(Re)constructing women: scaled portrayals of privilege and gender norms on campus

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How are privilege and/or particular gender norms for women spatially (re)produced over time and how are they challenged and changed? In interviews and mental mapping exercises with 32 students and graduates of an elite US women's college from graduating classes spanning 1937 to 2006, women's class and gender norms and expectations are found to have been produced, reproduced and reworked in their everyday experiences during college. Participants portray these norms through the scales of the body, institution and extra-institution in regards to the particular social and physical space of the campus. Participants’ experiences, as depicted in these scales, indicate that class norms remained stable over generational cohorts, but gender norms shifted drastically because the privilege found within and granted by the elite women's college campus allowed for and prompted such changes. Transformations of women's gender norms also correspond with changes in the larger social sphere with a particular split in how participants could enact their privilege to alter their gender norms before and after the late 1960s.

Key words: United States, scale, mental mapping narratives, campus, class, gender, women's colleges

Introduction

How are privilege and/or particular gender norms for women spatially (re)produced over time and how are they challenged and changed? Building from the work of feminist and critical geographers, particularly Geraldine Pratt (1998), Sallie Marston (2000) and Aansi Paasi (2004), this research seeks to answer these questions by examining the (re)production of and challenges to expectations of class and gender norms on an elite college campus over seven generational cohorts. Interviews were conducted with 32 alumnae who graduated from Mount Holyoke College, a highly selective women's college in the United States, in the years spanning 1937 to 2006. During the interviews participants answered a series of questions about their gender and sexual identity development in relation to their college experiences as they drew and labelled mental maps of the campus to accompany their narratives. Portrayals of the campus in interviews and maps indicated that gender and class norms are (re)produced and reworked through the women's independent yet consistent portrayals of the specific scales of the body, institution and extra-institution in relation to the physical and social campus. The scale of the body depicts how participants were embodied within the campus and used their bodies
to negotiate the campus; the scale of the institution defines both the formal educational and abstract discursive practices of and on the campus; and the scale of the extra-institution characterizes how ‘off campus’ physical and social networks affected students’ and alumnae’s daily lives. Each scale exemplifies how this all-women’s campus was and is a place where women across each generational cohort often managed to create a world beyond typical expectations of gender norms and, within the context of privileged expectations, at various scales from the body outward. The greatest of these shifts coincided with significant US social, economic and political changes that began in the late 1960s for women and other oppressed groups. Participants’ norms and expectations regarding gender and class encompass behaviours and attitudes such as dress, manners and career options. In this paper, the term privilege is used as a marker for those advantaged by membership in the upper social classes by economic wealth and/or occupational and personal success as so deemed by social mores.

Participants in this study attended an elite, residential, American women’s liberal arts college. Top schools in the US such as the previously all-male Ivy League have systematically reproduced a predominantly white, male elite throughout the twentieth century (Karabel 2005), and elite colleges as a whole rarely challenge gender and social class norms that fit the prevailing, privileged patriarchal worldview. Theories around scale began with a similar top-down, patriarchal and hierarchal model in Taylor’s (1982) work that was limited to the local-national-global. Feminist and critical geographers have called for a more complex and problematic interrogation of scale ‘that challenges gender-based oppositions by unpeeling hierarchies of space and scale’ (Pratt and Rosner 2006, 16). As the scales in this paper are particular to the place of the campus, this paper makes use of Paasi’s argument that scales are produced, historically contingent and ‘may be partly concrete, powerful and bounded, but also partly unbounded, vague or invisible’ (2004, 543). As discussions and interrogations of themes associated with the local provided means of deconstructing dominant themes of globalization, scale became a key concept for feminist geographers to insist that discussions of the global include the scales of the body and the home and how those scales can be used by historically marginalized groups, such as women, to come into their own authority (Marston 2000).

Through the lens of feminist and critical geography outlined above, this paper argues that the scaled identities formed by elite women’s college students and graduates in relation to the campus are forged within and against social and spatial (re)productions of the prevailing norms of gender and privileged class dynamics. For example, before the late 1960s these women experienced strong heteronormative expectations towards marriage and children, while opportunities for independent, occupational success were lacking. All participants who graduated before 1969 experienced a definite expectation that they would marry upon graduation. Some gender norms the women discussed were more obviously classed and specific to being white. In the interview, Connie ’50 shared that she was told the following during her interview for medical school in 1950 at Harvard University:

You know, honey, if you go to medical school you’ll be taking the place of some man who will be supporting his family and as soon as you have a child, of course, you won’t be able to practice anymore.

