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Getting In: Status Stratification and the Pursuit of the Good College Party

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Abstract

How do social hierarchies emerge from symbolic boundaries? Based on an ethnography of a college party scene, we consider “Who parties with whom” as a way to trace the micro-interactional bases of status stratification. Based on field observations and 60 interviews with college women and men in Boston, USA, we identify two main modes of partying: “crawling” and “climbing.” *Crawling* is the search for a low-status house party to attend, often leading to subpar experiences in poorly-maintained frat houses. *Climbing*, in contrast, describes the aspirational movement into superior parties at elite institutions, an experience potentially marked with feelings of shame. Regardless of their frequently bad experiences, students continue to go out with the goal of “getting in,” which we analyze as an exchange of capitals—bodily, cultural, and social—for access to exclusive spaces. The pursuit of college parties, we discovered, forces students to position themselves in hierarchies of desirability, and through this process, they learn to connect wealth, status, and campus affiliation.

Keywords Status · Social hierarchies · Symbolic boundaries · College parties · Gender

Introduction

“All of social life is like high school,” the social theorist Craig Calhoun has said, meaning that social hierarchies reminiscent of the school cafeteria reproduce themselves in all walks of life. Variations of the school dilemma of “Who sits with whom?” can be found from the boxing ring (on “Who boxes with whom,” see Wacquant 2004) to the college dormitory (on “Who associates with whom,” see Armstrong and Hamilton

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2013; see also Calhoun and Ianni 1976; Milner 2006). In this article, we interrogate how social hierarchies emerge from the symbolic cues available to students. Our case is the college party scene, and we consider “Who parties with whom?” to examine the micro-interactional bases of status stratification.

“Who parties with whom” is a question of social order in which students learn to place themselves by identifying and acting upon symbolic boundaries in their everyday practices. Previous research has documented how people learn to recognize status differences through symbolic markers of class, race, and gender (Bettie 2002; Kahn 2012; Mears 2020; Rivera 2010), and how status distinctions manifest *in situ* as people interact with one another (Ridgeway 2013; Sauder 2005). Meanwhile, another body of scholarship has critically examined social hierarchies on college campuses, showing how they are closely linked to class and gender hierarchies (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Stuber 2009; Sweeney 2011). Combining these literatures, our data shows how young people construct *social hierarchies* out of *symbolic boundaries* (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

Our research setting is the quintessential college town of Boston, in Massachusetts, USA, home to over 30 colleges and universities within a three-to-four-mile radius, including the nation’s number two (Harvard) and three (MIT) schools, in addition to several well-known schools like Boston College (ranked 37), Northeastern University (ranked 40), and Boston University (also ranked 40), according to the US News and World Report (2019).¹ To examine how students recognize and reproduce status hierarchies in the Boston college party scene, we collected field observations and 60 interviews with college women and men who mostly attend a highly ranked—but not *the* highest-ranked university—in the Boston area, which we call City University. We identify two main modes of social interactions: “crawling” and “climbing.” *Crawling* is the search for a low-status house party to attend, often leading to subpar experiences in poorly-maintained frat houses. *Climbing*, in contrast, describes the aspirational upward movement to superior parties at elite institutions, an experience potentially marked with feelings of shame.

We found students’ search for a good time often meant they attended subpar parties, even “gross,” “shameful,” and “embarrassing” ones. Yet to our surprise, the next weekend, they go back for more. Though rife with indignities, these were also exclusive spaces guarded by gatekeepers. Students emphasized the importance of “getting in,” that is, being included in an exclusive space, as a reward in itself. We analyze “getting in” as a shorthand for capital conversions, in which students try to trade on their bodily, social, and cultural capital for access to restricted spaces (Bourdieu 1986). The pursuit of college parties, we discovered, forces students to position themselves in hierarchies of desirability, and through this process, they learn to connect wealth, status, and campus affiliation. Paradoxically, this creates hierarchies that students, particularly women, both dislike *and* desire, and hence, perpetuate.

¹ The Boston metropolitan area includes more than 60 nonprofit four-year colleges and universities, including Boston proper and neighboring cities and towns.

Previous Research

Symbolic Boundaries and Status Stratification

How do symbolic boundaries intersect with social inequalities? This is a central question in cultural sociology. Lamont and Molnár (2002) defined symbolic boundaries as conceptual distinctions people make as they categorize objects, people, practices, and spaces. They are conceptual tools that people use to construct and legitimate their sense of belonging (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168).

Researchers have found that symbolic boundaries are important to the formation of social hierarchies (Pachucki et al. 2007), from ethno-racial boundaries in schools, neighborhoods and jobs (Carter 2005; McDermott 2006; Pattillo 2007), to class boundaries between children (Lareau 2003). At their core, symbolic boundaries point to the relational nature of group identity (Emirbayer 1997); one only knows who is “cool” at the lunch table or in the nightclub by comparison to those believed to be not cool. We learn these boundaries through socialization. Whether at a boarding school (Khan 2012), gay enclave (Greene 2011), VIP nightclub (Mears 2020), or college dorm (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), people learn “who belongs” with whom, who doesn’t, and in the process, they learn a system of meaning behind hierarchy.

By believing in symbolic boundaries, people produce status distinctions and, over time, durable inequalities form, like class as well as race and gender inequalities, which come to look and feel like natural differences (Lamont et al. 2015; Ridgeway 2013). These inequalities are linked to psychological feelings of envy (toward status superiors) and scorn (toward inferiors, see Fiske 2010). Like a physical border, symbolic boundaries require ongoing effort, or “boundary work” to police and maintain. Status orders are thus highly situational (Collins 2000).

These dynamics appear in many hierarchized social settings. In the French school system, teachers and students recognize “better” students as those with the symbolic cues of class privilege; they see students from lower class backgrounds as not “having what it takes” to succeed, and therefore belonging in lower educational tracks (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1977]). In hiring for elite professionals, social cues lead to in-group preferences among Human Resource staff (Rivera 2015). Being seen as an insider or an outsider can shape one’s access to inclusion in a neighborhood (Elias and Scotson 1965). And whether one appears “classy” or “trashy” can shape what kinds of friends one will have during freshman year of college (Armstrong et al. 2013).

Inclusion within status hierarchies can serve as a source of pleasure and belonging. But it can also be painful. Bourdieu described socialization into the bottom of a social hierarchy as *symbolically violent*, that is, *knowing and feeling* oneself as “less than,” as happened among the students Bourdieu and Passeron observed in their study of the French school system (1990 [1977]). Symbolic violence also takes an active, if unwitting, complicity in one’s own domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Because they correspond to objective realities, symbolic boundaries shape our desires and strategies for moving through the world. This is quite notable on college campuses.

