

# Cultural Knowledge and Social Inequality

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## Abstract

Using both qualitative longitudinal data collected 20 years after the original *Unequal Childhoods* study and interview data from a study of upwardly mobile adults, this address demonstrates how cultural knowledge matters when white and African American young adults of differing class backgrounds navigate key institutions. I find that middle-class young adults had more knowledge than their working-class or poor counterparts of the “rules of the game” regarding how institutions worked. They also displayed more of a sense of entitlement to ask for help. When faced with a problem related to an institution, middle-class young adults frequently succeeded in getting their needs accommodated by the institution; working-class and poor young adults were less knowledgeable about and more frustrated by bureaucracies. This address also shows the crucial role of “cultural guides” who help upwardly mobile adults navigate institutions. While many studies of class reproduction have looked at key turning points, this address argues that “small moments” may be critical in setting the direction of life paths.

## Keywords

social class, childrearing, cultural capital, transition to adulthood, social mobility

Over 20 years ago, I began a study of African American and white families with 10-year-old children. The families occupied different class positions: middle class, working class, and poor. The research involved classroom observations, in-depth interviews with 88 families, and intensive ethnographic research with a subset of 12 families. Drawing on these data, I argued in *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Lareau 2003) that social class shaped a cultural logic of childrearing such that the strategies of middle-class families, both white and black, were much more in sync with the standards of dominant institutions than were the childrearing strategies of working-class and poor families. Despite the advantages of working-class and poor family life, including much more

respectful children, greater autonomy for children when they engaged in leisure activities, and closer extended family life, the childrearing strategies of working-class and poor families generally did not comply with the expectations of educators. Following Bourdieu (1977, 1984), I suggested that the key issue was not the intrinsic nature of the parenting itself, but rather the uneven rewards dominant institutions bestowed on different types of strategies.

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During the years since the study ended, I have remained in contact with almost all of the 12 families in the ethnographic dataset. When the youths were 19 to 20 years old, I conducted follow-up interviews (Lareau 2011) and included the findings in the second edition of *Unequal Childhoods*. In this address, I present new data on members of the ethnographic sample, collected when the young adults had reached age 30. Longitudinal data of this kind are rare in sociological research. Most studies offer a snapshot in time, partly because the barriers to longitudinal work are formidable. Without such data, though, it is difficult to fully understand how certain, important social processes unfold. In the case of qualitative research, a revisit can be especially revealing (Burawoy 2003). With respect to the *Unequal Childhoods* study, the addition of longitudinal data over 20 years provides evidence of how class continued to shape opportunities as the children grew up. Because such revisits are often hampered by attrition and hence have a smaller number of cases, the goal of the work is conceptual, helping to develop our models of how inequality is maintained (Burawoy 1998).<sup>1</sup>

I focus here on cultural knowledge (i.e., facts, information, skills, and familiarity with social processes), particularly knowledge of how institutions work, to show the long shadow that social class origins cast on life outcomes. Scholars who study the transmission of advantage often emphasize the role of economic factors (Domhoff 2012; Tilly 1998; Wright 2005), including the role of economic factors in shaping educational success (Espenshade and Radford 2013; Reardon 2011). Still others focus on the key role of soft skills or non-cognitive skills in education and employment (Hurrell, Scholarios, and Thompson 2013; KIPP 2014). Unquestionably, all of these factors are highly significant in explaining life outcomes, particularly during hard times (Clark and Heath 2014; Pew Research Center 2012). Yet, beyond individual behaviors, such as persistence, or specific work skills, generalized cultural knowledge about how institutions function also can be important, particularly in helping individuals

negotiate key institutions such as schools and workplaces (see, e.g., Calarco 2011; Cherng 2014; Hardie forthcoming; Yee 2014). Sociologists allude to these forms of cultural knowledge, but most research focuses on individuals' academic knowledge, achievement scores, and work skills, rather than on the more elusive and contingent forms of informal knowledge that nevertheless can be crucial in facilitating advancement (see, e.g., Downey, von Hippel, and Broh 2004). In addition, researchers tend to focus on well-established life moments or conditional turning points (Wheaton and Gotlib 1997), such as the decision to apply to college, the choice of a major, or the pursuit of a particular career. There are signs, however, that seemingly small events—such as getting a low grade in a key course or receiving timely, unsolicited help from a school counselor—can threaten a long-held goal, create opportunities, or solidify stages in a life path.

The longitudinal data from the families I followed over 20 years reveal class differences in three forms of cultural knowledge as critically important in the reproduction of inequality. First, the middle-class young adults had more knowledge of the “rules of the game” regarding how institutions worked (e.g., how to drop a class, what grades are necessary for admission to medical school, and how to secure a job in a professional field) than did the working-class and poor youth. Second, the middle-class young adults displayed more of a sense of entitlement to ask for help from teachers, coaches, and mentors than did their working-class counterparts. The working-class and poor youth who managed to persist in college reported feeling “shy” and uncomfortable seeking help. Third, beyond having generalized knowledge, when faced with a problem related to an institution, middle-class young adults drew on prior experience with and knowledge about the workings of institutions and frequently succeeded in getting their preferences and needs accommodated by the institution; working-class and poor young adults were less knowledgeable about and more frustrated by bureaucracies. They usually failed to gain accommodations.

The actions of the middle-class young adults were not intrinsically more desirable (e.g., middle-class young adults showed signs of overdependence on parents). But the actions of middle-class young adults were better aligned with the expectations of the institutions they were dealing with and thus often resulted in successful outcomes. By age 30, the middle-class youth generally, although not universally, had better jobs and were in more secure positions than were the youth who grew up in working-class and poor homes. In fact, significant upward mobility is uncommon in the United States (Hout and Janus 2011), and the ethnographic sample did not provide any cases of upward mobility. For that reason, at the end of this address, I introduce data from a second study (Curl, Lareau, and Wu 2012) that specifically aimed at understanding the process and meaning of upward mobility among a sample of adults. That research shows that upwardly mobile adults often had “cultural guides”—teachers, coaches, relatives, or friends—who helped decode institutional rules of the game, gave advice, and intervened at crucial moments. The evidence suggests that class reproduction is often the default mechanism unless an intervention or unusual mentorship occurs (Hout and Janus 2011; Levine and Nidiffer 1996; Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014).

## **TRANSMISSION OF CLASS INEQUALITY**

The literature linking family origins to children’s educational and occupational destinations is impressively strong. Sociologists have demonstrated the powerful influence parents’ social origins cast on their children’s life experiences and outcomes. Although researchers differ in how they measure social class, studies show that various dimensions of class (particularly mother’s education) are linked to parents talking with toddlers (Hart and Risley 1995), participating in educational activities (Downey 2002), enrolling children in activities (Lareau et al. 2011), and

dispensing specific occupational advice to high schoolers (Hardie forthcoming). Class-related patterns also can be seen in children’s pre-literacy skills when entering kindergarten, reading group membership, SAT scores, and the likelihood of applying to college, entering college, and graduating from college (see, e.g., Collins 2009; Downey et al. 2004; Hout 2012; Lareau and Conley 2008; Lareau and Goyette 2014; National Center for Education Statistics 2009, 2013; Reardon 2011; Stevens 2007). Class also shapes key aspects of family life (Seltzer and Bianchi forthcoming) as well as interactions in daily life (Fiske and Markus 2012; Petev 2013; Ridgeway 2014).

Theoretical models explicating the mechanisms of the transmission of inequality are less developed, but in many models, the role of economic resources looms large. Indeed, in a recent theoretical essay, Lamont, Beljean, and Clair (2014) critique this focus on economic factors. They stress the need for more fully developed cultural models of the transmission of inequality, and they note the contingent nature of outcomes: “We argue that . . . the inequality-related outcomes of most cultural processes are largely uncertain and open-ended.” They also emphasize that “organizations and institutions contribute significantly to both the distribution and recognition” of social inequality (Lamont et al. 2014:584–85). The arguments I make here seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role cultural processes play in the maintenance of inequality (see also Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010; Wilson 2010).

In particular, I find that Bourdieu’s work provides a context for examining the impact of social class position. His model draws attention to conflict, change, and systemic inequality, and it highlights the fluid nature of the relationship between structure and agency (Bourdieu 1976, 1984). Bourdieu argues that individuals from different social locations are socialized differently. This socialization provides children, and later adults, with a sense of what is comfortable or natural (he calls this *habitus*). These background experiences also

shape the amount and forms of resources (capital) individuals inherit and draw on as they confront various institutional arrangements (fields) in the social world (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Cultural capital (skills individuals inherit that can be translated into different forms of value as people move through different institutions) is crucial in this process (see also Lareau and Weininger 2003). Social capital, which, following Bourdieu (1986), includes not just social networks but social ties with individuals who have access to highly valued resources, is also important (see also Lin 1999).