Both the possibility of success and achieved success of these participants was a rarity only and even for those highly educated, mostly white women of the upper and upper-middle classes before the late 1960s.

**Participant overview and context**

Interviews were conducted with 32 alumnae and students of Mount Holyoke College (MHC), located in the semi-rural town of South Hadley, Massachusetts. MHC is the oldest, continuing institution of higher education for women in the US. The college’s mission statement is to educate

> a diverse residential community of women at the highest level of academic excellence and to fostering [sic] the alliance of liberal arts education with purposeful engagement in the world. (MHC 2006)

This legacy is part of the everyday campus dialogue; hence, gender was a much discussed aspect of participants’ lives. MHC has consistently served female students over the years, while the school’s originally all-male Ivy League counterparts such as Harvard and Yale Universities became co-educational in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Immediately before these changes, the US passed laws that allowed reproductive freedom (Griswold v. Connecticut in 1965) and prohibited employment discrimination based upon race, colour, religion,

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national origin or sex (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964), and saw the beginning of the ‘second’
feminist movement which is often marked by the
publication of Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique
in 1963. Until that same era, women with the
intellectual ambitions, social ambitions and/or
financial means attended MHC or one of its peers,
the Seven Sisters colleges, which were referred to as
the ‘female Ivy League’. This historic, highly selective,
residential liberal arts women’s college is one of 56
remaining women’s colleges in the country and
continues to graduate high-performing students.

This paper defines the campus as a physical and
social space of postsecondary education. The
physical campus is composed of the natural environ-
ments (i.e. lakes and trees) and built environments
(i.e. buildings and paths) of the campus and its
design. The social campus includes rituals, codes,
traditions and rules about campus life. Spatially,
MHC’s Victorian gothic design has remained almost
untouched in style since 1896 – both exterior and
interior – so that students and alumnae are likely to
share memories common to the same places on
campus. Geographers and those in other disciplines
have only begun to examine the role of the social
and physical spaces of the campus in the lives of
the students (Tamboukou 2000).

Alumnae and students were invited to participate
through MHC’s Alumnae Association, email and
phone requests, and face-to-face interactions. An
attempt was made to solicit participants with varied
backgrounds when possible, yet the profile of
participants was fairly homogenous. Participants
were then included into the predefined sample size
(up to 35 participants) on the basis of who emailed
the investigator first. The sample was limited to
include only participants who attended college at a
traditional age (between the ages of 16 and 24) and
began and completed their degrees at the college so
that participants might share similar-aged interests
and memories of their time on campus. The sample
only included those born within the US in an effort
to focus on US women. Half of the alumnae
interviewed now reside in the New York City metropo-

tian area near the researcher, and half of the
alumnae reside within an hour of the college. It was
expected these different venues would result in
different or varied recollections of the campus,
although no significant differences were found.
Although the sample was self-selected, participants
were inclined to share both the complicated and
differentiated stories the researcher sought.

At the time of the interviews participants ranged
in age from 20 to 89 years old. A total of 29 of the
32 participants identified as white, Caucasian and/
or WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), and seven
did not identify as heterosexual. Thirty participants
self-identified as middle or upper-middle class, one
participant as working-middle class, and one partic-
ientified as upper-upper class. A total of 24
participants had taken or upon graduation planned
to take advanced degrees.

Inspired by C. Wright Mills’ (1961) concept of the
sociological imagination, this research examines
individual biographies in relation to the larger
socioeconomic and political eras. Karl Mannheim’s
concept of ‘political generations’ also came into
play when examining the women’s shared geography
and era that

limited them to a specific range of potential experience,
predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of
thought and experience, and a characteristic type of
historically relevant action. (Mannheim 1928/1972 as
cited in Duncan and Stewart 2000, 298)

