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Crossing the Line: Case Studies of Identity Development in First-Generation College Women

Phyllis A. Wentworth[1] **and Bill E. Peterson**[2]

In this paper we present four case studies of adult women from working class backgrounds who attended Hillside College (a pseudonym for one of the "seven-sister" colleges) during the early 1990s. Although research on women has led, over the past few decades, to a more complex picture of the contexts in which women develop their identities, one important context that has been underexplored is social class. Drawing on data from three lengthy interviews with each of our four participants, our purpose was to explore the identity concerns of adult women from working class backgrounds in their experience getting to and attending Hillside College, which has historically been home to the middle and upper social classes. Implications for college retention are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Identity; social class; college; women.

Psychologists interested in identity development have continued to build upon Erikson's (1950, 1959, 1968) groundbreaking theory. Erikson (1968) argued that identity formation was the major psychosocial task of adolescence, and theorized that in industrial societies, the college years provide the moratorium from adult responsibility that late adolescents need to explore their identities. Psychologists, taking this cue from Erikson, began a tradition of studying identity formation in late adolescent college students who primarily came from middle and upper social class backgrounds.

Early focus on male identity development by Marcia (1966) was consistent with Erikson's historical case studies of men grappling with identity concerns. Beginning in the 1970s, Marcia's (1966) ego identity status model was extended to college-aged women (e.g., Fannin, 1979; Marcia & Friedman, 1970; Orlofsky, 1978). Since then, women's identity development has received considerable attention by scholars inter-ested in how women's identity formation may be similar and different from men's (e.g., Archer, 1985, 1989; Josselson, 1987; Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1992).

One of the principal findings of this work on women's identity is that midlife appears to be an important time for ongoing explorations into identity. That is, whereas Erikson posited that adolescence was the key period in the lifespan for identity formation, research on women's identity formation strongly suggests that midlife may present opportunities for reevaluation and reorganization of role commitments that are distinctly different from adolescent opportunities (Hornstein, 1986; O'Connell, 1976; Schiedel & Marcia, 1985). For example, it is easy to imagine a women in her midforties who, feeling she has satisfactorily "launched" her children, turns to revisit her occupational commitments with different notions about her own desires, strengths, and weaknesses than she would have had as a late adolescent. This research on women's identity, along with broader research on women's development (e.g., Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Franz & Stewart, 1994; Rossi, 1980), calls for more careful attention to how stages of the family life cycle and employment patterns affect women's identities.

Although research on women has led, over the

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past few decades, to a more complex picture of the contexts in which women develop their identities, one important context that has been underexplored is social class. As Stewart and Ostrove (1993) point out, psychologists have been unclear about how to study social class, in general:

> The concept of social class has an ambiguous status in psychology. Usually measured in terms of occupational status or prestige (but sometimes in terms of self-description or education), it is often used as a "variable," even more often as a control variable, in psychological research, but it is rarely clear what it signifies in psychological terms. Little progress has been made in clarifying the psychological significance of social class . . . even less in considering its meanings in women's lives . . . (p. 476).

Few exceptions to this tendency to overlook the meaningfulness of social class in women's lives exist within identity research (although, see Jones, 1998; Ostrove & Stewart, 1994, 1998; Stewart & Ostrove, 1993). Social class has been included as a variable in some identity status studies (Archer, 1982; Morash, 1980; Munro & Adams, 1977), but neither directly nor critically discerned as a context for identity development. Given the tradition of studying late adolescent college students, however, identity researchers have *implicitly* addressed the identity concerns of middle and upper class individuals more often than not. Therefore, we argue that explicit attention to the identity concerns of women from the working class is particularly warranted.

Although psychological research on the identity development of women from working class backgrounds has been relatively scant, sociological studies with working class women have suggested that there are important cultural differences between the social classes (e.g., Durbin & Kent, 1989; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Luttrell, 1989, 1997; McLaren, 1982). Luttrell (1989, 1997), for example, interviewed black and white women enrolled in adult education programs, and found that her interviewees made clear distinctions between school intelligence and common sense. She observed that her participants' claim to common sense knowledge was their way of distinguishing themselves from the class of "professionals" who employed school intelligence. Therefore, as part of an adult education program, their own pursuit of school knowledge put them in a precarious position, threatening their connections to working class cultures that value common sense knowledge over school knowledge.

If participation in an adult education program threatened Luttrell's (1989, 1997) participants' sense of connection to working class cultures, this suggests that attendance at a prestigious liberal arts college would be just as threatening for women from working class backgrounds, if not more so. Indeed, when Stewart and Ostrove (1993) compared Radcliffe students from the working, middle, and upper social classes on their adjustment to the Radcliffe College culture during the late 1940s and early 1960s, they found that the majority of women from working class families reported feelings of alienation.

It is not surprising that women from working class backgrounds would experience feelings of alienation at a prestigious liberal arts college in light of the fact that such colleges have historically been home to the middle and upper classes. In addition, in our society it is often through a college education that upward class mobility is achieved. Therefore, women from working class backgrounds who attend college, particularly competitive 4-year private colleges, would presumably be in the position of having to negotiate feelings of alienation at the college, as well as feelings of potential disconnection from their family and cultural backgrounds. Research conducted with college professors from working class backgrounds (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Tokarcyzk & Fay, 1993) suggests that these feelings of alienation can be strong lived and pervasive—challenging one's sense of belonging within the academy. In other words, it seems likely that adult women from the working class who attend college face critical, perhaps very challenging, identity concerns.

