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### **In and Out of School Socializing Influences on the Development of US Middle-Class Student Subjectivity**

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses a cultural transmission-acquisition framework to investigate three socializing influences on the developing selves of American middle class students. The socializing influences exist in and outside of schools and include electronic and commodity culture, permissive parenting styles, and school policies and pedagogies that grant students significant freedom and choice. The paper explores the methodological challenges of examining and conceptualizing such influences that extend beyond classrooms and schools. It argues that because all of these influences share the common feature of deferring to students' own judgments, a reasonable place to focus inquiry is on their developing identities—and more specifically what their subjective orientations to authority of various kinds reveals about their own social goals. The paper shares preliminary interpretations of data drawn from a four-year anthropological study of student class culture conducted by a diverse five-person research team in an affluent suburban Midwestern US high school and community.

## Introduction

This paper examines three socializing influences on the developing selves of American middle-class adolescent students. These socializing influences exist in and outside of schools and include electronic and commodity culture, permissive parenting styles, and school policies and pedagogies that grant students substantial freedom and choice. The point of departure for the paper is that these socializing influences share the common feature of deferring to young peoples' own judgments. The analysis focuses, then, on the cultural-historical origins of these influences, and how and what students learn, both consciously, and inadvertently, from their interaction with them. The paper is grounded in anthropological perspectives on cultural transmission and acquisition; recent conceptual linkages between identity, discourse, and social environment; and historical shifts in educational philosophy that underlie contemporary school policy. It is motivated in part by Blum's call for anthropologists to focus their attention on relationships between education and well-being, and how schooling contributes to self-formation (2012). The paper draws on data from a four-year mixed method study of student class culture and is part of a larger project focused on the production of authoritative subjectivity in US middle-class adolescent students.

## Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

Education researchers have long held that the classroom is the "crucible" in which learning takes place (Pauly, 1991), that virtually all formal learning in school involves the "instructional triangle" of student-teacher-subject matter (Sizer, 1992), and that instruction itself is the "heart of the matter" (Boyer, 1983). While anthropologists of education would not dispute these ideas, they would point out that human learning involves both cultural transmission *and* acquisition, and that while significant learning may go on in the classroom, a great deal also occurs consciously and subconsciously outside the school walls (Basso, 2000; Spindler, 1967; Wolcott, 1994). Indeed, Gaskins has recently encouraged anthropologists to focus on out-of-school learning activities that are important to the child—and involve active learning (2012).

Indeed, following Nespore, I conceive of educational settings as "extensive in space and time... at intersections of multiple networks shaping cities, communities, schools, pedagogies, and teacher and student practices." Nespore points out that all of these are connected to each other and that student involvement in them produces "educational effects" (1997, pp. xi-xiii). I have come to think of various salient points of these networks as a complex set of feedback loops that

constantly shape, and are shaped by youth. This last point is important, as it reflects contemporary insights concerning the mutually constitutive nature of cultural complexity (Hannerz, 1997; Heath, 1999). Furthermore, I want to underscore that the problematic nature of subjectivity and identity must be kept in mind: they are continually being produced and reproduced in specific contexts within and by relations of power (Mallan & Pearce, 2003).

Like much other contemporary anthropological work concerned with conceptualizing the development of self-hood in contexts of social change, the paper draws on Foucault's ideas regarding the making of the subject (1972, 1983, 1988), as well as Bakhtin's notions of how selves are "authored" (1986, 1990). From these perspectives, young people in such contexts may be seen as "cultural innovators" (McRobbie, 1994, p. 179), who "orchestrate" discourses and practices in the construction of their subjectivities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001).

### **Home**

Over the past 15 years many researchers have commented that the most important characteristic of US suburban adolescents today is their "aloneness"—in an embodied sense (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Hersch, 1998; Nichols & Good, 2004): growing numbers of youth are seemingly being granted greater space by adults to socialize themselves. Adolescents in one study reported spending, on average, a quarter of their waking time alone—an amount that can lead to stress (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999) and that would be "not admissible in many cultures" (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Indeed the amount of "total contact time" US parents spend with their children dropped 40% during a 35 year period at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hewlett, 1992); according to one study it is white children from affluent families who spent the largest number of hours on their own each week (Richardson et al., 1989).

