Elite Visions: Privileged Perceptions of Self and Others

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Background/Context: *To date, there has been little attention given to how privilege is produced and enacted. Privilege has been mainly conceptualized as the advantages that one group has over another.*

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: *In this article, the author seeks to move beyond current conceptions of privilege to explore the relationship between advantages and identity formation and to examine the ways in which students with schooling and life advantages actively construct privilege as a dimension or aspect of their identity.*

Research Design: *To explore this connection between advantages and identity, the author examines the understandings of two affluent students attending an elite private high school about the differences in educational experiences between low-income and affluent students. These two students were part of a larger ethnographic study of the lessons that students at elite schools are taught about their place in the world, their relationships with others, and who they are.*

Findings/Results: *The students' understandings reveal their use of particular ideological operations and modes to justify their own advantages in life and schooling, construct between-class divisions, establish within-class solidarity, and rationalize the disadvantages of Others. The author argues that these particular ideological operations and modes are not simply methods or competencies that affluent students know how to use but also formative elements of their respective identities.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *This analysis illustrates the way that these students construct their own privilege not, fundamentally, as what they have, but rather, as who they are.*

I think students [at Parker Day School] are more successful in school because we work harder. Just from the stories I've heard from people who used to go to public schools, students there just

sit around and don't do anything. They don't do homework and don't work in class. They don't listen to teachers. Most of them sleep during class instead of paying attention. It's totally different here. Students work hard 'cause they want to be successful in school. We want to get into good colleges and know we have to work our butts off to get into the really good ones.

— Scott, age 16

Over the past 20 years, scholars writing about privilege have made great strides in increasing general understanding of how privilege works, both in schools and in society at large, to shape lived experience and human practice. This body of work has examined the ways in which so-called naturalized categories such as race, gender, and sexuality are intimately and inextricably involved with issues of power and power differences. Privilege, then, has been perceived as the advantages that one group has over other groups that are granted to them not because of what they have done or not done, but because of the social category (or categories) to which they belong (see Goodman, 2001; Jensen, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Kimmel & Ferber, 2003; Rothenberg, 2002; Wise, 2005).

Peggy McIntosh's (1988) groundbreaking work on White privilege and male privilege is rightly celebrated because she provided both a personal narrative and a theoretical framework to encourage reflection on, and conversation about, the difficult topic of privilege. In her essay on what she called the "invisible knapsack" of privilege, McIntosh argued that one way of understanding how privilege works—and how it is kept invisible—is to examine the way we think about inequality. She claimed that we typically think of inequality from the perspective of the one who suffers the consequences of the subordination or oppression, not the one who receives the benefits; hence, those who receive privilege are not in our focus. As she questioned this common way of thinking about inequality, McIntosh challenged individuals who have privilege to "open their invisible knapsacks," which contain all of benefits that come to them from their social, cultural, and economic positions. She urged them to take a critical look at all the various (and often unconscious) ways they enjoy benefits and advantages that others do not.

We begin to confront privilege, according to McIntosh (1988), by becoming aware of unearned advantage and conferred dominance and by understanding how social locations (e.g., schools, workplaces, and communities) create and maintain privilege for certain groups (e.g., White, heterosexual, male, and affluent). McIntosh argued that the more aware people are of their privilege, the more they can contribute to changing themselves and the privileged locations that they occupy.

Because privilege is rooted primarily in social systems, change does not happen only when individuals change; locations such as schools and workplaces that support privilege must change as well. Certain people, of course, need to change to do the work necessary to bring about change, but it is insufficient for individuals simply to change (see Bishop, 2002; Goodman, 2001; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Tappan, 2006).

McIntosh (1988) paved the way for others to examine the complex ways that privilege works through memberships (e.g., Jensen, 2002; Wise, 2002), representations (e.g., Mantsios, 2003), actions (e.g., Johnson, 2001), and language (e.g., Kleinman & Ezzell, 2003) to regenerate and recreate itself, thereby perpetuating structures of domination and subordination (e.g., Jensen, 2005; Wise, 2005). This body of work established a critical foundation for making systems of privilege visible (e.g., Wildman & Davis, 2002) and for revealing the ways in which individuals and institutions work to reinforce and regenerate privilege (e.g., Johnson, 2001).

Nevertheless, there are significant limitations to the current understanding of privilege. By and large, what might be called the "first generation" of scholars of privilege have constructed *commodified* notions of privilege. Privilege, in other words, has been conceptualized and understood extrinsically as something that individuals *have* or *possess* (that is, as something that can fit into a "knapsack"—invisible or otherwise). This commodified conception of privilege, although having generated a useful understanding of privilege as a source of the advantage of some over others, has ultimately fallen short in providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the pervasive nature of privilege as it is woven into the fabric of lived experience.