In this paper, we present four case studies of adult women from working class backgrounds who attended Hillside College (a pseudonym for one of the prestigious "seven sisters") during the early 1990s. Our understanding of identity is grounded in Erikson's (1959) notion that a complete understanding of development revolves around the interaction of biological, psychological, and social forces. In other words, each individual negotiates a sense of identity given his or her biological potentials and limitations, psychological strengths and weaknesses, and the social opportunities and restrictions that manifest during a lifetime. In this article, we explore how the psychological sense of identity of each woman in our sample is connected to the changes in social opportunities afforded by Hillside. The methodology we use is the multiple case study, which lends itself particularly well to explorations of identity development, where the goal is in-depth understanding of participant's experiences. Certainly, in contemporary psy-

chology, there has been a resurgence of interest in using case study methodology for describing complex psychological phenomena (e.g., Franz & Stewart, 1994; Jones, 1998; McAdams & Ochberg, 1988; Runyan, 1982; Yllo, 1988). Such detailed analyses are especially beneficial when initiating an investigation of understudied populations.

We believe that it is important to examine the identity concerns of working class women not only because psychologists have little knowledge about working class identity, but also because such information will be valuable to our understanding of identity development in general. The working class women in our sample face a discontinuity between their upbringing and the upper middle-class environment of Hillside College. Precisely because these women must fulfill the expectations of people from both social class environments, they are in a position to help us shed light on the process of psychosoical identity formation. Thus, although adult working class women at prestigious colleges may be a relatively small population, investigating their identity development is important (1) in and of itself and (2) because their relatively uncommon experience may contribute to a broader understanding of identity as a psychological construct.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were recruited through a program for nontraditionally aged women students at Hillside College. All students enrolled in the program received a letter that described the purpose of the study and stated the criteria for involvement. In an attempt to target adult women from working-class backgrounds, anyone over the age of 30 who was a first-generation college student and had working experience was invited to return a postcard indicating her interest in the study. Of the approximately 150 students who received letters, 31 returned a postcard, and, after learning more about the study, 26 of the 31 students volunteered to participate. Out of this 26, seven women were randomly chosen to be interviewed.

All of the women who were randomly chosen to participate in the study were white. The oldest woman interviewed was 53, the youngest was 31, and the median age of all participants was 40. Participants included single, married, divorced, and remarried

women. Four of the seven women were mothers and the mean number of children they had was two. Participants' work experience ranged from top-level executive positions in the business world to retail, administrative, and service positions. Six out of the seven women had received an Associates degree at a community college before transferring to Hillside. The identity experiences of four of these women are examined in this paper in detail. We chose the four that we did not because their identity concerns were unusual, rather, their concerns were representative of the group and are illustrative of the range of concerns that were discussed by all seven participants. We decided to limit ourselves to a discussion of four case studies with the length of our article in mind.

Interview Technique

The method of interviewing employed in this study was developed by Seidman (1991). Designed to explore a participant's experience in an open-ended, in-depth manner, Seidman's approach involves meeting with each participant on three occasions to discuss one main topic at each session. Each interview session is recommended to last approximately 90 minutes. For the present study, the three guiding interview topics took the following form: the participant's life before attending Hillside, her contemporary experience at the college, and what it meant to her to be enrolled in the program.

Procedure

Interviews

Interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience, in private settings, during the winter break between the fall and spring semester of 1993/1994. All interviews were tape recorded. Interviews typically began with the interviewer outlining the broad topic for that day's discussion. As the participant began speaking, the interviewer's role involved listening intently and actively, formulating and asking follow-up questions, and summarizing or rephrasing the participant's words in order to ensure her meaning had been grasped. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and the intervals between interview sessions ranged from 1 to 10 days.

Creation of Profiles

Upon completion of the interviews, a profile of each participant was created, following Seidman's (1991) suggestion. Profile construction involved gleaning the 100–120 pages of interview transcript per woman for paragraphs, sentences, and phrases that were most salient and compelling, then arranging these excerpts in a logical order, thereby allowing the women to tell their stories in their own words. This strategy, of taking our interviewee's words at face value, is one that we consiously adopted throughout the paper. Future work, however, may indeed benefit from a different type of analysis (e.g., from the perspective of depth psychology). Profiles ran between 9–11 pages. From these profiles, the following four case studies were developed.

In these case studies we focused on two superordinate themes that emerged across the women interviewed. First, all of the women linked their decision to apply to Hillside with frustration at the limitations that they perceived in their working-class backgrounds; as exemplified by Paula and Theresa, the frustrations that led to their application were sparked by key encounters (both positive and negative) with other people. The second superordinate theme revolved around the active renegotiation of identity after one semester at Hillside. In all the interviews, the women described a period of questioning their sense of self; as exemplified by Shannon and Jill, this questioning resulted either in a sense of identity continuity or transformation.

