

WORKING CLASS SINGLE MOTHERS:

Performing Middle Class Identity

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at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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Master of Arts

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by

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Dr. Joan Hermsen, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

WORKING CLASS SINGLE MOTHERS:

Performing Middle Class Identity

presented by Charise Albritton,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Joan Hermsen

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Professor Wayne Brekhus

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Professor Enid Schatz

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my children: Destiny, Heaven and Maurice Albritton. I love you three more than anyone or anything on this earth. For every hour that I have spent working, that is nothing compared to the hours that I have spent thinking about and praying for you. I would not be the same person if not for you three. Everything I do, I do with you in mind hoping that one day you can say, "This is my mom. She has a Ph.D." I hope you are proud of me, even a little bit as much as I am of you.

Mom, thank you for standing in the gap during this time. I appreciate you for all that you have done for the kids and for me. While we single moms like to pride ourselves on being able to do it all, it's nice when we don't have to! Thank you for making sure that the kids ate and got to wherever they needed to go and for entertaining them so that I could have a quiet place to work. I hope that some day you can say, "This is my daughter. She has a Ph.D." and that you are as proud of me as I am of you.

To all of the single working moms who participated in this study: thank you! I could not have done this without your participation, obviously. It has meant so much for me that you would give of your time and energy to share your stories with me. I know what a priceless offering that is. It is my hope that you get everything that you need and that all of your dreams come true.

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# WORKING CLASS SINGLE MOTHERS: Performing Middle Class Identity

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## ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on single motherhood has been devoted to poor or middle class single mothers. In this study I interviewed working class single mothers. Their unique position between the poor and the middle class leads to interesting observations about how women at the boundaries do and perform class. These women, while aware of the contradictions between their material realities and their symbolic realities, attempted to establish a middle class sense of identity through consumption, concerted cultivation and associational distancing strategies. These findings indicate that class is a salient feature in the life of working class single mothers and that they invoke strategies to maintain a sense of class identity and dignity.

## CHAPTER ONE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### *Introduction*

Single parent headed families comprise a large portion of American families. In the year 2007, almost 29% of households with children under 18 years old were single parent households (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2007). This is an increase of about 9% since 1980. Almost 40% of all children born in the United States in 2007 were to unmarried women (2007), an increase of over 21% since 1980. Additionally, the divorce rate has consistently remained around 50% of the marriage rate in the same time period (2007). With the increase of the birth rate for unmarried women along with high rates of divorce, the single mother is an increasing presence in the United States. Despite the stereotype of the non-working single mother, most single moms do work. Of these women, a great many occupy low-wage non-professional positions. This study examines the class identifications, symbolic indulgence, concerted cultivation and boundary work performed by working class single mothers.

The concept of class is used in multiple ways by stratification scholars concerned with mapping the class structure of advanced societies. Some see class as a structural location in capitalist relations of production (see for example, Wright 1980). Others see class as emblematic of the source and amount of income one earns, with class defined most clearly by one's occupation (see Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Weeden and Grusky 2005). As Acker (2006) correctly notes, until recently, much of the scholarly writing on class

has failed to account for women's unique position in relation to class, however class is understood. Most accounts fail to theorize reproduction (broadly conceived) and the gendering of reproductive and productive relations in society.

Feminist theorists have approached this omission from multiple perspectives (see for example, Fraser 2009, Hartmann 1979, etc). Perhaps the perspective most useful to my thinking in this project is that of Beverly Skeggs (1997) who draws on Bourdieu to highlight the fact that class is also a set of practices and beliefs that are shaped by one's economic resources. In order to understand class, and especially the reproductive and productive contours of class, one needs to map out the ways class emerges in everyday lives through processes such as identification, consumption, and boundary making. In this paper, I use the source and amount of income as means to draw the boundary for the sample of women I interview. However, I also use the idea of class as a set of beliefs and practices to understand how these women make sense of class in their everyday lives.

### *Objective and Subjective Class: Recent Findings*

There is no official way to define class in the United States. Further, there is no agreed upon folk understanding of class. Using occupation, education and income are common approaches taken to define both the "objective" class structure of the United States and the "objective" class of any individual person or family (Hout 2008). One's perception of the class structure and of one's own class is typically assessed through a set of questions on public opinion surveys (see for example, Jackman and Jackman 1985).

Family income levels have been rising for over 50 years such that the median family income in 2009 was approximately \$61,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The median family income masks important differences in average incomes for families at the top and bottom of the income distribution (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). In 2009, the top 20% of U.S. families reported mean family income of over \$189,000 as compared to mean family income of just over \$15,000 for the 20% of families at the bottom of the income distribution. This is the largest disparity reported in over 50 years. The official U.S. poverty rate is also on the rise due to the economic recession facing the country. The poverty rate in 2009 was 14.3% (Bishaw and Macartney 2010).

The occupational structure of the U.S. has changed over time as the nation has moved from an agricultural and manufacturing base to a service based economy (Cotter, Hermesen, and Vanneman 2004). Some have argued we now see a two tier labor market with high paying, high skill jobs in the primary sector and low paying, low skill jobs in the secondary sector (Piore 1970). In 2009, forty-six percent of the U.S. workforce is employed in just 40 (out of 800) occupations tracked by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). In 30 out of 40 of these large occupations, workers earn below the national average hourly wages.

At the same time, Americans are becoming a more highly educated population. According to the U.S. Census, the percentage of adults age 25 and older with at least a high school degree (87%) or at least a bachelor's degree (30%) has been rising since the

1940s (U.S. Census 2010). If college education is the measure of middle class, one could argue the U.S. is becoming increasingly a middle class society.

Very few Americans reject the notion that they belong to a social class. In fact, most will identify a class when asked (97%), and they select typically either working- or middle-class (at least two-thirds for the last 50 years) (Hout 2008). Subjective class identification varies by key objective markers of class (Hodges and Treiman 1968).

Using General Social Survey data from 2000-2004, Hout (2008) finds that for those who are employed, there is a strong positive association between occupation, education, family income, and subjective class identification. The majority of those with family incomes less than \$50,000 identify as working class, while the majority with family incomes over \$50,000 report being middle class. Those with more education, especially college degrees, are more likely to identify as middle class. And the higher one's occupational status, the more likely one was to identify as middle class. Low wage service and lower white collar workers, the groups represented in my sample, are more likely to self-identify as working class than middle class.

The current economic recession has likely impacted the American class structure. High unemployment rates (nearly 10%) and discouraged worker rates (18%) have undoubtedly contributed to the decline in median family incomes over the last decade (about \$2,000) and the rise in the poverty rate (up one full percentage from just 2008 to 2009) (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Home foreclosures are at record highs. There appears to be a growing awareness that opportunities for advancement based just on one's skills and

efforts are diminishing. For example in the mid-1980s, 72% of Americans reported on the General Social Survey (1984) that “Differences in social standing between people are acceptable because they basically reflect what people made out of the opportunities they had.” In 2009, in an Allstate/National Journal just 54% stated own skills and talents in response to the question “Which do you think plays a bigger role in determining whether or not you have more opportunity to get ahead: own skills and talents or the state of economy?” The recession was a backdrop to this study, although not the focus of the study. As highlighted in the discussion, the recession did not come up in discussions related to class in the everyday lives of my participants.

I will show that the class identifications of the working class women of this study are complicated by a list of factors. They refer to their income, official standards of poverty, their educational goals and their occupation as well as to other measures to determine their class location. (While the women of this study did not refer to themselves as working class, I believe that given their hesitation to choose “lower class,” their aspirations for the middle class, together with their pride in working that most of them would identify as working class if given a list of class positions to choose from (Hout 2008). I explain my usage of “working class” further in the discussion.)

### *Symbolic Indulgence*

Pugh (2009) discovered that lower class parents utilize “symbolic indulgence” as a strategy to present their children as middle class. They understood that the best way for them to be good parents was to provide for their children. Symbolic indulgence is the act

of buying “specific goods and experiences” for children that provide the “minimum necessary” for them to maintain their dignity in their interactions with their peers (124).

