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Navigating the Personal Statement in an
Upper-Middle-Class Community

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Undergraduate Thesis

Swarthmore College Department of Sociology and Anthropology

April 23, 2023

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Abstract

This thesis examines college application choices, conceptions of pressure and ambition, and parenting styles as they affect personal statement success in an upper-middle-class suburb of Massachusetts. I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Adrie Kusserow's theory of soft individualism to analyze five semi-structured interviews with Eastborough, MA parents, students, and a private college counselor. I show that Eastborough parents and students stigmatize peers with overt college ambitions despite enacting ambition themselves. They represent their soft individualism approach as a potential sacrifice for college chances, but it ultimately provides students with two things that college admissions officers value greatly in personal statements: unique achievements and self-knowledge. This thesis sheds light on how cultural capital, as manifested in classed parenting styles, helps to gatekeep elite education and ultimately reproduce class.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Inspiration, Research Question, and Key Terms	5
Methodology	7
My Argument	9
Literature Review	11
Cultural Capital Transmission	11
Middle-Class Parenting and Views of Childhood	14
Student Approaches to the Personal Statement Across Class	18
Chapter 1: To Hire a College Counselor, or Not to Hire a College Counselor?	20
The Specter of the College Counselor in Eastborough Social Life	23
Deciding Whether to Hire a College Counselor: Interviewee Testimonies	26
Conclusion	30
Chapter 2: Pressure, Ambitions, and Internalized Expectations in Eastborough	32
Who Believes Eastborough’s High-Pressure Reputation?	33
Who’s Putting Pressure on Who? College Counselor, Parent, and Student Viewpoints	36
Parents Differentiating “Healthy” Striving and “Unhealthy” Pressure	39
Students Differentiating “Healthy” Striving and “Unhealthy” Pressure	42
Conclusion	47
Chapter 3: How Does Soft Individualism Advantage Eastborough Students Writing Personal Statements?	49
How Soft Individualism Advantages Students Writing Personal Statements	49
Are Eastborough Residents Aware That Soft Individualism Helps with Personal Statements?	55
Cultural Capital, Parenting Styles, and Personal Statement Inequity	60
Conclusion	63
Bibliography	67

Introduction

Inspiration, Research Question, and Key Terms

I wrote the bulk of my college personal statement on three hours of sleep on January 1st of my senior year. I had always been a strong student, a plan-ahead type, and the fact that I'd made it to January without a personal statement draft was truly out of character. But I had never been more stumped by an assignment than I was by the personal statement. Over months, I'd written up bullet-point outlines for a dozen different ideas and none of them felt right. I sensed that there were hidden expectations behind the vague questions posted on the Common Application website ("Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?"; "Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?"), but I felt lost trying to identify what those expectations were. What type of story should I tell? How was I meant to format it? What tone should I strike? What were they looking for? The assignment rubric was a secret and I had no idea what to do about it.

Three years later, in the spring of my junior year of college, I began to think about my thesis. We were encouraged to brainstorm topics by thinking about juicy case studies—social situations which struck us as odd even if we couldn't quite identify why—and I thought back to the college personal statement. Thousands of high schoolers are tasked with identifying unspoken genre expectations in order to win access to a lifechanging education: pretty odd. And in my hometown of Eastborough, an upper-middle-class suburb in Massachusetts, students are collectively succeeding at this task with flying colors: definitely odd. Eastborough isn't the only

privileged town exercising some kind of college application advantage; children from the top 20% of income make up 68% of Ivy League students¹, disproportionately hoarding access to elite education. With this context in mind, I decided to frame my personal statement case study within the literature on class reproduction.

In addition to scholarship on class reproduction, scholarship on classed parenting styles is essential to my thesis. In my interviews with them, Eastborough parents consistently framed their college choices and ambitions (including those pertaining to the personal statement) in reference to what they termed “Russian-School-of-Math” parenting. The Russian School of Mathematics is a business which offers extracurricular math classes for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Many parents in Eastborough enroll their children in RSM classes from a young age. The Russian School of Math name invokes an Eastborough stereotype: parents who are ambitious and eager to maximize their child’s academic success, yet unattuned to their child’s individual needs or interests. What my interviewees called Russian-School-of-Math parenting, then, is a concept relatedly characterized by what they saw as an undesirable form of parental ambition—calculated and overly results-oriented at the expense of fostering a child’s individuality. My interviewees contrasted Russian-School-of-Math parenting with their own parenting styles, which map onto an approach that anthropologist Adrie Kusserow calls “soft individualism.” Parents who subscribe to soft individualism see it as their job to support their child’s individuality and unique interests. I engage with the literature on classed parenting styles to understand the ways Eastborough residents frame their own (and others’) college ambitions.

Bearing all of this scholarship in mind, I present my key research questions: how do Eastborough students and parents conceptualize and enact college ambition in reference to soft

¹ “Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes at America’s Colleges and Universities: Find Your College.” The New York Times. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/>.

individualism and Russian-School-of-Math parenting values? And how do these different parenting styles ultimately advantage or disadvantage students writing their personal statements?

Methodology

To answer my research question, I completed five semi-structured interviews with Eastborough residents. Two of these interviews were with parents, two were with students, and one was with an Eastborough-based private college counselor. I recruited parent interviewees by posting on several community Facebook pages as well as on a town listserv. I recruited student interviewees by posting on the Eastborough High School Class of 2023 Facebook page. I recruited tutors by reaching out to local counseling companies, and through recommendations from my parent interviewees. Finally, I read and analyzed my student interviewees' personal statements.

Of my three types of interviewees, counselors proved the hardest to recruit. I conducted my interviews in the fall (a busy season for college counseling) and many counselors never got back to me despite following up via email. Snowball sampling ended up being more effective than digital outreach, as my one counselor interviewee was recommended to me by a parent. For my student interviewees, I successfully recruited one student through digital posting and one student through snowball sampling, as she was referred to me by her father after I interviewed him. For my parent interviewees, digital recruitment was the most successful. I got one interviewee through my posts on Facebook and my other interviewee through my post to the town listserv.

In future projects with this population, I would pursue snowball sampling more intentionally. Not only did it prove effective, purposefully recruiting within families would allow me to gain valuable data about how parenting styles directly affect personal statement success. When I designed my project, I did not realize yet that the family would end up being a central unit of my analysis. Similar future projects could benefit from centering the family unit in recruitment techniques.

Finally, it is important to point out that my data is biased by who volunteered to speak with me. Parent volunteers may have spent more time thinking about hiring college counselors and navigating the college application process than their typical peers. Interestingly, one of my student interviewees seemed willing to speak with me because she had navigated her college applications so successfully, while my other student interviewee seemed interested in speaking with me because she felt frustrated and confused by several aspects of the application and wanted a space to vent her complaints. My college counselor interviewee, in turn, may have been interested in learning about my observations of Eastborough parents' attitudes toward counseling. In sum, each interviewee who spoke with me had their own motivations for doing so, and their words cannot be taken as representative of every perspective in Eastborough.

For clarity, I have included a table organizing demographic information about my five interviewees below.

Name	Interviewee Category	Age	Race	Family Status
Nancy	Parent	~60	White	Married, one son
David	Parent	62	White (Jewish)	Married, one daughter

Hannah	Student	18	White (Jewish)	David's daughter
Madison	Student	17	White	One younger sister
Janet	Counselor	54	White	Married, two daughters

My Argument

I argue that Eastborough students and parents stigmatize peers with overt college ambition yet enact ambition themselves. Parents resolve this dissonance by emphasizing how their actions foster their child's individuality. Parents and students represent their soft individualism approach as a potential sacrifice for college chances, but it ultimately advantages Eastborough students by giving them two things that college admissions officers value greatly in personal statements: unique achievements and self-knowledge.

In my first chapter, I show how Eastborough parents distance themselves from the "Parent Who Hires a College Counselor" stereotype (which is characterized by stigmatized Russian-School-of-Math parenting values, including overt college ambition) even as they hire college counselors themselves. These parents emphasize that hiring a counselor helps to preserve a nurturing parent-child relationship throughout the college application process, and they resist being perceived as intentionally maximizing their child's elite college chances—a priority in line with the Russian-School-of-Math approach. In my second chapter, I argue that soft individualist parents distinguish their extracurricular ambition as healthy by contrasting their choice to let their children choose individually-suited extracurricular challenges with parents who enroll their children in the Russian School of Math, a prestigious but not individually tailored extracurricular

activity. In my final chapter, I demonstrate how, despite representing their soft individualist choices as a potential sacrifice for elite college chances, soft individualist parents ultimately equip their children with personalized achievements and introspection skills to write optimal personal statements.

Literature Review

I engage with three key scholarly conversations in the course of my thesis. The first concerns the transmission of cultural capital. When upper-middle-class, college-educated parents in towns like Eastborough guide their children through writing their personal statements, they are passing on cultural capital. I consider scholarly writing about the nature, mechanisms, and effects of cultural capital transmission in the education system and beyond. The second relevant field of study that I engage with is the sociology and anthropology of middle-class parenting. I survey what scholars have said about middle-class parenting practices and middle-class parents' conceptualizations of childhood, and I use these ideas to help contextualize my parent interviewees' attitudes toward the college application process. Finally, I consider scholarship about how personal statement strategies differ across middle-class and working-class students. These works help me see how socioeconomic class is broadly (and invisibly) shaping my interviewees' approaches to writing their essays. Together, these three scholarly conversations frame my interview analysis by illuminating how soft individualism gives Eastborough students personal statement advantages—and ultimately helps to reproduce class.

Cultural Capital Transmission

In the 1970s, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed his revolutionary concept of cultural capital as a means to explain unequal academic achievement between children from different social classes. He defined capital as accumulated labor, and wrote that capital prevents a “universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia,

without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties.”² Bourdieu identified three basic forms of capital: economic capital (which is directly convertible into money), social capital (social connections which can sometimes be converted into money), and cultural capital (credentials and embodied states which can sometimes be converted into economic capital). He further broke down his concept of cultural capital into three subtypes: embodied (dispositions of the body and mind), objectified (material goods indicating social status), and institutionalized (institutional attestations to cultural capital, such as academic credentials). In Eastborough, upper-middle-class parents convert their material capital into embodied and ultimately institutionalized capital for their children when they hire college counselors to guide them through writing their personal statements. Money buys access to learning a writing style that college admissions officers reward with admission, thus naturalizing the educational privilege of these students as innate intelligence. In the first section of my literature review, I synthesize Bourdieu’s relevant arguments about cultural capital with related concepts contributed by other scholars.

In his essay “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu argues that parents transmitting cultural capital to their children will become increasingly important to reproducing social structures as the overt transmission of economic capital through inheritance becomes stigmatized.³ One important mechanism in the educational sphere that is employed by upper-class families to transform their economic capital into less stigmatized cultural capital for their children is shadow education. Buchmann et al. (2010) define shadow education as “educational activities, such as tutoring and extra classes, occurring outside of the formal channels of an educational system that

² Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (1986): 241.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (1986): 254.

are designed to improve a student's chance of successfully moving through the allocation process."⁴ They investigate shadow education test preparation, and find that wealthy families are significantly more likely to enroll their children in private standardized test prep courses—a strategy they find to correspond with higher SAT scores.⁵ High standardized test scores are one form of institutionalized cultural capital, as they objectify cultural capital in an official attestation of achievement, naturalizing inherited cultural capital as intrinsic talent. Admission to an elite college is also a form of institutionalized cultural capital. In both cases, by enrolling their children in test preparation courses and hiring college counselors, parents convert their economic capital into embodied capital which then becomes institutionalized and is thus made stable.