Status Stratification in Higher Education

In any given higher education institution, both academic and extra-academic features of college life reproduce existing inequalities (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lareau 2017; Stuber 2009; Stuber et al. 2011). As more and more people go to college, scholars have focused on horizontal differentiation among college-educated populations, that is, processes of differentiation among similarly privileged people (Borgen and Mastekaasa 2018; Gerber and Cheung 2008; Marginson 2016; Stuber 2009). Qualitative researchers examine how inequality is maintained through mechanisms like the extra-curriculum (Hamilton and Cheng 2018; Stuber 2009; Stuber et al. 2011), institutional pathways, and party culture (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Overall, we know that there are steep inequalities even among highly privileged college populations (Jack 2019).

We add to this literature by considering how symbolic boundaries propel horizontal differentiation in the context of college parties. We ask, how do students learn to recognize symbolic boundaries, and how do those boundaries translate into social hierarchies? Clearly, students acquire tacit understandings of status based on their and others' institutional prestige, as well as social ties and classed codes of the body (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bettie 2002; Bourdieu 1984). We want to know how these symbolic boundaries shape their practices as they negotiate access to college parties. Parties are an important part of student life (Khan and Hirsch 2020), and they have been found to reproduce social hierarchies like race and gender (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; May and Chaplin 2008; Rivera 2010).

As heteronormative spaces, college parties particularly constrain women. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) argue in their study of college women, fraternity men create status rankings among women by rewarding particular femininities with attention and access to their parties (see also Martin and Hummer 1989). Working-class women who joined the frat scene faced greater risks of sexual disrespect and academic derailment. Women, they show, also sexually evaluate and rank each other. However, femininities are never wholly derivative of masculinities, and women do not passively accept criteria established by men. In other observations of urban nightlife, white men make the rules by which women and all other men can participate in high-status nightlife scenes; for women, this requires exploiting their bodily or sexual capital for access (Grazian 2007a, b; May and Chaplin 2008; Mears 2020).

Drawing insight from these studies, we approached the Boston area college party scene as a kind of social game that students play. Each weekend, they go out in search of a “good party,” though they often end up in subpar places marked with discomforts and indignities. Regardless of their frequently bad experiences, they continue to go out with the goal of “getting in,” which we analyze as an exchange of capitals—bodily, cultural, and social resources mobilized for access to exclusive spaces. Through this process, they learn about their own social location in an unequal social field, and they conceptually link status, wealth, and campus affiliation.

Case and Research Design

Boston presents an opportune place for students from different campuses to interact. Following a relational approach that analyzes interactions and group dynamics (Desmond 2014), our ethnography centers on processes of status stratification among students who attend a private, four-year, expensive, and highly ranked R1 university in Boston, which we call City University (CU). City University belongs to a select group of universities in terms of reputation and prestige, but not as elite as Harvard and MIT, according to national rankings and our informants' perceptions.

Boston is home to a number of schools like City University: they rank near the nation's top 50 according to the US News and Report (2019), with between 4,500 to 18,000 undergraduates, many with world-renowned specializations, and tuition over US\$50,000 a year. Adding room and board, total sticker prices are well over US\$60,000 per year.

While all of these student populations are privileged because they attend private, expensive, and selective universities, they also sit in unequal status positions, and these are likely amplified given their relatively close proximity to each other (see Table 1). As students explained to us, there is a clear prestige gap between “the best,” i.e., Harvard and MIT, and “the rest.” Harvard and MIT graduates are some of the most influential of the political and economic elite, and Harvard's current endowment of \$US53.2 billion is among the largest in the world—and larger than half the world's economies (Goldman 2021). In this way, Harvard and MIT represent symbolic and socio-economic power associated with the elite.

Participant Observation

To study the inter-collegiate party scene, we conducted participant observation in the form of “go-alongs” (Kusenbach 2003) with City University students as they moved within and across campuses.

We began during the spring semester of 2018, with a team composed of the first author and PI, the second author, a PhD student who was the co-PI, and one key undergraduate informant who helped us navigate the party scene. After a first round of interviews, we focused on the party scene that City University students described as most important and formative for their college social experiences. Those were the party houses in the neighborhoods of Allston, near Boston University and Boston College, final clubs at Harvard, and frat houses at MIT.

After initially trying to recruit a representative sample of students from all colleges within a 10-mile radius of the Boston city center, we narrowed our focus to students who attend parties in these key neighborhoods. This party scene is predominantly white, with a minority of Asian, Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian participants. Attendees and hosts—according to interviews and field observations—are almost always white, and students frequently observed a lack of ethnic diversity in these spaces. As a result of the choice to focus on the dominant scenes, we missed attention to other social spaces, such as those run by students of color, LGBTQ-identified students, as well as niche musical scenes, among many others. Importantly, even if

Table 1 Rankings, tuition, and the field of higher education in Boston

| | <i>School</i> | <i>US News Rank</i> | | | | |
|--------------------------|--|---|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| RANKINGS | Tier 1 (Elite, Top 10) | MIT | 3 | | | |
| | | Harvard | 2 | | | |
| | Tier 2 (Upper Middle, Top 50) | BU | 40 | | | |
| | | Tufts | 29 | | | |
| | | NEU | 40 | | | |
| | | BC | 37 | | | |
| | Other Area Schools (50 or below, unranked) | Simmons | 125 | | | |
| | | Wellesley | 3** | | | |
| | | Berklee | unranked | | | |
| | | Emmanuel | 164-215 | | | |
| | Emerson | 8** | | | | |
| | UMass Boston | 228 | | | | |
| TUITION & AID | Tier 1 (Elite, Top 10) | <i>School</i> | <i>Tuition & Fees*</i> | <i>Financial Aid Recipients</i> | <i>Average Aid Award</i> | |
| | | MIT | \$53,790 | 59% | \$47,251 | |
| | | Harvard | \$51,925 | 55% | \$61,314 | |
| | Tier 2 (Upper Middle, Top 50) | BU | \$55,892 | 85% | \$36,461 | |
| | | Tufts** | \$58,758 | 98% | \$53,266 | |
| | | NEU | \$53,506 | 75% | \$37,965 | |
| | | BC | \$57,910 | 45% | \$43,793 | |
| | Other Area Schools (50 or Below, Unranked) | Simmons | \$42,070 | 78% | \$31,922 | |
| | | Wellesley | \$56,052 | 60% | \$56,000 | |
| | | Berklee | \$45,660 | 63% | \$17,895 | |
| | Emmanuel | \$43,967 | 71% | \$43,677 | | |
| | Emerson | \$51,264 | 50% | \$24,632 | | |
| | UMass Boston | \$14,613 (in state); \$35,075 (out of state) | 63% | \$9,731 | | |
| ACADEMIC PROFILE | <i>School</i> | <i>SAT Scores (Combined Math and Reading)</i> | | <i>Acceptance Rate</i> | | |
| | | | | | | |

students did not attend parties in the dominant social scene and preferred other activities, everyone was aware of these locations and the basic “rules” to get into these spaces, indicating the influences of this party on student social life.