This article moves beyond this commodified conception of privilege to explore the relationship between advantages and identity formation and to examine the ways in which students with schooling and life advantages actively construct privilege as a dimension or aspect of their identity. Although it acknowledges the theoretical debates on identity (e.g., Dolby, 2000; Hall, 1996), the present article employs an explicitly sociocultural approach to identity. That is, identities are viewed fundamentally as forms of *self-understanding*: "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3). Identities link the personal and the social—they are constituted relationally (see Apple & Weis, 1983; Wexler, 1992); they entail action and interaction in a sociocultural context (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Tappan, 2000, 2005); they are social products that live in and through activity and practice (Holland et al., 1998); and they are always performed and enacted (Butler, 1990, 1991; Tappan, 2005; Willie, 2003).

To explore this connection between advantages and identity, the present study examined the understandings of two White affluent students attending an elite private high school about the differences in educational experiences between low-income and affluent students. The data analyzed for this article were collected as part of a larger 6-year multisite ethnographic study of the *lessons* that students at elite schools are taught about their place in the world, their relationships with others, and who they are (Howard, 2008). The findings of the larger study surfaced what educators, students, and families at elite schools valued most in education and how these values guided ways of knowing and doing that both created high standards for their educational programs and reinforced privilege as a collective identity.

Fieldwork was conducted at a private school located in a suburb of a large Northeastern city, two elite private schools located in a midsize Midwestern city, and one public school located in a small affluent town in the Midwest. Howard was an outside researcher at all four schools. His involvement in the school communities was limited to the study. At each school, he observed one teacher's class approximately 30 times during a school year and conducted four interviews with that teacher and 2 students in the class. Only gender and willingness to participate in the study were considered in the selection of the students who were interviewed at each school.

The data reported in this article were generated from interviews with two students, Nicole[1] and Scott, at Parker Day School, the third site of the larger study. Nicole and Scott showed more interest and were more frank and open in discussing social class differences in schooling than were the other students participating in this larger study. Their willingness to discuss these issues so extensively provided the opportunity for in-depth exploration of how these two affluent students understand their own life and schooling advantages and the disadvantages of Others.[2] Moreover, their narratives reflect, in more detail, the other student participants' understandings of these issues.

METHOD: QUESTIONING PRIVILEGE

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

Nicole and Scott were interviewed four times over the course of a full school year. The average duration of the interviews was 50 minutes. Howard conducted all interviews at the school outside class time. The questions were selected for the interviews so as not to trigger superficial replies from the students. The interview methods developed by

Brantlinger (1993) were useful in composing questions to elicit reflective information from the students. The questions were open ended to encourage students to elaborate on their responses. During the interviews, students were asked repeatedly to clarify points raised in their answers and to explain their perspectives in more detail. The interviews consisted of two stages of questioning.

Stage 1. This initial stage consisted of two interviews. These interviews explored Nicole's and Scott's general feelings and attitudes toward school (e.g., what they liked and did not like about school, what opinions they held of their teachers) and themselves as students. They were asked about their families' attitudes toward education, their academic, athletic, and personal interests, and their college expectations and future plans. They were also asked to provide character sketches of the typical teacher and typical student at Parker and to provide a metaphor that describes what it is like being a student at Parker. Similar to research by Brantlinger (2003), these first two interviews were designed partly to gauge whether Scott and Nicole would bring up their life and schooling advantages on their own.

Stage 2. The two interviews in the second stage focused on the students' perceptions of people outside their own social class group and the differences in school circumstances and outcomes between low-income and affluent students (e.g., what contact they had with people living in poverty, how their experiences in school are different from and similar to the experiences of such students). In this stage, Nicole and Scott were directed to talk specifically about their life and schooling advantages and the disadvantages of Others. During the final interview, the students were also provided transcripts of the previous three interviews for review and given an opportunity to ask questions and give feedback about the overall interview process. The researcher also discussed with the students the primary themes that had emerged from initial analysis of the first three interviews. Students were asked to provide their thoughts about these initial themes, and suggestions for interpreting their responses in all four interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Analysis of the interviews involved reviewing the students' narratives in search of recurrent themes or response patterns. Emergent themes in their narratives were thematically coded and categorized. Coding entailed reading and rereading transcripts from each student's interviews and noting those statements that indicated their perceptions of their advantages and the

disadvantages of Others; that suggested how they related to others both inside and outside their social class group; and that pointed to the influences of these perspectives and relationships. The analysis made use of Thompson's (1990) modes of ideological operations and symbolic construction strategies to explore the role that ideology plays in establishing and sustaining a particular sense of self. These general modes of ideological operation, and some of their associated strategies, are further defined and elaborated in Table 1, below (adapted from Brantlinger, 2003, p. 37). The table also includes examples of each strategy obtained from the present study's interviews to be described in the sections that follow. Thompson's framework provides a useful lens for viewing how these two students constructed their sense of self.