While there is not strong empirical evidence that every type of shadow education consistently leads to improved academic performance, Bray (1999) notes that the widespread employment of shadow education services indicates that regardless of whether it always works, parents certainly *think* it does.⁶ I examine the reasons my parent interviewees cite for hiring college counselors, including the level of confidence they have that doing so will increase their child's odds of acceptance to an elite school. Finally, I'd like to note that the great majority of scholarship about shadow education that I've found looks at East Asian countries, and the shadow education scholarship that does focus on the United States largely considers standardized test preparation. Although I did not collect empirical data on the effects of using college counselors on elite college admission, I hope to shed light on the college counselor industry in the United States, including why parents employ its services and how counselors perceive their work.

⁴ Claudia Buchmann, Dennis J. Condrón, and Vincent J. Roscigno, "Shadow Education: Theory, Analysis and Future Directions: A Rejoinder," *Social Forces* 89, no.2 (2010): 484.

⁵ Claudia Buchmann, Dennis J. Condrón, and Vincent J. Roscigno, "Shadow Education: Theory, Analysis and Future Directions: A Rejoinder," *Social Forces* 89, no.2 (2010): 483-490.

⁶ Mark Bray, *The Shadow Education System: Private Tutoring and Its Implications for Planners* (UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 1999).

In her book *Pedigree*, Lauren Rivera offers a striking ethnographic analysis of one way embodied cultural capital becomes institutionalized: through individuals' successful performance of a gatekeeping social script. She studies the hiring process at elite consulting and law firms, and argues that cultural capital—particularly mental frames of knowledge, perception, interpretation, and behavior—shapes candidates' success in navigating interviews.⁷ Rivera writes that the case interview requires candidates to already be familiar with an expected style of response, that evaluators want responses that follow the appropriate style yet seem natural, and that mastering this appropriate style is time intensive.⁸ Similarly to the behavioral interview, the personal statement genre has hidden expectations and admissions officers reward the ability to perform the correct writing style in a way that feels natural. Rivera's ethnography of elite job interviews illuminates how upper-middle-class ways of thinking and acting can directly advantage young adults as they navigate gatekeeping application processes.

Middle-Class Parenting and Views of Childhood

Many scholars have written about middle-class parenting practices, and the ways that middle-class parents, consciously or unconsciously, optimize their children's chances in life. Middle-class parenting practices are of course not homogenous, and approaches to parenting interact in important ways with factors like race, educational background, and immigrant status. Nonetheless, I believe that cornerstone studies about middle-class parenting strategies prove helpful for understanding my data.

⁷ Lauren Rivera, *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁸ Lauren Rivera, *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 202.

Annette Lareau's book *Unequal Childhoods* has become one of the most influential works about middle-class versus working-class parenting styles. Lareau labels the dominant style of parenting that she observes among her middle-class subjects "concerted cultivation": an approach characterized by fostering children's talents through extracurriculars and teaching them to advocate for themselves in school.⁹ *Unequal Childhoods* focuses on families with elementary-age children but I believe that Lareau's description of the features of concerted cultivation helps illuminate the middle-class approach to college applications. In particular, I argue that a concerted cultivation mindset is evident in parents' and tutors' discourse about the personal statement. Concerted cultivation communicates to children that their opinions and thoughts are worth adults' time. This same messaging is embedded in parents and tutors encouraging students to 'tell their own story' and trust that this will win them admission. Students' belief in the value of what they have to say may also help them express their voice with ease—creating the sense of authenticity that college admissions officers look for.

Middle-class parents' tendency to focus on fostering their child's uniqueness is further theorized by Adrie Kusserow, who observes that upper-middle-class parents favor what she calls soft individualism, gently supporting emotional expression, creativity, and uniqueness.¹⁰ I show that Eastborough parents emphasize fostering their child's creativity and uniqueness when they describe making decisions about extracurriculars. Furthermore, successfully performing creativity and uniqueness is part of what college admissions staff desire and reward with admission. This means that the upper-middle-class parenting style is not only reflected in

⁹ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Adrie Kusserow, "When Hard and Soft Clash: Class-Based Individualisms in Manhattan and Queens," in *Facing Social Class: How Societal Rank Influences Interaction* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2012), 195–215.

parents' discourse, but directly prepares their children for success with the personal statement task.

The concept of concerted cultivation also proves useful in understanding my parent interviewees' decisions for or against hiring a college counselor. Smith and Sun (2017) argue that parents' decision to hire an Independent Education Consultant, such as a college counselor, can be seen as an extension of the concerted cultivation approach.¹¹ They coin the term "collaborative cultivation" to describe a process wherein parents turn to college application 'experts' in order to cope with their children's vulnerability in the admission process.¹² In this theory, the decision to hire a college counselor is as much emotional as it is a function of ambition. I find that my parent interviewees cite emotional and relationship-centered reasons for hiring counselors, and even deny doing so in order to maximize their child's college chances.

In addition to middle-class parenting practices, another scholarly conversation that is crucial to understanding my parent interviewees is about how middle-class parents envisage childhood. I am not only interested in middle-class parenting *behaviors*, I am interested in how middle-class parents think and feel *about* those behaviors, and the emotional motives behind their parenting choices. Several scholars have put forward analyses of the emotional reasoning behind the concerted cultivation approach to parenting. Vincent and Ball (2007) draw on qualitative data to argue that parents who enroll their young children in enrichment activities do so as a response to anxiety about their children achieving the same class status.¹³ They observe that middle-class parents feel a sense of urgency and responsibility for their children's

¹¹ Ken Chih-Yan Sun and Jill M. Smith, "Parenting, Uncertainty, and Expert Advice: How Privileged American Families Work with Private Counselors in Their Children's College Race," *Symbolic Interaction* 40, no. 1 (2017): 3–24.

¹² Ken Chih-Yan Sun and Jill M. Smith, "Parenting, Uncertainty, and Expert Advice: How Privileged American Families Work with Private Counselors in Their Children's College Race," *Symbolic Interaction* 40, no. 1 (2017): 3–24.

¹³ Carol Vincent and Stephen J. Ball, "Making Up' the Middle-Class Child: Families, Activities and Class Dispositions," *Sociology (Oxford)* 41, no. 6 (2007): 1061–77.

development.¹⁴ Smith and Sun (2017) similarly argue that parents hire college counselors (another example of concerted cultivation) as a response to anxiety they feel about uncertain class reproduction.¹⁵ However, these authors go on to argue that middle-class parents hire college counselors not just for the admissions advantage it confers, but because doing so fulfills a parenting ideal of consulting “experts” to ensure one’s child is on the best path.¹⁶ I analyze what my parent interviewees tell me about their decisions to hire college counselors, and how they relate those decisions to the imagined ‘good parent’ thing to do.

Other scholars, by contrast, have highlighted the ambivalent feelings that parents experience about concerted cultivation, even when their behavior ultimately conforms to this parenting approach. Perrier (2013) analyzes how middle-class mothers’ view themselves in opposition to two different types of imagined ‘bad mothers’: uninvolved working-class mothers and over-involved middle-class mothers, striving not to be perceived as either. Perrier urges us to remember that mothers are not simply agents of cultural capital transmission, they are people with complex subjectivities.¹⁷ Bearing in mind Perrier’s work, I analyze how my parent interviewees compare themselves to an imagined pushy, over-involved middle-class parent. I also consider whether the gender of my interviewees affects the moral judgements they assign to their parenting choices.

I would like to close out my section about upper-middle-class parenting by noting that I have found remarkably little scholarship about how children feel about being the subjects of

¹⁴ Carol Vincent and Stephen J. Ball, “Making Up’ the Middle-Class Child: Families, Activities and Class Dispositions,” *Sociology (Oxford)* 41, no. 6 (2007): 1061–77.

¹⁵ Ken Chih-Yan Sun and Jill M. Smith, “Parenting, Uncertainty, and Expert Advice: How Privileged American Families Work with Private Counselors in Their Children’s College Race,” *Symbolic Interaction* 40, no. 1 (2017): 3–24.

¹⁶ Ken Chih-Yan Sun and Jill M. Smith, “Parenting, Uncertainty, and Expert Advice: How Privileged American Families Work with Private Counselors in Their Children’s College Race,” *Symbolic Interaction* 40, no. 1 (2017): 3–24.

¹⁷ Maud Perrier, “Middle-Class Mothers’ Moralities and ‘Concerted Cultivation’: Class Others, Ambivalence and Excess,” *Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2013): 655–70.

concerted cultivation. There is some scholarship about how children build peer communities in resistance to their parents' efforts to schedule out their time,¹⁸ but overall there is little work about the effects of concerted cultivation on children's subjective mental health, feelings toward school, or ambitions. By interviewing students as well as parents, I hope to theorize middle-class youth as more than the subjects of cultural capital transmission, highlighting their perspectives and agency.

Student Approaches to the Personal Statement Across Class

Several scholars have drawn attention to differences in the ways working-class and middle-class students approach the personal statement. Warren (2013) draws on experimental data to show that one major disadvantage low-income applicants face when writing their personal statements is difficulty inferring the implicit expectations of admissions officers.¹⁹ He finds that providing these students with some explicit instruction about the persuasive narrative writing genre as well as prompting them to consider admissions' officers values significantly improved how their essays were rated by admissions officers.²⁰ Todorova (2018) similarly finds that first-generation students often misinterpret what admissions officers want, spending more time describing challenges they have faced (something the personal statement prompt explicitly asked them to do) while students with more exposure to college culture spend more time

¹⁸ Kathryn Gold Hadley, "How Do Parenting Practices Affect Children's Peer Culture? Examining the Intersection of Class and Race," *Race, Gender & Class* 16, no. 1 (2009): 6–24.

¹⁹ James Warren, "The Rhetoric of College Application Essays: Removing Obstacles for Low Income and Minority Students," *American Secondary Education* 42, no. 1 (2013): 43–56.

²⁰ James Warren, "The Rhetoric of College Application Essays: Removing Obstacles for Low Income and Minority Students," *American Secondary Education* 42, no. 1 (2013): 43–56.

describing their growth and ‘true self’ (something the personal statement prompt implicitly demands).²¹ Bearing this scholarship in mind, I try to evaluate my student participants’ level of familiarity with the personal statement genre and I strive to figure out exactly how they gained this knowledge. Although I am studying privileged rather than disadvantaged students, Todorova and Warren’s work makes it clear that class affects the way students write their personal statements.

I hope to bring a new perspective to scholarship about personal statement performance by focusing on upper-class students’ learning process. Many of the existing sociological papers about personal statements focus on first-generation applicants rather than applicants with access to significant cultural capital. What’s more, those articles that do analyze privileged students’ approaches to the personal statement often use document analysis as their primary method. By using interviews, I illuminate how privileged students articulate their learning, challenges, and strategies with the personal statement. I show that soft individualism informs students’ intuition that unique topics showcasing individualism make the strongest personal statements.

²¹ Ralitsa Todorova, “Institutional Expectations and Students’ Responses to the College Application Essay,” *Social Sciences* 7, no. 10 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100205>.

Chapter 1: To Hire a College Counselor, or Not to Hire a College Counselor?

In a town known for sending its high schoolers to elite colleges, Nancy had nothing good to say about the way Eastborough High School prepared her son to navigate the college application process. She hopped on our 45-minute Zoom call on the move, holding her laptop as she navigated through her house to her office (where, she explained, she could speak to me uninterrupted by the family cat). Her only son had graduated EHS the spring before, and Nancy—fresh off the college application marathon—was eager to share her views on navigating parenthood and education in Eastborough.