Extensive research on cultural capital has emerged in recent decades. As Weininger and I (2003) argue, however, too often cultural capital is defined in terms of high-status cultural experiences (e.g., beaux-arts) rather than knowledge of how to make institutions work to one's advantage (Purhonen, Gronow, and Rahkonen 2011; Sullivan 2007). But, some younger scholars have begun filling in the gap. Calarco (2011), for example, shows that young middle-class children get out of their chairs to badger teachers for help, whereas their working-class counterparts, in the same classroom, do not go beyond raising their hands. More recently, Calarco (2014) shows that middle-class parents provide direct and forceful coaching to their children, teaching them how to intervene in schools, whereas working-class parents admonish their children not to pester the teacher or engage in any potentially annoying behavior. Streib (2011) shows how daycare teachers create dynamics that often privilege the verbal skills of middle-class children compared to their working-class counterparts. Yee (2014) highlights how middle-class college students are coached by their parents and are able to maneuver successfully in a large, public university, whereas first-generation college students are often confused and, importantly, not guided in any meaningful fashion by academic advisors. In a somewhat different vein, Rivera (2012) documents that hiring standards in elite institutions draw heavily on the cultural tastes and preferences of current workers, who seek to

hire employees with whom they can imagine forging friendships. Despite this promising new work, we continue to lack sufficient understanding of how young people manage their lives in the transition to adulthood (for reviews of the literature, see Arnett 2006; Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005; Waters et al. 2011) and how they manage rules and regulations in gatekeeping institutions such as colleges and workplaces.

Moreover, much of the literature on turning points in the lives of young adults focuses on moments widely seen as pivotal rather than on small moments that may turn out to be significant (Wheaton and Gotlib 1997). Similarly, sociologists of inequality extensively address key moments such as reading group assignment; course offerings; track assignment; college application, acceptance, and enrollment; decisions about majors; and applications to graduate school (see Alexander, Entwisle, and Olsen 2014; Collins 2009; Klugman 2013; Mullen 2010; Pallas and Jennings 2009).<sup>2</sup> Research consistently shows that parents' social class often shapes children's educational experiences, including in college (see, e.g., Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hout 2012; Mullen 2010; Ostrove and Long 2007). Yet, there are also indications that little moments can be significant, as when pre-med freshmen receive a low grade in a critical course. In a slightly different vein, there has recently been interest in how people negotiate non-cognitive skills including "grit" (particularly persistence) or "soft skills" in the workplace (Duckworth et al. 2007; Heckman 2013; Hurrell et al. 2013). Bourdieu railed against the overly deterministic models of social theory, stressing instead the contingent nature of life trajectories and the situated nature of these paths within fields. This crucial insight is often overlooked, however. Because these small moments may be different for various people, and because they are often unique and contingent, they are difficult to capture in representative surveys. Frequently, the significance of these moments is apparent only in retrospect, thus creating the need for a longitudinal, qualitative approach.

**Table 1.** Definition of Social Class and Data Collection at Age 30

Race of Young Adults	Name	Type of Contact at 20 Years Old	Type of Contact at 30 Years Old
Poor: parents not in the labor force on regular, continuous basis.			
White	Katie Brindle	Interview	Interview
White	Mark Greeley	Interview	Interview
Black	Tara Carroll	Interview	Interview
Black	Harold McAllister	Interview	Interview
Working Class: neither parent is employed in a middle-class position, and at least one parent is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority that does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills.			
White	Wendy Driver	Interview	Only Internet data
White	Billy Yanelli	Interview	Spoke to mother
Black	Tyrec Taylor	Interview	No data
Biracial	Jessica Irwin	Interview	Contact with mother
Middle Class: at least one parent is employed in a position that entails substantial managerial authority or that requires highly complex, institutionally certified (college-level) skills.			
White	Melanie Handlon	Interview	No data
White	Garrett Tallinger	Interview	E-mailed with mother
Black	Stacey Marshall	Interview	Interview
Black	Alexander Williams	Interview	Only Internet data

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

## METHODOLOGY

The original *Unequal Childhoods* study (Lareau 2003; see also Lareau 2011) drew on classroom observations in third and fourth grades in public schools, in-depth interviews with parents in 88 families, and intensive observation of 12 of those families, usually daily, for three weeks. Half the families were white and half were African American. The sample included middle-class, working-class, and poor families (see Table 1); families in the ethnographic sample were paid for their participation. One decade later, when the youths were 19 to 20 years old, I collected additional data, conducting two-hour, face-to-face interviews with all 12 youths. I also conducted separate interviews in 11 of the 12 families with the mothers and all of the fathers involved in the lives of the young adults. I interviewed siblings in 10 of the 11 families with siblings.

In 2014, 20 years after the original study, as the young adults reached age 30, I initiated a third round of interviews. Using people-searching Internet companies (e.g., Intelius.com), I

tracked down addresses for almost all of the 12 youths. Using a variety of Internet sources, I was able to gather data on the class position of 10 of the young people. In most instances, this information includes their education, occupation, and homeownership status, as well as other facts. I communicated with eight of the families and formally interviewed five of the original 12 children: one middle-class young adult and all four from the poor families (see Table 1). Four families (two middle class and two working class) are lost from the study.<sup>3</sup> For this round of interviews, each young adult interviewee received a \$150 honorarium. Additional family members who participated in interviews received a \$100 honorarium. Most of the interviews took place in family members' homes, but one (with Harold McAllister) took place in my university office.<sup>4</sup> In general, the young adults greeted me warmly, with a hug. In this address, I focus mainly on data from these recent interviews, but to develop a longitudinal analysis, I also draw on interviews conducted when the young people were 19 to 20 years old as well as data from the original study (Lareau 2011).

Because I seek to understand how cultural knowledge shapes mobility, and because the *Unequal Childhoods* dataset does not provide any cases of upward mobility, I also include here data from a separate study conducted with two doctoral students, Heather Curl and Tina Wu (Curl et al. 2012). That study examines upward mobility and the forms of cultural learning upwardly mobile adults experience as they enter new social worlds. Using a snowball sample, we recruited 30 adults, age 25 to 50. These adults, all of whom were raised by parents who either dropped out of high school or received no education beyond a high school degree, had completed a high-status advanced degree (e.g., MD, JD, or MBA). The interviews were face-to-face; each lasted about two hours. Each researcher completed 10 interviews, for a total dataset of 30 interviews.<sup>5</sup> For the longitudinal and mobility studies, interviews were transcribed and then analyzed. We read the transcripts, looking for key themes, searching for disconfirming evidence, and producing data matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994).<sup>6</sup>

## INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

The young people in the *Unequal Childhoods* study interacted with numerous institutions between the time they were 10 and 30 years old. They attended high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges; took out loans and received grants; got driver's licenses and held jobs; received public assistance and childcare subsidies; were hospitalized; and (in one case) arrested (see Table 2). It is common for these kinds of large institutions, particularly in major cities, to be rule-based, inflexible, and inefficient. Educational institutions, for instance, combine formal rules (e.g., specific deadlines for adding or dropping a class) that are not always well advertised or clearly stated, with informal norms (e.g., the conditions under which a professor will grant an incomplete or reinstate a student dropped from a program of

study). I term formal and informal knowledge about how institutions work "knowledge about 'the rules of the game.'" My findings show that as young adults, the middle-class youth were much more knowledgeable than working-class and poor youth about these rules (see Table 3).<sup>7</sup>

Because my data indicate that help-seeking varied by social class, I also discuss instances in which the young adults sought help from teachers, counselors, coaches, and employers. In addition, the youths reported that at times professionals and administrators were willing to bend their organizations' rules to accommodate the youths' individualized requests; in other cases, their requests were denied. Middle-class young adults appeared to have more success at gaining individualized accommodation than did working-class or poor young adults. As Table 2 reveals, at age 30, the working-class and poor young adults generally had less education and lower-paying, less desirable jobs than their middle-class counterparts. Nonetheless, this pattern was not universal. For instance, at age 20, Melanie Handlon, a white woman of middle-class origin, was working as a hair stylist. Although she had been admitted to a four-year college, she did not attend (Lareau 2011).<sup>8</sup> Still, overall, the life paths of the young people in the study varied powerfully by parents' social class, a pattern amply documented in the literature (Alexander et al. 2014).

