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AS GCE SOCIOLOGY

G671/01/SM Exploring Socialisation, Culture and Identity

PRE-RELEASE STIMULUS MATERIAL

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Lehmann Wolfgang (2009) “Becoming Middle-Class: How working-class students experience university” in *Sociology 2009: 43; 631*

Although the number of university students from working-class backgrounds has increased, a vast amount of research based evidence shows that these students still experience university in different and uniquely working-class ways. The aim of this study by Wolfgang Lehmann was to investigate the influence of working-class students’ social background on their experiences of university. More specifically, Lehmann wanted to investigate these working-class students’ decision to attend university: to what degree these students encountered structural barriers to success, and how they negotiated their working-class status in an institutional environment that is generally characterised as essentially middle-class. 5

The research was a three-year longitudinal study. It focussed on first-generation students; those who were the first in their extended family to attend university. The research took place in three phases, collecting data in students’ first two years and then in their final year at university. 10

Participants were recruited through advertisements in the student newspaper, posters around campus and in halls of residence, and through announcements made in first-year classes across all the subjects offered at the university. In the first phase, 75 newly enrolled first-generation students were interviewed soon after arriving on campus and beginning their studies. Of the 75 participants in the first phase of interviews 55 were re-interviewed during their second year of studies. All interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, were of an in-depth unstructured format and were conducted in offices and classrooms on campus. 15

In order to gain a sample of students who fit the criteria of being working-class, Wolfgang used two main indicators. The first indicator was students who were the first generation in their families to go to university. Approximately 65 per cent of fathers and mothers in the sample had no further education beyond secondary school. The second criteria was parental occupation. None of the parents were employed in positions generally considered middle-class such as the professions or higher levels of management. Most of the fathers were employed in blue collar occupations (e.g. factory workers, truck drivers) and the mothers were mostly employed in lower-level service occupations or in factory work. 20
25

During first-phase interviews, participants were asked to discuss their reasons for coming to university, the role played by others (e.g. parents, siblings, peers and teachers) in their decision to attend university, and their expectations for university. In the second-phase interviews however, the focus was on actual experiences at university, which allowed the researchers to ask participants to reflect upon and compare what they had initially said in the first interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the researchers used pseudonyms throughout to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants. 30

Lehmann found that for those students who had, by the second phase of interviews, made relatively successful transitions into university life, a sense of entitlement and belongingness seemed to have emerged. This belongingness did not simply reflect a notion of feeling comfortable at university, but perhaps more importantly also becoming middle-class: 35

“I’m trying to move up in society, to *become* these people that have just lived with [privilege] all their lives and it’s normal for them. For me, it’s not normal, but it will become normal for my children. [I tell myself], ‘look at what they have, you could have that too. So you should work harder to get that.’” 40
(Abby, second phase, emphasis added).

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