This paper uses the term ‘generational cohort’ to
encompass both Mannheim and Mills’ concepts in
considering the socioeconomic and cultural aspects
of the era in which participants attended college.
Four or five alumnae were interviewed from each of
seven different generational cohorts spanning 1937
through 2000, and five students of the graduating
class of 2006 were interviewed, which include: Depression
and World War II (1937–1945), the Fifties (1946–
1962), the Sixties (1963–1971), the Seventies
(1972–1979), the Eighties (1980–1992), the Nineties

Methods and analysis: narratives in words
and maps

Participants took part in open-ended, semi-structured
interviews with mental mapping exercises that
mutually elicited narratives of how the physical and
social environment of the campus reflected and
affected their gender and sexual identity development.
Participants were asked to respond to various
questions about their notions of power, space,
education, gender and sexuality before, during and
after college and to label their maps with symbols
and words to represent the memories that arose in
defining their selves in relation to the space of the
campus. This paper explicitly examines participants’
experiences during college. Mental mapping is the
term I employ for the methodological technique used to explore participants’ cognitive maps – how humans think on and about space and how they reflect and act upon those thoughts in their everyday behaviours. The idea and technique has been employed by other researchers, notably Kevin Lynch (1960), Roger Downs and David Stea (1977) and Dolores Hayden (1995).  

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed for emerging themes such as scale and privilege, and predetermined themes such as gender. Participants’ discussions of their identities around these themes were then coded in their physical, social and historical descriptions of the campus. The mental maps were drawn on large sheets of paper and coded for structures and other features that were centrally, overly or underrepresented and for how the interview codes were materially represented and for structures and other features that were centrally, overly or underrepresented and for how the interview codes were materially represented in their drawings. Schemas (Agar and Hobbs 1987) were generated to explain the similarities that cross generational cohorts but are also specific to the women’s relationship to the campus. It was out of these schemas that three scales became apparent.

Analysis: scaled conceptions of privilege and gender on campus

The sections that follow outline the scales of the body, institution and extra-institution, and the connections between one another to elucidate the role of scale in (re)producing and reworking gender and class norms and expectations. This paper supports Marston’s argument that ‘the particular ways in which scale is constructed . . . are tangible and have material consequences’ (2000, 221). Not all of the participants directly discussed matters of class and/or privilege although their expectations and class norms were portrayed in the behaviours and attitudes they recounted.

Scale: the body

From a feminist perspective, the scale of the body speaks to the anonymous work, play and (re)production that have all been inscribed on and within women’s bodies for millennia (Pratt 1998; Mountz and Hyndman 2006). The regulation of the women’s bodies on campus, such as requiring formal attire for dinner and supporting a slim list of occupational choices or possibilities, produced and reproduced gender and class norms through the late 1960s. Linda ’66 remarked that it was ‘not a place to rebel’ both in terms of gender and class presentation. Yet the privileged aspect of their class allowed them the ability to minutely and progressively bend rules and regulations of their gender as each generation progressed. Linda ’66 went on: ‘Everybody stayed out now and then and had to climb through the French windows.’ Women discussed ignoring rules more and more in each generational cohort, including during the period when students were to sign on and off campus at all times and no men were permitted beyond the first floor of the dormitories. Sneaking out, often to meet boyfriends or dates, was just one of the infractions that could have led to a stigma for these upper-class ‘ladies’. Pratt, building from the work of Michel Foucault, writes that ‘the bourgeoisie constructed their class identity through the watchful regulation of their own bodies’ (1998, 285). In this way of regulating their own bodies and bodily access, the women incrementally challenged and redefined upper class, WASP gender norms for themselves in each generational cohort, with the greatest shift occurring parallel to the major social shifts of 1969.

Comments about rule bending were markedly different among alumnae who had graduated since the late 1960s. The majority of these women expressed a sense of complete access to the campus, although many remarked that they had no reason to enter the traditionally masculine, working-class campus maintenance building. Tess ’06 talked about how the open campus gave her a sense of freedom portrayed in the scale of her body: ‘No one’s, like, watching me or saying [in a stern male voice], “You can’t come in here”.’ Like other interviews with graduates of the late 1960s and thereafter, Tess ’06 equated full access to the campus with a sense of privilege and also a sense of breaking traditional gender norms for women.