Having identified our research site, the members of the research team conducted several “go-alongs” by attending parties with students. The party experience begins around 8 p.m. with the pregame ritual, a gathering of students who get ready together prior to going out around 10 p.m., when most parties start. These parties range in type from “formals,” or invite only, to open parties and theme parties (e.g., Luau, Anything but Clothes).

In 2018, we expanded the research team with seven undergraduate field observers, recruited from interviews, who we trained in writing field notes and Institutional Review Board codes of conduct. Undergraduate research assistants (RAs) were all women and mostly heterosexual. About a third were in sororities. Both authors are white women, and the research team of undergraduate observers were predominantly white but also included women who identified as Middle Eastern, African American, Bengali, and Filipina. Undergraduate field researchers were given a US\$10 Amazon gift card for every set of notes they submitted, and we reimbursed their Uber expenses. Undergraduate field observers took notes on their own experiences while pre-gaming, traveling to and getting into parties, and interacting with other students, with particular attention to their felt experiences. Undergraduate observers, especially those involved with Greek life, provided critical insights into mixers and closed parties at City University and similar institutions, as these events were not as accessible to the other researchers. The second author attended many nights out, including with the undergraduate team, and her age (then 31) was never questioned or explicitly noticed by party hosts or attendees, though she was recognized by two of her undergraduate students at different frat parties.

During the academic terms spanning January 2018 and January 2020, the research team and undergraduate field observers documented 60 nights out at five different campuses across Boston.

Interviews

We generated a convenience sample of interviewees through snowball sampling, and by recruiting from undergraduate sociology and political science classes at different campuses in the Boston area. While there are limitations with convenience sampling, the insular nature of college parties and Greek life made sampling through networks very useful to building our data set. We also recruited interview subjects directly from the scene. In the neighborhood of Allston, near Boston University, we approached students on the sidewalks with a clipboard and a small intake survey, and then we invited them for interviews. Students received a US\$10 Amazon gift card at the end of their interview.

To recruit Harvard and MIT students ($n=7$) as well as other students from schools like Bentley and Suffolk ($n=4$), we relied on our personal networks, in-person recruitment, and snowball sampling. We use data from these small samples to illustrate the

themes we generated from analyzing the main sample of City University students ($n=49$). In total, we interviewed 60 students, both affiliated with Greek Life ($n=24$) and not ($n=36$). Interviews lasted between 45–90 minutes; most were just over an hour. Our main insights draw from women, who were a larger part of the sample ($n=49$). To capture other viewpoints, we triangulate data from our relatively smaller sample of men, most of whom host parties ($n=12$).

Most of the students we interviewed identified themselves as upper-class ($n=38$), mirroring these student populations (see Table 2). We grouped participants into two broad class categories, as “upper” and “lower” class. This is an etic and relational way to assess class differences which we developed based on what participants reported as their parents’ income, educational and occupational backgrounds, family home ownership, and marital status. Most participants self-identified as middle-class, but they tended to have high-earning (above US\$100,000 household income annually) and highly educated parents. While the profile of material privilege looks similar for students attending the most “elite” and higher-ranked schools, we still found an emergent sense of status differences between them.

We also conducted four focus groups with between two and six individuals. Two focus groups were conducted with the teams of undergraduate RAs at the conclusion of their fieldwork. One focus group was with two City University women recruited during fieldwork; another group was with non-Greek freshmen, sophomores, and finally, the last focus group was with senior co-eds (four women and two men). Focus groups lasted between 60–90 minutes.

Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, except for one Harvard interviewee who allowed only hand-written notes. Transcripts and field notes were entered into NVivo for analysis. We open coded our data to identify emergent themes that corresponded to our read of the literature on campus culture, party scenes, status dynamics, and symbolic boundaries (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). We further identified these themes with analytic memos and cross checked against subsequent waves of focus groups and interviews. All student names and other identifying information (including university affiliation or Greek membership) are pseudonyms.

Findings

Symbolic Boundaries and Physical Spaces: Mapping the Party Scenes

Students can hypothetically socialize with each other on 30+ other campuses across the city. When asked about the most desirable parties, students in our sample shared a consistent sense of which college parties are desirable: Harvard is the best, followed by MIT, followed by Allston near Boston University. Rarely did they mention other schools lower in rankings, such as Suffolk or Lesley, both centrally located in

Table 2 Respondent demographics

| Respondent Information (N=60) | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Respondent Ages 18-22 | | | | |
| | Tier 1 | Tier 2 | Tier 3* | Total |
| <i>Respondents</i> | | | | |
| Male | 2 | 9 | 1 | 12 |
| Female | 5 | 40 | 3 | 48 |
| | 7 | 49 | 4 | 60 |
| <i>Greek Life Association</i> | | | | |
| Professional | | 7 | | 7 |
| Social | 1 | 13 | | 14 |
| Final's Club | 3 | | | 3 |
| | | | | 24 |
| <i>Year in School</i> | | | | |
| Freshman | | 6 | | 6 |
| Sophomore | 2 | 17 | 2 | 21 |
| Junior | 2 | 18 | 2 | 22 |
| Senior | 1 | 7 | | 8 |
| No Response | 2 | 1 | | 3 |
| | | | | 60 |
| <i>Racial Identity</i> | | | | |
| White | 1 | 23 | 3 | 27 |
| Black | 6 | 3 | | 9 |
| Latinx | | 2 | | 2 |
| Chinese | | 4 | | 4 |
| Korean | | 2 | | 2 |
| Bengali | | 1 | | 1 |
| Indian | | 2 | | 2 |
| Filipino | | 1 | | 1 |
| Persian | | 1 | | 1 |
| Mixed | | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| No Response | | 6 | | 6 |
| | | | | 60 |
| <i>Class Designation</i> | | | | |
| Upper Class; More Privileged | 1 | 34 | 3 | 38 |
| Working Class; Less Privileged | 5 | 5 | 1 | 11 |
| No Response | 1 | 10 | | 11 |
| | | | | 60 |

*"Tier 3" indicates other area schools that did not register to respondents as a destination to party; instead, students visited Tier 1 and Tier 2 campuses.

downtown Boston. However, students *from* Emerson, Lesley, Wellesley, Tufts, Simmons, Bentley, and University of Massachusetts at Boston visited these party scenes regularly; the research team often met them out.

Perhaps the pinnacle of achievement for accessing parties are the final clubs at Harvard. These private clubs have distinguished alumni such as J.P. Morgan Jr. and celebrity guests like Taylor Swift (Herbert 1965; Nir 2016). They are known for lavish interiors (including squash courts), aristocratic routines and rituals (such as on-site service personnel, scheduled teatime), and sought-after membership through a rigorous selection process, or “punching” (Nir 2016).