Over 20 years ago Eckert argued that US middle-class family ideology stresses participation of the child in decision-making, which accords the child a certain level of adult status and gives them experience in dealing with adults on a more equal footing (1989, p. 116). More recently Lareau observed that the middle-class parenting style she refers to as "concerted cultivation" is marked by "extended negotiations" between parents and their children (2003, p. 31). The cultural psychologist William Damon has more forcefully asserted that the contemporary lopsidedly child-centered ethic has led parents to routinely defer to the views of

their children, treat their sensibilities gingerly, and, in sum parent them in an “overindulgent” manner (1995, p. 19) (see also Buckingham, 2000; Milner, 2004). All the while, other researchers have documented a tendency of youth to turn to their peers as socializing agents at increasingly younger ages (Adler & Adler, 1998). The trends here, then, involve young people in suburban US context spending more time alone, being treated with more deference by their parents, and taking on more important socializing roles for one another.

### **Electronic and Commodity Culture**

While young people may be spending less time in the company of adults, they seem to be ever more connected to each other (especially via communication technologies), and to various forms of electronic media. Furthermore, such media have granted them “increasing access to social and cultural worlds that have until recently been largely confined to adults” (Buckingham 2000, p. 120). Researchers point out that young peoples’ engagements with popular culture and markets have intensified across the globe, affording them greater choices regarding how they spend their time, labor, and money (Canclini, 2001; Nespore, 1997; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Most recently Sherry Turkle has examined the profound ways in which online communication shapes human identity (2011). She argues that such interaction is qualitatively different from conversation and constitutes a state of being “alone together.”

More broadly, many writers are observing that culture today is shaped more by the market than by the state and that identities themselves are powerfully influenced by consumption (Dolby, 2003; Milner, 2004). Key to understanding the relationship between consumerism and self-formation is Hooks’ point that in the mass media, “consumerism is equated with individual freedom....” (2000, p. 71). In this vein, McLaren has described the development of “market identities” oriented around the excesses of marketing and consumption (1995). Children are becoming one of the most prized targets of “niche marketing” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 147), and indeed, Willis has asserted that it is the market that “supplies the most attractive and useable symbolic and expressive forms that are now consumed by teenagers and early adults” (2003, p. 403). He terms this commodity-related expressive consumption “common culture,” and encourages ethnographers to understand how young people experience and respond to it, especially in relation to school culture. Indeed, a relevant theme frequently espoused in popular culture in the United States, especially advertising media, is that of individual freedom and

unconstrained choice: “No limits” and “No boundaries” are used by several brands and are also found in the titles of several popular songs. “Never follow” is the brand core of automobile manufacturer Audi.

### **School Policy, Pedagogy, and Purpose**

One of the broad shifts in school policy and pedagogy in the United States during the last century occurred largely as a result of changing understandings regarding the relationship between students and the schooling environment. These changes can be usefully understood as involving “ideologies” of childhood, or the set of meanings through which views of children, and their relationships with adults, are rationalized (Buckingham, 2000, p. 11). “Factory” style schooling predominated from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> through mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, where the teacher was seen as the holder and communicator of knowledge, and masses of undifferentiated students were seen as the receptacles. In this model students were seen as passive recipients of knowledge. Several events marked a turn away from this model, including Piaget’s discoveries regarding cognitive development (1983); Dewey’s call for schools to educate the whole child, filling in where other institutions had failed, including families (1899); desegregation; and the rise of the self-esteem movement. An imperative arose that schooling must become a “personalized” experience for every child (Gardner, 1991), and more progressive “child-centered” models of education were adopted in many quarters. Here, students were seen as individual learners, with their own histories, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles. It is fair to say that the diffusion of such student-centered approaches to learning across national settings constitute a contemporary “policyscape” in education (Carney, 2009; see also Vavrus, 2009).