A similarity that spanned each of the generational cohorts was the sense of intellectual freedom they embraced in their bodies through constant intellectual conversations and more informal dress. Linda ’66 recalled the moment she realized the sense of liberation found in not needing to under-perform academically in order to make sure that men stood out as more intelligent: ‘It’s just all of a sudden, it allowed me to be an intellectual in a truer sense of the word . . . because it was all channeled around the ‘life of the mind’ in so many ways. Sort of letting go of the body . . . . It was empowering. It was good to be smart and good to really work hard.'
Yet the ‘life of the mind’ is a privileged experience only for those afforded the opportunity to study at such an institution. By placing the life of the mind as a classed marker of significance, and along with larger social shifts, each generational cohort progressively broke down classed gender norms – literal and metaphorical boundaries of bodily access and regulation – associated with expectations of women on an elite college campus.

**Scale: the institution**

Paasi writes

The conceptualization of relevant relations/structures in research objects can be a problem in any form of research, but it is especially so when these objects are not ‘concrete’ things but sets of institutionalized practices/discourses. (2004, 537)

The educational institution is typically delineated by what is studied in the classroom and the work of the college administrators and faculty. The bounds of the MHC institution are also formed by discursive practices evidenced in students’ and alumnae’s everyday experiences. In participants’ mental maps, the buildings on campus, the layout of those buildings and the boundaries of the campus that may include highways, dormitories, lakes and/or other colleges were varied, resulting in differing portrayals of the physical institution and that which surrounds it. In the interviews, the institution was defined and delimited by the students’ everyday spaces, acts, traditions and rules of the social and physical campus. The scale of the institution also absorbed traditional notions of home as most participants referred to the campus or a dormitory on campus as ‘home’. Most writings about women and the home have not yet considered college dormitories or other non-traditional home spaces. The malleable boundaries of the scale of institutions often mark where the women’s bodily and extra-institutional scales began, ended and ceaselessly overlapped.

The institution mimicked the lack of bodily freedom Linda ’66 described in MHC not being a ‘place to rebel’. Helga ’67 depicted an institution with ‘this light authoritarian cast to the whole place’, where administrators ‘wanted to make sure that my body was where I wasn’t being lost’, i.e. becoming pregnant before marriage. While the ‘life of mind’ made for some renegotiations of gender norms, the comments of Helga ’67 represent the traditional gender and class regulations and expectations imprinted by the institution on its students before the late 1960s.

Starting around 1969, the institution was a typical educational and discursive space where students increasingly and progressively both (re)produced class norms and reworked gender norms throughout each generation. Men were allowed beyond the first floor and into student rooms, the powers of housemothers began to wane, and shortly thereafter lesbians began a formal support group in 1976 (Mount Holyoke Lyon’s Pride 2006). The institution itself reformatted its purpose to educate women as leaders, which is evidenced in the college’s aforementioned, present mission statement. After listing the occupational and personal successes of her friends, Sarah ’99 described her experience of MHC in the 1990s,

[A]t Mount Holyoke I always felt very comfortable . . . I sort of take that comfort level and go back to that place in my mind – and then I always think, ‘If [my other female friends] can do something than why can’t I?’ And I think that the first realization that I had of all of that was probably at Mount Holyoke.

Class privilege once built around expectations of purity and heterosexual marriage presented itself in more recent decades in the gender norms of occupational and personal success for women at the institutional scale.

**Scale: the extra-institution**

Participants identified the extra-institutional scale to be constituted of those spaces that affected their daily lives but sat physically and socially beyond each individual’s border or ‘bubble’ (Rita ’82, Francine ’06, Daria ’06) of the institution, or within what she considered the ‘real world’ (Fiona ’66, Brandy ’86, Sarah ’99, Tina ’00). As such, the scale of the extra-institution subsumed the local (the town of South Hadley and nearby colleges, towns and routes), regional (New England), and the nation-state and global scales. Mountz and Hyndman write that borders possess ‘transformative potential’ because ‘they are lines drawn to be crossed’ (2006, 452). The borders between the scales of the institution and extra-institution were often delineated and/or made ambiguous by the bodily scale that transgressed them further in each generational cohort.

