

THE REVISED MRS:

Gender Complementarity at College

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Using an ethnographic and longitudinal interview study of college women and in-depth interviews with their parents, I argue that mid-tier flagship universities still push women toward gender complementarity—a gender-traditional model of economic security pairing a career oriented man with a financially dependent woman. Combining multilevel and intersectional theories, I show that the infrastructure and campus peer culture at Midwest University supports this gendered logic of class reproduction, which reflects an affluent, white, and heterosexual femininity. I argue that this logic may only work for a minority of students, and plays a role in reinforcing class inequities among women.

Keywords: *higher education; multilevel theory; intersectionality; stratification; peer culture*

I don't want her to be a career woman I wouldn't want Tara to be a doctor. No way I would love her to meet someone like that I want her to get married and have kids She wants to be a cookie-baking mom.

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What Tara's mother describes is a revised MRS, or "Mrs. Degree." The MRS is a carryover from an earlier era, in which privileged women would attend college to find a husband (Horowitz 1987). A recent revision reflects the postponement of marriage, particularly among affluent youth (Furstenberg et al. 2004): Tara's mother had no intention of her daughter marrying during college—only later, to a man who was a proven success. However, she still assumed her daughter's future would be secured through a mate's human capital.

This sentiment flies in the face of women's strides in higher education. Once underrepresented on campus, women are now more likely than men to enroll, persist, have higher GPAs, obtain four-year degrees, and enter graduate school (Bae et al. 2000; Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; Conger and Long 2010). On these fronts, or vertical inequities, men lag behind women. With regard to horizontal inequities—or differences in what students learn—women may still be disadvantaged (Charles and Bradley 2009).

Using an ethnographic and longitudinal interview study of college women and interviews with their parents, I bring a multilevel, intersectional framework to the study of horizontal inequities in higher education. I show that women arrive with diverse gendered logics of class reproduction, or models of how to achieve economic security. However, the infrastructure and dominant peer culture at mid-tier schools like Midwest University—neither elite nor open-access—support gender complementarity, a logic consistent with an affluent, as well as white and heterosexual, femininity.

GENDERING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A rich tradition of scholarship is attentive to ways in which K–12 schools shape and reinforce gendered peer cultures. Thorne (1993) explains that organizing elementary school spaces and activities around gender leads boys and girls to view each other as opposites. Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995) note that middle schools grant boys' sports visibility that girls claim by cheering for them—an activity emphasizing girls' appearance, charm, and support of boys. This literature shows that schools, inside and outside the classroom, help socialize youth into gender performances that become deeply embodied (Bettie 2002; Martin 1998; Pascoe 2007).

In contrast, what we know about the production of gender difference in college is limited. This is surprising, as 30 years ago “chilly climate” reports called attention to gendered processes happening *inside* colleges and universities (Hall and Sandler 1982, 1984). Today research focuses mostly on gender segregation in major choice (see England and Li 2006). There is debate about when girls and women fall out of the “leaky pipeline” to science, engineering, and doctoral-track medical occupations, with recent work emphasizing earlier effects of gender beliefs (e.g., Correll 2001). Yet, as Charles and Bradley (2009) argue, universities play a role by offering identity-based majors that allow students to indulge in gendered selves.

Most of the ways in which universities structure student life remain a black box, in part because of the assumption that students arrive fully socialized (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008). However, gender socialization continues through the college years and is intense on residential campuses, where students live, study, and socialize among peers of similar age. They are enmeshed in peer cultures that reward certain femininities and masculinities and sanction others. Universities provide the academic and social infrastructures undergirding these peer cultures.

Campus peer cultures have long emphasized gender difference. When women began to attend en masse, they were incorporated as future wives and mothers—a position reflected in the domestic nature of women’s social clubs and majors (Horowitz 1987). Even into the 1980s, women faced a college peer culture in which their romantic potential was valued over their intellectual potential (Holland and Eisenhart 1990). Today an update is needed, as youth sexual cultures have changed dramatically in 30 years (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007).

At least one thing, however, has remained the same: A majority of residential colleges still house a gender-segregated social organization system (i.e., the Greek system) that is delineated by race and class (DeSantis 2007; Hoover 2001). In the college party scene, predominately white Greek men have control over valuable resources and, consequently, social and sexual dynamics (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Boswell and Spade 1996). Men receive status from sexual prowess, athleticism, confidence, and appearance of power (“big man on campus”), while women are expected to be nice, attractive, and appealing to men (DeSantis 2007; Hamilton 2007).

Gendered Logics of Class Reproduction

Women cultivate gender-specific skills, tastes, appearances, and interactional styles that are shaped by their class, race, and sexual identity—a point emphasized by intersectional scholars (Bettie 2002; McCall 1992). Different femininities reflect distinct cultural models of how women should achieve economic security, or gendered logics of class reproduction. Logics crystalize when a model of gender relations works for a group to achieve class reproduction or mobility. Because class relies on positioning in labor and mating markets, and higher education prepares students for both, gendered logics of class reproduction involve approaches to romance and family life, as well as to career.

Gender complementarity, the logic employed by Tara's mother, is described in feminist psychological research on adolescent sexuality as a co-constructed pairing of traditional femininity and masculinity (Tolman, Striepe, and Harmon 2010). Later in the life course, complementarity is institutionalized in the gender specialization model of marriage. Here men and women are seen as matched opposites—with men as economic providers and women as supportive homemakers (Becker 1991). Heterosexuality is assumed, as is the class privilege necessary to live on a one-worker salary, a benefit historically more available to affluent whites (Coontz 1992).