However, while the building and preservation of students’ self-esteem was seen as primary in these pedagogical approaches, too often they did not include what Bruner refers to as the other half of self-esteem: self-evaluation (1996, pp. 35-39). Indeed, Damon asserts that such practices are based on the serious misconception that self-esteem precedes healthy growth (see 1995, pp. 68-81). Nevertheless, such practices have certainly made great differences in the educational outcomes of children from various backgrounds. In more homogeneous communities, however, it appears they may have some unanticipated effects. These pedagogical developments are especially important given recent advances in our understanding of how academic learning and social identification are deeply intertwined (see Wortham, 2005).

In the 1980s Powell observed how American high schools themselves had begun to be affected by the logic of consumerism. He wrote that because of economic shifts and attendant imperatives to “maximize holding power, graduation percentages, and customer satisfaction,” high schools themselves became so “profoundly consumer oriented” that they began to resemble shopping malls. Secondary education, then, had become “another consumption experience in an abundant society” (1985, p. 8). Soon thereafter, Labaree pointed out that social mobility goals had elevated the importance of educational credentials in the US and led to a tension between a view of education as a private good that facilitates individual advancement and a public good that provides society with collectively-shared benefits (1997). The ascendancy of these social mobility goals is evident in various kinds of educational commodification (Brown, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Urciuoli, 2010), rising rates of plagiarism and academic fraud (Blum, 2010; Callahan, 2004; Noah & Eckstein 2001), and the onset of “hypercredentialing” in schools (Demerath, 2009a).

### **Setting and Methods**

The research reported here is based on a study of student class culture conducted between 1999-2003 in Wilton—an affluent “historic” suburb of a large midwestern city that over the last decade has become significantly more diverse in terms of its socioeconomic makeup. There were pervasive and pronounced expectations for success in the community, as well as deep-seated norms concerning individual advancement and social mobility. At the time of the study Wilton High School itself was extremely well-resourced and in 1998 was nationally recognized as a “Blue Ribbon High School.” During the 2000-2001 school year the school had 1649 students, of whom 86% were classified European American, 10% Asian American, and 4% African American. 88.2% of the graduates of the class of 1999 planned to attend a college, university or technical school.

The project was designed as a four-year ethnographic study in order to describe the experiences and perceptions of a diverse group of students as they moved through high school. Data were collected by a diverse research team through participant observation and informal interviews in classrooms and other relevant in- and out-of-school settings; over 60 tape-recorded interviews with teachers, administrators, and students, including a diverse sample of eight high- and low-achieving male and female students from the class of 2003 and their parents; and consultation of school documents and popular culture discourses and social narratives on youth,

parenting, and schooling. In addition, a grounded survey consisting of 44 forced-choice and 16 open-ended items was administered to 327 female and 278 male students, in March 2002.

All observational and interview data were analyzed and interpreted through an inductive process of constant comparison across and within cases (Huberman & Miles, 1994). This iterative process led to the development and refinement of groups of themes as well as the identification of negative cases (Erickson, 1986). The aims of the student survey were 1) to assess the extent to which the findings from the study of focal students were representative of the experience and concerns of the larger high school student community, and 2) to examine the relative impact of factors such as gender, ethnicity, SES, grade level, and family structure as they related to various aspects of student experience. Cumulative GPA (used as the main outcome measure of student achievement) was compared between males and females using an unpaired t-test. Differences in GPA on the basis of caregiving arrangements, mother's educational attainment, and SES were compared using the chi-square statistic. Differences in student responses to specific survey responses (such as "How frequently do you eat dinner with your family during the school week?" and "How frequently do you feel 'stressed out' in school?") were compared across sex, SES, GPA group, grade, and residing caregiver groups in bivariate models also using the chi-square statistic. These models were expanded to include multiple student attributes (sex and SES age residing caregiver, etc.) using multinomial logistical regression with key response contrasts (such as "stressed out" "frequently" or "all the time" vs. "infrequently") as the dependent variables.