GETTING TO HILLSIDE COLLEGE

In this section we highlight the identity concerns that prompted the decision to apply to Hillside. We focus on Paula and Theresa.[4] Interestingly, both women had done well for themselves in the business world prior to coming to Hillside; they were not motivated to pursue a college education by lack of income opportunities. However, due to their vantage point as former salaried workers, they were especially articulate about the ways middle and upper-middle class membership is intertwined with expectations of a liberal arts education; this is a theme that appeared in all seven of our cases. Following retirement, Paula decided to attend Hillside in order to finally put to

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[4]Names are pseudonyms; identifying details have been omitted in order to protect participants' privacy.

rest the feelings of intellectual inadequacy that had haunted her for years. At midlife, Theresa struggled with all that it would mean to leave her working-class identity behind and move into a Hillside dormitory.

Paula

One of many children, Paula was raised in an urban environment until she was in high school and her family moved to a rural setting where her father could run his newly acquired farm. As a child, Paula "never felt any want of anything, but never saw money either." She did enough homework to get by in school, but always had other things that she would "rather be doing." After finishing high school, Paula said she went to work at a furniture company because her father felt she would be marrying soon and did not want to spend the money to educate her, a decision she said she "never even thought to question."

According to her father's expectations, soon after high school, Paula married and turned to raising her three children as a full-time homemaker. After 10 years of marriage, however, Paula made up her mind to divorce her husband, a decision that appalled her family of origin. In many ways, Paula explained, her first husband was wonderful: "He worked very hard, had his own business, was successful, made a lot of money," but she began to feel that they had grown apart.

> He had a reading problem nobody else knew about, but I knew that he couldn't read . . . he never picked up a newspaper, and those things started to become important to me—yes, it sounds so petty, but it wasn't. It has something to do with who you are.

Paula began to feel that her husband's world was too small, and that she wanted to be a "more active" participant in life.

After divorcing her first husband, Paula remarried, had a fourth child, and became an active volunteer on the board of a large New England organization. Through this experience, Paula began to feel that there was "something else out there" and that she had "missed a whole part of life," but she was so busy with four children and elderly grandparents that she did not act until her 40th birthday, when her youngest child was ten:

> I started to think, my children are going to be educated. My daughters are going to have choices. . . . I didn't care what they did, I just wanted to make sure they explored enough to know what the options were, and then make a decision.

When Paula was offered a position as a stockbroker by a firm that she had contact with through her volunteer work, she readily accepted. The position was a perfect match—she wanted to make as much money as possible, as quickly as possible to fund her daughters' educations.

Paula was a very successful stockbroker for 11 years, eventually becoming a vice president of her company:

> I went through the Wall Street crash, I went through the recovery in the eighties . . . I did business in a leer jet, floating around because (a client) didn't have time to do things. I mean, I rode in limousines—I had all those wonderful story book experiences that you read about.

During the years Paula was a stockbroker, her career placed her in the company of those from the middle and upper classes. Using income as a sole criteria, Paula had become part of the upper-middle class. However, in her interviews Paula expressed the fact that she felt intellectually inferior to her clients and colleagues. She spoke at length about the subtle, yet powerful, role her own lack of a college education played in giving her a sense of separation from her clients,

> When you are discussing millions of dollars with a successful business client who perceives you as equally successful, somehow conversations always get around to where you went to school. And it was always an uncomfortable moment . . . I'd say, well, you know, I never had the opportunity, and something happens in the other's mind . . . its involuntary, its just a little click in the back . . . you can see it, you can just see it, it's true. It is a fact, I think they are making a judgment. It's an important thing to society. It truly is. And anyone who doesn't think so is kidding themselves or has not had the experience.

Although having the higher income certainly provided Paula with important freedom, it also, ironically, put her in the extremely uncomfortable position of having to field questions about her educational background. Paula said that she considered herself a "street smart person," but that she "never felt educated." Not having a college degree, she explained, "looms larger than life." She said, "I just wanted to exorcise myself of that feeling. I didn't like it, I didn't want to live with it anymore and I was willing to do whatever I had to do to get rid of it."

Therefore, after years of working to put her daughters through both college and graduate school, Paula retired from stock brokering and entered her first year of college "to be able to learn about Jane Austin and Milton." For Paula, attaining a higher income, important as it was in making it possible for her to provide her daughters with more choices than she had, did not sufficiently quench her desire to be a more active and educated participant in life. To fully quench her own desires to learn, and to put an end to the dreadful anticipation of being asked about her education, Paula applied to Hillside. For Paula, it seems that the journey from a working-class to a middle-class identity would be complete only with a liberal arts education.

Theresa

Like Paula, Theresa wanted a liberal arts education from Hillside, but taking the necessary steps were very threatening. Theresa described herself during her high school years as "something of an emotional hermit" who did "whatever it took to get through" her classes. Her parents, who she identified as "blue collar," wanted her to go straight to college, which she tried, but left after half a semester to go to work. Theresa explained that, at the time, she questioned why she would need college if her parents had not. Unlike at school, she did very well when she went to work, and felt she "was never really held back because of lack of education."

Like Paula, Theresa managed to climb up within the ranks of her company. She was hired as a bank teller and progressed to head teller, then manager, and then head bookkeeper. After she had climbed as far as she could go, she left the bank to work as a bookkeeper for an independent contractor. This man, who had a B. A. in engineering, made a particularly significant impact on Theresa. She explained,

> When you start dealing with people like this, you see different things . . . just the way he handled his children . . . my parents, as authoritarians, they didn't give me reasons, they said, "you are going to do it because I said." And his style was a more tolerant way. He even dealt with employees that way . . . It was just his manner . . . And somehow I managed to connect it to education.

