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Sacks, Peter. (2009). *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

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This book is divided into four sections, and Section 1: 'Rich Families, Poor Families' is comprised of two chapters set in Boise, ID. Chapter 1 'Ashlea and Gillian,' provides individual level anecdotal comparisons of one high school student from a poverty-class/working-class background and one from a middle-class background, and Chapter 2 'Do We Look Intimidating?' involves a school-level analysis of instructional resources and strategies influenced by social stratification and cultural capital. Written in a readable and conversational tone, these two chapters are reminiscent of Sacks' 1996 book *Generation X Goes to College: A Journey into Teaching in Postmodern America*. These two chapters also provide an excellent introduction to the problems and issues faced by students and families from poverty-class and working-class backgrounds in the American educational

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system. Real world examples are effectively used to illustrate the dynamics of social inequality contextualized in Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, and would be useful readings in an upper-level undergraduate course or masters – level courses on the sociology of P-16 education.

In Section 2: 'Struggle for the Soul of Public Schools,' Sacks adopts a micro-level perspective on the intersection of social class origins and K-12 education, devoting Chapter 3 'Berkeley High and the Politics of Exclusion' to a journalistic case study of Berkeley (CA) High School and the influences of race and social class on the emergence of the 'small schools within a school' organizational approach. Sacks' background as a journalist becomes evident in this chapter with the extensive use of opinion quotes from administrators, teachers, and parents. These quotes provide useful insights into claims that socially stratified tracking exists in Berkeley High School, but do not provide substantive evidence that this is a widespread practice. For example, one Berkeley High School teacher related the experience of using the classroom activity that invites students to stay seated or stand up in response to different social class background characteristics. No students stood up to identify themselves as 'lower class' or 'upper class,' but almost the entire group of students stood up to identify themselves as 'middle class.' As a possible indication that social desirability bias and the myth of the middle class are alive and well among young people in the U.S., the teacher explained,

"I'm talking to kids with mansions on the hill and the kids who have nothing, and all put themselves in the middle class...They'll happily admit what race they are... But when it comes to social class, you can't have too much, and you can't have not enough." (p. 64)

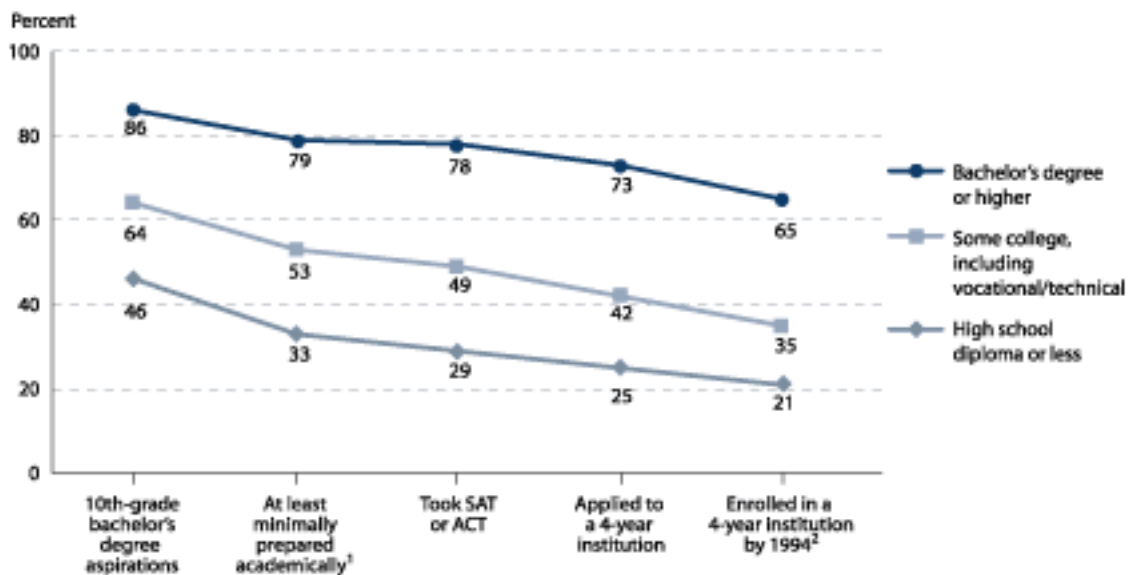
While this is a fascinating observation from a high school teacher on student class consciousness, only descriptive demographic statistics on student racial origins are presented in this chapter, and none are presented on student social class origins to provide broader evidence of the issues addressed in the chapter.

The thought-provoking titled Chapter 4 ‘Do I Make the Kids Smart or Get Them Into College?’ continues this micro-level analysis of academic programs that comprise the ‘small schools’ approach at Berkeley High School. This chapter uses the same anecdotal approach to interpreting organizational, racial, political and social stratification issues associated with student access and academic performance in these programs, and faculty, staff, and graduate students involved in high school-level assessment, evaluation, research and practice will be the most interested audiences for this localized discussion. The final chapter in this section, Chapter 5 ‘Public Schools, Private Privilege’ shifts the focus to a macro-level discussion of social class and academic performance in K-12 classrooms across the U.S. Using the cases of Boise and Berkeley as reference points, Sacks frames the broader level of discussion in this chapter by analyzing some implications of the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation, and tracing the continuation of ability grouping (or ‘tracking’) practices that were thoroughly investigated in Jeannie Oakes’s 1985 book *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*.