The paper begins with a description of some of the out-of-school socializing influences that were prevalent in this community. Then the paper moves into the school itself and discusses some of its founding educational philosophies and how they led to a climate of policy permissiveness. It also relates examples of specific policies that were appropriated by students for their own ends. Finally, the paper moves into classrooms, and discusses the intensely subjective way of knowing evinced by many students and how this manifested itself in classroom discourse and practice.

### **Relationships with Family and Parents**

As is the case for many other US adolescents in a variety of contexts, changing family structures, greater media interaction, and more readily available opportunities for work and consumption



have led young people in Wilton to have unprecedented responsibility for self-creation. After school, many students in Wilton returned to either single-parent homes, or situations where both parents work. Most of the focal students in the study did not regularly eat dinner with their parents or family, and indicated that they spent a great deal of time alone at home, either doing homework, watching television, listening to music, playing video games, emailing friends, or surfing the Internet (94.2% of surveyed students had their own bedroom at home). A mother of a focal student said that her family was “all scattered,” and a family stress was “trying to prioritize and have time.” Though recent research has identified family dinners as an important support in the overall well-being of youth, many Wilton students did not regularly eat with their families. One high-achieving African American focal student, who played school sports and generally didn’t get home until after 9 p.m. said, “We don’t really eat together at all. We’ve never ate together.... I’ve just accustomed myself to eating late while watching TV [generally Comedy Central] in front of my bed.”<sup>1</sup> Survey findings indicated that high SES students ate dinner with their families less frequently (OR=0.0769; 95% C.I.: 0.012339, 0.4795; p = .006), and that students who ate dinner with their families less frequently were more likely to report high levels of stress ( $\chi^2=82.8074$ , p=.027). In sum, the survey evidence in this area suggested that spending an inordinate amount of time alone or without regular family contact was stressful.

Given the pattern of aloneness that arose from the early phases of data collection, students were asked on the survey whether they “needed more adult presence in their lives.” While 83% said they didn’t, the open-ended responses are telling. The minority of students who responded positively often referenced challenging family circumstances and insufficient parental attention. For example, one male European American tenth-grader who lived with one parent, said, “They try to give me room too much.” The open-ended responses of the majority of students who responded negatively were suggestive of these young peoples’ estimation of their own independence and sound judgment:

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<sup>1</sup>Here and elsewhere extensive quotations are identified as having been recorded in fieldnotes or in formal interviews, which were tape recorded. Brackets ([ ]) mark text that has been inserted for clarification. Three ellipses (...) indicate a pause in the dialogue. Four ellipses indicate that a segment of protocol has been omitted. Italics indicate an emphasis of the speaker.

*I can take care of most of my needs. (ninth-grade European American male)*

*Adults are annoying, and I'm doing just fine how I am now, thanks. (ninth-grade European American female)*

*I think that I basically have things figured out on my own. (eleventh-grade European American male)*

*I am an adult. (eleventh-grade European American male)*

While a variety of parenting styles were apparent in the data, including rigid household rules and structures, many students commented on how lenient their parents were with them. One said, "They always let me off... they don't follow through when you're grounded." Several students reported that their parents couldn't seriously admonish them because they had told them about the much worse things they had done in their own youth. One parent, whose son had been suspended from the school for use of illegal drugs, candidly said,

*We are guilty as parents. We coddled him. We didn't provide enough structure. We didn't instill a work ethic and so he didn't develop that ability to self-regulate. And the result is... entitlement. (fieldnotes 5/26/04)*

Over half (50.3%) of surveyed students thought their parents "could be more strict" with them; male students were significantly more likely to answer positively (55.3%) than female students (45.6%) ( $\chi^2=8.2568$ ,  $p=.016$ ).