While working for the contractor, Theresa began to feel that she wanted and needed to be "more worldly" and "polished." However, as the first in her extended family to have a high school diploma, she was quite fearful and ambivalent about whether or not college was for her.

With the support of a therapist, Theresa enrolled in classes at a local community college. Battling per-

sonal doubts and sickness in her stomach, she slowly adjusted to the social and academic life of the community college. Originally, Theresa planned on becoming a nurse. She felt it was a "respectable profession," and that she could work hard and probably get into a nursing program. When her therapist challenged this plan and encouraged Theresa to consider a liberal arts degree at one of the elite women's colleges, she was apprehensive:

> I just felt it was way beyond me . . . you know, I was crossing a line . . . I very much wanted to have all the things that come from this type of education. These women are supposed to be very articulate and well spoken, and very bright. And they have a lot of self-esteem and self-respect, but with my background I just didn't see it as part of me . . . I never considered myself any kind of an intellectual.

Theresa began an application to the women's college, but after driving through the gate and around the ivy-covered campus for the first time, she thought "get out of here—there's no way," and was no longer interested in applying. Then, the day before the application was due, one of her community college professors took her aside after hearing that she would not be applying, and showed her the very positive letter of recommendation that he had composed for her. At his urging, she went home, completed the application, and delivered it by hand.

Theresa was surprised and elated to hear she had been accepted at Hillside. However, as the summer progressed, she became "horrified." She explained:

> I mean, I had this most terrible attitude about the whole thing. I kept thinking I don't belong here— this is a big mistake. I'm going to be so embarrassed, I'm going to humiliate myself, I'm going to get there and they are going to throw me out.

Despite such trepidation, at the end of the summer Theresa and her parents arrived at the women's college to move her into a dorm room.

There are, no doubt, a variety of reasons why students may feel intimidated by attending a prestigious college. There are many, for example, who arrive in their first year doubting whether they are "smart enough" to be there. However, what Theresa expressed was a notable dread about her own sense of belonging in an environment that has traditionally been home to those of the middle and upper classes. Simply deciding to apply tested her idea of herself— she would be "crossing a line." By crossing it, Theresa left familiar ground for a new territory, on which she had only a tenuous footing:

> Stepping out of that role, that whole . . . lifestyle that I grew up in, the blue collar family, you know, the whole thing, it was so hard . . . I think it was that fear of developing a new identity, and I was very unsure of myself.

Despite this fear, Theresa, like Paula, applied to Hillside College after making an explicit connection between higher education and psychological entry into the middle class.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE AT HILLSIDE COLLEGE

Although the decision to attend Hillside was full of symbolic meaning for all of our cases, the challenges to identity and sense of self continued during the actual years at Hillside as well. In her groundbreaking longitudinal study of women's identity, Josselson (1987) wrote about how "there is no one day" when identity formation happens. "Rather," she wrote, "the self is gradually modified so that one day one may look back and realize that one has changed inexorably, that one is different from how one used to be and is still essentially the same" (p. 12). The next two cases provide an interesting contrast between the two aspects of identity Josselson addressed: continuity and change. At Hillside, both Shannon and Jill underwent significant changes; however, Shannon stressed how she had come to see herself differently while at Hillside, whereas Jill tended to focus on the thread that still connected her to her past.

Shannon

Shannon was raised by her mother and stepfather in a poor and lonely environment. She described her stepfather as a "typical abuser" who isolated her mother and herself from the rest of their family. "He told my mother bad things about the family, and the family things about her—had everyone around us convinced that we were crazy . . . even in the trailer park we lived nobody associated with us."

Shannon was a "very shy child" growing up, but this changed out of necessity when she joined the Navy after high school and was assigned to a personnel position. While in the Navy, she met and married her first husband, who was also in the military. Over the course of their 4-year marriage, Shannon saw little of her husband due to his work, but she soon

discovered that he had "an alcohol problem," and "with the alcohol came a lot of physical abuse."

After being counseled at a crisis center, Shannon decided to leave her husband, in part because she did not want to be like her mother, who was never able to leave her abusive husband, Shannon's stepfather. She took her 1-year-old son and drove across the country to a state where she knew no one. While working as a receptionist, Shannon met, married, and had a second child with another man who she "thought was a wonderful person." "Although I was 24," Shannon said, "I was still young and naive." Her second husband also had an alcohol problem and Shannon said that in order to have enough money to support it, he told her to stop taking care of their child at home, and find full-time work.

Work proved to be a great source of pride for Shannon. After a couple of short stints with secretarial positions, she was hired by the military to manage their workers compensation program. In the face of a great deal of resistance, Shannon "decided things were going to be run by the book," and the program she built became a model for other bases. Despite this success, Shannon noted with much frustration that many people surpassed her at work because they either had more education or had done personal favors for those in power. The stress that she was experiencing at work was further compounded by the stress occurring in her personal life:

> So a lot of things were going on that were stressful (on the base). And I was also having problems with my husband that were very stressful. I ended up getting a divorce. In (the mid-eighties) I ended up in a divorce, being diagnosed with . . . cancer, and losing my job at (the base) . . . I was charging my mortgage on my credit card . . . I was getting no child support because I was on disability . . . (and) in the meantime I was trying to raise two children . . . I said, "if this is midlife, I don't want to see the rest of it."

