The Best of the Brightest: Definitions of the Ideal Self Among Prize-Winning Students

Michèle Lamont, Jason Kaufman, and Michael Moody

This paper documents and explains characteristics of the ideal self rewarded by the American educational system as defined and projected by high school students who have been selected as Presidential Scholars in a national academic competition sponsored by the Department of Education and a White House Commission. Drawing on analysis of competition essays written by 119 Presidential Scholars and interviews conducted with 19 of them, we identify how these students implicitly and explicitly define the ideal self and what they do to demonstrate that they embody the characteristics of the self they perceive as rewarded by the American educational system. The data show that morality is the most salient dimension of the ideal self displayed by Scholars, and that they define it in terms of self-actualization, authenticity, and interpersonal morality; that Scholars present negative or ambivalent

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2Department of Sociology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544.

3To whom correspondence should be addressed.

4Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, 675 William James Hall, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138.

5Department of Sociology, Boston University, 96 Cummington Street, Boston Massachusetts 02215.
views concerning the importance of socioeconomic status; and that culture as a dimension of the ideal self is highlighted only by a subset of Scholars. In general, their displayed definitions of the ideal self are individualist in content but highly institutionalized in form. We explain our findings by the cultural repertoires that are made available to students and by their life experience and the broader structural characteristics of American society that lead them to draw on specific repertoires.

KEY WORDS: cultural excellence; presentation of self; education; morality; self-actualization; fellowship; cultural capital.

INTRODUCTION

The ideal self is a cultural template expressing highly valued qualities, traits, and characteristics of individuals within an institution (Meyer, 1987). In recent years, sociologists have paid considerable attention to conceptions of the ideal self in the corporate world (Hochschild, 1983; Jackall, 1988; Leidner, 1993; Morrill, 1995), in gender relations (Mori et al., 1987), among political activists (Clecak, 1983; Lichterman, 1996), at various stages in the life-cycle (Buchmann, 1989), and in the “modern world” more generally (Thomas et al., 1987). The ideal self rewarded by the American educational system has not been studied, however. This is an important gap in the literature because schools are an institution deeply involved in the reproduction and dissemination of cultural norms, ideals, and repertoires (Boli, 1989). We aim to begin filling this gap by documenting and explaining the characteristics of the ideal self that are projected by a group of prize winning students certified by the top hierarchical level of the American educational system as “the best and the brightest” in the nation—specifically, students who have been selected as Presidential Scholars in a national academic competition sponsored by the Department of Education and a White House Commission. Drawing on analysis of competition essays written by 119 Presidential Scholars and interviews conducted with 19 of them, we identify how these students implicitly and explicitly define the ideal self and what they do to demonstrate that they embody the characteristics of the self they perceive as rewarded by the American educational system.

Each year since 1964, the White House and the Department of Education invites students having SAT scores in the top 1% of their cohorts to participate in the Presidential Scholars competition, which is designed to recognize “the nation’s most distinguished graduating high school seniors”