### **Engagement with Media and Markets**

Young people in Wilton had an enormous array of media outlets and consumptive choices available to them. One white male student, whose father was a professor, marveled at the electronic media in his friends' bedrooms: "It's like having the world's resources at your fingertips... I could stay in one of my friend's rooms for months!" Students mostly engaged with television, video games, popular music, the Internet, and movies. In the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year a teacher of a ninth-grade English class asked her students if any of them had read a book for pleasure over the summer. No one raised a hand. It is in this sense that these young people may be part of a new generation of consumers of media who have become accustomed to having great choice and control over their media consumption (see Hersch, 1998).

Consequently, over the last two decades there has been growing concern about the exposure of young people in the US to media intended for adults. Several Wilton parents expressed concerns that their children were "exposed to so much more of everything" than they

were at that age, and that “kids today have to grow up fast.” Indeed, when she was 14, one of the focal students in the study received a solicitation for a subscription to *Young Miss* magazine that asked her if she was a “sexual kind of girl.”

Indeed, these young people also had a wide range of experience with consumer markets. 17.2% of surveyed ninth-graders and 56.68% of eleventh-graders held jobs that they went to either after school, on weekends, or both. The difficulty some students encountered in balancing school and work is illustrated by the following exchange between two ninth-graders, which occurred just after their teacher had given them a heavy homework assignment:

*[Audible groans throughout the classroom] Tom: It's high school, guys.*

*Ashleigh: Tom, shut up. You probably don't have a job. (fieldnotes 1/25/00)*

However, while many of these students said they “had” to work; they often could not articulate what it was that they spent their money on. Some said they “wasted” their money; others spoke of consumer goods that they “needed”: One black male senior said, “It's real tough because when you don't have money, it's like there's so much stuff you need.”

There was evidence to suggest that alcohol and drug use was an issue in the school. The 2003 Primary Prevention Awareness, Attitude, & Use Survey, an anonymous questionnaire administered to 4,772 students in the Wilton schools every four years, indicated that alcohol was the most popular drug used by students (23% of ninth- and tenth-graders, and 40% of eleventh- and twelfth-graders reported that they drank regularly (at least once a month), followed by marijuana. 12% of ninth- and tenth-graders, and 21% of eleventh- and twelfth-graders reported that they smoked marijuana at least once a month) (Education Council & Drug-Free Schools Consortium, 2003). Several students, however, estimated that between 50-75% of their peers regularly drank or used marijuana several times a month. During the study students and teachers also reported on the rising use of ecstasy, as well as the common selling and purchasing of adderall a frequently prescribed drug for ADHD. In 2002 the Wilton District had more students classified as Other Health Impaired (which includes ADD and ADHD) than Cleveland or Cincinnati.

During the academic year students were also exposed to school-approved corporate solicitations such as employment opportunities with benefits and profit-sharing, and a bank offering qualified students free checking and no-fee credit cards. The principal of the school said that a lot of the kids in the school were “megalo-capitalists,” and indeed many students

demonstrated fairly sophisticated consumptive identities as early as ninth grade: One had set up a mutual fund from her previous summer's earnings, and another watched The Stock Channel regularly to keep up with his investments. During the course of the study the student newspaper published several restaurant reviews, reviews of area cafes, and a full-page spread concerning "Tips when using sunless tanning products." Most importantly, these experiences and opportunities with businesses seemed to provide particular resources for student's self-construction: after one interview, a ninth-grade male student gave one of us his "card"—a non-personalized card with the imprint of the video store at which he worked.

In this brief tour of sites of contemporary suburban youth socialization I have tried to show how these linked contexts all attribute great authority to young people, and defer to their views and sensibilities.

### **School Philosophies, Policies & Pedagogies: A Local Logic of Freedom, Deferral, and Individual Advancement**

Wilton High School itself was founded in 1991 with a philosophy geared toward preparing students for college environments. Accordingly, the school's policies and practices were informed by local beliefs regarding what was required for competitive academic success. Study data suggested that positive self-worth was central for such success, and that it could be cultivated in young people by ceding certain kinds of control to them and by accommodating their preferences.