Though these parents struggled to provide the basic needs of their families, they sacrificed to buy clothing, sneakers and other items of social value for their children.

These parents attempted to make up for the poverty in their children’s lives by giving in to their children’s requests for these items when they were able to. Most of the children became accustomed to not having everything that they wanted and usually did not ask for much. It was important for these lower class parents, that after saying “no” so many times, to say “yes” when they could. They used symbolic indulgence as “the best compromise” between their acute awareness of their children’s need to belong and their own sporadic capability to provide for them (130).

Symbolic indulgence served another purpose for the lower class single mothers in Pugh’s study. These moms fought the stigma associated with poor single mothers that comes with the “assumption that they were unable to control or provide for their children” (146). Purchasing markers of a higher class accomplished the “symbolic work” of “representing the low-income family as not ‘in trouble’” (146). The material wants of these children from lower income families were elevated to *needs* by their parents and often took precedence over such necessities as rent and groceries. I will show that the single working class mothers of my study draw from symbolic indulgence to protect the dignity of their children and to present them as middle class.



### *Concerted Cultivation*

Lareau (2003) found that middle class families raise their children with “concerted cultivation”. These parents pack their children’s schedules with sports, music lessons, choir and religious instruction. These families placed a high priority on the development of their children’s skills and talents, holding to the view that they are personally responsible for the intellectual and social growth of their children. Their children’s individual progress was prioritized by parents and often came before the needs of the family as a whole. Children raised in this environment benefit from being taught to interact with adults, work with others, to take responsibility and work hard. They are raised to negotiate with adults and to relate to them as peers. Middle class children grow into a “sense of entitlement” that Lareau did not find among the children of the poor and working class. They are trained to expect their needs and wants met, at home as well as at school, with teachers, coaches and doctors. Their parents, usually their moms, frequently intervene on their behalf to press for accommodations and push past limitations to get special treatment for their children. The cultural capital gained by the middle class kids serves to profit them as children and throughout adulthood. They will fare well socially, in job interviews and in employment.

Poor and working class parents accomplish “natural growth” by allowing their children unstructured free play rather than scheduled activities and do not consider it their duty to cultivate their children’s tastes and desires. Compared to middle class families, these parents acknowledge their children’s interests very little. Unlike middle class parents,

who engage in their children in conversations and strive to show their children that they are important, these parents often ignore their children's attempts to get attention. Since the kids are involved in few extra curricular activities, they do not benefit from the social skills that come from constant adult interaction or from the advantage of witnessing their parents pull strings on their behalf. Poor and working class kids learned to defer to authority figures and to not press for special treatment. They develop a sense of "distance, distrust, and constraint" that characterizes their institutional interactions (3). These qualities were a disadvantage to their parents and will disadvantage them as well. I will illustrate that the single working mothers of my study draw from concerted cultivation more than the natural growth model in raising their children.

### *Othering*

The reproduction of inequality is accomplished through "generic processes" that are alike regardless of the contexts in which they occur (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 421). Through an interactionist analysis, Schwalbe identified four processes that undergird inequality reproduction. They are: "othering, subordinate adaptation, boundary maintenance and emotion management" (422). For my study of these single working class mothers, I will highlight the three types of "othering" as tools for drawing class distinctions.

"Oppressive othering" transpires as one group endeavors to improve their status by elevating themselves over another group. They attempt to accomplish this by attributing

moral inferiority to the oppressed group. “Oppressive othering...commonly entails the overt or subtle assertion of *difference as deficit*” (423).

“Creating powerful virtual selves” is the process whereby individuals create “superior selves” (425). This is accomplished through a front stage presentation by members of an elite group to project an image of power and worth. This works to form an Other out of those deemed less moral and therefore less worthy.

“Defensive othering among subordinates” is “identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group” (425). This happens as those who are in the position of being the Other accept the demoralizing characteristics given to their group by the dominant group, but they reject application of that identity to themselves.

I will demonstrate that the working single mothers of this study apply strategies of othering as they distance themselves from their welfare dependent counterparts. I also show that the women’s boundary work is extended to the upper class as they distance themselves from those in the upper class as well as reject the upper class as a class aspiration.

### *Poor Single Mothers*

The poor, welfare dependent single mother has been the center of much attention. Welfare recipients, particularly single mothers, are stigmatized as lazy, idle and reliant upon the public (Sidel 1996). Americans believe that the American dream is possible for everyone and that poor single mothers are able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve success through effort and determination, just like everyone. Impoverished single mothers in the United States are blamed for their own poverty even with the existence of Eastern European models of support which offer much greater cash, childcare and other provisions (Polakow 1993). In 2010, South Carolina's Lieutenant Governor expressed his disdain for those who are welfare reliant. He compared them to “stray animals” that “breed” and his admonishment not feed them (lest they “reproduce, especially ones that don't think too much further than that”) suggests that he was referring to poor women with children (Associated Press 2010). The stigma attached to single mothering has an effect on middle class single mothers as well as the working class single mothers of this study.

### *Middle Class Single Mothers*

Middle class single moms are haunted by the stigma of the welfare reliant single mother which leads them to fear losing their jobs and their middle class status (Hertz and Ferguson 1998). Many have the feeling that their situations are precarious and that they are one step away from embodying lower-class single motherhood. They often utilize

various strategies to maintain their middle class lifestyles by relying on gifts from family and friends, having a roommate, or renting out a room in their home. Middle class single mothers cling to middle class status to legitimate their lives and families. This includes a growing number of women who choose single motherhood (Miller 1992, Hertz 2006). These women also draw from various resources to make it as single parents. Though drawing from family resources is common, low-wage women like those of my study, frequently come from working class families that are not able to contribute financially as much as upper and middle class families would (Hertz 2006).

### *Working Class Single Mothers*

The working class single mothers of this study form a unique group. Pugh and Lareau have set up rigid class models to depict the lower class parent and the middle class parent. The women of this study straddle the class lines: they are neither impoverished nor financially comfortable. Though they are lower income, they have middle class aspirations for themselves as well as for their children. Financially struggling, they share similarities with poor welfare reliant single mothers. As working women who distance themselves from poverty, they resemble the middle class single mother. They are located somewhere between the often disparaged poor welfare dependent single mother and the middle class single mother who fears slipping into the lower class.

This study offers the analytical advantage of shedding light on the issues of class identification, symbolic indulgence, concerted cultivation and the boundary work practiced by working class single mothers.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

To explore the lives of working class single mothers, I interviewed twelve full-time working, un-partnered women with children. I maximized data collection with this small sample by using a variety of methods. Each woman was asked to participate in an interview, then to journal and take photos about her everyday life as a single working mom, and to complete a second interview to discuss these photos. <sup>1</sup>

### *Interview 1*

Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes; two took place in fast food restaurants and two were at the public library. The first interviews took from one hour to an hour and a half and usually lasted an hour. I guided participants through a series of twenty-five questions, prompting them with additional questions for clarity as needed. I asked the women what social class they identified with and why they felt a part of that class. I wanted to know if they were satisfied with their current class position and whether they aspired to another class. We discussed the challenges that the women faced as an aspect of their class position. I inquired as to what motherhood meant to them and what motherhood ideals they held. I asked them to tell me about their jobs and what occupation they might like to have. We talked about the fathers of their children: their relationships with them, how involved they are in the lives of their kids, and whether they

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<sup>1</sup> 12 women participated in the 1<sup>st</sup> interview; 11 kept a journal; 10 took photos and participated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview.

paid child support. Finally, I wanted to know what women had to say about choosing to work as opposed to relying on social assistance benefits. These questions were informed by my own lived experiences as a working class single mother.