When I asked her how well she thought Eastborough High had prepared her son for applying to college, she answered without hesitation: “I don’t think it prepared him at all for the college app process. I don’t think it did anything to help with college, at all, whatsoever. I mean, we had a college counselor so [it was] a little bit different; if we didn’t have the college counselor, I would have been doing it all on my own. They did nothing.”

In many towns around the country, Nancy’s comment might not have been surprising. After all, EHS is a public high school and only 33% of public high schools in America have a counselor exclusively responsible for college advising.²² But Eastborough is well-known for its superb (and superbly well-funded) public schools. Each of my parent interviewees cited the quality of the schools when I asked them why they chose to move to the town, and did so in tones of voice that suggested spelling this logic out for me was redundant. In the class of 2021, 3.8% of EHS graduates (22 students) were set to attend Ivy League schools and dozens more

²² Catherine Gewertz, “College Advising Is in Short Supply in U.S. High Schools, Study Finds,” *Education Week*, November 13, 2018.

were bound for other highly selective colleges.²³ This is a town where the question floating around each spring semester is not whether a student will get into Harvard, but which five it will be. It is understandable, then, that Nancy was surprised to discover how little college counseling the school would provide her son.

Eastborough High School has no staff dedicated exclusively to college counseling, and in fact it employs just 10 counselors to serve a student body nearing 2,300. This means that access to one-on-one college counseling through the school is abbreviated at best and nonexistent at worst. To the school's credit, counselors do run a series of information sessions outlining the broad strokes of the college application process (make a balanced list of schools; write your essay; visit top schools to show interest; interview if you can), but for parents who want success for their children and feel keenly aware of how important applying to college is, such general information is insufficient. Eastborough parents face a choice: guide their children as best they can through applications already greatly transformed from the ones they completed, or hire a private college counselor.

Private college counseling is one type of shadow education, a phenomenon defined broadly as supplemental educational activities outside of the formal school system meant to “improve a student’s chance of successfully moving through the allocation process.”²⁴ Shadow education takes many forms including private tutoring sessions, extracurricular courses on school subjects, and classes that prepare students to navigate specific standardized tests. More and more students around the world have begun to participate in some form of shadow education, despite the fact that its efficacy is not at all clear. The evidence about whether shadow education actually

²³ Christina Li and Maia Hahn-Du Pont, “Senior Destinations,” *The Musket*, June 2021, https://lhsmusket.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/UPDATED_2021_Senior_Destinations.pdf.

²⁴ Claudia Buchmann, Dennis J. Condrón, and Vincent J. Roscigno, “Shadow Education: Theory, Analysis and Future Directions: A Rejoinder,” *Social Forces* 89, no.2 (2010): 484.

improves student test scores—particularly for students already privileged with excellent school educations—is mixed.²⁵ And as far as the decision to hire a college counselor goes, evidence proving a clear, causal relationship between having a college counselor and gaining admission to an elite college would be even harder to create; consider that the exact same application might be accepted one year but rejected the next because admissions officers need a different type of applicant to fill a niche in the incoming class.

Yet even in the absence of clear evidence that hiring a college counselor will result in their child being admitted to a top college, parents in Eastborough continue to pay (quite a lot) for them. Private college counselors generally cost between \$100–\$200 an hour²⁶ and parents typically hire them for 5–10 hour-long sessions. One popular college counseling company in Eastborough offers several 10-hour counseling deals, which range in price from \$1,300 to \$4,200.²⁷ So, in the face of uncertain results and excessive prices, why do Eastborough parents decide to hire college counselors? In this chapter, I will analyze how my parent interviewees described their decisions to hire (or not hire) college counselors, as well as how they depicted their peers who employ counselors. I will argue that despite often hiring college counselors themselves, Eastborough parents distance themselves from the “Parent Who Hires a College Counselor” cultural image. When asked about their own decision to hire a counselor, these parents emphasize how having a college counselor served to preserve a nurturing parent-child relationship rather than how it furthered college admissions success.

²⁵ Yool Choi and Hyunjoon Park, “Shadow Education and Educational Inequality in South Korea: Examining Effect Heterogeneity of Shadow Education on Middle School Seniors’ Achievement Test Scores,” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 44 (2016): 22–32.

²⁶ Lynne DeAmelio-Rafferty, “How Much Does a College Counselor Cost?,” *Edmit*, <https://www.edmit.me/blog/how-much-does-a-college-counselor-cost#:~:text=Pricing%20for%20private%20college%20counselors,can%20cost%20upward%20of%20%246%2C000>.

²⁷ “Expert Personalized Admissions Guidance,” Livius Prep, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://www.liviusprep.com/services/college-admissions>.

The Specter of the College Counselor in Eastborough Social Life

The specter of college counselors—and the types of parents who hire them—manifests in the everyday social lives of Eastborough residents. Perhaps nobody illustrates this better than David, a father of one who insists that he and his wife never considered hiring a counselor for their daughter, Hannah. He explained their decision to me, “we were confident that Hannah was a very good writer and she didn’t need that kind of help,” and says they never regretted letting Hannah navigate the process herself. But even David, who never sought out or considered a college counselor, would find himself in conversations with fellow parents about that very topic. He offhandedly recalled a memory: “many years [ago], like when Hannah was in second grade, we got together with some other couples and we were talking about that, you know, like, ‘do parents really pay consultants to make portfolios of all their kids’ work from pre-school up to high school.’” The parents in this story were a decade away from their children applying to college, but they still brought up the topic of college counselors. David’s story indicates that maximizing college chances and hiring college counselors is deeply enmeshed in the consciousness of the town’s upper-middle-class residents. It is a small-talk topic of conversation in the same way that weather or work might be—something everyone can relate to.

Hiring college counselors also comes up in online community conversations. Nancy described her experience with discussions about college counselors in a local women’s Facebook group: “So I don’t know if you’re familiar with this Eastborough Mavens Facebook group, like when someone asks for a college counselor, you get very few responses...It is very odd, and there are people I know who have had college counselors who haven’t mentioned anything. It’s—it’s a little weird [laughs].” Her comment illuminates a second important dimension of the

way Eastborough residents talk about college counselors. Not only are counselors a subject of conversation in the town, parents seek to distance themselves from the Parent Who Hires a College Counselor stigma. David and his friends exaggerated the persona of this Parent, painting a picture of a calculating person who sees everything their young child produces as future ammunition in the college application war. Likewise, Nancy's friends are reluctant to admit to having hired college counselors. Even the parents who ultimately hire college counselors balk at being perceived as a Parent Who Hires a College Counselor.

During our conversation, Nancy, who did hire a college counselor for her son, deployed an additional line of defense against being perceived as a Parent Who Hires a College Counselor: differentiating between the type of counselor she hired and truly elite counselors. She recalled hearing rumors about these elite counseling companies; "you know, really, some of these really expensive firms where, like, the counselor knows somebody at the school and you have special things, like we heard some of that too." By differentiating "these really expensive firms" from the company she hired for her own son, Nancy finds a way to distance herself from the Parent Who Hires a College Counselor persona even after sharing that she hired a college counselor herself. Parents Who Hire a College Counselor, in her equation, hire Really Expensive Firms. Nancy's efforts to not be lumped in with these hyperbolic parents reveals an additional dimension to the discomfort parents feel about publicly disclosing that they've hired counselors; while David and his friends critiqued a type of parent who is calculating and over-bearing, collecting portfolios of their kindergartener's work for colleges, Nancy and the Eastborough Mavens who didn't share their counselor recommendations seem to fear being perceived as giving their child a golden spoon and not making them work for college admission. Eastborough parents, it seems, are keenly aware of the stereotypes about their town and the

upper-middle-class families who live there and they are eager to distance themselves from them—even when they make choices that reproduce those stereotypes.

As much as parents joke about and shun the Parent Who Hires a College Counselor persona, Nancy also recalled another emotional reaction to hearing about people who had hired college counselors early: guilt that her son might be missing out on opportunities. She talked to me about her and her husband struggling to balance preparing their son for college applications with giving him freedom: “we tried really hard to balance. We—we heard of people who were, like, starting college consulting or college counseling in freshman year or even earlier so that they could figure out which classes to take. Like, that didn’t even occur to me. So I was, you know I felt a little bit like ‘should I feel guilty that I didn’t, like, figure out which classes he needed to take or what extracurriculars he was going to do?’ And he didn’t do tons, so I felt guilty about that because you’d hear other people saying ‘oh yeah, my kid cured cancer and played the violin at the same time.’” Nancy’s comment evokes Maud Perrier’s work interviewing middle-class mothers. Perrier found that his interviewees viewed themselves in opposition to two different types of imagined ‘bad mothers’—uninvolved working-class mothers and over-involved middle-class mothers—and they strived not to be perceived as either.²⁸ Perhaps, then, there is a gendered element to the community discourse around college counselors. Everyone puts social distance between themselves and the Parent Who Hires a College Counselor, but only mothers struggle with guilt over potentially moving too far away from the very-involved parenting philosophy, to the detriment of their child’s chances.

Before ending this section, it is important to examine how the specter of college counselors manifests in students’ social lives. Madison is a senior at Eastborough High School.

²⁸ Maud Perrier, “Middle-Class Mothers’ Moralities and ‘Concerted Cultivation’: Class Others, Ambivalence and Excess,” *Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2013): 655–70.

She arrived to our Zoom interview exactly on time, wearing a gaming headset and sitting in her room at home. It quickly became clear that she has a somewhat cynical view of the college admissions process; she lamented the contrived nature of demonstrating interest in subjects through extracurricular participation, and recounted the irony of struggling with a decision to drop a school club that she knew she didn't enjoy but also knew would have looked good on her resume. Madison brought up not having a college counselor before I asked. When I inquired as to whether she felt that most people had a counselor, she responded immediately. "Yeah, like all my friends do. Um, and I—it's like I thought about it but by the time I was like 'oh maybe I should get a college counselor' it was a little too late." For Madison, considering getting a college counselor was the default option. Having a counselor was the social norm, and she only broke it because of her hesitation to commit to a process which already felt performative to her.

In sum, parents in Eastborough discuss, shun, and differentiate their own choices from those of the hypothetical Parent who Hires a College Counselor. Parents and students alike are also aware of real friends and community members who have hired counselors, and struggle with comparing themselves to them. It is striking that college counselors are so normalized in everyday discourse among Eastborough residents that every one of my interviewees (whether they used a counselor or not) recalled a conscious decision-making process about whether they should hire one. In the next section, I turn to analyzing the different types of logic behind the decisions they ultimately made.

Deciding Whether to Hire a College Counselor: Interviewee Testimonies

An outside observer might assume that parents who hire a college counselor are doing so to maximize their child's ability to get into an elite college. But my interviewees cited reasons that were as much emotional as logistical. Nancy and her husband hired a college counselor for their son, Aiden. She explained their decision to me: "in junior year we said 'oh gosh, you know, there's so much going on, we're so busy, we'll get some help,' and also our son is—he's a typical teenage boy, like he doesn't want to hear it from us but if he hears it from somebody objective, it'll be meaningful. So, that was the other reason, was I don't want to be a pest. I don't have a lot of time, and maybe he'll take somebody else's advice instead of mine [laughs]. So that was really—that was it more than 'I'm trying to get into, like, the world's best school.'" Nancy says she was happy to find a counselor she could relate to; "[it was] somebody who lived in Lexington who was a mom of boys, so we interviewed her and it was clear they had a connection, and I could tell that she would pester him exactly the same way I would but it wouldn't be me [laughs]." Nancy thought of her son's college counselor, in a way, as a surrogate parent. She valued the relief of knowing that her son was being kept on track as much as any increased odds of his college acceptance. She also seemed to value the fact that outsourcing the "pestering" parts of college application project management allowed her to keep her own relationship with her son nurturing and supportive.