I use a case study approach here, comparing Tara Carroll, an African American young woman who grew up in a poor family, with Stacey Marshall, a middle-class African American young woman. I selected these cases because they illustrate themes found in other cases in my datasets; also, the findings for Tara and Stacey at age 30 are highly consistent with the patterns observed a decade earlier. To situate the cases in a broader context, I also briefly discuss examples from the lives of other young people in the ethnographic sample. In the final section of the address, to illuminate the role of cultural guides, I present the case of Nick Nevins, a young white man from the study on upward mobility.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2.** Status of Young Adults at Age 30

Name	Details
<b>Poor</b>	
<i>White Young Adults</i>	
Mark Greeley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grocery store worker</li> <li>• High school drop out</li> <li>• Lives with brother in a rental</li> <li>• Has a serious girlfriend</li> <li>• No children</li> </ul>
Katie Brindle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Last job at 7/11</li> <li>• High school drop out</li> <li>• Lives with truck driver who separated from his wife</li> <li>• Raising three of four daughters (1.5, 3, and 13 years)</li> <li>• Lost custody of second child; has visitation rights</li> </ul>
<i>Black Young Adults</i>	
Harold McAllister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dealing drugs</li> <li>• High school drop out</li> <li>• Mother disapproves of drug dealing</li> <li>• 6-year-old daughter; sees weekly, pays child support</li> <li>• Would like to own bar or barbershop</li> </ul>
Tara Carroll	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studying to be a nurse</li> <li>• Works part-time as program specialist for disabled</li> <li>• AA degree</li> <li>• Lives with aunt and grandmother</li> <li>• No children</li> </ul>
<b>Working Class</b>	
<i>White Young Adults</i>	
Wendy Driver	<p>[No data for occupation at 30 years, data are from 20 years]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stay-at-home mom</li> <li>• High school graduate</li> <li>• Married to (white) serviceman (Navy)</li> <li>• Lives five hours from mother, stepdad</li> <li>• Children 9 and 11 years</li> </ul>
Billy Yanelli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unionized house painter; works intermittently</li> <li>• GED</li> <li>• Had own apartment, but now lives with parents</li> <li>• Drug problem</li> <li>• No girlfriend</li> <li>• No children</li> </ul>
<i>Black Young Adults</i>	
Tyrec Taylor	<p>[No data for occupation at 30 years, data are from 20 years]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High school graduate</li> <li>• Construction worker</li> <li>• Took some community college courses</li> <li>• Does not have own apartment, lives with relatives</li> </ul>
Jessica Irwin (biracial)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art therapist</li> <li>• BA and MA in art therapy, Townson State University</li> <li>• Married to (African American) police officer</li> <li>• Sees parents regularly</li> <li>• 8-month-old son</li> </ul>
<b>Middle Class</b>	
<i>White Young Adults</i>	
Melanie Handlon	<p>[No data for occupation at 30 years, data are from 20 years]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hairstylist</li> <li>• High school graduate</li> <li>• Attended community college for several weeks</li> <li>• Lives on own</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Name	Details
Garrett Tallinger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-level manager for private transportation firm</li> <li>• BA Villanova</li> <li>• Married to (white) lawyer</li> <li>• 1-year-old son</li> </ul>
<i>Black Young Adults</i>	
Stacey Marshall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University administrator</li> <li>• BA University of Maryland, PhD Ohio State</li> <li>• Married to a (biracial) manager</li> <li>• 2-year-old son</li> </ul>
Alexander Williams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medical doctor</li> <li>• BA and MD Columbia University</li> </ul>

*Note:* All information was confirmed when the young adults were 30 years old, except for the information noted in brackets, which refers to status at age 19 or 20. I have no current information on family situation for Handlon, Taylor, or Williams. Tallinger, Marshall, Driver, and Irwin are purchasing homes. Renting was confirmed for Yanelli, Greeley, Brindle, McAllister, and Carroll. Housing information was not available for Handlon, Taylor, and Williams. The family information for Driver was confirmed via the Internet.

## PLENTY OF GRIT, LIMITED CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE: TARA CARROLL

Tara Carroll spent seven years, usually taking six credits at a time, earning an AA degree from a community college. She graduated with a GPA of 3.08 and a debt of \$12,000. She is now, at age 30, enrolled in a hospital-based, accredited nursing program that awards an RN degree. If she successfully passes the state licensing exam, the degree will provide access to a professional position.

Tara's journey has included many setbacks. Several of these were linked to her limited knowledge of the rules of the game of educational institutions. She did not know that a student could withdraw from a college class without penalty during the semester, that timing mattered when protesting an administrative decision, or that when a student is ill or in a car accident, it is common for professors to focus instrumentally on what the student needs to do to catch up in class rather than to express concern about the student's well-being. Tara's lack of this kind of knowledge complicated her higher education experience. In addition, she felt uncomfortable in college, and she was reluctant to seek

help. These factors played a role in her inability to get the institution to accommodate her request for individualized treatment.

Tara grew up in an older, low-rise housing project, where she lived with her grandmother, a deeply religious woman who routinely answered the phone, "Praise-the-Lord-hello." They were supported by public assistance and under-the-table income Tara's grandmother earned by caring for elderly people in their homes. Tara's mother, who had drug issues as an adolescent, had left Tara and her older brother in her mother's care when both children were young. But, by the time Tara was in fourth grade, Ms. Carroll was sober, employed, and a frequent visitor to her mother's apartment. As Tara's grandmother told me at the time, "Tara's mother manages the schooling."

Tara's mother and I attended the fourth-grade parent-teacher conference together. The teacher, Ms. Stanton, was a bubbly African American woman, who had grown up in a middle-class home and worked as an educator for more than 15 years. She told us she liked Tara very much. Her remarks throughout the conference indicated that she felt Tara was "doing well" in school and was a pleasant and well-behaved child. Without ever explaining why Tara had received a D in math,



**Table 3.** Forms of Cultural Knowledge

Respondent	Knowledge of Rules of the Game (informal and formal knowledge of how organizations work)	Help-Seeking Behavior	Requests for Individualized Accommodation
Tara Carroll (African American/Poor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unclear on how grades influence acceptance to selective high schools</li> <li>• Did not know to formally withdraw from a class she was failing</li> <li>• Misunderstood meaning of grades in nursing school</li> <li>• Did not know proportion of her financial aid covered by loans or grants nor details of the loans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shy</li> <li>• Found it hard to ask for help</li> <li>• Called professor when in car accident, shocked by focus of professor on completion of school work rather than expressing concern for her welfare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrote letter to nursing school six weeks after terminated from their program; she requested reinstatement; request was denied</li> </ul>
Mark Greeley (White/Poor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wants to work in computers, unclear how to make it happen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talked to a buddy about his community college program in computers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unclear about steps to get GED; took course years ago but not test; does not know if past work will count; unsure how to start again</li> <li>• Filed appeal for unemployment, appeal granted</li> </ul>
Stacey Marshall (African American/Middle Class)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a freshman knew grades of C and C- precluded medical school</li> <li>• Knew precisely the interest rate and types of loans she had accumulated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At mother's insistence, visited advisor in college for help with course selection</li> <li>• Sought advice from doctoral committee and peers</li> <li>• Attended "cold" an educator of color networking event an hour from her home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although had combined household income of around \$100,000, requested and granted a "forbearance" on loans</li> </ul>
<i>Case of Upward Mobility</i> Nick Nevins (White/Working Class)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In high school did not know where to apply to college; was headed toward a low-status state school or community college</li> <li>• Did not know how to interview well for medical school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When offered help, met with high school counselor and Dr. O'Flanagan</li> <li>• After getting C's in midterms first semester of college, made friends with someone who helped him learn to study</li> <li>• "Shy"; did not attend office hours or seek help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Told people in ER he was waitlisted for Columbia; they "were a huge help" in getting him off the waitlist</li> </ul>

Ms. Stanton assured Ms. Carroll she should “not worry” about the math grade.

During my visits to Tara’s well-regarded (but high-poverty) urban elementary school, Ms. Stanton and the school counselor told me that to qualify for admission to Tara’s classroom, children had to be at least two years below grade level in at least one subject. (Tara was at grade level in most subjects, but she struggled in math.) Because no one had mentioned this information to Tara’s mother, Ms. Carroll was unaware of the situation. She was anxious for Tara to do well in school. Although she earned poverty-level wages, Ms. Carroll had spent \$250 on Hooked on Phonics educational materials for her daughter. She proudly told Ms. Stanton about this purchase, but the teacher seemed unimpressed. She stressed the importance of reading to Tara.