A member of the School Climate Committee said of their initial discussions, "We wanted to work with kids on managing their time, so it is more like when they go away to college." A 1999 OERI website posting stated that Wilton High School designers "envisioned a learner-centered environment and a strong Teacher-Learner Connection in what they fondly referred to as 'adding TLC to the high school'" (Wilton Burnham High School, 1999b). In this regard, Principal Cunningham said that it was important that students were "made to feel equal" in the school. Another founding principle was that "each child's achievement should be recognized" (fieldnotes 12/8/03), and in the Commons was an array of what I have come to call "technologies of recognition": The WHS Hall of Fame; National Merit Finalists; Students of the Month; the Socratic Society; Junior Book Awards, and farther on toward the athletic wing, framed photographs of teams and individual athletes. There were other school-sponsored means of recognizing students, such as the weekly Stellar Senior segment in the WHS News, the School

Newspaper's 15 minutes of fame column, and congratulatory "vanity ads" taken out by parents in the school yearbook. Given this environment, the following vignette should not be too surprising: one of us once observed one of our focal student participants comment to her teacher that she was a "special person" that day because she was being shadowed by a researcher. Her teacher immediately responded with a wry smile and said, "This is Wilton. Everyone is a special person!"

As such, both formal and informal school routines accorded students great freedom. Students were allowed 10 minutes of passing time between classes, juniors and seniors in good academic standing could move freely within the school during their unscheduled class time, and, with their parents' permission only be present in school during their scheduled classes. In addition, while the School Handbook stated that students were not allowed to take food out of the cafeteria, many did, and ultimately were allowed to, because they had not scheduled lunch, in part so that they could leave school earlier, to go to a job, or have free time (Wilton Burnham High School, 1999a). A new female freshman student described the school as "a more relaxed environment than any I've been in before."

From the time they entered kindergarten, students in Wilton were generally schooled in "democratic" classrooms that accorded them significant input into classroom practice,<sup>2</sup> and with "student-centered" pedagogies that privileged their own experience and judgment. Anyon contends that such classrooms in "Executive elite" schools transmit what she argues is the most important kind of symbolic capital: "the ability to analyze and control" (Anyon, 1980, p. 89). Indeed, these students were constantly asked what they "thought" about various topics. A European American female sophomore AP US History student said that she had really "valued" her Extended Project Program (EPP) English classes in elementary and middle school because "what we learned was... how to understand and state your opinions... and you need to be able to defend your opinions, and that's more important than the grammar stuff." These data suggest that one of the more important things students learned in this school environment was that they ought to be able to exert significant control over their educational experiences and that their opinions were important.

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<sup>2</sup> Barry (2012) points out that such practices can also give students the illusion of choice.

### **Personal Epistemologies: Learning an Intensely Subjective Way of Knowing**

The epistemological underpinnings of these dispositions may be understood in part through what Damon refers to as the contemporary Western phenomenon of the self becoming its own moral referent (1995). This may also be understood as students regarding themselves as being most capable to determine what “goods” are worth pursuing in life (see Taylor, 1989). The beginning of a white male student’s philosophy project from the 2003-2004 school year is illuminating in this regard—in particular what he wrote in between the selected literary quotes.

*“The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait until that other is ready”—Thoreau*

*It is best to lead not to follow, I lead in my life. I walk alone and in my solitude I find peace. I choose my own path and invite others to follow. The best path is one untraveled and unmarked because it is yours and yours alone.*

*“Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.”—Emerson*

*I will walk my own path and by doing this bring myself happiness.*

This sort of disposition was also evident in survey responses to the question, “Have you ever been treated unfairly by a teacher?”