My college counselor interviewee, Janet, similarly described the counselor role as serving to preserve the parent-child relationship. Reflecting on the college counseling industry, she remarked: "I see it as a positive thing, and it just, it really helps families. That way the parents don't have to nag the kids and say, you know, 'your essay—things are due in a week! What are you doing?' You know it just preserves the relationship and keeps that a little—so parents can then say 'how are you coming along? You know, how are you feeling?' And just kind of more be

a support as opposed to a nag.” This is a remarkable view of the significance of college counselors. Although counselors perfect applications and maximize elite admissions chances, Janet and Nancy both emphasized that counselors allow parents to outsource “nagging” and maintain a sympathetic, nurturing status. They raised the preservation of the parent-child relationship as a major part of a college counselor’s value. Importantly, the values of a parent who would hire a college counselor to preserve a nurturing parent-child relationship are opposite to the values of a parent who (recalling David’s story) would hire a college counselor to instrumentalize their child’s pre-school work for college admission. Nancy and David distanced themselves from the Parent Who Hires a College Counselor, who they characterized as hyperambitious, callous, and calculating. Nancy then created a narrative wherein her own decision to hire a college counselor was what allowed her to be the opposite kind of parent: nurturing, supportive, sympathetic.

Although Nancy’s parenting style may seem relaxed, even natural, compared to the regimented Russian-School-of-Math Although style, it is critical to recognize that parents like Nancy invest a huge amount of mental labor and emotional calculation in their parenting choices. Nancy performed significant cognitive labor to maintain a nurturing relationship with her son throughout the stressful college application process, calculating (and financially paying for) ways to outsource nagging and remain a sympathetic presence in his life. Her approach to the college application process is not natural, relaxed, or low-maintenance, even if the ultimate outcome of her mental calculations is a parenting style that appears hands-off rather than hands-on. Parents like Nancy emotionally and cognitively labor to preserve an ideology of the family that centers nurturing and love.

In addition to the counselor's ability to act as a surrogate parent, Nancy reflected on the value of having a college counselor to help wrangle the logistical complexities of applying to college. She talked about helping her son apply during the pandemic: "there were a lot of changes along the way...there were so many changes with Covid, that was the—I think that was the single biggest [challenge]. Just project managing him, just to make sure he knew when the deadlines were—she did a lot of that, I will say. I didn't have to do a lot of that." Between school-specific supplementary essays, varying deadlines, and changing test-score policies, applying to college is logistically challenging. Nancy valued both the actual project management that her son's counselor provided, and the relief of not being fully responsible for tracking the logistical requirements herself.

These observations extend and complicate Smith and Sun's argument that advantaged parents hire college counselors in part to cope emotionally with their and their children's vulnerability in the college race.²⁹ It is true that for Nancy, hiring a college counselor was not simply a calculation to get her son into the top school possible, but was a decision that helped ease her anxiety about the application process. However, Nancy valued her college counselor less because of her expert status, and more because the counselor was in fact similar to her. One of my interviewees did value college counselors for their expert status and ability to provide guidance in a process that seems beyond control, but this interviewee was not a parent; it was Madison, the high school senior.

Madison never used a college counselor and feels worried that she should have. She explained her regret to me: "I think part of it, for me, I was like 'oh I don't need one' because, for example, like with SAT tutors I know sometimes people get that. I never got that and I was

²⁹ Ken Chih-Yan Sun and Jill M. Smith, "Parenting, Uncertainty, and Expert Advice: How Privileged American Families Work with Private Counselors in Their Children's College Race," *Symbolic Interaction* 40, no. 1 (2017): 3–24.

fine, and I was like ‘oh yeah’—I’m very like, I like doing things by myself. That’s just, like, my personality, I don’t know. But I’ve realized that there is a value [to college counselors] because you can get, like, help with your essays or they can just generally give you advice on where to apply, stuff like that, and I didn’t have that and that’s caused a lot of stress.” Madison sees college counselors as valuable because they can help make a process that’s filled with hidden expectations and variables more legible. Counselors have an insider’s expertise, which Madison has struggled to navigate college applications without.

But secondary to college counselors’ expertise and guidance, for Madison, is an emotional rationale for hiring one: a counselor provides reassurance that you’re on the right track. Early in our interview, Madison said, “I don’t have a college counselor so it’s like, I’m a little on my own.” Applying to college means figuring out one new challenge after another (how do you create a list of schools? How do you demonstrate interest? How do you write a personal statement?). Part of the value of having a college counselor then, as Madison says, is that you don’t feel alone in navigating these challenges.

Conclusion

College counselors and stereotypes about the parents who hire them are deeply embedded in the social consciousness of Eastborough. Eastborough parents distance themselves from the Parent Who Hires a College Counselor, who they characterize as hyperambitious and calculating. Throughout this chapter, we have seen several of the strategies Eastborough parents employ in order to distance themselves from this persona, including making fun of overambitious parents, keeping quiet about hiring counselors, and emphasizing that their counselors are less elite. Nancy

resisted being seen as a Parent Who Hires a College Counselor even as she discussed her decision to do just that by emphasizing how hiring a counselor allowed her to remain a nurturing, non-nagging parent, and even explicitly denied that hiring a counselor was motivated by maximizing her son's chances of getting into an elite school.

Eastborough parents construct narratives about their own choices in opposition to a stigmatized hyperambitious parent persona. In this chapter we have seen how this pattern plays out in the decision to hire a college counselor. In the next chapter, we will turn to extracurriculars, another aspect of the college application, to analyze how students and parents conceptualize their own college ambitions in relation to the town's reputation and their overtly ambitious peers.

Chapter 2: Pressure, Ambitions, and Internalized Expectations in Eastborough

There is one word that invariably comes up when I ask an Eastborough resident to describe the town's reputation: high-pressure. The Eastborough name is linked to stereotypes of incredibly ambitious parents and students, all feeling huge pressure to achieve excellence in everything they do. Yet when I questioned my five interviewees about their personal impressions of the town, I got five distinctly different evaluations of whether those stereotypes are true. My interviewees disagreed about the extent to which Eastborough fosters unhealthy ambition, and about exactly who is putting pressure on whom. In order to make sense of this disagreement, I will structure this chapter into two halves. In the first half, I will focus on what my interviewees explicitly told me about pressure and ambition in Eastborough. I will demonstrate that parents do not perceive themselves as pressuring their children, but children nonetheless experience "subliminal" pressure stemming from their parents' unconscious expectations of success. In the second half of the chapter, I will focus on what my interviewees suggested and seemed to implicitly believe about pressure and ambition in Eastborough. I will argue that my interviewees differentiated themselves from peers who they see as holding unhealthy college ambitions, despite making ambitious choices themselves. My parent interviewees managed this dissonance by emphasizing that their children chose their own extracurricular challenges freely (in contrast to parents who force classically prestigious extracurriculars upon their children), while my student interviewees managed the dissonance by emphasizing that they only pursued elite college admission because doing so is the town norm (in contrast to students who make getting into elite colleges their identity). To begin, I will share quotes showcasing the extent of explicit disagreement among my interviewees about the realities of pressure in Eastborough.

Who Believes Eastborough's High-Pressure Reputation?

David, Hannah's father, leveled the most extensive criticism of Eastborough's high-pressure reputation. Halfway through our interview, he paused while answering a question. "I'm gonna digress a little bit," he told me, and he recalled an old newspaper article about mental health at Eastborough High School:

I think that there's a lot said about how high-pressure Eastborough is and, you know—have you read the New York Times article on Eastborough High that came out in like 2015? So that painted a picture of Eastborough High that was a high-stress environment, like where kids committed suicide and they were, you know, felt this pressure to get into not just an elite college but like Harvard or Yale or MIT. Which was—I really think that's a lot of bunk. You know, if—there are kids who were smarter than, who had better grades than Hannah, but were not as organized. And those were the kids who would, you know they would watch TV and stuff before they did their homework and that's the reason they would be up till 1 or 2 am, it wasn't because the workload required them to be. And Hannah most nights was in bed at 10 o'clock and that included finishing her homework and getting good grades and time to watch television or listen to music or text with her friends...[The article cites a] student risk assessment survey, that like 12% of Eastborough High students indicated that they had contemplated suicide in the last year, and they called this out as a sign that 'oh it's so high-pressure and so stressful.' But when you looked at the underlying numbers behind that, that was a true number but Eastborough's peer communities...they were right around that number. And the thing that really debunks that conclusion is that the state-wide and the national average were up around 25%, but the author left that information out. So I think when some, when a lot of parents saw that, they, like, freaked out. And I think that what that [the statistics] really says is that Eastborough is doing something right not something wrong. So, you know it's like—there's that, things that happen that sort of paint a false picture of Eastborough and what it's like to be a student here.

David dismissed the notion that Eastborough students feel a unique pressure to get into Ivy League schools. He cited the New York Times' statistics to show that Eastborough is comparable to its peer schools in terms of mental health, and he cited his own daughter's experience to argue that Eastborough High's homework demands are not unreasonable. It's true that pressure is partly

a function of how overwhelming one's responsibilities are, and suicide statistics are a logical proxy measure for extreme pressure levels. But David's analysis does not touch on the fundamentally subjective element of pressure; it's a feeling, and only Eastborough students can speak to whether or not they've experienced it.

Hannah, David's daughter, acknowledged a range in how much pressure individual Eastborough High students experience. I asked her about the school's culture, and she responded thoughtfully:

So I'm actually an interesting person to ask about that cause I'll be honest, there was pressure definitely, but I was a person who was very, or was fairly well organized with my time...so the stress was always fairly manageable for me.

I know other people had a very different experience with it, but just me personally, I never really had like—like of course there's academic rigor and there's the pressure to, like, do well in your classes and perform well and be a good student which I definitely felt. But it wasn't as pronounced as I know that other people's experiences were. I didn't have that sort of very stressful EHS experience.

Although David described Hannah's experience at EHS as quite stress-free (in bed by 10pm each night without a problem), Hannah reported that she still felt some measure of “pressure to do well in [her] classes and perform well” as a student. This suggests that academic pressure is pervasive enough in the school culture to be felt even by individuals who are objectively succeeding in their classes. We cannot, as David does, dismiss the idea that EHS students widely feel academic pressure simply because some students are able to logistically handle their responsibilities without problems. Additionally, although Hannah didn't consider her own experience of pressure at EHS to be unhealthy or unmanageable, she was aware that some of her peers had a harder time. She thus sees the much-discussed high-pressure EHS experience as something that is real, if by no means universal.

Madison, currently a senior at EHS, had a grimmer view of widespread pressure to achieve and its consequences. With regard to the college application process she told me “the stress of it just does not—it kind of brings out the worst in people, I think. Especially with cheating and stuff like that...like [recently] my physics teacher was just kind of like ‘oh I forgot to grade these tests I’m going to give them back and the answer key is online so you can see how you did before I grade them’ and then he left the room. Which, okay, that was the first mistake. And then of course people started cheating on it and everything, and I was, like, disappointed people cheated, but I’m disappointed in him, like how could you be so naive? But it’s just like, people’s immediate reaction was ‘oh well of course I’m gonna cheat if you’re gonna give me this opportunity.’...I think there’s a lot of [cheating]. It’s like people care about the grade more than learning, obviously cause it’s EHS.” In Madison’s account, enough EHS students feel pressure to achieve top grades for their college applications that entire classes cheat when given the opportunity. These cheating students are pursuing on-paper success and college advantage in a way that is obviously unhealthy and indeed destructive to their own personal development. Madison sees the pressure to constantly achieve excellence as systemic to EHS, with widespread cheating as one of the symptoms.