Accounts of how classed interactional styles, tastes, and beliefs are passed down in families tend not to consider gender (e.g., Lareau 2003; see McCall 1992 for a resuscitation of gender in the work of Bourdieu). However, the notion of women as primarily wives, mothers, and helpmates has been preserved and supported among the upper class (Ostrander 1984). In contrast, professional upper-middle-class parents may cultivate a more competitive, nontraditional femininity (Levey 2013). Among the upwardly mobile women of the less privileged, femininity may be marked by the pursuit of pragmatic pink-collar careers (England 2010; Lopez 2003).

On residential college campuses, youth are unmoored from their families—living independently and among their peers. These years embody what Swidler (2001) refers to as an “unsettled” period (see Arnett 2004). During this time, cultural acquisition is at its peak and social environments are heavily influential. When a particular femininity is rewarded above others, women can be nudged toward a gendered logic of class reproduction that may not serve them well.

Multilevel gender theory is useful here, as it posits that gender is not only embedded in the self, but it is also an organizing feature of interactions and

built into institutional policies and practices—making it hard to escape (Martin 2004; Risman 2004). Multilevel theory alone, however, is not well suited to ascertain why some models of gender relations are privileged. It is necessary to overlay an intersectional framework to understand why gender complementarity, a logic privileging an affluent, white, heterosexual femininity, is still mainstream on many campuses—while other gender logics remain marginalized.

I show that the dominant peer culture on campus, bolstered by social and academic policies and practices, supports the cultivation of a gender disposition suited for a revised MRS. I discuss how difficult it is for women to pursue a different logic in this context, and for whom the consequences of failing to do so are highest. Although I do not directly examine masculinities, it is important to note that complementarity is a dialectical concept: A gender-traditional femininity coexists, and relies on, gender-traditional masculinity—and vice versa (Schippers 2007). The institutional and interactional supports described in this article also help men—especially those with class and race privilege—to construct a masculinity based on sexual dominance over women (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Sweeney 2013).

METHODS

Almost half of students at a four-year college attend a “moderately selective” public institution like Midwest University (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). In 2004, at the start of the study, 17 percent of the MU undergraduate student body was Greek. Large public universities, especially in the Midwest and South, typically range from 10 to 20 percent Greek, and many private liberal arts schools have robust Greek systems. Highly selective institutions, open-access regional or commuter schools, and schools without a Greek system have different social and academic infrastructures from those discussed here.

Large state schools have historically offered a variety of academic and social programming to different constituencies. In recent years, cuts to state and federal support for higher education have pushed mid-tier publics like MU to cater to socially oriented and out-of-state students who can afford it, as many academically competitive privileged students go elsewhere (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lewin 2013).¹ These class-based processes also have gendered consequences.

The project began when my co-director (Elizabeth A. Armstrong), a team of researchers, and I secured a room on a women’s dormitory floor

at Midwest University. Women were told that researchers were studying the college experience, and we expressed interest in all facets of their lives. We interacted with women on their own terms and tried not to reveal our predispositions. Many even engaged in homophobic and racist behaviors in front of us. Our approach minimized effects of social desirability, as it was difficult for women to know what we were studying and how they might be judged.

We also traced women through five waves of in-depth interviews, from the first year of college to a year after they were slated to graduate. Interviews covered academic engagement and performance, involvement in college social life, gender beliefs and attitudes, parent-child relationships, sexual and romantic experiences, and future career and family plans. Forty-seven women were interviewed at least once, and they form the core sample. Eighty-three percent were interviewed at least three times, and 70 percent across all five waves.

I was the primary ethnographer and conducted a majority of the interviews. As a white, heterosexual, middle-class, in-state woman in my twenties, I was well positioned to connect with many women on the floor who fit this demographic (see below). Women treated me as a therapist, and I attempted to respond neutrally or positively. One (Morgan Y5) noted, "You are someone who I feel I can tell anything to because you have no bias."² I probed in moments when I felt respondents were relying on shared assumptions.

My relationships with women facilitated in-depth interviews with their parents, useful here for information on family-based gendering processes. After gaining permission from women, I conducted 59 interviews, with parents of 38 individual women (or 81 percent of the interview sample). Sixty-one percent of interviews were with mothers, and 39 percent with fathers. I traveled to parents' homes and workplaces, catching most as their daughters were near graduation. Interviews covered topics including gender socialization, parental investments, academic and career expectations, and college partying.

The floor on which women initially lived was in the largest housing complex on campus, accommodating nearly a third of incoming students. It was known as a "party dorm," not because of activities taking place inside, but due to the assumption that residents were socially oriented. This was true of many, but not all. Around 20 percent—predominately affluent women from out of state—selected the dormitory because of its social reputation. All but a handful of the rest were open to college partying, although they would become more so over time.

Living in this dorm ensured that residents—even those who landed there unintentionally—would be forced to deal with the dominant social scene on campus. Students who lived in the small alternative housing units on campuses did not have the same exposure, and experienced less pressure toward gender complementarity. However, pilot group interviews conducted before the study began suggested that even they defined themselves in relation to the social world that I describe below.

Respondents started college together, on the same floor, at the same school. All were white, a result of low racial diversity on campus and racial segregation in housing (see Tatum 2003), and most identified as heterosexual. While this homogeneity is a limitation, it is also a strength: By holding all else constant, I focus on how social class and gender intersect at MU to create support for gender complementarity.

Class diversity among families aided in this task: I interviewed a CEO father at his office overlooking Central Park in New York City, and I caught a single mother at a rural truck stop with her youngest son. Class was determined by parental education, occupation, student employment during school, and student loan information (see Table 1). I sometimes refer to upper- and upper-middle-class women as privileged because their participation in the social scene was not constrained by resources.