Throughout the conference, Ms. Stanton mispronounced Tara’s name, saying “Tie-rah” rather than “Tear-a (rhymes with Sarah).” Ms. Carroll grimaced at these mistakes but said nothing. However, when Ms. Stanton was briefly out of earshot, Ms. Carroll leaned toward me and said, under her breath and with obvious frustration, “It’s Tear-a!” She did not feel comfortable correcting the teacher on this relatively small yet important matter. Nor, in part because the school did not share the information, did she understand the intricacies of Tara’s educational progress. A high school drop-out, Ms. Carroll depended on educational professionals to know how best to educate her child. She did not feel comfortable intervening, even to ask that the teacher pronounce her daughter’s name properly.

When Tara was ready to enter high school, she, like other students in her district, could choose to apply to a number of high schools. She was surprised when she was not accepted at either of the two most competitive high schools:

TC: [Sounding agitated] That’s what I didn’t understand, because my grades were good. . . . I still don’t know to this day why did I not get accepted. I remember when I got the

letter back saying that I didn’t get accepted, I was so upset. I was crying, but I got over it, though.

AL: Do you remember what your grades were?

TC: I know math, that wasn’t my strongest area. But I never failed math, like I always got C’s or maybe I got a D possibly. . . . But as far as English and science, I always had good grades in those classes.<sup>10</sup>

Given the competitive nature of the high schools, a string of C’s would eliminate a student from consideration. The district did not publicize information of this kind on its website, announce it in handouts, or seek other means to ensure its wide distribution. Instead, it was shared informally through parent networks (Kimmelberg and Billingham 2013; Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2014). Neither Tara nor her mother (with whom she was then living) was privy to such networks.

For most of her life, Tara has wanted to be a nurse. At age 30, she described her aspirations this way:

Ever since I was five years old, my dream was becoming a nurse. That was because I used to go [to] church, and my aunt, she was a nurse for the pastor. And I would always see her dressed up in her nurse uniform, and a little nurse hat. She, like, [would] always take care of the pastor, and it looked nice. And, like, she was helping people. . . . [Tara’s voice changes.] And I was like, “Oh, I want that feeling. I want to feel good like that. I want to help people.”

Tara was an ambitious student. She wanted to go to college. Her mother encouraged this desire and was particularly interested in Tara going to the “suburbs” for college rather than to the local city college. But, as when her daughter was in fourth grade, Ms. Carroll left the details of educational matters to school personnel. In Tara’s urban school district, however, the ratio of counselors to high school students was low. Tara turned to other sources to guide her college choices. During the year,

representatives visited her high school and counselors took her on college visits. She applied to seven colleges she was familiar with due to this exposure; she also applied to the local public university her aunt had attended. She was rejected everywhere, an experience she and her mother found deeply hurtful. Neither Tara nor Ms. Carroll was familiar with the complex forms of informal cultural knowledge that lead to finding a good fit between an applicant and a college. For instance, they were unaware of the critical role SAT scores played in college acceptance. Tara applied to schools where median scores were 200 to 300 points above her scores. Such knowledge about finding a good fit, although not confidential, was not available to her.

Tara enrolled in community college “as a last resort.” She was flustered with the fast pace of her anatomy course and did not like the teacher. She did not understand the material but did not feel comfortable asking questions. She simply stopped going to class (without speaking to the teacher or an advisor) and received an F as her final grade. At age 30, she summarized the experience this way:

When I initially started out at community college . . . I didn't fully know about the academic policies [as] far as like withdrawing or dropping a course. Because I was really always a shy student and I was always afraid to ask questions and stuff like that. So instead of me seeking counseling or advising, I just stopped going to that course. And as a result of that, I received an F on my transcript.

As with other educational matters, Tara's mother was not familiar with the details of her troubles with this course, nor did Ms. Carroll appear to feel responsible for the outcome. She provided boundless, enthusiastic pride in her daughter's pursuit of college, but she was not able to help Tara navigate this new environment.

During the years she spent in community college, Tara had a job caring for disabled adults, a car, and an apartment where she

lived on her own. Still determined to become a nurse, after earning her AA, she applied and was admitted to a for-profit, four-year nursing school that cost \$30,000 per year. To reduce expenses, she gave up her apartment and moved into her aunt's house. During her first semester, she was given a large grant (for her first year); she took out loans totaling \$2,500 for one semester. She had a difficult fall term, struggling with emotional problems (she was deeply upset by her brother getting involved in serious trouble) and physical ones (she was in a car accident that totaled her vehicle and left her seriously injured). Tara was unable to attend school for a time. She did not know what steps to take to gain academic accommodations, such as petitioning for an incomplete or for a leave of absence. When she contacted her professors, she was shocked by how “mean” they seemed to be:

Some of the people wasn't really receptive. Their disposition was just like, they just seemed so mean. And I just felt like they just seemed like they wasn't really, um, really sympathetic or empathetic. I just felt like they treated it as a business and that was that. . . . I told [a course professor] I was in a car accident, and she's, “Okay, well, whenever you come back just make sure you get your materials for the next lecture.” I was just like, “Okay, I was in a car accident and you didn't say, ‘You were okay?’” You just told me to have materials for the next lecture.”

Tara's expectations and the realities of the institutional rules of the game were not in sync.

Tara continued to take classes. But, explaining that she was “shy,” she said she “had a difficult time asking questions and speaking up,” even though she knew her grades were borderline:

The policy is in that particular school you cannot fail two nursing classes . . . in order to pass, you had to have a 75 or higher. I had like a 73 point something in one class, and I

think like a 72 something in another class. And so I ended up getting dismissed from the program, which was very devastating.

She was confused by the dismissal:

I just didn't understand why 'cause it wasn't like I was failing tremendously. . . . That hurt me even more. . . . I went through a stage of depression because, of course, that's what I wanted to do for a long time and finally I get the opportunity and I didn't make it.

Not feeling mentally "prepared" for another rejection, Tara waited six weeks before writing a letter to protest her dismissal:

I did talk to one of my instructors 'cause they asked me why did I wait so long to, uh, write a letter. . . . I was going through a lot and mentally I wasn't prepared, and I didn't want to write or try to come back if I wasn't focused 'cause I feel like that was another recipe for disaster. So I did it when I was mentally prepared and when I was ready. . . . I received a letter from the Dean and she pretty much rejected my [request].

Her instructor's inquiry implies that had Tara written her letter sooner, the outcome might have been better. Many students face bumps in the road, and most universities have formal and informal procedures for addressing such difficulties. Faculty typically have discretion in matters involving short-term developments that may threaten a student's academic performance. But professors want to be apprised of these conditions as soon as they occur, not late in the semester. For serious problems, most institutions require more formal steps, in which sequence is crucial and deadlines are rigid. Tara did not know what policies were in place at her institution. She did not make inquiries or ask for help, and no one at her school offered her assistance.

After being dismissed, Tara worked full-time. She then applied and was admitted to yet another nursing school. This one was an

accredited, two-year, hospital-based nursing program that cost \$25,000. The program awards an RN degree (but not a combined RN/BA, which most hospitals now require for employment).<sup>11</sup> When I interviewed her, Tara was in her first year of this program. She was no longer employed full-time, but she worked two shifts (16 hours) every weekend. She said she was "more disciplined" in her studies now. Her knowledge of key institutional dynamics remained limited, however. For example, she was unclear about important aspects of her financial package, including the interest rate and payment terms of her loans, which were being deferred while she attended school.

Tara had grit and determination. But as Table 3 reveals, these resources were not coupled with the same forms of cultural knowledge the middle-class youth had (discussed in the section on Stacey Marshall). Nonetheless, she was excited about her future. When I asked her how her life was going, she replied, smiling:

So far everything is going great. I'm just very excited 'cause . . . ever since I was a kid, I always talked about becoming a nurse. I finally got that opportunity to pursue my dream and become a nurse and I'm in school. . . . I'm just excited that I'm taking the necessary steps towards my degree in nursing.

Many factors led to Tara's challenges. Nonetheless, a student from a middle-class home with similar academic weaknesses might have avoided being dismissed from the first nursing program by being able to gain educational accommodations.

## **OVERWHELMED BY BUMPS IN THE ROAD: EXAMPLES FROM OTHER WORKING-CLASS AND POOR YOUNG ADULTS**

The crucial role of cultural knowledge—knowing the rules of the game, how to ask for

help, and how to gain institutional accommodations—was also apparent in the lives of the other working-class and poor young adults. They all experienced bumps in the road. In many instances, the complex, bureaucratic nature of the institutions they confronted overwhelmed these young adults and undercut their efforts to manage the challenges they faced. And, unlike the middle-class youths who depended on their parents for assistance, these young people negotiated life on their own.