Looking at these three accounts in comparison, it is clear that my interviewees disagreed significantly about just how much pressure students at EHS experience. David sees the school’s high-pressure reputation as “a lot of bunk,” Hannah thinks excessive pressure is felt by some individuals but not others, and Madison sees results-oriented pressure as a systemic and insidious force in EHS culture. The interviewees disagreed just as strongly about the directionality of this pressure.

Who's Putting Pressure on Who? College Counselor, Parent, and Student Viewpoints

Counselor, student, and parent interviewees all described seeing other Eastborough residents inflict an unhealthy version of college application pressure that centered on admission to Ivy League schools. But they had very different opinions about who was putting that pressure on whom. Is it parents pressuring students? Students pressuring themselves? The school pressuring both? Janet, my college counselor interviewee described a dynamic most in line with the Eastborough stereotypes: prestige-oriented parents inflicting unreasonable pressure on their children to get into Ivy League schools. I asked her what her student and parent clients seem most worried about. She replied: “the parents, if we’re talking just Eastborough, the parents by and large are very worried about their kids going to Ivy League schools. And they gauge their college list based on U.S. News and World Report’s ranking that just came out recently. The kids on the other hand are a little more realistic and they understand. They do want to push for top schools, but they also understand the necessity of having a balanced college list. And I think the kids have a better sense also of what fit means to them, like going to a school that is right for them.” In her experience, unhealthy college pressure tends to stem from over-ambitious parents, with their children on the receiving end.

David described an inverse dynamic. He believes there are a few Ivy-League-obsessed parents in Eastborough, but reported that the vast majority were not like this. To prove his point, he recalled the experience of his daughter’s friend; “she had one friend who personally, who imposed on her[self] pressure to get into Harvard. And she [the friend] ultimately, she had—very smart, very good grades but she did not get into Harvard. That was something she imposed upon herself. Like her parents did meet at Harvard, they both went there, but they were the most

laid-back people you could ever meet. And they're not the kind of people who are gonna, you know, say 'either get into Harvard or Yale or your life is a failure.'" In David's account, pressure to get into a top school is often self-imposed by students themselves. Hannah's friend strove to get into Harvard, she assigned high stakes to her success or failure, and she did all of this (in David's view) independently of her parents. So are Ivy League expectations stemming mostly from parents (like Janet says) or are they stemming mostly from students (like David says)? A partial answer could be that Janet and David are both right, and there is simply a selection bias in who chooses to employ Janet. After all, it is presumably the most ambitious, prestige-oriented parents who elect to spend thousands of dollars on a college counselor. But my conversation with Madison complicated David's story about "chill" parents whose children merely impose upon themselves immense college pressure.

Madison observed a racial distinction in her friends' parenting styles. She noticed that her Asian American friends seemed to be under more "direct" pressure from their parents because these parents were explicit about their expectations that their children achieve high test scores, make excellent grades, and get into prestigious colleges. But white parents, she said, exerted pressure in their own way. "For a lot of white Eastborough parents, I think there's a thing where it's like they're not directly—they don't put, like, direct pressure on their kids as much as other maybe like Asian American parents do, but it's like if their kid isn't successful, if their kid isn't getting As or whatever, they're like 'wait what?' [laughs]. And then like my mom has said things, like, to that extent, or like 'oh it's great that you guys are successful and if you weren't I don't know what I'd do.' There's just an expectation of, like, well of course you're being academically successful, and I—it's like that with my friend where he's like, usually his parents are really chill, but if he gets like a B or something then suddenly they are like weirdly interested

in that, and he's like 'wait I thought you guys were chill'. So it's like this subliminal pressure.” In Madison's experience, even parents who appear “chill” impose pressure to succeed on their children through non-direct means. They indirectly communicate to their children that their success or failure will affect the parents' emotional state; instead of telling their child “I will be disappointed in you if you fail,” they say “I don't know what I'd do if you weren't so successful.” Rather than explicitly instructing a child to get an A on a test, these “chill” parents indirectly communicate this same expectation by ignoring good grades and reacting to bad ones. In sum, they create unspoken expectations of success by normalizing its presence.

David, Nancy, Madison, Hannah, and Janet each help illuminate different facets of how college pressure works in Eastborough. From a parent's perspective, not explicitly pressuring their children to succeed equates to not pushing ambition upon them. But from a teenager's perspective, these same parents put “subliminal” pressure on their children when they silently expect success. When planning the second half of this chapter, I considered trying to put their perspectives together to make an argument about whether Eastborough High School students do in fact experience a unique type of pressure, or who that pressure stems from. But these aren't the questions that my data are suited to answer. I can't make a claim about the *reality* of ambition and pressure mechanisms in Eastborough based on my interviewee's opinions, but I can make an argument about the ways my interviewees *speak* about ambition and pressure. And so in the second half of my chapter, I turn to my interviewees' implicit beliefs about college ambition and pressure as revealed in the way they speak about their college application choices. What do my interviewees seem to believe about what is healthy and reasonable, and what is unhealthy and unreasonable college application behavior? How do parents and students distinguish between

“healthy” striving and “unhealthy” pressure? How do they conceptualize and describe their own ambitions? And what do their actions show about internalized expectations of achievement?

Parents Differentiating “Healthy” Striving and “Unhealthy” Pressure

Twenty minutes into our Zoom call, I asked David about his approach to extracurriculars with his daughter, Hannah. Had he and his wife encouraged her to do extracurriculars they thought would advantage her with college applications? He shared his philosophy:

Are you familiar with the book *The March of the Tiger Mom*? So that mom, and I think there are probably some parents like that in Eastborough but not everybody and certainly not the majority, um, she [the woman in this book] gave her daughters two choices: you can either play the piano or you can play the violin. That was it. Um, Hannah picked her own instrument, and, you know, she started out playing classical guitar and when she wanted to move on from that she moved on to clarinet. She did very well at the clarinet, she did All-State, she made District and All-State, but that was all her. It had nothing to do with us. And if she had wanted to play the trumpet, she could have played the trumpet. And the other thing is, like—so all of her extracurriculars were her choice... We never had to tell her ‘sit down and practice’ cause she practiced 30 minutes every day on her own... But I think it is true that some parents force their children to do Russian School of Math, and, you know, all those other things. Not only did we not make Hannah do any of that, she had no interest in doing any of that, and yet she still got into Brandeis, and she still had excellent grades, and—so I will tell you she did get combined 1500 on her SATs. But all that happened because of her. It had nothing to do with any other nonsense that some parents think is important.

David’s statement reflects a mental schema in which he distinguishes two parenting philosophies: his own, which he represents to me as healthy, reasonable, and effective; and the “Russian-School-of-Math” mentality, which he characterizes as restrictive, unhealthy, and not necessarily effective. His differentiation between these two parenting styles seems to hinge on two aspects. First, in David’s parenting style, the extracurricular impetus comes *from Hannah*. Hannah had ambitions to reach All-State, and Hannah elected to practice 30 minutes each day.

Indeed, he stressed repeatedly that her extracurricular achievements were “all her.” By contrast, in David’s description of the Russian-School-of-Math parenting style, the extracurricular impetus comes *from the parents*. The parents “force” their children to attend extracurriculars and parents are the engine behind extracurricular achievement. Second, David stresses that Hannah’s extracurricular agenda was *individually tailored*. He encouraged Hannah to play the instrument which best fit her, and allowed this choice to change over time as she did. Hannah’s extracurricular plan was guided by her internal disposition and passions. By contrast, he represents the Russian-School-of-Math philosophy as pushing *classically prestigious, stock* extracurricular activities. The Russian School of Math has a reputation in Eastborough. Its name conjures stereotypes of ambitious parents enrolling their children in extra math classes from a young age, following a well-worn path to maximizing their child’s academic and college admission success. By invoking the Russian School of Math, David is indexing this reputation and implying that participating parents are subscribing to a one-size-fits-all, results-oriented extracurricular program that does not accommodate individual students’ needs or interests.

The parenting philosophy that David is espousing in his statement is in line with what Adrié Kusserow terms “soft individualism.” Kusserow famously studied the ways that New York City mothers from different socioeconomic classes raise their children and coined the term “soft individualism” to describe the upper-middle-class mothers’ approach. In soft individualism, a parent’s job is to foster their child’s uniqueness, individuality, and self-confidence. A drive to achieve will naturally follow from a child getting to do activities they authentically and intrinsically enjoy (Kusserow, 1999).³⁰ When telling me about Hannah’s extracurriculars, David linked Hannah’s success (making All-State, getting into Brandeis, scoring highly on the SATs) to

³⁰ Adrié Kusserow, “De-Homogenizing American Individualism: Socializing Hard and Soft Individualism in Manhattan and Queens,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55, no. 4 (1999): 541-562, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/640657>.

the fact that she was doing activities *she* chose to do. In this way, he reflects a class-typical mindset about what makes effective parenting as well as a broader classed logic which frames achievement as a natural outcome of doing what you love.

David represented his own soft-individualism-style parenting as morally positive and healthy, while he represented the Russian-School-of-Math parenting style as morally negative and unhealthy. Yet he also stressed to me that Hannah achieved a high degree of excellence in what she chose to pursue. Indeed, making it to an All-State music competition is a much greater achievement than completing a Russian Math class. This asymmetry indicates that parents like David do not deem parental ambitions morally negative based on the magnitude of success they're hoping for. Rather, they consider it morally positive to support their child through a greatly rigorous and ambitious extracurricular program *as long as* that program is chosen by the child and specific to them as an individual. An equally rigorous extracurricular program, if designed by a parent or lifted from a cookie-cutter plan for maximizing college chances, is seen as callous and calculating. This logic is evident in how Eastborough parents talked to me about the choices they made guiding their children through extracurricular participation—a major component of the college application profile. It is also central to how they describe their ambitions and hopes for their children.

Like David, Nancy emphasized that letting her son choose his own activities was key to her parenting philosophy. I asked her if she and her husband ever encouraged their son to do any particular extracurriculars to stand out in college applications. She replied, “never. You know, like, you be you. Yeah, we—we’re a little atypical, so I don’t know if I fit your mold,” and chuckled. Then she continued, “I mean we were really, you know, I would encourage him to do extracurriculars, I would say it’s important for you to do that, it’s important for you to do that to

understand what your interests are. Like, how will you know if you don't do other stuff? Um, but he got really wrapped up in ultimate frisbee as a—you know, early. He played since he was eight, so that was like his thing. By the time he got to EHS we knew he was going to play for the team. The team was the team and that was sort of, you know, where he socialized. Um, and that was a good experience for him.” She encouraged her son to do extracurriculars not because it would advantage him in the college application process, but because she thought it would help him develop his sense of self. She sees paying attention to her son's individuality, rather than pushing a cookie-cutter path upon him, as the central directive of her parenting choices. But Nancy still seems to have had an internalized expectation that her son pursue *something* rigorously. Because he chose to play ultimate frisbee, Nancy assumed that he would end up playing competitively for the Eastborough High team. Nancy and David both emphasized to me how important it was to let their children make their own extracurricular choices, but choosing to do nothing or choosing to do something in a noncommittal way were never options. Part of the reason Eastborough parents are happy to let their children shape their own extracurricular agendas, it seems, is that they assume their children will achieve excellence at whatever they pick. (And, recalling Madison's description of “subliminal pressure,” they will step in if their child doesn't meet that standard).