Data analysis evolved over time. Theoretical memos written during data collection incorporated the perspectives of differently positioned researchers with regards to class, sexuality, gender, and age—one strength of team research. I used these memos to help identify patterns and themes—such as the notion of gendered logics of class reproduction. In an iterative process, I added questions to the interview guides that allowed me to test my theories. Later, I systematically coded around 260 interviews with children and parents, and 2,500 pages of notes using Atlas.Ti qualitative analysis software. I focused on early exposure to gendered logics, women's logics upon exit, and mechanisms that could explain shifts during college.

PRODUCING GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY

Diverse Gendered Logics

Mid-tier public universities like MU enroll students from a broad range of class backgrounds, who espouse different gendered logics of class reproduction. This diversity is important, because it suggests most women do not arrive primed for complementarity.

TABLE 1: Class Background of the Interview Sample

Class	Mother Education	Father Education	Mother Occupation	Father Occupation	Employed during School	Loans	Residency	N
Upper	College degree	≥ College degree	Homemaker	CEO/CFO	None	None	Out-of-state	9 (19%)
Upper middle	≥ College degree	≥ College degree	Teacher, social services	Professional	Few	None	Mixed	17 (36%)
Middle	College degree	College degree	Teacher, management	Sales management	Few	Some	Mostly in-state	6 (13%)
Lower middle	≤ Some college	Some college	Secretarial or sales positions	Sales management	All	Most	In-state	9 (19%)
Working	≤ Some college	≤ Some college	Low-paying service work	Manual labor	All	All	In-state	6 (13%)
								47 (100%)

Twelve women from highly educated, mostly upper-middle-class professional families—in-state and out-of-state—grew up in homes where a *consolidation of privilege* approach to economic security was reinforced.³ They were expected to focus on the development of professional careers, not refinement of traditional femininity—only later sharing breadwinning responsibilities with a similarly credentialed mate (see Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Complementarity was rejected. As Brooke's father approvingly described:

[My daughters] are not . . . the sorority girl stereotype. The ones that are too blonde and too pretty and too made-up . . . They're not just here to get a degree in . . . the MRS degree. The Mrs. Degree.

Similarly, Taylor's mother worried about gendered pressures at MU:

At Midwest U—it's probably the same thing at any school in the Midwest—I sense a percentage of the girls are there . . . to find a man. It drives me crazy. . . . Maybe it would have been on the coast, too. Maybe it's just everywhere.

Another 15 women came from middle-, lower-middle-, or working-class in-state families for whom tuition at a flagship state university was a financial stretch. They were oriented toward *pragmatic mobility*—a logic emphasizing women's immediate need for self-sufficiency. A solid earner to partner with—even early on—was a plus, but financial reliance on men was never assumed. Stacey's father explained to his daughter:

There's only two ways that you make it in the world: You either have to earn your money or have somebody give you your money. Well, I don't think anybody's gonna give us any, so that leaves the earning part.

All but a few parents encouraged vocational, pink-collar careers that offered a direct and traditionally gendered option for class mobility (England 2010). They viewed the party scene as a distraction. Emma's father noted, "I was concerned . . . that it would become more of the party situation and not as much as an educational situation."

The parents of seven women, mostly out-of-state, supported *gender complementarity*—linked to a specific femininity, concentrated in the Greek scene. Tara's mother, for example, had her sights set on a certain house for her daughter: "When I was in school, Gamma Pi Zeta was very exclusive and beautiful girls, all blondes, the best sorority." Her definition

of “best” pointed to class (“exclusive”) and race (“blonde”). Parents often pushed their children to conform. Julie’s mother noted, “We always talked about sorority, sorority, sorority.” When Julie missed the rush deadline, her mother snapped, “You have goals, right?” Similarly, Hannah’s mother would chide her for failing to adequately perform appearance-work for a sorority formal early in college. She told Hannah, “Go shopping! . . . Buy yourself a new dress. Are you crazy? . . . You deserve it. What is wrong with you? Are you a child?”—implying that it was immature not to understand the importance of looking good.

Their comments suggest a focus on the look, tastes, and social skills parents assumed women needed to secure a breadwinner, enabling a future as a “cookie-baking mom.” Naomi’s parents even paid double what they would have paid in-state to send her to an out-of-state school with a dance team. Her mother did not expect Naomi to be a “great provider for herself,” but had plans for Naomi to “marry a millionaire.”

These parents viewed the real action as occurring outside the classroom. They were joined by four other sets of parents, who did not explicitly reference a complementary femininity, but did privilege immersion in the college social scene. Sydney’s father remarked, when asked if his daughter partied, “That’s what going to school is for.” Relative to other groups, these 11 families brought the most tuition dollars to MU, and their children spent the most in surrounding restaurants, bars, and stores. What they were willing to pay for, and what MU offered, was a quintessential “best years of your life” social experience, embodied in Greek life.

Organizational Supports for Complementarity

In many ways, university life accommodated high-paying, mostly out-of-state families with social interests. This support had unintentionally gendered consequences: It allowed peer cultures in which gender complementarity was paramount to thrive.

The most powerful student organizations on campus were predominately white Greek houses. This influence was a direct result of the uneven distribution of valuable resources. For example, these groups owned property in several prime campus locations, affording them the ability to entertain large groups of people. Disparities in physical space made it hard for Black, Latina/o, and multicultural Greek organizations to compete (Ray and Rosow 2009). Universities could ban Greek organizations, but they would risk losing housing near campus and valuable alumni donation dollars.

The university unevenly implemented state drinking laws. In dormitories, resident assistants, police officers, and peer police enforced a zero tolerance policy; at fraternities, alcohol flowed freely. The Interfraternity Council, or IFC, handled boisterous parties internally by first issuing advance warning of entry. The party would then go into “lockdown,” as one woman (Leah Y1) described: “They go into lockdown a lot here. . . . Everyone has to go into a room and the doors are closed. . . . Literally, a red light goes on.” By the time IFC officers arrived, the party was quiet and underaged drinkers hidden. Because campus police rarely intervened, the system offered virtual legal impunity.