Facing the idea that she would die "a heck of a lot sooner than anybody else," on top of additional personal crises, Shannon went to see a counselor who encouraged her to take stock of her life, and to lower the stress she was feeling by any means possible. Shannon used "a holistic approach"—including reading, listening to music, visiting a holy place, and visualizing. After a year's time, the cancer had not reappeared, and she went into remission.

Shannon described her change in lifestyle and ultimate triumph over her illness as a defining moment of her life. On the one hand, it gave her "a very strong sense of a higher power" and, on the other hand, it gave her an equally strong sense of independence and personal achievement. She had taken charge of her life and improved it tremendously. One of the things her counselor had suggested to Shannon was to take a course or two at the local community college. She took this advice and enrolled as a full-time student, only to surprise herself by receiving all A's. At the encouragement of one of her community college professors, Shannon took a drive by Hillside:

> Well, I had lived in (a nearby town) for quite a while, but I didn't even know Hillside was here. And then I drove up and looked around and I said, "What a beautiful college—it looks like an English-style college." I began to seriously think I could fit in here—this could be my school. And I began to think of it as "my school" about a year before I ever got here. I just knew they were going to let me in. They didn't know, I did.

Shannon entered Hillside with a feeling that she belonged there. Her adjustment, however, was not as smooth as she anticipated:

> My first semester I took a class in psychobiology . . . psychobiology is quite a complicated class . . . it tested my ability to be at Hillside . . . My second semester I took cognitive psychology . . . I was going absolutely crazy with that . . . I don't know whether it was so much that I expected something different from the major, or from the professors. At the community college, there was a lot of help from professors, particularly for students who were looking for help. I found that help was not here . . . (the professors) were always available, but they didn't speak clearly enough to bring the whole thing home to me . . . So by the end of that first year I was wondering why I was putting myself through this.

But a pride in her identity as someone who perseveres in the face of hardship kept Shannon at Hillside. She explained, "Throughout my life I've been told by one person or another that I'm stupid. Well, I'm obviously not stupid . . . while I might not be very bright at a lot of other things, in the areas I choose to pursue, I'm very good."

In discussing how she had changed as a result of her experience at Hillside, Shannon drew distinct lines between her present self and who she was before Hillside. These lines were clearly class-based:

> Hillside will definitely change everything that happens to me from here on out. For one thing, there is no way I am going back . . . I can see that I have progressed in relationships with men . . . I now demand more of a partner—a higher intellectual level. When I was younger I would think of that as being snobbish, and now I think of it as self-defense

. . . (Before), I had relationships with high school graduates and they had what I would consider a blue collar mentality . . . But there is no way that I could still be associating with those types of people and dedicating as much time as I do to my school work, especially at Hillside. I would get no help, no emotional support, and I would probably be ridiculed and put down for even trying.

Although Shannon did weave themes of identity continuity throughout her interviews—particularly one of herself as "the kind of person who nothing is going to hold back"—she focused more attention on themes of change when she discussed her experience. This is evident in the above quotation, where she focused on the differences between her past and present ideas of relationships with men, and it was also central to her discussion of her relationship with her family of origin:

I can go back to my roots for a week or two, but I am certainly not going back there to live . . . (To my family), anyone who has gone to a highfalutin school and wants to become a psychologist is really trying to get too far ahead . . . I want a nice house, I want nice cars, I want to be able to make mortgage payments, I want to have money in the bank—things these people don't have. Things that supposedly upper middle-class people have . . . I guess the way they make me feel is that if I want (these things), then I must be classist—"you will forget your roots, you'll be over there, you'll never speak to us" . . . My relatives live in a small mental space . . . To them, there is no future, and to me there is a future.

The metaphor of college as a bridge to another world works very well for Shannon. On one side of Hillside is her past—where she could visit, but would never go "back to live." On the other side, is her future—where she would pursue more "progressed" relationships with men, and the material securities equated with the middle class. The stark shift in social class identity that Shannon described experiencing at Hillside was absolute to her; she had irrevocably changed.

In contrast to Shannon's experience, we now turn to a discussion of Jill, a participant for whom themes of identity continuity at Hillside were more salient than those of change.

Jill

Jill, born the youngest of five children, remembered disliking school from the very beginning. Her mother, after years of being a full-time homemaker, went back to work when Jill was four and, because the family could not afford to hire someone to look after her, Jill stayed home alone spending most of her time playing outdoors. Because it was her own responsibility to get herself on the school bus for kindergarten, nobody noticed when Jill "kinda dropped out" and spent most days at home instead of at school.

In junior high and high school, Jill said she coped with school by becoming "a big time drug addict." There was 1 month when she remembered deciding to "turn over a new leaf," and found that she enjoyed reading and classes. But she also found that she was more isolated than at any other time in her life, so she "reverted back to old ways" and "somehow graduated."