### *Journals*

Researchers have found that participant journals offer “far more detailed, personal and insightful” responses than can be obtained through other methods alone (Meth 2003). Participants were encouraged to journal each day for a period of one to two weeks, but were asked to complete at least six entries. The journals included anywhere from four to twelve entries and ranged from a few sentences to one page per entry. Most were three typed or seven to eight handwritten pages. The content of the journals ranged from recounting of the day's events (working, making dinner, attending holiday or family celebrations) to heartfelt expressions of the overwhelming burdens they faced as single parents (the fatigue of the never ending responsibilities and the frustration of the endless financial hardships) to euphoric descriptions of unexpected blessings that arose (discovering yard sale bargains at back-to-school time or finding money unexpectedly just as they were down to their last dollar). Asking the women to journal was a way for them to reflect on their experiences as they lived out their day to day lives, allowing for them to incorporate topics of interest to them. I hoped that they would feel freer to express themselves through writing and in the absence of the researcher. It was my aim to allow the women the opportunity to include thoughts and feelings which arose after having some time to reflect, something that interviews do not offer.



### *Photos and Interview 2*

Many studies have incorporated photo elicitation to facilitate data collection (Sampson-Cordle 2001, Harper 2002, Johnson and Weller 2002, Massey and Sanchez 2010). “Photo elicitation” is the use of photos to draw out deeper meanings and shared understandings, to give strength to interview research (Harper 2002). Participants were asked to take twenty to twenty-five photos. They took between ten and twenty-five photos, with an average of about fifteen photos. The photos depicted various events: every day trips to and from daycare or work, the participants’ children involved in a variety of activities from playing outside to participating in sports or family get-togethers, the participants spending time with their children, the participants themselves (usually before work) and the women’s workplace. The second interviews were an opportunity for the women to discuss these photos and took from forty-five minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes. Most were forty-five minutes long. The photos were used to generate a conversation about class and parenting and as a springboard for discussion points. For each photo discussed in the second interview, I asked how it represented the participant’s life as a single working mom and whether it demonstrated her class.

### *Methods of Analysis*

Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed and printed. Journal entries that were provided electronically were printed out and analyzed with the hand written journals. I analyzed the interviews and journal entries thematically, making notes in the margins. Several themes emerged which were consistent with the literature. I made note of these, as well as the particular distinctions within each theme. Following this, I identified which

themes were the most common and relevant within the framework of class analysis. I did not perform a content analysis on the participants' photos, but used them to elicit more in-depth information regarding the participants' everyday lived experiences. The names of each participant have been changed to protect their anonymity.

### *Sample*

The participants were five Black and seven White women ranging in age from 27-40. The average age was 32. Participants were recruited by snowball sampling, which began with my social networks of colleagues, family and friends. Several participants then offered the names of friends that they believed would be willing to participate. Four of the women had not attended college; five were current college students and two had completed paralegal or LPN training. One participant held a bachelor's degree but was not employed in her field. Each woman worked from 30-45 hours per week; the average was 40 hours.

They earned from \$13,600 per year to \$28,000. (One participant earned \$40,000 with two full-time jobs.) The average salary was \$22,000. The women had 1-2 children; half of them had one child and the other half had two children. The children ranged in age from 4 years to 14 years old, with one woman also having a 21 year old son who lived on his own. The median age of the children was 7 years old. Most of the women were never-married while two were divorced and one was widowed. The majority of the women occupied office positions, three were care givers and one worked in the optical department of a large discount store. Half of the women were raised in single parent households while the other half were raised by two parents. In all cases, the participant's mother was a working mom.

I chose this sample of “working class” women based on their status as full-time workers in low-paying, non-professional jobs. While most of the women in my sample have completed at least some college or semi-professional training, none are employed in a professional position and they all express financial strain. While the term “working class” may elicit images of manual laborers employed in factories or restaurants, the group of women that I have chosen represents the working class by their low-wage, non-professional status. These women share the struggles of raising children and managing full-time employment with the job inflexibility and financial stresses that characterize the working class (Rubin 1976, Edin and Lein 1997, Ehrenreich 2001). See table 1 for a basic description of my sample.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Participants

<b>NAME</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Kids</b>
<b>Sierra</b>	28	Black	Food Bank-Office	1
<b>Vivica</b>	29	Black	Textbook Sales Co.-Customer Service	1
<b>Alana</b>	27	White	Discount Store-Optical Department	2
<b>Kate</b>	39	White	Insurance Co.-Customer Service	1
<b>Jasmine</b>	30	Black	Daycare Teacher	2
<b>Lillian</b>	30	Black	Assisted Living: Special Needs Adults-Caregiver	2
<b>Shayla</b>	29	Black	Bariatric Clinic-Office	2
<b>Abby</b>	27	White	Electronics Service Co.-Office	1
<b>Kim</b>	34	White	Assisted Living: Special Needs Adults-Caregiver	1
<b>Madeline</b>	29	White	Insurance Co.-Customer Service	1
<b>Jackie</b>	40	White	Telephone & Internet Co.-Customer Service	2
<b>Jennifer</b>	36	White	Telephone & Internet Co.-Customer Service	2

### *Standpoint Theory*

This research was informed by feminist standpoint theory: privileging the knowledge of the women in my study and acknowledging my own influence on the research process (Sprague 2005). I recognized the power dynamics inherent within any research of human subjects. As I went into my interactions with these women, I considered my status as a graduate student from the University that pervades life in the geographic area where I conducted this research. I attempted to express our commonality, explaining to participants that I had been a single working mother for several years and having spent most of that time as a (low-income) student. I acknowledged the role of my body in relation to the bodies of the women I interviewed for its factor in knowledge production. As a racially ambiguous Latina woman, I attempted to minimize the social distance between myself and the Black participants through this shared experience of single motherhood, while acknowledging to myself that I could not claim to know all of the challenges that these women face.

I attempted to build trust between myself and the women that I interviewed, striving to build some depth of a relationship. As Oakley proposes, I endeavored to accomplish this through “self-disclosure and ‘believing the interviewee’” (Reinharz 1992: 27). Rather than regarding my participants as ‘data-providers’ in a positivist model, I valued their subjectivity and its role in “the mapping of social experience” (28). Privileging the experience of each participant and expecting that what she had to say was the truth as she experienced it helped to facilitate trust between the participants and myself. This trusting relationship was strengthened by offering participants various means and multiple

opportunities to express themselves (1992: 36). Asking the women to journal gave them a chance to explain or enhance what we had discussed in the first interview. In conducting a second interview, I reinforced the accuracy of my findings by clarifying information given in the first interview and the journal entries. Kelly supports this practice as a way for participants to review, explain and add to previous statements (37).

I endeavored to uphold the “ethic of caring” that characterizes Black feminist epistemology (Collins 2000: 262). The three elements that make up this ethic of caring are: emphasizing the uniqueness of each individual, valuing emotions within communications, and appreciating the power of empathy (263). To welcome the distinctiveness of each participant, I strove to keep an open mind to the responses that each of them gave and resisted comparing their unique opinions and feelings to my own sometimes contradictory experiences as a single working mother. I concur with Collins that “emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument” (263). I attempted to draw from the anger, sorrow and joy that the women expressed, and not just their words, as I analyzed their responses. I utilized the strategy of empathizing to bridge the gaps between myself and my participants and to facilitate our conversations. I made an effort to tell the women when the things that they expressed resonated with my own experiences. As a working single mother, I agree with Sprague that “having people interested in what you have to say, in your own way of saying it, can be psychologically empowering to those who are not used to people being interested in their opinion” (2005: 163).

## CHAPTER THREE: DEFINING AND PERFORMING CLASS

The women of this study struggled to define their class position. Many of them asked me to clarify what I meant by “class”. Abby, who is 27 years old and holds a data entry position, expressed her uncertainty by responding, “I don’t know. I’m poor.” Including Abby, half of the women identified as lower class, the other half as “lower middle”. Each participant relied on money, or the lack thereof, to define her lower class position. The effort to locate themselves in a class position was complicated by ambivalence. Many of the women drew from social services standards or official statistics to define their lower class realities yet most expressed feeling middle class or being on a middle class trajectory.