MU’s Greek system also had strong support from administration. The dean of students during the time of the study had been a fraternity member and received numerous Greek-related awards. He explained in an interview with a national sorority:

Institutions have, in the past, tended to have a supervisory mentality about fraternal organizations. Today I think they are moving away from that and toward a partner mentality.

As “partner” to the university, the Greek system was afforded more weight than other student organizations. The dean even institutionalized ties between administrators and Greeks by establishing a special advisory board.

The structure of residential life also channeled students into the Greek system. Residential neighborhoods had reputations, and students were allowed to self-select into them—although not everyone was equally informed. The result was homogeneity in class, race, sexual identity, and performance of femininity. Clustering allowed fraternities to pick up crowds of women interested in parties, and sororities could process potential recruits in large batches. It also heightened pressure to conform to traditional femininity. Perplexed about how she landed there, Valerie recounted:

I got stuck in [this dorm] where everybody is exactly the same and I was, like, “How can MU preach about diversity, more diversity, and here I am living in this dorm where every other girl [has the same name], and they have the same pink stuff, and they all look the same?” (Y1)

Students who might have diluted peer dynamics often opted into alternative housing communities, which existed in protective segregation from the rest of campus but had the effect of reducing heterogeneity elsewhere.

By supporting Greek organizations and the party scene, the university gave a small group of largely affluent, white men power on campus, which largely affluent, white sorority women tapped into by virtue of their sexual and romantic relationships with these men. In fact, the Greek system is structured around unequal heterosexual partnerships. Most sororities cannot consume alcohol, throw parties, and have men overnight in their own houses. They “pair” with fraternities for particular events. This gender dynamic, in which the man is dominant and well resourced, and the woman is passive and dependent on men, is at the heart of gender complementarity.

Presumably women could counter gender complementarity in the classroom. However, even academic functions, at times, were organized around Greek life. During rush, women were required to attend parties at all houses within a time window, yet six floor residents had a math test scheduled for the first day of rush. A similar scenario was likely unfolding on most floors, as the math class was a basic requirement. Field notes recount:

It seemed that the [campus-wide Greek organization] took the issue of the women’s need to take the math test seriously, but they took the notion of the women missing any one of the parties even more seriously. . . . [In the end] rush trumped the math test, and . . . the math test [had to] be moved. (FN 10/22/04)

As Charles and Bradley (2009) suggest, universities also provide academic programing that allows women to invest in gendered dispositions. MU, like similar schools, is organized to facilitate student reliance on “easy” majors. Easy majors are characterized by the ease of obtaining a high GPA and little general skills improvement during college (Arum and Roksa 2011). They allow socially oriented students to manage schoolwork while directing efforts elsewhere, and include business (outside of competitive business schools), communications, tourism, recreation studies, education, human development, fitness, and fashion, among others.

In many easy majors, career success is tied to characteristics developed outside of the classroom, even prior to college. They allow women to leverage personality, looks, and social skills in the academic sphere. For instance, at MU a Department of Interior Design and Apparel Merchandising offered majors by the same names. These majors do not exist at most elite private schools or top public schools, and—unlike education or social work—do not feed directly into a vocation. MU’s website claimed to prepare students for jobs like residential interior designer, in which aesthetics and taste are

important, and showroom representative, in which charisma and personality matter. A college degree is not required for many of these jobs.

A significant number of easy majors were organized under one institutional umbrella. The focus of the school was recreation, sports, leisure, fitness, and nutrition—areas where the body, personality, and classed tastes count. For example, the sport communications major attracted women who wanted to do “media relations with a sports team . . . [or be] a sportscaster on ESPN” (Karen Y2). Women and men both flocked to communications majors, but, as we will see later, women’s success as a media personality hinged on being impeccably dressed, bubbly, attractive, and feminine—performing a classed femininity.

Gender Complementary Peer Culture

With these organizational supports, the predominately white Greek system and party scene were the main avenues through which college women could gain social and erotic status. Virtually everyone had exposure: Forty-three percent of the floor went Greek, although more rushed. All but four women attended at least one party their first year. Over half were regular attendees.

Even many of those initially skeptical of the Greek scene would join in as partiers, sorority members, or both. For instance, Nicole—who opted out of first-year sorority recruitment—would later become a member after realizing that campus life revolved around Greek organizations. Regarding a campus event, she noted, “It was all for the Greeks. Like if you weren’t Greek you really didn’t belong. So that really made me just be, like, ‘I really want to do this’” (Y2). Nicole’s assessment of MU social life was consistent with online websites labeling MU, among other state schools, as ideal for those seeking the “party scene” and “Greek life.”

At the top of MU’s social hierarchy were the Greeks. A non-Greek member (Tracy Y4) noted that this was immediately apparent in peer interactions:

You get certain judgment from people. . . . They’re, like . . . “Oh, you’re in a house?” and I’m, like, “no.” And then you can always see some sort of reaction. . . . Normally you get some kind of comment, like, “Oh GDI.”

Laura: What is that?

I think it stands for God Damn Independent.

The “Elite Three” sorority houses were the most sought after. One member (Mara Y4) explained:

[Fraternities] want to pair with us for certain things, because we’re so outgoing and fun and we know how to have a good time. We just had our [house social event] and we had so many people show up. I think it says a lot about our personality. People really like hanging around us, and not just ’cause these girls are pretty, but because they actually have life to them, and love to party, and . . . just like to have a good time.

There is a type who made it into a top sorority: She was attentive to appearance, concerned with appealing to men, ever the fun companion, but not especially career-oriented—that is, she embodied gender complementarity.