From high school Jill went on to a community college, where she appreciated having a "clean slate" and worked hard to achieve all A's and B's in her classes. "The crisis came" however, when Jill realized that success in her chosen major, human services, depended on her as an individual. She wanted badly to be a counselor, but began to have serious doubts about whether she could rely on herself to be "the tool" in her field. During her second semester, she withdrew from her classes, and began using drugs again. She said,

I didn't really feel good about it; I knew I was just withdrawing when all of these wonderful opportunities were out there . . . that was a major part of my personality until about the last 5 years or so. When anything would get hard I would just withdraw or drop out. I knew I was running out of money and I thought that the only thing that had ever really given me good feelings about myself was working. I said that I just wanted to work—work and get paid.

Jill found work as an assembler in a factory, which was fulfilling for a while. She enjoyed working with her hands and had the time she needed to complete her required task. However, when she was moved from her small department to a "big warehouse type of environment," things took a turn for the worse and after many months in that department she decided she "would go nuts" if she stayed. She remembers that her boss told her "Good, good. You should get out—you can do more than this."

With hopes of doing something else with her life, Jill decided to try the community college again and moved in with her parents so she could afford to pay tuition. However, she soon discovered that her parents' marriage of 37 years was disintegrating and "because of all the stuff going on," Jill withdrew from four of the six classes she had enrolled in. At the end of the semester she "ended up running away"

with a man who was much older than she was because she "just wanted to get out of the situation at home" and thought she was in love with him.

What developed was an "absolutely suffocating" relationship that lasted for over 5 years. Her boyfriend, who Jill worked and lived with, was "an unbelievable alcoholic" and physically abusive. When she began to fear for her life, she found refuge at a shelter for battered women and they helped her to do "a disappearing act." She packed up her car and drove across the country—an act she referred to as a "huge pivotal point" in her life. Having built up the resolve to finally leave her boyfriend, she drove away without any concrete plans.

On another side of the country, Jill found work as a housekeeper at a large hotel. Although she greatly appreciated her independence, eventually the work became very physically difficult for her, and financially she was "just barely surviving." After moving to an island back east to be near family, and continuing to work at more service jobs, Jill came to the depressing conclusion that she did not have any real skills. Once again, she decided that she should go back to school.

Jill's intention was to go back to the community college and take classes, such as typing and computer literacy—taking these sorts of "skills-oriented" classes was the only way she felt she could "justify" giving college another try. After speaking with a counselor at the college Career Center, however, Jill realized that she did not "ever want to spend a whole day at a desk." With the counselor's "permission," Jill decided to go into the liberal arts.

Her third time at the community college Jill felt as though she had blossomed. She explained,

> I started at the community college and that's when I fell in love with learning. I was just like, wow! This is fun! And I applied myself, and I'd get such positive feedback because it was a community college and a lot of people that were there didn't really know why they were there . . . I was in love with learning, so the professors loved that. It was just this positive, positive experience. And I got involved in all these activities . . . Just a huge change in my life.

Jill graduated from the community college amid scholarships and awards. She had set admission to Hillside as "the only big goal and aspiration" that she had ever had. Once accepted, she said she "wanted to come more than anything else in the world."

Needless to say, Jill had very high hopes for her experience at Hillside. She felt that if there was one thing that separated her from everyone else it was

that nobody was "more grateful" to be there. She said she would sit with the catalog and read the purpose of the college and the course descriptions over and over again. Her adjustment, however proved to be extremely difficult and troubling. During the first couple of months she continued to experience a sense of elation—she attended as many events and guest lectures as she could. Then, around November, the tide began to shift and Jill began to struggle both personally and academically for two main reasons.

First, Jill had learned at the community college that "if you put in enough time and effort, the result was you did well." In contrast, at Hillside, Jill found that many of her peers were putting in a small fraction of the time that she was taking to study, yet were getting better grades. The system was unfamiliar to her and seemingly unfair. With three courses, she was barely able to keep up. Second, Jill was struck and personally jostled by the confidence of the other students. To her, the traditionally aged students appeared to be "so sure that they knew the answers," and she did not see them "opening their minds and their hearts to different perspectives." In short, Jill understood a college education to be a time "to explore all of the other perspectives and question your own beliefs," and she was sincerely crushed to think that few of her peers shared her ideal. With her expectations for Hillside and for her ability to do well dashed, Jill was under great duress:

> By the time November came I was just so depressed—I started crying for no reason when it came time to turn in papers. They were my first papers at Hillside which I had built up to this big thing that I was never going to be able to do . . . In my mind I thought that I was lucky to be here, that there was no reason to be depressed, but physically, or chemically something was out of whack.

In addition to being depressed, Jill became physically ill with a kidney stone during her first semester at Hillside. With a sense of failure, she withdrew from two of her three classes. During her second semester things began to improve. She still found classes to be "a real struggle," but she got through them "one by one."

In contrast to Shannon, who equated her experience at Hillside with a marked shift in identity, particularly in her social class allegiance, Jill offers a window into the experience of someone more in the process of discovery:

> I feel like I'm here for nothing else, there's nothing else right now that I'm supposed to do other than study and learn. And I'm going to learn what I want

to, in the ways that I want to . . . I'm here and I am trying to figure out who I am and how I can make a difference, and what direction I'll go in . . . If I start worrying about the future too much, I just say "well, you did have this experience, and even if you have to take a job cleaning houses or something to pay back student loans for the time you had here, you did have this time here through this little twist of fate." I try to hold onto that notion.