Consider Katie Brindle. A white mother of four children by the age of 28, Katie grew up in a poor family and learned to fend for herself at an early age. But when she decided to enroll in a community college course, she very quickly lost patience with the school's sign-up procedures:

I don't know how to [do it on my phone]—I need to go to the school, and tell them, "Look, I enrolled. I need you to help." . . . They want me to schedule a placement test. And instead of just calling them and scheduling it, they want me to go through nine different steps to do a placement test. Like, are you serious? Why do you want me to do all this online, when I can call you, and we can have a conversation? You set a date and time, and I show up with my ID and a damn pencil.

The "nine different steps" proved too much for Katie. She tabled her college plans.

Others also reported difficulty in managing organizational challenges. Mark Greeley, a young white man from a poor family, has worked in a Safeway grocery store for 10 years. He told me that what he really wanted was a job "working with computers," but he had no more specific goal than that (e.g., he seemed unable to distinguish between an interest in computer repair versus programming). Despite his long tenure, Mark had recently briefly lost his job at Safeway. As he explained when he was 30, he came to work late because of unavoidable delays on public transportation. His angry manager called him

into his office and said, "Yeah, if I was 21 without a high school diploma, I'd be scared to lose my job, too." Hearing this insult, Mark "snapped" and threatened to "beat up" the man. Although this reaction—threatening the manager with physical harm—is consistent with how some working-class men handle insults at work (Lubrano 2004), it did not, of course, comply with organizational policy. Mark was fired.<sup>12</sup> When the store was bought by a new owner three months later, he was subsequently rehired, but the conflict had the potential to derail his life. Overall, he felt stymied in his life. Filing an appeal for an unemployment claim displayed important cultural knowledge, but in other key ways, Mark had difficulty maneuvering institutions. For example, getting his driver's license was a major life challenge he was seeking to conquer, and he did not know how to make his desire to work with computers a reality.

The poor and working-class young adults also had difficulty advancing their careers. Harold McAllister, an African American young man who grew up in a poor home, faced this problem. After working in a TGI Fridays restaurant for 10 years, he felt he was being passed over for promotion while others, who had been there for less time, were selected. He did not discuss this view with the manager. Rather, not trusting his bosses and convinced he was not their "type," he quit (see also Levine 2013). This one moment ended up being pivotal. Harold was soon drawn into "running the streets," dealing crack cocaine. He was arrested twice; he insisted that in the second arrest the drugs were planted by the police. Hence, when he was 28 and 29, he spent 16 months in prison because he could not make bail. In the end, the second case was one of dozens of cases dismissed by the District Attorney due to evidence of illegal activities by the arresting officers. (Harold pled guilty to the first felony and was released with credit for time served, but he was bothered by the injustice of the second arrest.) At 30, he had returned to "running the streets" and lived a life with few formal institutional ties. He lacked a driver's

license and a bank account, because these required showing a copy of his birth certificate, which he did not have. He could have attained a copy, but he was frustrated by the bureaucracy of city hall:

I'm like stuck, and then I don't have the patience to go down nowhere and fill out everything. See the streets make you lazy, and I like to pay my way to the front. I don't like to wait for nothing. I'm so impatient. It's like I can't wait. If I'm not number one, I can't be number 73. I can't do that.

When he needed an ID, he borrowed one from a friend. "It just won't be me on the ID," he said. Harold paid dearly for his lack of specific types of cultural knowledge: he was not comfortable initiating a discussion about promotion and so abandoned a steady job; and his frustration with bureaucracies led him to forgo two key components of adulthood—a driver's license and a bank account.

In summary, the working-class and poor youth had incomplete understandings of how institutions worked, had difficulty negotiating conflicts at work, felt deeply constrained in asking for help, and often failed when they sought individualized accommodations from institutions. They felt frustrated and powerless when they could not get what they saw as reasonable accommodation to their individualized preferences. If the community college where Katie hoped to enroll had been more flexible or city hall more efficient, their lives might have had different outcomes. But given the bureaucratic nature of the institutions they confronted, and their own limited cultural resources, such accommodations were unlikely.

## **CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE TO THE RESCUE: STACEY MARSHALL**

When the children in the original study were 10 years old, parents in the 36 middle-class families interviewed displayed deep cultural knowledge, assiduously gathered information

regarding institutional practices, and intervened in their children's lives early and often. This pattern was powerfully revealed during the in-depth interviews with these parents. More importantly, in the middle-class families who participated in the ethnographic portion of the study, the pattern persisted over time and was readily observed when the children were 10 years old, 19 to 20 years old, and 30 years old.

The utility of middle-class parents' extensive cultural knowledge about educational institutions emerges clearly when we contrast Tara's experience with that of Stacey Marshall, a middle-class African American young woman almost exactly Tara's age. When Stacey was 10, her mother had detailed information about how schools operated. Although Ms. Marshall, an African American woman with a master's degree in math, held a demanding professional position and commuted 90 minutes roundtrip daily, she worked hard to "stay on top" of her two daughters' lives outside as well as inside the home. She knew of the existence and purpose of the gifted program at Stacey's school, the criteria for entrance, the availability of private tutoring, the names and prices of math-enrichment summer camps, and the pros and cons of various gymnastics programs and horseback riding programs.<sup>13</sup> Ms. Marshall's knowledge was based on research she did and on the social networks she maintained with other mothers ("the grapevine"). She activated the social capital she accumulated. When she needed to find the ideal gymnastics program for Stacey, for instance, she deliberately began "listening to some of the parents."

I started putting my ear to the grapevine, and I heard a number of parents mention, "Well, if the kid really likes gymnastics, you send them to Wright's."

Similarly, Ms. Marshall was assertive in her interactions with school professionals. When Stacey barely missed the cutoff for entrance into the school's gifted program, Ms. Marshall paid to have her daughter tested

privately. When Stacey's score remained two points shy of the cutoff, Ms. Marshall lobbied school officials. Stacey was admitted to the program.

I interviewed Stacey's mother after Stacey had completed her freshman year of college at the University of Maryland. It was apparent that Ms. Marshall had remained very active in her daughter's life, although she noted she was trying to wean Stacey from overdependence. Ms. Marshall had grown frustrated with Stacey's late-night telephone calls and seemingly constant requests for advice. When Stacey entered college, she had been determined to become a pediatrician, but during freshman year, she earned a series of C and C- grades in her pre-med courses. Drawing on her own extensive knowledge of complex institutional practices, Ms. Marshall advised her daughter to drop calculus ("you don't want your GPA to get too low") and to seek help by meeting with a campus advisor:

I said, "Look, you have got to get out of calculus. Because first semester, you don't want your GPA to get too low, because then you can never dig yourself out of it." And so she was calling me about "What should I take?" . . . "In the meantime, you have an academic advisor. . . ." I really stressed with her that *she* needed to establish communication with those people. I said, "You need to call Sarah. Call Sarah, set up an appointment, and *go to talk to her*. Talk to her about your major. And see what advice she can give to you. That is what she is being paid for."

She wanted Stacey to be more assertive in acting on her own behalf. Put differently, Ms. Marshall was training her daughter in help-seeking behavior with professionals in institutions (and cultivating a sense of entitlement). Ms. Marshall saw help-seeking as a valuable life skill that Stacey needed to develop for herself.

Ms. Marshall was successful. Despite struggling academically as a freshman, Stacey quickly learned the rules of the game. Unlike Tara, she knew that a C grade was

unacceptable and would preclude acceptance to medical school:

I was just struggling. I was like getting C, C- and I was like, "What med school's gonna accept me with like C-'s? I'm gonna have to retake all this stuff."

Stacey's sophomore year was much more successful, as she explained to me during an interview in 2014:

Sophomore year of college . . . basketball-wise that was my breakout like season. I made All Conference First Team. It was just really good. I met a boy, you know, fell in love, all those fun things. I was doing well in school. I had a, I finally figured out by the time I had declared a major, I figured out that I wanted to major in Africana Studies and kind of put the dream of being a pediatrician like, like [I] got over that and had a new dream to, you know, get my PhD. And I followed through on it, so just—it was a, like important year.

By her sophomore year, Stacey had accumulated her own body of cultural knowledge. She knew that a medical school would not accept her with grades of C-. She put aside her dream of becoming a pediatrician. Drawn to the humanities, she majored in Africana studies, established connections with professors, and moved ahead. She won a sportsmanship award in college and was invited to play basketball in Europe after graduation. She chose, instead, to go directly to graduate school (in Africana studies) at Ohio State. While in graduate school, she met her husband, Brian (who is biracial), online. Stacey's cultural and, especially, occupational knowledge deepened as she learned how to do research, successfully applied for grants, and traveled to other continents. After being awarded her doctorate, she moved to the Northeast where her husband was settled in a job he "loved."