Greek recruitment highlighted ways that traditional femininity was rewarded. Nicole, after joining a mid-tier house, noted that potential recruits were ranked from one (“Can’t stand her”) to five (“I definitely want her”):

If we have a lot in common and were laughing and having a good time, then I would give the girl a five.

Laura: What are some of the things that you’re, like, “Oh, I’m going to have to give this person a one?”

For me, it was just girls that would be sitting there and she wouldn’t ask me any questions about myself. I just have to be asking her things over and over again. Like when it got to the point where I had to ask her what her major was ’cause we had nothing else to talk about—then I knew it was bad.

Nicole’s comments indicate privileging of a femininity marked by niceness, social extroversion, and catering to others—a style of relating common among affluent students (Bettie 2002). Notably, attempts to discuss academics were registered as desperation, suggesting studiousness was not a desirable trait.

A certain appearance—what many referred to as “cute”—also figured into status. Cuteness reflected efforts toward meeting classed beauty standards. As Hannah explained, women had to be well groomed and display the right aesthetic:

When I was rushing I just remember it was just so gross and rainy out and our [rush counselor] was like, “No, the girls aren’t gonna judge on . . . how

you're looking." Of course they are! Oh, my God, that's the first thing that everybody looks at—how they're dressed, what jewelry they're wearing, what kind of shoes they're wearing, what jeans they're wearing. (Y4)

These judgments were based on clothing, jewelry, accessories, and shoes that only some women could afford, and knowledge of high fashion held primarily by affluent students. When less privileged students managed to join sororities, they often did not last long. As Tara described of a former housemate:

She deactivated. . . . I don't know why she was in [Elite Three House]. Like you could never see her in [our house]. She was really different from the other girls. She just, I mean, she wasn't as cute as a lot of the girls, and she definitely wasn't very well off. . . . You can tell [she was] just kind of, like, blue collar, just kind of, like, country, hickish type. (Y3)

It seemed clear that the other women in the house had not made her feel welcome.

Notions of beauty were also premised on race and body size. Thus, Abby wanted to take into account body weight, even in her low-ranked sorority:

She's the nicest girl, but we all think she's fat. . . . I'm not trying to take a stance, "No fat people," but People are gonna see her and be, like, "I can't be in this house. . . ." We need to have I mean, we are a sorority. We can have some standards.

Others would point out it was almost required for Elite Three members to be "blonde, have big boobs, and [be] tanned" (Taylor Y4). It was not always easy, or possible, for women to achieve these ideals. For instance, the desired "blonde" look—meaning light-colored hair, blue eyes, and white but tanned skin—had racial, ethnic, and religious implications, and led to costly investments in colored contacts, hair straighteners, salon coloring, and various tanning techniques. Women of color were categorically excluded.

Status was derived not only through evaluations by same-sex peers; women's rank was also linked to their erotic status, or sexual appeal to powerful men on campus. Erotic status was achieved via participation in the main heterosexual marketplace. For underaged drinkers, this was located primarily in the fraternities, later spilling out to bars with a strong Greek presence. Women who identified as lesbian were thus at a distinct

disadvantage (Hamilton 2007). Here, women gained status via connections to high-status men, and vice versa.

An illustration of the link between social and erotic status comes from an MU newspaper devoted to Greek life. In one edition, a fraternity member detailed “the trusty 1-10 system for rating girls.” He explained that a one is “as bad as it gets. Lucky enough, these girls hardly ever go out in public.” A five is “the first girl on the list that can be acceptable to bring around your friends. . . . A five may be in a sorority, but it will be an ugly one, so don’t get excited.” By comparison, an eight “can make it into almost all the sororities and can get away with being a you know what. She’s got a lot of guys texting her and she’s texting a lot of guys.” A ten “get[s] what they want, when they want it. Guys want them, girls want to be them.”

His derogatory commentary suggests a feedback loop: Women who obtained more power by virtue of their attractiveness, desirability, and popularity among high-status men had already been vetted by top sororities for similar traits. This example suggests ways in which gender complementarity also relied on (hetero)sexuality for fortification. Women were doubly penalized for developing traits not considered to be traditionally feminine—like intelligence, studiousness, wit, or bravado.

EFFECTS ON WOMEN

I will now describe how the social and academic environment of the university shaped women’s gender dispositions and career approaches. I also examine exceptions—women who managed to pursue other gendered logics of class reproduction.

Deep Transformations

Over time, women began to internalize a complementary femininity until it felt natural. Even many who arrived disinvested in gender complementarity changed as they realized that being good at being a certain kind of “girl” was rewarded.

The most striking example was Brianna, who arrived as a self-identified lesbian. Brianna was direct, even crude, and loved to talk about “crotch rockets” (a type of motorcycle). Her style was masculine, and her belongings decidedly not pink. She was networked into a GLBTQ (gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-queer) organization on campus. Her parents were lawyers who espoused the consolidation of privilege logic

and warned Brianna against heavy participation in the social scene. Initially Brianna managed to avoid Greek parties, despite their ubiquity: “They have frat parties all the time It’s not my scene, not my scene at all” (Y1). With the help of the research team, she transferred out of the dormitory into a community known for its alternative residents. Brianna was the last woman I expected to be influenced by the environment at MU.