Moreover, students could easily describe who attends these sought-after parties. The student members of final clubs are understood to be the most elite of the elite, even inaccessible to most Harvard students. Every student in our sample acknowledged this, even if they hadn’t been there personally. Samantha, a white 21-year-old junior and sorority member from City (CU) who attended final club parties, explained their significance in terms of powerful social and political ties:

I think my understanding of it is, final clubs are just a little more, like, exclusive and secretive ... almost like uppity history. A lot of... legacy kind of stuff. Yeah. Because I know a final club I’ve been to, JFK was in it when he was at Harvard.

At the other end of the spectrum were house parties in Allston, sometimes called Boston’s “student village,” and, less flattering, the “student ghetto” (Hosman 2018). The neighborhood of Allston is home to a high concentration of undergraduates and Greek and athletes’ houses, also known as “party houses.” Most parties in this area cluster around streets that begin with letters G, A, and P, and this intersection of student social activity is described as “the GAP,” which local realtors advise home buyers to avoid, because of the rowdy weekend nights and general disrepair of the neighborhood.

Here, students do the “Allston crawl,” a practice that involves wandering the residential streets in small groups of two to five students at night in search of an open party, often in the basement of a dilapidated house. Students described their conditions as physically abysmal:

The [Allston] frat houses are kind of gross. The floors are always muddy. I don’t know where the mud comes from, but you always end up with mud smeared all over your body. It’s really gross... you typically congregate in the basement. And it’s just kind of like, low ceilings and it’s dark and there’s lots of music and there’s a ton of people crammed in there. And it’s really hot and it’s just muddy and dirty.

--Gabriella, CU, 19, F, mixed race, sophomore, sorority member

Gabriella’s description of an Allston frat house likely characterizes many low-budget party spaces in which college students congregate. But beyond noticing the physical state, Gabrielle intuits social differences in the people that go to such parties compared to higher-status parties at nearby Harvard. She continued:

The girls that I’ve met from Harvard and MIT, especially at the Harvard finals club parties... they’re very closed off. I don’t know. They didn’t seem as friendly or as outgoing as the girls that I had met from CU. But they are very put together. I think MIT as well. They’re kind of all the same. They just seem very to themselves. And a little bit of a pretentious attitude as well. Maybe because of the ranking of their school. I think that kind of feeds into it as well.

Within Gabriella's casual observations, we see the formation of linkages between physical spaces, social behaviors, institutional ties, and status hierarchy. Within this landscape of high-status social settings (Harvard and MIT) and comparatively low (Allston), students were not necessarily coming from different levels of economic privilege. That is, money was not necessarily the defining trait distinguishing City students from those at Harvard or MIT. But they made sharp symbolic distinctions as Laxmi notes:

I feel like Harvard is definitely much more wealthier. ...But I also think... these are all private universities. They're all really expensive and we're all coming from some sort of money, so even if Harvard is more elite, we're all kind of paying the same or we're all having to pay the same amount.
- Laxmi, City University, 19, F, Asian, sophomore, sorority member

While Laxmi understands her economic privilege to be on par with peers at higher-ranked schools like Harvard, since students likely come from relatively privileged families if they can afford to attend any of these schools, she also knows there are vast inequalities in terms of legacy, reputation, and prestige. She draws distinctions between her college and the others in terms of status rather than class. Hierarchy does not solely manifest from unequal material resources but from a symbolic system in which Harvard and MIT carry higher prestige.

That students would intuit two tiers of parties among the abundance of other—the elites of Harvard and MIT on the one hand, and the Allston basements on the other—suggests an insight about how symbolic boundaries work. People can endlessly differentiate among themselves, but symbolic boundaries may be more likely to generate social boundaries when they are drawn in opposition to one group as opposed to multiple, often competing out-groups (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 174). It is into these two modes of partying, which we term the crawl and the climb, that we now turn.

Crawling through Dominated Space

The “Allston crawl” is typified by small groups of students roaming the streets of Allston in search of an open party. We first describe students' experiences here, then describe how and why they seek access.

To minimize attracting notice from police, Allston party houses corral music and dancing into basements. These are mostly unfinished, with exposed cement walls. The windows are usually darkened with big pieces of insulation or fabric, to hide the party. Here, a makeshift DJ booth plays loud music from an iPhone with an aux cable. The makeshift bar serves “jungle juice” out of a large cooler (a mixture of beer, liquor, and juice/soda designed to make a lot of people drunk quickly and cheaply) or shots of cheap flavored vodka in red plastic solo cups.

Inside the Allston party basements, the ceilings and lights are low, space is tight, and the general atmosphere is, according to partygoers' most frequent terms, “gross,” “sweaty,” “shitty,” and “disgusting.” All students who had crawled described in one lurid detail or another the poor physical characteristics of these party houses, the cheap “Craigslist furniture,” the trash in the kitchens. Bathrooms were a common talking point

during interviews, with long lines, no toilet paper, no soap. One student described the inside of an Allston frat house as “a ridiculous grimy, grimy place. It’s nasty. It’s definitely what hell looks like.” The metaphor of “crawling” thus aptly describes students’ movement into literal subterranean space.

As a metaphor “crawling” captures the figurative movement downward in social space, where people are presumed to be immature, intoxicated, and poorly behaved. In fact, several students indicated an expected inverse relation between their sobriety and their ability to enjoy the experience. Michelle, a 20-year-old white sophomore and sorority member at City University, for instance said:

...Especially [now] leaving Allston parties, like, “Oh, I don’t know if I was the right amount of drunk for that.” In the sense that, ugh, that house is gross or the people there are lame or something.

Destructive behaviors reminiscent of the 1978 film *Animal House* are common inside these houses, like smoking indoors, extinguishing cigarettes on the windowsills, bothering household pets, stealing items (like sandwich meat or cups), and throwing empty bottles from porches and into streets and neighbors’ backyards. Erick, a 21-year-old senior at City University who is part of a fraternity, described his experience hosting parties:

I’ve seen people try to destroy our bar, like with heels they kick holes into it and things like that. And they think it’s funny. On Marathon Monday, I think we broke two tables from people just standing on it and trying to body slam it down. And they weren’t even brothers, they just did it, and we’re like, “Great, we have to go get two more tables.” I mean they just throw cans everywhere, spill beer.

The poor conditions of the Allston houses translated into strategically poor attire, as here partygoers prefer to wear “frat shoes.” Alicia, a white 20-year-old junior associated with Greek life at City University explained:

I have a pair of really beat up sneakers that are really dirty and gross that I wear, cause the frat basements are disgusting and sticky. We call it frat sludge. In the winter, it’s snow and alcohol and sweat and all kinds of different body liquids, and a sludge on the floor. So, you don’t wear nice clothes.