THE COMMUNITY: A SITE OF PRIVILEGE

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), in her study of "good" high schools, observed during her research at the elite St. Paul's School in New Hampshire that "the incredible beauty, seclusion, and abundance of St. Paul's makes it seem far away from the reality most people know. . . . It is easy to imagine that people might quickly forget the ugly facts of life beyond this serene place" (p. 228). Consistent with her observations, as well as those of other researchers (e.g., Peshkin, 2001), the "ugly" facts and realities of poverty and those living in poverty seem very distant from the life and schooling circumstances of students at Parker Day School. Parker students are clustered in isolated, class-segregated communities. Isolation is fairly consistent in the various spheres of these students' lives. They have little contact with the "ugly" school and life circumstances of Others.

Parker Day School is a private nonsectarian coeducational school located in a midsize Midwestern city. The texture and atmosphere of the landscaped grounds of Parker's 25-acre campus are a far cry from the rundown urban area that surrounds the campus. The school's modern, sophisticated-looking buildings, numerous and spacious fields, swimming pools, tennis courts, and football stadium sit on top of the hill detached from the adjacent community. As the head of school explained to me during our initial meeting, "We are truly in our own little world here. The school was here before [the surrounding community] became such an absolutely horrible place. You wouldn't even know you were near that type of community when you're on our campus."

Parker students do not live in the surrounding communities, but instead live mostly in one of the string of affluent suburban communities just north of the school campus, whose residents are considered

Table 1. Modes of Ideological Operation With Examples From the Present Study

Legitimation	When relations of domination are represented as just and worthy of support **Strategies** -*Rationalization*: Defending particular relations or institutions -*Universalization*: Representing arrangements that serve the interests of some as serving the interests of all **Examples** Nicole and Scott justified a sense of worthiness for their own social class group to position Others as unworthy. Nicole: *I think students at Parker just work harder than students at poor schools and public schools.* Scott: *I think it's bad that we have different education than poor people, but honestly, I think it has to do a lot with how much students care about education. [Parker] knows we all care, and so they take that into account.*
Dissimulation	When relations of domination are concealed, denied, obscured, or represented in ways that deflect attention **Strategies** -*Displacement*: Transferring positive or negative connotations to other individuals **Examples** Scott and Nicole attributed social class distinctions in schooling to the decisions, attitudes, and actions of low-income students and their families to divert attention away from their own school and life advantages. Nicole: *Since [low-income students] aren't going to college, [their parents] don't see the need to make the financial sacrifices to have their kids go to really good schools.* Scott: *In the poor areas, people . . . aren't willing to provide money for schools to make sure that they have the needed resources for a good education.*
Unification	Allows individuals to be embraced in a collective identity, irrespective of any difference or division **Strategies** -*Standardization*: Promoting a certain framework as the shared or acceptable basis of evaluation for all **Examples** Regardless of what individual differences Nicole and Scott may have had with each other and other Parker students, they emphasized the similarities of those within their social class group. Nicole: *Most of the kids [at Parker] are wealthy, so there are certain expectations that are different than at other schools.* Scott: *It costs a pretty hefty sum to go here. Our families pay a lot of money for us to go to this school because we all value education.*
Fragmentation	Dispersal of individuals and groups capable of mounting a challenge to a dominant group **Strategies** -*Differentiation*: Focusing on distinctions or characteristics that disunite individuals and groups -*Expurgation of the Other*: Constructing an enemy so threatening that it must be resisted **Examples** Scott and Nicole repeatedly highlighted how dissimilar Others were to themselves. Scott: *[Low-income students] just sit around and don't do anything [in school]. They don't do homework and don't work in class. They don't listen to teachers. Most of them sleep during class instead of paying attention. It's totally different here.* Nicole: *People in poor areas don't put the same emphasis on education [that we do at Parker].*
Reification	Represents a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were natural, permanent, and outside of time **Strategies** -*Naturalization* or *Essentialization*: Portraying a social creation as the inevitable outcome of innate characteristics -*Eternalization*: Depriving phenomena of social-historical character by emphasizing their permanent, unchanging nature -*Nominalization*: Focusing attention on certain themes at the expense of others who are marginalized or decentered **Examples** Scott and Nicole claimed that low-income students did not value education and were less motivated to do well in school than affluent students. Scott: *Education is one of the top priorities in the families here . . . I don't think it's the same priority for poor people. . . They don't want to succeed.* Nicole: *[Low-income students] don't care about school as much as [Parker students] do.*

"nouveau riche" and liberal by the wealthier and more established communities of the city. The high school enrolls approximately 240 students, of whom 22% are students of color (i.e., 14% African American, 4% Asian American, less than 1% Latino, and 3% unidentified), which is representative of the local private schools, and 44% are female. There is limited financial aid available for tuition. Grants are based on need, merit (academic ability, potential for leadership, and contribution to the total school community), and funds available. Approximately 20% of students receive need-based assistance, and nearly 60% of these students are African American.