### *Objective and Subjective Class*

#### *Status Inconsistencies*

It has been shown that Americans refer to objective criteria when determining their class location, but experience what Hodge and Treiman (1968) call ‘status inconsistency’ when “their income, occupation, and education do not line up...” (Hout 2008: 36, 37). People who find themselves straddling the line between classes because of these factors form ambiguous subjective class identifications. The “longer the list of relevant factors, the more possibilities for the inconsistencies that make choosing a class hard for people” (40). The women of this study had many features to draw from to locate themselves in a class position. They were all low income and had a clear sense that class

was determined by money. Their class identification was also complicated by a sense that their lower incomes and what state assistance agencies consider “low income” were in conflict. To further obscure the women’s class distinctions, they also drew from various other factors to validate a middle class identity: their morals and values, their homes, their clothing, their educational aspirations and their positions at work.

Half of all participants referred to government or unofficial guidelines to describe their class. Many of the women described themselves as “poor” or “lower income” but explained that while they experienced a life of financial struggle, their incomes were considered sufficient by government standards, too high to qualify for most assistance benefits. Vivica, a 29 year old customer service representative, explained that “the federal guidelines based on a two person income [of] about \$14,000 dollars” was the official cut off for the poverty level. Grossing closer to \$21,000, these guidelines led her to identify as “lower class” instead of poor. The complexity of understanding class is further emphasized in statements made by Jackie, a 40 year old customer service representative whose last paychecks totaled \$1,100 for the month. She identified as being closer to middle class because “I wouldn’t say we’re poverty level, not by the government’s standards at least.”

These examples illustrate that the women’s subjective class identification is complicated by status inconsistency. Almost every one of them defined her class position in terms of her salary and living “paycheck to paycheck.” In spite of what they perceive to be more middle class achievement, these women were constrained to define their class by their economic realities. Jasmine, a 30 year old daycare teacher, explained that “even though I have a job. I do have a car. I have a house and everything. I’m living paycheck to paycheck...I’m living day to day.” Shayla is 29, works in the office of a medical clinic, and consistently works up to 95 hours in two weeks. Though she considers that her

position suggests a more middle class identity, she describes herself as “lower middle class” because “I just feel like every time I get paid, all the money is gone and we’re poor again.” When asked if she saw her social class in the photo of her work desk she responded, “If I could put how much I made right there, I’d see my class on there!” Regardless of their middle class accomplishments, the women’s class identifications were restricted by their income.

Most of the women were aware of these status inconsistencies and every one of them expressed the belief that the only thing separating them from middle class status was simply having more money. When I asked the women if they were satisfied with their current class position, their answers reflected this. Each of the women believed they would be more middle class if they had an income sufficient to pay their bills. Kim, an assisted living caregiver explained, “I have to be honest. There are bills that I haven’t paid in the last month that I’m going to pay this month...Sometimes you have to do that. Where I would *like* to be one of those families who pays everything on time, no late fees, no, none of that.” Jasmine also expressed that earning more money would enable her to pay her bills and lift her into a higher class. Having no insurance and forced to attend the emergency room during an illness last year, she acquired large medical bills which she was unable to pay. As a result of this, she was sued and her wages are being garnished. She explained, “If I could make a couple dollars more, I think I would be ok.” Despite her middle class accomplishments, Jasmine’s salary is a constraint to middleclassness.

### *Aspiring to be Middle Class*

The identities of most of the women revolved around middle class aspirations. All adopted strategies to perform or pass as middle class and to attain middleclassness.



Goffman explains that:

In most stratified societies there is an idealization of the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones...Commonly we find that upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performances and that efforts to move upward and efforts to keep from moving downward are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of the front (Goffman 1959: 31).

The women accomplished this in a variety of ways. Understanding that they may officially qualify as lower class, they expressed to me that they held middle class values and that they raised their children accordingly. Most of the women also described the material things that they possessed as evidence. They strived to present a middle class appearance based on their clothing and accessories, both for themselves and their children. Finding ways to have their children in middle class activities was also important for most of the women. These women derived a sense of pride and middleclassness from working. Almost all spoke of education as a catalyst to middleclassness and had a clear sense of what it would take to qualify them as middle class. This is consistent with the working class women of Skeggs' (1997) study who "made investments in their bodies, clothes, consumption practices, leisure pursuits and home [indicating] a strong desire to pass as middle class" (95).

Women who are downwardly mobile following a divorce also identify as middle class, rather than what their lower incomes suggest (Grella 1990). Despite their drastically reduced incomes, they attribute their 'beliefs', 'convictions', 'values' and the way that they raise their children to this middle class identity. Likewise, the women of my study established that middle class ethics drove their choices and lifestyles. Kate, a 39 year old insurance company representative, made it clear that while being "lower class financially", she is a middle class mother. "I think as for mentality and upbringing I think I'm raising my kid more middle class than lower class...I've always concentrated on his

education...so generally people who are more intellectual come across from a higher society.” Though the women were restrained by income, a sense of middleclass values guided their hopes and dreams. Alana is 27 years old and works at the optical department inside a discount store. She wanted me to know that although she struggled, she valued success. “So I have like plans. I want to have a career. I don’t want to stay at [Discount Store] all my life...I want to be something and have something under my belt, take care of my kids.”

The moms also used clothing as a marker of middleclassness for their children as well as for themselves. Clothing is one way that working class women claim “respectability” (Skeggs 1997:84, 85). Vivica explained that dress was “very important because people perceive you from the time that you walk out that door, what you have on...So yes, it’s very important.” The photos she took of herself and her son before they left the house in the morning reflect this. To describe a full length photo of her, clad in a simple and elegant dress accessorized with a long silver necklace and matching earrings, she said, “so based on this picture, you wouldn’t know I was in the lower class. I dress better than my boss.”<sup>2</sup> “I may have paid maybe six dollars for that dress. [That] dress is from Wal-mart, George brand. But looking at it you wouldn’t know that.” In this way, the moms are like the woman in Grella’s (1990) study who prided herself on being able to “come off as looking like” she had more money than she did.

As Jackie and Kate emphasized the education of their children, the other women viewed their own education as the catalyst to upward mobility and middle class attainment (Bourdieu 1984). Likewise, for the working class women in Skeggs’ (1997) study, pursuing an education was a way for them to use their “caring capital” as a resource to attaining higher paying and more respectable employment (82). Half of my participants

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix for Figure 1

were currently pursuing a college degree. Three others had gone through paralegal or nursing training or were pursuing a GED. Lillian, spent the first year of her oldest son's life going to LPN school during the day, working until 11:30 pm, and squeezing in homework, sleep and time with her son between midnight and 6:00 am. Due to the pressures of raising an infant and working fulltime, she never took her state board examinations which would have enabled her to practice as a nurse. She now has two children and has worked two fulltime jobs for the last 4 years. While her desire to pursue a nursing career has been on hold, she holds on to the possibility of having a brighter future. She explained that taking state board exams means "at least [I'd] be working in a facility where I could be making a decent amount of money, possibly get rid of my second job and pursue going on to RN school. So I do think, I know it's hope. I don't have to stay where I am." When I asked Vivica if she was satisfied with her current position, her response was "No. Not at all. No way. I think that's what's the drive to go to school. Regardless of your race, your gender, education tops it."

While most of these women were pursuing an education, almost every one of them derived a sense of middleclassness from her position, title or company. This is consistent with other studies that have shown that women derive a sense identity from their work (Crosby 1991, Garey 1999). Crosby believes that women benefit from a sense of identity and self-esteem and receive stress relieving advantages from managing both families and employment. She argues that this applies to working class women as well as middle and upper class professionals. Alana, who had middle class aspirations and was determined to move up in life, had recently experienced a promotion from cashier to the optical center within the same discount store. She had always held cashiering positions in the past and considered the optical center a large step up. She detailed her responsibilities including doing "adjustments, ordering contacts, and glasses" and reading glasses prescriptions which entailed knowledge of "the sphere, the cylinder, and the axis." Attaining this more

middle class position in what is essentially an optometrist's office, and being able to accomplish the tasks associated with it, contributed to her sense of pride and middleclassness. This came through as she explained that the "previous girl, she cried and she was like 'I can't do it.' And she went back to cashiering." Often, the jobs that the women held were considered transformative as they brought them closer to middleclassness. Madeline claimed, more than once, that the insurance company she has been with for almost five years has changed her life. After a sporadic work history at places such as a dollar store, she has found a sense of middle class security. At a previous job, which she held for one day, she was expected to work for over ten hours on her first day and was denied a break. At her current company, she is entitled to benefits including personal and sick time. "My income is higher. My self-esteem is higher, too. So I can say that I work for a really good company."