Visitors also wear “frackets,” e.g., low-cost and disposable jackets, since the Allston frat houses do not typically have coat rooms.

Curiously, and despite the disgust, we found that most people who had been to an Allston party went more than once. When trying to figure out why students return to a scene that putatively offends them, we found their limited access was a powerful draw: doorkeepers elevated even the nastiest basement party into a desirable social space.

Getting into the Gross Basement

Crawling was often accompanied by a sense of “FOMO” or “fear of missing out,” in part because access was controlled by gatekeeping doormen who limit their access. All parties are screened by ad hoc “doormen,” one or two frat brothers who are usually younger pledges, who will “look down on you and decide your fate,” as one student told us, a process rife with potential humiliation. In general, better-looking and better-connected women expect easy entry or can even walk right past the with doorman, a move that signifies one’s higher status. As the sociologist David Grazian has termed it, these students have the right *nocturnal capital* to access exclusive party environments (2007b).

“Girls get in” was a common refrain in our interviews. Women were seen as being advantaged, because doormen believe in the greater desirability and lower perceived risks of women (Mears 2020; Rivera 2010). Doormen specifically attend to the “ratio,” about five women for every one man, to achieve an excess of women in their house. However, having too many women makes the ratio unappealing to them, and women reported feeling disinterested or uncomfortable with too few men present. This ratio is delicate business: women reported in our interviews a sensitivity to space feeling “predatory” and “creepy,” at which point, women leave.

At the door, men face frequent rejection. They sometimes pay an entry fee ranging US\$5–US\$20 to get access. Women never pay an entry fee. A man may sometimes accompany a “solid ratio” like five to seven women to offset his perceived negative value.

While a gendered privilege, women’s access hinges on their “approval” from men who control the space. Women frequently described using displays of embodied femininity to game the brothers’ door policies. Michelle, a 20-year-old white sophomore at City University and sorority member, described her practices of amplifying the visibility of her body to access the space:

... we’ll unzip our coats and be like, “LOL, we have boobs. Let us in” [...] If we see that they’re rejecting people at the door, we’ll be like ... “We’re hot. It’s fine. They’re going to let us in.”

In addition to sexual capital, access can be increased with social capital. Persons with pre-existing ties to advantaged people are more successful at the door, as social network research would predict. Lianne, a white female sophomore at another area school (neither elite nor highly selective), described entering City University parties as such:

Sometimes you can fake it and pretend you know someone and just say a name, and sometimes they’ll be like, “All right, what the fuck.” But yeah, that’s really all I’ve known, is if you know someone, or if you just flirt with them hardcore.

We observed this inflation of social capital during field work, when would-be entrants sometimes try to trick the doorman with lines such as, “Do you remember me?”, or asking about a course they allegedly took together. Social capital inflation also takes the form of lying and offering a “random white boy” name in

popular use, such as “Kyle” or “Matt.” In this way, women can use heterosexual desirability and/or fake ties to nonexistent men to maneuver through intra-campus symbolic boundaries in a social space controlled by men.

Another attempt to inflate social capital occurs when students physically try to blend with successful others who have been granted access. When a bouncer grants entry to one group, other people sometimes try to nonchalantly “sneak past” the bouncer, attempting to use the approved group as camouflage.

“Getting in” could be seen as a game of chance, which Goffman noted in his observations of nightlife. Chance is the thrilling uncertainty of what a night might bring them, and its pursuit keeps customers coming back for more (1969). Gaming the door was a part of crawling, said this student during a focus group:

The thing with crawling is that it’s like you don’t really know if you’re gonna get in, who’s there and if it’s any good, so like ... yeah we crawl a lot but I feel like that we always ended up at the same places anyways.

-- Julianna, CU, F, mixed race, junior, no Greek affiliation

The result of crawling leads to socially mixed parties in Allston, and an abundance of socially-disconnected people, called “randoms.” We met students from Emerson, UMass Boston, Boston University, Boston College, Lesley, Simmons, and Bentley, all crawling the GAP.

In contrast to “randoms,” women connected to prestigious sororities were assumed to not go to Allston’s basement parties. For instance, at City, students described the most elite of sorority sisters as the “*Sigma* girl,” recognizable for her class privilege and beauty in the exclusive *Sigma* sorority. In one focus group, Ally, a white 20-year-old sophomore at City University, discussed this with Anna, a 21-year-old junior also attending City University:

Anna: I was gonna say that, like the culture of certain sororities here, there’s definitely a hierarchy...Number one is *Sigma*.

...

Ally: They’re just like tall and they all are beautiful, like *model beautiful*. No, really. They’re very *Sigma* and they know they’re *Sigma*.

It was considered unusual, in fact, to see a *Sigma* woman at an Allston house party, because such women are understood to have better places to be:

I feel like they have bigger plans [...] I haven’t seen a lot of like top tier sisters hanging out at a frat house basement. They have clubs to go to or they have their own private things to go to. Or they have Harvard. [...] I definitely feel like the high status people in Greek life don’t often mix with [City University]. They are always at Harvard. Or they are always at MIT.

-- Laxmi, CU, 19, F, Asian, Sophomore, sorority member

Thus, by their absence, high-status women marked Allston as further lower status.

Allston also yields a high volume of first-year students, especially women, consistent with sociological observations that partying in college has a particular role for first-year women (Sweeney 2011). Some called Allston “freshman central,”

and it was striking that every student we interviewed reported having “crawled” in Allston at least once their first year (and often several times). Nina, a white 19 year-old sophomore, explained the term through laughter, “it’s called crawling ‘cause we’re babies.” Alicia, a white 20-year-old junior at City University, elaborated:

Usually, when you Allston crawl [...] you’re a freshman. It’s just a bunch of random girls from everywhere, even from different schools, that are all in one frat house.

Leah, a 19-year-old City University Asian identified sophomore affiliated with Greek life, believed that frats welcome first years because:

They know freshmen are doe-eyed, innocent, and willing, just trying to live up to some college dream.

Upon arrival into the Allston party house, however, the college dream turns into what was widely described as a sensory nightmare. Yet, we found that most people who had been to an Allston also described the experience as fun.

The Fun of Crawling

Why do students crawl, when crawling can feel so abysmal? Alongside disgust, and the chance of getting in, we also found thrilling experiences in the form of collective effervescence and the accomplishment of capital conversions, which are powerful motivations to go out.

First, students talked about fun elements of a good night: dancing with friends, to good music, with a good crowd, paralleling Grazian’s study of homosocial bonding in college partying (2007a). Many mentioned their interest in “going to have fun with my friends,” usually including dancing and drinking. When asked what makes a good party, Ellie, a 19-year old woman and white CU sophomore affiliated with Greek life, explained,

Just dancing, laughing around with each other. No one’s in a bad mood. No one’s getting sick, it’s just like everyone’s at a nice level of having fun.

