



College Daze and “Party Pathways”: Women, Social Class, and Disadvantaged Futures

A Review of

Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality

by Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton

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What's past is prologue.

—Antonio, *The Tempest* (Act II, sc. I)

I just never fit in. I don't know if it was personalities. I think it was mainly because I felt like they all had a lot of money. All their dads were doctors and lawyers and I just didn't fit in. I never felt like I did.

—Blair (Year 5, p. 118)

. . . I really would love to move to the city, but because of money right now I just can't. . . . I wish someone told me that college was like Disneyland. It's just not real.

—Nicole (Year 5, p. 118)

Truly great works in the social sciences—from sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and even economics—speak to us about the human condition. They capture our imaginations and move us with the drama of lived experience: often to elation, certainly to recognition, and sometimes to despair. In *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, a fine piece of sociological participant observation, the authors—Armstrong (sociology and organizational studies, University of Michigan) and Hamilton (sociology, University of California, Merced)—have sympathetically but candidly portrayed the fates of a group of young women from their dorm days at a flagship Midwestern public university (dubbed “MU” for purposes of confidentiality) to five years after they entered. Their research reveals poignant and sobering results: The siren song of status-seeking sorority life at MU leads the most well-heeled women (i.e., those hailing from the upper or upper middle class) through the maze of Greek life and the “party pathway,” where social experience and connections trump academics. Less-affluent women (those from middle-, lower middle-, and working-class backgrounds) who earnestly, sometimes wistfully, follow the same route begin the chase with many disadvantages (e.g., precious little or no discretionary funds, the “wrong” clothes and jewelry, lack of familiarity with unspoken but powerful class rules, a threadbare parental safety net as far as funding is concerned, lack of savvy parents or siblings who can guide them through the collegiate maze). Unlike those from the upper social strata, they often flounder in consistent ways through MU, pursuing a socioeconomic brass ring that continually eludes them.

Some less-affluent women choose easy majors (often opting for careers that do not require a bachelor's degree, such as wedding planning or travel management) in lieu of challenging and marketable ones (e.g., natural science, economics, finance); others party hearty so much that their grades slip precipitously while their debts mount continuously. Some transfer to regional universities, where they regroup and often succeed in a less expensive, less Greek-life centered setting; others leave school altogether; and still others hang on at MU, forever on the outside looking in at the socially successful girls who master the Greek universe with ease in preparation for replicating the class structure and folkways they were born to (admittedly, often with parental support and connections that are graciously, never grudgingly, given).

Everyone, it seems, pays for the four-year party, but only some women are truly welcome guests because they have the means and social acumen to succeed. Although the affluent readily pay their way, the less-affluent pay in more than one way. In addition to accruing literal debt, I believe they also “pay” in terms of emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012) by trying to conform their inner emotional lives and outward behaviors to the seductive “party pathway.” Unfortunately, they usually have a somewhat hollow experience on the outskirts of the endless social whirl of games, tailgates, and fraternity parties, ending up, for example, in a low-prestige sorority or a “gut” major, or being consigned to (admittedly sometimes by choice) an “alternative student” dorm—and experience—far from MU’s dominant Greek life.

Here’s the real rub: Many of the women portrayed in *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality* leave campus with little else but staggering loans that compromise their subsequent quality of life and options. Many end up back where they started, in small, often rural, communities with little or no professional opportunities. Worse yet, the administrative and student services sides of MU are complicit in maintaining, even encouraging, a class-based system that socially, educationally, and financially harms those from less-privileged backgrounds who come hoping for the promise of upward social mobility. By paying for the party, relatively few women from modest or impoverished backgrounds are able to use the college experience as a springboard for social class mobility.

Observing Life on a Dorm Floor

Like other intrepid observers of college life before them (e.g., Grigsby, 2009; Moffatt, 1989; Nathan, 2006), Armstrong and Hamilton actually lived among the natives by moving onto a floor for 53 young women in a first-year coeducational dormitory. In the fall of 2004, they occupied a room and made no effort to disguise their intentions, gradually revealing their interest in learning about dorm and campus life (a research team of graduate and undergraduate students helped them). They observed, interacted with, and interviewed the floor’s residents, quickly discerning the palpable influence of the party pathway:

Over the course of five waves of interviews, we would come to learn that these painful popularity contests and the stratification processes that concern economists and sociologists of education are linked. . . . The party pathway at MU was impossible to avoid—even by those who wished to. For students who could not afford or did not wish to join in on the revelry, it served as a constant reminder of their place in the university. (p. xii)

Originally, the authors had planned to focus their research on sexuality during college. That topic did not disappear from their research agenda, but it was examined as a piece of the larger, integrative web of sorority rush, fraternity parties, choices of major, roommate issues, and family connections. Romance and sex were found to be alive and well in the party culture, acting as central mechanisms through which class structures are maintained within and after college, as well as in later marriages.

This book would work well in a graduate or advanced undergraduate seminar on college life or social class in either sociology or psychology. I will be very surprised if the project’s aim, which the authors cast in the tradition of the recently acclaimed *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2011), and its provocative findings fail to launch related research efforts that are surely, and sorely, needed. In addition to nine narrative chapters that categorize and characterize the women (e.g., socialites, wannabes, strivers, achievers, underachievers) and their experiences, the book contains four data-oriented appendices (participants, social class, collection and analysis of the data, ethical concerns) for readers interested in research design and methodological issues.

College Days Are Over, but Their Impact Lives On

College is now a presumed stage of life for many adolescents—less a privilege or rite of passage than a perceived requirement necessary for earning potential. The authors are not certain such a conclusion is actually justified, given the constraints revealed by their work. Reflecting on the experience of some of the cohort’s women, they observe that

From a purely utilitarian perspective, it is hard to justify a four-year college experience that appears to have generated limited intellectual engagement, no pathway toward a professional career, and little hope of earning a middle-class salary. . . . [O]nly a tiny fraction of the women in the floor—perhaps just the seven achievers—exited MU with the kinds of credentials or human capital that many expect college graduates to acquire. This makes it difficult to engage in a wholehearted defense of the four-year residential experience in its current form. (p. 249)

Ouch. That message should reverberate in faculty meetings and trustee boardrooms on the campus of any big state university. One wonders whether liberal arts colleges and private universities are immune from some of the problems raised

by this book and whether they have party pathways that are so very different?

In any case, the reader is left with the knowledge that the past is largely prologue for the fate of the MU women from the floor portrayed in *Paying for the Party*. The wealthier ones skate through the experience, sometimes gaining a good education but, regardless, never really having to worry about the future. The less-affluent struggle with a situation that is largely that of lost promise and a source of bewilderment.

As the parent of a daughter soon to head off to college, I will be sharing the main findings with her. More than that, however, I will be sharing the stories and perspectives of the participants whose collegiate ups and downs are disclosed in this book. As a psychologist and an educator, however, I believe this book should be required reading for faculty concerned about the intersection of academics, the Greek system, and campus quality of life. Administrators, particularly deans of students, should study this book carefully. Anyone interested in women's issues will find much to mull over here. The lingering question, of course, is this one: What can constructively be done about the problems posed by the "party pathway"?

References

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