The women had a clear sense of what it would take, in addition to career advancement, for them to attain middle class status. Half of the women (in addition to the two who already owned a house) expressed a longing to own their own home. A working class woman in Kefalas' (2003) study explained this desire by saying, "If you don't have a house, what have you done with your life? Owning a house is the ultimate dream. So when you get a house you're creating your perfect existence" (103). The women I interviewed spoke of strategies, such as trying to bring their credit scores up, to be able to purchase a home. Alana lamented, "I want a house. I'm gettin' tired of living in duplexes and apartments. I'm 27 and I have nothing." Madeline explained that while it would take some time, she desired to buy a house and said, "I think that if I got out of this neighborhood I would feel more middle class." Savings was one way for the women in my study to obtain middleclassness. Some attempted to save but most were unsuccessful. They saw the cushion of protection, which having a savings account provides, as a middle class aspiration. Jennifer equated her lack of savings with a lower status, "I would

say [I'm] lower middle class because I don't make enough to, you know sock some away every month like I would like to." Another middle class marker for these women was the ability to simply work one job. Lillian expressed this when she defined her class as "lower class because I'm havin' to have this second job to try and even things out and balance things out." She took photos of her children wrestling on the floor (and then crying in "time out") at the home of her special needs client.<sup>3</sup> These photos produced a conversation which revealed that Lillian longs for a day when her children can come home to their own house instead of to her client's apartment each weekday evening.

Single working class women's subjective class identification is crafted from, yet complicated by, notions of objective class criteria (Hout 2008). These women understand their class location in terms of money: their own low incomes versus the official guidelines that tell them that they are not impoverished; occupations and possessions that suggest middleclassness versus the reality that they are living from paycheck to paycheck; and the sense that while they are financially struggling, the only thing standing between themselves and the middle class is just a little more money. For this reason, it is important for the women to present themselves as middleclass. The women performed middle class presentation strategies by the use of their middleclass values, appearance, educational attainment and occupations.

### *Symbolic Indulgence*

Lower class parents act out what Pugh (2009) terms "symbolic indulgence" to present their children as middle class (124). These parents sacrifice to provide them with items that protect their dignity. Most of the single working class women in my study had a sense that middle class belongings were important to their sense of dignity and to their

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for Figures 5 and 6

children's security. These women used possessions as proof of middleclassness. This is consistent with Steedman's (1986) account of her working class childhood which she describes as being characterized by longing and a sense of exclusion. Steedman's own mother grew up in poverty and "brought away a profound sense of insecurity and an incalculable longing for the things she did not have" (108). Knowing the social value of game systems and trendy sneakers, lower class parents often ensure that their children possess these things. With a sense of pride, Vivica explained how she dressed her son by only buying discounted items or shopping at thrift stores. "You would never know the shirt he has on right now, I paid three dollars for." Moms with even less money to spend still found ways to dress their children as middleclass kids. Kate, who spoke of raising her child middle class through education, also explained the importance of dressing him accordingly. She purchases "all" of her child's clothes from yard sales. In her journal entry from the first day of school she wrote that in addition finding a coat for \$5, she "hit a goldmine" with several Abercrombie shirts for 50 cents each. Refusing to put her son in used shoes, she was able to buy "a brand new pair of Nikes for only \$40" at a Nike outlet store.

In addition to acquisitions of clothing and shoes, symbolic indulgence often takes the form of smaller, more impromptu purchases. Shayla detailed in a journal entry about her day at the circus with her son. On what was supposed to be a free, school funded activity, she reluctantly spent \$25 which was allotted for other expenses. "I really over spent there. It was so expensive, my son practically guilted me into getting this severely over priced glow in the dark sword. I only had \$30 and it costed \$15 plus I bought him cotton candy." Our conversation during her second interview revealed that it was the social value of the sword and cotton candy which motivated this sacrificial spending. As her son saw the other children in his class proudly displaying their own refreshments and souvenirs, this

prompted him to request them for himself. Shayla's sacrifice was motivated by "prioritizing the dignity of [his] social participation" (Pugh 2009: 125).

In addition to smaller purchases of clothing and toys, the women accomplished symbolic indulgence by sacrificing to provide what they considered to be more middle class homes for their children. For working class women, the home is a site for identity construction (Kefalas 2003). The home's appearance says something about the kind of "mother, wife, and woman" she is (100). Shayla explained "Like my home is better than a lot of people who make the same amount of money as me." Lillian also demonstrated how important it was to give her children a middle class home. She had been spending most of her earnings from her full-time day job to pay the rent on a newer, nicer duplex. "I loved our duplex but I literally was working to pay rent. I paid rent with one check pretty much and then went and with my part time [job], paid my other bills...I had done that for two years." She described her sense of loss at having to give up the duplex to take something less expensive. "It was perfect because I wanted everything in my boys' world at that point and time to be ok, no matter what struggles I went through. I wanted everything in their world, [as] they looked at me and saw me in our surrounding...everything was ok."

Working class single mothers practice symbolic indulgence to protect the self-esteem and social standing of their children. Like the lower class single mothers of Pugh's (2009) study, they accomplish this by ensuring that their children have the right clothing and shoes and they give in to impromptu requests for toys. I also found that these working class moms practice symbolic indulgence in a way that was different than the lower class moms of Pugh's study and that suggests a more middle class strategy. Their desire to

guard their children, to ensure them a middle class environment and present them as middle class, led them to sacrificially provide their children with a more middle class home.

### ***Concerted Cultivation***

Clothes, toys and homes were not the only way that these moms provided a sense of middleclassness for their children. They found ways to provide them the social capital which comes from “concerted cultivation” (Lareau 2003). Middle class families raise their children according to concerted cultivation, which is accomplished by having children in as many extracurricular activities as possible and by teaching children to assert themselves in exchanges with others. These parents deliberately raise children who are culturally competent due to this interaction that they have with adults and peers. The children learn social skills that lend to success in future educational and career ventures, which is consistent with Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (1984). Most of the moms held middle class activities for their children in high regard even though these activities often stretched their already tight budgets. They took many photographs of their children at t-ball or karate practices, and they gave me lists of their children’s activities including karate, football, baseball, cheerleading, gymnastics and Scouts.<sup>4</sup>

Jasmine explained “I try to put them in anything and everything that I can afford to give them a chance to grow...and maybe go further with it...The activities are important to me because of the society that we live in...Sometimes it can get expensive but we find a

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for Figures 2 and 3



way.” The moms often relied on programs to make up for their inability to pay for these activities. When Shayla described a photo of her son at t-ball practice, she explained that her social class was portrayed because at the time of registration, she did not have the \$20 fee. Shamed but grateful, she turned to a non-profit agency that covered all but two dollars. Jackie’s photos included a tour of the state capitol with her son.<sup>5</sup> She felt lucky to discover a free outing that was educational, at a place of history where it was possible to mingle with upper class politicians. She described the visit as a middle class experience for her child, “It’s something that most people wouldn’t do. Most people wouldn’t take their child [there]...I would see a middle or upper middle class that would do that.”

As these working class mothers practice concerted cultivation like middle class parents, they differ from lower class parents who raise their children according to “natural growth” (Lareau 2003). While some of the women’s photos showed their children playing with friends, there were even more of them spending quality time with their parents and grandparents. Though they were usually not enrolled in multiple activities simultaneously, the children benefitted from frequent interactions with adults. These interactions were child focused as the many pictures of the moms playing with their children depicted. Lillian’s photos included a photo of her father and son reclining in bed playing guitars, the 2 year old with a toy version of his grandfather’s larger guitar. This differs from the natural growth model where children receive very little attention or interaction from their parents or other adults. While finances constrain their ability to have their children in several programs at once, these moms do concertedly cultivate their children in the ways that they can.