However, by year three, Brianna looked and acted different:

I’ve gotten hotter, in guys’ words, like I’m not a dyke anymore. . . . [My two old friends] were talking about . . . where are your big-boy shorts, and your sports bra, and your wife-beater, and your boy shoes, and your hat? . . . I know this sounds bad, but . . . I suddenly changed my group of friends. Kinda went from kind of attractive to really attractive. . . . Everybody was, like, you could be so much prettier if you were just girly. . . . I guess I kinda hated myself for being so boyish. (Y3)

Brianna had adopted heterosexual men’s standards of evaluation. She began to avoid the stigmatized label of “lesbian.” Such changes corresponded with a shift in her peer group:

I think 95 percent of my [new] friends are in the Greek system. [My two old friends] are the only two gay people I know. . . . I don’t hang out [with others]. . . . The funny thing is that they have met my really hardcore frat friends.

Laura: How did the frat friends take that?

They were fine. ‘Cause these guys . . . [have] been acting so much straighter lately. So they don’t even know. (Y3)

Brianna’s comments suggest the extent to which exposure to university-supported peer cultures encouraged students toward gender complementarity.

Other women started college performing a more traditional femininity, but at MU they strove to perfect it. Thus, middle-class Blair went from wearing no make-up, sporting a “What Would Jesus Do?” T-shirt, and keeping a low social profile to becoming a member of an Elite Three sorority:

Blair said that [her boyfriend from home] said something to her the other day that was hard to hear but maybe true. . . . He said that ever since she

got here she has been different, trying to be “Miss Big U sorority girl.”
(Field Notes 3/29/05)

Over time, Blair’s interviews became laced with assessments of her appearance. In her junior year, she noted, “Freshman year, the stuff I wore out was just cute. When you’re in a sorority you gotta be hot”—a term reflecting a hetero-femininity that appealed to fraternity men. Disparities in classed resources made this harder to pull off. Blair would always worry that “in a way, I’m not good enough” (Y4).

Even those who arrived ready to dive into the party scene were nudged further into gender complementarity. By year three, Hannah—whose mother had pushed her to buy a formal dress—reported:

I feel like everything more is about name brands here. . . . I’m much more conscious of that. I feel like every—not like anything is a competition—but, I mean, I feel like it’s more Now I like to wear make-up. I don’t really like to go out without, like, mascara on. I feel like I’m albino, like my lashes. (Y3)

These transformations went deep. Women shaped how they carried themselves, what felt comfortable, how they derived self-esteem, and where they found pleasure. As noted below, only two groups of women were shielded from these pressures.

Gender Complementary Career Paths

The majors women selected were limited, despite many options. Some entered traditionally gendered vocational fields—health or social services (7, 16 percent) or education (6, 13 percent). Less than a third (13, 29 percent) majored in traditional liberal arts fields, and only two (4 percent) in science or quantitative fields. The majority of women were in some form of business or communications (17, 38 percent), including majors such as tourism, sports broadcasting, arts management, and fashion merchandising. These majors relied more on subjective assessments of performance, in which women’s ability to embody a particular feminine self was likely to be rewarded.

Women pursued such majors because they were allowable and popular. For example, Amanda was a working-class woman who had intended to be a teacher but changed course:

I took a freshman seminar about how to be in college. We all had to talk about our majors. I was still undecided at that point. There was a girl in

there who wanted to be a wedding planner. I found out that that was a job, and I was, like, “Wow, that would be a ton of fun.” . . . So then I applied and got in. I realized later that I probably should have not done that. (Y5)

MU’s support of an event planning major indicated that this was a viable choice. No one explained that wedding planners are hired to make aesthetic decisions having little to do with academic credentials. In searching for jobs, Amanda realized this: “None of [the event planning jobs say] ‘Oh, you need a degree in this.’ . . . I didn’t even have to go to college for this” (Y5). What Amanda needed was the “right” cultural tastes and social networks—classed resources that she lacked.

Amanda would consider going back to school to acquire a degree she could use. Her experience was not unusual. Eight others from middle- to working-class families struggled to translate an easy major into security. (This number would be even higher if seven less privileged women had not left MU for regional schools, where they opted for pragmatic pink-collar majors.) A year out of college, Blair was cold-calling for a sales company, Alana was a part-time ski instructor, and Crystal was working in a gated community for \$13 an hour.

Affluent women who invested heavily in the party scene also saw lower GPAs, despite their easy majors. As Tara noted of the trade-off, “I have a really low GPA. . . . I go to class. I have my responsibilities, but I’m more social.” This would be an issue for tenuously upper-middle-class women. Sydney explained:

[My GPA] was a 2.8, which I’m a little upset about because I totally could have had a 3.0 if a few semesters in there I would have worked a little harder.

Laura: Do you think it matters at this point?

I think for some job opportunities it does because some places I looked deny you right away if you don’t have a 3.0. (Y5)

Sydney struggled with depression during her seven-month-long job hunt.

The problem for most was that a gender complementary career path produced a specific form of feminine capital—and only this. Dependence was necessary in order for women to live a privileged lifestyle. Prior to the (assumed) marriage to a breadwinner, parental resources were needed to compensate for limited credentials and low grades. Very few families

had these resources. Emma's father explained of his daughter's peers, "A lot of those girls [live] beyond their personal needs The expectation was okay, doesn't matter what school does because when we get out we'll just . . . we'll do whatever Mom and Dad can afford for us to do and it's gonna be okay."

Only seven women were from families affluent and well connected enough for this to be true. Several offered their daughters internships and work. Abby's mother remarked, "Abby's fortunate to have a nice-looking resume right now [because] . . . she's worked for some of my husband's businesses." In other cases, affluent and well-connected parents drew on their social networks. Hannah noted, "I'll tell you how this whole job thing started. My dad . . . [Tom, his friend] gave [the CFO of the sports league] my resume. . . . A day later I got a phone call from the production department" (Y5).

Once they got their foot in the door in media industries, major and GPA were not considered—at least for the type of jobs they could get. Naomi observed, "In the world I'm working in, it doesn't matter" (Y5). When asked what her music marketing company looked for, Tara told me, "They want you to be outgoing and bubbly and down to earth and polite and respectful . . . [and] just put together. You just show up and want to make a good impression" (Y5). Her answer emphasized the traits she honed during college.