*Yes, our teacher was not listening to our ideas, opinions, or suggestions. (ninth- grade European American female)*

*They gave me a certain grade because they compared my paper with another student’s and just because mine isn’t as good as theirs, I got a bad grade. (ninth- grade European American female)*

Student responses to the survey item, “Do you sometimes think that you know better than your teachers what or how you ought to learn?” are also illuminating in this regard. 62.2% of students answered affirmatively to the question, and there was a significant relationship between such responses and: higher GPAs ( $\chi^2=23.3589$ ,  $p=.0547$ ); and, importantly, reporting high levels of stress (OR=1.991; 95% C.I.: 01.10, 3.61;  $p = .023$ ). Some of the open-ended responses are particularly instructive:

*I know how I learn the best and it would be nice if they listened at least once. (ninth- grade European American female)*

*Because I am myself, my teachers aren’t me, therefore, I should know best how I learn. (ninth-grade European American male)*

This epistemological stance was also likely the basis for the vocal protests among a freshman Enriched Social Studies/English class when they were given the assignment of writing an “objective” research paper. Though the teacher instructed them, “you should have no opinions in this,” several students objected, including one who said, “Why can’t we have an opinion?” This epistemological stance then, seemed to be born of the out-of-school socializing influences discussed earlier, and the school policies and pedagogies described above.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The paper has sought to deepen our understanding of how American middle-class adolescents are adapting to significant changes in their environments of socialization. Data from the study at hand suggest that changes in family structure and parenting style, intensified engagements with electronic and commodity culture, and student-centered policies and pedagogies have ceded young people in this community significant power to direct their own socialization and education. Study data suggest that what youth seem to be learning from this assemblage of socializing influences is largely inadvertent—a distinctly authoritative subjectivity.

This authoritative subjectivity privileges these young people’s own experience and judgment, and seems to lead them to see themselves as their own moral referents—as arbiters of what is good and ought to be. Elsewhere I have described some of the educational effects of this new pattern of self-formation (see Demerath 2009b). These include tendencies for students to: 1) see schooling in terms of self-advancement and self-discovery; 2) judge and contest pedagogy and curriculum; 3) self-advocate and negotiate assignments; 4) personalize relationships with teachers; and 5) experience high levels of stress. Most broadly, these data suggest that this authoritative subjectivity is compelling these young people to seek greater degrees of control over multiple dimensions of their lives: a stance that Anthony Giddens foresaw 20 years ago when he wrote that under conditions of modernity the self faces a “puzzling diversity of options and possibilities” and thus becomes a “reflexive project” characterized by incessant efforts to exert control (1991, p. 117).

Such efforts to exert influence over socialization and schooling need to be better understood, but are potentially problematic especially in light of recent studies of the adolescent brain (Giedd, 2004; Thompson, 2000). This body of research has shown that the prefrontal cortex, a center of judgment, is still undergoing such rapid change into late adolescence that Laurence Steinberg, a leading adolescence researcher, likened the situation to one in which, “one

is starting an engine without yet having a skilled driver behind the wheel” (2005, p. 70). While more research is needed to adequately understand linkages between adolescent brain development and behavior, it is possible that attributing too much decision-making authority to young people at this age can result in both poor decisions and elevated stress levels.

More research is also needed to understand two other aspects of the contemporary environments of socialization for US middle-class youth: their ever-evolving individual and social uses of communication technology and their lack of genuine responsibility (see Blum, 2012; Lancy, 2012; and Gaskins, 2012). The data presented here suggest that this lack of responsibility may allow young people more space to exercise their own judgment (and reify the importance of their own judgments), and cultivate their own values and tastes.

The paper concludes that if culture is seen from an anthropological perspective as any social learning, this emerging authoritative subjectivity and its attendant social goal of control may signal an unprecedented and unparalleled role for these young people in shaping processes of cultural transmission and acquisition. We need further research on the extent to which this will contribute to or impede their own flourishing (see Brighouse, 2005).



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The conference, organized by Kellogg Faculty Fellow and Professor of Anthropology Susan Blum, witnessed inspiring discussion and collaboration between leading scholars of education from several disciplines and nations.

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