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix for Figure 4

These working class single moms practice concerted cultivation, rather than natural growth, to ensure social advantages for their children. In this way they compare to the middle class parents of Lareau's (2003) study. Most of them find ways to have their children in as many extra curricular activities as they are able to. Though a lack of money restricts their ability to enroll their children in multiple programs at once, the women understand the cultural capital that sports and other activities provide for their children. They differ from the lower class parents that Lareau described. Those parents practiced natural growth because they did not consider it their responsibility to nurture their children's cultural capital through the cultivation of their talents and interests. In the case of these working class moms, they were only constrained by the lack of resources to do more.

## CHAPTER FOUR: BOUNDARY WORK

The women of this study consistently described themselves by contrasting their class position to others'. They better understood their class location in relation to what they are not. They employed distancing strategies to distinguish themselves from welfare-reliant single mothers as well as the upper class. In addition, they realized their own class limitations by acknowledging that they would never belong to the upper class. Savage explains that

rather than evoking a sense of belonging to a collective group, [class] invokes a sense of differentiation from others. In most cases it means that they are not one of the privileged who have it easy, nor are they one of those at the bottom who are morally suspect. People's sense of self-identity is linked to a claim of 'ordinariness' or 'normality' which operates as a double reaction against both above and below (Savage 2000).

“Because it is not possible for the [working class] to distance themselves physically or economically from poverty, they create symbolic distances and erect moral boundaries instead” (Kefalas 2003:100). There is a hierarchy of single mothers that is imposed by the public, with assumed ranking ranging from the never-married poor Black woman on welfare to the divorced upper class White woman (Sidel 2006). It has been shown that welfare reliant women distance themselves from other women on welfare (Broughton 2003), believing that structural forces are behind their reasons for not working but that other welfare dependent women are capable of working; they just choose not to. These women create an Other out of fellow welfare recipients out of a need to reconcile

themselves with the stigmatized view of women on welfare. They see themselves as “deserving” and the others as “undeserving”.

Other groups have been shown to draw from the same distancing strategies to preserve a sense of dignity. Latina/o immigrants adopted a reactive Latino identity based on not being American (Massey and Sanchez 2010). The qualities that they attribute to themselves (“warm, nurturing, and communal”) are in direct contrast to what they perceive to be American qualities: “cold, calculating, and competitive” (204). Likewise, the homeless distance themselves from other homeless persons in general and from certain groups of homeless people (Snow and Anderson 1992). For example, the ones who are able to secure employment, and are on the brink of leaving the streets, dissociate themselves from other homeless persons. They explain that the others are permanently and contentedly homeless. Working class men also maintain their dignity by performing “boundary work” between themselves and those of other groups (Lamont 2000). Moral standards are the bricks that make up these walls as working men maintain their “sense of identity, worth and status” despite their lack of the socioeconomic status of the middle and upper classes (2). They accomplish this by defending the characteristics that their own class or racial group possesses while devaluing the qualities upheld by those in other groups.

### ***Othering the Welfare-Reliant Single Mother***

Defensive othering among subordinates is “identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group” (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 425).

Welfare recipients, particularly single mothers, are stigmatized as lazy, idle and reliant upon the public (Sidel 1996). This adds to the stigma of single motherhood and has been contributed to, in part, by the war on welfare (Polakow 1993, Sidel 1996, Nelson 2005). As the single mothers of this study reach towards middleclassness, they pull away from welfare reliant single mothers and resist the stigma of the single mother who does not work but relies on government assistance to raise her children.

These working moms felt a sense of middleclassness in relation to non-working welfare dependent women. Their identity as working women played a role in how they viewed themselves in relation to non-working mothers. When I mentioned the availability of programs that provide assistance to single mothers in lieu of their working, Jackie expressed strong opinions. “Oh no!!! NO!!!...I could not do it. I don’t see how women do that. To me, that would just be like a slap in my face. Because I can get up and I work. I’m perfectly ready, willing and able to.” Jasmine and her friends, all of whom are single working mothers, frequently discuss these welfare reliant women, “We see these parents out here that don’t work and don’t do anything and live this happy life. So they don’t have a worry in the world because they’re living off of the government and getting all these assistance programs, which they should have programs for women who do work and are by themselves and are trying.” When Shayla told me of being denied Medicaid at the time of a miscarriage, she said “It hurts me because I go to work every day and I’m paying for the people [they’re] teaching this to and it creates a cycle for them because they’re not going to learn responsibility.”

The women had a clear sense of the distance between themselves and lower class moms on welfare. They understood this, in part, by the good example that they were setting for their own children as well as the bad example that welfare reliant moms were setting for

theirs. Shayla's experience of being denied Medicaid benefits and the realization that non-working mothers qualify for this form of assistance, lead her to exclaim, "so you'd rather I sit at home and collect this free money and get your free insurance versus me out there trying to make something out of myself and show my kids you need to go to work [to] take care of yourself?" When I asked Sierra why she chose to work rather than to receive assistance which would enable her to stay home with her pre-school aged child, she did not hesitate to say:

Yes I could set at home every day and not do anything and more than likely could get my rent paid and have my utilities paid and kids could have insurance and food and stuff. Yeah, I'd choose to set at home and do that but what type of example is that setting for my child? You know, am I going to set the example that you know, this is what you get when you don't work... [or] these are the things you can have if you go to work and you work hard. I'd rather set that example for him than to set a bad example.

The animosity that these women have towards welfare dependent women is exacerbated by their own experiences with being denied assistance by welfare and other non-profit agencies. Several of them were informed by agency workers of ways to qualify for benefits. Shayla was told that she made too much money to receive Medicaid, but that if she were to quit her job she could receive healthcare benefits along with \$240 per month. After turning down the food stamps and daycare assistance that Lillian once received as a new single parent, she continued to struggle despite working two jobs. Upon returning to the Division of Family Services to request Medicaid for her family and daycare assistance to continue working, she was denied. "[The case worker] told me, she said 'Well you only have 3 in your household currently, but if you were to have another baby then you would qualify'." Her resentment of welfare reliant women was fueled by her

inability to receive help when she needed it. “You have people out here that absolutely do nothing. And here I am, I work two jobs [and] I couldn’t get daycare assistance.”

### ***The Upper Class***

#### *Otherring the Upper Class*

The women of this study also defined themselves in opposition to the upper class. In this way, they garnered a sense of middleclass respectability despite their lower position in society. Lamont’s (2002) study of American and French working class men revealed that American men admired the success of the upper classes but did not accept the values that they associated with this group. The men expressed a belief that those in the upper classes were “cold”, “exploitative”, money hungry and possessed inferior relational abilities (108, 117).

Many of the women in my study referred to their own struggles as character builders that put them in a league above wealthier people. Jennifer defended her newfound lower class position following her divorce and explained that she doesn’t need money or material possessions to make her happy. She often talked of being grateful for the lessons she’s learned since becoming downwardly mobile. “Some people wouldn’t be able to live in the same clothes every single day, wearing the same shirt twice a week... You know, some people it is all about stuff and *I feel sorry for them* because it is not that way.” Kate explained that those in the upper class are “financially driven” but being happy, compassionate and giving are the qualities that she values. She clarified that money cannot buy happiness and she believes that wealthy people tend to be selfish. “Stereotypically people who are in the upper class are very materialistic... I think those kind of people kind of miss a lot [and] are very self-involved because you don’t need anybody else [and] you never look outside yourself.”