Students Differentiating “Healthy” Striving and “Unhealthy” Pressure

Parents differentiate healthy extracurricular ambition for their children from unhealthy extracurricular ambition based on whether their child chose the activities. They assign a positive moral value to letting children make their own extracurricular choices, and they assign a negative moral judgement to parents who choose extracurriculars for their children, yet all parents seem to

have internalized the expectation that their children will achieve excellence at something. In the final section of this chapter, I turn my attention to my student interviewees' perspectives. How do they distinguish between "healthy" striving and "unhealthy" ambition in the college application process? How do they describe their college ambitions? What internalized expectations do they have?

Hannah is David's daughter. She joined our Zoom meeting from a wood-paneled library pod at Brandeis University, where she's currently a freshman. Hannah immediately struck me as thoughtful and articulate. She had a lot to say and spoke just as quickly as she could recall information, answering my questions with confidence and detail. My student interviewees offered a window into the social component of applying to college in a way that my parent and tutor participants couldn't, and I knew I needed to take advantage of this. I asked Hannah what kinds of conversations she had with her friends about their college applications. She replied:

I think one of my friends—well no two of my friends, in my opinion, did not have the most healthy relationship with their applications. So that would sometimes make it a little bit stressful to talk to them about it. Um, like one of my friends was one of those people, she applied to like 21, 22 schools or whatever. So she had a lot of applications she was writing, and like even though I was perfectly happy with the number of schools I was applying to, sometimes talking with her would be like 'oh no, what if I don't get in anywhere?' But then I'd be like 'no, you're fine, it's gonna be fine.' But, like, it would not be the best experience. And then one of my other friends was dead set on getting into Harvard. And as the year progressed, senior year specifically but it had been all through high school she had that opinion, um, it was more stressful to talk to her. Like the day Harvard decisions came out she was, like, very anxious, kind of a mess, food all over the place. Um, so yeah, that was sometimes stressful. But for the most part I think my friends had, like, a good handle and grasp on how to talk about their applications and everything. And it wasn't super bad.

Hannah identified two aspects of what she considers an unhealthy relationship with the college application process: applying to 20+ schools, and fixating on getting into a particular, big-name school. Earlier in our interview, she had listed the schools that she applied to: MIT,

UMass Amherst, Brandeis, McGill, University of Rochester, Wellesley, University of Southern California, and Stanford. Many of these are elite schools, and MIT (although not in the Ivy League) is equally prestigious and selective as Harvard. So how did Hannah differentiate her decision to apply to a big-name university from her “unhealthy” friend doing the same? When describing why she considered her friend’s approach to be unhealthy, Hannah stressed that getting into Harvard had consumed her life. She was “a mess,” anxious in a way that made her hard to be around and essentially nonfunctional by the time decision day arrived. What seems to matter for a college list being “unhealthy” is not, in Hannah’s view, the magnitude of ambition or pedigree, but the extent to which you attach your happiness and identity to admission to a particular school.

Hannah’s logic, in this regard, reflects a classed stigmatization of striving. In the class-anxious upper-middle-class stratum, overtly trying very hard to achieve success (and ultimately class reproduction) is socially penalized. Those who publicly reveal how much effort and emotional investment they are putting into succeeding are labeled “try-hards.” Hannah participated in this classed stigmatization during our interview when she distanced herself from her friend who publicly revealed how hard she was trying to get into Harvard and how much it mattered to her. Eastborough residents’ evaluations of healthy versus unhealthy college ambition are thus influenced by class stigma toward open displays of ambition.

Madison, my other student interviewee, gave me insight into the other side of this coin—what Eastborough students consider the “healthy” way to apply to elite schools. Madison is currently a senior at EHS, and I asked her how she was crafting her college list. “So far I’ve applied to Northeastern and UMich early action, and I plan to—the ones I’m sure about would be like MIT, um, some of the Ivys like Brown or whatever, and then UMich, Carnegie Mellon,

Tufts, Georgia Tech, and then I still need safeties,” she explained. Madison plans to apply to Ivy League schools not because she is deeply invested in getting into a particular one, but because it’s simply the thing to do in Eastborough. Applying to Ivys is so typical for EHS students that Madison has reserved a spot for them on her list before doing any research on fit, social scenes, or academic programs. No matter what, she’ll apply to “some of the Ivys, like Brown or whatever” because everyone does. Two Eastborough students might apply to exactly the same elite school, but one who visibly obsesses over getting in would be considered unhealthy while one who shows no deep emotional investment in being admitted would be considered healthy. Although my limited data cannot confirm this, I speculate that a student who internally feels deeply invested in getting into, say, Harvard, might not consider that investment unhealthy. After all, getting into Harvard would be life-changing and it makes sense to care deeply about the possibility of being admitted. But publicly showing how deeply you care—talking about it constantly, wearing Harvard sweatshirts, making getting into Harvard central to your social identity—is what makes the investment feel unhealthy when you’ve internalized this social standard.

In addition to applying to Ivy League schools, applying to schools early is another normalized form of college ambition in Eastborough. Many colleges and universities give students the option to apply early in one of two ways: early decision (ED) or early action (EA). Both types of applications are due in November rather than the regular January deadlines, but they differ in that ED acceptances are binding while EA acceptances are not. Nationwide, socioeconomically privileged students consistently apply early at a greater rate than socioeconomically disadvantaged students; in 2018, for instance, 29% of high-achieving students from families making more than \$250,000 a year applied ED, compared with just 16% of

similarly high-achieving students from families making less than \$50,000 per year.³¹ There are many logistical inequities which may influence this gap, among them: applying early takes extra time and organizational energy; you need all of your application components, including essays and recommendation letters, ready months earlier; you need to know that schools have EA or ED options; if applying ED, you need to be able to commit to attending before seeing how much financial aid you will receive. But the disparity in who applies early is not only down to factors inhibiting socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants—applying early is also being promoted among socioeconomically privileged applicants by cultural normalization. In towns like Eastborough, the discourse around early application is not about whether you will apply early, but which schools you will choose. Applying ED or EA is an action that many Eastborough students take, including both of my interviewees. But similarly to applying to Ivy League schools, the choice to apply early can be judged as healthy and reasonable, or unhealthy and calculating, depending on what your motives are perceived to be.

Hannah applied early decision to Brandeis, and applied early action to the University of Massachusetts Amherst and MIT. She told me about her decision to apply ED, and about her perceptions of whether others were doing the same. “I knew a good number of people who EDED. Like one of my friends EDED to WPI and he got in. One of my friends EDED to Duke, she didn’t get in. And that was also a bit more stressful. I know, at least my year, a lot of people EDED to Cornell, and that was, like, a big talking point cause everyone was applying to Cornell. Um, but yeah I think a good number of people EDED cause it’s Eastborough so people research, like, the best way to get into school and how they can better their chances of getting into an Ivy League and whatever, so yeah I definitely think a good number of people EDED. And I got that

³¹ Scott Jaschick, “Popularity of Early Decision Continues to Grow,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/01/07/popularity-early-decision-continues-grow>.

vibe. I didn't feel like I was the only one doing it in any way." Hannah expressed distaste for people in Eastborough who she sees as applying early to Ivy League schools just to maximize their chances of gaining admission to a prestigious, big-name institution. She sees their decision as a calculated effort to get into the most recognizable school possible. Yet Hannah applied early to MIT, an undeniably prestigious and recognizable school. She explained her EA reasoning to me: "I EAed to UMass Amherst and MIT. I got into UMass Amherst which was good cause that was my safety school and I wanted to have gotten into one school, that was my goal with EA." Hannah applied EA to a safety school with the aim of creating an acceptance safety net for herself. She applied ED to a school she loved because it offered a specific program she liked (a five-year Linguistics Master's degree). And she applied EA to a big-name elite school just because. Students in Eastborough apply early to elite schools they have little chance to get into because, like applying to Ivy Leagues, it is normalized—even expected—to take your shot. Once again, Hannah seems to distinguish between healthy striving and unhealthy ambition based not on where you're applying but on how much a student *cares*. Applying early to Cornell because you've done research on how to get in and become deeply invested in maximizing your chances of admission to an elite school is a distasteful form of ambition. Applying early to MIT to take your shot like everyone does, because you might as well, is a healthy form of ambition.

Conclusion

Across parents and students, my interviewees differentiated themselves from people they saw as holding unhealthy ambitions or fostering unhealthy pressure, yet their actions show that they had similar ambitions themselves. Parents distinguished their approach to extracurriculars

from calculated, Russian-School-of-Math parents. The core of this mental distinction came down not to the magnitude of achievement that they expected from their children, but to whether their children had chosen the extracurriculars in question. Students distinguished their approach to creating college lists and applying early from peers obsessed with maximizing their odds of getting into an Ivy League school. The core of their mental distinction came down not to what schools they applied to or when, but to how much they cared about and made it their identity to get into a big-name school. The key to this dissonance is internalized expectations. Parents and students don't consider their extracurricular or college ambitions to be unreasonable because achieving success is normalized. High expectations, as long as the challenge is felt to be freely chosen and doesn't visibly consume your identity, is deemed a healthy kind of pressure. But of course in a town like Eastborough, internalized expectations and cultural norms limit the choices you are free to make. You can choose your extracurriculars, but you must pursue them rigorously and achieve excellence. You can choose your college list, but you'll still be expected to apply to a few Ivy League schools and apply somewhere early. Internalized expectations are the invisible mechanism behind Eastborough residents saying one thing about extreme ambition and doing another.

Chapter 3: How Does Soft Individualism Advantage Eastborough Students Writing Personal Statements?

We have seen that Eastborough parents feel that it is important to let their children choose their own extracurriculars—a mindset in line with soft individualism. They stigmatize parents who overtly display college ambitions, yet they hold internalized expectations that their own children will achieve success at whatever activities they pick. In my final chapter, I relate this analysis to my original research question about how Eastborough students navigate writing their personal statements. How do soft individualism and parents’ covert ambitions matter for Eastborough teenagers as they write their college personal statements? In the first section of this chapter, I argue that soft individualism advantages Eastborough students by giving them two things that college admissions officers value greatly in personal essays: unique achievements and self-knowledge.

How Soft Individualism Advantages Students Writing Personal Statements

When it came to understanding the things that advantage students writing their personal statements, my interview with Janet proved invaluable. Janet is the co-founder of a small, Eastborough-based college counseling company called Bright Start Admissions. Her career has spanned many chapters; she began teaching English at the high school and college levels, transitioned to designing corporate training programs, and now co-runs Bright Start, a “strategic admissions consulting” company. Bright Start Admissions offers a range of college-admission-oriented services, including consultations about course and extracurricular selection, academic tutoring, and personal essay coaching. Janet, with her background in

teaching creative writing, specializes in one-on-one essay coaching. She is also an Eastborough resident and mom to two daughters who have been through the Eastborough public schools. All told, she is well positioned to offer insights into Eastborough students' common strengths and weaknesses with the personal essay as well as the impact of Eastborough parenting on the application process.

My very first interviewee, Nancy, referred me to Janet. She had employed Janet to help coach her son through his college applications, including writing his essay. When I explained the future course of my project to Nancy near the end of our interview, she gave me Janet's name and suggested that her experience as a mother and a counselor could be relevant to my project. Janet and I met on Zoom one morning in mid-October. I was at home in Eastborough for fall break, which proved a disorienting change from conducting interviews from my dorm room at Swarthmore. I felt very aware of how I had changed from my time living in the town four years before, and both my old mindset as an Eastborough student and my new mindset as a sociologist felt salient to me. During our call, Janet multitasked in the style of a true Eastborough resident, managing to eat her breakfast while answering my questions. While all of her answers proved interesting and insightful, I had been looking forward to asking one question in particular: what do college admissions officers look for in a personal essay? Janet's answer was as specific as I hoped it might be.