While too young at the conclusion of the study to determine if or with whom they might couple, there were class disparities in the potential to pair with a breadwinner. Most women who selected easy majors could not afford to live in major urban centers where the men they wanted to marry worked and socialized. This was true even of some out-of-state upper-middle-class women whose families ran out of funds. As Nicole bemoaned of her hometown, "None of the boys [who are still here] have steady jobs One just got a job in a delicatessen at a Shop Rite kind of place, a supermarket" (Y5).

The wealthiest of women, whose parents put them up in city apartments, were mingling with the type of men they wanted to marry. Hannah noted of her recent boyfriend, "This kid has money flowing out of every single angle of his body. . . . He went to [top college] and graduated from the business school and is an investment banker here now." Her father was pleased with this suitor as "he always says to me, 'Marry rich, marry rich'" (Y5). These women would need to, as their jobs—while more lucrative than others—would not support the affluent lifestyle they desired.

Exceptions

Not all women we interviewed internalized gender complementarity or pursued career paths informed by this logic. Two groups were least affected by the dominant peer culture on campus. Here social class intervened in different ways.

Seven out of 12 women socialized into consolidation of privilege managed to evade gender complementarity; five did not. Sometimes parental socialization was no match for the environment. This was the case for Brianna, as discussed earlier. However, parents' active efforts to push back against traditional femininity were often successful.

Taylor's mother illustrated just how much work was involved. She helped her daughter manage friends who were focused on traditionally feminine pursuits:

There's was a ditsy-ness that was pervasive in terms of what's important These girls [who live with Taylor], they're going to decorate for this and decorate for that Who cares? It's not really why they're there [I told Taylor] "It's okay to outgrow these friends . . . 'I am woman, hear me roar.' You're a lot stronger."

She gave Taylor the support necessary to resist peer pressures. Taylor noted:

I had a long talk with my mom today. I wrote it down. Homecoming Week is this week and my roommate plans everything. . . . She's planning all these activities with one of the frats. . . . I planned to study all week and then I could celebrate. . . . But then my roommate is, like, "Why doesn't anybody come out?" My mom was, like, "Just try to stay out of her room as best you can during the day." (Y3)

Taylor's mother even intervened when Taylor was dating a wealthy college man with a trust fund who was not supportive of her ambitions. She noted, "I think if Taylor hadn't given up on Owen she wouldn't be going to dental school."

These parents also helped to foster their children's academic interests in nontraditional areas. Lydia's father told me:

Did Lydia tell you our oldest daughter was an engineer at [top public school]? Really male [dominated]. . . . There was nothing that I would ever do that was going to pigeonhole them—that that is a female job, that's a male job—because I think that is so limiting.

Lydia would major in accounting at the competitive business school. Not one of these seven women selected easy majors reinforcing a complementary femininity. In fact, when a few thought about communications, their parents suggested they reconsider. Brenda's father told her, "[It is] a useless degree What do you do with telecom[munications]?"

These women prioritized their own professional goals. Taylor explained:

A lot of these girls [at MU] are, like, "I'm just going to marry a rich man." . . . I just think there's a more important idea than "I'm going to be tanned and cute to find a guy." . . . Some of the sororities were called the "perfect wife" sorority. That was their reputation. [You see it] more in a lot of the sororities, but I do often think you find it in other [non-Greeks]. (Y5)

Similarly, Erica wanted "to have my own money, have my own career. . . . I just don't see myself being someone who . . . lives off of some boy's money" (Y4). It seemed likely they would never be dependent in this way. Several would attend graduate schools tracking into professions. None were un- or underemployed at the time of the last interview. Lydia even landed a job in a top-four accounting firm. Years out of college, she would marry a man who secured a high-paying business consulting job. Her story suggests that daughters of professionals could enter into peer marriages, if they desired.⁴

On the other end of the class spectrum, seven women, mostly working-class, had less exposure to complementarity: Because participation in campus life was expensive and time-consuming, they were shut out of the dominant peer culture. Alyssa explained:

Not really being able to relate to some of the girls that were there really kinda made it hard [to fit in]. I'm from a small town, have to make do with what I have. . . . They could go and do whatever they wanted. (Y4)

These women juggled 20–40 hours of paid employment, alongside their studies, to pay for college. They could not afford to focus on appearance and sociability. Megan noted, "People at Midwest U . . . have to do their hair before class. They have to look a certain way. . . . I pull my hair up in a ponytail and go. I don't have time to do my hair" (Y2). Even when they tried to fit in, women were reminded they did not belong. Heather remarked of former friends, "A lot of the girls . . . that got into sororities changed a lot, even, like, the first week. . . . They all thought they were better than everybody" (Y3).

Without social integration into campus life, women had little reason to stay and pay more than they would at regional or community colleges.

They found the focus at their new schools to be more practical. As Stacey described, “[Regional campus] doesn’t have any fraternities or sororities I just really love it and, like, nobody cares about it ’cause they’re there just to graduate and get through” (Y3). All pursued degrees that were linked to specific careers, most of which were female-occupied (nursing, teaching, and various health specialties). They pooled resources with non-college-attending men in their lives—but did not depend on them. This was a pragmatic mobility, in which women took the most direct path available to financial security.

DISCUSSION

Women’s families espoused gendered logics of class reproduction largely consistent with their class resources. However, the organization of social and academic life at Midwest U, and the supporting peer culture, rewarded performance of an affluent, white, and heterosexual femininity. Many women, particularly those not sheltered in alternative residential communities, were pushed toward gender complementarity—a gender-traditional model of economic security pairing a career oriented man with a financially dependent woman.