### *Distancing from the Upper Class*

The women that I interviewed expressed a drive to be middle class and rejected the upper class as a desirable class location. This is consistent with the distancing practices that American working class men employed to highlight their own respectability in comparison to the upper class (Lamont 2002). Each of my participants specifically stated that they did not want to be upper class. This can also be viewed as a way that the women understood their own class reality. As those in the middle class might at least dream of someday attaining upper class status, these working class women could only dream of attaining middle class standing. When I asked the women what class they aspired to, Abby, like each of the women, responded “just middle class.” When I asked whether she would be ok with being upper class, she said “I don’t even know if that’s attainable” and explained that she had struggled financially for so long that she did not know if she could handle being wealthy. Sierra, who was between semesters in college, rejected upper class aspirations to “be comfortable with middle class.” She said, “I’d be happy making at least \$50,000 a year...And you know, that’s something I feel that I can maintain. It’s kind of unrealistic to think that I’m going to be upper class, making six figures with a human services degree. That’s just kind of impossible.”

When the women described aspiring to be middle class rather than upper class, almost all of them expressed a longing to “just be comfortable”. This is similar to the French working class men who believed that some people were meant to be at the top while they themselves are comfortable “in the middle” (Lamont 2002: 219). The women of my study wished to be free from the relentless stress of financial struggle. Vivica would like to be “comfortable [as] bills come in and [be] able to pay them with no worry. She expounded on this by saying, “Not tryin’ to pay the light bill and think about how you’re gonna pay the rent...That’s where I want to be... I’m tired of the worry.” The women did not desire



wealth and great possessions, only the comfort of having all of their needs met. At the time of our first interview, Abby was in need of new tires and wished that she did not have to worry about how she was going to get them. She said that comfort meant to “not have to stress about how I’m going to afford tires on my car...I don’t necessarily want to be rich, but I’d like to be able to cover necessities and a few wants and not really stress about money.” Alana’s definition of “comfortable” was to be “happier, less stressed [and not] have to worry about every day how many hours I’m gonna get on the job...and if I’m gonna get kicked off food stamps soon or [my children’s] insurance.”

With the women’s rejection of the upper class came the claim that having more money and being upper class did not bring advantages, but rather leads to a different set of problems. Madeline wants to be upper middle class and said, “I don’t aspire to be a millionaire. I don’t want more money, more problems. I just want to be comfortable. That’s what I really want. I don’t want a huge house. Just want to be more comfortable.” Some of the women cited upper class frivolity as a potential source of stress. Vivica rejected the upper class as an option, “I think I would have a new set of worries, probably not like the old ones as far as finances and wondering how to pay a bill but probably deciding on where to go or what vacation I would want to take.” The women distanced themselves from the upper class in an effort to assuage the reality of their lower class position and the possibility that they may never even achieve middle class status.

These working class single mothers utilize strategies to create an Other from those both below and above them. They practice oppressive othering by attributing moral inferiority

to non-working welfare reliant single mothers. They create powerful virtual selves by presenting themselves as worthy by the example that they are setting for their own children by working. The practice of creating boundaries between themselves and their welfare dependent counterparts exemplifies defensive othering among subordinates. The women of this study reject the stigma of the poor single mother as they seek admittance into the ranks of the middle class. I also show that the women's boundary work is extended to the upper class as they distance themselves from those in the upper class as well as reject the upper class as a class aspiration. These working class women cite the insufficient morality of those in the upper class as reasons for their rejection. This is coupled with the assertion of their own superior values. As they aspire to a higher class, but realize that the upper class is an unattainable quest, they create a problematic view of the upper class in their efforts to insert value into their own lower class position.

### *Lived Complexities*

The working class position of the single mothers of this study shapes the reality of their everyday lives. The single mother bears most, if not all, of the financial, physical and emotional responsibilities of raising children yet often the lived complexities of this woman's life is overlooked (Sidel 2006). The story of working class single mothers would not be complete without a description of the hardships that these moms face on a daily basis.

The women in this study lived with the relentless stress of making ends meet and negotiating which bills to pay and which to let go overdue. Most of them described living paycheck to paycheck or as Madeline put it, "paycheck to overdraft to paycheck to overdraft". For these women, the reality of living with no money and no savings means

having to do without much of the time. When Shayla's washing machine broke, she went without one for some time. She describes her photo of overflowing laundry baskets, "I was packin' all that to the Laundromat and I was tired!"<sup>6</sup> She explained that the only time she was able to do laundry was late at night at the Laundromat in an area "where they shoot people, beat people up...and that scared the crap out of me!" The expense of the Laundromat and the physical strain of hand washing clothes in the bathtub forced her to obtain a high interest payday loan in order to buy a (used) washer. Large purchases such as these and other bills are often put on hold indefinitely. Kate took a photo of a basket full of unpaid bills and explained that "just looking at that picture" caused her to experience anxiety.<sup>7</sup> Despite having insurance, she has accumulated several large medical bills from her son's specialists and she fears having her wages garnished.

The financial pressures were exacerbated as these moms were often pressured to spend money that they did not want to and that they did not have. This is exemplified by Shayla's purchases of a glow-in-the-dark sword and cotton candy for her son at his school field trip to the circus. Seeing the other kids with snacks and souvenirs, she reluctantly gave in to her son's requests for them. The stress of being \$25 short led her to an anxiety ridden afternoon, which culminated in a headache. She journaled, "What am I gonna do? I was just tryin' to be like 'forget it' but it was still in the back [of my mind]...it was still there." When she arrived home that evening, she discovered a \$400 insurance check in the mailbox. "YAY! I was happy. I actually slept good that night 'cause I didn't have to worry about it."

Many of the moms experienced this nagging fear of overspending. My interview with Alana took place on her daughter's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday. When I asked what challenges she faced as a mom in her class she responded, "I have to be extra careful what I spend on. Like her

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix for Figure 7

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for Figure 8

birthday's today and I have nothing for her.” She teared up as she explained that she had some money but that she was too *afraid* to buy her daughter a birthday present for fear of coming up short on “the next bill”. She also expressed a concern that she was being selfish, but explained “I cannot be late on a payment...if I lose that car--phh--I'm done.”

The difference that a little extra money can make in these women’s lives is exemplified best in Vivica’s midweek journal entry:

I began to put my keys in my jacket pocket when I felt a folded piece of paper...I reached in my pocket to get the paper out and what do you know, it was \$100.00. That’s right 5 twenty dollar bills in my pocket. Do you know I wanted to scream, I was broke as you know that payday was 1 week away. I wanted to cry. Just the day before my mom, [my son] and I went to some of my favorite thrift shops only to make a wish list due to a lack of cash not knowing I had \$100 in my bright yellow jacket.

In addition to their financial struggles, juggling the demands of work and raising children is especially challenging for single women. Often work schedules conflict with the availability of childcare facilities. Abby took a photo of the clock in her car, which read “6:59”. She explained that the before-school program at her daughter's school did not open until 7:00, the same time that she was required to be at work. She and her daughter wait in the parking lot each morning until exactly 7:00 when she drops her off and races to work. She explained her frustration as she entered the building on time one morning only to be told that she was one minute early. She was warned that if it happened again, she would receive a bill for \$5 for each minute before 7:00, payable to the person whom she inconvenienced. Then she was instructed to fill out some paperwork before she left for work, causing her to be even later. Lillian's journal reflected the same early morning rush, compounded by those who show little sympathy for the struggles of working single moms. After waking up over an hour late, she realized that she would not have time to feed and dress her two young children and get herself ready in the fifteen minutes that she had left. Her entry reads:

So I did what I dreaded to do every Monday morning when I knew I was going to be running late—call the grouch of the man I have to relieve, who completely has nothing to do but go home & feed and look at his cats...And had no compassion or understanding for the jobs that I do before I actually get too work. After about two minutes wasted listening to him tell me about how his cats haven't eaten all night, I apologized for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time & hung up the phone only to find that I had 13 mins to complete all of my tasks.

Many of these women experience exhaustion on a regular basis. Abby depicted this struggle in her photos. One photo is of a coffee mug and a can of Diet Coke in front of her computer monitor at work. Another contains only a small bottle of “energy spray”. She explained, “I start out with coffee in the morning and then switch to Diet Coke in the afternoon”. She then resorts to the energy spray when the effects of the coffee and soda have worn off. Despite these efforts, her energy is often depleted. Jasmine's journal entries repeatedly described her as “very tired” or “exhausted”. She frequently fell asleep on the couch, only to be awoken by one of her children. She wrote, “I was off at 5:30 and was dead tired! I got home and laid right down in my clothes. It wasn't until 11 pm when [my 6 year old] woke me up and said, 'Mommy what am I going to eat?’”