Although the public schools in the communities where most Parker students live are well funded and offer strong college preparatory programs, families choose Parker for its smallness (e.g., the average class size is 14 students) and its record of success in helping students gain admission to highly selective colleges. One hundred percent of Parker graduates attend college. During the year of the study, 18 graduates went on to attend Ivy League colleges (i.e., approximately 28% of the graduating class), and the vast majority of the other graduates attended some of the highest tier private and public universities and colleges in the United States.

Like most Parker students, Nicole and Scott are from families with characteristics of those whom Anyon (1980) classified as members of the affluent professional and executive elite classes. Nicole's father is a chief executive officer of an international company, and her mother is an accomplished novelist. Her mother also volunteers regularly at Parker and holds a leadership position in the parents' association. Nicole came to Parker at the beginning of her freshman year from a magnet public school that emphasizes a performing and creative arts curriculum. Throughout the school day, she can be frequently found in the art studio working on her latest painting. She continued to make creative arts an important part of her education even though Parker does not emphasize the arts. Nicole earns almost all As in her classes, although she claims that she's "not overly focused on keeping a perfect GPA." She plans to attend "a good college" but is not working toward gaining admission to one of the highly selective places. "Students who want to go to Ivy colleges dream about it and will do whatever it takes to get into them. I just don't want it bad enough," she admits.

Nicole describes herself as very athletic. She is a member of the school's soccer team during the fall, plays basketball during the winter, and participates in track during the spring. She also participates in her church's athletic program. She describes her family as a "traditional American family with strong Christian values." She uses the word

traditional to describe their conservative views. She often complains about Parker being too "liberal," but she criticizes the more conservative private schools in the city for "being too stuck up and too pretentious." Nicole's comments reveal her own family's status as "nouveau riche."

Scott is one of the several "lifers" at Parker, which means that he has attended Parker since preschool. He actually began attending the school's program for 1- to 3-year-olds, what Scott calls "preschool preschool." Scott maintains a grade point average just barely below 4.0, which he is very proud of because he is not "one of those [students] who takes easy classes to get good grades." Because his goal is to become a physician, he takes mostly honor math and science classes and selects electives that prepare him for a premedical program in college. Scott does find time in his heavy class schedule to be involved in several activities. He holds a leadership position in the student senate, is a class officer, and volunteers in community service activities. He also participates in athletic programs in and out of school. He plays for the school's soccer and basketball teams. He also plays for a regional select soccer team that travels internationally to compete against other select teams throughout the world. This select team is composed of high school males throughout the Midwest who have both athletic ability and the financial means to afford the fees and travel expenses. The parents are responsible for paying all expenses accrued by team participation, which Scott calls "a very expensive activity." In addition to his soccer travels, Scott's family has traveled extensively throughout the world.

Scott describes his family as a "typical nontraditional family" because his parents are divorced. He lives with his mother and stepfather but regularly sees his dad. His father is a urologist. His stepfather is also in the medical field (a cardiac surgeon), and his mother does not work so that she is able to devote full attention to Scott and his three siblings. His mother also actively volunteers for the school in various capacities and participates in community service events. Scott further describes his family as "liberal for the area." He complains that the local area is "extremely conservative." However, he feels that his family fits in well with the community at Parker because it is "way different from the rest of [the city]."

RESULTS: PRIVILEGED PERCEPTIONS OF SELF AND OTHERS

The study's results will be presented first using quotations from the students in their interviews. The next section will discuss students' responses to interview questions using the framing lens of Table 1. The evidence obtained from interviews indicated that although Scott and Nicole were isolated and had little contact with those outside their closed

communities, they were aware of the class divisions of the larger society and within their local communities. They were also aware of their own life and school advantages. Both acknowledged social class differences and had some ideas as to why these differences exist and persist. They believed that their school had better teachers and more resources, and offered an overall better education than schools with economically disadvantaged students. They also believed that students at their school were being better prepared for different occupations and positions in society than low-income students. Scott and Nicole indicated that the disparities in schooling resulted from differences in the efforts, attributes, and attitudes of students and their families. They said they believed that affluent students had better schooling than economically disadvantaged students because they worked harder in school and cared about being successful, and their families paid more for education.