Of course, not every aspect of Stacey's life has gone smoothly. In addition to her potentially disastrous decision to pursue pre-med

courses as a college freshman, Stacey struggled emotionally when her sister, Fern, was arrested in conjunction with a shooting committed by Fern's then-boyfriend. Although Fern was ultimately cleared, her arrest was deeply distressing to the entire Marshall family. Stacey also had a heavy debt load, as did Brian. She accumulated student loans during graduate school; he still had college debts to repay. Although their combined income was almost \$100,000, their combined debt was around \$90,000. Their home had lost value; Stacey said they were "underwater." But, she displayed institutional expertise in negotiating institutions. For example, when faced with daycare bills of \$1,000 per month, she arranged for her loans to be placed on "forbearance." She also knew precisely the interest rates, terms, and duration of each loan.

Stacey was just turning 30 when I interviewed her, during one of her frequent visits to her parents' home. She had just taken a new job as an administrator in the athletic department of a respected public university. She and Brian and their 2-year-old son were going to live on campus; the couple would be resident advisors. When I asked Stacey how her life was going, she smiled broadly and spoke excitedly:

I think it's going really, really great. I have a lot to be excited about. . . . I think I'm gonna be exposed to an amazing place and Brian will be [too], when he's there. And then, at the same token, it's a little bit anxiety [provoking] right now—with how everything's gonna work. But I'll figure it out. That's life.

I was struck by how thoroughly Stacey seemed to have learned the lessons her mother taught her. She had extensive social networks with high school friends from the racially diverse public high school she had attended, dorm friends from college, athletic friends from her college basketball team, graduate school friends, relatives, and family friends. She knew how to "network." Making use of weak ties helped her get her first job, which

was in an elite high school. From there, she transitioned to her new position.

Many factors contributed to Stacey's success. She was a talented athlete, won a college basketball scholarship, and studied extremely hard in graduate school. But in addition to her hard work, she benefitted from having adults closely monitoring her progress (even as a young adult) and from having rich, varied, and extensive cultural resources. She was deeply grateful to her parents and appreciative of the support they provided. When she talked about that support, however, she referred to *emotional* support and to their physical presence at her games and other important events:

My mom is patient. . . . [And] my parents always put that effort in to be [there], to whatever, whether it was [a] sporting event, which most of the time it was, but my mom was always at my chorus stuff when I did that. . . . And I was really glad that they were both there to see me defend my dissertation.

Her parents' far-reaching knowledge about higher education, and her mother's "hands on" guidance of her education, including in college, were powerful forms of help. But, in part because her mother had acted in this fashion for her entire life, her mother's actions were so natural and invisible that Stacey was only vaguely aware of her mother's help in navigating institutions. Instead, she stressed her *emotional* support. The working-class and poor young people also benefitted from parents' love and emotional support, but their love did not smooth the pathway in complex institutions (Lareau and Cox 2011).

## SMOOTHING OUT BUMPS IN THE ROAD: EXAMPLES FROM OTHER MIDDLE-CLASS YOUNG ADULTS

In contrast to the working-class and poor young adults, who appeared to be in charge of their own lives, at the age of 19 or 20 the



middle-class youth remained heavily dependent on their parents, speaking to them regularly, and consulting them on decisions large and small. For example, while he was in college, Garrett Tallinger called home several times per week and regularly discussed major and minor life decisions with his parents, including his choice of major. Alexander Williams, whose mother had worked tirelessly to enrich his life when he was in elementary school, continued to benefit from her efforts in his college career at Columbia University. Ms. Williams contacted a community college to find out what courses were available for Alexander to take during the summer after his freshman year in college, and she helped him make sure Columbia would accept the summer courses he chose. She also asked colleagues about potential internships and helped her son arrange to be a summer volunteer in a doctor's office.

Of course, the middle-class youth sometimes resisted their parents' help. As a third-grader, Melanie Handlon had a learning disability that her mother tried to manage through active involvement in Melanie's schooling. Ms. Handlon's intensive intervention continued as her daughter grew older, but it did not always yield the desired outcome. For example, although Melanie had enrolled in a community college course, she often did not attend class, despite her mother's many cajoling reminders. Melanie assured her parents she had withdrawn from the course, but she had not done so formally and thus received an F on her transcript. Unlike Ms. Carroll, Ms. Handlon appeared to feel humiliated by this grade; she felt she should have intervened more.

The efforts undertaken by Alexander's and Melanie's mothers provide evidence of continuity over time in parents'—especially mothers'—interventions in children's lives, as well as middle-class mothers' deep belief that these interventions were their responsibility. In addition, as Stacey's experiences indicate, these young adults appeared to embrace the practices they had seen their parents adopt as they gathered information about institutions' formal and informal rules of the game and

built extensive social networks. A crucial element in this process was the development of their repertoire of cultural knowledge about how institutions worked.

## UPWARD MOBILITY AND THE ROLE OF CULTURAL GUIDES: THE CASE OF NICK NEVINS

The *Unequal Childhoods* dataset did not provide any cases of dramatic upward mobility.<sup>14</sup> To highlight the crucial role of cultural guides in the achievement of upward mobility, I now present a case from the mobility study (Curl et al. 2012) mentioned at the beginning of this address. Using the case of Nick Nevins, a young adult from a working-class family, I show how cultural guides helped him learn the rules of the game in institutions of higher education and assisted him in gaining individualized accommodation. Strikingly, Nick's success at pivotal points resulted not from specific efforts of his own but from efforts others offered to make on his behalf.

Nick, who is now in his mid-30s, is tall and blond; when we met for an interview, he wore pressed khaki pants, a blue oxford shirt, and loafers; even after a long day, he looked crisp. Nick is an anomaly. Although he comes from a working-class family, he is now an endocrinologist at an Ivy League institution (Attewell and Lavin 2007; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). There is no doubt he is academically talented. But, his success also reflects help he received from cultural guides at three pivotal moments. Without the intervention of cultural guides, he might not have been able to benefit from his academic prowess. His story should not be seen as one of overcoming deficits, however. Nick viewed his family background as having provided him with key resources, and he described himself as grateful for his upbringing.

Nick's father graduated from high school, joined the Navy, and later became a machinist; his mother dropped out of high school but later earned a GED and worked as a "lunch lady" in a public school. Nick is the first in

his family to go to college. He earned a GPA of 4.0, had very high SAT scores (i.e., 1400 of 1600, or approximately 2100 today), and was valedictorian of his high school, but neither he nor his parents were well informed about college. A high school counselor intervened:

He knew that I had always had an interest actually in medicine and . . . got me in touch with a guy whose name was Sam O'Flanagan. He was [a] thoracic surgeon at [a local hospital] and he had a sort of track record of helping high school kids basically with interest in medicine and sort of choosing a college.

Given the Nevins's unfamiliarity with the college application process, Dr. O'Flanagan's help was valuable, even essential:

It was a pretty amazing experience actually because we didn't really have a great sense for how to start, you know, that process. So we had a meeting with him . . . like me and my parents and he and his wife actually all met thinking about a list of schools, thinking about how to apply. They helped to read my essay for me and helped me revise it. It was a huge help for us.

Nick described his parents as "very grateful" for this help:

They were very grateful, because . . . they didn't know exactly. . . . My wife, for example, was a good counterpoint. She has stories from when they went [to visit colleges]. They had a list. As a family [they] went on a tour one summer and they drove to one college and looked at it and drove to the next. It was like they spent a week doing that, writing down [what they thought]. Uh, and, we, we, you know, we didn't and, um, I don't think my [parents], they, they knew. So I think they were grateful to have that assistance.

Nick had been reluctant to consider Ivy League schools because of the cost. Dr. O'Flanagan, however, knew what Nick did

not, namely that Ivy League financial aid packages would make the final costs comparable to those of state schools:

Dr. O'Flanagan . . . was helpful . . . in helping me think about . . . options. [Dr. O'Flanagan said,] "We'll see what they offer—what the deal is." He was good in saying like, "You should look at . . . Ivy League places and expensive places but also we'll make sure that we have a range," which I think was helpful. I remember being surprised when the financial aid came in and actually it was very good here [Columbia] and there really wasn't that much of a cost difference between the different schools, but I remember being surprised by that.