Perhaps because Jill, at the time of the interview, was working on integrating her present identity with her past and her future, there was an overriding sense of continuity. This sense of continuity seemed to characterize her notions of social class membership, as well. Whereas Shannon spoke about the changes she experienced at Hillside in language laden with class consciousness, Jill never made *direct* reference to changing her social class background during her interviews. Rather, she stressed the notion that she was the same person at Hillside as she was before:

I'm the same person now as I was when I was a housekeeper at the (hotel). Its just that (there) you're made to wear a uniform and people don't want to look you in the eye, so you're just invisible. But inside I was still the same person who is in school, and who wants to help people, and who wants a good life.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we were interested in exploring the identity issues that nontraditionally aged women from working-class backgrounds grappled with getting to and adjusting to a private liberal arts college. We chose a case study approach because this research method is well suited to developing a rich sense of context about participant experience. The first of the two superordinate themes that we focused on in these case studies was that all of the women connected their decision to apply to Hillside with feelings of being hindered by restrictions placed upon them by their working-class backgrounds. In other words, our participants felt strongly that their movement up the class hierarchy would not be complete without a degree from a four-year college or university.

As the cases of Paula and Theresa highlight, the frustrations that precipitated their applications were triggered by salient interactions (both positive and negative) with college-educated people. In getting to Hillside, both Paula and Theresa emphasized how it

was not a desire for a higher income that propelled their interest in attending the college. Rather, they wanted the opportunity to expand their sense of self through a college education—to "read Jane Austin and Milton" and be exposed to "worldly" ideas. After years of success on Wall Street, Paula came out of retirement to go to Hillside so that she could finally put an end to the feelings of inadequacy that she had experienced working with colleagues and clients who assumed that college was part of her past. Theresa ultimately gave up a comfortable apartment and position in mid-career to move into a Hillside dormitory, in part, because she said she had connected the way that her boss treated his children, employees, and clients with his education. Having done very well at her community college, Theresa considered applying to Hillside but immediately gave up the idea after driving through the campus once. The image of the school that she gathered from her brief visit simply did not overlap in any way with her sense of self. Theresa described feeling like she would not belong at a place like Hillside and that she could not cross the class-based line that the school represented for her. It was not until she was strongly encouraged by a community college professor, whose opinion of herself she had come to trust, that she felt enough courage to prepare an application the day before the admissions deadline.

While largely disregarding the role of economic income, Paula and Theresa accented the sociocultural aspect of class identity in their interviews. Directly and indirectly, they discussed the meaning of social class in terms of the type of knowledge and experience that was acquired through a liberal arts education. The way in which they came to associate class with education was through face-to-face contact with individuals who made an impact on them. In other words, what we gathered from the examples of Paula and Theresa is that identity issues and changes do not happen in a vacuum. Although there is certainly evidence, as many identity researchers have contended and shown support for, that identity concerns may often be dealt with internally through mental manipulation of hypothetical options, our research highlights how heavily other people are involved in offering alternatives to one's current identity. That is, identity concerns are not isolated or exclusively internal events; other people may play a crucial role in standing for something different from oneself, but somehow within reach. This reinforces how the metaphor of crossing the line is not just applicable to working-class students attending an elite liberal arts

college. There are certainly many other ways that women (and men) cross social class lines that warrant scrutiny. For example, what issues are involved when social class lines are crossed in marriages (e.g., a nurse who weds a medical doctor) or friendships?

The second superordinate theme in this study centered around our participants' active renegotiation of identity after one semester at Hillside. In all the interviews the women described a period of questioning their sense of self. As the cases of Shannon and Jill exemplify, this questioning resulted either in a sense of identity transformation or continuity. In speaking of their adjustment to Hillside, both Shannon and Jill said they approached the campus with high hopes for a sense of belonging. Months before she would apply, Shannon had driven through the campus and known at once that it was "her school," and the summer before she moved to campus Jill had read and reread the college handbook with great excitement. At Hillside, however, Shannon and Jill faced challenges to their sense of identity.

When asked about her adjustment, Shannon tended to focus on the academic difficulties she underwent in making the shift from a community college to Hillside—significant difficulties that caused her to question her decision to attend Hillside more than once. In terms of her social adjustment, when Shannon discussed relationships with family and friends, it was clear that she had handled the discrepancies she discerned between their world (her former world), and her world at Hillside, by making a clean break from her past. Shannon had resolved to pursue ideals associated with the middle class (a college degree, a career, a mortgage, and a car loan) and not to look back. Jill, on the other hand, described feelings of alienation on both an academic and social level at Hillside. The themes of identity change that were so salient in Shannon's narrative were not to be found in Jill's narrative. Jill struggled academically with the realization that she worked significantly harder yet received lower grades than a majority of her peers—peers who she felt isolated from because of what she perceived to be their overconfidence and lack of appreciation for all that Hillside had to offer. Of the four interviewees, Jill was the one who seemed to be struggling the hardest to fit in at the college and to maintain a sense of continuity between her past and her present. She seemed to be experiencing the sense of alienation described in prior research with working-class women in adult education and college programs (e.g., Luttrell, 1989, 1997; Stewart & Ostrove, 1993), and with academics from working class backgrounds (e.g., Jones, 1998; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993).