A marriage of multilevel and intersectional theory is necessary to understand the institutionalization of gender complementarity at schools like MU. Multilevel theory helps explain why gender complementarity is so pervasive: Complementarity is instantiated in university practice and policy and rewarded in peer interactions—generating deep individual investments. Addressing the gender beliefs of individuals, without addressing the contexts in which they are embedded, will not combat it.

Intersectional theory looks at *whose* performance of femininity is privileged. It acknowledges the possibility of multiple gendered logics, delineated along class lines, not all of which are equally institutionally supported. The role of class in sustaining a particular femininity is also highlighted. Indeed, university reliance on an affluent, out-of-state population—a class-based process—has strong *gender* implications. Dismantling support for complementarity thus requires addressing how the university contributes to class—as well as gender—inequities.

Together these theories offer a textured picture of how gender and class systems intersect to produce a culture of gender complementarity. Complementarity is robust because it is supported on multiple levels and by multiple, intersecting systems of inequality. It is critical to

address gender complementarity because its effects are not just confined to college.

The long-term costs of gender complementarity are high for women. Certain feminine dispositions may work as capital on campus, but mark women for work that is heavy on emotional labor and interactional niceness and leave them reliant on looks and sex appeal. In addition, when labeled as “women’s work,” jobs are associated with less pay and prestige (Reskin and Padavic 2002). Women workers even face a hiring, wage, and promotion penalty when status characteristics mark them as feminine (Correll, Bernard, and Paik 2007). Building traditionally feminine traits—in lieu of other forms of human capital—is likely to hurt women’s economic prospects.

In contrast, campus life often encourages men to build gendered dispositions that correspond to “hegemonic masculinity”—placing them at the top of the social heap during *and* after college (Connell 1995). Men are rarely penalized for displaying this masculinity, especially in the boardroom. It is thus no surprise that men who are athletes in college, despite poor grades, do exceptionally well after college (Shulman and Bowen 2002): They spend considerable time honing traits that the job market rewards. Women athletes can also benefit from participation in sports, but this requires them to push against the gender-complementary femininity valued on campus.

Horizontal inequalities in postsecondary education may justify vertical inequalities for women after college. For instance, if women invest in femininity, then they are likely to be disadvantaged vis-à-vis male graduates in occupational status and pay. Gender complementarity also reinforces an inegalitarian division of household labor, because women are seen as naturally suited for homemaking. Thus, advantages that women may have in getting to and through college may be reduced by the lessons they learn while there. This suggests taking a more expansive view of gender inequalities in education and looking at how horizontal and vertical inequities feed into each other, across different institutions.

Recruitment into gender complementarity places most women in a position of class vulnerability. As I demonstrate, only some are able to use parental funds and connections to gain entry into fields where their feminine attributes have value. For those who bank on complementary femininity without extensive classed resources, it is questionable as to whether their time at MU will improve their future class standing.

These findings suggest that college may not equalize class differences as effectively for women as for men. In fact, in her Panel Study of Income Dynamics analyses, Torche (2011) shows that class background does not predict future earnings for men with just a bachelor's degree, but a significant link between the two remains for women (although she does not emphasize this point). In the middle swath of the four-year residential sector, one mechanism supporting class inequality may be an institutionalized logic of gender complementarity that only affluent women can translate into security.

Class differences in marital market prospects for college-educated youth may only exacerbate the situation. As Musick, Brand, and Davis (2012) demonstrate, less privileged students do not get the same marital benefits from college as those from privileged backgrounds. While affluent women espousing complementarity had reasonable hope of rescue by a high-credentialed spouse, women from less affluent backgrounds did not.

It is important to note, however, that continued viability of the revised MRS—for any group—seems unlikely. Men and women are increasingly selecting spouses based on similar factors—in particular, education and income (Buss et al. 2001; Schwartz and Mare 2005; Sweeney and Cancian 2004). High-earning individuals want to pair with other high earners, regardless of gender. Thus, women's economic contributions may not only be valued, but expected, in most heterosexual marriages.

Postsecondary institutions do women a disservice by promoting, even unintentionally, what may be a rapidly closing avenue for women's economic security. This situation reflects the interests of affluent, socially oriented, mostly out-of-state students on whom mid-tier publics like MU have come to rely (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Alternative gender logics of class reproduction help steer other women toward skills and credentials they need to avoid dependence on parents or romantic partners. It is problematic that, in the context of MU, pursuit of these logics was so challenging, and complementarity so pervasive.

Future research should consider the experiences of other college students. As many less privileged women were—somewhat ironically—protected by social exclusion, we might expect the same for minority students. Looking across institution types, at more elite schools a strong academic focus may encourage students to pursue consolidation of privilege. Open-access institutions, geared toward less affluent students, may best accommodate pragmatic mobility. These comparisons may yield insight into additional interactional and institutional features that push back against complementarity.

Thirty years after the “chilly climate” reports, and in the midst of women’s vertical gains in higher education, the durability of gender complementarity at college may come as a surprise. However, the gradual shift from higher education as a public good—funded heavily by the state—to a private commodity—for sale to the highest bidder—has significantly stalled not only progress toward class equality, but horizontal gender equality as well. Change will require unlinking the solvency of organizations like MU from the interests of those who can afford—and thus demand—an exclusionary, and highly gendered, social experience.

NOTES

1. This trend is reflected in increased enrollment of out-of-state students (Jaquette and Curs 2013) and growth in the share of funds spent on recreation relative to academics (Dillon 2010).

2. “Y” indicates the wave of the interview.

3. Numbers in this section reflect the 38 women with at least one parental interview.

4. I maintain contact with study participants, and was thus aware of Lydia’s marriage.

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