I just met with college admissions officers from Emory and Georgia Tech. And they are looking for, in an essay itself, I think they want to see that a student is part of community and engages in community. And community can mean different things. You know, it could be—and also one person mentioned replaceability, meaning that they've done something, or they've been instrumental in that community, in that unit, whatever it is, and that they would be hard to replace. So the best example given to me was, um, if a student is required to babysit a younger sibling so parents can work, you know, and has to come home from school and can't participate in other activities, that's actually looked at really strongly because that student is a necessary part of that unit or community. And

that will be looked upon probably more favorably than someone who just runs track.

Janet juxtaposes someone who is an irreplaceable part of a community with “someone who just runs track.” Not only are these two extracurricular experiences meaningfully distinct when it comes to the college essay, being a part of track is *less valuable* than doing something unique and irreplaceable. And incidentally (or not), soft individualist Eastborough parents draw the exact same value differentiation when they encourage their children to pursue unique, individually-suited extracurriculars rather than stock options like track and Russian Math. Nancy encouraged her son to do something he loved, and as a result he became deeply involved in the ultimate frisbee community. David let Hannah choose her own instrument and she became one of a few highly skilled clarinet players at EHS. By giving their children a chance to select niche activities they enjoyed and felt motivated to become skilled at, Nancy and David set them up to become irreplaceable members of communities.

As far as I can tell from my conversations with them, neither of my parent interviewees ever consciously calculated that having their child pursue a unique extracurricular track would later advantage them with the college essay. They wanted their children to develop a sense of self (in the case of Nancy) or believed children choosing their own activities would make them happier (in the case of David). Yet the way they parented ultimately equipped their children with exactly the right kind of experiences to write about in their personal statements. Soft individualism steers children away from stock option extracurriculars, and subliminal parental ambition pushes them to achieve at what they choose; the result is unique achievements and irreplaceable positions in communities. In other words, the result is potential personal statement topics that optimally match college admission officers’ criteria.

Eastborough parenting doesn't just give Eastborough students optimal personal statement topics. It also fosters the necessary perspective, one characterized by introspection, self-knowledge, and an ability to relate your achievements to your sense of self. Janet drew my attention to the link between students' ability to introspect and different parenting styles near the end of our interview. When I asked her if there was anything else she'd like to share about her experience as a college counselor, she explained:

It's very rewarding when I can help students craft really strong essays. And some students, again, are just better able to do it than others. Some students are more introspective. I think for the students whose parents kind of like—I want to say like push them, you know, or almost like really force them to participate in certain extracurricular activities, those students have never had time to even think about choosing their own, what do they like, do I really want to be doing this activity, is this where my strengths are? Because they haven't been given that opportunity. So that can be frustrating because those students don't often know themselves particularly well.

Janet observed that her clients who had been “forced” into certain extracurriculars by their parents were consistently less able to execute the personal statement genre than clients who had been able to make their own extracurricular decisions. Like David and Nancy, she distinguished Russian-School-of-Math parenting from soft individualist parenting. Janet is an Eastborough parent as well as a counselor, and she evidently holds the same cultural schema marking Russian-School-of-Math parenting as different from and morally inferior to soft individualism parenting. Her word choice reveals a mental image of Russian-School-of-Math parents as intense and controlling, prone to “forc[ing their kids] to participate in certain extracurricular activities.” However, Janet is unique among my interviewees in linking these two parenting styles to differing levels of success with the personal statement. This is a striking insight, which she backs up with a theory as to the mechanism behind the correlation: differing ability to introspect.

Janet had first raised the importance of introspection for personal statements earlier in the interview, when I asked for her opinion on what characterizes the personal statement as a genre of writing. She answered, “I go back to introspection. I think being able to come to some realizations about one’s self and growth. Or, you know if it’s about an event, what does this event mean, how did it impact me and my outlook. But I think it comes down to introspection and showing what kind of a person a student is, as well as how they engage with others or how they think about things.” In her view, being able to engage in an introspective mindset is the key to success for a personal statement writer. A strong essay conveys an applicant’s demeanor, their strengths, and how they think; in order to communicate these things, an applicant must first be able to effectively self-reflect. Janet posited that students whose parents never let them choose their own extracurriculars (a parenting approach I have been referring to as the Russian-School-of-Math style) consequently never got the opportunity to self-reflect, and ultimately were less able to engage in introspection when writing their personal statements.

I would like to extend Janet’s logic to look at the other side of the coin: soft individualist parents. Recall that parents who subscribe to soft individualism consider it their job to foster their child’s uniqueness, individuality, and self-confidence.³² Eastborough parents enact this set of values when they let their children select their own extracurriculars. When Eastborough students are given the chance to choose their own extracurriculars, they are forced to reflect on what they enjoy and excel at—an act of introspection. As they habitually make their own extracurricular choices, they practice self-reflection and come to better understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. In this way, soft individualism helps children develop exactly the kind of self-perspective that they will need to effectively write a personal statement.

³² Adrie Kusserow, “De-Homogenizing American Individualism: Socializing Hard and Soft Individualism in Manhattan and Queens,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55, no. 4 (1999): 541-562, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/640657>.

Lastly, soft individualism prepares students for writing an essay that links their achievements to their sense of self. The personal statement poses a unique and in some ways contradictory challenge for applicants. One blog offering advice for students writing their personal statements sums up this dualistic charge of the genre, explaining that “a personal statement for college [is] an essay you write to show a college admissions committee who you are and why you deserve to be admitted to their school.”³³ Applicants must perform certain facets of their self (their values, their achievements, their character strengths) within the broader context of an application that argues these qualities merit admission.

Being raised under soft individualism prepares students to reconcile these two tasks in two ways. First, it provides them with experiences that both illustrate their achievements and convey a sense of their personality. Students given the freedom to choose their own extracurriculars generally pursue activities that match their interests, strengths, or dispositions. As a result, these students amass extracurricular experiences that can function as optimal essay topics, simultaneously showcasing their achievements and illustrating their personalities. Second, soft individualism habituates teenagers to relating their ambitions to their inner life. Students who choose their own extracurriculars become comfortable linking their extracurricular pursuits to their internal sense of self. Although neither of my student interviewees spoke to me about this explicitly, I hypothesize that choosing your own extracurriculars could make writing a personal statement feel more comfortable and natural.

Janet told me that what makes a good personal statement topic is an experience that demonstrates individuality and irreplaceability, while what makes a good personal statement writer is the ability to introspect. I have laid out the ways in which soft individualism can provide

³³ “College Personal Statement Examples and Writing Tips,” *Wordvice*, September 10, 2022, <https://blog.wordvice.com/examples-of-successful-college-personal-statements/#:~:text=Personal%20statement%20for%20college%20%E2%80%94%20an,for%20graduate%20school%20as%20well.>

students with topics and perspective matching these ideals. I have also gone beyond Janet's observations to argue that soft individualism prepares students to execute the dualistic demands of a personal statement, showing their personalities while portraying their achievements. It is somewhat ironic that my parent interviewees who practice soft individualism stigmatize the peers they see as overtly trying to set their children up for college admission success (either by signing them up for extracurriculars like Russian Math or by hiring college counselors with the conscious aim of getting their children into Ivy League schools). My analysis shows that it is soft individualist parents who provide their children with greater personal statement advantage than their more directive peers.

In the second section of this chapter, I shift to examining whether Eastborough students and parents are aware of the advantages that soft individualism is giving them. Using excerpts from my conversations with Madison and Nancy, I show that both my student and parent interviewees made soft individualist choices that ultimately provided them with personal statement topics matching the desires of college admissions officers, yet they represented these choices as potential sacrifices in college admissions success.

Are Eastborough Residents Aware That Soft Individualism Helps with Personal Statements?

Recall Nancy, who we met in chapter two. She raised her son with a soft individualist approach, and described her conviction that it was important to let him choose his own extracurriculars. But she recalled sometimes feeling guilty about this approach, and the possibility that she might be failing to help maximize her son's college admission chances. She explained:

We didn't do a lot of the enrichment [activities] as a child, he did not do Russian School of Math or any of those things... You know he did balanced things, we tried really hard to balance. We—we heard of people who were like starting college consulting or college counseling in like freshman year or even earlier so that they could figure out which classes to take. Like, that didn't even occur to me. So I was, you know I felt a little bit like 'should I feel guilty that I didn't, like, figure out which classes he needed to take or what extracurriculars he was going to do,' and he didn't do tons, so I felt guilty about that because you'd hear other people saying 'oh yeah, my kid cured cancer and played the violin at the same time.' So yeah there was some of that, you know, I'd look around and say 'I'm probably not doing everything that I possibly could to maximize exactly where he's gonna end up, but he's gonna end up somewhere and if he's not happy he's gonna transfer, and if he is happy he's gonna be happy.'

In chapter one, I analyzed this quote to illustrate the ambivalence that parents experience about distancing themselves from the Russian-School-of-Math parenting style when deciding whether to hire a college counselor. Now I would like to return to Nancy's statement to analyze the dissonance between how Nancy framed her choice to let her son choose his own activities, and the actual consequence of that choice for personal statement success.

Nancy represented her choice to let her son choose his own extracurriculars (he chose ultimate frisbee, as it turned out) as a potential sacrifice in maximizing his college chances. What's more, she construed her decision as a sacrifice *relative* to her peers who enrolled their children in "enrichment [activities]" like Russian School of Math, signed them up for the violin, and pushed them to shiny achievements on par with "cur[ing] cancer." She recalled comparing herself to these parents, and worrying that her son would be a weaker college applicant than their children. But in fact, I argue that Nancy set her son up for greater personal statement success than the Russian-School-of-Math parents did by letting her son develop introspection, become part of a niche community, and achieve in a way he could link to his sense of self.

Later on in our interview, Nancy herself recognized that these qualities are what ended up making her son's personal statement strong. She described how he wrote multiple essays, the

first about a stock sense of ambition and desire to go to college, and the second about ultimate frisbee, his chosen extracurricular. “I thought it was pretty good. I mean I, again, obviously biased [laughs]. But I thought it was—to me I would say surprising after seeing the original draft of the essay which was sort of like the more ‘why I want to go to college’ kind of boring kind of thing. It [the ultimate frisbee essay] was a vast improvement over that. It showed his personality, it showed his passion, it showed his focus and how he had stuck with something for a long period of time, it showed his leadership, so we were able to bring out like a couple core things that may not have come out in other essays or other aspects of his application. So I think that’s why it worked. Like his—I could see *him* in it.” Nancy’s son was able to write a strong essay because he had chosen an extracurricular which matched his strengths (a perfect topic) and because Nancy had encouraged him to reflect on how his extracurriculars related to his sense of self (the perfect perspective).

Kusserow theorized soft individualism as a parenting style, but I saw an analogous mindset in my student interviewee Madison when she discussed managing her extracurriculars. Madison prioritized developing her own interests over participating in stock extracurriculars, even though, like Nancy, she feared that she might be compromising her college chances by doing so. She recalled:

I remember when I was a freshman coming into freshman year, I was like ‘oh I’m gonna do so many clubs’ and stuff like that, ‘I’m gonna, whatever, do competitions like everyone else.’ But it’s just like I’m not...I just don’t like competitions and clubs as much. I think it’s like I don’t like being told what to do kind of, I might get that from my dad [chuckles] that I just—I don’t know, I don’t like the culture of like ‘oh we’re just gonna really go study for this.’ Like for example, there’s a computer science club at EHS. And at first I joined and I was like ‘oh this is a good thing, I can put this on college applications.’ And then I came in and I realized the whole thing is just preparing for this, like, individual test you take, where it’s almost like a math competition kind of thing where you’re given a coding prompt, it’s just some random ‘oh make something that does this’ and everyone’s making the same thing. And it just felt so inefficient and

uncreative to me. And so then I decided to quit that club even though I knew it might be good on college applications, and work on what I actually am interested in, which is my own coding projects and stuff.