Nick was accepted at SUNY-Stony Brook, Columbia, and three other colleges. Because the cost of the state schools and Columbia was similar, he chose Columbia. As a freshman, he was lucky to be assigned a roommate with a family background similar to his own. Nick recognized, though, that he was in a "different world":

[Columbia was an] introduction to the fact that it's sort of a different world. There is clearly a big segment of the Columbia undergraduate population that comes from a much more affluent world and, that comes out.

Although he had been an outstanding student at his high school and had A's in all three AP courses his school offered, Nick realized, in retrospect, that "it was not a very academic high school." His first set of midterms brought a flood of C's. This was a shock. If such grades had persisted, they would have ended his chances of attending medical school. Fortunately, he made friends with a young man—someone who was different from him socially—and they became "study partners." Observing his friend's approach to studying, Nick "started to learn what he was doing. [I] really had to figure out how to study." His grades rose. Majoring in biology, he graduated with a GPA of 3.94.

Nevertheless, Nick said he often felt like an outsider: “I wasn’t going out to eat, wasn’t going out to the bar, wasn’t wearing brand [names], expensive clothing, or whatever.” The cavalier attitudes of other students in his dorm angered him. Nick valued his own, quite different, upbringing. He was hesitant as he spoke, but he valued his “groundedness”:

[M]y upbringing has been a great strength in many ways because I think that, um, you know, I understand what the value of a dollar is. . . . I think that’s good. I mean, that in many respects . . . there’s a groundedness I think to some of the things I learned from my background that I think has been a strength for me.

He was appalled at the helplessness and dependence he witnessed among many Ivy League undergraduates. For example, in doing his work-study job of providing “computer support for the dorm,” he discovered other students’ apparent helplessness with basic tasks:

I remember thinking . . . “God, these people have all these brand new fancy computers and they don’t even know how to open it up.” . . . But my roommate was good because he didn’t come with a computer. He was like, “My parents said there’s a computer lab.”

Nick and his roommate had habits of resourcefulness that he felt were missing in his more affluent peers.

Like Tara Carroll, who described herself as “shy,” Nick characterized himself as “never [having] been good at taking advantage” of advising, visiting professors during office hours, or seeking help. He attributed this to “some notion of independence or ‘I can, I can figure this out.’” Stacey Marshall and other middle-class youth frequently visited their professors and teaching assistants to get advice or help. Nick’s approach meant he did not receive the same kind of personalized assistance.

Despite his high grades and MCAT scores, he had another moment when he faltered, during the interview portion of the medical school application process:

I think I interview poorly. I mean, I think I’ve gotten a lot better at it over time, but I’ve always been a shy person. But I’m also, [I] have a big ego. I did well on the MCATS, I have a good GPA, I was coming from Columbia, I had some research experience. I thought, “This is going to be great. I’m going to do well. I’m going to get into med school.” So I applied to probably only five or six med schools, um, Columbia, Harvard, SUNY-Stony Brook, Albany, and one other.

Things did not go as Nick had assumed they would:

I thought this is going to be fine. So I got accepted to SUNY-Stony Brook, rejected at Harvard, [and] initially, waitlisted at Columbia. I was like, “Oh, my God!” I had my crisis. But I was very fortunate in that I had another work-study job, with the emergency department [at Columbia]. . . . They sort of said, “You’re on the waitlist.” [They] talked to some people and they really helped me actually a lot. That was a huge help.

In describing his ER friends’ intervention as “a huge help,” Nick reveals his belief that his informal networks with these doctors made all the difference in facilitating his admission to Columbia’s medical school, as they helped him get admitted from the waitlist.

Hence, in Nick’s experience of upward mobility, having guides who helped him navigate key steps was crucial. He had a high school counselor who actively and aggressively intervened in the college application process; a college friend who taught him how to study; and people in the emergency room who knew how to intervene on his behalf and helped him get admitted to medical school.

These guides all played essential roles, but as Nick rightly noted, without the intervention of his high school counselor, the rest of

his life trajectory would likely have unfolded very differently. Just as Tara did not know how to get help in college, Nick and his family had little understanding of the college application process, and neither he nor his parents would have initiated a request for help with the applications. Instead, Nick probably would have enrolled at a nearby, low-status, four-year college or at the local community college:

In retrospect, if there hadn't been an outside person . . . to step in and say, "Someone should help you. This is the person. You should meet with him," I don't know [what] would of happened. I come from a . . . family full of sort of stubborn, independent people, and, you know, the traits that I see, like at that time . . . were keeping me from saying, "Hey someone. Where should I apply?" My parents, I think, are the same way. They are hesitant to ask people for help, because they figure that they'll take care of it.

Here Nick makes explicit a form of cultural reproduction common among other young adults but frequently left unstated: he approached institutions in the same way his parents did.

His journey has not been without financial and emotional costs. He must repay \$25,000 in loans from his undergraduate days and \$135,000 from medical school. The world he lives in now often leaves him feeling "isolated" and estranged from aspects of his past, including his family's racially insensitive comments, meat-based diet, and bewilderment about the attraction of international travel (Curl et al. 2012). Still, he emphasized that he viewed his upbringing as valuable. He considered it a strength in his clinical work:

I think it really helps me with relating with patients actually because the way I relate with my family is more typical to our patients than, than my peers'. So I think that's helpful actually. I mean, I think that that's one of my great skills as a clinician is

that I think I relate well to people and I think I know how to communicate with people in a way that they can understand and [in a way] that's approachable. I do think that my upbringing has helped with that.

In summary, Nick's upbringing had important strengths, but it did not provide him with the knowledge commonly associated with a middle-class upbringing—resources that would have helped him get institutions to work for him. He was, however, able to secure cultural guides at three crucial life moments. The help these mentors provided Nick was essential: they taught him the requisite cultural knowledge in two instances (where he should apply to college and how to study) and intervened on his behalf in a third (helping him move off the waitlist at Columbia).

## DISCUSSION

Sociological analysis illuminates the processes that lead to different outcomes for different groups of people. Indeed, male college graduates are predicted to live nine years longer than men who drop out of high school (National Center for Health Statistics 2011). Educational achievements also are deeply shaped by parents' class positions (Alexander et al. 2014). Yet, there is some upward and downward mobility (Hout and Janus 2011), and upward mobility dramatically alters mothers' childrearing (Attewell and Lavin 2007). Life also contains missteps. Young people miss deadlines, fail a class, decide they do not like their career path, or have their hearts broken. Nonetheless, the contingent nature of life advancement has not been sufficiently developed in our sociological models (Lamont et al. 2014).

Not all missteps are equally consequential. As returns to education have grown (Hout 2012), educational success looms large in any pathway of advancement. As I have shown, educational success is not only about substantive knowledge and test performance. Students also need to manage their education by complying with educational organizations'

rules. Many educational institutions have similar rules and regulations, and informal knowledge of these shared patterns is valuable. Although there are always new developments, much of this informal knowledge appears to be stable. (For example, Stacey Marshall's mother could help her daughter because the rules of college had not changed much in 20 years.) Ms. Marshall advised her daughter to drop a class at a crucial moment to preserve her GPA. But for the uninitiated, educational institutions are complex, bureaucratic, and unclear. When Tara Carroll attended college, she was persistent and determined, but she did not have her mother hounding her on the phone at 11 p.m. at night to go to see her adviser. Similarly, Katie Brindle could not figure out the "nine steps" to register. Many memoirs of the upwardly mobile report key pieces of cultural knowledge that were generally unavailable to young adults from working-class families (e.g., Sotomayor 2014). In the context of these complex, obscure institutional dynamics, cultural guides are invaluable. As in Nick Nevins's case, guides can shine a bright light on a complex system and tell one how to proceed.

These forms of cultural knowledge are not the same as academic knowledge. Nor should they be seen as the same as non-cognitive knowledge (and soft skills) that are often defined in terms of characteristics such as persistence, self-control, and sociability or, put differently, grit or character (Duckworth et al. 2007; Hurrell et al. 2013; KIPP 2014; Moss and Tilly 1996). Rather, they consist of knowledge of the informal and formal rules of institutions, strategies for gaining individualized accommodations, and the timing and requirements for implementing any request for accommodation. As Weininger and I argue elsewhere (2008), these forms of knowledge, which can help individuals advance in dominant institutions, should be seen as cultural capital.

