

## Becoming An "Educated Person":

### Narratives Of Female Professors From The Working Class

#### Introduction

Social class is about material conditions and social relations of power. It is about where you live, how you live, the work you do, and the power you have over your own life and the lives of others. Although the U.S. is considered a classless society, social class continues to be the best predictor of adult achievement and health (Adler, Marmot, McEwen & Stewart, 1999; Gilbert & Kahl, 1993; Kawachi & Kennedy, 1999; Ryan & Sackrey, 1996). Class is ascribed to individuals at birth based on the income, occupational status, and educational achievements of their parents. In post-industrial societies, education is an important component of class mobility. Although the majority of people in the U.S. graduated from high school, less than a third have college degrees. According to 2000 census data, approximately 84% of persons over 25 have completed 4 or more years of high school and only 26% have completed 4 or more years of college. Data on persons between the ages of 25 and 29 in 2000 are slightly higher: approximately 88% completed high school and 29% completed 4 or more years of college. These figures reflect opportunities in the labor and education markets. In contrast to the belief in a middle-class majority, data on education, income, and occupations suggests that the majority of people in the U.S. are working class (Zweig, 2000).

Because we live in a class stratified society, educators and social scientists need to be sensitive to issues of class as well as race and gender (Coiner, 1995). This paper attempts to raise consciousness about class issues by examining the experience and meaning of education for a small group of women from the working class. Growing up working

class informs women's subjectivity in particular ways. Based on interviews with working-class families, Lillian Rubin (1976) argues that a "distinctly working class" consciousness and culture arises from the economic realities of working-class life (p. 210). As a way to explore the ways in which class informs consciousness and sense of self, I engaged in a qualitative research project with ten female academics from the working class. During interviews, participants talked about experiences of class as children, adolescents, and adults. In this article, I draw upon a subset of the findings that engage the experience and meaning of education for participants as students (for a complete description of findings see Jones, 1998b). As a way to provide a larger context for the findings, I briefly review literature on mobility, first-generation college students, and academics from the working class.

#### The Context

A contributing factor in the suppression of class identities is the pervasive belief that the U.S. class structure is relatively permeable, and that people on the lower end can percolate up through the structure if they apply themselves. This belief justifies huge inequalities in the class system by denying the effects of social class on life chances and keeps those on the bottom "in a state of political impotence, frozen by self-contempt for their own failure" (Ryan & Sackrey, 1996, pp. 1-2). In reality, a relatively small percentage (approximately 30%) of children whose fathers are employed in blue-collar occupations move into professional positions (Gilbert & Kahl, 1993, pp. 146-149).

Within a context of constricted mobility, research indicates that higher education plays an important role in upward mobility (Gilbert & Kahl, 1993, pp. 161-187; Ryan & Sackrey, 1996, pp. 15-44). Since the 1960s, college attendance has risen. Although the