled:

He’s fairly intelligent, but he misses a ton of school, and he’s not good at following up with work that he missed. He doesn’t ask for help. Just kind of shows up and floats through the day.

As with help-seeking, the consequences of not asking varied across situations and reflected both contextual constraints and teacher interpretations of student motivation.

Simultaneously, however, it seemed that the negative consequences of help-seeking were much less severe than those for not making requests. At Maplewood, for example, I never witnessed a teacher punish a student (e.g., keeping them in for recess or denying them privileges) for seeking help. Teachers would occasionally lash out at excessive help-seekers with verbal diatribes. In general, however, they demonstrated their frustrations by denying students' requests or by being gruff and dismissive in their replies. The teachers, in turn, would often regret their moments of frustration. In the situation described above, for example, Mr. Fischer heard Melanie counting the words aloud to herself and called out to her, saying encouragingly: "You should probably have one extra, right?" Mr. Fischer seemed to feel bad about being gruff with Melanie, and subsequently provided her with the help she desired. Overall, then, while help-avoidance ensured that working-class students had fewer opportunities for support, negotiation allowed middle-class students to maximize the assistance they received.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how students activated distinct cultural tool-kits to manage "interpretive moments" at school and how those efforts typically resulted in profits for middle-class students but not for their working-class peers. Specifically, teachers' shifting expectations for help-seeking created interpretive moments in the classroom. Middle- and working-class students drew on different logics of action to make sense of those interpretive moments. Those logics of action, in turn, prompted students to activate different strategies of action. Middle-class students' logic of entitlement, for example, led them to see inconsistencies in teachers' expectations as opportunities for reward and thus to activate strategies of negotiation and help-seeking. Working-class students' logic of appeasement, on the other hand, led them to see teachers' inconsistent expectations as opportunities for reprimand and thus prompted them to activate

strategies of help-avoidance. When teachers' expectations became clear, however, logics of action were less salient, and students tended to behave in institutionally-patterned rather than culturally-patterned ways. For example, students ceased negotiations when teachers responded angrily, and students asked for help when teachers explicitly offered assistance. That said, when students did behave in class-based ways, such strategies of action yielded stratified profits. Those profits were contingent on teachers' interpretations of the situation at hand. When help-seeking was perceived as beneficial, such behaviors were rewarded; when requests for assistance were instead perceived as detrimental or disruptive, these same behaviors led to reprimand.

This study suggests that interpretive moments are a fruitful arena in which to explore the intersection of culture and social psychology. While explicit expectations tend to produce institutionally patterned behavior (McPherson and Sauder 2013), ambiguities may activate more conscious processes of interpretation (Pescosolido 1992). This heightened awareness is also likely to make it easier for research subjects to recall and articulate both the strategies of action they activated in a given situation and the logics of action that guided that activation. At Maplewood, for example, students were keenly aware of inconsistencies in teachers' expectations around help-seeking, and were able to describe in rich detail their responses to these interpretive moments at school.

Interpretive moments may also have important consequences for inequalities. In keeping with tool-kit and cultural mismatch theories, I found that students' strategies of action and logics of action varied with social class, and that mismatches of school expectations and individual behavior created stratified profits. Middle-class children, for example, seemed undaunted by ambiguous expectations. Their logic of entitlement (coupled with their familiarity with middle-class styles of indirect communication—Bernstein 1958; Delpit 2006), prompted them to feel

comfortable negotiating for assistance, even when teachers seemed ambivalent about granting requests. This blindness to the possibility of reprimand sometimes had negative consequences—middle-class children occasionally had requests denied or were chastised for lacking problem-solving skills. Yet, those negative consequences were rarely as severe as the consequences for not seeking help. By adopting a logic of appeasement and choosing not to ask, working-class students sometimes protected themselves from reprimands, but also eliminated opportunities for support. Middle-class students, on the other hand, persisted in their requests and thus maximized the support they received.

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