Paasi’s (2004) rethinking of scales as ‘networks’ rather than purely in areal terms fits participants’ portrayals of the extra-institutional scale. Paasi
writes that in the study of the social construction of places, geographers have ‘suggested that networks/scale interdependences challenge bounded perspectives on place/scale and accentuate discontinuous spaces’ (2004, 541). As with the scales of the body and institution, a shift in participants’ ideal and classed extra-institutional networks took place in the late 1960s with those spaces and persons literally and metaphorically ‘off campus’. Before that period, Stacy ’60 remarked that even though women on campus held all of the leadership positions, ‘I thought the only way to have power was to attach yourself to a man who had power because the men had the power’. Further, while the quote of Ginnie ’61 at the beginning of this paper indicates that a few social networks for women existed throughout all of the generational cohorts, her first position on Capitol Hill, the prominent, political power centre in Washington, DC, was limited to secretarial work.

Tina ’00 summed up the powerful role of social networks in privileged women’s independence as of late: ‘I guess I felt women’s power was more related to women’s ability to network, to know people, to be a little bit more dogged than necessarily intelligent.’ This reworking of gender norms at the extra-institutional scale entered into and built upon institutional practices and bodily experiences. As each generational cohort strived for and expected to achieve a privileged notion of women’s success at the extra-institutional scale, and therefore reworked women’s gender norms over time, the women seemingly only served to (re)produce class norms and expectations, particularly in relation to upper and upper-middle class male roles and expectations.

Elizabeth ’37 depicted a connection to a physical network that altered the possibilities of her own gender and class. Lacking academic confidence, she considered herself a ‘borderline’ student, yet was invited to perform prestigious honours work in her senior year per the institution (at scale):

> I have always been crazy about the reading room. As you know it’s a replica of Westminster Hall in London, on a somewhat smaller scale. I was thrilled when I was given a carrel. Honor students were allowed to have carrels in the stacks. I loved it because it made me feel like a scholar.

Elizabeth ’37 demonstrates that students and alumnae used the physical spaces of the campus to connect themselves with global and historical powers, namely this prominent hall for British kings and the original British Parliament. Replicating Westminster Hall on campus – a Western architectural symbol of masculine power – allowed the institution and those bodies within it to internalize the privilege located in the meaning and metaphor of that space. This again not only legitimated students’ claims to their privileged status, but also served to progressively increase participants’ sense of entitlement that challenged and redefined their gender norms over time.

**Discussion**

Three scales emerged in participants’ (re)production of and challenge to notions of privilege and gender norms in their sociological and geographical portrayals of the campus throughout their interviews and maps: the body, the institution and the extra-institution. Each of these scales arose frequently as participants depicted their expectations of gender and class norms on campus; further, these scales overlap and build upon one another, demonstrating an interdependent relationship between participants’ expectations of gender and class. Similar to Paasi’s (2004) contention that identities are produced within the demands of and upon various geographic scales, these scales are essential to the women’s understanding and enactment of their own notions and expectations of gender and class. While the scale of the home is often central in the study of women’s spaces (Marston 2000), the everyday and scaled experiences of these young women’s lives were instead channelled into and formed by bodily, institutional and extra-institutional spheres.

Pratt (1998) examined how female Filipina domestic workers successfully reworked and challenged their embodied subjectivity within and against fixed, stereotyped identities bestowed upon them by the white, upper-middle class community they worked for in Vancouver, British Columbia. The working class participants in Pratt’s study used the Philippine Women Centre as a physical and social space within which to gather and recreate themselves at the bodily scale. Marston found that for urban middle-class women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a
reconstruction of the private sphere of the home.
(2000, 235)

Pratt’s participants, Marston’s subjects, and the women in this study recast their embodied roles through the use of particular places. The mostly upper-middle class, white women in this study use their all-women’s elite college campus to both replicate and subvert class and gender norms as evidenced in the bodily, institutional and extra-institutional scales they portrayed of their experiences. This renegotiation and (re)production takes place in the freedom and binding of the bodily scale, ideals of success at the institutional scale, and the networks and ‘real world’ borders of the extra-institutional scale.