WE WORK HARD IN SCHOOL

Scott and Nicole attributed academic achievement to individual effort. They believed that affluent students were more successful in school than other students because they worked harder. Scott's statement prefacing this article captures this sentiment. He clearly felt that students at Parker had strong work habits, such as paying attention in class and completing their assignments. These work habit strengths led to academic success. For Scott, students were personally responsible for how well they did in school by the amount of effort they put into their schoolwork. He believed that most students at public schools, which he repeatedly equated with economically disadvantaged students, were not willing to do what it took to be successful there: "They don't do homework and don't work in class." As he further explained, "Students decide how well they do in school by how much they're willing to work in school."

Looking at his own academic success, he said, "I really just try to do my best, and if I know that I tried my hardest throughout the quarter and I got a grade, then I think that's what I deserve cause that's what I got. So I just try to do my best, but if I don't do my best, then I get disappointed with the grade I get because I know it's my fault. I haven't worked hard enough to do as well as I know I can." He went on to say that his work habit strengths allowed him to maintain his high grade point average. He believed that he *earned* his good grades and deserved academic success for his work.

Similarly, Nicole believed that success in school was a result of individual effort. In response to a question about the differences between Parker students and students at a local public school, Nicole said,

I think students at Parker just work harder than students at poor schools and public schools. We also have a lot of really smart students. Almost everybody wants to get good grades because they want to go to a really good college. So we work a lot in our classes. To do well here, you have to really work a lot. We all pretty much do what it takes to make good grades. I don't think it works the same at poor schools, because students just don't work that much.

Elaborating on this point, she explained, "Everybody here wants to go to college and we know what it takes to get there. That's what makes this school different than other ones. The schools with poor kids just don't have too many students wanting to go to college." Both Scott and Nicole believed that individual effort, motivated by the aspiration to attend a "good" college, precipitated academic achievement. In their opinion, low-income students did not have the same motivation as affluent students to work hard.

WE CARE ABOUT EDUCATION

"We work hard in school because we care about education," Scott explained. Both students believed that academic success rested on students caring about their education. They contended that affluent students worked harder in school because they cared more about their education than did low-income students. Scott's and Nicole's belief that economically disadvantaged students and their families did not care about education reverberated through their discussions about social class differences in educational outcomes. As Scott said when asked about the college expectations of Parker students and their families,

Most students and their families at Parker really care about getting a good education. Education is one of the top priorities in the families here . . . I don't think it's the same priority for poor people. I think the schools they attend are a lot different than this one. They develop a routine that has an idea that they're not going to go to college. They don't really care about going to college. They don't want to succeed. They just want to stay there and just live and survive. I think the schools take that into account. I think it's bad that we have different education than poor people, but honestly I think it has to do a lot with how much students care about education. This school knows we all care and so they take that into account.

Scott believed that low-income students "don't want to succeed," because, as he explained, "they don't really care about going to college." He believed that low-income students' preoccupation with the day-to-day aspects of life and survival outweighed their drive to succeed. Scott's conclusion that affluent students cared more about education was couched in his narrow understanding of "success" as going to college. Like Scott, when asked about the college expectations of low-income students, Nicole said she believed that they were not concerned with going to college, which resulted in them caring less about education.

Along with students caring about education, Nicole and Scott contended that their teachers expressed more care than teachers at schools with low-income students. As Nicole explained when asked about her relationships with Parker teachers,

> Our school has a smaller community. It is more academic. The teachers here care more about their students. Well, I mean, it's hard to find a good teacher in poor schools, and here there's a larger majority of good teachers. There's a tighter knit community, there's a feeling of community in private schools because people just seem to care more, and they know each other more. At least everybody has seen each other's face, and at most poor schools, there's not even that. They have a lot more students to deal with. Teachers don't even know their students well, and this makes it more difficult to care about the students the same way they do here.

In addition to community size influencing teachers' attitudes about students, Scott maintained, "Teachers at our school care because we care about school. Teachers couldn't be here if they didn't care about their students. The families just wouldn't put up with it. There's not that same pressure at poor schools."

WE PAY MORE MONEY FOR OUR EDUCATION

Nicole and Scott also believed that they received a better education than economically disadvantaged students because their families were willing to offer the necessary financial support for them to attend a good school. Although they recognized that families at Parker were financially capable of paying more for education than were low-income families, they nonetheless felt that because education was not a priority for low-income families, they did not make the financial sacrifices to ensure that their children received a good education.