Analogously to parents who view it as their primary job to foster their child's individuality and passions, Madison felt that her personal passions were important enough to pursue, even at the perceived cost of activities that could more easily support college admission. Feeling that fostering your internal passions is the primary objective of extracurricular engagement (rather than making money or maximizing college chances) is certainly a class-influenced mindset, one which seems to reflect internalized soft individualist priorities. And like Nancy did for her son, Madison believed in the importance of developing her own passions, represented the corresponding choices as potential college application sacrifices, yet ultimately benefited from pursuing a niche and individually-suited activity when it came to writing her personal statement.

Madison wrote her personal statement about one of her coding projects, a schedule app that she designed and successfully got over 1,000 members of the EHS student body to use. I asked her what she hopes admissions officers will learn about her from her essay. She reflected: "Maybe that I'm creative, or that, like, that I really care about the projects I've worked on? Cause it's kind of like, compared to someone who, say, has spent the last three years at EHS getting really good at math competitions or Science Olympiad or something like that, it's a lot easier for them [admissions officers] to sort of be like 'oh well they're this rank and so they must care about it a lot and be really passionate about it.' It's a little harder for me to prove that because it's just like, I don't know I like made a project, it's not related to any club or anything so I'm kinda trying to show that, like, 'no I am passionate about this and I have made something that at least I think is pretty cool.'" Madison worried that she might have compromised her future

college admission success by opting out of stock activities like Science Olympiad and math competitions. She reasoned that college admissions officers would immediately recognize these activities, and they would function as a straightforward way to demonstrate interest in STEM fields. But I argue that her essay about coding her schedule app will be far more compelling to admissions officers than any essay she could have written about Science Olympiad. Recall how Janet summarized her conversation with Emory and Georgia Tech admissions officers: in the personal statement, they look for evidence that a student is irreplaceable in a community. Madison demonstrates irreplaceability when she writes about an app that only she could have coded, serving a community need that only she could meet. She had the strong personal statement topic because she had, in the soft individualist style, prioritized developing her own passions above participating in stock activities. And she had the optimal personal statement perspective because she had been forced to reflect on her values as they related to her extracurricular participation back when she decided to quit the EHS computer science club.

Was Madison aware that her essay topic was stronger than one about a stock extracurricular experience? It seems that she was. She explained to me that she (like Nancy's son) had written two versions of her personal statement, the first about a fairly stock activity and the second about her coding project. She explained her reasoning for abandoning her first draft: "basically, I have one that I started writing this summer, and it's about tutoring because I've done a lot of tutoring over the years, and sort of like my experience with that, and also TAing a computer science class. Um, and then I've kind of changed my mind and decided I don't want to write it about that, even though I did spend a lot of time on that essay, because I've just realized I feel like it would be more unique and better, especially given how little extracurriculars I have, to talk about my experience making apps and my own computer science projects." Unlike Nancy,

Madison didn't articulate that the reason that an essay about a unique achievement, rather than a stock extracurricular, would be stronger is because it would more effectively showcase her personality. Nonetheless, she realized that a "more unique" topic would be "better," and felt this strongly enough to begin writing a second essay even after investing considerable time in the first.

Madison and Nancy both framed their soft individualist choices to pursue personal passions over stock, classically prestigious extracurriculars as a sacrifice in maximizing college admissions success. However, having unique experiences which related naturally to their personalities actually allowed Madison and Nancy's son to write stronger personal statements. But what has emerged for me as particularly striking is the indication that when it came to the context of writing a personal statement, Nancy and Madison were both aware that having a more individually-tailored experience to write about was advantageous. They maintained the belief that they may have disadvantaged themselves by choosing to pursue personal passions when they reflected on their past extracurricular choices, but they recognized that having these unique experiences advantaged them now in the personal statement process. I posit that unconscious cultural capital is the mechanism behind this dissonance. Upper-middle-class, soft individualist parents and their children have embodied the mental disposition to value personal passions over classically prestigious activities. They create a narrative that this disposition is a disadvantage, but in fact, college admissions officers—figures of institutional power—share this mindset and reward it with admission. In this way, cultural capital can be transformed into institutionalized capital through Eastborough students writing their personal statements.

Cultural Capital, Parenting Styles, and Personal Statement Inequity

In my final paragraphs of this chapter, I would like to reflect on the broader significance of the two parenting styles in Eastborough and how they reflect cultural capital coming to bear on class reproduction. The Soft Individualist parents and the Russian-School-of-Math parents presumably have roughly equal incomes, given that they can all afford to live in Eastborough. Their children all go through the same school system. But because of the way the Eastborough High curriculum is set up, students without soft individualist parents will struggle to develop the experiences and mindset they need to write a strong personal statement. EHS only offers one creative writing course and it is not required. In other words, students are not taught to think or write introspectively at school. Janet sees the effects of this at her counseling company, noting that her Eastborough clients disproportionately struggle to introspect when writing their personal statements. “They write like EHS students! They try to write a five-paragraph essay. It comes across very factually, you know where there’s—it’s very factual, it’s like a research paper...Eastborough by and large has used a very formulaic approach to teaching writing, and again that goes back to the research paper, so I think that’s impacted students.” And just as the Eastborough curriculum fails to help students develop the correct perspective for writing their personal statements, the culture of high achievement at Eastborough discourages students from taking up extracurriculars they feel drawn to. Janet reflected on her experience as an Eastborough mom. “I think they [EHS students] fall into this, like, prescribed mode, or kind of, I don’t what I want to call it, a regimen, of everything they’re supposed to do...everything at EHS you have to audition for, right? Everything. And there’s no trying it because you think you might like it because you already have to be good at it...like if you want to sing for example, you need to have started when you’re young. You can’t just come into high school and say ‘you know, I

know I can carry a tune, I think I want to try this' because it's too late." Eastborough High's culture of excellence blocks students who are drawn to join new extracurriculars from doing so when they don't already have the skills. This means that students being able to participate in extracurriculars that suit their personalities falls to parents, to either enroll their high school children outside of school or to enroll their children when they are young. The lack of creative writing courses and barriers to extracurricular participation prevent students from gaining the mindset and experiences that allow them to write strong personal statements. Soft individualist parents fill this gap by going out of their way to sign their children up for their chosen extracurriculars, but Russian-School-of-Math parents are not aware that the gap exists. Thus, even in the face of equal material capital and equal institutional access, the cultural capital enjoyed by some Eastborough families gives them an advantage with the personal statement.

American culture fosters a unique myth: do what you love and the rest will follow. The college personal statement ritualizes this myth by rewarding the combination of achievement and self-knowledge with college admission. But only some families have the cultural capital and class habitus to value pursuing unique, individually-suited achievements over classically prestigious activities. Through fostering the right kind of mindset (introspective) and experiences (irreplaceable), these families advantage their children in college applications even over families with equal material and institutional resources.

Conclusion

Residents of Eastborough distance themselves from the Russian-School-of-Math cultural stereotype and resist being perceived as calculating or prestige-obsessed. Parents do this by emphasizing that their ambitious choices (including hiring college counselors and expecting extracurricular success from their children) are in service of fostering their child's individuality and preserving a nurturing parental relationship. Students emphasize that their ambitious choices (including applying to elite schools and applying ED) are simply in response to town norms and they distance themselves from peers who visibly care too much about getting into particular big-name schools. Despite disavowing elite college ambition as unhealthy, and even representing their own "healthy" choices as a potential sacrifice for college chances, soft individualist Eastborough residents advantage themselves in ways they are not even aware of. By holding internalized expectations of achievement while encouraging their children to pursue their own interests, these parents raise children with the ability to skillfully sell self-narratives.

The personal statement is not the only gatekeeping social script which rewards the combination of self-awareness and high achievement. Behavioral interviews, for example, often feature the questions "tell me about yourself" and "talk about a time you faced a challenge." Like the personal statement prompts, these questions are vague and loaded with hidden expectations. They reward candidates experienced with narrativizing their achievements and self-knowledge. My claim that parenting styles influence teenagers' ability to execute the personal statement genre could be extended to examine the ways in which parenting style affects social script navigation—and ultimately class reproduction—in job interviews.

I believe that my analysis in this project illuminates several interesting facets of how upper-middle-class individuals conceptualize their own class reproduction and maintenance. My interviewees were very aware of the stereotypes about their community (Ivy-League-obsessed; rich; will do anything to secure their children spots at elite schools) and they resisted being perceived in these ways even as they made ambitious college choices. They constructed a narrative wherein they risked class reproduction (e.g., by letting their children choose their own extracurriculars) even though their choices ultimately advantaged their children. They also assigned a positive moral value to soft individualist parenting choices and a negative moral value to Russian-School-of-Math choices, which were more overtly in line with the Eastborough stereotypes. These insights shed light on how upper-middle-class individuals, especially parents, morally reconcile class reproduction with their values. They feel uncomfortable with using material capital (e.g., for counselors or extracurriculars) for the explicit purpose of securing elite education and an upper-middle-class future for their child, but they are able to construct a moral high ground via downward comparison with a more overtly ambitious group of parents. My analysis of this mechanism can help reveal how privileged individuals who consider themselves liberal are able to see themselves as moral even as they actively contribute to continued class stratification.

I would like to conclude with a final note about the subjective and culturally situated nature of moral judgments about parenting choices. My soft individualist parents, who privileged their child's wishes and fostered their chosen interests, saw centering the child and their happiness as the right thing to do. In this, they reproduced an American, classed, and raced cultural logic. The pursuit of happiness and the sacrality of childhood and a child's happiness can both be historicized, and this moral schema should not go uncritiqued. What's more, because my

interviewees come from a privileged sector of society, their (culturally influenced) moral reasoning about the *right* thing to do is aligned with the reality of the most advantageous thing to do. In other countries and education systems, the Russian-School-of-Math parenting style might be seen as morally correct and might be the most effective approach for preparing students to navigate higher education applications. In a cultural setting that does not value success *through* individuality as much as white, upper-middle-class America, enrolling your child in stock prestigious extracurriculars and publicly hiring an elite college counselor could be seen as responsible parenting.

If I were to continue the line of research I have begun in this project, I would like to examine the ways in which parenting styles and the moral values assigned to them are not only classed but raced as well. Madison, who coined the term subliminal pressure during her interview, observed that it was largely her white friends' parents who held such covert expectations. She contrasted this with her Asian American friends, whose parents (she reported) explicitly demanded high grades and extracurricular accomplishments from their children. My data was not suited to answer these questions, but Madison's comment raised a new potential line of inquiry: how do soft individualism and Russian-School-of-Math parenting choices divide along racial lines in Eastborough? How do parents subscribing to each style morally evaluate their own parenting choices and those of parents from the opposite style? And in what ways are these moral evaluations racialized?

Parenting is one of the most sociologically interesting intersections of the private and the public. Parenting choices and our moral judgements about those choices reflect differing values across race, class, gender, and country categories. And parenting styles have a lasting impact on class reproduction through mechanisms including an individual's ability to navigate gatekeeping

social scripts—of which the college personal statement is only one. Denaturalizing parenting styles and examining the ways they serve class reproduction is an essential sociological task.

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