Each of the women expressed a sense of empowerment in the privileges granted upon them by the campus or in their manipulation of campus regulations, and/or they expressed empowerment in the full right to entry and use of the campus. Such privileges were not often granted to women and/or young people. As noted above, the break between these two notions of empowerment is largely seen starting around 1969. While all-male Ivy League schools became co-educational in this period, some women’s colleges, including MHC, chose to remain single-sex. MHC maintained that different types of institutions were necessary to instruct a diverse group of citizens, particularly to offer a place where women could serve and grow as leaders (Gettell 1967, 7–8). The participants in college at this time experienced and helped to enact drastic changes in institutional and larger social policies that ended the ‘in loco parentis’ role of the college. These changes reflected national and global trends in women’s and young people’s liberation. ‘In loco parentis’ was the institution’s right and duty (granted by the extra-institutional scale and enacted upon students’ bodies) to serve in the role of parent to young women (and sometimes men) away from home.

While class norms on campus generally remained stable over time, gender norms shifted drastically not only because of women’s transformations in the extra-institutional sphere, but also because the privilege found on the elite women’s college campus allowed for and prompted such changes. While women growing up in the 1980s and 1990s experienced a backlash against feminism and its accomplishments (Evans 2003), the women of MHC experienced a supportive, privileged environment in which to continually challenge gender norms. It is of note that the experiences of those in college during World War II more closely fit those who attended college in the late 1960s. It seems as if the war granted temporary economic freedom and altered class and gender expectations for those women as the US government urged women to fill what were traditionally men’s occupations (Sealander 1997). Marta ’45, for example, was recruited on campus into a position at a Fortune 500 corporation upon graduation, which she then lost when male employees returned from the war.

Geographers write about scales other than the body and institution, but participants’ memories and experiences of the campus did not portray scales – such as the home or local – beyond those constructed in regards to the residential, semi-rural campus. For example, Tina ‘00 remarked when drawing the campus of MHC versus the ‘real world’ for the mental mapping exercise: ‘And we have a little walkway with an arch, leading out into the real world of South Hadley, Massachusetts.’ The nation-state, local, regional and global scales were absorbed into their accounts of the extra-institutional scale, while the scale of the home was absorbed into that of the institution.

Conclusion
Using the lens of feminist and critical geography, this paper has examined a group of predominantly upper-middle class, white women’s (re)productions of and challenges to gender and class norms on their college campus over time through the scales of the body, the institution and the extra-institution. The interviews and mental mapping exercises with 32 students and graduates of an elite women’s college, Mount Holyoke College, from classes spanning 1937 to 2006 illuminate the complexity in the (re)production and reworking of class and gender expectations and their connection to geographic study. The methodological techniques in this research showed how the women (re)produced and challenged gender and class norms in their scaled everyday experiences. These women use these scales to portray their personal experiences and definitions of gender and class in relation to the campus they both absorbed and challenged, and as such this paper has further helped to define the construction of everyday lived scales in people’s lives.

Much like Paasi’s depictions of scales, the scales portrayed in participants’ daily lives were partly concrete, unbounded and historically contingent;
and similar to Mountz and Hyndman’s portrayal of borders between scales, the participants transformed the boundaries of their scales and the gender and class norms associated with them. These women’s stories evidence how these related and overlapping scales ‘disrupt traditional organizations of space’ and ‘reconfigure conventions of scale’ similar to Pratt and Rosner’s feminist pairing of, rather than opposition between, the global and the intimate in women’s lives (2006, 15–16). Participants depicted the extra-institutional project as enacted in the institution; the institution’s project was taken on as their own as they worked to define and be formed by it.

At the beginning of this paper, Tina ‘00 responded to the question ‘What socioeconomic class do you use to identify yourself?’ by indirectly explaining how privilege was and is successfully inscribed while on campus through responding with her own (rhetorical) question: ‘Am I automatically upper-middle class if I went to Mount Holyoke?’ Through this privilege that spanned generational cohorts and along with transformations in the larger social sphere for women’s gender norms, MHC prompted ‘the physicality and collectivity of social existence in new ways’ (Pratt 1998, 299) in their scaled understanding of women’s gender norms on this particular college campus. The women’s privilege developed within the institutional and extra-institutional scales served to progressively break down gender norms over generational cohorts both within and against the patriarchal structure built for and around the upper class, WASP culture on campus.

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Notes

1 All names given are pseudonyms to grant anonymity to the research participants.
2 The term (re)production is used here to encompass the often simultaneous production and reproduction of gender and class norms.
3 Highly selective is used by the US higher education administra-

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