In fact, every person answered this question similarly with reference to dancing and music, paralleling Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence— that is, the extraordinary feeling of losing oneself in the group with a shared experience, in this case, of music and mutual appreciation of the scene (Durkheim 2001 [1912]). To make this happen, they needed music that everyone liked and was not “weird,” as many put it, and they needed a large gathering of people but not too large as to be too uncomfortable (hot, sweaty, and unable to dance). Conditions needed to be just right to produce collective effervescence, which typically didn’t last long during the night, because people come and go, they drink more, and the music changes. Moments of shared joy are quickly spoiled by a room that becomes too hot, “weird,” too “messy,” too drunk, or with too much “drama,” such as relationship drama.

Importantly, one never knows if one will catch the fun in the night; there is an element of what Goffman termed “chance” in the pursuit of fun (1969), further enhanced by the uncertainty of access and the thrills of gaming doormen.

Furthermore, the game of “getting in” gave students, particularly women, the chance to trade on their bodily capital for access. A successful flirtation with a doorman, a clever maneuver of the closed list, and the flashing of cleavage beneath the fracket: all were moments of agency that could lead to getting in. While many women were critical of the male-controlled door, they also clearly enjoyed making it past, akin to prior studies’ findings of women’s agency under masculine domination (e.g., Bourdieu 2001).

Because gaming the door is a game of chance, and the opportunity to exchange bodily, sexual, and social capital, getting in becomes a success in its own right, even if access just leads to a gross basement. Some City University students in our sample even expressed a fondness for crawling, as Courtney, a 20-year-old white sophomore woman with no Greek affiliation at City University described the Allston scene: “It’s grimy, but we like it.” One CU Junior, Chris (20, white) described Allston parties as having “their little grunge aesthetic, which is very appreciable, but dirty.” The familiarity and the disgust are both in sharp contrast to students’ experience when they participate in the higher-status social scenes at neighboring campuses.

Climbing up to the Dominant Space

In stark contrast to the crawl through “frat sludge” and randoms in basements, parties at Harvard and MIT are described in terms of their luxury and exclusivity. For City University students who enter this elite party scene, their movement is better described as a “climb,” metaphorically as social mobility and literally in the movement upward via the houses’ mahogany staircases and high ceilings.

Among the City University students we interviewed, several had attended an occasional Harvard dorm party, and most of them (42) had partied at a frat house party at MIT, a scene that students described as more accessible. Accessing final club events, however, was a rare badge of honor among interviewees and party goers. Among the 54 non-Harvard and MIT students in our sample, 8 attended a Harvard final club party. Most got in by their sororities’ invitations.

Students from schools like City University recounted their experience upon arrival to the parties at Harvard and MIT as one of initial shock and awe, and details of their grandeur circulate among undergraduates. Inside the buildings of finals clubs and MIT fraternity houses are multiple levels of party-space connected by grand staircases, high ceilings, hardwood floors, elaborate chandeliers, bartenders serving top-shelf alcohol with real glassware, leather couches, real DJ booths, and exciting props akin to those one might find in a nightclub, like stripper cages, ice sculptures, pool tables, and designated coat rooms.

About two miles east of the GAP in Allston is MIT’s Frat Row on Beacon Street, another dominant space in the Boston college party scene. Frat Row features about ten fraternity houses in historic brownstones integrated with

residential apartments, with sweeping views of the Charles River. Some have wrought iron gates before the doors. Houses at MIT and Harvard are also marked on building placards or sidewalks using Greek letters or other symbols associated with the house, whereas City University party houses are not. Unlike City University frat houses, MIT and Harvard windows are open and unblocked.

City University students who accessed these spaces spared no detail to convey their delights in interviews. Gabriella, a 19-year-old mixed-race sorority member from City University, explained:

The house is cool. It had, like, a grand piano, and it had a billiards table and a chandelier. Matt Damon used to be a part of it, so they have [his] photo on the wall. It was super clean. The bathroom was immaculate. I was like, “Oh my gosh, this is so nice.” So, I was really excited to go there. Mostly because I just wanted to see what the hype was about because most people spoke really positively about it. So, everyone got dressed up really nice. It was cool.

That final clubs’ houses are well-maintained houses should come as no surprise. These organizations tend to own and occupy the same houses for decades in the rich real estate market of Cambridge, and their impressive interiors are as well-known as the legacies of past members, thoroughly tended by staff. Likewise, Chris, a white 20-year-old junior at City University with no Greek affiliation, explained:

You see the top-notch alcohol, you see the fountain of little champagne and everything. You see just little markers around, like the embossed wooden oak fireplace and the genuine claw footed leather chairs. We’re like wow, these people are on a different tax bracket than I am.

While students described a low bar of behavior in the Allston scene, at Harvard and MIT, they described higher standards of behavior:

At [Allston] a lot of it is dancing, doing games with alcohol, and kind of just being goofy and silly. But at Cambridge, it was very much talking to people. And like one-on-one interaction. At least in my opinion, when I was there, they were not that drunk. So, they were very aware of their surroundings and they were very competent. Whereas [in Allston], no one is sober. Everybody’s kind of gone and doing stupid things.

--Gabriella, CU, 19, F, mixed race, sophomore, sorority member

The guys at the frats that live there are a lot nicer... One time [at MIT] they gave us a book to leave with. They were like, “Here’s a book.” ... It’s a beautiful space, big bookshelves. It was definitely still dirty, but not as grimy as the Allston frats.

--Courtney, CU, 20, F, white, Sophomore, no affiliation

Scholars have found that physical environments structure the meanings of places (Milligan 1998), so it stands to reason that dilapidated party houses in Allston lead to sub-par experiences, while fancy houses at Harvard inspire greater reverence.

Chris, a white 20-year-old CU junior, explained how wealth shapes the basement location of Allston parties:

[Allston] parties ... they can be dirty. Sometimes they can be a little bit gross in that regard, because there's a lot of people compacted together, and it gets hot and sweaty, and it's in a basement, so there's not that much ventilation, so that's kind of the environment. I'm not trying to insinuate that this is just based upon wealth and everything, but I just believe that this is how the placement of the frat ... Like, it is a product of its wealth, but it's not directly correlated to wealth. It's a weird sentence, but like, I feel like it's [wealth] like a factor, but it's not that big of a factor, that separates the experiences between them.

As Chris explains, the physical differences are tied to wealth, but factors like legacies of power and status continue to be evident today, *beyond* the physical space itself. While the built environment surely informs students' experiences, we think physical space does not sufficiently explain how City University newcomers arrive in Boston with such powerful pre-existing expectations of final clubs and MIT frats, even before ever stepping foot in them. Additionally, City University students strategize to get into the Harvard and MIT parties well before seeing their physical grandeur, suggesting a persistent allure. These two spaces, Allston and Harvard/MIT, anchor important social positions in the symbolic economy of Boston student life.