Scott pointed out the failed levies to increase funding for the city's public schools as an example of the unwillingness of low-income families to support, financially, the schools that their children attended. He said,

> It costs a pretty hefty sum to go here. Our families pay a lot of money for us to go to this school because we all value education. In the poor areas, people don't value education the same way and aren't willing to provide money for schools to make sure that they have the needed resources for a good education. The last election proved this point. Poor families may not have as much money as the people at our school to spend on education, but they can show their financial support in other ways. The city's public schools need a lot of money. Everybody knows that. But people aren't willing to make sure that they get more money through taxes. The schools ask for more money at every election, but they never get it. This is a way for poor families to support their kids' schools financially, but they don't.

Scott was asked to consider, "How about the voting patterns of poor people? Since not a lot of poor people vote, at least compared with the affluent, do failed levies really indicate poor people's unwillingness to financially support the schools that their children attend?" He responded, "Again, if they cared about their kids' education, then they would vote and make sure that schools got more money. Just like voting against giving more money for schools, not voting at all still sends a message." Scott did not acknowledge that there may have been other reasons why people living in poverty did not vote, that it was not simply a matter of low-income people "not caring" about their children's education.

Nicole embraced the notion that "you get what you pay for." She associated educational opportunity with one's family financial circumstances. When asked about what factors were important for her and her family in choosing Parker she said,

> Our parents just have more means to send us to a school like Parker. There are expectations that if you go to this school, then you're going to go to a good college. Kids here are expected to have better jobs and make a certain amount of money. It's just the nature of different social statuses and the way kids are educated. We just have more opportunities because of our parents. Like, our counselor is really good. She's an excellent college advisor. She gets you where you want to go and helps you realize what you want to do. So it depends on the parent if they want

their kid to get into college. This school has parents who have the means and kids who want to learn. Parents want their kids to come here because the teachers are good and the school has the needed resources to prepare us for college. Everybody knows we have a better school. It's just the way the world works. It isn't fair, but you get what you pay for when it comes to education.

When asked about the disparities in school resources for students from different social class backgrounds, Nicole attributed class distinctions in schooling to what families are capable of affording. With facile liberal, egalitarian sentiments, she expressed the unfairness of the differences in education between the affluent and the economically disadvantaged, but concluded, "It's just the way the world works." In her perspective, affluent students had more opportunities because their families had the means to provide them with those opportunities.

Like Scott, though, Nicole also believed that low-income families did not value education and deliberately chose not to support, financially, the schools that their children attended. She explained,

Most of the kids here are wealthy, so there are certain expectations that are different than at other schools. And I guess it's because of the students' backgrounds, just what their parents have done and like the neighborhood they're in. In the poor areas, most of them haven't gone to college, and they just have those kinds of jobs. The community is people who do labor kinds of jobs which don't pay that much. Here, it is totally different. Most of the people here come from wealthy families where we don't have those kinds of jobs, those labor kinds of jobs. Because of that, people in poor areas don't put the same emphasis on education. Since they aren't going to college, they don't see the need to make the financial sacrifices to have their kids go to really good schools.

Scott and Nicole alluded to conditions beyond personal control in discussing resource disparities in schooling between low-income and affluent students but in the end attributed educational advantage and disadvantage primarily to individual actions and choices, not to systemic or structural forces or circumstances.

DISCUSSION: CONSTRUCTING PRIVILEGED IDENTITIES

Nicole's and Scott's narratives revealed a variety of ideological operations

and frames at work—all of which served to shape and mediate their own privileged identity. First, and perhaps most obviously, Nicole and Scott used legitimation ideological modes (representing relations of domination as legitimate) to justify a sense of worthiness for their own social class group and to position Others as unworthy. Because Scott and Nicole equated academic success with merit, they established the worth of affluent students with their patterns of academic success. In turn, by attributing school failure to lack of effort and bad decisions, they established the unworthiness of economically disadvantaged students who they felt did not achieve academically. In legitimating their own worthiness, they rationalized their advantages in schooling by discrediting Others. They did not, however, establish a relationship between their advantages and the disadvantages of low-income students. Although they believed that they attended a "better" school with more resources and considered their teachers "better" than the teachers at low-income schools, they attributed their advantaged schooling to the higher financial support that their families provided for education as compared with low-income students' families. Similar to Peshkin's (2001) findings in his ethnography of an elite private school, Nicole and Scott felt that they deserved the schooling advantages they had.