The four chapters that comprise Section 3 of the book (‘Affirmative Action for the Rich’) shift the focus to higher and postsecondary education, and Chapter 6 ‘Class Matters’ changes from personal anecdotal evidence of social class inequality among students to the presentation and interpretation of empirical results of U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data analyses with accompanying charts and tables. The discussion in this chapter is an accessible and insightful portrayal of increasing social stratification in American higher education, especially at elite, selective colleges and universities. The chapter highlights the significantly more pronounced gaps in social class inequality than in race or gender inequality, however, the data analyses are limited to descriptive statistics reporting percentages. As a result, for example, it is difficult to assess the full meaning of 15 percentage point differences between working-class groups and middle-class groups on any measure of educational access, time to degree completion, or graduation rates.

While Sacks included a number of charts and graphs depicting NCES data analyses by race, gender, and class, surprisingly, one of the most powerful graphic representations of social class stratification in American higher education using longitudinal NCES was omitted from the chapter:

Percentage of 1992 high school graduates who progressed through each step to enrollment in a 4-year institution, by parents' highest level of education



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 Eighth Graders, "Third Follow-up" (NELS:1988/1994)

While Sacks included thought-provoking analyses of social stratification in elite, selective colleges and universities, this table provides a longitudinal view of the stratifying influences of parental education across all types of institutions. In keeping with the idea that a picture is worth a thousand words, the results presented in this graph effectively summarize the points Sacks made in several chapters.

The title of Chapter 7, 'Part Church, Part Car Dealer,' addresses the admissions processes at elite, selective institutions and provides a behind-the-scenes view of the intersection of social class, enrollment management, and tuition pricing. As such, this chapter is representative of

recent books devoted primarily to the college admissions process, such as Steinberg's (2002) *The gatekeepers: Inside the admissions process of a premier college*, Avery, Zeckhauser and Fairbanks' (2003) *The early admissions game: Joining the elite*, Daniel Golden's (2006) *The price of admission: How America's ruling class buys its way into elite colleges – and who gets left outside the gates*, Peter Schmidt's (2007) *Color and money: How rich white kids are winning the war over college affirmative action*, and Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Radford's (2009) *No longer separate, not yet equal: Race and class in elite college admission and campus life*.

The focus of the admissions process in this chapter is on universities that are ostensibly viewed as 'key gatekeepers in the American opportunity structure' (p. 135). In their efforts to increase institutional prestige in the popular media college ranking publications, these gatekeeper institutions have reduced their efforts to maintain access for students from poverty-class and working-class backgrounds. This issue has also been addressed in the 2010 report by Kati Haycock, Mary Lynch, and Jennifer Engle, *Opportunity adrift: Our flagship universities are straying from their public mission*, and returns an important question to the forefront of the national discussion of the purposes of American higher education: Are elite institutions as committed to increasing diversity and expanding higher education participation as they profess to be?

Chapter 8 ('A Social Compact Broken') continues to focus on the nexus of SAT scores, flagship institutions' responsibility to expand educational access, and uses Pell Grants as a proxy for social class background to document the declining numbers of college students in these institutions that receive them. This chapter appears to restate the ideas advanced in the previous chapter, and Sacks resorts to the same journalistic flair when introducing the reader to Tom Mortenson, independent researcher and author of the *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* newsletter, for the second consecutive chapter.

Sacks rates flagship and elite institutions on the percentages of Pell Grant recipients comprising their student bodies, but

omits any reference to Gerald and Kati Haycock's report from 4 years earlier, *Engines of inequality: Diminishing equity in the nation's premier public universities*, that had already provided the evidence-based conclusions presented in this chapter. Most salient was that the student bodies in flagship institutions were becoming less economically diverse in the early 2000s, as compared to various points in time during the previous decade.

The final chapter in Part 3, Chapter 9 'Government Gifts to the Rich,' takes a different tack on the issues of social class and financial aid, and uses personal anecdotes to contrast the college choice processes and financial aid packages of two students. Sacks introduces the reader to Katelynn, a working-class public high school student with good grades, but little family financial capital to pay for college. As is the case for many poverty-class and working-class high school students (including Katelynn), the college choice process includes the question of 'whether' to attend college, in addition to identifying 'where' (i.e. affordable institutions as possible options for application and enrollment). Sacks contrasts her situation to that of Michael, an upper middle-class student whose private high school with tutors for coursework, SAT preparation and college counseling enables him to have a much different college choice set comprised almost exclusively of Ivy League institutions. This contrast effectively illustrates the educational advantages available to students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

Part 4 of the book is titled 'Experiments in Gatecrashing and the Backlash of the Elites,' and Chapter 10 'A Dangerous Man' continues this personal focus on individuals, using a journalistic approach to trace reform efforts at Oceanside High School in San Diego. Heavy on quotes from high school administrators, the chapter chronicles the school's strategy of detracking students, expanding access to AP courses, and changing grading practices, all in an effort to improve school performance and change the culture to promote higher and postsecondary education as a realistic goal for all students. These efforts are informed by, and assessed on, California Department of Education descriptive data and this chapter can serve as a

useful starting point for discussion among parents, teachers, and administrators concerned about failing high schools.