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

While there have been studies on both poor and middle class single mothers, the working class single mother has been mostly unrepresented in the literature. I have contributed to the literature by examining the intersection of low income single mothers who both work and have middle class aspirations. By examining the issues of class identification, Pugh's (2009) notion of symbolic indulgence, Lareau's (2003) concept of concerted cultivation and Schwalbe's (2000) generic process of othering I have shown how working class single mothers are similar to, yet differ from their welfare reliant and middle class counterparts.

My findings show that class is salient in the lives of these women. They are constrained in their subjective class definitions by the inconsistencies of the objective criteria that they drew from (Hout 2008). While they earn a low wage and struggle financially, they derive a sense of middle class identity in various ways. They take pride in what they consider to be middle class positions (Crosby 1991, Garey 1999) and many of them seek degrees or promotions to lead them to middleclass incomes as well. They strive to present themselves as middle class through their values (Grella 1990), clothing (Skeggs 1997) and possessions (Rubin 1986).

I have shown that single working class mothers practice symbolic indulgence as lower class mothers do, sacrificing to provide their children with middle class markers such as clothing and shoes. They also acquiesce to their children's requests for toys and other items that protect their dignity among peers. Additionally, these women practice a more

middle class component of symbolic indulgence in that they consider it necessary for their children to have middle class homes as well.

I have illustrated that these women raise their children according to concerted cultivation as much as they are able. In this way, they are consistent with middle class parents who develop their children's cultural capital by enrolling them in a variety of activities. While their children do not participate in multiple programs simultaneously, they are not raised by natural growth as lower class children are. They receive plenty of attention from their parents and grandparents who often engage them in games and other play. The children of working class single moms are only hindered from participating in more extra curricular activities by their mothers' lack of financial resources.

I have also demonstrated that working class single mothers practice oppressive othering by attributing moral inferiority to welfare reliant single mothers as well as to those in the upper class. They create powerful virtual selves by presenting themselves as worthy in relation to the unworthiness of non-working single mothers and the ethically challenged members of the upper class. While they reject the upper class as a desirable class location, they do resist their own lower class position and strive to achieve a middle class location. In efforts to distance themselves from the stigma of the welfare dependent single mother and attain middleclassness, they practice defensive othering among subordinates.

#### *Limitations and Considerations for Future Research*

There are limitations to this study. Even though I utilized a variety of data collection methods, the sample size of 12 is small. A larger sample may have shown different findings. As I recruited by snowball sampling methods, it is also possible that the participants' responses were similar because some of them knew each other. Future

research could incorporate measures to obtain a more diverse sample of working class single mothers.

I define these women as working class because of their low wage, non-professional work status although they did not refer to themselves in this way. I did not offer the women a choice of social class positions to choose from, rather I left class identification open to subjective interpretation. Had I provided a list of social class possibilities, including lower, working, middle and upper, I believe that many of them would have chosen “working class” (Hout 2008). Given their aversion to a connection with poor single mothers dependent on welfare, their desire to attain middleclassness and the pride that they cherish as working women, I think that a “working class” option would be considered a better fit by most of the women. This is a component that I will add to my own future research of single working mothers.

Class shapes the way that researchers understand class terms such as “working class,” who we include in our sample, how we think about the responses we receive and how we perceive what our participants are saying. I identify as “working class”: raised by a single working mother and then a mother and step-father who held lower wage, non-professional positions. Although I am educated, I have only held lower wage non-professional positions. Most low-earning graduate students would not refer to themselves as “working class,” but as a single mother raising three children, *I do*. As an educated and employed woman who has resisted welfare reliance and who is not completely impoverished, to label myself as “lower class” doesn’t seem quite appropriate. Likewise, as I’ve occupied only lower earning positions and have struggled financially for most of my life, the “middle class” still eludes me.

While the only employment criteria for potential participants were that they held low wage and non-professional positions, the women that were recruited for my sample were



very similar to my self-definition of working class. I did attempt a more diverse sample, soliciting participants from among discount store employees, hair stylists and salon patrons. Though my request to post flyers in the break room at local discount stores was denied, I made personal requests of a few employees. I also called hair salons and hand delivered flyers to some. From these attempts, I received just two responses and only one of these women met the criteria of this study. A consideration for future research would be to purposefully recruit women from two groups of the working class. One group would be women like those of my study and the other would be composed of those employed in more manual labor positions such as housekeeping or restaurant servers. Through this a comparison could be made between two similar but different groups of “working class” women.

This study takes place in a time of economic uncertainty: recession, high unemployment and a mortgage and credit crisis. While some of the women in this study did express gratitude for having employment, the women never brought up concerns about this economic downturn, nor did I ask them about it. The current historical moment is not relevant to this particular story of working class single mothers. Their middleclass identity maintenance and distancing strategies would be similar regardless of the economic climate. It is my understanding that a concern for the economy is absent in the women’s discussion because these women live a life of economic uncertainty, with or without a national crisis. Most of them come from working class backgrounds and have experienced financial constraints for most of their lives. These women hold traditionally female jobs as caregivers or are in lower level service positions. These types of jobs are not under threat and are mostly immune to the economic climate of the times. As a single working class mother, it is also my sense that recent shifts in the economy have little effect on my circumstances. For this reason I did not probe in this direction, but this is a

consideration for further study. Future research might include how the recession has subtly shaped class based behaviors.

There are many other possible directions for future research of single working class mothers. One possible study would be to include speaking with the children of these participants. An interesting phenomenon, which did not make its way to this paper, was the relationship that the women and their children had with the fathers of the children. Specifically, the way that the women thought about receiving child support from their children's fathers would make a fascinating future study. While many of them did receive child support, several of them received little to no child support. Many times, the women did not request child support from the fathers or push the enforcement of it, but rather they drew from the support that the fathers did provide. This came in the form of providing care for the children and consenting to requests for money when specific things were needed for the children, such as clothing. Care came in the form of having the children for part of the weekends or before and after school, or when the moms took college classes. These moms used sophisticated strategies to ensure father involvement and to meet the needs of their children. Though this group of women has been largely overlooked in previous studies, an examination of their lives has a lot to offer the field of Sociology. As I anticipate continuing research in the area of working class single mothers, it is my hope that other researchers will pursue this direction as well.

APPENDIX



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

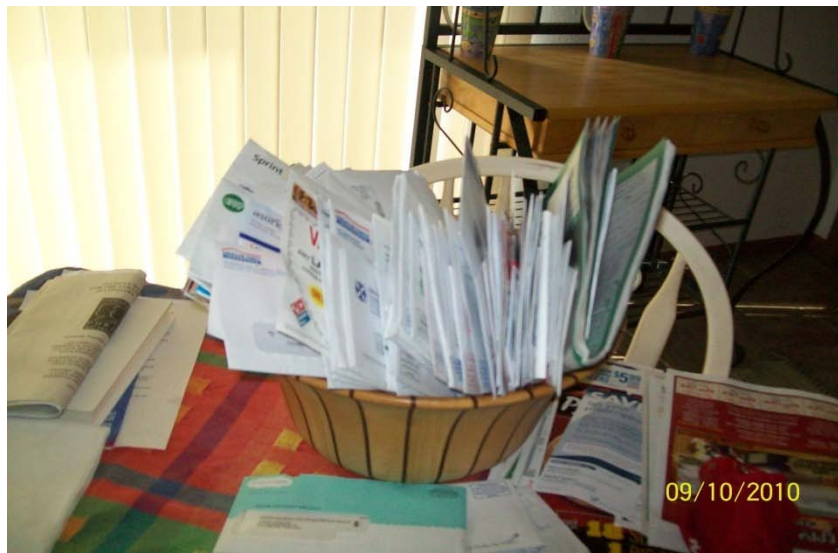


Figure 8

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