



Race, Class, Culture, Privilege and Choosing a College Major:

Is it Really a Choice?

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Privilege of Autonomy

The ability to make life decisions governed by your own interests rather than external pressures

INTRODUCTION



This research explores the effect that different levels of **privilege** have on how UNC undergraduate students **choose their major**. Privilege tied to **race, class, and culture** leaves certain groups more likely to consider external pressures as opposed to personal interest in choosing their college major. This creates a tension between the experiences of privilege and the freedom to choose your own major, something I am referring to as the **"privilege of autonomy."**

METHODS

The findings of this project are based on a **mixed-methods** approach that includes **self-administered online survey** responses and six **in-depth interviews**. These methods were conducted among a sample of **undergraduate students at UNC-Chapel Hill**.

199 Survey Responses

- Randomly sampled across all undergraduate students
- Respondents were surveyed on:
 - Demographic Indicators:
 - Racial/ethnic identity
 - Class (family socioeconomic status)
 - U.S.-based vs. foreign cultural upbringing
 - Choice of Major:
 - What major they chose
 - Primary influences behind choice
 - Satisfaction with choice

6 In-depth Interviews

- 45-60 minutes long
- Sampled from survey respondents
- All students of color who had at least one immigrant parent
- Asked to reflect on individual stories of choosing their major in relation to their privilege
- Discussion of pressure from family to pursue certain majors

RACE

SUMMARY

- Overrepresentation of White students in business and literature/languages/humanities
- Overrepresentation of students of color in social sciences
- Significant overrepresentation of Asian/Asian-American students in STEM

KEY FINDINGS

- Students of color, especially Asian/Asian-American students, are more likely to name parental or family satisfaction as a primary influence
- Students of color, especially Black and Asian/Asian-American students, are less likely to consider personal interest as a primary influence

"As a Black person, I cannot afford to not be economically stable in this country. It's okay to be mediocre as someone who is not a person of color, but for people of color, to be mediocre— that's just feeding into a narrative that's been fed by non-POC people for a long time"

CULTURE & IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES



SUMMARY

- U.S.-born students with U.S.-born parents underrepresent in STEM and overrepresent in all else
- Children of immigrants underrepresent in business and literature/languages/humanities
- Foreign-born students overrepresent in STEM and business and underrepresent in all else

KEY FINDINGS

- Students who are foreign-born or children of immigrants are more likely to consider economic viability and parental/family satisfaction as primary influences

"I feel like for a lot of immigrant families, in their minds, success is being a doctor, or an engineer, or something along those lines... I think I was a little worried about my parents being disappointed in me if I didn't go into STEM."

CLASS

SUMMARY

- Overrepresentation of students with a total combined family income of over \$150,000 a year in STEM

KEY FINDINGS

- Students with existing class privilege feel a need to maintain economic success by making similar choices as their successful role models and family members, often in STEM, and especially medicine

"You're so financially comfortable because your dad's a doctor. So everything you have, that's all because of his work. If you don't meet those same expectations, you're going to have to downgrade"



COVID-19

SUMMARY

- Interviewees felt more obligated to consider economic viability and future job stability as a result of COVID-19, especially in STEM and medicine

KEY FINDINGS

- The global loss of privilege resulted in shifting perspectives on economic employment and security that made STEM/medicine careers/majors more appealing
- The stress caused by COVID made choosing the "right" major less of a priority for students

"The financial stability and the secure job pathway of STEM was now even more enticing because during COVID, a lot of people were being laid off... Changing my major wasn't on the forefront of my mind."



RESULTS

Racially-tied pressure leaves non-white students more likely to consider factors such as future economic viability over personal interests. Students with existing class privilege are likely to value financial success themselves, often pushing them toward similar career choices as their financially successful family members. Cultural experiences rooted outside of the U.S. are related to an increased emphasis on majors that are tied to prestige and financial success. The global moment of loss of privilege during the COVID-19 pandemic pressured students to consider factors such as job security over personal interests. **As societal privilege decreases, so too does the freedom to choose a major based on one's own interests, therefore lowering privilege of autonomy.**

CONCLUSION

There is a strong link between racial, class, cultural, and historical/contextual privilege and the privilege of autonomy. **This leaves the choice of a college major not really a "choice" for some students after all.**

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