With respect to this second superordinate theme, what we gathered about identity development, in general from our particular case studies, is that not only are other individuals heavily involved in offering alternative identity options, but that changes in physical place offer new identity options in and of themselves. As emphasized already, making the changes necessary to move to Hillside, thereby changing their physical locations, was not easy for our participants in the first place. However, once physically present at Hillside, our participants faced another host of challenges to their sense of identity. This suggests to us that the new perspective that changes in physical location and social contacts inherently offers, whether that perspective is related to social class membership or not, may very well precipitate identity inquiries, revisions, and/or crises.

As Lynn Weber (1998) has recently argued, when trying to understand the psychological effects of systems such as social class, race, gender, and sexuality, it is critical to keep in mind that these systems are not permanent or stagnant, but are always undergoing change and often cannot be completely comprehended by using them as variables in customary quantitative studies. Therefore, in thinking of social class not as a stable characteristic of individuals but as something that takes on various meanings throughout everyday life, it was our hope that in-depth focus on a few individuals would offer a more complex understanding of the identity issues faced by people in the position of our participants.

In our study, we were particularly interested in issues of social class, yet we were mindful of the fact that social class is one branch of the social hierarchy within the United States and where one may be a member of a dominant group within one domain, in another domain one may belong to a minority group. With respect to our data, this point was made nicely by Beverly Daniel Tatum in her book *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations About Race* (1997). Tatum, who is familiar with the current study in its Master's thesis form, made the observation that although our interviewees were quite cognizant of the many ways the social hierarchy had worked against them in the past, as white women from working-class backgrounds they indicated no awareness of the white privileges from which they had benefited in their struggle to get to Hillside. Future research in race, class, gender,

and sexuality studies will hopefully continue to examine the ways in which individuals psychologically manage multiple roles and memberships within the network of social hierarchy.

Our participants, by nature of the fact that they had succeeded in being admitted to Hillside and were the first in their families to be admitted to a school of its kind, were in an interesting position to consider the way that social class ideology in America is tied to notions of effort and ability (Weber, 1998). On the one hand, their experiences at Hillside brought them face to face with differences between their own backgrounds and the backgrounds of the majority of students at Hillside, therefore they had reason to acknowledge the tacit advantages of being born into a middle- or upper-class family and that the majority of people from their own class background would not have the experience they were having at Hillside. On the other hand, as women who had "beat the odds" and made it to Hillside, an achievement of which each one of them was extremely proud, they were also prime candidates for the belief that it is primarily effort and hard work that determines one's place in the social hierarchy. We were interested in the ways in which our participants were reshaping their sense of class identity in light of the precipice on which they perched at the time when they were interviewed. And, as already stated, although our participants' experiences were nontraditional, we believed they could teach us something about identity development in general.

RETENTION OF ADULT STUDENTS FROM THE WORKING CLASS

The experiences of all four women highlight the importance of exploring how returning students' past experiences might aid them in facing college and subsequent challenges to identity. Each of our cases had arrived at Hillside having either established a strong record of success in the working world (Paula and Theresa), or weathered one or more formidable personal crises (Shannon and Jill). All of them, except for Paula, had proved themselves academically at a community college before applying to Hillside. How these kinds of life experiences that we assume to be not atypical of nontraditionally aged women students from working-class backgrounds might help or hinder the transition to an elite liberal arts college remains to be explored more fully.

As it stands right now, some implications of this study for college retention of working class students might be drawn. We suspect that these subsequent remarks are applicable to students of any age, as long as they come from a working-class background; however, future research will need to untangle any differences in the experiences of working-class students due to age (i.e., traditionally aged working-class students versus nontraditionally aged working-class students). First, in terms of the initial interest that an individual from a working-class background might show in attending college, it seems, based especially on the experience of Theresa and Jill, that counselors should be sensitive to students' potential need for "permission" of some kind to study the liberal arts. Theresa and Jill explained that if they were to spend the money on college, that they felt they must acquire concrete skills that could be immediately applied to the working world—such as nursing or computer skills. The notion that they could study other subjects that might intrinsically interest them—such as the liberal arts—was something they both needed support for in order to pursue.[5]

Second, in addition to the academic adjustment, our participants' experiences underline a variety of issues that affect the social adjustment that nontraditional, working class students must make to a place like Hillside. Based on our interviews, being responsive to feelings of alienation is key for helping students who want to make the transition to a 4-year liberal arts institution. As indicated by our participants, alienation takes different forms and can motivate students in a variety of ways. Paula came to attend Hillside as a way of putting an end to the sense of alienation she experienced as a non-college-educated member of the business community. Theresa's sense of alienation at driving through the Hillside campus almost was enough to keep her from applying. Shannon, through an identification with Hillside, came to feel a sense of alienation from her own past. Jill seemed to be struggling *not* to feel alienated from her own past, while at the same time feeling alienated from her Hillside peers. Sensitivity to the identity concerns that students from working-class backgrounds grapple with at 4-year colleges and universities should help them to make the necessary transitions more successfully, as strongly suggested

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[5]In writing this paper we were guided by the assumption that a 4-year liberal arts education is inherently valuable. We are aware that such an assumption may not be shared by all people. Related to this, the issue of the subjective value of a "liberal arts" degree versus an "applied" degree needs further scrutiny in other samples.

by the number of times that our participants made references to counselors and professors who gave them invaluable support at and along their way to Hillside.

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