In fact, they used both legitimation and dissimulation ideological modes (obscuring relations of domination) to attribute social class distinctions in schooling to the decisions, attitudes, and actions of low-income students and their families in order to divert attention away from their own school and life advantages. They fully attributed their advantages to their intentions and deliberate choices of caring about their education, working hard in school, and investing financially in their education. They credited success in school to individual merit and attributed failure to personal inadequacies. Consistent with Brantlinger's (1993) in-depth examination of affluent and low-income students' perceptions of their educational experiences, Nicole and Scott framed social class differences in schooling in the abstract liberal ideology of "personal choice"; that is, they attributed the differences to individual merits, efforts, and choices rather than societal circumstances or biased institutional structures. Their comments were also consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) observation that affluent people assume that low-income people prefer their disadvantaged lifestyles. These ideas reflected the use of naturalization ideological strategy by casting the differences in achievement patterns between affluent and low-income students as the inevitable outcome of personal characteristics.

Although Nicole and Scott had little contact with economically disadvantaged people, the lower class was symbolically visible in their

narratives as a problematic group who made wrong decisions about their lives, particularly decisions about education, and who shared virtually no commonalities with their own social class group. Nicole and Scott positioned themselves, and other Parker students, as superior to low-income students even though their narratives revealed that they had no firsthand knowledge of the educational circumstances of low-income students: They were, in fact, both physically and socially segregated from economically disadvantaged people. Unification ideological modes (embracing individuals in a collective identity) surfaced in their narratives to reinforce solidarity with others in their own social class, whereas they used fragmentation modes (dispersing others capable of mounting a challenge to the dominant group) to differentiate themselves from low-income people. Regardless of what individual differences Scott and Nicole may have had with each other and other Parker students, they emphasized the similarities of those within their social class group while highlighting how dissimilar Others were from themselves. They differentiated themselves from the "bad" decisions and actions of low-income students. They emphasized the positive traits of those within their social class group and the negative attributes of Others. Simply put, they constructed a social class dichotomy that separated affluent from the economically disadvantaged.

Although neither Nicole nor Scott fully established a cultural deficit position to explain the differences in achievement patterns between affluent and low-income students—that is, they did not make reference to the intellectual abilities of low-income students—they cognitively lumped together low achievement, indifferent attitudes toward education, laziness, and lower social class. Scott and Nicole claimed that low-income students did not value education and were less motivated to do well in school than affluent students. As such, they employed forms of reification ideological modes (representing a transitory historical state as natural and permanent) and naturalizing ideological frames.

In Brantlinger's study (1993), low-income students claimed that affluent students taunted them with "stupid" and "dumb" even though the affluent students in her study never used such labels for economically disadvantaged students. The affluent students in her study, however, communicated that low-income students were less advanced academically than students of their class. Similarly, Nicole and Scott never directly identified low-income students as less intelligent than affluent students, but they continually pointed to the distinction in academic achievement patterns and levels between low-income and affluent students. Both of them felt that affluent students were simply more advanced academically than low-income students.

Howard (2000) found that affluent students often refrained from expressing certain views and using derogatory language to project a politically correct image; they have been taught ways of talking about Others to avoid being seen as prejudiced (cf. Bonilla-Silva's 2003 conception of "color-blind racism"). Nicole, for example, demonstrated such reluctance by emphasizing how "really smart" Parker students were in her explanation for why affluent students achieved higher levels of academic success than low-income students. Although both Nicole and Scott were openly critical of low-income students and their schools, they constrained the ways in which they talked about low-income students by pointing to their choices and actions rather than talking about their abilities. Once again using reification ideological modes, they, however, made a point to call attention to the high abilities of affluent students in their explanations for academic success. Therefore, for Nicole and Scott, intelligence was signified by achievement and attainment.

To some extent, Scott and Nicole acknowledged the unfairness of the disparities in schooling between the affluent and economically disadvantaged. Their narratives gave some indication that they understood that low-income students did not have the same schooling advantages that they had. They demonstrated awareness of the social class influences in schooling. They concluded, however, employing a naturalizing frame, that even though social class distinctions in schooling were unfair, "it's just the way the world works." They accepted unfairness as natural and unavoidable. As others (Mickleson, 1990; Olson, 1983) have found, Nicole and Scott accepted and even expected their own advantage in schooling even though they spoke of fairness. In their narratives, they straddled an ambiguous position on social class distinctions. Glimmers of their awareness of social class inequities in schooling were overshadowed by ideologies that diverted attention from and justified their advantaged schooling.