Getting into the Grandeur

Access to parties at Harvard and MIT is carefully screened and well-organized. "Randoms" are not allowed in. People line up outside of Harvard final clubs in front of velvet ropes to be vetted by paid, professional bouncers with a guestlist. At MIT frats, brothers on door duty check the list, ID cards, and issue wristbands. Guests "sign-in" prior to entrance as a required form of risk management, and identification cards are loosely checked to ensure a 21+ crowd.

Like the Allston crawl, access to elite parties is gendered; women get preference at the door. However, unlike in Allston, women's bodily capital alone could not overcome a lack of social capital in elite spaces; people without an invitation or social ties are excluded, unless the party is "open" (much less common at MIT than in the GAP, and virtually a non-occurrence at Harvard). As one student told us, "There are no randoms at Harvard."

Insider status is cultivated through networks, often through Greek life association. Greek life "filters" and socializes sisters in top sororities to be fast-tracked into social events and mixers with men of Harvard and MIT, akin to how "little sisters" in Greek societies at Southern universities fast-track women to frat social life (Strombler 1994), a system of "traffic in women" in which women lend value to male-controlled circuits (Rubin 1997 [1975]). Top City sororities tout their access to Harvard parties:

I know a lot of top sororities here mix with elite Harvard kind of clubs. That's their goal, when they climb up the ranks in certain sororities in status. It's easier to get a party organized with a top Harvard kind.
--Ally, CU, 20, F, sophomore, sorority member

This vetting and socializing process leads to a perception that only the “best” of sororities at City University get to mix with elite schools, a gendered heterosexual status hierarchy (Waller 1937).

For CU students, the stakes of going to a Harvard or MIT party were simply higher. Partygoers tried to dress better, get there on time, follow specific codes of decorum which were often spelled out by their sorority leadership, and discussed the prospects of who they would meet. One undergraduate field observer described her excitement when her sorority received a Harvard invitation: “Everyone was clearly very excited because of how prestigious final clubs are [...] our sorority doesn't get invited to their social events often.” Another CU woman explained that her sorority was invited to mix with a final club “because a lot of the older girls [in the chapter] have done a lot of networking to make this possible.” Thus, older sisters advised all attendees to “keep it classy.” City University women described more effort in their dress and appearance, said one about an upcoming neon-themed mixer, “The only time I'd ever wear neon is for Harvard.”

While the “Cambridge climb” is not a particularly accessible experience, most City University students we interviewed expressed a clear understanding that Harvard and MIT parties were the most desirable to attend, and the Allston crawl was the least desirable, but a sort of “rite of passage,” an intriguing and necessary evil in their college experience.

The Symbolic Violence of Climbing

When students from City University manage to get into the dominant party space, their thrill of entry is accompanied by an uncomfortable sense of not belonging—of status inferiority. Throughout interviews, field observations, and focus groups, it became clear that City University students recognize their relative lower standing when visiting elite parties. Some described a painful process of identifying with a subordinated position in the field, and they acutely felt as though they “didn't belong” in the higher-status spaces. For instance:

I went to this final club party. Do you know what the final clubs are? Yeah. I felt like I was in a movie. Everyone was dressed to the nines. Honestly, the most attractive people I've ever seen in my entire life. This man was wearing a blazer and had a chain and, oh my god, he just looked so good. Everyone looks like a movie. It was crazy and I went with two of my high school friends actually and we were all like, “How did we get into this? Why are we here?” [laughs]
--Addison, CU, 21, F, white, junior, sorority member

An undergraduate field observer elaborated on this when she managed to get inside a roped-off upper floor of a MIT frat party:

There were high ceilings, chandeliers, fancy chairs and couches, and a fancy bar with high-end alcohol. It reeked of privilege, and it definitely felt like we weren't supposed to be there.

--Eva, CU, 19, F, Asian, junior, sorority member

Adding to CU women's sense of outsider status was their shared sense they were the subject of gossip, a means of enacting power over dominated groups (Elias and Scotson 1965). CU women reported gossip about their presumed style of dress, behavior, and sexual availability. The women we interviewed described their own reputations in the scene as "fun," "wild," "party girls," "messy," "basic," and "bougie," short for bourgeois, a reference to conspicuous consumption and flashy lifestyles. Eva continued:

City University girls, they're definitely seen as very, very basic... The things that they're concerned with are more materialistic. They care more about superficial things and they watch the Kardashians and they blow all their money on expensive make-up and stuff like that. Yeah, that's pretty much it.

Gabriella elaborated how these presumed symbolic meanings are relationally constructed via Harvard and MIT students:

Well, in Harvard, maybe, I think they kind of assume for us ... This will sound kind of bad, but I think there's kind of this idea that maybe we're not as intelligent or as interesting as they are, just because they made such a point to always show off. So I think there is this kind of idea that we are not up to their status. But with City University frats it's all kind of the same, because they are our peers.

When one City University woman, a 19-year-old sophomore, was invited to a party in a Harvard dorm, she was advised to "dress hot but not Allston trashy, because this is Harvard." Mark, a 21-year-old white male senior who hosted parties at a highly ranked fraternity, reluctantly described the tendency of City University women to dress in flashy and revealing clothing:

There is kind of this stereotypical culture of, I guess, girls are maybe supposed to dress more revealingly if they're trying to, I guess, draw the attention of guys. So I do notice and more so among I think City University students and students from other schools...there are some girls who definitely dress more revealing than others.

In their community study, Elias and Scotson (1965) described a similar form of "blame gossip," like name-calling and stories, that were shared through the gossip channels of social dominants. Gossip serves to harden social hierarchies throughout generations, and indeed, we were surprised to find old forms of campus gossip alive and well, specifically around women's sexuality. Consider the remarks of Claire, a 20-year-old African American junior at an elite institution:

This isn't my point of view, okay, maybe [CU women] may have a reputation as being slutty or attractive. So, there's this term on Harvard campus, it's called to bed, to wed, to talk to... So, you bed City University girls. You wed Wellesley girls. And you talk to Harvard girls because presumably, they're less attractive and not great sexual partners... girls from CU and Wellesley tend to go to Harvard to party, to mingle with the boys in their suits and ties, and their mansions.

Claire's phrase actually recurs across generations. Writing in 1980, *The Harvard Crimson* described the same gossip among Harvard men as such: "everyone has heard of the well-known adage 'Lesley to bed, Wellesley to wed, and Radcliffe to talk to'" (Adams 1980).

Sometimes students turned this discomfort into humor, navigating these stereotypes using sartorial strategies. As Laxmi described, "I know that there's a running joke at Harvard, that's like, try to stay away from CU Trash... I've told people, 'Oh, don't mind me, I'm just CU Trash' when I'm walking around Harvard."