Chapter 11 ‘The Gatecrashers’ explores the gatecrashing reference to this section of the book in further detail, and flows conceptually from the previous chapter to present a chronological analysis of the next stage in the California educational pipeline. This next stage focuses on students and effects of system-wide admissions policy reform in the University of California (UC) System between 1999-2003, and contextualizes the discussion in the UC decision-making process to eliminate the SAT in admissions decisions.

The main point of this chapter is to present empirical state-level evidence refuting concerns of some opponents of eliminating the SAT, and demonstrate that the admissions profiles of freshmen admitted to UC institutions changed little after the implementation of ‘comprehensive review’ (reform of the admissions process to consider the personal and social contexts of each applicant (in addition to the academic achievements)).

Sacks’ description of the subsequent shift to comprehensive review sounds similar to William Sedlacek’s Non-Cognitive Variables approach and the resulting supplemental assessment questionnaire used in some college and university admissions processes in the 1980s and 1990s. While recent debate has emerged regarding the accuracy of the Non-Cognitive Questionnaire (NCQ), this chapter would have benefitted from some discussion of the NCQ to help reader better understand the historical context for California’s implementation of comprehensive review.

Chapter 12 ‘I Always Imagined Myself as a Rock’ returns to the individual level anecdotal approach used in chapters 1 and 2 to profile the educational experiences and decision-making of Melissa, a working-class high school student who held aspirations for college. Despite the support of teachers, parents and Upward Bound program participation, she dropped out of high school a few months before graduation. In this chapter, Sacks points out an important limitation in quantitative research efforts to understand the influences on

educational decision-making for students from poverty-class and working-class backgrounds:

“When social scientists talk about class, they typically speak of it in terms of the most readily measured attributes, such as parental education levels and economic factors such as income and wealth. But perhaps the most salient aspects of class aren’t so easily measured – for example, the bold confidence with which the child of a wealthy family approaches the world, and how large and full of possibilities the world may be from that child’s perspective.” (p. 262)

In my discipline (Higher Education), much of the quantitative research on diversity reduces the operationalization of social class to a composite variable labeled ‘Socioeconomic status’ comprised of parental education and income, and fails to adequately account for the complex nature of social class influences. This approach also fails to bring an appropriate depth of insight into the related working-class cultural issues, and Sacks’ observation highlights the value of qualitative research methods as more accurate methods of investigation.

The last section of the book, Part 5: American Dreams, traces the changes in the opportunity structure in American education that produces the conditions chronicled thus far in the book. It begins with Chapter 13 ‘How We Got Here,’ which is a brief summarization of American domestic fiscal policies and changes from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and the Lyndon Johnson administration’s ‘Great Society’ programs through the Ronald Reagan administration’s efforts to dismantle the social compact established by these programs. Since this book was published in 2009, Sacks included an initial retrospective review of the George W. Bush administration’s efforts to continue the Reagan policies and their effects on increasing the demarcations of social stratification in general, and on restricting access to American higher education. Chapter 14 ‘Class Confusions’ briefly addresses two prevailing myths in American society: the myth of meritocracy and the myth that the vast majority of Americans are middle-class. Sacks extends the previous chapter’s focus on American domestic fiscal changes to an

international scope, and presents analyses of international personal income comparisons to provide evidence of widening gaps between rich and poor in American society, as well as the increasing rigidity of social stratifications and reduced social mobility.

In the final chapter, 'Where Are We Going?', Sacks brings the preceding discussion full circle, framing America's mediocre rankings in international assessments of K-12 student academic proficiency and BA attainment as a human capital issue. He reviews the obstacles to higher and postsecondary education opportunity and attainment, and concludes with a series of recommendations for educational reform to decrease the patterns class-based inequality addressed in previous chapters; making higher education a universal opportunity for children from all social class backgrounds, creating K-12 schools that foster a lifelong love of learning, overhauling college and university admissions processes, and ensuring that financial aid programs are based on actual need.

These proposed reform measures will be viewed as evolutionary by some, and revolutionary by others. Regardless of this, the undeniable evidence indicates that the demographics of American society continue a decades-long shift in the composition of races and classes. Combine this with more recent trends and future predictions of more Americans with high school diplomas or less, and fewer Americans with BA degrees, and the economic and social implications will reverberate across the country for decades to come. In the tripartite construct of race, gender, and class, *Tearing Down the Gates* problematizes the solitary focus on only race or gender in the K-16 pipeline and provides ample evidence that it's time to stop conceptualizing diversity in higher education solely in terms of race. Issues of social class in higher education are often masked by race, and this book provides a useful starting point to understand that social inequality is more complex than many scholars on diversity have conceptualized it.

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