In sum, the ideological frames and modes embedded in Scott's and Nicole's narratives constituted an array of available cultural meanings for understanding the world around them and stabilizing themselves in that world (Dolby, 2001). These ideologies revealed how an interwoven collection of ideas rationalized their schooling and life advantages, constructed between-class divisions, established within-class solidarity, and discredited Others. Ideological operations and modes were not simply methods or competencies that Nicole and Scott knew how to use, however; they were also formative elements of their respective identities. The ways in which they concealed and rationalized their advantages revealed the medley of forces at play in constructing their sense of self. Their cultural construction of meaning was interconnected with the development

of their identities. Ideology and identity met at the boundary between the students' inner and outer worlds. Their identities were produced in relation to and coordination with their ways of thinking and knowing. Through this coordination and relationship, their identities were not givens, but activities, performances, forms of mediated action.[3] These activities/performances were ones of coordinating the values and views that formed the foundation of Nicole and Scott's immediate social context with those that underlined their ideologically mediated identities. As revealed in their narratives, privilege was firmly situated as a central aspect of who each student was, what they did, in the world in which they lived.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING PRIVILEGE

The gaze of educational researchers has traditionally been turned "down" toward the experiences of communities deemed "at risk," presumably with the purpose of improving their plight. In fact, theorizing about inequality has traditionally emerged from the study of low-income and marginalized groups in public schools. The past 20 years, however, have seen a small yet important increase in attention to privilege. Privilege has increasingly entered scholarly discourse as a useful and analytical concept for educational researchers in their efforts to address the dynamics of power and oppression to achieve social justice, not only in schools, but in society at large. This body of scholarship has advanced our understanding of the relationship between privilege and inequality. Although these contributions in scholarship represent a significant shift in how inequality is understood, there is much ground yet to cover, and important questions remain to be addressed.

Specifically, the scholarship on privilege has focused mainly on the *what* (that is, the advantages that one group has over another); there has been little attention given to *how* privilege is produced and enacted. This is not simply a "gap" in the existing literature, but a critical conceptual link missing in our understandings of privilege. The discussion of the two student narratives presented in this article attempts to address this missing link by exploring how their advantages in life fashion a particular sense of self rather than focusing on what advantages they have. This is not to deny or diminish the importance of advantages that individuals and groups have on others; it is, in fact, to underline the relationship between advantages and identity formation and thus to understand the ways in which individuals actively construct privilege. Privilege, for students like Scott and Nicole, is more than what school and life advantages they have; it is a crucial part of themselves, and their self-understanding,

that they both inherit and recreate.

Looking at how the affluent justify and internalize their advantages in life and schooling is crucial for critically interrogating the sophisticated processes involved in the cultural production of privilege. Ideology plays a critical role in maintaining, reinforcing, and reproducing the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression (Brantlinger, 2003; Thompson, 1990). Ideologies, however, are neither imposed, hegemonic structures, nor stable. Individuals do not perform prescribed parts in enacting and practicing their identities. As many have argued (see, for example, Apple, 1995), hegemonic ideologies are imposed on people in schooling and in larger society; however, these meanings take on different values and forms as individuals mediate these cultural meanings in constructing their identities. Identities are constantly shaped and reshaped by the complex interactions of individuals' everyday realities and lived experiences. Through these interactions, privilege, for affluent students like Nicole and Scott, is constructed (and reconstructed) as a central aspect of their identities. They construct their own privilege—not, fundamentally, as what they *have*, but, rather, as *who they are*.

As students construct their sense of self, educators play an important role in providing students with alternatives to privileged ways of knowing and doing. However, simply sharing new ideas and new ways of thinking and doing with our students does not always bring about change. As Kumashiro (2002) pointed out, "Students come to school not as blank slates but as individuals who are already invested in their thoughts, beliefs, and desires" (p. 73). Most often, students enter the school context with a well-established sense of self that continually influences how they think and understand, and what they know and decide not to know. Thus, as Kumashiro (2002) continued to explain, "The problem that educators need to address is not merely a lack of knowledge, but a resistance to knowledge . . . and in particular a resistance to any knowledge that disrupts what the students already know" (p. 73). There is no overlooking the fact that students from dominant groups are comfortably socialized to accept (and even defend) particular ways of knowing and doing that protect their advantages (e.g., Brantlinger, 1993; Howard, 2008; Proweller, 1999). Students like Nicole and Scott have formed an acute interest in maintaining these benefits; their resistance to alternative ways of knowing and doing should be expected. Their acts of resistance, however, are instructive for deepening our knowledge of their understandings of self and Others. With this knowledge, we are provided with the necessary footing for taking steps toward transforming our students' taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves, Others, and the world around them.

Notes

1.   A pseudonym, as are all names of people and places in this article.
2.   The term *Other* is used to refer to those groups that are traditionally marginalized in society (see, for example, Kumashiro, 2000).
3. Informed by the work of both Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981), the concept of mediated action entails two central elements: an "agent," the person who is doing the acting, on the one hand, and "cultural tools" or "mediational means," the tools, means, or resources appropriated from the social world and used by the agent to accomplish a given action, on the other (Wertsch, 1995, 1998; see also Tappan, 2000, 2005).

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