Ariana, an Asian identified, 19-year-old CU sophomore, described how, en route to a Harvard party, her friends joked about their presumed inferiority. Her friends described, "I already feel smarter just being here," and another joked: "Wow, look at all the people smarter than us." These jokes express ironic humor, because—according to interviewees—CU students do not actually believe themselves to be inferior; they are mocking the stereotype that they are. In Bourdieusian terms, CU students sense their own subordination as dominated dominants, and they maintain an active—though critical or ironic—engagement with such symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1984).

Given the transactional pattern of traditional heterosexual romantic relationships—in which women are believed to trade sexual and beauty capital for access to men's resources and social power (Armstrong et al. 2014; Waller 1937)—women were especially aware of assumptions that, as social inferiors, they were "trading up" sex for social prestige. CU women reported being perceived as "husband hunting," and "looking for a Harvard daddy" when they socialize at higher-status campus parties.

While some women may certainly be looking to "level up" with romantic partners, some women resented being labeled as such. In focus groups, City University students traded stories about how Harvard and MIT men react upon learning their university affiliation:

From having a friend who goes to Harvard and knows a lot of the [final club] boys, I knew that the club really only had private parties with female Harvard final clubs. I wondered why they asked to mix with us. Though I hate to admit it, I suspected that it was because they assumed we would be easy hookups and doubted they actually wanted to get to know us.

--Eva, CU, 19, F, Asian, Junior, sorority member

In interviews and fieldnotes, City University women frequently shared negative perceptions of Harvard men, who they described as “more obnoxious” and “entitled.” Serena, a 21-year-old white senior at CU, described in a focus group how Harvard men would introduce themselves to her at Allston bars by simply stating, “I go to Harvard.” Eva, a 20-year-old Asian junior at City University, describes, “I know for guys, when they see a girl from CU on a dating app, they’ll assume she’s just there for a hookup... [those guys are] looking for something casual, they think they’re gods who can sleep with whoever they want. They’re all dicks.”

Despite these insults, women consistently wanted to return to Harvard parties for the felt sense of legitimation that their inclusion warranted. The pursuit of inclusion is readily apparent in how Janis, a CU Sophomore, talks about feeling a part of an elite “network” when she went to a final club:

... My sorority partied with one of their final clubs... I really like it because I like feeling like I’m in the social network. And I also like how the Harvard houses have a lot of history to them and the structures themselves are really beautiful... [at MIT] one frat has all the football players and they have a really big house with a lot of different rooms and a lot of history.

--Janis, CU, 20, F, white, Sophomore, sorority member

Janis clearly understands the physical and social superiority of Harvard in relation to her own campus, and despite having to party with men who are “obnoxious” and “entitled,” she feels legitimated to be included in these spaces.

City University students consistently preferred parties at Harvard and MIT—especially Harvard final clubs—over others. For example, after a night of unsuccessfully trying to access a Harvard party, another City University student commented, “a night of crawling at Harvard was worth avoiding another night of Allston crawling.” Even without actually attending a party, mere proximity to the dominant space was preferable to just “another night” in the dominated space.

Conclusion

By attending to the micro and interactional bases of status differentiation, this ethnography shows how *symbolic boundaries* become *social hierarchies* (Lamont and Molnár 2002), even among similarly privileged students. We thus illustrate the symbolic dimensions of horizontal stratification in higher education (Stuber 2009). Students come to equate luxury houses, upscale liquor, and exclusive guest lists with superior status, and importantly, they link these status positions to their and others’ university affiliations, such that “crawling” and “climbing” are both metaphors and concrete practices of movement through hierarchized space. These boundaries are literal, as located in physical place, but they are also symbolic, defining bodies and behaviors as superior or inferior. From the lowliest of frat houses in Allston, to the

most desirable of final clubs, the party scene is experienced in fundamentally different tactile and affective worlds among similarly privileged students.

As a result, students clearly perceive their relative status locations at a *sensory level*, showing the internalization of symbolic cues that organize and maintain social hierarchies. Whereas Allston compels disgust, elite institutions invite shame, and through partying, students come to understand their own subordinate position. In Bourdieusian terms, CU students sensed their own subordination as dominated dominants (Bourdieu 1984). While much has been written about the hidden curriculum on college campuses (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Khan and Hirsch 2020), we find that college partying also teaches young people the hidden rules of exclusion, that is, who belongs in which party, who can “get in” and whose social position is of highest value.

This plays out in gendered ways, with women’s access depending on the perceived value of both their social ties and their bodily capital (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Status is communicated through women’s bodies, literally as they dress with care for final clubs or in frackets. Women’s bodies in particular signal the relative desirability of parties and their attendants, akin to other heteronormative settings (Grazian 2007b; Mears 2020). While women may have more mobility across party scenes, men make the rules by which women can participate. Still, we found that “getting in” to these constrained spaces was a reward in itself that compels continued participation, and hence reproduction of, these hierarchized spaces.

Future research should consider alternative party scenes. By selecting the dominant case, our ethnography reveals typical, even expected, logics of masculine domination and elitism (Bourdieu 2001). What symbolic boundaries perpetuate exclusions and hierarchies in fields that are *not* so closely aligned with wealth, gender, and power? For example, which hierarchies mark LGBTQIA+ scenes, and which logics guide who parties with whom in alternative, expressly anti-racist or anti-sexist spaces?

The limits of this ethnography also raise important directions for further investigation. How do such experiences manifest in broader institutional inequalities, for instance, in the formation of lasting friendships, romantic relationships, and labor market opportunities? Our ethnography provides a snapshot in the social lives of college students and suggests some are hoarding social opportunities while closing out others through symbolic boundaries, e.g., *social closure* (Weber 1978 [1922]). Longitudinal and survey data should track the effects of these party experiences to show, for instance, if and how the patterns of mixing identified here between City University sororities and final clubs lead to hypergamous marriages? Future research should track the “careers” of college students partying over time, not in a single college setting, where Armstrong and Hamilton have already documented the disastrous effects of the party scene on working-class women (2013), but rather, using a field approach such as ours to examine how inter-class alliances may be forged or suppressed through initial confrontations across status-unequal campus cultures. For instance, does the stereotype of City University women hunting “Harvard daddies”—a hypergamous logic of sexual sorting—help or hinder women as they enter future marriage and dating markets?

We conclude by noting the continued significance of symbolic boundaries and social hierarchies and their gendered dimensions, in which perceived inequities in status and institutional affiliation play powerful roles in social differentiation. Ours is perhaps a familiar story of wealth and status inequality, and yet, our findings are surprising to the extent that they show how little things have changed, despite new mantras of diversity in higher education and the full inclusion of women in powerful institutions.

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