My argument aims to illuminate the role of noneconomic forces in both key life transitions and the little moments that build up to these transitions. Of course, money mattered

in the lives of all these young adults. It mattered for paying tuition, buying books, and meeting other school expenses. It also mattered when working-class youth wanted places of their own and needed rent and deposit money, had healthcare bills, or faced mounting childcare costs. Indeed, economic positions are linked to many aspects of daily life, including social networks and cultural repertoires (DiPrete et al. 2011; DiTomaso 2013; Fiske and Markus 2012). What my argument seeks to bring into sharper focus is the important role that knowledge, expertise, and cultural skills also play in navigating institutions and shaping life paths. Middle-class youth had parents who began coaching them as young children and continued to do so as they grew into adulthood. They had many adults showering them with advice (Hardie forthcoming). This approach fostered dependence combined with a sense of entitlement and transmitted the cultural skills needed to get institutions to act on their behalf. By contrast, the working-class and poor youth exhibited American individualism. When something needed to be done, they tried to do it themselves. When they faced challenges, they often felt uncomfortable and did not seek help; nor were they usually offered help. In some cases, they were overwhelmed or confused. Having the ability to persist in the face of adversity did not solve these particular problems (Black 2009).<sup>15</sup>

What can make a difference is offers of help from middle-class cultural guides (see, especially, Stanton-Salazar 1997). This pattern is documented in other research on upward mobility. Vallejo (2012) reports that teachers and employers are a crucial source of aid for upwardly mobile Mexican Americans. Gonzales (2011, forthcoming) finds students receive valuable assistance from teachers, counselors, and staff in educational institutions. Stephens and colleagues (2014) show that providing first-generation college students with valuable knowledge of how to approach college can close an achievement gap in grades. Lareau and Calarco (2012) report some working-class mothers receive

mentorship from middle-class mothers on how to gain accommodation from educators. In his classic essay, Turner (1960) discusses the notion of “sponsored mobility” offered by educators, but this key concept has not received sufficient attention in recent decades. While there is ample evidence of the utility of help-seeking practices among middle-class youth and the alignment between these practices and institutional norms and expectations, it is also important for researchers to critically assess key practices that are touted as highly desirable. Researchers need to include negative dimensions of the same practices—for example, when students badger professors to change grades, demand accommodations for their vacation travel during the semester, and otherwise act in a difficult fashion. The point here is not that working-class young adults are behaving incorrectly when faced with intransigent bureaucratic institutions. Rather, the task is to highlight how forms of cultural knowledge learned at home are unequally valuable in a specific context.

Institutions, however, can also make a difference in facilitating the success of working-class youth. The City University of New York, for example, has created a CUNY START program, whereby students can take the remedial courses they need for entrance to the CUNY system. This is an intensive, low-cost program in which students take all of the remedial courses together. After introduction of the program, an evaluation report found that the pass rate for students who had completed their remedial courses shot up from 5 to 31 percent (CUNY Office of Academic Affairs 2014). In this and related programs (Tough 2014), first-generation college students are more likely to continue to study, accumulate credits, and graduate. Hence, institutional scaffolding can help students develop the requisite skills to thrive in higher education. Nonetheless, these programs are unlikely to instill a level of ease that middle-class youth display in comparable circumstances (Khan 2012). After all, these programs are seeking to impart a specific set of skills. These programs cannot usually inculcate a cultural

logic of childrearing, and a set of taken-for-granted dispositions for how to negotiate daily life, which have been drilled into middle-class children since they were in elementary school (Calarco 2014; Lareau 2011; but see also Horvat and Davis 2011).

As Pallas and Jennings (2009) argue, the advantages associated with social class are cumulative. In describing the lives of the children in *Unequal Childhoods* as they have grown older, I suggest that cultural capital affects life chances through specific events that may not seem significant in real time. In addition to the educational sphere, these contingent moments might be found in a host of other institutions, including healthcare, the world of work, the criminal justice system, and the political sphere. Our sociological models of the transmission of advantage can also be better. There is ample evidence that many successful people have rejections and setbacks, but these missteps are not woven into sociological models. Conceptually, we need to pay special attention to these near misses and setbacks, as well as the educational and occupational successes of young adults. As we draw these portraits, our models will ideally always detail the “rules of the game” in key institutions *and* look at how young people use their knowledge to maneuver through these institutions. After all, individual effort and grit can only carry one so far. In particular institutional moments, cultural knowledge is crucial. And in some instances, cultural training is not learned on-the-job as an adult, but appears to be linked to lessons in childhood. There are important parallels to the lessons children learn in elementary school about how the world works and how they should act as young adults. Showing the long shadow of social class on life destinations, as well as the experience of upward mobility, remains one of the most important tasks for sociologists in the future.

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## Notes

1. The small number of cases influenced my decision to focus exclusively on social class in this address. Hence, I focus particularly on the experience of two black women of different social class positions. Nevertheless, in Lareau (2011) I discuss how the significance of race clearly grew for the young black men in ways consistent with other literature (for accounts of the interweaving of race and class, see, e.g., Lacy 2007; Pattillo 2013).
2. Research in the sociology of work on soft skills typically focuses on employment-related skills (e.g., interacting with customers) rather than generalized cultural knowledge about how institutions work (Hurrell et al. 2013).
3. The Williams family (middle class) severed ties in 2005 (Lareau 2011:318–19). I received no response to a letter of inquiry I sent in 2014 to Melanie Handlon (middle class) and to Tyrec Taylor and Wendy Driver (both working class) at their parents' home address.
4. Usually, I brought the families a framed photograph taken when their now-adult child was 10; sometimes, I also brought along a dessert.
5. At the time, Curl (2013) was collecting data for a related study on upward mobility for her dissertation, which she subsequently finished.
6. Although I had a team of research assistants to help in the data collection for *Unequal Childhoods*, I collected all of the data for the two follow-ups. But see Lareau and Weininger (2008) and Lareau and Cox (2011) for earlier analyses of the follow-up data as well as Lareau (2011).
7. Per Bourdieu, middle-class youth were more knowledgeable about the *field*. A discussion of field is beyond the scope of this address (see, e.g., Salaz and Zavisca 2007), as is a discussion of habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). For a recent discussion of class differences in the habitus of young adults in terms of their dispositions for the future, see Tevington (2014).
8. Multiple factors likely contributed to this outcome. Melanie's mother (who was most active in childrearing) had only two years at a community college, and she had difficulty negotiating with institutions. Melanie had a learning disability. She also weighed about 100 pounds more than the recommended weight for her frame, although the role this may have played is not clear. She was admitted to a four-year college, but she declined to attend. At age 20, her goals were to be married, be a stay-at-home wife, and have four children. She did not have a boyfriend at the time. At 30, she did not respond to the request for an interview.
9. Space constraints preclude the presentation of additional cases of upward mobility. Still, the key purpose is to use this case study for conceptual development (Burawoy 1998; Luker 2008). For additional discussions of the experience of upward mobility, see Curl (2013); Curl and colleagues (2012); Lubrano (2004); Vallejo (2012); and, for blocked mobility, Silva (2012).
10. In some instances, to improve readability, I have deleted false starts, "um," "uh," "like," "you know," and other filler words if they did not appear to be particularly meaningful. In a few instances, I shifted the order of the sentences.
11. Most hospitals strongly prefer a nurse with a bachelor's degree. Tara is hoping to get a master's degree one day.
12. Mark challenged the firing. He recounted the story this way: "I filed for unemployment. They denied it. I took them to court. The three managers showed up to court." According to Mark, "None of them could get their story straight. . . . [When] I mentioned to [the judge] what he [the manager] said to me about my high school diploma, [the judge] actually turned to the guy and said, 'What did you expect him to say to you, after that? Like, after you made that comment, what did you expect him to say to you?' And by the time the hearing was over, I was leaving, and the judge went, 'Good luck. You should be seeing your [unemployment check] in about two weeks.'" Three months later, the chain was bought out. Mark applied for a job and was rehired.
13. Mr. Marshall, who had a college degree and worked in a government job, generally complied with his wife's requests and supported her actions, but he did not closely oversee his children's daily lives. His role conforms to patterns among middle-class fathers reported in many other studies (Lareau 2000; but see Friedman 2013).
14. Mark Greeley grew up in a family where his mother worked in a thrift store and received public assistance during his childhood. (While she had a drug problem, he and his siblings lived in foster care.) In high school, his mother worked as an entry-level case worker for the public aid office. Mark dropped out of high school; he has worked in a grocery store. He has never received public assistance. Hence, his position is stronger than his family's situation when he was a child (i.e., he does not receive public assistance). But because he did not have a college education or a highly desirable professional job, I do not consider him to be a case of upward mobility.

15. It is theoretically possible that without sample attrition I might have drawn different conclusions, but this seems unlikely because I have social class data on 10 of the 12 adults at age 30. These results are also consistent with national data (Hout and Janus 2011). More to the point, the purpose of qualitative research is not to describe frequency of patterns, but to illuminate the mechanisms behind patterns to show how these established patterns may unfold.

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